

SCHOOLING SEXUALITY: AN INTERGENERATIONAL INVESTIGATION OF THE  
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF AUSTRALIAN GAY MEN AND TEENS

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Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
College of Arts and Education  
Victoria University  
September 2021

## **Abstract**

This study (re)presents the intergenerational experiences of gay men in Australian schools, communities and families across a fifty-year period. A snowball sample of six participants, ranging in age from fifteen to sixty-five, participated in life history interviews that focussed on eliciting narratives of (re)membered school experiences connected to the social and cultural discourses of (homo)sexuality. This study contributes to the scholarship of sexuality in Australian contexts. A particular gaze is directed on how schooling, family and community norms form and storm subjectivity and identity in childhood and adolescence.

This research is framed by the national debate regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ)+ rights in Australia that erupted over the implementation of the Safe Schools Coalition program across Australian states. The ensuing moral panic incited by conservative groups, and the public scrutiny surrounding the proposed support mechanisms and inclusivity for LGBTIQ+ adolescents and their peers, inspired my resolve to undertake this research. Drawing on a sociocultural framework to look at the intersections around sexuality, in conjunction with the embodied knowledge of Othering, I saw the importance of a discursive examination of experiential encounters with institutionalised heteronormativity in Australian schools, family dynamics and community settings.

The lived experiences of same-sex-attracted informants is an under-explored area within the scholarship of sexuality in Australian schools. This study elucidated firsthand experiences of what it has meant, and means, to be gay in Australian schools communities and families over a fifty-year period. The conclusions of the study indicate that all participants, regardless of age, have encountered overt (homo)phobia, and describe how heteronormativity has limited and negatively impacted on their ability to contribute and participate in school, in their families and in community settings.


This investigation is presented in the form of a creative product and an exegesis. In each of the components there is an understanding of how deviations from binary constructions of gender and sexuality are articulated. This study adds to the plethora of work and rethinking which needs to be done in Australian schools, families and communities to support LGBTIQ+ individuals.

## **Declaration of Authenticity**

I, Samara van Toledo, declare that the Doctor of Education thesis entitled *Schooling sexuality: an intergenerational investigation of the educational experiences of Australian gay men and teens* is no more than 103,442 words including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Signature

A large black rectangular box redacting the signature of the author.

Date 20/09/2021

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincerest thanks to my two wonderfully wise and warm supervisors, Associate Professor Mark Vicars and Dr Ligia Pelosi. Not only have they generously offered me their knowledge and expertise, but they have also championed me from the start to the finish of this research. I truly do not think I could have achieved this without them. It is rare to find people who walk the balance between kindness and the expectation that one will do one's best. I am indebted to you both.

I would also like to thank my incredibly supportive husband, Robb van Toledo. His unswerving commitment to me and his belief that I can do anything is humbling. He has washed, cooked and cleaned for me for over three years, never asking for acknowledgement, always wholehearted and generous in spirit and action.

Special thanks to my parents, Graeme and Wendy, and my boys, Oliver, Henry and Tom. You have all contributed to this research through your actions and words. A particular nod to Tom, my youngest son, who read my novel with enthusiasm and love.

And to my friends. Thank you for reading my drafts and supporting me with encouraging words and clever ideas throughout this research. The Friday coffee group is a circle of love and sisterhood and helped support me through some of the troughs.

Also, to my dog Vinny. Walking you each day has given me the opportunity to think and grow. You have kept me company in the late hours of the evening and provided warmth when my feet were cold.

My thanks to and acknowledgement of, Dr Kerrie Le Lievre, for her editing work (Standard D & E) in this thesis.

## **A Note on the Exegesis**

A portion of the exegesis appearing under the subheadings 'A Darkened New Dawn' has previously been published as part of the paper

Vicars, M & van Toledo, S 2021, 'Walking the talk: LGBTQ allies in Australian secondary schools', *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 6, n.p.,  
<<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2021.611001/full>>.

I confirm that I am the sole author of the exegesis, including the portion of it that was included in this paper.

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# **The Ties that Bind**

A novel by Samara van Toledo



## Prologue

### *Raymond*

*Melbourne, Victoria, 2015*

Raymond tried to open his eyes, but his leaden lids wouldn't budge. Rough and smooth palms intermittently stroked his forehead and patted his arm. His skin puckered as a damp flannel swept across his chest.

*Too cold, too cold...*

At times, he thought he could hear Ron's voice. 'I'm here, Raymond. Don't give up.'

*I'm here too*, he wanted to say, but the words were locked inside his head.

Memories of the past floated aimlessly between decades.

His brother Francis appeared to him as a teenager, strong and angry. 'Be a fuckin' man, Raymond,' he hissed.

*I tried.*

'You've brought this on yourself, Raymond,' Nancy repeated over and over again, pressing her foot down hard on the pedal of her Singer sewing machine.

His mind swirled in a kaleidoscopic jumble of fabric patterns, accompanied by the buzz of a whirring needle.

*Stop. Stop.*

Terrence scowled. 'It's all your fault, Raymond. You're the reason I don't belong.'

*Sorry.*

Mr Sheen emerged from the ocean. 'Come, Raymond.' He beckoned with his finger. 'Come close to me.'

And then the curtain fell.

2015

From: Jenny Cole

Subject: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

Just a quick note to say that we've booked to come down next Tuesday. Arriving at 2pm on Virgin. Departing on Sunday. We can get a taxi to your house. Funeral is at 10am on Thursday at the funeral home in Coburg (White's). No church service.

Your dad hasn't seen his sisters and his brother, Terrence, since their father's funeral, so he's a bit on edge.

Hopefully it will all be okay. You know what these things can be like.

Love you,

Mum.

From: Shane Cole

Subject: Re: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: ColeNF@bigpond.com

Hi Mum,

I can pick you up. Send through your flight number and I'll meet you at the gate. I'll come to the funeral. I want to meet Dad's family. I understand that Dad's 'on edge' but just wanted to reiterate that he needs to be respectful to Charlie (and me).

Love,

Shane

From: Jenny Cole

Subject: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

Thanks for picking us up. We don't know Melbourne that well and I have to admit I was a bit worried about getting a taxi to your house.

We're on Flight VA 318, arriving at 2pm.

I've had a talk to Dad about Charlie. He's changed, Shane. Really, he has! He'll be on his best behaviour.

As for why he's going to the funeral, it's complicated. Let's just pray that it goes well.

Love,

Mum

## ***Patrick***

*Melbourne, Victoria, 2015*

Patrick felt no sense of pride as he charged along at the front of the pack. Being first was a rule. Only losers came second.

The finish line was close. He picked up his stride and sweat trickled down his back in the unseasonal dry heat of the afternoon. He glanced behind him to make sure that there was no-one in his wake. It was all clear. With ten metres to go, his legs and feet worked mechanically. They were numb and overworked but kept going, loyal to his need to be the best.

The pain surged when he stopped. His chest was tight, and he gasped for air. His body screamed at him to collapse in a heap on the ground.

Patrick's coach came over and tapped his stopwatch. 'Good time. You're having a cracking season.'

Patrick nodded.

'You're going to be one of the greats, mate. You have it all – speed, stamina, ability to read the play, and that incredible hoof. There's not many that can kick like you.'

The rest of the Under-16 team began to trickle in and Patrick raised his chin, nostrils flaring, eying them as they crossed the line.

'Well done, Patrick. Good run.'

Patrick needed the praise and recognition. He'd been programmed to think and breathe footy, and he knew his worth hinged on it. It helped putty the cracks of self-doubt. There was only one boy at his school who was the same as him, and look how that had turned out.

*Fag.*

*Poof.*

*Girl.*

The only time he felt he could drop the ball was when he was nestled in the dark hollow of his doona. That was when the fear flowed in his head.

What if they find out?

Patrick had learned how to hide in plain sight. Football provided the perfect camouflage, and he clung to it like a drowning sailor. As long as he continued to kick goals, he knew he could float.

Patrick glanced over at the carpark and saw his dad standing next to the car, stroking his goatee. He eyed him apprehensively, wishing that he was more like the other dads who milled around casually chatting to each other. The dads complimented him on his sporting prowess, which he guessed came from wanting to be connected to his talent. Despite the lavishness of their compliments, he sensed veiled envy beneath their words. It was obvious to Patrick that they all wanted to be the father of the school champion.

Patrick wiped the perspiration from his brow. 'Got to go,' he said to the coach. 'Dad's waiting over at the car.'

'Righto, Patrick. Tell your dad I said you did well today.'

Patrick nodded, even though they both knew that his praise had no value.

'In.'

'What's wrong?' Patrick asked, putting on his seatbelt.

'What do you mean, what's wrong? You know what's bloody wrong.'

'No, I don't.'

His father hit the steering wheel forcefully, and Patrick flinched. 'What have I told you?'

'To be the best,' Patrick mumbled.

'I saw you at the end. I saw you give up before the finish line.'

'I was miles in front.'

'This is about you, not who you're in front of. I've told you to always give one hundred percent, no matter what.'

Patrick looked down at his legs. They still hurt from the exertion and the pressure he had put them under during the run. He felt tears welling and blinked rapidly to regain his composure.

'For god's sake. Are you bloody crying?'

'No.'

'Well, you'd better not. Get a grip and man up.'

Patrick felt a tear slide down his cheek.

'Here's something to cry about,' his father snarled, reaching over to hit Patrick's face with the back of his hand.

\*\*\*

Patrick opened the front door to his home and was greeted by the smell of oversized chicken fillets sizzling in the frying pan. His stomach rumbled, but there was no stab of hunger. He walked straight to the bathroom, peeled off his t-shirt and shorts and kicked them across the bathroom floor. Turning on the shower, he put one foot on its base while he waited for it to get warm.

There was a loud thump on the door.

'Make sure you get into it cold!'

Patrick didn't answer.

His dad thumped the door again. 'Did you hear me?'

Patrick shifted the lever to cold.

He turned and faced the full-length mirror and stared at his naked body. The pride that he normally garnered from viewing the ridges of defined muscle on his torso was replaced by a sinking helplessness. His deep blue eyes traced the faint stripe of red that ran across his cheekbone. He mashed his lips together, biting hard on the fleshy cushioning.

He let the cold water cascade down his body. The pores on his skin protested, standing to attention in dotted rows. He rubbed his arms up and down with the bar of soap, trying to create a wall of warm friction. *Fuck you*, he thought, shivering, as he rinsed his skin clean.

\*\*\*

Patrick took his seat at the dinner table. His father always sat at the head. The television in the lounge was in clear view from his father's seat, its constant drone punctuating the fractured conversation.

‘Make sure you eat all of that chicken. Protein equals performance,’ his father ordered.

Patrick cut off a corner and put it in his mouth. It was leathery and tasteless.

‘Stop all the chewing. Just eat the bloody thing,’ his father snarled, savagely cutting into the chicken breast. He held up a piece of jaggedly cut chicken on the prongs of his fork and waved it in the direction of Patrick’s mother. ‘This is overcooked.’

Patrick’s eyes flicked between his parents. He sat still, doing his best to keep his expression neutral, mechanically using the implements in his hands.

‘Don’t eat it if you don’t like it,’ his mother said, taking her plate from the table. She pushed the foot lever on the bin and then hit the fork with force against the china plate. Scraping her meal into the bin, she let the lid fall with a crash.

‘What’s wrong with you? Are you on your rags?’

‘I’ll be in my room. Pat, make sure you get your homework done.’

His father pushed his chair backwards, sending it screeching across the wooden floor ‘Women. Don’t even try to understand them. They’re all the bloody same. I’m gonna eat in front of the telly. You stay here and finish your plate.’

Patrick closed his eyes and tried to think of a time when it had been different between his parents. His mind sifted through Christmases, Easters and birthdays, searching for a shred of harmonious memory. The only evidence was hanging in a dusty silver frame behind the front door in the hall. His mother had been a beautiful bride; his father’s arm was cinched tightly around her waist.

*How did it unravel? How does it turn into shit?*

\*\*\*

When Patrick returned from his run at seven am, his father’s Ford Falcon was gone. Trying to catch his breath, he leaned against the letterbox at the front of the house and surveyed his street. His neighbour’s automated sprinkler hissed and gurgled before sending jets of water out onto the manicured garden beds. Their house was a newly built, made-to-order home. Patrick had heard the woman who lived there bragging to his mum about how it was a Premium Hampshire, or something like that.

Patrick's home was older – clinker-brick and square, with a carport jammed up against the side. There were other houses like his in the street, but they were thinning out, knocked down and replaced by modern homes with fancy names like his neighbours'.

His mother had created an enviable garden that drew people's eyes away from the house. She preferred native shrubs and trees to the standard white roses that lined most paths in his street.

'The natives attract the birds,' she said. 'And they don't need as much water.' When the banksias flowered, she would cut the woody stems with her secateurs and bring them inside. 'I only have to look at them to feel better,' she'd once said to Patrick.

'Better about what?'

'Never mind.'

Patrick wiped the sweat from his face with the end of his shirt and went inside. He picked up his iPhone from the table. There were three text messages from his father.

**I want you to focus on your speed. Do intervals.**

**You must have left?**

**Call me when you get in.**

His mother walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. 'You know, Pat, you don't have to play footy.'

Patrick looked up at her. 'I can't give it up.'

'But there's too much pressure. Way too much.'

'I can handle it.'

\*\*\*



There were long queues to get on the school bus when Patrick arrived late at the interchange. He squinted into the morning sun, looking for his friends. He heard a sharp whistle and turned his head.

‘Pat, over here!’ someone called from the crowd.

Patrick smiled and ambled over. Being in the firsts football team made him feel powerful. He slipped under the barrier. There weren’t many boys who could bypass the line.

‘Pat, man. Let the great man through, fellas.’

As the sea of boys parted to let him past, Oscar, his best mate, yelled, ‘Had a sleep in, did ya?’

Oscar towered over the other boys. He was stocky, with a large head and thick hair which he was in the process of growing long. It was a mess, and he spent much of the day pushing it out of his eyes and tucking it behind his ears.

Oscar pulled his phone from his pocket. ‘Have you heard about Sally Trimble?’

‘No. What about her?’

Oscar shoved the phone in front of Patrick’s face. ‘Cop a look at this. She sent a picture of her tits to one of my mates, who sent it to me.’

Patrick looked at the photo. ‘How do you know it’s her? You can’t even see her face.’

‘I’ve got my sources, Paddy boy. Now that’s a rack and a half,’ Oscar sniggered, zooming in on the girl’s breasts.

A boy from their class who was standing in front of them in the queue swivelled his head and stared at them disapprovingly.

‘I don’t think this would be of interest to you, Archer,’ Oscar said. ‘Not your type.’

\*\*\*

Mr Banks, the PE teacher, was standing with his clipboard in hand when Patrick arrived at the oval. ‘Ah, Patrick. I’m looking forward to the footy game on Friday afternoon. If we win, we walk straight into the final. No pressure, though,’ he chuckled.

'I'll do my best, Mr Banks.'

'You been training hard?'

'Yep. I've been putting the hours in.'

'Excellent. A hat-trick for the school if we win the cup.'

'We're definitely gonna win, Mr Banks,' Oscar chimed in. 'Paddy will see to that.'

The class gathered in a semi-circle around Mr Banks. 'Right, boys,' he said. 'Let's get going. A warm-up lap of the oval to start with. No dawdling.'

Patrick started the run in the centre of the pack. He thought about staying there for a brief minute, but then his legs switched to autopilot and he sailed to the front.

'See you at the end,' Oscar called out as Patrick ran past him.

Patrick's nostrils flared as he galloped along. He concentrated on his stride, counting the steps. *Now*, he said to himself when he hit the halfway mark. *Go now*.

He stretched out his fingers and pumped his legs. *One, two, one, two*, he counted as his legs mowed down the grass, running at full pace until he reached Mr Banks.

'Well done, Patrick.' Mr Banks beamed.

Patrick nodded and planted his hands on his hips. He kept his body upright and inhaled through his nose, just like his father had told him. As he stood catching his breath, Archer arrived at the oval, cheeks flushed he peered skittishly at Mr Banks through a gap in his blonde fringe.

'Sorry, sir.'

'Not good enough, Archer.' Mr Banks prodded Archer's shoulder and pointed at the boys who were crossing the line. 'What are you waiting for? Get moving. You're holding everyone up. A lap of the oval. Pronto.'

Archer bent down and tightened his shoelace.

'Stop wasting time. Start running!'

Patrick watched Archer take off.

'Right boys, as soon as Archer gets back, we can start.'

All eyes turned and followed Archer as he ran. Oscar nudged Patrick and exclaimed loudly, 'Careful he's not around when you get changed, Paddy – he might try to get a photo of your old fellow.'

'Archer, Archer, Archer,' he chanted, kicking Patrick to join in with the deep-throated choir.

'Archer, Archer, Archer – homo Archer!'

Archer stumbled as he finally reached the finish line. The wind had whipped his cheeks, patterning them mottled shades of purple and pink. Patrick couldn't be sure if it was because of the cold or the chanting. He watched Archer sit down on the grass and hang his head. He could see the rise and fall of his chest as he tore at the small tufts of grass by his feet. He continued to pick at them until he had a handful and then he abruptly threw the green grass into the wind.

Mr Banks blew his whistle. 'Okay, boys. Eyes this way. Get up, Archer. We've waited for you long enough already. Right, lads, choose teams.'

All the boys let out a collective cheer, except for Archer, who hung his head and shut his eyes.

\*\*\*

Patrick was completely exhausted when he arrived home. His stomach sank when he saw his father's car parked in the carport.

Entering the house, he heard soft footsteps in the kitchen.

'Dinner's ready.'

'Thanks, Mum.'

And in a lowered voice, she added, 'Just a heads up. Dad's in a bad mood.'

His father was sitting at the table with the television blaring in the background. He eyed Patrick as he walked into the kitchen but didn't say anything.

'Hi, Dad,' Patrick ventured.

His father nodded.

His mother rolled her eyes behind him, and then carried the plates over and put them on the table. 'Steak and chips tonight.'

His father stared at his cutlery. 'I need a steak knife.'

'You know where the drawer is. Feel free to help yourself.'

'You're in the kitchen, though.'

'Yes. I am.'

'So would it be too much to ask, after a full day at work, for you to get me a bloody decent knife?'

'I work too, you know.'

'You work part-time at a chemist. Half your life is a bloody holiday.'

'You know what?'

'What?'

'You're an arsehole.'

As his father carved into the meat, the anticipated retort came swift and vicious. 'Yep, I'm the arsehole who pays the bills.'

When his mother sat down at the table, Patrick could hear the fury in her breathing, her anger manifesting into loud clinks and scrapes as she dragged the cutlery across her plate.

'I'm taking Friday afternoon off. So that I can come to the footy game at school.'

Patrick wiped his mouth with his hand. 'You don't need to come, Dad.'

'Yeah, I do. That coach doesn't know his arse from his elbow. There'll be scouts there and I don't want him cocking things up.'

\*\*\*

After dinner, Patrick went straight to his room. He picked up his phone from his desk and scrolled through Instagram. Selfies flooded his feed; he flicked through dozens of photos of girls posing in underwear with full faces of make-up until he arrived at a photo Oscar had taken of the two of them in the locker room. The boys stared at the camera with their chins tilted upwards and their jaws thrust out. "Brothers In Arms," Oscar had captioned the snap, and tagged them both. Patrick sighed, liked the post, then double-clicked on the home button to shuffle through to his Kik account, an online chat that he had been introduced to by Oscar to converse about footy, girls and sex. He'd quickly grown sick of it and had rarely logged on until recently, when he had created a clandestine account and username. The Kik account had been a

limp-bodied afterthought, but it was one that he hadn't regretted, especially since he'd met Corey.

Patrick had found Corey in a chat called Gay Teens Melbourne, after taking over an hour to work up the courage to type a basic greeting.

*Hi, he'd finally written. I'm Peter.*

Corey had been the first to respond.

*Hey Peter, he had typed. I'm Corey. You new here?*

*Yes.*

*Out?*

*?*

*Are you out? As in gay?*

*No.*

*Switch to direct message?*

*Ok.*

It had been two weeks since their first exchange, and Patrick had been messaging Corey every day since.

*U there Corey.*

*Yep.*

*Wot u doin.*

*Homework... You?*

*Chilling b4 I start.*

*You mean procrastinatnr*

*\*procrastinating*

*Yeah...exactly cbs with homework. I play a lot of sport so always tired at night*

*😓.*

*I hate sport*

*Why?*

*Bc I suck at it and also I hate teams*

*Why u hate teams?*

*Bc they're filled with dickheads... 🍷🤡*

*Hey, I'm not a dickhead and I play footy*

*Ok one exception.*

*LOL... So, where in Melbourne do u live?*

*Why?*

*Just curious.*

*Bi-curious? LOL... I'd prefer not to say where I live. I've been burnt before.*

*Burnt? Bi-curious?*

*Yeah, giving out personal deets. You need to educate yourself, Peter.*

*Wot happened with the deets? And yeh I know.*

*They found my FB account and started putting shit on my page. Now I keep everything private. Recommend you do the same.*

*Ok... will do.*

*Let's just say, where I go to school its social suicide to be gay. Wot about for u?*

*It would be bad. Worse than bad.*

*So... does anyone know about you?*

*No.*

*Parents have any idea?*

*No... Fuck... No way. What about your parents?*

*Yeh, they no.*

*And?*

*First they asked me if I was sure. Like fuck...*

*Then?*

*They were fine. Gave me the speech...we love you know matter what, etc.*

*Bought me some books.*

*Books?*

*Queer books...Kind of like birds and the bees for gay teenagers, lmao*

*My dad would punch me in the head.*

*Really?*

*Yeah really.*

*Yr mum?*

*She'd be shocked but not like my dad.*

*Yr friends?*

*Don't go there.*

*Why?*

*It makes me feel sick.*

*U need new friends then.*

*Not possible.*

*Anything's possible.*

*Haha... not in this case.*

*Hey Peter. I have to go. Sorry. Chat tomorrow?*

*Sure. Bye Corey.*

He started thinking about a boy he'd gone to primary school with. John Scott had been the first boy to garner his attention. It had happened in the blink of an eye, in the change rooms at a swimming pool. One minute Patrick had been thinking about where he'd put his goggles and the next John Scott had emerged from a toilet cubicle wearing board shorts. Patrick had stared for a fraction too long at his smooth olive skin and corrected himself just in the nick of time, sticking his blushing face back into his swimming bag. But the mental imprint of John's body and the rush of desire that he'd felt had never left him.

The thought of John always caused Patrick to reach down into his underwear. He shut his eyes and imagined how it would feel to have his olive skin pressed against his body and his lips nestled into the soft junction of his neck...

\*\*\*

Patrick was woken up by a gentle knock on his door.

'Pat, are you awake? Can I come in?'

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock beside his bed. 'Yep.'

His mum pushed the door open and sat on the end of his bed. She reached over and gently rubbed his leg, just like she'd done when he was small boy, frightened by a nightmare or a storm. 'Sorry to come in so late, but I really need to talk to you.'

'Are you okay?'

Tears welled in her eyes. 'Yes and no.'

Patrick sat up. 'Dad?'

'Yes. The thing is, Pat...I've tried, really, I have,' she whispered.

She blinked and tears spilled from her eyes. Patrick reached over to his bedside table and plucked a handful of tissues from the box that sat on top of it.

'Here,' he said, handing her a wodge.

Leanne blew her nose and rubbed her eyes, creating a smudgy black circle of eyeliner in the hollow under her eye.

Patrick knew what was coming before the words spilled from her lips. 'You're leaving, aren't you?'

She nodded. 'I have to.'

'Why do you have to leave? Shouldn't it be Dad who goes? Where are you going to?'

'I have a friend from work with a spare room. It's temporary, but it will give me time to work things out.'

Patrick retracted his hand and pressed his palms against his temple. *No.*

'It will be okay. I promise I'll sort something out. I hate myself for doing this to you, but I can't stay. I just can't.'

After she had left, Patrick curled into a ball. His throat and head ached as thoughts of himself alone in the house with his father flooded his head.

*Take me with you, Mum. Please take me with you.*

\*\*\*



Leanne had packed while Patrick was at school and was gone by the time he got home. She had put a casserole in the slow cooker and left a note for him on his bed.

*Call me whenever you like. Be strong and be brave. I love you.*

*Mum xxx*

Patrick ladled some of the casserole into a bowl and sat down at the table. He heard his father's car pull into the driveway and lifted the spoon to his mouth.

His father walked through the door a few minutes later. Throwing his keys down on to the kitchen bench, he walked over to the stove and lifted the lid of casserole pot. He bent over it, inhaling the steam that rose. 'What's this slop?'

'Beef and vegetables.'

'Looks like shit.'

He served himself a bowl and took it through to the lounge, where he sat on his chair and flicked the television on with the remote.

Patrick ate silently at the table. When he'd finished, he got up and put his bowl in the sink.

'Oi! Who do you think's gonna clean that? The kitchen fairies? And don't even think about blaming me for this. I'm not the one who walked out and left you.'

Patrick opened the dishwasher and put his plate in.

'And then get your stuff ready for the game tomorrow. Early to bed so you don't screw it up.'

Patrick got into bed with his phone and saw a text from his mum in the notifications.

**Mum: All ok?**

**Pat: Yes.**

Patrick logged into Kik.

*You there Corey?*

*Yep*

*Doing homework?*

*Yep. You?*

*In bed*

*A bit early*

*Nothing else to do*

*You ok?*

Patrick hovered his finger over the text bar.

*Yeah. Just got some family shit happening.*

*You wanna talk?*

*Nothing anyone can do. My mum's left my dad. I think they're getting a divorce.*

*Shit. Sorry. That's hard.*

Text received 9.31pm

**Mum: Good luck for the game tomorrow. I'll be there. xxx**

\*\*\*

Patrick felt nervous when he stepped out onto the field. He scanned the perimeter of the oval looking for his father, who always chose a vantage point close to the action and away from the crowd. Patrick jogged on the spot, lifting his knees up high to his waist as the umpires walked to the centre of the ground and called the captains over from each side.

'Patrick!' someone screamed from the boundary.

Patrick didn't look over. *Focus*, he told himself. *Win*.

The umpire flicked a coin into the air. Patrick's school won the toss, and their captain chose to kick toward the north end of the ground. The siren sounded and the players took their positions. The umpire held the ball high in the air, blew his whistle

and bounced it onto the middle square. Patrick's ruckman won the tap and he pounced. He caught the ball, ran with it, bounced it once and then kicked it toward the home goal.

The crowd erupted.

The ball sailed toward his teammate, who fumbled and lost possession.

The crowd groaned.

'Fuck,' Patrick muttered.

The opposition bulleted the ball down to the other end, where it was marked. Their player took his time and kicked it cleanly through the centre posts. The goal umpire waved his white flags. Goal.

The score wavered throughout the match, each team taking the lead. At three-quarter time, Patrick's school was down by thirteen points.

The coach unleashed his fury at the boys. 'I'm not seeing second and third efforts. Talk to each other. Man up. Shepherd!' he roared.

Patrick sucked on an orange segment, breathing heavily through his nose.

His father approached. 'You're not reading the play,' he spat in his ear. 'You're making stupid mistakes. Get it right.'

Patrick tensed as his father's fingers dug into the flesh under his arm.

'Listen to me, not that dickhead coach.'

'Boys,' the coach said. 'Gather round.'

'I've got to go, Dad.'

His father gave him a sharp nod and one last painful squeeze. Patrick moved toward the coach, put his head down and tried to concentrate on what he was saying but the words tangled together. Patrick blinked but couldn't focus.

*It's up to me, he thought. I have to win the game.*

The siren blared across the oval and the players took their positions. Patrick glanced over to the eastern barrier and saw his father standing and watching. Adrenaline surged through his body.

Patrick breathed deeply, willing himself to be calm.

*Focus, focus, focus,* he said to himself.

The ball came into possession. The player booted it toward Patrick.

The crowd ignited. 'Patrick, Patrick, Patrick!' The chant reverberating around the oval.

It was a bad kick. Patrick propelled his body sideways, valiantly stretching out his arms, and marked the ball. One leg twisted awkwardly as he fell to the ground, thirty metres from goal.

His leg was injured. He hobbled into position and punched his leg, desperately trying to get his blood flowing to the weakened area.

He looked over to the boundary and saw his father, aimed at the goal, and kicked the ball. It missed. His leg collapsed, and he hit the ground. He lay curled in a ball with his head on the muddy grass until one of his teammates came over and pulled him up.

As Patrick limped across the oval, he felt numb and broken. He'd given everything, but it wasn't enough.

He sat on a bench inside the club rooms, leaned back against the wall and shut his eyes, wishing that he could go to sleep and block everything out.

'Well, you stuffed that up good and proper, didn't you?' his father yelled when he got home. 'I've put my heart and bloody soul into you, Patrick. I've done everything humanly possible to help you, and you're just pissing it away. That kick was child's play. A fuckin' basic action that you should have been able to do in your sleep.'

'I hurt my leg.'

'Just piss off. Get out of my sight before I fuckin' lose it.'

Text Received 8.10pm

**Mum: I really am sorry. I know how hard this is on you. How did it go with your dad? Love you. xx**

Text Received 8.15pm

**Oscar: Are you still coming to Sally Trimble's party? Might cop a look at her tits. LOL**

\*\*\*

Patrick shivered as the winter wind whipped through his thin cotton pants and sent discarded chip packets and wads of Gladwrap into a whirlpool around his feet. There was only a handful of schoolkids waiting for the last bus. There were no familiar faces or friends to shout out his name. Patrick pulled his jacket close to his chest. *If the bus doesn't come in the next five minutes, I'll just go home*, he thought.

Three minutes later, he heard the purr of the engine. He sighed and heaved his bag onto his shoulder. There was a loud hiss before the bus door opened. Patrick climbed the steps, flashed his pass at the driver and looked to the back of the bus where he and his friends normally sat before sliding into a seat halfway down the aisle.

The driver closed the door and then abruptly opened it again. Patrick saw Archer scramble up the steps, out of breath and dishevelled, frantically searching for his bus pass.

The driver exhaled loudly and waved Archer through. 'Don't worry about it.'

Archer sat down in the seat directly behind the driver and slumped, keeping his head bent forward, not moving for the rest of the journey.

Patrick stood up just before they arrived at school and walked down the aisle, pausing when he got to Archer's row, wondering if he should acknowledge him.

'Hi.'

Archer glanced up at him and nodded, then quickly diverted his gaze to the window. The bus came to a stop and the driver opened the door. Patrick bounded down the stairs, losing his footing as he made contact with the asphalt. He stumbled forward and pinwheeled his arms, fighting for balance. His phone shot out of his blazer pocket and smacked on the ground.

'Shit,' Patrick said, and quickly retrieved it. He turned it over and his heart sank. The left-hand corner of the screen had shattered.

Archer came down the stairs behind him.

Patrick held his phone out. 'I smashed it.'

Archer's eyes flicked from the phone to Patrick and then shrugged. 'Shit happens.'

Patrick stared at him. *Who the fuck does he think he is, talking to me like that? No-one talks that way to me.* 'Piss off, fag,' he hissed and took a step toward him.

Archer flinched and moved his head a fraction backwards.

The bell had already sounded by the time Patrick entered the locker rooms and dumped his bag onto the floor. He leaned against his locker and took his phone from his pocket, running his finger over the broken screen. The damage was worse than he'd thought. The fracture in the glass zigzagged all the way down to the home button. Patrick scowled, swiped left on Oscar's latest text and deleted it. He bent over and removed the textbooks that he'd need for the next few classes and then jammed his bag into his locker. He left the combination lock swinging open, knowing that no-one would dare rifle through his belongings. Kids didn't target people like him. It was an unwritten rule. When you played in the firsts, you were untouchable.

Mr Banks the PE teacher was also Patrick's homeroom teacher, which gave Patrick a degree of leeway when it came to lateness. Mr Banks understood the demands of playing football. Sometimes it seemed to Patrick that his all teachers were more interested in his results on the field than in the classroom. Mr Johns, his English teacher, was one of the few exceptions.

'The bones are there, Patrick,' he'd said, in relation to a text response that Patrick had written about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 'You just need to work on fleshing out your ideas. Think about what the author is trying to say in relation to social hierarchy and relate it to your own experiences.'

'I don't have experience with that,' Patrick mumbled.

'I think you do. That's the beauty of literature such as this. It makes us conscious of the subconscious and it helps us to examine our lives in the context of others. Sometimes how we are perceived is entirely different to who we are.'

Patrick pushed open the classroom door and a mass of heads swivelled and looked up at him.

'Paddy!' Oscar yelled.

Oscar pushed his chair out and patted the seat. 'How come you didn't answer any of my messages or come to Sally Trimble's party?'

'I lost my phone charger.'

Oscar screwed up his face. 'And you couldn't have borrowed one from your parents?'

Patrick shrugged his shoulders. 'S'pose I could've.'

'You missed a good night. You'll never guess who I hooked up with.'

Patrick rolled his eyes. 'Sally, and wait, don't tell me, you saw her tits.'

Oscar looked at him with a puzzled frown. 'What's up your arse?'

He looked at Oscar's hulking face and imagined slamming his fist into it.

The bell rang piercingly through the classroom's intercom. The boys sprang from their seats. Patrick picked up his books and headed straight for the door.

\*\*\*

There was no car in the driveway when Patrick arrived home from school. He went to his bedroom, kicked off his shoes and climbed into bed. He shut his eyes, breathed in and out through his nose and tried to relax his body.

His phone beeped and he reached down to his bag to retrieve it from the side pocket.

Text Received 4.36pm

**Dad: Why haven't you been for a run yet?**

Patrick looked over to his desk at his running band, which was coiled next to his lamp. Anger pitted in a hard lump in his chest. He gripped his phone tightly, raised his arm and contemplated throwing it against the wall.

'*Fuck!*' he screamed, instead of hurling the phone. 'Fuck you all!'

Patrick strapped the band to his chest and stepped out into the dappled late-afternoon sun. His neighbour was outside collecting her mail.

She waved at him. 'Hi, Patrick. Off for a run?'

'Yeah.'

She held up her hand, signalling for him to stay put. 'Have you got a minute?'

Patrick nodded.

She took the letters from the box and walked over to him. 'How is everything?' she asked in a tone that suggested she knew things were far from fine.

'Good.'

'I haven't seen your mum's car in a while. Is she away?'

Patrick nodded.

'How long for?'

Patrick reached for his earbuds, which dangled around his neck. 'Not sure,' he said, and pressed them into his ears. 'I've got to go.'

As soon as he got back from his run, he logged on to Kik.

*Corey. You there?*

*Corey...?*

\*\*\*

Patrick woke on Friday morning with a sense of foreboding. He rolled over and looked at the time on his bedside clock. It was a few minutes after six. He stretched his arms and legs and then curled into a ball.

His father banged on his door and stuck his head into the room. His thinning hair was sticking up in comical angles, revealing large patches of bald scalp. Patrick wasn't sure why he didn't just shave it off. It looked ridiculous.

'Come on, get up.'

Patrick got out of bed and hastily put his clothes on. His school shirt was a mass of wrinkles and the underarms reeked. Since his mum had left, the washing had steadily banked up in a corner of his bedroom. It seemed longer than a week since she'd gone and he kept expecting her to walk into the kitchen, smelling of tea-rose perfume, wearing her pink dressing-gown.

\*\*\*



*Hey Corey*

*How's things?*

*Pretty meh*

*Wdym? Ur dad treating u like shit?*

*Yeah, nothing new tho. Dad's on my back bout footy. U should try having a Nazi dad on your arse all day*

*Tell him to piss off*

*He'd lose it*

*Report his arse*

*To who?*

*Idk. Cops?*

*Hi cops my dad's a Nazi bitch. Arrest him*

*Lol. Fair point*

*Ur lucky that ur mum and dad are so nice to you.*

*Yeah but I get called a fag every day at school, so I guess that makes us even*

*IDK why u don't talk shit back at them*

*Same thing could be said for yr dad*

*Not rlly, having a shit dad is different to a shit friend.*

*Friend? The 30 people who say this shit to me daily aren't my friends*

*Tru. U really need to talk with ur fists, Corey*

*Not going to happen*

*I wish I could help u mate, I reckon I could fuck em up.*

*Ur all talk, Peter*

*If someone called me a fag, I'd make them wish they were dead*

*They won't call u a fag, cos u spend most of ur time pretending to be straight*

*I have to*

*No u don't*

*U don't know what my life is like*

*Tru but ppl are gonna find out eventually*

*Not if I don't say anything*

*Trust, they will*

*Nah, Anyways I don't wanna play footy past school, so then maybe I can think about it*

*Wait what? Have u told ur dad this? I thought you were going to the AFL?*

*Nah and nah*

*U serious?*

*I think so. I'm starting to hate it. I've got a big game tomorrow, so I've just got to suck it up for a while*

*What will u do instead of footy?*

*Idrk, probably just chill*

*Why not quit now?*

*I can't*

*Yea, you can. Simple. Just say...I quit*

*My dad would freak. Seriously freak*

*So let him freak*

*I want to live*

*He sounds pretty bad*

*Yep he's bad. Scary bad*

*Shit, Peter. Are u ok?*

*Sort of*

*U need to go live with yr mum*

*Can't, no room*

*Grandparents?*

*Dead*

*You should talk to someone about yr dad*

*I'm talking to u*

*Maybe a counsellor? You sound pretty down*

*Yeah, I won't lie. I feel pretty shit. I've got a pain in my head that hurts bad*

*You're scaring me. Are you ok?*

*Yea. I'll be ok. Just good to talk, u know. I don't have anyone else that I can say shit to*

*Like I keep saying. I'm always here for a chat Peter. If yr low, just message me*

*Thanks. Yr a good friend*

*xx*

*Lol... That's a bit gay for me*

*xxxxxxx*

*Stop it*

*Ha*

*GTG. Speak tomorrow?*

*Yep xoxox*

*Piss off*

*\*\*\**

As soon as Patrick stepped out onto the oval, he closed his eyes and tried to visualise how he'd play the game. When he opened them, he didn't look to the sideline or over at the grandstand. Instead, he focussed on the red ball tucked under the umpire's arm.

The siren screamed. The ball was thrown into the air, and the opposition tapped it neatly toward their goals. Patrick charged. Seconds later the ball was in his possession and he ran with it, bouncing it along the way, making it to the fifty-metre line in seconds. He could see that the forwards were in position, waiting for his kick.

He knew he should kick the ball to them but chose not to because he wanted first blood. He handballed the football to a teammate and sprinted ahead.

'Here!' he screamed, when he knew he was far enough ahead to take the mark.

The boy nodded and kicked the ball cleanly to him. Patrick caught it and in a fluid motion, ran and kicked it straight between the goalposts. 'Yes!' he yelled, pumping his fist in the air.

At half time, his team huddled in the change rooms. They were forty points ahead. Patrick had kicked five goals.

The coach stood in the middle, shuffling players' positions around on his magnetic white board. 'Right, boys. This is how we're going to play the next quarter,' he said, and began to read out their positions.

Patrick didn't hear his name.

'Patrick, you're playing well, but this is not a one-man band,' the coach said. 'You can start on the bench. Give yourself a breather and then we'll put you on.'

'You're joking,' his father snarled from the corner of the room.

The coach ignored him.

'Are you coaching the Girl Scouts or a bloody football team?' his father asked furiously. 'He's the best player out there.'

The coach looked up at his father, shook his head and put his finger to his lips.

His father's face went red. 'Don't tell me to shut up about my own son.'

'Not the time or place to air your grievances, Terry. Have a chat to me later,' the coach said calmly.

The room went quiet. Everyone's eyes bounced from Patrick to his father. Patrick dropped his head and stared at the concrete floor.

'Too right I will, and –'

'Okay, boys,' the coach interjected. 'Let's get out there and win.'

Patrick sat on the wooden bench near the coach's box and swung his legs impatiently. *That's my goal*, he thought when the captain of his team booted one through the white sticks, and watched as his teammates surrounded him, patting him on the back with huge grins on their faces. *That should be me. I'm the best on the team. Not you.*

The adrenaline that had rushed through Patrick's body in the first half had completely gone. After a few minutes, he stopped moving his legs and stared with glazed eyes at the players. He blinked, trying to focus, and then gave up and hunched his body, placing his head in his hands.

The coach tapped him on the shoulder. 'All right, Patrick. You're the next interchange. Remember what I said – don't be selfish with the ball. Got it?'

'Yep.'

'Are you okay?'

'Yep.'

'I want you to go in as fullback.'

'Why?'

'Because I said so, that's why.'

'I can't kick goals from the backline.'

'That's the point.'

'They can stick their school footy up their arse,' his father said in the car on the way home. 'If it wasn't for you, they'd be sitting in a loser's circle. That coach is a washed-up has been. Putting you in the bloody backline, is he on drugs? You're a fuckin' goal-kicker, not a bloody backline player. I'm in two minds about you playing for the school. That team would be nothing without you. Maybe you should just stick to club football. Don't want that dickhead ruining any recruitment chances.'

Patrick stared out the window.

\*\*\*

Oscar spent the weekend bombarding Patrick with texts until Patrick gave in and responded on Sunday evening.

**Oscar: Are u dead?**

**Patrick: Na, just had heaps on and haven't checked my phone**

**Oscar: Bullshit**

**Patrick: Tru. Speak tomorrow**

**Oscar: Yr acting strange**

**Patrick: All g. Like I said. Talk tomorrow**

Patrick switched off his phone and pulled his maths textbook out of his bag. He had a pile of work that had to be done by Monday. He thought about emailing Mr

Banks for another extension but decided that there was no point in delaying the inevitable.

He chewed on the end of his pencil and started reading through the list of algebraic fractions, wishing that he'd paid more attention in class.

Just as he put his pencil to the paper –

'Patrick, come into the kitchen.'

'Why?' he shouted back.

'Cos I said so.'

Patrick put the pencil down. 'All right, coming.'

His father was sitting at the table, scrolling through his phone. 'You're gonna be late for school on Thursday,' he said without taking his eyes off the phone.

'Why?'

'We've got to go to a funeral. My brother died.'

'I thought you hated your brothers?'

'Not both of them. Just the one who died. He's the no-hoper. The other one's all right, and he's coming down from Queensland for the funeral. I want you to meet him.'

'Why do you hate the one who died?'

'Cos he's a drug-taking poofster who fucked up my life.'

Patrick winced.

His father put his phone down on the table and met his eye. 'It wasn't enough that he was a poof. He had to drag us all into it. Even showed up at my school when I was a kid with a bloke in tow and minced around in front of my mates.'

'Minced?'

'Yeah. I never lived it down.'

It had never occurred to Patrick to ask his father for much detail about his family. He knew that his grandparents had died before he was born and that he had a couple of aunties and uncles floating around the country, but there had been no contact with them throughout his childhood. There had been mutterings over the years about how hard his dad's childhood had been, but to Patrick, these were all

inconsequential statements about a life and people that he didn't know. There were no photographs of them or family stories. It was as though his dad had bypassed childhood and just turned up as an adult.

'So why go to the funeral?'

'To see my oldest brother. Who knows when he'll be back down from Queensland? He left home before I was born, so I don't know him like I should. He's a good bloke. Loves the footy'

\*\*\*

*Hey*

*Hey Corey*

*Feeling better?*

*Yeah, a bit.*

*Just thought I should check.*

*Tks.*

*xxxx*

*Fuck...stop that shit*

*Lol. So, you ever hooked up with a guy?*

*No. You?*

*Yeah, once.*

*Where?*

*Went to a Minus 18 thing*

*Minus 18?*

*Yeah. It's social group. They have events and shit. I went to a dance party and well, things kind of just happened with a random guy.*

*Things?*

*Yeah, we hooked up.*

*What did you do with him?*

*That's personal.*

*Like just kiss?*

*Pretty much.*

*Wot was it like?*

*Um, good. You should go to an event.*

*Na. Not possible.*

*There u go again.*

*Like I keep sayin, we're different.*

*No, not different. We're actually on the same team.*

*Our situation is different.*

*Only cos you hide.*

*Yea. I have no choice.*

*Not tru. You have a choice, you just don't wanna make it.*

*Hey Corey, I've GG.*

*Ok. Cya.*

\*\*\*

Oscar accosted Patrick in the locker rooms on Monday morning. 'What's up your arse?' he asked.

'Nothing. Just been busy.'

'Too busy for your mates?'

'Seriously, Pat. You've changed. You don't hang out with the boys anymore. You don't answer your messages. I just wanna know what the fuck's going on.'

Patrick clenched his right hand and then forced himself to relax it. 'Nothing's going on.'

Oscar took a step backwards and nodded conciliatorily. 'All right, I get it. We just miss you, bro. That's all.' He looked over Patrick's shoulder and saw Archer standing by his locker. 'Are you listening in on our conversation, fag?'

'Why would I be interested in what you've got to say?' Archer shot back.

'It's probably not what we're saying that interests you,' Oscar retorted.

Patrick put his hand on Oscar's shoulder. 'Just leave it.'



Oscar looked at him for a second, his eyebrows arched quizzically. 'Leave it? Who the fuck does he think he is?'

Patrick could see the tension in Archer's shoulders as he started to load books from his bag into his locker. Oscar walked over to him, grabbed him by the blazer lapel, and spun him around. 'Talk to me like that again, fag. Go on. Do it to my face.'

Archer's face went red. 'Get your hands off me.'

Oscar forced a laugh. 'Ooh, you're terrifying me.' He took hold of Archer's blazer pocket and forcefully pushed him backwards, tearing the pocket from its seams. 'Oops, sorry about that. Have a good day.'

The bell rang and Oscar sauntered off, leaving Patrick behind. Archer glared at Patrick, running his hand over the damaged pocket.

Patrick stood awkwardly. He swallowed a couple of times unsure of what to say. 'You should have just ignored him,' he finally blurted out.

'Should I?'

'Yeah.'

'Thanks for the advice. So nice of you.'

Patrick rubbed his hand back and forth over his chin, unable to understand why Archer had spoken back to Oscar. 'You know what he's like. You asked for it.'

\*\*\*

Text received: 12.46pm

**Mum: Hi Pat. Are you free after school tonight? I thought I might pick you up and we could get a bite/drink together?**

**Patrick: Yeah. Can do.**

**Mum: Great, will be out the front of school at 3.30. See you then xxx.**

Patrick almost collided with Archer and his parents in his rush to leave school to meet his mum.

'Sorry,' he said, before he realised who it was.

Archer scowled at Patrick and nudged his mum with his elbow.

A surge of heat rose in Patrick's cheeks when his eyes locked for a second on Archer's mum's frosty frown. 'Let's go, Archer,' she said, and shepherded him toward the door.

Patrick gave them a minute and then followed them down the school's winding driveway. Archer walked briskly, cushioned between his parents. Archer's mum glanced back when they were nearly at the exit, and Patrick quickly looked down at his phone.

When he thought it was safe, he lifted his head and was shocked to see Archer's mum walking toward him.

'Patrick, isn't it?' she asked, stopping in front of him.

'Um, yes.'

There was a distinctive line etched across her brow that didn't budge as she spoke. 'You know my son, Archer?'

'Yeah.'

'He told me not to talk to you,' she said. 'But I just want to know why.'

'Why?'

'Why you do it?'

'Do what?'

'Be so mean.'

'I'm not.'

'Do you really believe that?'

Patrick shrugged.

Archer's mum sighed. 'It's not hard to be kind, Patrick. You should try it. It really makes you feel better about yourself.'

'I'm not even the one who says stuff to him.'

'Maybe. But you stand with those that do and that's just as bad, if not worse. Anyway, I just wanted to ask. Just to make sense of it and you in my mind. Have a good life, Patrick.'

Patrick saw his mum's car parked right in front of the school entrance. The unease in his stomach was momentarily comforted by her presence. He walked over to the passenger side and as she opened the door for him, he could smell her tea-rose perfume. Tears unexpectedly pricked his eyes. He brushed them away with the sleeve of his blazer.

Patrick's mind drifted back to his childhood. His mum had always been the first parent to arrive for school pick-up. He would look up from his desk and see her peeping through the classroom window, holding up whatever she'd brought him for afternoon tea. It had made him feel proud that she was his mum. He'd never told her that he felt that way, it hadn't seemed necessary at the time, but now he overwhelmingly wished that he had.

As he secured the car door his mum smiled and squeezed his knee. 'There's something I need to tell you. I've found a two-bedroom flat that's affordable and not too far from school. I've increased my hours at the chemist, and I reckon we could just about scrape by. What do you think, Pat?'

Patrick didn't answer her straight away. He pictured telling his father and knew that there would be no going back once he'd told him he was moving out. He knew how his father worked, and how he would consider it the ultimate act of treachery.

'How will I tell Dad?'

As she leaned over and brushed his hair back with her hand, Patrick saw a flicker of fear pass across her eyes.

'I can do it,' she said. 'I owe that to you.'

'It doesn't matter who tells him. He's going to...'

'Yes. It won't be good.'

'When will we do it?'

'After I've signed the lease on the flat.'

\*\*\*

Patrick's phone pinged.

Text received: 9.29am

**Mum: Just letting you know that I signed the lease today.**

**Patrick: Great. When will we tell Dad?**

**Mum: Sunday.**

**Patrick: OK**

As the car approached the church, his father started. 'Just a few pointers before we arrive. My sisters will be there, and they're meddling pains in the arse. Steer clear of them and tell them nothing. They'll be poking their noses into everything and they're manipulative, like your mother.'

A wash of dread passed over Patrick. 'So what do I say if they talk to me?'

'Just say you've got to go to the toilet or something.'

'How long will we be there for?'

'Not long. Just enough to talk to my brother. I'm gonna invite him back to the house for a few beers.'

'Okay.'

'Make sure you talk about your footy. If you have to talk to anyone, tell them that you're gonna play AFL. That'll keep them off the personal topics.'

'What if they ask about Mum?'

'Just say she's at work. My private life is none of their bloody business.'

The funeral had already started by the time they found a carpark. His father opened the door to the chapel and motioned for Patrick to sit in the back row.

Patrick scanned the room. There were no familiar faces. A wiry man with leathery skin was standing at the lectern, midway through the eulogy, tears running down his cheeks.

' – but now when I look back at it, I realise that he was a lot stronger than me. He did the hard yards. He stayed and cleaned up the mess. He made sure that everyone else was safe. He kept the wheels moving forward. I never said thanks. I never picked up the phone for a chat, or to see how he was. I discarded him. Threw him aside cos I didn't think he measured up. I see now that I was wrong. I wish I'd seen it sooner. I wish I'd said goodbye. So many regrets. Rest in peace, my brother.'

His father squirmed in his seat. 'Fuck me,' he whispered under his breath when the service had concluded. 'Wait for me by the door. I won't be long. Just gonna speak with my brother, and then we'll go. Don't forget, just talk about footy.'

Patrick positioned himself by the exit, pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled through Instagram. He looked up after a few minutes and saw two men walking toward him. They were both tall. One was pale-skinned and the other tanned.

'Hey, mate,' the man with the fair complexion said, holding out his hand.

Patrick shook it hesitantly, surprised by the tight grip and the warmth of the man's palms.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Patrick.'

'How old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

'How do you fit in here?'

'I'm here with my dad, Terry.'

'Shit. You're my cousin. Nice to meet you,' he said. Then his cousin put his hand on the other man's shoulder. 'This is Charlie.'

Charlie smiled warmly. 'G'day, Patrick.'

'What year are you in at school?' his cousin asked.

Patrick's mouth went dry and he swallowed rapidly. 'Year Ten.'

'Only a few years to go,' Charlie said with forced cheeriness. 'Any idea what you want to do afterwards?'

'Play footy,' Patrick replied, now avoiding eye contact altogether.

'You must be good,' his cousin said.

Patrick lifted his chin into the air and nodded his head. 'Yeah. I'm the best at my school.'

His cousin and the other man stared at him for a second. Patrick could see contempt wash over their eyes.

'Well, good luck with it,' his cousin finally said, then sighed. 'Maybe see you at the next family get-together.'

Patrick watched as them as they walked over and joined in a conversation with his father and the man who'd read the eulogy.

'*Jesus!*' his father yelled out.

The small crowd's conversational murmur stopped immediately, and all heads turned toward his father, who was pointing his car keys at the old man. Patrick couldn't hear what he was saying, but he knew that he was in the midst of a full-blown altercation.

His father suddenly threw his arms into the air and then stormed across the room toward Patrick. He grabbed him roughly by the arm. 'Come on, Patrick. We're leaving.'

His father punched the steering wheel and then turned the key in the ignition. Patrick sat rigidly in his seat, too scared to ask what had happened.

His father rammed the gear stick into reverse and backed erratically out of the car space. 'Fuck!' he yelled. 'They're all dead to me. You hear me? Fuckin' dead to me!'

Patrick glanced over at him and saw the anger in his bulging eyes.

'Fuck,' his father kept saying. 'Fuck them. It's just you and me, Patrick. We don't need anyone else. He has the nerve to introduce me to his poofster son and his fuckin' boyfriend, like it's nothing. Expects me to smile and lay down the red carpet and goes all soft about our dead junkie brother.'

Patrick sat picking at a flap of skin next to his thumbnail. He peeled it down, exposing red, raw flesh, and then ripped it off with his teeth. Blood seeped from the wound and dripped down his hand.

Patrick looked at his thumb and then tore the skin down further.

\*\*\*

*U there Corey?*

Patrick waited a few minutes, but there was no response, so he pushed his phone aside and surveyed his room, wondering what he should take with him to the new flat.

His bookshelf was crammed with gold medals and trophies that he'd won over the years. Last year, they had been a source of pride and measure, but now, he thought, they were worthless trinkets from a different life.

\*\*\*

Text received: 9.46pm.

**Mum: I'll come around tomorrow to tell your dad about the flat**

**Patrick: Maybe we should wait a few days**

**Mum: Why?**

**Patrick: His brother died**

**Mum: Which one?**

**Patrick: Ray or something like that**

**Mum: He hated him**

**Patrick: I know, but he's acting weird**

**Mum: Weird?**

**Patrick: He keeps going on about trusting me**

**Mum: You are trustworthy**

**Patrick: I'm worried about what he'll do when I say I'm going**

**Mum: I know. But I'll be there too**

**Patrick: Ok**

**Mum: See you tomorrow. I'll be there at 5**

**Patrick: Are we going to take my bed?**

**Mum: I've got a mattress for you. The house is pretty empty, but we'll make do**

*Corey??? Where are you?*

\*\*\*

It took Patrick less than half an hour to pack up his belongings and put them into bags. After he was satisfied that he had everything, he kicked the bags under his bed and straightened his doona cover.

He sat down on the floor, hugged his knees to his chest and thought about his father. He visualised him alone in front of the television with a plate of greasy eggs balanced precariously on his knees and felt a sudden pang of guilt.

‘Patrick!’ his father boomed. ‘Footy’s on.’

Patrick grabbed his heartrate monitor, put on his sneakers, and walked out of his room. Terry was sitting in his chair, with a bowl of chips and the television remote nestled on his lap.

Terry pointed to the couch. ‘Come and watch.’

‘I’m going for a run.’

‘Go later.’

‘I won’t be long.’

The run hurt. Patrick put everything he had into it, making sure that the pace was even and fast, just like his father demanded. His legs ached but he kept pushing them to try and dull the guilt he felt about leaving him.

It wasn’t until he reached his home that the physical pain finally overrode his anxiety. He collapsed onto the front lawn with his legs splayed and his chest heaving. His breathing took a few minutes to regulate. When the pain in his legs slowly dissipated, the guilt found its way back into his head. His mouth filled with saliva and he felt a wave of nausea. He turned his head and vomited white, frothy bile onto the grass.

Patrick stayed in the shower for half an hour, scrubbing his body with a loofah until his skin was pink and stinging.

He screwed up his nose when he reached for the towel hanging on the rack. It was damp and smelled musty.

His hand trembled, just like it did before a big game, when he opened the door to his bedroom. He punched himself hard in the arm, but it didn’t make a difference. The toothpaste lid fell off and rolled across the carpet as he shoved his toiletries into



one of his sports bags, but he left it lying on the floor. His mind ticked over, calculating the time it would take to gather his belongings and leave. He surmised that it would only take a few minutes, less if necessary.

‘Chip?’ Terry asked, holding out a bag when he walked into the lounge.

‘I’m right.’

Terry pointed to the football players on the screen. ‘That’ll be you one day. That’s if you stick to the plan. Go and make yourself a shake. You need the protein.’

Patrick nodded and went into the kitchen. He ladled protein power into the shaker, added milk, swished it around and then swallowed it. The grains of undissolved power made him gag.

‘Hurry up. You’ll miss the bloody end. It’s a close game.’

Patrick wiped his mouth with his hand and walked over to the couch.

‘I thought we could go out for a feed at the pub tonight. What do you think?’

‘I’ve got homework to do.’

‘You’ve still got to eat. It’d be good to get out. I’ve been thinking lately that we need to do more stuff together.’

‘I think Mum’s coming over.’

‘What the hell for?’

‘To talk.’

Terry turned the television down and faced him. ‘Talk about what?’

‘She’s found a flat.’

‘How the hell can she afford that?’

‘She’s got more shifts at the chemist.’

‘Has she got someone else, Patrick?’

Patrick quickly shook his head. ‘No.’

‘You’d tell me if she did, wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why does she need to come over to say that?’

Patrick didn’t answer.

Terry leaned forward in his seat and glared at him. 'Why, Patrick?'

'She wants me to live with her.'

Terry's head jerked backwards. 'You're joking, aren't you?'

'No.'

'Are you saying that you want to live with her too?'

'For some of the time.'

'After every sacrifice I've made for you?'

'I'm sorry, Dad.'

'No, you're not. You can't bloody wait.'

Patrick shook his head slowly. 'It's not like that.'

His father got out of his chair. 'You're the only thing I've got, Patrick. The only part of anything that matters.'

'I'll stay here as well. I promise.'

'No, you won't. She'll get in your ear. I know how she works. She's a manipulative bitch. How fuckin' dare she go behind my back! She'll fuck up your football future!'

'She won't.'

'I lived with that bitch for eighteen years. I know her. I know how she works.'

Terry collapsed into his seat and slapped his palms against his forehead. 'Just fuckin' go. Just get the fuck out of my house.'

Patrick hurried to his bedroom, dragged the bags out from under his bed and then sent a text to his mum.

**Patrick: Come now. I told Dad and he's kicked me out.**

**Mum: I'm on my way.**

Patrick pulled his headphones out of his pocket put them in his ears and stared at his phone screen, praying that his mum wouldn't take long.

His mum beeped the horn when she saw him. Patrick hauled himself up off the grass, walked over to the car and got in. He leaned over and rested his head on her shoulder.

His mum put her hand on his head and then rapidly withdrew it. 'Your dad's coming.'

Patrick sat up and turned his head toward the house. His father was striding barefooted across the nature strip. He stopped a few metres from the car and stood staring at them with one hand on his hip.

His mum frowned. 'Stay here. I'll get out and talk to him.'

'No,' Patrick said. 'Just drive.'

Patrick could see his neighbour hovering behind roses that divided the two properties. *She's waiting for a show*, he thought angrily, and opened his door a crack so that he could hear what was going to be said.

'I don't want to fight, Terry.'

'Why have you done this to me?'

'I didn't do this to you. You did this to yourself.'

'You've got someone else, haven't you?'

'For god's sake, Terry! Listen to yourself. This isn't about you or me, it's about what's best for Patrick.'

'I know what's best for Patrick. I'm the one who sees his potential and makes sure he achieves it. I'm the one who's invested in him.'

His mum rolled her eyes.

Terry lunged forward, grabbed and spat, 'You've always thought you were better and married down. But now the truth comes out. You're nothing but a slut.'

'Get your hands off her!' the neighbour squawked, holding up her phone and aiming it at his father. 'I'm filming this.'

Patrick jumped out of the car. 'Let her go, Dad!'

'I can call the police and film at the same time,' the neighbour threatened.

Patrick glared at his dad, whose eyes were wide open as though he was trying to comprehend what had just occurred. He pointed accusingly at Patrick's mother 'She – she started all of this,' he stammered.

'This is on you, Dad,' Patrick said. 'On you alone.'

'If you get into that car, you're...'

'I know, Dad. I'm dead to you. Just like the rest of your family.'

'I didn't say that.'

'But you were going to.' Patrick shot his father a venomous look and then nodded. 'I'm coming, Mum. I'm done here.'

'What about the bloody finals, and your training?'

'What about them?' Patrick answered.

'You need me to win.'

'No, Dad,' Patrick said in a steely tone. 'It's the other way around. I don't give a shit either way.'

Patrick climbed into the passenger seat. He put on his seatbelt and wound down the window. 'See ya, Dad.'

'Pathetic,' his dad snarled. 'I always knew you were a fuckin' big girl's blouse.'

'Yep, you're right. I'm gay. Yep. Your son's a fag.'

As his mother put the gear stick into drive and pressed her foot down on the accelerator, Patrick looked back to see their neighbour with her phone poised, recording the moment his father dropped to his knees.

\*\*\*

*Thank god for Corey, Patrick thought as he picked up his phone.*

*Corey, u there? Corey?*

*Yeah.*

*Where have u been?*

*Sorry...lots of stuff been happening. How r u?*

*Good. Moved out of my dad's house and now with Mum*

*That's good.*

*Yeah...it really is...guess wot?*

*Wot?*

*I came out to my mum...and my dad*

*WTF!*

*Yeah*

*How did they react?*

*Mum was ok. She was a bit shocked but doesn't care*

*That's so good. Yr dad?*

*That's another story. I haven't spoken to him since*

*Wot did he say when u told him?*

*Nothing. Stood on the footpath shocked and then we drove off.*

*How do u feel?*

*Relieved/scared. Not ready to come out to anyone else yet.*

*Well, the hardest bit's done.*

*Do ya reckon? My mates will be harder.*

*Not the ones who count (like me).*

*So...I don't think any of my mates count. They'd never accept it.*

*You might be surprised.*

*Nah...*

*You never know.*

*I do...Anywayz...without sounding too fem or whatever you call it, I've realised how good it is to have a friend like u, Corey. U know, someone I can just be myself around. I've never had that b4.*

*Good (real) friends are life. Seriously LIFE!*

*I know. I actually don't know what I would have done without you to talk to over the last few months. You kept me alive.*

*Fuck, Corey. Alive? That's pretty serious shit.*

*I'm not saying I was going to kill myself. Just was good to have someone that I could really talk to. You know about everything. No secrets. No shit. It made me feel better. Sort of gave me some hope.*

*Hope?*

*Yea, like that I could be me, u know and gay and have friends like u. It's not something I thought I could ever have.*

*Like I've said before. I'm always here for u. I know we haven't spoken face to face but that doesn't mean the friendship is less.*

*Yeah. That's what I mean. You just said it better. Thanks Corey. I mean it. Thanks. If u ever need anything, I'm 100% there for u 2. Happy to mess up those fuckwits at yr school anytime, anyplace.*

*Ha. Doesn't matter now because you'll never guess what???*

*What?*

*I changed school.*

*OMG...how is it?*

*GREAT!!!*

*How?*

*It's totally different to my old school. No-one gives a shit that I'm gay.*

*Really?*

*Yep. I'm totally out and no-one cares.*

*Jeez.*

*The school has a NO discrimination policy.*

*Wow... And it works?*

*Yeah, all the parents and teachers are on board. I feel like I can be totally me for the first time eva. Like no-one gives a shit about what u look like. How u talk. I don't feel scared anymore.*

*Why did u end up leaving yr last school?*

*Just could not take the shit anymore. A kid attacked me in the locker rooms. Called me a fag and pushed me around. Then ripped the pocket off my blazer. Mum and Dad went off their heads when I got home. Said I wasn't going back. I*

*had to go and see the year level coordinator before I left. He was all like, we're so sorry to see you go. Why didn't you talk to us? Like fuck. I spoke to teachers about it over the years but they just dismissed it. Told me to be more resilient. It's just teasing. At my new school they take shit like that seriously. I never want to see any of those people from my old school ever again. Now that I'm out of it, I realise how bad it was. That school totally shut me down. Made me feel like a worthless piece of shit. All good now. So much happier.*

A shot of panic surged through Patrick's body.

*That's great, Corey. Really good.*

*Yea. It's so good. I hope those pricks at my old school rot in hell. Karma is going to be their bitch.*

*Yep. It will be. That's for sure.*

*We should meet up one day. Now I've moved school, I don't care about being secretive. We could go to a movie or something?*

*Yep. Sounds good. Got to go, Corey.*

*U Ok?*

*Yea. Fine*

*Speak later?*

*Yea. Later.*

Patrick collapsed onto his bed, grinding his fists into his eye sockets. *No. No. Archer is Corey. Fuck.*

Every interaction he'd had with Archer looped in his mind, like an out-of-control merry-go-round, spinning faster and faster until he thought he was going to be sick.

'Stop it, stop it!' he yelled but the waves of self-loathing continued rising, drowning his words. *Pain*, he thought. *I need pain*. He levered himself off the bed, clenched his fist and rammed it with all the force he could muster into the wall.

2015

From: Shane Cole

Subject: Re: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: ColeNF@bigpond.com

Hi Mum,

I'll meet you both at the baggage carousel.

As for Dad, I really hope he's changed. I have to be honest and say that this is his last chance. Last time I was home, he treated me with complete disrespect. It hurts, Mum. For my own self-preservation, I have to draw a line in the sand.

It's not just me who suffers, it's you too. If he doesn't get his act together, none of us will be able to have a relationship. I'm sorry to sound so harsh, but I think it's important to state what is at stake here.

I love you, Mum, but my relationship with Charlie comes first.

Love,

Shane

From: Jenny Cole

Subject: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

I understand what you're saying, but I need you to remember that we grew up in a different time. It's hard for people of our vintage to change overnight. I have to admit that I've struggled with the whole Charlie thing too. That doesn't mean I love you any less, it just means that I have to rethink things. What you are goes against everything we were taught in church. I know that sounds outdated to you, but it's real for us.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is that we all have to try. It's not one-sided. At the end of the day, you have to remember that I have chosen you over my



beliefs. Please take some time to think about that and how hard this whole thing has been for us too.

Love,

Mum

From: Shane Cole

Subject: Re: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: ColeNF@bigpond.com

Hi Mum,

I have spent my whole life thinking about it and feeling it.

I am what I am, and that will never change.

I'll see you at the airport.

Love,

Shane

P.S. Is Paul coming to the funeral?

From: Jenny Cole

Subject: Travel and Funeral Plans

To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

I'm not asking you to change. Please bear in mind that Dad has just lost his brother and that their relationship was complicated. He's hurting too. I'm not making excuses, I just want you to understand that his pain is very deep.

It's been years since he's come face to face with his siblings, and even though he would never admit it, his past is a painful subject for him. I know he comes

across as strong and unemotional, but the truth is that he is the opposite of that.

See you on Tuesday.

Love,

Mum xxx

## **Shane**

*Melbourne, Victoria, 2015*

Shane careered into a parking space and killed the engine. He glanced at the car's clock to see how much time he had before the plane landed. *Loads*, he thought, and leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

It had been years since he'd come face to face with his father, but Frank was a man's man and he realised at that moment that distance and time meant nothing.

Now he was a man, and yet he still felt like a child.

He craved a cigarette in the way he had when he'd first stopped smoking. His nicotine receptors always came to life when he thought about Frank, but he'd never felt an urge as strong as this one.

Shane abruptly opened his eyes and banged the steering wheel with his fist. 'Get a grip,' he said to himself. 'Man up. Just fucking man up.'

He took his phone out of the charger and messaged his partner.

**Shane: Charlie, hi, I'm at the airport.**

**Charlie: How are you feeling?**

**Shane: Tense.**

**Charlie: Try to be open-minded.**

**Shane: History makes it hard to be anything but cynical.**

**Charlie: I know. But they're your parents, and no matter what they've done, I know you still love them.**

**Shane: I get angry at myself for feeling vulnerable. You'd think after all this time I'd have some more backbone.**

**Charlie: You have heaps of backbone. This isn't about bravery. It's much deeper than that. Your parents messed it up.**

**Shane: That's an understatement.**

**Charlie: This is their chance to make it right. Give them a go. Try to open yourself up to the possibility. If you go in angry, nothing will change.**

**Shane: I'll try.**

**Charlie: Good for you. And no matter what happens, you've always got me.**

**\*\*\***

*Sarina, Queensland, 1987*

The gulf between them had been there for as long as he could remember. The intensity brewing in Frank's dark eyes had always frightened Shane. They were different in every way. Frank was wiry, with twitching muscles and a short fuse. Shane was soft and round and had liquid brown eyes that widened when he absorbed his father's ire.

When Frank dragged on his cigarette, he would squint and look at Shane through the haze of smoke as though he were a stranger.

'Don't know where you came from,' Frank had once said.

Shane did his best to avoid his Frank's company. He preferred being with his mother, and the methodical pace of the kitchen, where there were no unexpected reactions.

Frank's mood always shifted without warning. Silent gloom could turn in an instant to tornado-force outbursts. His rules changed daily, and Shane knew that nothing was a given.

'Shane,' Frank barked. 'You're coming with me to work.'

'Okay, Dad,' Shane answered, though what he really wanted to do was stay on the couch and watch cartoons.

'Put your boots on and meet me in the car.'

Shane sat at the back door and levered his boots on with a shoehorn. They pinched the sides of his feet, but he knew better than to draw attention to his discomfort.

Frank pushed the screechy wire door open and strode past Shane. 'Quick. I want to get there before they start the burn.'

Shane forced his feet into the boots and jogged nervously over the crunchy gravel to the car.

Frank turned the key in the ignition and revved the engine. 'Put your belt on, Shane,' he growled, wrapping an arm around the back of Shane's seat. He turned his head to make sure there were no obstructions and reversed out of the driveway. 'Clear on your side?'

'Yes.'

'Right,' Frank said, and swung tail-first out on to the road. He put the car into drive and slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

Frank motioned towards the glovebox. 'Get me a cigarette. There's a packet in there.'

Shane opened the hatch and pulled out the pack. 'Here you go,' he said, passing one over.

'You light it for me, I need to concentrate on the road.'

Shane put the cigarette into his mouth and tried to roll the lighter's flint with his small thumb.

'Press it harder,' Frank instructed.

The tip of Shane's thumb burned from the friction, but no flame appeared.

'I said do it harder.'

Shane tried again and finally it ignited.

'Quick, suck.'

Shane leaned his face forward and drew hard. The smoke filled his mouth and entered his lungs, making him cough violently, before he handed it over to Frank.

Frank put the cigarette in his mouth. 'Bloody hell. It's all wet.'

'Sorry.'

'Don't go wandering off, Shane,' Frank warned, when they arrived at an expansive crop of willowy, green-leaved sugar cane. 'The men will light it soon.'

'Why do they burn it?'

'It gets rid of the snakes and rats. Watch where you step. You don't want to get bitten by an angry snake or find a rat running up your jocks.'

Shane looked down nervously at the ground beneath his boots, there was nothing but sooty soil and gravel. He sniffed the air and peered out across the cane, watching for the fire. When the clouds of thick smoke began to fill the sky, Shane moved behind Frank and kept his eye firmly fixed on the edge of the crop.

'Look out! Snake!' Frank yelled.

Shane screamed and hopped from foot to foot.

‘Settle down, you idiot. I’m only joking.’

Shane’s heart raced frantically. ‘Can I go back to the car, please?’

Frank shook his head and frowned. ‘For god’s sake. You’re acting like a baby, not a ten-year-old. At your age I was already doing a day’s work.’

The flames began licking around the cane, gaining crackling momentum, and within minutes the paddock had become a vertical blaze. A loud crack made Shane jump. He panicked and grabbed hold of the back of Frank’s shirt, burying his face in its cotton fibres.

‘What are you doing?’ Frank shouted above the sound of destruction. He seized Shane by the arm and thrust him forward.

Shane shut his eyes.

‘Look at it,’ Frank hissed. ‘Be a man and face the bloody fire.’

\*\*\*

It was a furtive mission that took place out of direct sight of the house. Shane knew it was wrong, but he couldn’t help himself. There was something inside him that wasn’t normal. He called it his bad side, and he wrestled with it daily.

Often, he didn’t realise that the bad side had come out until his mum or dad brought it to his attention.

‘Enough, Shane. Go and work with your dad in the shed,’ his mum Jenny would instruct.

‘Shane, I’m warning you,’ Frank often said in his low deep voice. ‘You need to watch yourself, boy.’

A wave of warm air engulfed Shane as he pushed the flywire door open and stepped out into the backyard. Perspiration dripped down his back, and by the time he had reached the old shed, his shirt was damp.

The shed’s exterior had been ravaged by hot summers, and the avocado-coloured paint hung in flaky strips. Shane heaved the door open and recoiled as the trapped heat rushed out.

Jars of screws, nuts and bolts were perched on custom-made shelving, and neat rows of tools were suspended from nails around the walls. Frank could lay a hand on any item in a second.

‘The world has an order, Shane,’ he had told him once. ‘If you’re going to become a man, you need to follow the rules.’

‘What rules, Dad?’ Shane asked.

‘There’s right and there’s wrong. It’s that simple.’

Shane had to play his ghetto-blaster away from the house.

‘I don’t want that stupid pop music in the house,’ Frank said. ‘You can listen to it in the shed.’

Shane’s new favourite artist didn’t appear in the charts. He’d stumbled across her by accident, in a chance encounter at a trash-and-treasure stall. He wasn’t sure what drew him to her – maybe her hair, or her name – but whatever it was, he knew it wasn’t the right choice for a boy. She had become a secret pleasure, only to be enjoyed when no-one else was around.

The long cord trailed in the dust as he heaved the ghetto-blaster from the shed to his trampoline. He opened the battery compartment, fished out new batteries from his pocket and removed the cassette from its casing, easing it into the deck.

Shane smoothed back his sweaty hair, glanced back towards the house to make sure he was alone, and pressed play.

Bette Midler understood real love. When she sang, it made Shane feel wretched, just the way love should. He yearned to be loved. Not in the way that his mother loved him, but in a *falling in love* kind of way.

No-one he knew ever talked about that kind of love. At home, love was used as a name.

*Hello, love.*

*Shane, love.*

*How was work, love?*

Love, like that, didn’t mean anything. It didn’t rouse his heart or make him feel special. He often wondered how it would feel to kiss someone. To join lips and stay that way until one or the other needed a breath.

He bounced on the trampoline, writhing around on the springy surface, mimicking Bette’s dulcet tones, imagining that it was him that was the star and that the bushes in the background were his adoring fans.



Bette spoke to him through her music. He had seen her on television, and sometimes, when his family prayed to God, he would shut his eyes and talk to Bette instead.

*Sarina, Queensland, 1989*

'What's for tea, Mum?' Shane asked as Jenny removed a bowl of hot rice from the microwave.

'Curried sausages.'

After the steam had dissipated, she looked him up and down and then clicked her tongue. 'You're filthy, Shane,' she scolded. 'Go and wash up and then come and set the table.'

The family bathroom was small and poky, and someone was always yelling at Shane to get out. Now that he was a teenager there were changes that warranted prolonged inspection, and the constant invasions of his privacy annoyed him.

The small mirror above the basin only revealed his head, which meant it was only good for examining the small crops of white-capped pimples on his face. He touched them with his fingertips but resisted the urge to squeeze. He was already plump, and he knew he couldn't afford to be pockmarked as well.

Shane splashed cold water on his face, washed his hands with the soap, and then dried himself with the hand towel. He stared at his reflection and sighed.

*It's not fair. Why couldn't God have made me look better?*

'Good boy,' Jenny said when he came back into the kitchen smelling of soap. 'Right, get a move on. That table won't set itself.'

Shane opened the cutlery drawer and rummaged through the assortment of odd knives and forks.

'What are you doing?' Jenny asked.

'I'm trying to find knives and forks that match.'

'For goodness sake, Shane, there's no need for that. Just put out whatever's in the drawer.'

'It looks better when they match.'

Jenny shot him a look of annoyance. 'It doesn't matter. It's just for dinner. Dad will be home any minute, so just get the job done.'

Shane pouted and then scooped out handfuls of the mismatched cutlery, carried them over to the table and set to work aligning the knives and forks in front of each chair.

‘Mum, do you think we could use chopsticks for dinner one night?’

‘For goodness sake, Shane. Could you imagine Dad with chopsticks?’

‘It would be fun.’

Jenny shook her head. ‘You really need to spend more time helping Dad in the shed, not fussing around in the kitchen. Speak of the devil, that’s him.’

The rattle and roar of Frank’s ute was unmistakable, and it made everyone jump to attention.

‘Paul!’ Jenny yelled to Shane’s brother. ‘Dad’s home. Dinner time.’

The engine went silent and then the car door slammed.

Jenny quickly wiped the top of the laminate bench. An L-shape of cabinets with burnt orange tops and brown, slatted wooden fronts ran from the back door and finished at a small four-burner electric stove. The original floorboards had been covered over with a tan and cream laminate in a swirling pattern, and a freestanding fridge hummed incessantly next to the door that led to the lounge. Jenny was not the sort of woman who made demands, but Shane knew that she’d love to have the kitchen remodelled. He had watched her countless times, flicking through her pile of glossy magazines. She’d land on a page that depicted a modern kitchen, squint her eyes, poke the tip of her tongue out and stare at it for a few minutes, until the reality of her situation made her turn the page.

Frank opened the back door and gave them a curt nod.

Jenny smiled. ‘Hi, love. How was work?’

Frank wiped the gritty dust from his forehead with the back of his hand and peered over at the casserole dish. ‘All right.’

Frank’s post-work odour made Shane screw up his nose. ‘Hi, Dad,’ he ventured.

‘Hi,’ Frank replied hoarsely and walked past him without eye contact.

Jenny waved the dishcloth at Shane. ‘Right, you. Best behaviour. No funny business.’

‘Funny business?’

‘You know exactly what I’m talking about.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Enough. I mean it, Shane. You need to do as you’re told. Go and tell your brother it’s dinner time. I’ll be serving as soon as Dad gets out of the shower.’

Shane’s brother Paul was four years older than him and boarded at the Catholic Agricultural School for Boys, which was where Shane was due to start in the new year. Having Paul home for the Christmas holidays was a highlight for Jenny. She was proud of his boyish good looks and charm.

Paul was taller than their father, and years of elite rugby playing had sculpted him into a top-heavy, intimidating mass. He was unable to pass a mirror without flexing or stopping to observe himself.

‘Paul!’ Shane yelled.

Jenny brought her hands to her ears. ‘Don’t shout, Shane. Go and get him.’

Shane sighed. ‘Why do I have to everything around here?’

Paul lumbered into the kitchen. ‘What?’

‘Dinner’s ready,’ Jenny said, motioning for him to take his seat.

Paul sat down and lounged back in his chair, stretching his arms above his head, looking Shane up and down with a bemused expression on his face. ‘You’re going to have to lose some weight before you come to boarding school. There’s no way you’ll make any of the teams looking like that.’

‘It’s just puppy fat,’ Jenny said. ‘It will go soon enough. Lots of boys have it.’

Paul rolled his eyes. ‘You need to start him running and stop buying him chips and ice cream.’

‘He’ll be fine, Paul. Anyway, I’ve already bought him his school uniform, so there’s no point in putting him on a diet.’

A throaty cough terminated the conversation. Shane looked up and saw Frank standing in the doorway, his wet hair slicked over one side of his head. He looked expectantly at Jenny and then silently took his place at the head of the table.

Jenny smiled and placed the steaming plates on the table. ‘Frank, can you say grace, please?’

Frank nodded and waited for Jenny to sit down. He cleared the nicotine laced phlegm from his throat and the family hung their heads. ‘Bless us, O Lord, and these

thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.'

'Amen,' the family said in unison.

Paul stabbed his fork into a sausage. 'I'm starving.'

Hunger terminated the conversation. The only noise came from the occasional clink on a plate as a knife cut through a sausage. Shane ate half of his plate and then drank his cup of water in three big gulps.

'Tell Dad what the coach said about your last rugby game, Paul,' Jenny said.

Frank put down his knife and fork. 'What did he say?'

'He reckons there was a scout there who was asking questions about me.'

'Isn't that great, Frank?'

Frank frowned. 'Jenny, let the boy finish, for Pete's sake.'

'That's all I know,' Paul said. 'I'll have to wait until next term to see if anything comes of it.'

Frank leaned forward in his chair, his eyes alert with interest. 'What kind of questions did he ask?'

'We should try and make it down for at least one game,' Jenny butted in.

Frank banged a fist on to the table, making everyone jump. 'Jenny! Would you let the boy talk?'

'The coach didn't tell me,' Paul growled.

'You should have bloody asked him, then,' Frank snapped.

Paul pushed back his chair so that it screeched across the laminate floor. 'Maybe you could come and watch, and then you could ask him yourself.'

Shane stuffed his remaining piece of sausage into his mouth and swallowed it without chewing. He knew how these discussions ended.

'It's a long bloody way to go for a game,' Franks said.

'Maybe we could combine it with a little getaway?' Jenny suggested.

'The bills don't pay themselves, Jenny. Someone has to work to pay for all of those clothes and bags you buy.'

Paul got out of his chair. 'Why do you speak to Mum like that?'

'I'll do whatever I like in my own house. Don't forget who foots your school fees, Paul. I work my arse off so that you can go to that bloody hoity-toity school, and even then it's not enough. We're mortgaged to the hilt. So don't you dare bloody tell me what I should or shouldn't say in my own home. Sit down until we've all finished eating.'

'Mum, the Mackay show is soon,' Shane said, deliberately changing the subject.

'Yes, Shane. It is.'

'Can we go?'

'Yes, if you're a good boy.'

Shane said, 'I'm thinking of entering a cake.'

Frank shot an accusing look at Jenny. 'What bloody next?' he asked. 'Paul's got no respect, and that one...' He pointed at Shane. 'That one needs to get out of the bloody kitchen and go to boarding school before you turn him into a girl.'

'Mum, I'll clean the whole house if you let me go to the show,' Shane begged when they were alone in the kitchen after dinner.

'You don't need to clean the house, Shane. It'd be better if you did some jobs for Dad.'

'Like what?'

'Oh, I don't know. Why don't you ask him?'

'If I do jobs for Dad, can I make a cake to enter?'

'Why don't you do something different? What about a billycart?'

'I'd rather make a cake.'

'Dad really wants to spend time with you in the shed.'

'I like being inside.'

'Sometimes it's not a matter of what you like, love. It's about the right thing to do.'

Shane looked up at her, noting the frown etched between her eyes. 'What's wrong with making a cake?'

Jenny puffed air exaggeratedly from her mouth. 'Look, just think about the billycart idea. It would make Dad really happy.'

'What about what makes me happy?

'Shane, just leave it.'

Shane dropped his bottom lip, an angry feeling of injustice bubbling in his stomach. 'It's not fair.'

'Do you want a cup of Milo before bed?'

'All right.'

Shane sat on the kitchen stool, silently watching her make it. Her 'housework hands', as she called them, were dry and red, similar to the lobster meat he'd seen on a cooking show. 'You should use Ponds cream.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Your hands. It will make your hands look better.'

Jenny held her hands out, studied them for a few seconds and then waggled her index finger at him. 'For goodness sake, Shane. Drink your Milo. Seriously, if your father heard you talking about hand cream...well, he wouldn't like it.'

'Why?'

'Enough! Drink it down and go and brush your teeth. I'll come and say goodnight after I've done the dishes.'

\*\*\*

'It's just me,' Jenny whispered at Shane's door before she came into his room. She sat on the side of his bed and scratched his scalp with her long fingernails. 'You're just like a cat. I wouldn't be surprised if you started to purr.'

'Meow,' Shane said in a squeaky voice.

Jenny smiled. 'Sweet dreams. Don't forget to say your prayers.'

'Mum.'

'Yes?'

'Why can't I make a cake?'

'Shane. We've been over this. Just leave it alone.'

'It's not fair.'

'Don't make me cross.'

'How does it hurt anyone?'

'It's just not right for a boy to make cakes, or to talk about Ponds cream, for that matter. Now that's enough. Go to sleep.' She got off his bed and went to the door.

'Night, Shane,' she said quietly, and turned the light off.

Shane lay in the dark with his eyes wide open, thinking about what Father O'Brien had said in mass. Shane had been sure that he'd been looking directly at him when he spoke.

*God has eyes and ears everywhere. There's no point in hiding from him, for he already knows your every thought and your every action.*

Shane shut his eyes and pressed his palms together.

*Dear Lord, please make it so I like the shed.*

He snuggled down into his sheet.

*I wish God was like Bette Midler,* he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*

Every clothesline in Shane's vicinity stood bare during the last quarter of the afternoon. Sheets, shirts and smalls were whipped off lines in a communal frenzy, all in preparation for the lighting of the sugar cane.

The sooty debris was known as sugar snow by the locals and was the curse of every cleaner and housewife in the district. It began its descent in the late afternoon on Christmas Eve. The wind carried it across the sky, depositing tiny sprinkles of ash in Shane's backyard. Jenny had closed the windows and shut the back door to keep it out of the house. She stood in the hot kitchen, up to her elbows in pots and pans, humming softly as she prepared food for the Christmas feast.

Despite the heat, Jenny insisted that they have a traditional roast dinner for lunch. 'It's not Christmas without a turkey,' she said.

Shane wasn't particularly excited about Christmas this year, since Jenny had revealed that his new school uniform and books were part of his gift. He'd dropped his bottom lip when she'd told him.



'You'll trip over that lip if you're not careful,' she'd teased.

'There's no point in writing a Christmas list if I'm just getting school stuff.'

'There's still some surprises. Dad has got you boys something, and you'll never guess what it is. I want you to show your appreciation, Shane. Dad went to a lot of effort to get them for you and Paul.'

Shane hoped it wasn't something that involved the shed. Last time Frank had forced him to help fix the hinge on a kitchen cupboard, he'd hit his finger with the hammer. Shane had clutched the wounded digit and cried.

'Stop crying like a girl, Shane! I'll knock it out of you, by god I will!' Frank had yelled, raising his hand threateningly.

Shane had tried desperately to stifle his tears.

'Get out of the bloody shed, you sissy.'

Shane had tripped and then cowered, covering his head with his hands.

'*Out!*' Frank screamed. 'Before I give you something to really cry about.'

Shane had crawled out of the door and run to the house with Frank's disgust ringing in his ears.

*Sissy.*

*Cryer.*

*Girl...*

Jenny nudged him. 'Shane.'

'What?'

'You're away with the fairies. I've asked you three times to go and get your clothes ready for midnight mass. You need to bring me your shirt so I can iron it, and I want you to polish your shoes. Then into the shower, young man. Make sure you use the soap – I want you sparkling.'

Attending Christmas Eve mass was a long-held family tradition. The smoky tang of incense and the melodic sound of Christmas carols greeted Shane at the entrance of the church. His parents paused before they entered, scanning the pews to find a space for them to sit.

'Over there,' Jenny whispered, pointing to a gap big enough to fit four people. She turned to Shane and frowned. 'What's that on your chin? Gosh, Shane – I told you to wash your face thoroughly.'

'Stop fussing over him, Jenny! No wonder he is the way he is,' Frank hissed.

Jenny handed Shane a tissue. 'I just want him to look nice.'

'Girls look *nice*, Jenny.'

Shane could see the conflict in her dark eyes, and how she fought against it.

The organist finished playing 'Silent Night', and Shane closed his eyes and prayed.

*Help me God. Please help me. All I want for Christmas is for you to get this thing out of me.*

'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' the priest said to the congregation.

Shane opened his eyes and sighed. He knew the prayers and procedures off by heart. They'd been a part of his life for as long as he could remember.

Frank stared straight ahead with a vacant expression on his face, and Jenny nodded her head, looking solemnly at Father O'Brien. Shane absentmindedly picked at the side of his nose until Jenny swatted his hand and frowned.

'Shane,' she whispered. 'Don't.'

\*\*\*

Christmas morning began with the drone of Jenny's Mixmaster. Shane yawned, stretched his arms above his head, kicked the tangled sheet away from his legs and lay in bed until he couldn't bear the heat any longer.

Jenny was stirring a pot with a large wooden spoon when Shane walked into the kitchen. 'Just a light breakfast this morning, Shane. I want you to leave room for the roast.'

'When will we open the presents?'

'As soon as I've put the turkey on.'

'Do you want me to set the table?'

'No, it's all sorted.'

He felt a stab of annoyance when he saw the pile of gaudy Christmas napkins on the bench. 'I can make the centrepiece.'

'No. Please don't make a fuss. I want it to be a lovely day.'

'How will me making a centrepiece ruin it?'

'Why can't you just do as I say? Is it really too much to ask for?'

'I'm just trying to help you.'

'Well, if that's the case, go and get your brother out of bed – and don't touch the presents until we're all there.'

'Mum said not to touch the presents,' Shane said to Paul when he came into the lounge.

'I know what they are, anyway.'

'What are they?'

'You'll see,' Paul chuckled. 'Dad's outdone himself this year.'

Jenny walked into the room carrying a cup of tea. 'Right, where's your father?'

'Still in bed,' Paul answered.

'Frank,' she called. 'Come and open the presents.'

Frank lumbered out of the bedroom a few minutes later, unshaven and only wearing his pyjama bottoms. Shane could smell the stale cigarette smoke that clung to his body.

'Out,' Frank said to Paul, who was sitting in his chair.

Paul rolled his eyes and moved.

'Coffee, Frank?' Jenny asked.

'Okay.'

'What about the presents?' Paul probed.

'It'll only take a second to make it, Paul,' Jenny said. 'Then we can do the presents.'

If it wasn't for the gifts surrounding the tree, it could have been any day of the year. Frank sat wordlessly while he waited for his coffee. There were no sounds of

anticipation or pent-up excitement, just the ticking of the hall clock and the bubbling of the boiling kettle.

Jenny broke the silence when she walked into the lounge with the coffee in her hand. 'There you go, Frank. Now, who wants to give the first present?'

'Me,' Shane said, and scrambled over to the Christmas tree.

Shane picked up the present he'd bought for Jenny. 'This is for you, Mum.'

She tore off the paper in a second. 'Oh, Shane. Roses chocolates,' she said, holding them up for everyone to see. 'You know I love them. Thanks, very thoughtful of you.'

'Oops,' Paul said as he handed her his present.

Jenny smiled when she unwrapped it. 'More Roses. You two know me so well. Thanks boys.'

'That one's for you, Jenny. It's from me,' Frank said, and pointed to a small package under the tree.

Jenny picked it up. 'Oh, Frank. I thought we said no presents.'

'Just something small.'

Jenny unpeeled the sticky tape slowly, and then carefully removed the paper.

'Oh, its talc,' she said trying unsuccessfully to appear elated. She sniffed the top of the canister and smiled politely. 'Geranium. That's lovely. You can never have enough talc in this heat.'

Frank dismissed the comment and lasered his eyes onto Shane. 'All right, boys. You can unwrap your gifts from me.'

The long, narrow presents were wrapped in brown paper. Shane picked his up. It was weighty and felt hard.

'Come on. Stop looking at it and open it,' Frank instructed impatiently.

The paper was brittle and came off easily.

'It's a gun,' Shane said, putting it down on the floor.

Paul held his gun up and eyed through the barrel. 'Fantastic. Thanks, Dad.'

Frank stared at Shane. 'Well?'

'Thanks, Dad.'

'What do you think?'

'Um. Oh, it's good.'

Frank made his hand into a gun and pretended to fire a shot at Shane. 'I'll teach you how to shoot it after lunch.'

The sun had bite as it bore down on Shane's back as he trotted behind Frank to get to the far end of the dusty backyard.

Frank stopped when they were clear of the trees and held the gun in front of Shane's face. 'Now watch carefully, Shane. You need to learn how to do this by yourself. This is something that all men should know.'

'Why?'

Frank lowered the rifle and looked at Shane squarely. 'Because it's up to us men to protect the family.'

'From what?'

'From all sorts of bad people.'

'Like criminals?'

'Yes, but it's not just the criminals we have to worry about. There are some strange people in the world.'

'Like people in mental hospitals?'

Frank frowned. 'Yes, but they're already locked up. There are other men who commit unnatural sins against God that you have to watch out for. There's laws against those sort of perverts, you know. You get locked up if people find out you're one. Some of them slip through the cracks, though, so you have to be prepared.'

'To shoot them?'

Frank stared hard into his eyes and then raised the gun and opened the bolt. 'Yes, if that's what it takes.'

'What are you doing, Dad?'

'Getting it ready for you,' Frank said, passing the gun over. 'Be careful with it.'

The gun felt heavy and awkward in Shane's hands. His breath quickened as he handled it, and a drop of perspiration slid down his forehead.

'Relax your arms.'

Shane took a deep breath and tried to loosen his rigid stance, hating the feel of the gun in his hands.

'Pick something to aim at.'

Shane scanned the yard and settled on a kookaburra, which was perched in plain sight on the branch of the acacia tree. 'I'll aim for the kookaburra.'

'Good choice. Don't get scared of the noise. Expect some kickback.'

Shane nodded and brought his eye to the sights.

'Okay, safety catch off and finger lightly on the trigger. Don't yank it.'

Shane slid his finger nervously into place.

'When you're ready, shoot.'

Shane curled his finger and squeezed it gently, as instructed. The violent explosion stunned him. His ears rang and his shoulder felt bruised from the recoil.

Frank took the rifle from his hand and ruffled his hair. 'Bloody hell, Shane. You're a natural. What a ripper shot. Look, you killed it. Wait until I tell Paul. Do you want to do it again?'

Shane looked over at the tree.

Frank pointed to a small mass in the distance. 'It's over there. Stiff as a board.'

'I really killed it?'

'Yep, go and look.'

Shane didn't want to. He wasn't a murderer. He hadn't thought that there was even a remote chance the bullet would connect.

Frank nudged him. 'Go.'

The kookaburra's fresh blood had stained its white chest. Shane wanted to weep. He looked back at Frank, who was wearing an elated smile, giving him the thumbs up. Shane reluctantly returned the gesture, hating himself for doing it.

*Sarina, Queensland, 1989*

A fly buzzed around the food as Shane bowed his head in the last week of January.

‘Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.’

‘Amen.’

‘Gravy, anyone?’ Jenny asked, holding up the white china boat.

Frank picked up his serviette and flicked it at the fly. ‘Got it!’ he said, pointing to the fly, which landed dead on to the floor. ‘I’ll have some gravy.’

Shane had already eaten two slices of meat by the time the gravy boat reached him.

‘You’re such a pig,’ Paul said. ‘No wonder you’re a little lard-ball.’

‘Be nice to your brother, Paul,’ Jenny said.

‘I am,’ Paul replied. ‘I’m trying to stop him from getting fatter so he doesn’t get beaten up at boarding school.’

Shane frowned. ‘I’m not a pig,’ he said indignantly and over-tilted the gravy boat so that a large puddle of gravy oozed all over his plate.

‘Case in point.’ Paul smirked.

‘Enough, Paul,’ Frank barked.

Paul leaned over and spoke quietly into Shane’s ear. ‘Don’t bother coming to me for help when they heap shit on you at school.’

Frank put down his cutlery and cleared his throat. ‘I’ve organised a night out before you boys go back to school.’

The whole family turned to him, wide-eyed.

‘Oh, Frank. How fantastic,’ Jenny said excitedly.

‘Sorry, Jenny. I should have said – it’s a boy’s night out. Fred Brophy’s coming to Mackay and I thought I’d take the boys.’

‘Who’s Fred Brophy?’ Shane asked.

‘He runs a boxing tent. Locals take on professional boxers,’ Paul told him.

‘Yeah,’ Frank said. ‘There’s a bloke from work who’s going to give it a crack.’

'Do I have to go?' Shane asked.

Frank nodded sternly. 'Yes. It'll be good for you.'

Shane kicked at the dusty ground while Frank paid for the tickets to see the Fred Brophy boxing show.

'Should be some good fights tonight,' the cashier said. 'A couple of decent local boys stepping into the ring.'

'Looking forward to it,' Frank replied.

Shane looked over at the red and yellow tent. Over the entrance were pictures of boxers, poised and ready to fight.

'Will there be much blood, Dad?' Shane asked.

'During the fight?'

'Yeah.'

'It depends on how good they are at ducking.'

The light inside the tent was dim, and it took Shane a few seconds to adjust his eyes. It was humid and smelled of beer and body odour. Swaggering men, most of them wearing blue singlets, shouted and jeered at each other as they competed with the noise for attention.

'Follow me,' Frank yelled above the din.

Frank took long, fast steps, which meant Shane had to trot behind him. A few metres on, Frank raised his hand into the air and waved at a group of men who stood in a circle nursing cans of beer.

'G'day,' Frank said when they reached them.

'Frankie!' they hollered collectively and shoved a can of beer into his hand.

Frank pulled the ring on the can and took a large mouthful. 'Ah,' he said. 'That's more like it.'

'Are these ya lads?' a burly, bearded man asked.

'Yeah. Paul and Shane.'

'G'day, boys,' the burly man said.



Paul held out his hand without hesitation. The man shook it and then patted Paul on the back. 'Nice to meet ya.'

Shane stood still and kept his hands by his sides until Frank kicked his leg. He held out his hand limply, tentatively offering it to the man, who took hold of it, gripping it like a vise, forcing Shane to wince from the pain.

The man winked at Frank, gave Shane's hand another hard squeeze and then let go. 'That one's all muscle, Frank.'

Frank shut his eyes for a brief second and sighed. 'Yeah, what do ya reckon? Put him in the ring for a few rounds?'

The man laughed. 'I think I'd be more inclined to back your other boy.'

Frank put his hand on Paul's shoulder. 'He plays top-notch rugby. Strong as a Mallee bull.'

The burly man laughed again and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. 'Dart?'

Frank took one from the pack. 'Thanks, mate.'

Seconds later, a haze of smoke surrounded them all. Shane coughed and put his hand over his nose.

Frank bent down and hissed in Shane's ear. 'Don't embarrass me.'

Shane nodded. 'Sorry.'

'Can I go and have a look around?' Paul asked.

'Yep, meet me back here in half an hour,' Frank said, motioning for them to leave. 'Shane, you go too.'

Paul shot off, leaving Shane standing alone.

'Off you go, Shane,' Frank said. 'Don't stand there looking like a lost dog.'

Shane scanned the tent, fearfully wondering where he should go.

Frank pushed his shoulder. 'Piss off, Shane.'

Shane hurried toward the outer perimeter of the tent, pressed his body into one of the corners of the shadowy canvas and peered out at the clusters of men guzzling cans of beer in rapid succession. The atmosphere was tense. The men crammed together like matches in a box, waiting for an ill-placed look or the slop of another's beer – any reason to combust.

Shane felt a sudden urge to map out an escape route. He scanned the tent, searching for the nearest exit, and when his eyes landed on it he levered his body away from the canvas wall. He contemplated running – getting out and away from the feeling of inadequacy that the canvas pressure cooker had evoked – but a distinctive whistle flew like a missile across the tent and stopped him before he moved a foot forward.

He turned his head to the source of the sound. Frank put two fingers in his mouth and whistled again, and Paul appeared by his side. Frank smiled, standing back to allow him access to the circle, and squeezed his left bicep.

*It's easy for him*, Shane thought resentfully.

Driven by another whistle, this time in two short bursts, Shane made his way over to them. 'This one looks like he needs a feed,' the burly man said as Shane approached.

The men, including Frank, guffawed at the remark and Shane forced himself to smile.

The burly man poked a steel-rod of a finger into Shane's soft stomach. 'Better get the poor kid a doughnut.'

'All right, Bert,' Frank said to the burly man, raising his voice to be heard above the laughter. 'Best we be off. Gotta get a seat with a good view.'

'See yas,' the burly man replied, patting Paul's Mallee bull back as he left.

'You want a beer, mate?' Frank asked Paul.

Paul smirked at Shane. 'Yeah, thanks Dad.'

Once Frank had gone to the bar, Shane asked Paul, 'How long does this go for?'

Paul shrugged. 'A couple of hours, I reckon.'

Shane leaned forward in his seat and turned to Paul. 'Do you actually like this?'

'The boxing?'

'Yeah, the boxing,' Shane said, but he really meant all of it. The men, the smoke, the violence and the expectation to show enjoyment.

'Yeah, it's good.'

The first splatter of blood that stained the boxing ring floor came from a broken nose, and Frank got up from his seat and whooped, punching his fist into the air. The crowd joined him, stomping steel-capped boots onto the dusty floor and yelling for more.

'Get up, ya pussy,' Frank screamed, as the weaker boxer lay panting on the floor.

Shane looked at Frank, realising that for the first time that he could remember, Frank seemed truly happy. It was written all over his face. The hard lines had softened, turned upward in strokes of contentedness. And Shane thought that what was even plainer to see was that under the canvas of manhood, Paul and Frank had found in each other unexpected bits of themselves.

'Cop a load of that,' Frank said, nudging Paul and nodding in the direction of a woman in a scanty bikini carrying a round card.

'Nice tits,' Paul said.

Frank raised his eyebrows and laughed heartily.

'What do you reckon, Shane?' Paul asked.

'About what?'

'Are you blind?'

'No.'

'Check her out.'

Shane looked at the woman in question. Her make-up was streaky and her breasts, barely contained by her bikini top, were out of proportion with her tiny body.

'I saw her,' Shane said.

'And?'

'Her tits are big.'

'Are you a tit man, Shane?' Paul asked.

'No.'

'What kind of man are you, then?'

\*\*\*

'Shane,' Frank said sternly the next morning, 'I want you to come and help me in the shed.'

'With what?'

'Don't ask questions, just do as you're told.'

'Mum said I have to help her pack my stuff for boarding school.'

'Be in the shed in fifteen minutes.'

The shed door was open when Shane arrived. He peered tentatively from behind the door before he went inside. Frank was bent over his workbench, holding a screwdriver.

'Dad?'

'Come in,' Frank said without looking up. 'I just need to finish fixing this flywire screen.'

Shane could hear the quickness of his own breath while he stood and waited. He glanced over at the nail on the wall and saw that the belt was hanging there.

Frank finally put the screwdriver down and looked over to him. 'First things first,' he said, and withdrew a cigarette from his soft pack.

Shane searched his face, looking for a mood clue.

Frank lit his cigarette and dragged heavily on it. 'Right. I'm not going to mix my words. I'm going to tell ya straight.'

'Okay,' Shane whispered.

'You're going to boarding school next week, and you're going to be in for a hell of a time if you don't listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you. Are you listening?'

Tears sprang into Shane's eyes. 'Yes, Dad.'

'You're not going to bloody cry, are you?'

'No,' he said, brushing furiously at the escaping tears.

'This is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. Case in point. If you're going to a school for boys, then you need to start acting like one. No crying, no mincing around, and no bloody girls' activities. Do you get what I'm saying?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know what mincing is?'

'I think so.'

'What is it, then?'

'It's what you do to meat to make pies.'

Frank shook his head and blew out a stream of smoke. 'Of course you'd think that. The amount of time you spend bloody hovering around your mother in the kitchen, it's no wonder. That's a different type of mincing. For god's sake, stop those bloody tears. At boarding school, you don't cry. Do you get it?'

Shane nodded. 'Okay, I'll stop.'

'Good. The type of mincing I'm talking about, is when you walk and talk like a woman. It's also in the way you hold your wrist and shake hands. It should never, ever be limp. Look at me, Shane. Now look at my hand. It's straight and strong, just the way it should be. Now watch the way I walk. It's not all la-di-da like you do it. It's like this,' he said, breaking into a military stride. 'Upright, confident and on the lookout. Are you taking note?'

'Yes.'

'You have to think before you walk and talk. You have to be aware of everything you do. You have an opportunity to put your best foot forward at school. Go in there and show them that you're a man. Don't let anyone so much as look at you the wrong way. Punch first, ask questions later. You need people to fear you. You'll be slaughtered if you don't. So, who are you going to be?'

'Me,' Shane whispered.

'Are you bloody serious? What have I just told you?'

'To be a man.'

'And?'

'Not be weak.'

'And?'

'Not be scared.'

'Yep, all of those things. Cole men don't take shit from anyone.'

Frank watched Shane with an eagle eye after their talk in the shed. Whenever he was around Shane shoved his hands into his pockets and chanted silently.

*Strong hands. No mincing. Act like a boy.*

'What are you doing?' Frank asked when he saw Shane sitting on the couch watching television.

'Watching TV.'

'How are you sitting?'

Shane glanced down at his legs and uncrossed them.

'That's better. Only women cross their legs. It's the attention to detail, Shane. You won't have me to help when you're at boarding school.'

Shane turned back to the television just as the cloaked figure lifted his scythe in the air with one hand and rolled a bowling ball toward the victims of AIDS. The narrator's voice boomed through the lounge room, warning viewers about the catastrophic impact of the disease.

'Listen to that very carefully, Shane,' Frank said. 'Very carefully indeed.'

\*\*\*

'What's wrong with you, Shane?' Jenny asked, a day before his departure.

'Nothing.'

'You're all jittery. Are you nervous about boarding school?'

'A bit.'

'It will be okay. You've got Paul there, don't forget. Just tell the other boys that he's your brother.'

'They won't care who my brother is.'

'They will when they find out that he's on the firsts rugby team. Trust me. In my experience people always want to attach themselves to boys like him. That's why I pull you up on some of your less desirable habits. I'm trying to make sure you're aware of what you're doing, so that you don't put off the other boys.'

'Like when I mince?'

'Where on earth did you hear that word?'

'I don't know, somewhere.'

The roar of Frank's ute brought the conversation to an abrupt halt.

'I've got to serve tea, Jenny said, turning to the simmering pots.

'I'm going to my room.'

Shane lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to remember how Frank had told him to walk. Head up, hands down. Chest forward, fists clenched. He thought about the men in the Brophy tent and how their eyes had darted around, looking for signs of disrespect. He understood now why they'd been tense. It was hard to appear relaxed when there were so many things to remember about being a man.

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Shane glanced back at his house and said a silent goodbye. He took a mental snapshot of the mottled brick and the patchy lawn, and then fastened his seatbelt.

'I'm not looking forward to the drive,' Jenny said after they'd pulled out onto the highway.

'I don't think any of us are, Jenny,' Frank replied, and lit a cigarette. 'Next time you can catch the train to school, Shane. This is a one-off.'

Shane took a sip of water from his drink bottle, trying to quell the nausea that had settled in his stomach. He would never dare tell Frank to stop smoking in the car, even though it made him feel sick.

It made Shane angry when he thought about how differently Frank treated Paul. Their exchanges often got heated, but Shane had never seen Frank take to Paul with the belt.

It seemed to Shane that Paul woke up fresh every morning, not caring about what he had done the day before, and he never had to think about whether he was crossing his legs or saying the wrong thing.

Tropical scrub and towering gum trees had been cleared early in the century and replaced by manicured rugby fields and an imposing red-brick school. Strappy agapanthus lined the school's winding driveway, which was clogged with Land Cruisers.

'There's a park!' Jenny shrieked, pointing to an empty parking spot.

Frank slammed on the brakes. 'Bloody hell, Jenny! No need to give me a heart attack,' he growled, before reversing into the space and killing the engine.

Shane opened the door and inhaled the fresh, eucalypt-tinged air. Frank got out of the car and immediately lit another cigarette.

'Frank,' Jenny said. 'Don't smoke here. We don't want to give the wrong impression.'

'For god's sake,' Frank mumbled under his breath, but stubbed the cigarette out under his shoe.

'I'll say my goodbyes here,' Paul announced, slinging his large duffle bag over his shoulder. 'I want to see my mates.'

'All right. Have a great term,' Jenny said and hugged him. 'Love you.'

'You too,' Paul responded. 'See ya, Dad.'

Frank shook his hand and patted his shoulder. 'Bye, mate.'

'You're on your own now, Shane. Be a man and don't sook,' Paul said, and punched his arm.

'This is where we need to go,' Jenny said as she pushed open the double glass doors of the school's reception. The foyer had an ornate stained-glass ceiling, which beamed shards of multicoloured light on to a statue of the crucifixion. 'It's beautiful. Isn't it, Shane?'

Shane screwed up his nose and studied it for a few seconds. 'I wouldn't say beautiful.'

Clustered groups of adults and boys spoke in hushed tones as they waited to be told what to do. Shane's parents distanced themselves from the possibility of small talk and stood inconspicuously at the edge of the room, next to the piles of bags and suitcases.

Frank crossed his arms, raised his chin and leaned against the wall. 'Shane,' he said, gesturing with a nod of his head for Shane to stop slouching.

An audible clearing of the throat brought Shane's attention to a stocky man dressed in a light grey suit.



‘Good morning,’ he said. ‘Welcome to you all. Today is the start of your son’s journey to manhood. It is a quest which requires a commitment to faith, the acquisition of knowledge, and a respect for mankind.’

Frank prodded Shane in the spine. ‘Stand straight.’

‘We encourage you to say your goodbyes, and then we would like to invite the parents to an informal morning tea,’ the principal concluded.

Parents turned to their sons and embraced them. Shane stood stiffly.

‘The holidays are just around the corner,’ Jenny said. ‘But in the meantime, there are so many lovely boys for you to get to know.’

‘Girls are lovely, Jenny,’ Frank barked. ‘Not boys.’

‘Well, you know what I mean,’ she said, opening her arms to hug Shane.

‘Don’t embarrass me,’ Shane said, stepping away.

‘Oh, okay. Well, have a great term. I love you.’

Shane nodded.

‘Well, son. No point in prolonging the inevitable,’ Frank said brusquely.

‘Yeah, Dad. No point.’

Jenny squeezed his shoulder. ‘Be a good boy, Shane, and don’t forget our talks.’

Frank removed her hand. ‘Enough, Jenny. Get stuck in, Shane. Play rugby and be a man.’

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Shane was shown to the dormitory by the house master.

‘I’m Brother O’Flaherty and I’m in charge of you while you’re in the boarding house,’ he said dourly. ‘I’ll leave you to choose a bed and unpack. Each boy has a chest of drawers and a hook to hang your coat and blazer on. Make sure you keep your section neat and tidy. Do you understand?’

The boys nodded.

‘What do you say, then?’ Brother O’Flaherty asked.

‘Thank you,’ Shane said automatically.

'No! You say, *Yes, Brother O'Flaherty.*'

'Yes, Brother O'Flaherty,' the boys replied in unison.

'I'll expect you all to assemble in the common room in half an hour.'

'Yes, Brother O'Flaherty,' they repeated.

'Better. I'll leave you to get on with it.'

Shane picked up his case and put it on a bed next to the window. The latch was on the window was rusty, and when Shane tried to jiggle it, it wouldn't budge.

'Do you need help?'

Shane turned around and saw a freckled faced boy with dark hair that looked like it had been cut with blunt scissors.

'Yeah, sure. Thanks,' Shane said.

'This might do the trick,' the boy said, taking a Swiss Army knife from his back pocket. 'There's a little screwdriver in here somewhere that might lever it open.' The boy found the tool he was after and wedged it under the latch. 'Hopefully with a bit of force we can open it. Get ready to pull it up,' he said, levering the screwdriver under the latch. 'Excellent!' he said as it unlocked.

Shane opened the window up as far as it would go.

'That smells better,' Shane said. 'The room stinks.'

'I'm Jimmy.'

'Shane.'

'I want the bed by the window,' a boy yelled from across the room.

Jimmy raised his eyebrow and put one hand on his hip.

The boy who made the demand sauntered over to them. 'Move your case, fatso,' he jeered.

'No,' Shane said, his hands held limply by his side.

The boy knocked his case off the bed, breaking the feeble clasp in the process. It opened on impact and spilled his clothes across the floor.

'I got here first,' Shane said.

'I don't give a shit,' the boy answered. 'It's mine now. So, pick up your lady jocks and piss off.'

'Who the fuck do you think you are?' Jimmy interjected. 'If you take him on, you're taking me on too.'

'Why would you want to side with the fatso?' the boy exclaimed.

'Because he's my mate and you're a fuckwit,' Jimmy said, giving him a hard shove. 'Do you want to take this further?' he asked, inching toward him. 'Nothing like a good fight on the first day.' Jimmy pushed up his shirt sleeves. 'Come on, have a go.'

'You're not worth it.'

'I think you'll find that I am,' Jimmy said, circling him. 'Scared?'

The room was silent. All eyes were locked on the sparring boys.

'Come on, pussy,' Jimmy taunted.

The boy sneered.

Shane moved up to stand next to Jimmy.

'Like I said, you're not worth the effort,' the boy conceded.

'Like I said, take your bag and fuck off.'

The boy shook his head and skulked over to the last remaining bed.

'You okay?' Jimmy asked Shane

'Yeah. Thanks for that.'

'No worries,' Jimmy said nonchalantly, then bent over to help Shane gather his belongings. 'We've been here for an hour and we've already made an enemy. Not a bad effort, I'd say.' He chuckled. 'Nice clean jocks,' he added with a wink. 'No skiddies in sight.'

Shane laughed. He'd never encountered someone like Jimmy before. He didn't understand why he had taken it upon himself to stand up for him. It was odd and confounding, but he instinctively knew that the help had been genuine. *Why me?* he wanted to ask. *What did I do to deserve your friendship?*

The common room where Brother O'Flaherty had told them to gather held a few battered couches and a television. Drab brown curtains hung flaccidly on the windows, partially obscuring the sunlight.

‘Jesus,’ Jimmy said to Shane. ‘This place is a dump. I expected a bit more bang for my buck.’

Brother O’Flaherty came into the room carrying a wad of paper. ‘Okay, boys. Quiet now.’ Everyone turned toward him and stopped talking. ‘What’s your name?’ Brother O’Flaherty asked Shane’s new nemesis.

‘Jonathon.’

‘Jonathon what?’

‘Jonathon Squires.’

‘Not your full name. How do you address me?’ Brother O’Flaherty said, leering at him.

Squires squirmed. ‘Brother O’Flaherty,’ he said in a small voice.

The boys sniggered at his discomfort.

‘Squires, hand these out,’ Brother O’Flaherty ordered, and passed him the stack of paper. ‘This has your timetable and a map of the school.’

‘Thanks, Jonathon Squires,’ Jimmy said when he dropped the collated information at his feet.

‘Piss off. You and your mate had better watch yourselves,’ Squires sneered.

Jimmy laughed. ‘We’re shitting ourselves.’

Brother O’Flaherty whistled to refocus their attention. ‘Everything runs like clockwork here. Learn the schedule and keep to it or suffer the consequences.’

Shane scanned the pieces of paper. The first page contained a small map of the school and a weekly timetable. Every hour was accounted for, apart from three hours on Sunday afternoon. On the final page there was a long list of rules.

Shane glanced sideways at Jimmy and raised an eyebrow.

‘This place is a prison,’ Jimmy whispered.

It felt strange to Shane on that first night to brush his teeth with ten boys that he hardly knew. They stood in a row, two to a sink, spitting toothpaste on top of toothpaste under the watchful gaze of Brother O’Flaherty.

His nasal voice echoed through the bathroom. 'Get a move on. Lights out in ten minutes.'

There was a scurry of activity. Toilets flushed and doors banged. Shane nervously gathered his belongings and made a dash for the dormitory. He peeled back the sheets on his bed and jumped in.

An uneasy silence pervaded the room. Brother O'Flaherty clapped his hands and turned the light out. 'No talking, straight to sleep.'

Shane shut his eyes on command.

'Good night, boys,' called a small voice from the other side of the room.

The light went on. Brother O'Flaherty stood in the doorway and glared at them all. 'Who said that?'

'Me,' a boy said from his bed.

Brother O'Flaherty walked over to the boy.

'I said no talking!' he screeched, and punched the boy's chest.

Shane woke up in the middle of the night feeling disoriented. The dormitory door was open and light filtered in from the hallway. He rubbed his eyes and then gasped audibly.

Brother O'Flaherty was standing just inside the room, still and staring. Shane lay rigid, praying that he hadn't heard him.

A bed creaked as a boy turned over. Shane held his breath until he heard the sound of Brother O'Flaherty's soft feet padding out of the room.

On Monday morning the shrill ringing of the dormitory alarm woke Shane from a deep sleep. For a second, just before he opened his eyes, he thought he was at home, but Brother O'Flaherty quickly corrected his disorientation by storming into the room and barking orders to get up and dressed. 'Don't dilly-dally. Classes start at half past eight.'

Shane's mind flashed back to the punishment meted out to the boy the night before and leapt out of bed, standing to attention, his eyes tracing Brother O'Flaherty as he roamed the room.

Brother O'Flaherty pointed a gnarled finger in Shane's direction. 'What are you gawking at?'

'Nothing,' Shane said, and began smoothing the wrinkles from the sheets on his bed with his palm.

'Nothing, what?'

'Nothing, Brother O'Flaherty.'

'You've got ten minutes to get to the breakfast hall, so get a move on.'

Shane nodded, turning to his cupboard and getting out his clothes. His bladder felt like it might burst as his fingers fumbled incompetently with the stiff, starchy buttonholes on his new shorts. When finally got the button through, he glanced over at the other boys, who were robotically dressing, heads down, standing close to their beds.

'I'll see you at breakfast,' Brother O'Flaherty said, turning on one heel and exiting the room.

The boys exhaled in unison, their eyes darting across the room looking for someone brave enough to break the silence.

'Bloody hell,' Jimmy whispered. 'He's as mad as a cut snake.'

Shane was unable to begin to start processing what had occurred over the last twenty-four hours, the stabbing pain in his abdomen overriding all threads of thought. The intensity of the cramp had him doubled over, forcing him to hobble towards the bathroom, where he shuffled into a toilet stall and frantically tugged at his shorts.

A warm seep of urine spread through the crotch of his shorts, bringing relief and humiliation with it. *I've pissed myself. I've gone and pissed myself.*

Jimmy rapped on the toilet door. 'Shane, you there? You're going to be late.'

Shane looked in horror at the dark wet patch. 'I'm sick, Jimmy,' he rasped, not able to think of anything else to say.

'Do you want me to get someone?'

'No. Just go.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Just leave.'

He grabbed the toilet roll, winding the paper in a huge wad around his hand; realising after a minute of frantic crotch-patting that it was a useless endeavour. Only a change of shorts could eradicate what had occurred.

*The fucking button*, he thought, sitting on the toilet, head slumped defeated over his lap, knowing full well that the cost of discovery would be brutal and ongoing – his name forever attached to piss jokes. His only chance, he reckoned, was to make it back to the dormitory unseen and change.

*Please God*, Shane begged in silent prayer, as he sidled his way back to the dormitory. He breathed a sigh of relief to find it empty and hurried over to his cupboard, grateful that Jenny had insisted that he have three pairs of shorts rather than the regulation two.

The button opened easily, the dissipation of the cramp allowing him to focus on the job more efficiently. He peeled the shorts and his underwear off and shoved them into the back of the cupboard to be dealt with later, and wriggled into the new pair.

‘What are you doing in here?’ Brother O’Flaherty yelled from the door.

Shane’s hands dropped to his side, his heart feeling like it might launch from his chest and splat on the floor.

‘I asked you a question.’

‘I...had to go to the toilet.’

Brother O’Flaherty strode towards him, his polished leather shoes squeaking with each step. ‘Irrelevant,’ he snapped, his spindly hands reaching out and taking hold of his ear, twisting it until Shane was sure the lobe would tear from his head.

‘Sorry,’ Shane cried.

Brother O’Flaherty let go abruptly and pushed him towards the door. ‘Get to breakfast.’

Shane ran fast. Faster than he could remember ever running before. His ear throbbed in time with his steps. When he reached the breakfast hall, he stopped and slumped against the corridor wall, gulping oxygen.

He’d been punished many times by Frank, but that was nothing compared to this. Brother O’Flaherty was different. Looking into his eyes reminded Shane of

standing at the entrance of a deep, cold cave, and he had an instinctive sense that something dangerous lurked inside.

'What happened?' Jimmy asked when he slid into the seat beside to him, his face as red as his ear.

'I vomited.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really.'

Shane bit hard on his bottom lip, the pain helping him keep control. 'I'm going to get my breakfast,' he said, feeling an urgent need for food.

The toaster was industrial-sized. Shane filled each slot with white bread and slammed the lever down. He grabbed a tablespoon and plunged it into jar of apricot jam, scooping it up in an orange mound. He waited, spoon suspended mid-air, licking at it until the toast burst from the machine.

Returning to the table, Jimmy stared incredulously at the loaded plate. 'I thought you were sick?'

Shane nodded, spreading the jam from crust to crust. 'I was,' he said, cramming half a slice into his mouth.

Jimmy gave a low whistle. 'Jeez. You're a machine.' Shane shrugged, opened his mouth and stuffed the other half in. Jimmy looked at him, one eyebrow raised. 'You sure everything's okay?'

Shane's lip and ear smarted, but that kind of pain had a beginning and an end. It was the fear that ate at him, twisting its way through his body like a vine, snaking its way into his head and winding tightly around his stomach. 'I'm fine,' he said, cramming another half of toast in and corking the potential for a volcanic spewing of unspeakable emotions.

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Shane hadn't slept soundly in weeks. He woke on Sunday morning when it was still dark, his heart hammering, convinced that Brother O'Flaherty was standing in the doorway with the jack in his hand.

The jack was his equivalent of Frank's belt. It was a thin section cut from a rubber tyre, with a piece of wire looped through the top. It hung menacingly in



Brother O'Flaherty's study. Squires had been the first casualty – retribution for swearing – and as much as Shane despised him, watching him receive six blows had made him feel sick.

Squires had started off bravely, but after Brother O'Flaherty had hit him for the third time he'd sobbed and cast blame. 'It wasn't just me. Jimmy was swearing too!'

With that pronouncement, Squires broke a cardinal rule. Everyone knew that no matter what, you didn't dob.

The experience had changed Squires. His swagger and inflated sense of importance had morphed into sulky underhandedness, and from that day on he spent his time scuttling around with his eyes and ears open, reporting everything back to Brother O'Flaherty. He denied it, insisting that he wasn't a spy and that he hated Brother O'Flaherty as much as the rest of them, but they all knew it was a lie.

*It was just a dream*, Shane thought as he tried to go back to sleep. He rolled around in his bed, trying to get comfortable, but the image of Brother O'Flaherty standing with the jack kept appearing in his head.

He was still wide awake when the birds started their morning routine. He lay in bed, thinking about home – about his mum. He imagined her in her dressing-gown, standing in the kitchen with the kettle bubbling in the background. *Coffee, Frank?*

She would have ironed all of their clothes the night before and laid them out ready for mass, and then spent time agonising over the accessories.

*Which handbag do you think, Frank?*

*Either.*

*Black it is, then.*

At boarding school, Sunday was bittersweet. The morning began with mass and was followed by chores.

'To think that our parents pay fees for us to bloody work for the school,' Jimmy complained as they removed litter from the school grounds. 'It's criminal.'

'Only three hours to ourselves in the afternoon,' Shane answered. 'That's what's criminal.'

Jimmy was bolder than Shane, and not averse to breaking the rules. As they roamed the expansive sporting ovals on Sunday afternoon, he discreetly removed a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. 'Have you ever had a smoke?' he asked.

'I've tried it,' Shane said.

'I think we deserve one after this morning.'

Shane looked at the packet pensively. 'We'll have to be careful and go beyond the boundary.'

Jimmy nodded. 'Yeah, I know. There's a creek behind the rugby field's back fence. We could go there.'

The fence was rotted and partially falling down.

'Here's a gap,' Jimmy said, ramming his foot into the palings. 'Come on.'

The fence folded easily, revealing bushy scrub on the other side. An old trail partially obstructed by bracken led to a creek.

Jimmy kicked off his shoes and began to remove his clothes. 'We need a swim.'

'We haven't got swimmers,' Shane said.

'Who cares? I'm going in anyway.'

Shane watched him remove his underwear.

'Come on,' Jimmy said, and jumped into the water. He turned around and splashed Shane. 'What are you waiting for?'

'I don't feel like getting wet.'

'You'll dry off in the sun, don't be a wimp.'

'I'm okay.'

'You're mad. It's beautiful in.'

Shane watched Jimmy's naked body bob and dip over and under the waterline. He was tanned and muscular and not at all self-conscious.

'Shane, seriously, it's so good in. Come on.'

Shane shook his head. He sat uncomfortably on the bank with his legs gathered towards his chest, furtively glancing at Jimmy's body. A flame ignited inside him, making his heartbeat faster and his groin ache. He crossed his legs and moved,

trying to hide the dangerous, tell-tale bulge that pressed relentlessly against his shorts.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Jimmy called from the water.

‘Nothing,’ Shane replied. *Everything*, he thought.

Jimmy turned in the water so that he was floating on his back.

*Stop looking.*

Shane forced himself to shut his eyes. The fear that had swirled around in his guts for years, like a forgotten teaspoon at the bottom of a dirty sink, abruptly rose to the surface.

*I’m one of those. A mincer, a sissy. I deserve to be shot. Fuck, fuck, fuck...*

Jimmy waded out and sat next to him on the bank. He touched Shane’s knee with his wet hand. ‘This should become a regular thing. What do you reckon?’

His cold hand felt like fire on Shane’s skin.

‘Sure,’ Shane said, keeping his eyes directed toward the water’s edge.

Jimmy reached for the cigarette packet. ‘Smoke?’

‘Yeah, that’d be good.’

Jimmy stood up and reached for his clothes. Shane watched him out of the corner of his eye as he got dressed.

Jimmy passed him a cigarette. ‘Enjoy,’ he said as he sparked the lighter. Shane inhaled and coughed. Jimmy laughed and patted his back. ‘Takes a bit of getting used to. But once you do, there’s nothing better.’ Jimmy took another drag and then puckered his lips and blew out neat little rings of smoke. ‘Good, eh?’

‘Who taught you that?’

‘A mate from home.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘He’s a bit like you. I think that’s why I knew we’d be friends.’

‘How is he like me?’

Jimmy lay flat on his back and looked at the sky. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘You’re just similar.’

Shane and Jimmy didn't speak as they journeyed back from the creek. Shane liked that Jimmy didn't always feel the need to fill space with sound. It allowed him to tune into the rustles in the grass and distinguish what birds were around by their calls.

'Back to the prison,' Jimmy said with a sigh when they reached the boundary fence.

'So depressing,' Shane said.

They pushed past the palings and stepped onto the oval's neatly manicured grass. Shane used his hand to shield his eyes from the glinting afternoon sun. 'We'd better hurry. It's later than I thought.'

They jogged across the oval toward the school.

'Is that Squires?' Jimmy asked, pointing to a figure in the distance.

'Yeah. What's he doing out here?'

'I assume we're about to find out.'

When they reached Squires, he smirked. 'Brother O'Flaherty wants to see you in his office.'

'Why?' Jimmy asked.

'I don't know. You'll find out soon enough, I suppose.'

Jimmy glared at him. 'What the fuck have you told him?'

'Nothing. He just told me to get you both.'

Jimmy grabbed hold of Squires' collar and yanked it. 'I swear, if I find out that you have any part in this, you're dead meat. Do you hear me? Dead fucking meat.'

Squires smiled. 'I don't think it's me who's dead meat.'

Jimmy pushed Squires to the ground. 'Come on, Shane. Let's see what O'Fuckery wants.'

'Get rid of the smokes,' Shane said, as they approached the boarding house.

Jimmy threw them into the nearest bush and then breathed into his hand and sniffed his fingers. 'I think the smell's gone. Just deny everything. We'll be all right if we stick to the same story.'

'Which is?'

'We've just been walking around the rugby field, talking.'

'It might not be about us going out of bounds.'

Jimmy sighed. 'I hope you're right. I doubt it, though. Squires looked pretty smug.'

They knocked tentatively on Brother O'Flaherty's office door.

'Enter.'

Jimmy took a deep breath and turned the handle. 'You wanted to see us, Brother O'Flaherty?'

'Sit,' Brother O'Flaherty said, without looking up from his desk. 'I need to attend to these documents before I speak to you.'

Five minutes passed before Brother O'Flaherty put down his pen.

'Now,' he said. 'Where were you two this afternoon?'

Jimmy looked him straight in the eye. 'Just walking around the ovals.'

'Are you quite certain about that?'

'Yes,' Jimmy said emphatically. 'Quite certain.'

Brother O'Flaherty turned to Shane. 'How about you?'

'Like Jimmy said, we were just walking around the rugby pitches.'

Brother O'Flaherty stroked the ridge of his nose. 'One last time,' he said, staring directly at Shane. 'Where were you this afternoon?'

'We've told you,' Jimmy said.

'I don't think you have. I have a firsthand account of a sighting which differs from your story. Think long and hard, boys, before you answer again.'

Jimmy lifted his chin and sat up straight in his chair. 'Like we said, we were just walking around the rugby pitch.'

'You're a liar. And do you know what happens to liars?'

Shane gave a tiny shake of his head.

'We aren't lying,' Jimmy insisted.

'We're telling the truth,' Shane nodded.

Brother O'Flaherty pointed his finger at Shane. 'I know where you were and I know what you've been doing,' he said, reaching behind his desk and removing the jack from its hook.

Shane breathed in and out through his nose and gripped the side of the chair.

Brother O'Flaherty whacked the jack onto his desk. 'I might have been more lenient if you'd told the truth.'

'We're not liars. Maybe the person who told you was making it up and you're believing his lies,' Jimmy said, as a last-ditch attempt to convey innocence.

'Don't be insolent,' Brother O'Flaherty snapped.

'I'm not,' Jimmy said. 'You're not being fair.'

Brother O'Flaherty walked over to Jimmy.

'I'll show you fair,' he said, grabbing Jimmy by the hair and pushing him face first onto the desk. 'Don't move, boy, or I'll make you wish you'd never been born.'

Brother O'Flaherty lifted the jack up and brought it down with full force across Jimmy's buttocks. Jimmy barely flinched. Brother O'Flaherty lifted his arm again and this time the jack landed on Jimmy's back. The blows got faster and more frenzied.

Shane watched in horror, unable to move or speak.

Jimmy moaned and then began to beg. 'I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!'

Something snapped inside Shane. He lurched forward and snatched the jack out of Brother O'Flaherty's hand. 'Stop!' he screamed.

'Give it back,' Brother O'Flaherty demanded.

'No!' Shane yelled.

Brother O'Flaherty approached Shane with beads of perspiration glistening on forehead. 'You'll be sorry,' he said, yanking the jack from his hand.

Shane took a step backwards and collided with the desk.

'Bend over,' Brother O'Flaherty snarled.

Shane shook his head.

'Suit yourself.'

Brother O'Flaherty grunted as the blows landed on Shane's body. He hit him indiscriminately, not caring what part of his body he made contact with. Shane

mustered a weak defence with his hands to begin with, , but then it was as though his mind and body disconnected, and the pain gave way to hysterical laughter.

‘You...disobedient...blight...on...society!’ Brother O’Flaherty panted.  
‘Stop...your...laughing!’

Shane fell to the floor and curled into a ball.

‘No more!’ Jimmy screamed. ‘You’re going to kill him!’

Brother O’Flaherty lowered his arm. ‘Get out. Get out of my sight, the pair of you!’

Once they had left the office, Jimmy gingerly put his arm around Shane’s shaking body. ‘Are you okay?’

Shane nodded, unable to muster words.

‘It’s okay. It’s over. Just breathe,’ Jimmy said. ‘That’s it,’ he soothed. ‘Nice and easy.’

‘Thanks,’ Shane whispered, a few minutes later.

‘It should be me thanking you. He’s a fucking lunatic. Are you sure you’re okay?’ Jimmy asked.

Tears brimmed in in Shane’s eyes. ‘Sorry,’ he said, and began to weep.

‘For what?’

‘F-f-f-or cry-ing – ’

‘Jesus, Shane. No need to say sorry for that. I’ll tell you who *will* be sorry, though. That fucking dog Squires. He’ll pay for this.’

*Yeppoon, Queensland, 1990*

By the time he walked in at the gates to start his third year at boarding school Shane had perfected the art of camouflage. He knew what to say to be a part of the group, and more importantly, he knew what to keep to himself.

The routine helped. Apart from Sunday afternoons, all of his time was accounted for. Sport, class, mass and school maintenance had become ingrained components of his life.

The alarm rang loudly every morning at six. There were few deviations.

'Boys need routine,' Brother O'Flaherty barked. 'It prevents idle thoughts and actions.'

He was right, to an extent. During the day, Shane operated on autopilot, playing rugby and attending class, and peppering his conversations with just the right amount of crude sexual innuendo. Tits, sluts, and frigidity entered his vocabulary. He swore and sweated, modelling his behaviour on his peers. He'd seen how it worked to forge acceptance and had adeptly mastered the skill set.

'What do we have first period?' Shane asked Jimmy.

'RE. Those men from Centre Care are coming in to give us the birds and the bees talk.'

'Are they priests?'

'I don't think so. Just men out to save the world.'

'Oh, god. They won't know anything. I bet they haven't even had a root,' Shane said.

Jimmy laughed. 'Yep, that's for sure. And guess what? It's a two-hour session. We should've made popcorn.'

Squires approached them slyly from behind. 'What's going on?'

Jimmy jumped and then scowled. He often vented to Shane about revenge and what he was going to do to Squires when he got the chance. 'What's it to you, dog?'

'Seriously, Jimmy. You need to get a life,' Squires said, trying to sound tough.

'I have one, and one of my life goals is to make *your* life shit. Now piss off and leave us alone.'



It made Shane uncomfortable to be around Jimmy and Squires. He hated Squires too, but not with the same poison. Jimmy had never forgiven him for telling Brother O'Flaherty about their excursion beyond the boundary, but it seemed like a long time ago to Shane. Brother O'Flaherty had never mentioned the incident again, and Shane had, for the most part, buried it.

Jimmy spat at Squires' feet and walked off. 'Come on, Shane. Let's go.'

'You're weak,' Squires called after him.

Jimmy turned around. 'What did you say?'

Shane grabbed Jimmy's arm. 'He's not worth it. There are teachers around. You just need to ignore him.'

Jimmy seethed. 'I can't. Believe me when I say I will get him and when I do, it's going to be bad.'

The RE men were already in the room setting up when they arrived at class. They were dressed in identical white short-sleeved shirts and black trousers.

'Hello,' Jimmy said to the men. 'We're here for the talk.'

'Hello,' one of the men responded solemnly. 'Take a seat and wait quietly for us to get organised.'

'Definite virgins,' Jimmy whispered. 'Probably poofs, too.'

Shane's body tensed. 'Yeah, probably.'

Jimmy nudged him and held up his arm, dangling his hand limply by the wrist. Shane forced himself to smile.

The class filed in and noisily took their seats. The taller of the men stepped forward and clapped his hands. 'Quiet please. We have a lot to get through and I need your undivided attention. I'm Mr Abbot and this is Mr Randall.'

The class collectively slumped into their chairs.

'This is going to be a barrel of laughs,' Jimmy murmured.

'Before we begin, we must stress the importance of maturity when discussing matters of sexual reproduction. There will be detentions for anyone who misbehaves. Are we clear?' Mr Abbot asked.

'Yes,' the class droned.

Mr Abbot stuck two large anatomical pictures of the male and female body onto the blackboard. A titter rippled through the room.

'First and final warning,' Mr Abbot said sternly.

Mr Randall pointed to each body part with a long stick while Mr Abbot gave a rudimentary explanation of sex.

'Now, intercourse should only take place within the confines of marriage,' Mr Abbot said. 'It is a sacred union and not a recreational pastime for the unmarried.'

Jimmy sniggered softly. 'That's not what I've heard,' he whispered to Shane.

Mr Abbot cleared his throat. 'Furthermore, it is important that when you decide to marry, you select wisely.'

Jimmy's hand shot up. 'Do you mean we need to pick Catholic girls?'

'Yes, obviously. But you also need to be careful not to get carried away by the triviality of charm and looks.'

Jimmy grinned. 'That sounds a bit boring.'

Mr Abbot frowned. 'Novelties wear off. Of course, there must be an amiable accord that runs between a husband and a wife, but it is important to select a woman who will be a good mother as well as a good companion.'

'How do you know if she'll be a good mother?' Jimmy called out.

'There are some physical signs. For instance, a woman with wide hips has a lower chance of complications during childbirth.'

'I think I'll stay single,' Jimmy said, making the class laugh.

Mr Abbot glared at Jimmy. 'You may think that now, but you'll change your mind. Now, enough chatter and frivolity, we have a lot to get through.'

Shane zoned out as the monologue continued. The morning sun flooded through the classroom window, lulling him into a drowsy state. He felt his eyelids grow heavy.

'Homosexuality is an abhorrent and sinful practice,' Mr Abbot declared loudly, and Shane jerked upright in his chair. 'The recent AIDS epidemic, some leading Catholics say, is proof of this. There has been no evidence of decent men contracting the disease. Mr Randall will now demonstrate the insidiousness of this homosexual virus.'

Shane watched wide-eyed as Mr Randall drew the outline of a condom on the board and filled it with cross-hatched strokes.

'Now you may be wondering about the purpose of these lines. They are the fibres of a condom,' Mr Abbot said. As he spoke, Mr Randall drew a giant picture of a sperm. 'Note the size of the sperm in comparison to the fibres of the condom,' Mr Abbot said. 'The sperm is larger than the gaps and is unable to penetrate the condom.' Mr Randall drew a tiny curly line onto the board. 'This represents the AIDS virus,' Mr Abbot said, picking up the pointer and resting it on the tiny squiggle. 'It's microscopic and easily passes through the fibres of the condom. There is no protection from AIDS, which is one of many reasons why you should avoid contact with anyone who is homosexual.'

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Shane drew his legs to his torso, curled into a tight ball and listened enviously to the rhythmic breathing of the boys in the beds around him. Their presence did little to disperse the loneliness that had seeped into him since his encounter with Mr Abbot and Mr Randall.

In the past, when he'd woken with a churning stomach, he'd been able to see fault in the people who had caused him pain. But those two men had changed the order of things in his head. Not only had they pointed their fingers at him, they'd backed up their accusations with evidence.

*They're right*, he thought miserably, and as far as he could see, there was no way around it. If he didn't change, he would be relegated to the status of a bottom-feeding roach.

He shut his eyes and pictured himself opening the bedroom door to a wide-hipped wife. He saw her lying on the bed like a sack of potatoes, looking at him with the expectations of the church shining through her eyes.

Then he thought of Jimmy's sunny face, and how it would feel to roll over in bed and see it every morning. To open the curtains and smile as he slumbered peacefully in their cosy bed.

*It's wrong*, he told himself, even though it was what he wanted above anything else. *You have to live like a normal man with moral fibre. That's all there is to it.*

The bell rang for breakfast and the boys in the room stirred. Shane sat up in his bed and looked over to Jimmy, who was lying under his tangled sheet. Jimmy was not a morning person, and Shane had undertaken the responsibility of getting him roused before Brother O'Flaherty stormed the dormitory.

'Jim,' he called. 'Wakey, wakey.'

Jimmy groaned and then poked his face out of the sheet. 'Just five more minutes.'

Shane laughed. 'Why don't you ask Brother O'Flaherty if it's okay for you to have a sleep in? I'm sure he'd be more than happy to grant you the privilege.'

'All right,' Jimmy said and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and then swung his feet onto the wooden floor. 'Point taken. Now, what's on the agenda today? Oh, that's right, the same as the last hundred Sundays. Piss, breakfast, mass, chores, and...'

'And what?' Shane asked.

'I've got an idea for a bit of fun this afternoon.'

'What kind of fun?'

'All in good time, Shane.'

'I have an idea for a competition,' Jimmy said to Shane after mass.

'Is this the fun that you were alluding to before?'

'Yep,' Jimmy said, smiling mischievously. 'It's happening in the toilet block at three. It costs five dollars to enter.'

'What kind of competition is it?'

'Just come, Shane. That's all you have to do.'

Shane screwed up his nose when he entered the toilets. 'It stinks in here,' he said to Jimmy. 'Why have your competition in here?'

'Ha,' Jimmy said. 'I'll explain when everyone else arrives.'

Shane rolled his eyes. 'Why all the mystery?'

'You'll see.'

A few minutes later, six boys stood crammed around the toilet stalls.

'Step right up, step right up. It costs five dollars to enter. High stakes but the potential for a huge reward. Put your money in this hat,' Jimmy said, giving his best ringmaster impersonation. 'When I say go, get into your cubicle and get your old fellows out. First one to come gets the pool.'

The pronouncement gave Shane an instant erection. He entered the cubicle and unzipped his pants.

'Go,' Jimmy yelled.

The frenzied sound of boys in the midst of masturbation aroused Shane unlike anything he had ever experienced. He grabbed his penis and stroked it. It took less than a minute for him to claim victory.

'I'm done!' he called.

'Shit, Shane,' Jimmy replied from his stall. 'You're a stud.'

Shane emerged from the cubicle. The boys circled him, clapping and cheering.

'Easy money,' Shane said, with false bravado.

The standing ovation warmed Shane for a brief minute and he stood grinning ear to ear, until Mr Abbot's words charged back into his head and he remembered what he really was.

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Shane's sleep was disturbed during the late hours of Sunday night. He opened his eyes and lay still. Then he heard the distinctive padding of bare feet across the floorboards and quietly turned in his head toward the door to see who it was. The glow of the full moon penetrated the flimsy curtains, providing just enough light for Shane to identify the culprit as Squires. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Squires reached his bed and lumbered into it, the springs creaking as they accommodated his body weight. There was an intermittent rustling of sheets, and then the room went quiet.

*Toilet trip*, Shane thought wearily.

He woke again later with a start. This time, the light from the passage spilled into the dormitory. Shane opened one eye and looked toward the light. Brother

O'Flaherty stood motionlessly in the door frame, staring fixatedly at the rise and fall of Jimmy's chest.

Shane gasped. Brother O'Flaherty's head instantly jerked toward him. Shane scrunched his eyes shut and didn't move until he heard the door close.

The dormitory was slow to get going on Monday morning. Most boys stayed in bed until Brother O'Flaherty shrieked at them to get up. Shane got out of bed well before anyone else and woke Jimmy.

'Jimmy,' he whispered. 'Get up and meet me in the bathroom.'

Jimmy opened his eyes groggily. 'Why?'

'I'll tell you in there. Quick, get out of bed before all the others need a piss.'

Jimmy got up and followed Shane to the bathroom. Shane closed the door behind them and stood with his back against it.

'What's wrong?' Jimmy asked.

'Last night O'Flaherty came into the dormitory and stood staring at you for ages. It was really weird.'

'He's such a perve. I told you he was a poof.'

'I'm worried, Jimmy. I've seen him do it before, but this time he just looked directly at you.'

'Like I said, he's a pervert. If he tries anything, I'll smash him in the face.'

'Something's not right.'

'You worry too much,' Jimmy said.

'Maybe.'

Someone pushed on the door. Shane stepped away and let it swing open. Squires walked in and smirked. 'Having another competition? Just the two of you this time?'

'Fuck off, dickhead,' Jimmy said.

'You're really starting to piss me off,' Squires snarled.

Jimmy laughed. 'I'm shitting myself.'

'You will be,' Squires said, pushing past them.

'He's piss-weak, Jimmy,' Shane said. 'All talk, no action.'

Shane could see Brother O'Flaherty observing them while they ate breakfast. He hit Jimmy's leg under the table.

'O'Fuckery's staring at us,' he whispered. 'Something's definitely up.'

Jimmy looked up from his cereal bowl and waved at Brother O'Flaherty.

'What the hell are you doing?' Shane asked incredulously.

'I've done nothing wrong,' Jimmy said and waved again.

'Seriously, Jimmy. Just eat your breakfast.'

'You worry too much, Shane.'

Shane tensed. 'Fuck, he's coming over.'

Brother O'Flaherty's lips were pressed firmly together as he marched toward them. 'I want to see you in my office after breakfast,' he said to Jimmy.

'Why?'

'I think you know why.'

'No, I don't. That's why I asked.'

'Don't be insolent. I know all about your perverted little competition.'

'You're the one who's perverted,' Jimmy muttered.

Brother O'Flaherty lurched forward and hit him on the side of the head with an open hand. 'Don't you dare speak to me that way.'

Jimmy's face flushed. 'Don't hit me,' he said heatedly.

'Don't tell me what I can and can't do,' Brother O'Flaherty replied, and struck him again.

Jimmy stood up and curled his hand into a fist. Shane jumped to his feet and grabbed Jimmy's arm. 'Don't, Jimmy,' he said.

'What are you looking at?' Jimmy screamed at Squires, who was hovering behind Brother O'Flaherty.

Shane felt a rush of panic. 'Calm down, Jimmy,' he said.

Squires grinned in the background, and Shane squeezed Jimmy's arm, willing him not to bite.

'Not so tough now, Jimmy,' Squires scoffed.

Jimmy's twisted his arm and broke free from Shane's grip, unadulterated hate seeping from his every pore. Shane didn't try to hold him back. No force on earth could restrain his need for revenge. A guttural roar erupted from deep inside Jimmy, and Squires's mocking face froze for a split second as he contemplated and then understood what was to come.

Jimmy lunged at his prey with the ferociousness of a starving wild animal, fists curled and ready to maim. He slammed his fist into the bridge of Squires' nose, but the crack of the breaking bone wasn't enough. Squires fell helplessly on to the hard floor, and before he had time to cover his face Jimmy had punched him again.

It was Brother O'Flaherty who brought an end to the violent retribution by yanking Jimmy backwards by the hair.

'Fuck off, you spying pervert!' Jimmy screamed, fists flying erratically.

Brother O'Flaherty kept hold of Jimmy's hair and pushed him face first to the ground, rendering him ineffective.

'We all know about you in the dormitory at night,' Jimmy yelled into the floor.

Brother O'Flaherty gripped his hair tighter and banded his face hard, twice on the floor.

'Let me go!' Jimmy raged, kicking backwards until the hard sole of his school shoe connected with Brother O'Flaherty's shin. The pain of the impact imprinted on Brother O'Flaherty's face, and he abruptly let go of Jimmy and clutched his injured shin.

Shane ran to Jimmy, smothering him in a bear hold. 'Enough, Jimmy. Please.'

'Squires, get the principal!' Brother O'Flaherty yelled. 'And you,' he shouted to Shane. 'Get your friend under control!'

Blood dripped from Squires' nose down onto his white school shirt. 'I have to get a cloth,' he moaned nasally.

'Do as you're told, Squires,' Brother O'Flaherty shrieked and limped out of the breakfast room.



All conversation had ceased in the hall. Every pair of eyes stared at Jimmy in disbelief.

'It's okay, Jim. He's gone,' Shane said.

Jimmy sat up and tucked his head between his knees. Shane bent down and put his arm around his shoulders. 'Come on. We need to get out of here.'

Jimmy nodded. 'They'll expel me.'

'No, they won't,' Shane said, hoping he was right.

'They will.'

Brother O'Flaherty, the principal, and a bleeding Squires collided with Jimmy and Shane in the corridor.

'Into my office!' the principal roared. 'And you,' he said, pointing furiously at Shane. 'You, get to your class.'

Shane held on to Jimmy's arm protectively.

'You heard the principal,' Brother O'Flaherty hissed at Shane. 'Get out of here.'

'I'll be okay, Shane,' Jimmy said. 'Don't worry about me.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yep. It's been so good,' Jimmy said, squeezing Shane's hand.

Shane fought back his tears. 'Yeah, it was good. So good.'

'See ya round, Shane.'

Shane nodded stiffly.

'Scram,' Brother O'Flaherty snapped at Shane.

The principal gestured to the exit. 'This way, Jimmy.'

Shane watched as they led Jimmy away. Jimmy kept his head high and only glanced back at Shane once, just before he walked out of the door. He saluted and then he was gone. All of his belongings had been removed by the time Shane got back to the dormitory in the late afternoon. His bed had been stripped bare and all that was left of him was the slight hollow of his body in the mattress.

Shane made his way over to his own bed and collapsed onto it face first. *There will never be another Jimmy.*

## **Shane**

*Melbourne, Victoria, 2015*

Shane entered a toilet cubicle and closed the door behind him. He sat down on the toilet and buried his face in his hands. The funeral had thrown him into disarray.

His mind bounced between his living aunties and his uncle until it settled morosely on his father. His chest was wound tight. He sat up and punched the wall furiously, then slouched and sobbed. He unravelled a wad of toilet paper and held it over his face to mute the sound of his pain.

*It's never going to change. My family is cursed.*

Shane's phone pinged. It was a text from Charlie. He wiped his eyes and squinted to read the message.

**Charlie: Just checking that you're ok?**

**Shane: I don't know.**

**Charlie: ?**

**Charlie: Do you want me to come back?**

**Shane: No, I'll be ok in a minute.**

**Charlie: Where are you?**

**Shane: In a toilet cubicle.**

**Charlie: You're crying like a man who's been badly hurt. Stop speaking about yourself like that. That's the sort of shit that your dad would say.**

**Shane: Yeah. Bad habit.**

**Charlie: I'm in a cab. I can easily come back**

**Shane: No. I'm fine.**

**Charlie: You sure?**

**Shane: Yep. Sorry for dragging you into this shit.**

**Charlie: Your shit is my shit.**

**Shane: I love you Charlie.**

**Charlie: I love you too.**

## **Raymond**

*Melbourne, Victoria, 1969*

Raymond's stomach knotted when he heard the rusty front gate scrape open and the boots thudding slowly on the concrete path. Suddenly, the steps quickened, the pattern becoming irregular before ending in an almighty crash of steel.

'Fuckin' bins!' Ron yelled. 'Who put the bins in the way?'

Nancy walked the short length of the linoleum floor in the kitchen, brow downturned, muttering obscenities under her breath. Thumping her fist down on the kitchen table, she exhaled. 'Not again. What on earth did I do to deserve this?'

*You bring it on yourself*, Raymond thought. *You can't let things be.*

'Mum,' Raymond said, putting his finger to his lips. 'You'll scare the twins.'

Nancy stood still and glared at him, her blue eyes darkening. 'Don't, Raymond,' she snarled. 'Don't ever tell me to be quiet in my own home.'

Ron stabbed the key at the lock, grinding the metals together. 'Open up,' he yelled, thudding his boot repeatedly against the solid timber.

Raymond positioned his body in front of Nancy, who was pacing up and down the worn kitchen floor and raking her fingers through her dark hair. Nancy nudged him with her bony shoulder. 'Out of the way.'

'Ow,' Raymond cried, rubbing his arm.

Nancy narrowed her eyes, staring at Raymond and making him swallow hard. He put his hand to his throat, feeling the rise and fall of his Adam's apple beneath his skin. 'Please, Mum. He's drunk. Just let him sleep it off. It's not worth it.'

'Not worth it. I'll tell you what's not worth it,' she said in a low voice. 'You, him – all of this.'

Raymond glanced over at his five-year-old twin sisters, who were standing in front of the sink wearing matching neck-to-toe pink dressing-gowns, heads cemented together as though conjoined. 'Have it your own way. I'm going to take the twins into my room,' he said, signalling with his hand for them to come to him.

The twins darted over to Raymond and pressed their faces into his back. 'Come on, girls,' he said, leading them away.

Raymond's bedroom was tucked at the rear of the house. He ushered the twins inside. 'Sit on my bed. Don't come out.'

After shutting the door, Raymond trod softly to the hallway junction and spied Nancy standing under the pendant light bulb, a metre from the front door. One hand rested jauntily on her hip; the other held the straw-ended kitchen broom, poised to throw as one might a javelin.

Raymond's eyes traced the outline of her slight body under the sheer fabric of her polyester nightdress. *Why?* he bemoaned silently. *Why does she do this to herself?*

Nancy cried, 'You drunkard,' and pointed the broom at Ron's head. 'You're a disgrace to yourself and this family.' Ron, standing unsteadily as he adjusted to the brightness of the light, was captive to her onslaught. He steadied himself against the wall and motioned with his hand for her to leave. Nancy took a step forward, the broom inches from his head. 'Get outside. You can sleep on the front lawn.'

Ron pushed the broom away from his face. 'Pish off.'

'Out!' Nancy yelled.

'Leave me alone, woman.'

Nancy cracked the broom hard on Ron's head. 'I said get out.'

Ron fell backwards onto the floor and sat cradling his head in his hands.

'Out!' Nancy screamed.

Ron looked up at her, his eyes appearing white as they reflected the light.

Nancy kicked his outstretched foot. '*I said get out!*'

Ron put both hands on the floor and levered himself off the ground, swaying as he rose to his full height. He stood for a few seconds, blinking into the light, and then, in what appeared to be a sudden return to sobriety, snatched the broom from Nancy's grip. 'Go!' he snarled. 'Go now, if ya know what's good for ya.'

Nancy's cheeks inflated. 'No.'

Ron threw the broom down and it cracked on the wooden floor. With his palm open, he slapped Nancy hard across the face and then grabbed hold of her nightie. 'I warned you,' he said, wrapping his worker's hands around her neck. He pushed her

backwards, keeping her upright by the strength in his hand. 'Get in the fuckin' kitchen.'

Raymond shuddered and stepped back into the shadowy hall, and lowered himself into a crouching position, tucking his head between his legs, holding his trembling hands tightly together, praying that it would be over quickly.

Nancy's shrill screams and the sound of smashing china reverberated throughout the weatherboard house, growing in intensity until Ron shouted, 'Shuddup, woman!'

Raymond's heart thumped against his chest.

'You're a useless drunk,' Nancy whimpered, the fight in her voice gone. Then came the unmistakable sound of knuckle connecting with bone and flesh.

Raymond retreated, feeling his way back through the hall to his bedroom. The twins were sitting on his bed, melded together, mouths open, fear stuck in their throats. 'Shush,' Raymond said, lifting the blankets. 'Get under.' The twins crawled into the hollow and Raymond got in next to them, draping the covers over all their heads. The twins nestled into him, their faces so close to his own that he could feel their warm breath on his cheek. 'It's going to be all right,' he whispered. 'I'll take care of you.'

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Ron's breath smelt like a mix of stale cigarettes and alcohol when he emerged from the bathroom the next morning with his hair parted neatly to one side. 'Morning,' he said cheerfully to Raymond, who was waiting to go to the toilet.

Raymond said, 'Morning,' amazed that the only tell-tale sign of the night was the stench coming from Ron's mouth. Ron's eyes were surprisingly clear, the whites bright against his blue irises, and the skin on his face was shiny from being shaved smooth. His white shirt was crisp, tucked in at the waist and secured by a brown, polished belt.

'Whatcha looking at?' Ron asked, giving Raymond's shoulder a playful nudge.

'Oh. Nothing. I mean...just thinking that you look good.'

Ron winked at him, a smile creeping onto his face. 'A bit long in the tooth these days, I'd say. But, as a young fella, when I played football, I could spark some interest, if ya know what I mean.'

Raymond had seen an old photo of Ron when he'd played full forward at the Collingwood Football Club. It had been damaged by age, but there was no mistaking that Ron had been handsome.

'It was all an illusion,' Nancy had told him when he'd shown her the photo. 'I thought he'd amount to something more. I was well and truly fooled.'

Ron smiled brightly at Raymond. 'When you've finished on the toot, be a good lad and get the twins' breakfast. Ya mum had a bit of a fall last night, so I've ordered a taxi to take her to the quack.'

'Is she all right?'

Ron ruffled his hair. 'Yeah, of course she is. Good as gold. More of a check-up, really. You know, just in case,' he said, his eyes flicking to the bedroom that Raymond shared with his brother Francis. 'Is he in there?' he asked, pointing to their room.

'No. He didn't come home last night.'

'Righto. Can you give the kitchen a quick tidy to stop ya mum from going crook about the mess? Here's a couple of bob for you to spend later on,' he said, scooping out a small handful of coins from his pocket.

'Yeah, I can do that. Thanks, Dad.'

'You're a good lad, Raymond,' Ron said, patting him on the back.

Raymond nodded and looked down at the coins.

Ron lit a cigarette, sending a plume of smoke into Raymond's face. 'Well, I'll leave you to count ya money. I'm going out front to wait for the taxi.'

Raymond waited until Ron had closed the front door, and then followed him and opened it a crack. Ron was sucking hard on his cigarette and staring vacantly at the powerlines that hung in ropey lines above the street. *It's not him*, Raymond thought. *It's the beer that does it, and Mum. She's the one who won't leave things alone.*

'Taxi's here,' Ron called out, stubbing the cigarette out under his shoe. 'Come on, Nancy. The meter's running.'

Raymond shut the door and turned around. Nancy shuffled out of the bedroom. One side of her face was swollen and blue, almost unrecognisable, and her right shoulder hung unmoving by her side.

'The taxi's here,' Raymond said.

Nancy scowled. 'Well, don't just stand there with your mouth gaping. Get out of the way or make yourself useful and open the door.'

Raymond said, 'Ok,' and turned the knob.

Ron was standing on the doorstep. 'Easy on,' he said, offering her his hand.

'Don't touch me,' she hissed.

Ron stepped back and let her pass. 'I'm just trying to help.'

'Help? You've got to be joking.'

'Mum, where are you going?' Katherine piped up from the other end of the hall.

Nancy said breathily, 'Stay in your room. Raymond's home. He'll sort everything out.'

'Careful,' Ron said, as Nancy negotiated the step that led to the front yard. 'Wouldn't want you to trip.'

Debris from the previous night's altercation was scattered across the kitchen floor. There were splatters of milky tea and splotches of blood on the linoleum floor, and a couple of smashed plates, and Nancy's favourite bone china teacup lay upended and minus its handle. Raymond sighed and picked up a grubby tea towel. He turned on the tap over the sink, the pipes groaning before the water flowed. *It's not fair*, he thought, crouching down on all fours. *I should leave it for them to clean.* But thoughts of Francis entered his head, and how he'd warned Ron, *If there's a next time, you'll be the one who cops it. You don't hit a sheila. End of story.*

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Ron walked through the door early Saturday afternoon with the cold air following him down the hall. Raymond poked his head out of the kitchen. 'Where's Mum, Dad?'

'Dunno. I dropped her at the doctors and left.'

'What's wrong with her arm?'

'Probably just bruised from the fall. She'll be as right as rain in a few days. Is Francis out?'

'Yeah, he left about an hour ago.'

Ron's eyes twitched. 'Did he say when he'd be back?'

'No, but he was meeting friends, so probably late.'

'Righto. Well, there are things to be done. I'll be in the shed.'

Raymond held up the tea towel. 'I cleaned the kitchen.'

Ron smiled and said, 'Good on ya, mate,' then walked into the lean-to that led to the backyard.

Raymond waited for the back door to slam before folding the tea towel and hanging it neatly on the metal rack next to the sink. He ran his eye over the counter-tops and sighed. Every section of the beige surface was marked by hot cup rings and spillages and he knew that no amount of lemon-scented dishwashing liquid could ever make them look clean.

Raymond heard a crash in the backyard and hurried to the lean-to, wiped a grubby pane on the glass door with his sleeve and peered out into the backyard. Ron was standing next to the shed where a large plastic container lay on its side, spilling dark liquid onto the concrete.

'Bugger,' Ron said irritably.

Raymond opened the door. 'Do you need any help, Dad?'

'No, she's right,' he said, turning the container upright.

'What is it?'

'Oil.'

'What do you need oil for?'

'I was gonna use it on ya mother's sewing machine. It's not running smoothly. I wanted to fix it as a surprise.'

'I could help you with it.'

'Nah, mate. You've gotta know what you're doing.'



Raymond nodded.

Ron looked up at him, shielding the sun with an oily hand. 'How about you get the twins out of their room and make us all lunch instead?'

The twins often spent large chunks of their time playing in their bedroom, and of late, the only sign that they were a part of the family came from listening carefully at their door. If Raymond stood still, he could hear them moving around like mice in a cage, played silently with their cheap Barbie replicas, dressing them up in clothes that Nancy made from fabric scraps on the Singer.

To Nancy, they were twins in a singular sense. *What are the twins doing? Are the twins ready for school?* Life for Nancy was easier when they were one rather than two. *And even easier*, Raymond thought bitterly, *when I'm here.*

Raymond opened the fridge and removed the rock-hard butter. 'Damn,' he mumbled when the knife bowed against the pat. He sighed and cut the butter into thin slices, pressing it into the doughy bread slices with the back of the knife and slapping them together.

'Katherine. Susan!' he yelled. 'Lunch.'

They trotted in, holding hands. Susan peered at the sandwiches and pouted, her bottom lip jutting out. 'I hate the butter like that.'

Raymond frowned and pushed the plate in front of them. 'Stop whingeing. You should be grateful that I made it.'

'When's Mum coming home?' asked Katherine, the nosier of the two, taking a bite of bread.

'Soon,' Raymond answered.

'How soon?'

'Not long. Don't talk with your mouthful.'

'Is Mum hurt bad?' Katherine asked, her voice small, almost a whisper.

Raymond draped his arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. 'She'll be ok. The doctor will fix her.'

'Did Dad hurt her?' Susan asked.

Raymond shook his head. 'She just had a nasty fall. That's all.'

Ron walked into the kitchen, rubbing his oil-stained palms together. 'Great. Lunch.'

'Yours will be a minute,' Raymond said. 'Thought I'd get the twins theirs first.'

Ron winked at the twins. 'And how are my hungry little princesses?'

The afternoon drifted into the evening without any sign of Nancy. Raymond could see that Ron was concerned by the way he kept looking at his watch and then at the door.

After the light faded, Ron said, 'Raymond, go up to the fish and chip shop and get some chips for tea. I'm going out.' He dumped a handful of coins onto the table, some rolling off onto the floor. 'That should do the trick.'

'Will you be late?' Raymond asked, bending down to pick up the errant coins.

Ron shook his head and put on his jacket. 'Nah, just nipping down the road for a tick.'

Raymond followed him to the front door. 'What about the twins?'

'What about them?'

'I'll have to leave them by themselves if I go to the shops.'

Ron opened the door and cupped his hands, blowing his warm breath into them. 'It won't take you long to nip there and back. They'll be fine for a bit.'

'It's pretty dark outside.'

Ron snorted. 'Hells bells, you're not scared of the dark, are ya?'

Raymond zipped up his jacket, rubbed his arms to warm them, then hung his head low and stepped onto the street. The quickest way to get to the fish and chip shop was through the network of unlit bluestone laneways that ran behind a series of weatherboard houses similar to his own. But Francis's warning about going into the lanes at night ran through his head.

'All sorts of perverts go there,' Francis had said.

'What do you mean perverts?'

'Poofters, Raymond. Poofters love the lanes.'

'How do you know that?'

Francis had smiled wryly. 'Cos me and my mates go out looking for them.'

'Why would you look for them?'

Francis had punched his fist into his hand. 'Why do you think?'

'Oh,' Raymond had said, his skin pricking as though chilled.

Raymond walked along his street until he arrived at the turnoff that led to the lanes. He stood and bit his thumbnail. The icy wind blew against his body, pushing him towards the lane. *I'm going to have to do it.*

The lane was silent, apart from the distant sound of a barking dog. The cold air made Raymond's lungs feel tight as he walked briskly under a tiny sliver of moonlight. Glass crunched beneath his cheap canvas shoes and he flinched, half expecting a shard to penetrate the soles. He stopped walking and listened, his eyes straining as he searched the darkness for lurking figures, then took a deep breath and moved forward, using a mental picture of the twins to propel him. *Not far. Not much longer.*

He powered ahead, arms mirroring his brisk stride, and within minutes heard the rattle of trams. Then the darkness gave way to the warm glow of Sydney Road's streetlights and the cobblestones turned to concrete. *Safe*, he thought, his body still wound tight. Then he heard a car backfire in the distance, bringing with it the memory of Ron's fist cracking against Nancy's cheek.

He put his hands to his ears and shut his eyes, his mind unearthing a picture that made him feel sick. He opened his eyes abruptly, but it was too late to wipe away the imprint. What he'd seen felt frighteningly real. Francis had been punching a pervert, and the pervert had been him.

Raymond turned left at the end of the lane and tagged behind a group of people until he reached the fish and chip shop. He pushed open the door and walked in, squinting as his eyes were hit by a sudden burst of fluorescent light. There was no-one in the shop apart from the owner, who was standing with his back to him watching a small television.

'What do you want?' the owner asked, not drawing his eyes from the television.

Raymond's eyes flicked hungrily down the order board. 'Just the minimum of chips, please.'

'That all?'

'Yeah.'

The man wiped his stringy fringe from his forehead, loaded the chips into a wire basket and dropped them into the oil.

'It'll take a few minutes,' he mumbled.

Raymond plonked himself down onto a grubby plastic chair under a tubular light that buzzed and flicked intermittently. He slumped, exhausted, the warmth and thick oily air making his eyes heavy. He let them close, drifting into the fuzzy haze that fell between sleep and wake, where his mind wandered to places that he usually kept at bay.

It wasn't thoughts that reared in his head, but dozens of snapshots of Ron, always smiling until he wasn't.

'Oi!' the man in the shop yelled.

Raymond jolted, his eyes flying open.

'Chips are ready.'

Raymond nodded.

The man tipped the chips from the metal basket on to a piece of newspaper. 'Vinegar?' he asked, holding up a plastic bottle.

Raymond slid the coins across the counter. 'No thanks.'

When he opened the front door to his home, Nancy called, 'Is that you, Raymond?'

'Yes,' Raymond said, his heart sinking at the sound of her voice.

He walked into the kitchen and breathed in sharply. Her arm was suspended in a sling and one eye had completely closed over.

'Too much to expect for you or your dad to look after the twins while I was gone?' she snapped.

The flicker of sympathy Raymond had felt vanished. 'I was thinking of the twins,' he said. 'There wasn't anything for them to eat here.'

Nancy rolled her functional eye. 'So it's my fault. Is that what you're trying to say?

'No, I'm not saying that.'

'Well, what are you saying, Raymond?

'Nothing,' he mumbled.

*And you wonder why he hits you.*

'You'd think it wouldn't have been so difficult to do the right thing while I was gone.'

'We thought we were doing the right thing.'

She snorted. 'We? Oh, that's rich. What a pair of do-gooders you and your father are.'

'I was just trying to help,' Raymond said, holding up the parcel of chips. 'Do you want some?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Where are the twins?'

'In their room playing dolls.'

'Katherine. Susan!' Raymond shouted. 'I'm home with the chips.'

Nancy frowned and placed her palms over her frontal lobe. 'Do you have to shout? My head's already pounding.'

'Sorry.'

'Sorry,' Nancy imitated. 'You're always sorry. Why don't you use your brain for once? Even blind Freddy could see that I need some peace and quiet, and on that note, you're going to have to step it up around here for the next few weeks while I'm out of action.'

Raymond nodded. *Bitch*. 'Will your arm be okay?'

'Not in the short term. It's dislocated, which means I'll be wearing a sling for a few weeks.'

'That's no good.'

The twins ran into the room, flocking around him like hungry seagulls, arms flapping, poking at the parcel.

‘Chippies,’ Susan said excitedly.

Raymond held the chips up over their heads. ‘Hold your horses.’

Katherine stepped back and pointed her finger sternly at Raymond. ‘You took ages. Me and Susan were scared.’

Raymond smiled benevolently and put the chips onto the table. ‘Well, I’m here now and you’re okay. I wasn’t gone long.’

Katherine pouted and shook her head slowly from side to side. ‘It was ages, Raymond. A really long, long time and we thought we heard monsters.’

Raymond covered the accusing finger with his hand and knelt down so that they were eye to eye. ‘There’s no such thing as monsters, and anyway, you weren’t home by yourselves for long, Mum was already back when I got home.’

Katherine glanced at Nancy and opened her mouth as if to speak but no words followed.

‘See, Raymond,’ Nancy said. ‘Your selfishness frightened her.’

A hard pit of anger formed in Raymond’s stomach. *I lied. There are such things as monsters.*

‘I’m not scared now,’ Katherine said, hugging him. ‘Just hungry.’

‘That’s one thing I *can* fix,’ Raymond said quietly into her ear. ‘I’ll unwrap the chips.’

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Raymond’s feet were cold when he opened his eyes early on Sunday morning. He reached over to the side of his bed and picked up the socks that he’d discarded the night before and slipped them onto his feet. He burrowed into the blankets, leaving only his eyes exposed, and hugged his legs to get warm. *No wonder Francis wants to head north*, he thought, turning his head towards the twin bed on the other side of the room where Francis lay huddled under his bedclothes.

It had taken Raymond ages to fall asleep; his mind had ticked until the early hours, thinking about what Francis would do to Ron. He’d experienced a rush of panic when Francis had come home drunk, stomping his boots on the hallway floorboards on his way to their bedroom, and it wasn’t until he was sure that the

house was still and he could hear Francis's deep but steady breathing that his body began to unwind.

Raymond shut his eyes and then opened them with a start, remembering that it was Sunday and it was his debut in the church choir. He'd been thinking about joining the choir for months, wooed more by the idea of performing than the singing. He'd watched the choir enviously from his pew, week after week, picturing himself front and centre, cravat meticulously tied around his neck, all eyes on him. He'd spoken to Nancy about the idea, but she'd scoffed and waved him away.

It had been Ron who'd told him to give it a crack. 'I reckon you'd be beaut at it,' he'd said, his eyes creased by his smile. 'What have you got to lose?'

Raymond's stomach had felt like it was filled with goldfish when he had approached Mrs Anderson, the choir mistress, after mass and enquired about joining.

She had frowned and looked him up and down. 'Can you sing in tune?'

'I think so.'

'Practice is on Tuesdays at five thirty. Think of it as an audition, so get there half an hour early.'

Raymond had arrived on the following Tuesday, as asked, at a whisker before five and had found Mrs Anderson sitting at the piano, arranging sheets of music.

'Excuse me,' Raymond said timidly.

'Just a minute,' Mrs Anderson replied, keeping her back to him. 'I just need to organise these. I'll be with you as soon as I'm done.'

'Okay.'

Raymond stood behind her, peering curiously at patches of red scalp that were visible beneath her salt-and-pepper hair.

Mrs Anderson abruptly spun around and faced him. 'Yes?'

'I...I...I'm here for my audition,' Raymond spluttered, taking a step backwards.

'Oh, that's right. Raymond, isn't it? So, Raymond. What do you want to sing?'

'I don't know,' he said, wishing that he had come more prepared.

Mrs Anderson frowned. 'I see. Well, I always find a good measure of one's ability is to sing 'Waltzing Matilda'. Are you familiar with the lyrics?'

'Yep.'

'Say, yes, Raymond. Not yep. You need to work on your elocution if you want to become a singer.'

'Yep. I mean yes.'

Raymond stood, hands rigidly by his side waiting for Mrs Anderson to play the introduction to the song.

'What are you waiting for?' Mrs Anderson asked brusquely.

Raymond pointed to the piano.

Mrs Andersen sighed. 'No accompaniment for an audition, Raymond. I'll count you in. One, two, three...'

Raymond cleared his throat and began to sing. He started strongly but when he got to the chorus, he faltered. The high notes were above his range, and he felt his cheeks flush as he strained to hit them.

'Ok, that's fine,' Mrs Anderson said, cutting him off. 'Here's the hymnbook,' she said, passing him a weathered hardbacked copy. 'The pages that you need to learn are marked, and when you sing in the choir, you need to dress smartly. Hair combed in a neat and tidy fashion too.'

'Yes, Mrs Anderson.'

'Do you have sensible shoes?' she asked, pointing to his worn sneakers.

'I can borrow some from my dad.'

'Perfect. As long they're polished, then that's fine.'

Raymond reached over to his bedside table and picked up the hymnbook that Mrs Anderson had given him. He turned the brittle pages until he arrived at the first hymn. *Who wrote this?* he wondered, imagining a fully habited nun hunched over a piece of paper in a dimly lit room, with nothing but a crucifix for inspiration. He grinned, thinking about the outfit he'd selected to wear in the choir and how it contrasted with the pious odes written in miniature letters on the book in front of him.



He'd been planning his outfit since the audition. Nancy had sewn him a forest-green crepe shirt with a long-pointed collar that was hemmed in brown metallic thread. She had worked as a seamstress before she met Ron, specialising in custom-made wedding gowns and formal attire. 'And I gave it all up to have you kids,' she'd lamented while she sewed the shirt on her Singer. 'I could have had my own shop by now.'

Instead, she'd dedicated a corner of the lounge to her sewing equipment, and Raymond loved her jars of brightly coloured buttons and the neat pile of fabric swatches that she'd accrued over the years. He'd run the back of his hand over the crinkly crepe fabric she'd used to make his shirt before pressing it to his lips and smelling it.

'Stop it, Raymond. It's annoying,' Nancy said, pulling the fabric away from his face. 'Why do you have to fiddle with everything?'

Nancy was always gruff and unemotional, except when it came to clothes. The possibilities of fabric made her eyes sparkle and her mouth twitch. She carried a small sketchpad in her handbag, and when she spied a garment or a design that took her fancy, she would hastily replicate it with her soft-nibbed pencil.

'It's in the detail,' she said, unravelling the metallic thread. 'It's how you finish and accent clothes that makes the difference.'

Raymond knew that he took after her in that respect. He followed the fashions of the day with a keen eye and asked Nancy to replicate them. 'Can you make these pants fit me?' he asked, holding up a pair of Ron's cream slacks. 'I want them tight at the top and flared at the bottom.'

For Raymond's last birthday, Nancy had handed him a present, wrapped in soft green tissue paper.

'This is for you,' she said. There'd been no kisses or hugs, but he'd been able to tell by the way her eyes followed his hands as he tore away the wrapping paper that she wanted him to like it.

A piece of silky fabric slid from the parcel. It was cream, with tiny brown treble clefs dotted all over it.

'Is it a scarf?' he'd asked.

'No, it's much fancier than a scarf.'

‘What is it then?’

‘It’s a cravat,’ she replied with a worldly nod. ‘You drape it around your neck and then tuck it into your shirt. It’s what gentlemen wear.’

The beautiful fabric slid through Raymond’s hands. ‘How do I put it on?’

‘Like this,’ she said, and tucked it into place. ‘It’s real silk, so make sure you look after it.’

He’d settled on the slacks and shirt for his choir outfit, accented by the cravat, which had taken half an hour to get to sit properly. *And it’s going to be perfect*, Raymond thought, hugging himself under the covers, glad that striving to look your best was one of his and Nancy’s points of common ground.

He made sure that he acknowledged her work with strategic compliments. Nothing too lavish, or she’d twig that he was buttering her up to make something else. She preferred comments about her skill as a dressmaker rather than descriptions of how it made him feel to wear a garment. But he didn’t need her praise or admiration anymore, because it had become enough just to imagine the looks he’d get from the congregation when he took his place between the drab knitted twin-sets and grey woollen suits.

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It was Raymond’s bladder that forced him to rise from the warmth of his bed. He pulled his dressing-gown off the hook on his door and quietly opened the door. Francis stirred as the hinge creaked, and Raymond stood still until he was sure that he’d not fully woken.

The smell of urine hit Raymond when he opened the bathroom door. He could never understand the logic behind Nancy’s insistence on putting a carpet mat under the toilet bowl. It was rarely washed, and on occasion felt damp underfoot. He stood in front of the toilet, keeping his feet either side of the mat, and relieved himself. Mid-stream it dawned on him that the outfit he had selected was lying in a heap waiting to be pressed in the laundry basket. Ironing day was always Saturday, and he realised, shuddering, that it would not have been done.

Nancy was ritualistic about when she attended to the clothes. She’d turn the radio on and flick through the stations using the dial until she found something to her taste. The ironing-board was lugged from the lean-to into the kitchen, where she

would begin what she referred to as 'ironing the essentials'. She was fussy about it. *It's a process and it has to be done right.*

Raymond flushed the toilet and tried to remember Nancy's process. Was it collars, then sleeves? Oh, and something about temperatures and delicates?

He wondered if he should wake Nancy and ask for help but quickly dismissed the idea, knowing that even at the best of times his parents' bedroom was off limits. The door was always kept shut and the curtains remained drawn day and night. He'd only ever peeped inside a handful of times, and always when no-one had been home. The musty-smelling room was piled high with clothes, and an aged dressmaker's dummy stood in the corner, draped with beads, scarves and tape measures. The only clues that Ron slept there were on his bedside table: a small clock and a black-and-white photo of his own mother sat on his side of the bed, angled toward his pillow.

The thin, multi-paned windows were rattling when Raymond walked into the lean-to. He kicked away the leaves that had blown in through the gap under the door, dragged the ironing-board out from the corner of the room and carried it into the kitchen. He got the iron out of the cupboard and held it close to his eyes, squinting to read the settings on the dial. There were smudged lines and dots, which he assumed had once been letters, so taking a guess, he rotated the dial as far as it would go, flicked the power on at the wall and tapped the silver surface with his finger, like he'd seen Nancy do, until it was too hot to touch.

The shirt was among the wrinkled pile of clothes in the laundry basket. He took it out and put in onto the ironing-board, smoothing it out with his hand. The iron hissed and dribbled water when he placed it onto the front of his shirt, but instead of sliding across in a continuous motion, it stuck fast to the fabric.

Black smoke and a smell like burning plastic came from the base of the iron. When Raymond retracted the iron, a piece of fabric came with it, leaving a shrivelled hole in his shirt, and panic ensued.

'What an earth have you done?' Nancy yelled from behind him.

Raymond jumped. 'I was trying to iron my shirt.'

'Ironing? You call that ironing? You've gone and ruined it. I worked on that for a week.'

Raymond looked at the shirt, his mind making a leap from Nancy's ire to his impending choir debut. 'You could sew a patch onto it. Dad fixed the Singer yesterday.'

'Your dad did *what*?'

'He oiled it, as a surprise.'

'A surprise? Spare me.'

'He said it wasn't working properly.'

'Did he just? That shirt's beyond repair, you twit. And even if I could fix it, I won't be sewing for weeks,' she said, pointing at her sling. 'The material's synthetic – it should have been ironed on low. Why didn't you ask me first?'

'It was too early and you were in bed.'

'So you took it upon yourself to do it?'

'It was an accident. I needed it for the choir.'

'Well, you can't wear it in public now, can you?'

'What will I wear, then?'

'Ask someone who cares, Raymond. I'm sick to death of you all.'

'But I'm singing in the choir, in front of everyone.'

'You caused the problem, so you fix it. I'm going back to bed.'

Raymond climbed back into his bed and pulled the blanket over his head.

'What's bloody wrong with you?' Francis asked from his bed.

'Nothing.'

'Well, why are you huffing and puffing while I'm trying to sleep in?'

'It's Mum, if you really want to know.'

'What's she done now?'

'Gone crook at me for trying to iron my shirt. I needed it done so I'd look good in the choir at church and I burnt it.'

'Why the hell do you want to sing in the choir?'

'I thought it'd be fun.'

'You're fuckin' strange, Raymond,' Francis said, picking up his work boot from beside his bed and throwing it at him.

'Ow! Rack off. That hurt. Why'd you do that?'

'Because you're acting like an idiot. Anyway, why didn't you get Mum to iron it for you?'

'Her arm's hurt. It's in a sling.'

Francis scowled. 'Dad?'

'Yeah. She went off at him for being drunk on Friday night.'

Francis punched the headboard of his bed. 'Fuckin' Dad.'

'It's not all his fault. She was the one who started it.'

'Watch your mouth. There are things you don't know, so don't go around placing the blame on Mum.'

'What don't I know?' Raymond asked.

'You'll find out what's going on soon enough. Now shut up while I deal with Dad.'

Francis hastily put on his t-shirt and jeans. He narrowed his eyes and pointed his index finger at Raymond. 'You stay here.'

Raymond sat upright in bed. 'Please don't hurt Dad.'

Francis shook his head and walked over to the door, putting his hand on the doorknob and then quickly letting go of it. He turned to Raymond and sneered. 'Shut your trap, ya little ponce. It's about time someone did something about what goes on here. It seems to me that you care more about a frilly shirt than ya do about your own mother.'

Raymond opened his mouth to speak, but the words lodged in the back of his throat. *I'm not a ponce. I'm not.*

Francis turned on his heels, his feet clipping together as though he was in the military, and yanked the door open. 'Dad,' he growled into the hallway. 'Where the fuck are ya?'

Raymond hugged his knees and listened while Francis demanded that Ron 'man up' and come out of the bathroom.

'Watch your language, Francis. We've got two young girls in the house,' Ron said, carefully modulating his voice from behind the door.

'Don't feed me that shit,' Francis snarled. 'Outside. *Now!*'

Raymond heard Francis kick the door.

'I'll come out when ya calm,' Ron said.

'Calm?' Ya fuckin' pullin' my leg?'

Raymond lay down in his bed and covered his ears with his hands, ruffling them up and down to block Francis's threats of violence.

Minutes later, a collective high-pitched scream from the twins broke through Raymond's noise barrier. He threw back the blankets and got to his feet; running to the lean-to, he found the twins huddled together, eyes clamped shut and hysterical. 'Girls,' Raymond said, shaking them to alert them to his presence.

Their screams stopped but their mouths remained wide open. 'Go to your room. *Now!*' Raymond said, his tone leaving no room for them to do anything other than obey.

Raymond looked out the back door and saw Francis holding Ron by the shirt collar.

'I fuckin' warned you, Dad!' Francis screamed, flexing his youthful muscles. 'I told you it was going to be the last time!'

'This's got nothing to do with you,' Ron shouted back. 'Get ya hands off me if ya know what's good for you!'

'Stop it!' Raymond yelled at them. 'The twins are terrified.'

'Piss off, Raymond,' Francis snarled. 'Or I'll give you a hiding next!'

Francis drew Ron to him, their puffed faces centimetres apart. 'You're a fuckin' coward, Dad. What kind of man hits a woman?'

Ron grimaced. 'It's none of your business, Francis.'

'It *is* my fuckin' business,' Francis said, and punched him in the face with his free hand.

Blood streamed from Ron's nostrils.

'Let him go, Francis. You've hurt him!' Raymond shrieked, running over to them and tugging on the back of Francis's shirt.

'Fuck off, ponce,' Francis yelled, pony-kicking him in the shins and sending him flying backwards.

Nancy burst through the back door, one arm flailing. 'Stop this rot!'

'It's Francis,' Raymond said, clutching his bruised shin. 'It's all Francis' fault.'

'Francis, get your hands off your father,' Nancy ordered.

'Go inside, Mum. This is between Dad and me!' Francis yelled. 'I'm doing this for you.'

'I can look after myself,' Nancy said.

'Can ya, Mum?' Francis shouted, louder this time. 'It doesn't fuckin' look like it to me!'

'Do as you're told, Francis! This is our house. You don't make the rules here,' Nancy snapped.

'Are you bloody serious, Mum?' Francis asked, his face stung by her words. 'Look at the state of you. You're pregnant, for god's sake.'

Nancy glared at Francis. 'That's got nothing to do with this.'

'It's got everything to do with this,' Francis countered. He let go of Ron's shirt and turned to face Nancy. 'I'm only trying to protect you and the baby, Mum. I'm making sure you're both okay.'

'You're making things ten times worse,' she hissed. 'You touch your dad again and you can find somewhere else to live.'

Francis froze, staring hard at Nancy. 'I don't believe you,' he said.

'I mean it,' Nancy warned.

Francis looked over at Ron, sprawled out across the lawn. He walked over and stood above him. 'You pathetic sack of shit,' he said, and kicked him.

Ron groaned and curled into a defensive ball.

'Pack your belongings and get out of our house,' Nancy said, her tone spiked with menace.

Francis stood still for a few seconds, his eyes flicking from Raymond to Ron, and finally settling on Nancy. 'Fuck you all. I'm gone. You deserve each other.'

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'Well, that's that,' Nancy said dispassionately, after Francis had stormed off. 'Raymond, go and make the twins some breakfast while I look after your dad.'

*You're pregnant?* Raymond shouted silently. *You're having a baby? And you kicked Francis out?*

Raymond walked into the kitchen, his hands trembling as he put two slices of bread into the toaster. His mind somersaulted through a series of vignettes featuring Nancy. *How can she be pregnant?* he thought, finding himself stuck on the vision of her reedy silhouette beneath the hall light.

Smoke rose from the toaster, shifting Raymond's train of thought to the twins. He flicked the power button off at the wall, leaving the charred toast in the slots, and hastily made his way to their room.

'Katherine. Susan,' he called into the empty room.

'We're here,' came a voice from under the bed.

Raymond and knelt down on the floor and flipped the blanket up, coming face to face with the twins. 'What are you doing under there?'

'Hiding,' Katherine said.

Susan poked her head out. 'We were scared.'

Raymond put both his hands out. 'Come here. It's okay now.'

'Is Daddy alright?' Katherine asked, taking his hand.

Dragging them both out he said, 'Yes. He's okay.'

Susan put her finger to her mouth and began tearing at the nail with her teeth.

'Stop that,' Raymond said, pulling her hand away. He held her hand up, wincing at the sight of her raw and bloody nailbed. 'No more biting, Susan,' he reiterated. 'You can get worms from biting dirty nails.'

'Worms?' Susan asked.

'Yeah. They lay eggs and then live in your bum.'

Susan screwed up her face. 'Is that even real?'



Raymond nodded. 'Yes. It's real.'

Susan wiped her hand on her dress and then inspected her fingers closely. 'Yucky.'

'I'll buy you some nail polish to put on them if you stop biting them,' Raymond said.

'Me too?' Katherine asked.

Raymond smiled at her. 'Of course. You too.'

Katherine looked at her nails. 'I want pink.'

Raymond forced his lips to smile. 'Pink it is.'

There was a pause and then Katherine lifted her head and looked at Raymond with a wide-eyed, stern expression. 'Why did Francis fight Dad, Raymond?'

'Well,' Raymond began, not sure how to proceed. 'Well...he was mad.'

'Because Dad hurt Mum?' Katherine conjectured.

'There's always two sides to a story. It's complicated.'

Katherine cocked her head, her flecked eyes blinking as she processed what he had said. 'Whose side are you on, Raymond?'

Raymond felt heat rise in his cheeks.

'Are you on Dad's side?' Katherine pressed.

'I'm not taking sides,' Raymond answered, more sharply than he intended.

Raymond scraped the burnt bits off the twins' toast, mindful of the time. 'You'll have to play in your room or outside after breakfast,' he said to the twins. 'I've got to go to mass.'

Katherine whined. 'Can't we come too?'

'No. I haven't got time to get you ready and anyway, I'm singing in the choir so I couldn't sit next to you.'

'What about Mum?' Susan asked. 'She could sit with us.'

Raymond shook his head. 'She needs to rest and you need to be good girls and do as I ask. Please, just for me.'

Susan pouted. 'Not fair.'

'Sorry. Maybe next week,' Raymond said, putting their toast onto the table. 'Eat up. I've got to go and get ready.'

The chill in Raymond's bedroom was different – colder, despite the fact the temperature had risen. He glanced over to Francis's side of the room and saw that his bedside clock was gone. The chest of drawers had not been shut properly and Raymond could see that most of Francis's clothes had been removed. He pushed it closed, harder than necessary, and sank to the floor with his head in his hands.

*Why? Why couldn't you have shut your gob, Francis?*

The idea of leaving home was foreign enough, but it seemed inconceivable that Nancy, his own mother, could have told him to go.

Raymond levered himself upright, reopened the drawer and began rummaging through his clothes. 'Nothing,' he muttered. *At least nothing good enough to wear today*, he thought, ruefully reflecting on his original ensemble. He wondered if Ron's modified slacks with a t-shirt would do, but promptly dismissed the idea on account of Nancy's adage that stepping out in an incomplete or ill-fitting outfit was akin to a crime.

Blowing out his breath audibly, he picked up his jeans and t-shirt from the floor, hesitating before putting them on, imagining Mrs Anderson's frosty look of disapproval. *Maybe best not to go at all*, he thought, his eyes drifting to his battered shoes. *What's the point?*

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The house was quiet when Raymond got home. He put his ear against the twins' door when he went past and heard rustling sounds of occupation. 'I'm home,' he said, opening the door to find the twins sprawled on a bed with a sea of dolls' clothes between them.

Susan thrust her doll into the air and waved it at him. 'Play with us, Raymond.'

'Maybe later. I'm tired.'

'Pretty please,' Katherine said, pressing her palms together. 'It's more fun with you and we were good while you were at mass. Just like you said.'

Raymond walked over to the bed, swept the dolls' clothes aside with his hand and sat between the twins. 'All right, but only for a bit. I've got homework to do. And no whingeing when I go. Deal?'

'Deal!' they both squealed delightedly.

Susan passed Raymond an undressed doll. 'You can be the Mum and me and Katherine will be the baby sisters.'

After half an hour of dutiful role-playing, including a trip to the hair salon to get Mum's nylon hair permed, Raymond left the twins and took to his room, collapsing in an exhausted heap onto his bed. After glancing guilty at his bag, which had lain slumped in the corner of the room unopened since he'd left school on Friday, he forced himself to rise and withdraw his dog-eared math textbook. Sitting with his knees up, resting the book against them, he began to work his way through the list of sums.

He'd only managed a couple when there was a rap on his door. 'Is that you home, Raymond?' Ron asked.

'Yeah, It's me.'

'Can I come in?'

'Yeah.'

Ron opened the door, taking only a few steps inside the room. There were traces of dried blood around his nostrils and the beginning of a bruise over one eye. 'Hi, mate. You all right?'

'Yes.'

'I just wanted to say thanks for trying to help with Francis. He's a bugger, that one.'

Raymond nodded without looking up and doodled on his math book.

'I probably should say it more often, but you really are my right-hand man. A trusty little soldier if ever there was one.'

'I should join the army,' Raymond said, drawing large swirling patterns.

Ron coughed throatily. 'Can't see ya in the army.'

Raymond continued drawing circles, pressing hard on the pencil, overlapping them until the lines became indistinct. 'Can't you?'

Ron coughed again, this time louder. 'Well, I just stopped by to see if you were all right.'

'I'm fine.'

'You know, mate,' Ron began and then stopped, searching for words. 'I feel like...that is to say...I'm really grateful to ya.'

'Why?'

'Cos you're a good lad.'

The pencil nib broke, sending little shards of grey lead across the page. Raymond blew the lead off the book and looked up at Ron. 'Has Francis gone for good?'

Ron shrugged his shoulders. 'Who knows? Anyway, best be off. I've got things to do.'

'Righto.'

'Hooroo.'

After Ron had left, Raymond was hit by another wave of tiredness. He pushed the maths book off his lap, letting it clunk to the floor, dragged the blanket over him and closed his eyes.

It felt only like a few minutes had passed when Nancy's flinty voice woke him. 'Raymond, I need help with dinner.'

Rolling over, he lifted the blanket over his head and burrowed deeper into his bed.

'Raymond,' she called, protracting each syllable in his name.

'Bloody hell,' he muttered, flinging the blankets aside irritably. 'Coming!' he answered, looking sheepishly at the discarded maths book on his way out.

\*\*\*

Raymond woke before his alarm on Monday morning and lay in bed worrying about his uncompleted homework until the shrill bell on his clock forced him into action. He breathed out heavily, realising that his school clothes were also laundry casualties – unironed and unwashed.

Arriving at the kitchen in his wrinkled and slightly odorous uniform, Raymond found that the twins had helped themselves to milk, resulting in large white puddles on the table.

'Where's Mum?' Raymond asked them, grabbing a tea towel and throwing it over the spilled milk.

Susan burped. 'In bed.'

Raymond smiled despite his frustration. 'That's disgusting, Susan. And what have I told you both about asking before you help yourselves to food and drink?'

Susan burped again, her face impishly animated as she observed Raymond's admonishing frown. 'Scuse me,' she said.

'Is Francis coming back?' Katherine asked, instantly changing the tone.

Raymond wiped up the milk and took the wet tea towel over to the sink to rinse. 'I'm not sure,' he said, keeping his back to them. 'Now finish your milk and go and get the hairbrush and comb.'

Since the twins had started school, Raymond had become adept at styling their blonde hair. Initially he'd taken the job on to keep nit infestations at bay, learning that when their hair was tied back, the likelihood of peer transmission was quelled, but his styling had quickly evolved past ponytails and now he had mastered French braids.

'Quick,' Raymond said when Susan returned with the hair utensils. 'I have to be on the tram in twenty minutes.'

Brushing the knots from their hair first, he moved to parting sections with the point of the comb, making sure each segment was smooth before twisting the hair over and under his fingers to create the braid.

'You do it better than Mum,' Susan said when he'd finished.

'Shh, don't let her hear you say that,' Raymond said, giving her a kiss on the forehead. 'Now, let me see you both.'

The twins stood in front of him, twirling on the toes of their school shoes.

'Beautiful,' Raymond said. 'Perfect pirouettes to match perfect hair.'

The twins' faces lit up, their wide smiles dotted with rows of tiny white baby teeth.

Raymond drew them to him and pointed to the kitchen clock. 'Now, don't forget you have to leave the house when the big hand gets to the six and the little hand is on the eight.'

'We won't,' Susan said solemnly.

'That's my good girls. And don't forget the rule.'

The twins nodded.

'Which is?'

'Don't talk to strangers,' they said in unison.

To get to school, Raymond caught a tram on Sydney Road, which was packed with schoolchildren and city-bound commuters with their noses glued to newspapers. He glanced around the tram, recognising a couple of kids but none that he felt inclined to approach.

After elbowing his way onto the tram, he stood in the aisle gripping a dangling leather strap, thinking about the consequences of not having completed his homework. The maths teacher had issued a stern warning to the class on Friday that failure to hand in the work would result in a detention. 'No excuses,' he'd added as they'd filed out of class.

*Nothing I can do about it now,* Raymond thought, resigned, after he'd arrived and started walking towards the cast-iron fence that ringed the school.

To the outside eye, the original school building seemed imposing and austere. It was a three-story construction, rendered in grey stone and topped with a double-pitched slate roof. In its glory days it had educated the sons of the Catholic elite, but time had changed the demographic, and now working-class boys from the poorer inner-city pockets of Melbourne swarmed its corridors.

Raymond joined the crowd of boys jostling to pass through the gates, swamped in the process by a collective of scraping bags and jabbing elbows. He barrelled through the bottle neck and then jogged to his locker, unloading his bag just as the bell sounded.

Arriving without his maths book, Raymond walked into the classroom and found a seat at the back of the room. The din created by twenty-odd boys quickly dissipated when their teacher, Mr Taylor, walked in the door.

Amongst the boys he was known as Mr Sheen. It had been Raymond who'd made the connection between him and the bespectacled, rosy-cheeked, shiny-headed character named Mr Sheen, who graced television screens selling a spray-on product that promised to clean and shine a host of surfaces. 'He's a dead ringer,' he'd told the boys, who had wholeheartedly agreed and used the name thereafter.

'Morning boys,' Mr Sheen said. 'Books out, turn to page forty-three.'

Raymond folded his arms and sat back in his chair.

'Raymond, sit up properly and get your book out,' Mr Sheen said.

'Sorry, sir,' Raymond said, 'It would seem that I left my maths book at home.'

'It would *seem*, would it?'

'Yes. Looks that way.'

'*It seems* that you're in quite a facetious mood this morning, Raymond.'

Raymond raised his eyebrows. 'It would *seem* that I am,' he said, buoyed by titters from his peers.

'Enough, Raymond.' Mr Sheen said, his tone bringing the class to silence. 'I suppose that means you haven't done your homework, either?'

'I did it. I just haven't got it with me.'

'See me after class, Raymond,' Mr Sheen said brusquely. 'In the meantime, you can share a book.'

Raymond stayed seated after the class had filed out.

'Come here, Raymond,' Mr Sheen said.

Raymond trudged over.

'What's going on?' Mr Sheen asked, peering up at him through his thick lenses.

'Nothing.'

'Are you quite sure?'

'Yep.'

'I'll see you Friday night after school, then. You were warned, Raymond. I was very clear that there would be a detention for those who didn't do their homework.'

'Fair enough.'

'I'll see you then. Now off to your next class.'

The rest of the day dragged, and when the final bell finally rang, Raymond made haste, arriving at his locker to retrieve his bag before the mass exodus. The habit of rushing had been formed when the twins had first started school and worries about their welfare had plagued him. Nancy had scoffed when he'd brought up his concerns and suggested that she take them and pick them up. 'Don't be stupid. You and Francis were fine, and anyway, there's two of them.'

'How do you know I was fine?' Raymond shot back.

'Because you're still standing,' she answered.

The tram rolled down the road as soon as he exited the school, enabling him to arrive home at a whisker after four. The twins were sitting at the table, weary-eyed, but with their hair, Raymond mused proudly, still perfectly in place.

'Where's Mum?' Raymond asked.

'Don't know,' Katherine said. 'Maybe at the shops.'

'I doubt it,' Raymond said, knowing that Nancy wouldn't venture out with her blackened eye. 'She's probably in bed,' he added, opening up the food cupboard.

The twins followed him, their faces registering dismay when he pulled an open packet of dried biscuits off the shelf.

'Nothing a bit of butter and Vegemite can't fix,' he said. 'Get your readers ready. I want to hear you read after you've eaten.'

\*\*\*

Raymond felt a tightness in his stomach when Friday came around. He'd been dreading his meeting with Mr Sheen all week. When school finished he dawdled in the locker rooms and took his time to load his books into his bag. *Damn Mr Sheen*, he thought, glancing at his watch and hoping the twins were home safely. He'd told Nancy at least three times that he'd be home late, but it had barely registered. She'd been spending most of her time in her room, only appearing when it was time to eat



or to use the bathroom. Raymond had taken to picking up basic food supplies and for most of the week they'd been living off sandwiches toasted under the gas grill.

Arriving at Mr Sheen's office, Raymond rapped lightly on the door and waited.

'Raymond,' Mr Sheen called out from the end of the corridor. 'Sorry I'm late,' he said, striding briskly toward him.

Raymond nodded and stepped away from the door. Mr Sheen extracted from his pocket a large set of jangling keys that were attached to a Sydney Harbour Bridge keyring and began flicking through them. 'This is it,' he said, holding a key up before inserting it in the lock. He opened the door. 'After you.'

A round Indian-style rug in vivid reds and blues sat between the desk and the door, which Raymond assumed had been put there to compensate for the brown threadbare carpet that covered the rest of the office. 'Take a seat,' Mr Sheen said, gesturing with his hand to sit down.

Raymond sat, crossing his arms and legs.

Mr Sheen smiled at him. 'Relax, Raymond. I'm not angry. I just want to chat. I have some concerns. Is everything all right at home?'

'Yes. Fine.'

'You know you can trust me, Raymond.'

'Everything's fine.'

'You don't seem yourself.'

Raymond stared at the intricate pattern on the rug, confused by the concern. Mr Sheen sat back in his chair and crossed his arms, the springs squeaking as he adjusted his body. 'Take your time,' Mr Sheen said. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

Raymond glanced at his watch, licking his lips like a nervy dog, rattled by Mr Sheen and the silence that stretched between them. He cleared his throat and scratched the back of his head, stealing a look at Mr Sheen, whose eyes, he discovered, were firmly focussed on him.

After what felt like an eternity, Mr Sheen placed his hands on his desk and spoke in a half-whisper. 'I used to be like you, once. I know it's hard to believe, but I understand, Raymond.'

'Understand what?' Raymond said, his dry throat barely managing the words.

'That you're lost. Confused. Unsure.'

'I'm not.'

'I think you're telling yourself fibs.'

Raymond shook his head.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Can you please just give me my punishment?'

Mr Sheen sighed audibly. 'I'm not sure a punishment will benefit you. Instead, I have a proposition.'

'Proposition?'

'Yes. Now look at me while I'm talking. It's important to have eye contact with people when they're speaking to you.'

Raymond raised his head, meeting Mr Sheen's magnified eyes.

Mr Sheen smiled. 'How would you feel if I mentored you, so to speak?'

'Mentored?'

'Yes. Took you under my wing.'

'How?'

'It's not something I broadcast, but each year I select a boy like yourself to give opportunities that he wouldn't ordinarily have. I like to think of it as opening your eyes to possibility.'

'What possibilities?'

'Experiences that are not afforded to boys like you. If I were to select you, I would see you out of school. Take you on trips into the city, out for dinner and that sort of thing. Would you like that Raymond?'

Raymond fumbled for words. 'I...don't know.'

'There are no expenses or conditions, if that's what you're worried about.'

'Can I think about it?'

'Better than that – why don't we meet on Saturday, and you can see if you like it? If not, no hard feelings.'

'I might not be allowed,' he said.

'I'm sure you can work out a way to slip off for an afternoon.'

'I'm not sure.'

'Just once, Raymond. Just come once, before you dismiss the idea.'

'Okay, maybe. Just once.'

'Good. Where do you live?'

'Coburg, off Sydney Road.'

'I'll pick you up at eleven, in Sydney Road. Tell me where and I'll be there.'

'Okay,' Raymond said. 'The post office.'

Mr Sheen lowered his voice. 'Oh, just one other thing. This is strictly between you and me. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

On Saturday morning, Nancy asked, 'What are you dressed up for?' as she stirred a spoon of sugar into her cup of tea.

'I'm going out.'

'Where to?'

'It's a school excursion type of thing,' Raymond replied, deliberately vague.

'On a Saturday?'

'Yeah, there's a teacher going.'

'I see.'

'I have to go soon. I'm meeting them at eleven.'

Nancy scowled. 'What about the twins?'

'I'll make them their lunch before I go.'

Nancy opened the newspaper. 'Make sure you're home before dinner.'

Raymond's stomach fluttered as he walked along bustling Sydney Road. Nearly all of the shops shut at noon, which resulted in collective brisk strides from the people hurrying to stock up for the weekend. Reaching the post office, Raymond slouched

against the red, crown-capped mailbox, his eyes homing in on the occupants of cars that went past.

He heard two short beeps of a horn and turned his head. Mr Sheen was at the wheel of a royal blue Cortina, dressed in an eye-catchingly bright yellow shirt. He waved at Raymond, then reached across the seat and opened the passenger door. He said, 'Goodness, it feels strange to see you out of school uniform' with a smile that revealed staining on his bottom teeth. 'I like your shirt,' he added, putting his foot to the pedal and taking off.

'It's old. Mum made it.'

'Well, you look terrific.'

Raymond glanced back at the post office. 'Thanks.'

'By the way, when we're out of school, you can call me Bruce.'

'Um, okay.'

Mr Sheen patted his leg. 'It might take a bit of getting used to.'

'What?'

'Calling me Bruce.'

'Oh,' Raymond said.

'All okay?' Mr Sheen asked, as they hurtled along.

'Fine.'

'Have you ever been to Chinatown in the city?'

'No.'

'Excellent,' Mr Sheen said. 'Then that's where we'll go.'

'Nearly there,' Mr Sheen said, indicating to turn left into Little Bourke Street. 'Watch for a parking spot, Raymond.'

Raymond's ignored Mr Sheen's instruction, lured instead by the sights and sounds of what felt like a completely foreign city. Chinese characters were written in black across the tops of shops painted in glistening gold and rich red.

'There's one,' Mr Sheen said, slamming the brakes on and reversing back into a narrow park. 'The parking gods are on our side today.'

Raymond got out of the car and gazed upwards in awe at the multi-storied buildings. He was struck by the smoky, spice-laden scent, which mingled with the odour of rotting fruit. The overpowering smell made him think he might retch. *What is it?* he thought, pulling his shirt over his nose.

Mr Sheen seemed oblivious to the aroma, shepherding Raymond down a tiny cobblestoned lane and landing in front of a grey four-story building. 'Welcome to Chung Wah, Raymond,' Mr Sheen said, opening the glossy, black-painted door.

Inside, Raymond was overwhelmed by the clatter coming from the kitchen and the frantic pace of the waiters who carried trays of food in small white bowls to the crowd of loud patrons. He coughed as he inhaled second-hand cigarette smoke and the dense, steamy air that filled the restaurant. A waiter led them to a tiny table parked at the side of the room, immediately placing a ceramic cup that reminded Raymond of something from a child's tea set in front of him and poured a stream of weak tea, stopping expertly just before the cup overflowed.

Mr Sheen flashed the menu in front of Raymond. 'Would you like me to order for you?'

Raymond nodded, his head turning in wonderous circles.

Mr Sheen gave a short laugh. 'Your eyes are as wide as saucers, Raymond.' He dotted his finger down the menu, indicating his choices to the waiter, who bowed his head and hurried off.

'Have you ever used chopsticks?' Mr Sheen asked, picking up a pair and clicking them together.

'No. Do they have forks?'

'Give it a go, it's part of the experience. Here let me show you,' Mr Sheen said, placing them between his fingers. 'Now, think of them like a crab's pincer. Rest them on your thumb and use your pointer to move them.'

'I can't do it,' Raymond said, clumsily handling the chopsticks.

'It might be easier with food.'

The meal arrived quickly and Raymond tucked a paper serviette into his collar, his eyes feasting on the unusual colours and textures of the food.

Mr Sheen shook his head discreetly. 'Raymond. The serviette goes on your lap.'

'On my lap?'

'Yes, that's the correct place for it.'

'It won't protect my shirt if I put it there.'

'It will if you're careful.'

Raymond removed the serviette and placed it on his lap, 'What's that?' he asked, pointing to a bowl of battered meat swimming in an orange glaze.

'Sweet and sour pork. Try some, it's delicious.'

Raymond fumbled awkwardly with the chopsticks. 'I can't do it.'

'Yes, you can. Just take your time.'

Raymond tried again, but this time instead of using the chopsticks as pincers, he stabbed the meat through its heart, bringing it to his lips and sniffing it suspiciously.

'Don't you trust me, Raymond?' Mr Sheen asked.

'Yes.'

'Then take a bite.'

Raymond chewed the pork slowly. The taste was unfamiliar but surprisingly pleasant.

'And?' Mr Sheen asked after he had swallowed.

'It's sweet. Weird, but good weird,' Raymond said, skewering another piece with his chopstick.

'So, what do you think, Raymond?' Mr Sheen asked as they drove back to Coburg.

'Good. I didn't think I'd like Chinese food.'

'Not the food. The idea of me being your mentor. No problem if you don't want to do it. There are other boys I could choose.'

Raymond looked out of the window, hesitating before answering. 'Yes, Bruce. I think it'd be good. I just have to ask...'

'Ask?'

'You know...make sure it's okay with my family. But I think it should be all right.'

'That's terrific, Raymond. We're going to have such a culinary adventure together.'

Mr Sheen double parked outside the post office. 'Thanks, Bruce,' Raymond said, undoing his seatbelt. 'I had a fantastic time.'

'That's wonderful, Raymond. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Just remember that this is between you and me. Under no circumstances are you to tell your friends. At school, I will continue to treat you exactly like any other student. Are we clear?'

'Yes, Bruce. We're clear.'

'You're a delight, Raymond. An absolute delight. I'll pick you up next Saturday. Same time and place?'

'Yep. Thanks, Bruce.'

\*\*\*

Raymond walked into the kitchen and found Katherine sitting on the bench with a knife in her hand, about to plunge it into the toaster.

'Stop!' Raymond shrieked.

Katherine dropped the knife and immediately burst into tears.

'Don't cry,' Raymond said, scooping her off the bench. 'I didn't mean to scare you. It's dangerous to put metal in the toaster. You could have been electrocuted.'

Katherine clung to him, nestling her head into his shoulder. 'Please don't leave like Francis.'

'Shush,' he soothed her. 'I'm not leaving.'

\*\*\*

Raymond found Nancy sitting next to her sewing machine, sifting one-handed through piles of muted fabric.

'What are you doing, Mum?'

'Sorting these out.'

'What are you thinking of making?'

'Clothes, when I get out of this sling.'

'For the twins?'

'No, Raymond.'

'Who for, then?'

'The baby,' she said angrily.

'When's it due?'

'Some time in November.'

'That's good, it'll be warmer then.'

'Good? There's nothing good about it, Raymond. I should be out enjoying life, not stuck in a house with a crying baby and a bucket full of nappies.'

'So you're not happy?'

'No, I'm not happy. The only thing that would make me happy would be if I could get rid of it.'

Raymond gasped. 'Get rid of it? Why would you want to do that?'

'Look around, Raymond.'

'At what?'

'This hovel. I never thought this would be how I'd end up, and now I'm tied to it all for another twenty years.'

'You'll be all right, Mum.'

'Will I?' she asked and started to weep. 'It's not fair. What did I do to deserve this?'

'I'll get you a hanky.'

\*\*\*

It had been a month since Raymond's first meeting with Mr Sheen in Chinatown. Since then, Mr Sheen had met him at the post office every Saturday, arriving in his Cortina wearing a broad grin and his trademark thick-framed glasses.

'Raymond,' he always said. 'I have something special planned for you today.'

The transition between Mr Sheen at school and Bruce on the weekend had taken some getting used to. Raymond crossed a line in the second week.



'Thanks, Bruce,' he said cheekily, when Mr Sheen had dropped his corrected maths test on his desk.

Mr Sheen had ignored the comment, but his body had stiffened and he nabbed Raymond after class. 'Meet me in my office after school,' he said tersely.

Raymond arrived at Mr Sheen's office just after the bell and tapped lightly on the door.

'Enter,' Mr Sheen barked.

'I'm sorry, Raymond blurted, as soon as he opened the door.

Mr Sheen's fist was curled on the desk. 'What were you thinking?'

'Sorry. It just came out.'

'Last chance, Raymond. There are plenty of other boys who would eagerly take your place.'

'It won't happen again, I promise.'

'It had better not.'

Tears pricked in Raymond's eyes. 'I'm sorry.'

Mr Sheen held his gaze for a steely second and then his face softened. 'We all make mistakes, Raymond.' A tear rolled down Raymond's cheek, and Mr Sheen plucked a tissue from the box on his desk. 'Here,' he said, getting up and walking over to him. 'It's all right. I know you didn't mean it. Now, can you guess where I'm taking you on Saturday?'

Nancy had carried on for the first few times that Raymond met with Mr Sheen, laying seeds of guilt at every opportunity but he had stuck to his guns and continued leaving the house each Saturday, deliberately vague about who he was meeting. The allure of stepping into new worlds outweighed her sulky retribution.

'In France they eat their steak raw,' Mr Sheen said as they perused the menu in a little café in Victoria Street. 'It's called steak tartare, or in English, raw steak.'

Raymond had turned up his nose. 'Yuck. I like the way Mum blackens our chops.'

Mr Sheen chuckled into his serviette. 'You're like a blank canvas, Raymond. Just waiting for a palette of colour.'

'Am I?' Raymond answered, not sure how art and food related.

At the end of their lunch, the waiter had brought Mr Sheen coffee. 'What kind of man is your dad?' Mr Sheen asked, stirring half a teaspoon of sugar into his cup.

'I don't know,' Raymond answered warily. 'Mostly nice.'

'Mostly?' Mr Sheen probed.

'Yeah, well, he's got a few faults, I s'pose.'

'Such as?'

'Sometimes he drinks too much beer.'

Mr Sheen took a sip of his coffee before continuing. 'Too much?'

'Yeah, occasionally.'

'What kind of a drunk is he, Raymond?'

'What do you mean?'

'Happy? Morose? Aggressive?'

'A combination, I s'pose.'

'Is he violent?'

'Mostly not.'

'Mostly?'

'Never toward us kids. Just occasionally to Mum. She asks for it, though.'

'Raymond,' Mr Sheen said, looking directly at him. 'Violence is not something that one asks for.'

'You sound like my brother. It's different when you're there. She screams at him. Going on and on until he can't take it anymore.'

'I repeat – there is never a reason for violence, except as a means of self-defence. Think about what the world would be like if everyone applied your logic.'

When Raymond woke the next morning, thoughts of Ron's violence hung like a thick fog in his head. Unable to lie still, he got up and put on his dressing-gown, wrapping the cord tight around his waist before treading quietly to the toilet.

The flush sounded loud in the thin-walled house, and the cistern filling even louder. He waited until the hiss of water subsided and listened, sure that the noise would rouse Ron and was glad when it didn't.

In the kitchen, Nancy's teacup was on the table, half full and stone cold. He took it to the sink, adding it to the pile of dirty dishes, and turned on the hot tap.

Coming from behind, Ron said, 'Morning, Raymond.'

Raymond jumped. 'Oh. Hi Dad.'

'You're a good lad, helping ya mum with the dishes.'

'Yeah.'

Ron slid some coins into his dressing-gown pocket. 'Here's a few bob for ya. To say thanks for ya help. It doesn't go unnoticed by ya old man.'

'I'm right, Dad,' Raymond said, reaching into his pocket and giving them back.

'Not like you to pass on a bob or two. Everything okay, mate?'

'Yeah.'

\*\*\*

'Tell me about your mum,' Mr Sheen said, while Raymond wound spaghetti noodles around his fork. 'Put less on, Raymond – it's not polite to shovel.'

Raymond put down the fork, letting the noodles slip onto the plate.

'Now, just a few at a time,' Mr Sheen said.

Raymond twirled again, this time with half as much.

Mr Sheen nodded encouragingly. 'Better. Now, back to your Mum.'

'She's hard to explain.'

'Why?'

'She just is.'

'Is she loving?'

'No...I mean, not in the way other mothers are.'

'What do you mean?'

Raymond put his fork down and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

'Use your napkin, Raymond. That's what it's there for,' Mr Sheen said, picking up his own to demonstrate. 'Lightly dab the corners of your mouth. Like this.'

'Sorry,' Raymond said.

'No need for apologies. You can't be expected to know something until you're taught.'

'Yeah, I s'pose.'

'Now, back to my question. How should a mothers love their children?'

Raymond sighed. 'I dunno. With kindness, I suppose. She doesn't like...you know, like touching and stuff.'

'I see. She must have some positive attributes too?'

'She's good at making clothes,' Raymond said, pausing to think before he continued. 'I don't know, Bruce. She's hard to explain.'

'Do you mean that she's complicated?'

'Yes.'

'It sounds like she has a fair amount to contend with.'

'Yeah, especially with the baby coming.'

Mr Sheen raised his eyebrows. 'A baby?'

'Yeah, she's pregnant.'

'Does your father still beat her?'

Tears filled Raymond's eyes. 'Yes.'

\*\*\*

Raymond made a dash for the tram stop after school on Tuesday, arriving just as one departed. 'Bugger,' he muttered as a drop of rain landed on his forehead. He glanced up at the gathering storm clouds and then looked at his watch, calculating how long it would take to get ready for choir practice. He edged closer to the tracks, making sure he was positioned to be the first on board, and then staked out his territory with his school bag.

A dingy bell alerted him to an approaching tram, which ground to a halt with the door directly in front of him. Scrambling on, he made a beeline for a seat, glad that he'd made before the rain tipped down.

Twenty minutes later, Raymond yanked on the cord, signalling for the driver to stop, and exited the tram amid heavy traffic and rain, dashing to cover under a shop's veranda.

A piercing whistle emanated from further down the street. Raymond turned towards the sound and saw Francis, wet-haired and wearing rain-stained work clothes. Raymond waved hesitantly, not sure if he should walk over to him. The anger in their last exchange still felt fresh.

Francis made the decision for him; moving past sheltering pedestrians, he approached holding a cigarette, its smoke rising in a thin stream over the back of his hand. 'G'day, Raymond. Long time no see.'

'Yeah, it's been a while.'

Francis brought the cigarette to his mouth, dragged on it and released the smoke through his nostrils. 'So, how is everyone?'

'Good.'

'Mum?'

'The same.'

Francis flicked the ash off his cigarette using his thumb. 'What do ya mean, the same?'

'She's the same as always.'

Francis frowned. 'Is her arm better?'

'Yeah. She's out of the sling.'

'And our fuckin' excuse for a father?'

'He's all right.'

'Have ya done anything about him, Raymond? Or are ya still pussy-footing around it all?'

'You only see what you want to see.'

Francis butted the cigarette out under his foot and took hold of Raymond's arm, gripping it tightly. 'I know what I saw.'

Raymond winced, prompting Francis to dig his fingers deeper into his bicep. Raymond pulled back his arm. 'Let go.'

'Stop acting like a fuckin' pansy,' Francis snarled, releasing his arm and stabbing a finger hard into Raymond's chest.

Raymond pushed his hand away. 'And you think you're better than Dad? Take a look in the bloody mirror, Francis.'

'Me? Look in the mirror? You're joking. I'm not the one who dresses like a shelia, wearin' fuckin' scarves around me neck and singin' in choirs like a poofte.'

'We're all so fuckin' glad you left, Francis,' Raymond yelled, feeling his heart pumping in his chest. He turned and ran towards the rain, lifting his head to the dark sky as soon as he cleared the shelter. 'I hate you,' he screamed. 'I hate you so much, Francis.'

\*\*\*

'Now, Raymond,' Mr Sheen said to him over lunch. 'I have a rather large surprise for you.'

Raymond put down his knife and fork, remembering to splay them across the plate to show the waiter that he hadn't finished.

Mr Sheen looked at his cutlery with approval. 'You're a fast learner, Raymond.'

'I've been taking notes,' Raymond said, swallowing a grin.

'If it wasn't for the fact that you barely put pen to paper at school, I might have believed you.' Mr Sheen smirked.

'That's not true,' Raymond said indignantly.

'Enough shenanigans. Do you want to know what I have in store for you or not?'

Raymond leaned forward in his seat, deliberately putting his elbows on the table. 'Yes, of course I do.'

'What do you think your parents would think about you going away with me for a week over the school holidays?' Mr Sheen asked, ignoring the elbow transgression.

Raymond sat up abruptly. 'I don't know.'

'Well, what do *you* think of the idea?'

It had been the last thing Raymond had expected. He picked up his fork and took a mouthful of chicken, chewing it slowly.

'I thought you'd be delighted,' Mr Sheen said, looking puzzled.

Raymond swallowed. 'I am, I think.'

'You think?'

'I've never been away from home before.'

'I see,' Mr Sheen said. 'You're worried that you might get homesick?'

'No, it's not that.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Mum,' Raymond said, and looked down at his plate.

'Are you worried that she won't let you go, or about leaving her by herself?'

'Both,' Raymond said, picking up his glass of water, drinking half of it, and then putting it down on the coaster. 'The other thing is...'

'Yes?' Mr Sheen urged.

'I haven't told my parents about you, or these lunches.'

Mr Sheen removed his glasses and breathed on the lenses. 'I see,' he said, wiping the fog off with his hanky. 'Perhaps I should meet them.'

'No,' Raymond said. 'I don't want you to.'

'Why?'

Raymond shrugged.

'You must have a reason?'

Raymond fingered the serviette on his lap. 'They're different to you. My family isn't...*this*,' Raymond said, gesturing at the restaurant.

‘Oh, Raymond. I don’t give two hoots about what they’re like. I’m not interested in them, or where you live. It’s you I care about. If meeting your parents is what it will take to get you to come on holiday with me, then it’s worth it. Don’t you think?’

‘Maybe.’

‘I haven’t even told you about where we’re going,’ Mr Sheen said. ‘I think you’ll find it’s worth the trade-off.’

Raymond pushed his knife and fork together. ‘Where?’

‘To Sydney. I have a friend who has a house just near Bondi Beach. He’s away, which means we’ll have the whole house to ourselves.’

‘How will we get there?’

‘Ha,’ Mr Sheen said. ‘That’s the best bit. We’ll fly. Have a think about it Raymond, while I visit the men’s.’

Raymond watched Mr Sheen as he crossed the restaurant, confidently sliding between the tables and smiling at the other diners as he passed. Mr Sheen won people over without effort or planning. It was just how he was – a mix of old-school charm and sunny breeziness.

Mr Sheen paused at the toilet door. He turned and winked. Raymond waved with the tips of his fingers. Mr Sheen smiled and stretched out his arms, making them into aeroplane wings, before he stepped inside.

At that moment, Raymond knew that he was going to Sydney no matter what.

Raymond and Mr Sheen hatched the plan in the car on the way home.

‘I’ll write a note to say that I’d like to arrange a time to meet with your parents. I’ll put it on school letterhead, so it’s official,’ Mr Sheen said.

‘That’s a good idea,’ Raymond replied.

‘And then, when I meet your parents, I’ll say that it’s a sponsored school excursion and that you’ve been selected as a participant,’ Mr Sheen added.

‘My dad will let me, but my mum might say no.’

Mr Sheen leaned over and squeezed his leg. ‘Don’t worry, she’ll say yes. I’ve got a way with people, Raymond. I’ll win her over.’



'No need to get into such a flap,' Nancy said, flicking through the pages of the *Sun*.  
'You're carrying on like it's the queen's coming over.'

'I'm not in a flap,' Raymond lied.

'So, you don't have any idea what this teacher wants to discuss?' Nancy asked.  
'You're not in trouble, are you?'

'No, Mum. I haven't done anything wrong.'

'Well, I'll find out soon enough.'

Raymond had launched into the cleaning as soon as he'd woken up. Mr Sheen had said that he would be there by eleven o'clock, and Raymond wanted the house to be in order.

'Mum, can you move out of the way while I sweep under the table?'

Nancy lifted her feet.

Raymond sighed. 'I meant get off the seat.'

'I'm in the middle of reading the paper.'

'Don't worry, then,' Raymond huffed, and got down on all fours.

He'd been secretly pleased when Nancy had appeared at breakfast wearing a maternity dress made from floaty fabric. Ron hadn't been drunk for a few weeks, and Nancy's gloomy hours of staring into space had become less frequent. Her arm was out of the sling and she was back on the Singer, humming while she sewed baby smocks and a new shirt to replace the burnt one.

'I like your dress, Mum,' Raymond said, from underneath the table. 'It's really pretty.'

She snorted. 'Pretty?'

'Yeah, nice.'

'You're an odd duck, Raymond. Cleaning, complimenting my dress, and a teacher coming for morning tea. What next?'

*I'm going to Sydney with Mr Sheen. That's what's next,* Raymond thought, climbing out from under the table.

Raymond heard the roar of the Cortina's engine at a few minutes before eleven o'clock and his stomach turned an anticipatory flip. He ran his eyes over the tired kitchen and then walked to the front door and opened it.

'Hello, Raymond,' Mr Sheen boomed as he got out of the car, carrying a box of chocolates.

'Hi,' Raymond said. 'Come in. Mum's in the kitchen.'

'Is your father home too?' Mr Sheen asked.

'No,' Raymond said. 'He went out.'

'Never mind. As long as your mum is in, then that's fine.'

Raymond led Mr Sheen into the kitchen. 'Mum, this is Mr Sheen. I mean Mr Taylor.'

Mr Sheen cleared his throat. 'You can call me Bruce. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs Cole. These are for you,' he said, placing the box of chocolates on the kitchen table.

'Thanks,' Nancy said impassively. 'That's kind of you.'

Mr Sheen smiled widely. 'They're a dark assortment. I hope you like them.'

'Can I make you a cup of tea, Bruce?' Nancy asked, not returning the smile.

'That would be lovely.'

Nancy rose from her chair and turned the kettle on. 'So, what's this all about?'

Mr Sheen launched into his explanation, and throughout it Raymond kept his eyes firmly fixed on Nancy, trying to gauge her reaction. A frown was etched onto her brow and her lips stayed closed in a taught line. *Slow down*, Raymond willed Mr Sheen. *Don't use big words*.

'He will be fully supervised,' Mr Sheen concluded. 'It really is a splendid opportunity, and a credit to your son that he has been selected.'

Nancy didn't respond. She got the milk out of the fridge and carried it over to the teacups.

'Do you take sugar, Bruce?'

'A half, if I may,' Mr Sheen replied.

Nancy measured out half a spoonful and slowly stirred it into the cup. 'When do you need an answer by?'

'Sooner rather than later. Flights need to be booked and accommodation organised. Would you like to speak with your husband first? Perhaps you should ask for his permission before you make a decision?'

'No,' Nancy said abruptly. 'I'm capable of making the decision. He can go.'

Raymond swallowed his excitement.

Mr Sheen's ruddy face beamed. 'That's marvellous, Mrs Cole. Really marvellous. You're a lucky boy, Raymond.'

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Mr Sheen opened the door to the airport terminal and ushered Raymond through. There were rows of counters and people holding suitcases in snaking queues.

'I love airports,' Mr Sheen said. 'The excitement and anticipation are contagious.'

Raymond stared vacantly across the room.

'Earth to Raymond,' Mr Sheen said, laughing. 'Come on, we need to check in.'

Raymond followed Mr Sheen over to the Ansett desk, where they waited in a slow-moving line of travellers.

'Are you okay?' Mr Sheen asked.

Raymond nodded.

'Just go, Raymond,' Nancy had said before he'd left. 'You don't need me to stand on the street to wave you off.'

'I don't have to go, Mum,' Raymond had said, fighting back tears.

'Yes you do. Now go. I don't want that teacher coming into the house to fetch you.'

Her eye was as swollen as her belly, and her hands shook by her side.

'Why?' Raymond asked her.

'Enough. Go,' she ordered.

The twins walked with him to the front door. 'I'll bring you back a present,' Raymond said, knowing it was a pitiful compensation. 'Be good girls.' They hadn't

cried or made a scene. They'd just stood there, staring at him as though he was never coming back.

'Raymond,' Mr Sheen said. 'Stop daydreaming, it's our turn.'

Raymond picked up his suitcase and walked with Mr Sheen to the check-in desk.

'Tickets, please,' the heavily made-up attendant said.

Mr Sheen fished the documents out from the inside of his jacket and passed them over.

'Aren't you a lucky boy, travelling with your dad to Sydney?' the woman said.

'Oh, he's not my son,' Mr Sheen answered. 'He's my nephew.'

'What a lovely uncle you are,' the woman responded. 'I wish my uncle was as generous as you.'

There was a thunderous noise as the pilot applied the brakes and the aeroplane touched down on the tarmac. Warmth and an endless blue sky greeted Raymond as he walked down the stairs of the plane. Sydney smelled different to Melbourne. The humidity was dense, and although they were miles from the sea, there was a salty tinge to the air.

'Bags first, then we'll find a taxi,' Mr Sheen told him as they walked into the terminal. 'It will only take about half an hour to get there. Should we go to the beach today?'

'I can't swim,' Raymond said.

'You can wade, or just lie on your towel and soak up the sun. You don't have to be able to swim to enjoy the beach, Raymond.'

Their suitcases were amongst the first out.

'It's our lucky day,' Mr Sheen said, picking up his case.

Sweat patches gathered on Mr Sheen's shirt as they stood in the queue and waited for the taxi, and by the time their taxi pulled up in front of them they had joined, forming a damp mass.

Mr Sheen opened the door of the taxi. 'Get in, Raymond. The man will deal with our bags.'

Raymond moved across the vinyl seat and clipped on his seatbelt, catching a whiff of body odour in the car.

'Wind down the window if you want,' Mr Sheen said, getting in beside him.

'Where to?' the taxi driver asked.

'Hall Street, Bondi Beach, please.'

Raymond wound down the window and hung his head out, lapping the fresh air like a dog.

Mr Sheen pointed out the window at a group of trees with masses of green leaf foliage. 'Look at those Moreton Bay fig trees. See how their roots twist and turn.'

Raymond craned his neck as far out of the car as he could. 'Wow,' he said into the wind.

The taxi pulled up in front of a double-story red-brick building with rectangular windows that were trimmed with white paint. 'This is it,' Mr Sheen said to the driver. 'You get out while I pay, Raymond.'

Raymond stood on the footpath, angling his face to the sun, soaking its warmth into his skin. Its glinting power forced his eyes shut. He took slow deep breaths through his nose, savouring the brackish scent.

'Raymond,' Mr Sheen said.

Raymond opened his eyes and turned his head to Mr Sheen, who was pointing to one of the ground floor apartments. 'We're in this one. I just need to find the key. Hugo's hidden it in the garden.'

'Hugo?'

'My friend who owns the place.'

Mr Sheen made his way to a rocky patch in the overgrown front garden bed and patted the soil, lifting his hand triumphantly when he located the key. 'Righto, let's go in.'

Mr Sheen pushed open the glass panelled door, signalling for Raymond to follow him into the narrow entrance. Raymond picked up his suitcase and trundled in

behind him. The apartment was dark, with a damp odour that hung stagnantly in the air.

'We need to get some curtains and windows open. You do the lounge and I'll do the bedroom,' Mr Sheen said.

Raymond pulled back the heavy velour drapes in the lounge and a shot of sunlight filled the room. A towering bookcase covered one wall, each shelf stuffed with books and an assortment of strange ornaments. Raymond walked over to it and picked up a wooden anatomical carving of a male, complete with an oversized erect penis. He stood staring at it, intrigued by the facial expression, not able to decide whether it depicted pain or elation.

Mr Sheen called from the bedroom, 'Raymond?'

Raymond jolted, quickly putting the carving back on the shelf.

'Come and see our digs.'

The bedroom was small and sparse. A double bed, covered by a sea-blue quilt with matching pillows, took up most of the floorspace. Mr Sheen folded the corner of the quilt over and patted the bed. 'We're going to have to bunk in together. Sydney isn't renowned for its spaciousness. Do you want to sleep here next to the door, or on the wall side?'

'Oh,' Raymond said. 'Um, I'm not sure.'

'Well, we can decide on that later. Let's not waste time worrying about sleeping arrangements. Get your trunks on and let's get down to the beach.'

Arriving at Bondi Beach, Mr Sheen spread his towel out on the sand and took off his shirt.

'Ah, this is the life, Raymond,' he said, plonking himself down. 'Come on, get your kit off.'

'I'm okay,' Raymond said, feeling self-conscious about the white-headed pimples that clustered on his back and shoulders. 'Maybe later.'

'Suit yourself,' Mr Sheen said, lying down with his hands behind his head. 'I'm going to have a snooze first, then after that, how about we hit the water?'

Raymond sat on his towel and raked at the hot sand with his hand. He glanced at Mr Sheen to make sure his eyes were closed, then patted the sand into a mound. Sticking a discarded straw on the top, he set to work shovelling out sand, creating a moat.

‘Are you making a castle?’ Mr Sheen asked sleepily.

‘No,’ Raymond said, quickly pummelling the sand flat with his fist.

Mr Sheen smiled. ‘It’s okay, Raymond. You don’t need to hide anything from me.’

‘I’m not.’

‘How about a swim?’ Mr Sheen asked.

Raymond brushed the sand from his hands. ‘Okay, but not deep.’

‘Of course,’ Mr Sheen said, standing up and stretching his arms up to the cloudless sky. ‘Best take your t-shirt off.’

Raymond ignored him, keeping it on as they walked to the water’s edge. Mr Sheen waded out, turning when he was knee deep, waving Raymond in. ‘It’s gorgeous. Don’t be scared.’

Raymond took tentative steps towards him, the small foreshore waves breaking over his legs. Mr Sheen held out a hand, and when Raymond was nearly at his side, he splashed the water over his torso.

‘Hey!’ Raymond screeched. ‘It’s cold!’

‘Rubbish. It’s magnificent. Utterly magnificent. I won’t splash, I promise.’

A large wave rolled in, breaking over Raymond’s chest. Mr Sheen grabbed his hand, holding it tightly, keeping him upright. ‘I’ve got you. Come. Let’s go deeper, past the wave break. You’ll feel safer.’

‘But I can’t swim.’

‘I can,’ Mr Sheen said. ‘And I won’t let anything happen to you, Raymond. I promise.’

Clamped on to Mr Sheen’s arm, Raymond let him guide him out, until the water skimmed his belly button. ‘No further,’ Raymond gasped, when a wave hit him.

‘Just a bit further,’ Mr Sheen coaxed.

'I need to be able to feel the bottom with my feet.'

'Oh, Raymond!' Mr Sheen shouted above the surf. 'That's not where the best parts of life are found!'

'What do you mean?' Raymond yelled back.

Mr Sheen took hold of both his arm, pulling him close. 'I mean. You're not living life to the full until your feet can't touch the ground. That's where the magic happens. Sometimes you need to feel out of control to gain control.'

'I want to go back to shore,' Raymond said, feeling panicked.

'All right, Raymond. We can go in. I'd never let anything bad happen to you.'

Mr Sheen stopped to buy fish and chips on the way back from the beach. When they walked into the apartment, much to Raymond's hungry annoyance, Mr Sheen put the parcel down on the coffee table, leaving them there while he thumbed through Hugo's record collection.

'Do you like jazz? Or perhaps something classical?' he asked.

'Anything.'

'Jazz it is then. You get the plates while I work out how to use this record-playing contraption.'

Raymond opened the kitchen cupboard, withdrew two plates and carried them back to the lounge. Mr Sheen had lit tea lights, which flickered in a cluster on the coffee table.

'It's important to create the right ambience,' Mr Sheen said as Peggy Lee's husky tones drifted into the room. 'Eating should be more than filling the hole of hunger. Don't you think?'

'Yeah,' Raymond said. 'I s'pose so.'

'I see it as a ceremony,' Mr Sheen said, as he divvied up the food between the plates. 'It's not just about the food. It's also about who we share it with.'

*Shut up and eat.*

'There you go,' Mr Sheen said and passed him his plate loaded with chips and a piece of fish so large that it hung over the side. 'Enjoy.'



The salty batter crunched noisily in Raymond's mouth as he wolfed down the food. Mr Sheen looked at him disapprovingly, but Raymond was too hungry to care.

When Raymond had finished eating, he pushed his plate to the side.

'Thanks, Bruce,' he said through a yawn.

'My pleasure, Raymond.'

Raymond sank back into the couch and closed his eyes, and his mind drifted to the twins and Nancy, resulting in a sudden pang of sadness that sat heavily on his already full stomach. He let out an unintentional loud sigh.

'What's wrong, Raymond?' Mr Sheen asked.

'Oh,' he said. 'Nothing.'

Mr Sheen lifted the record-player needle and pulled it off the record.

'Is your heart heavy?' he sang.

Raymond rolled his eyes. 'No.'

'Is there someone special that you have left behind? Someone you haven't told me about?'

'No,' Raymond said emphatically.

'You don't need to be embarrassed, Raymond. I remember how it felt to love someone at your age. It can be hard for people like us.'

Raymond sat up. 'What do you mean?'

'I think you know.'

Raymond felt his face flush. 'No, I don't,' he said angrily.

'No matter,' Mr Sheen said airily. 'All in good time.'

'I'm going to go to bed,' Raymond said. 'I'm exhausted.'

'Fine, pick a side. I won't be too far away.'

Raymond got into his pyjamas and crawled under the sheet. He shut his eyes. The exhaustion that he had felt so acutely in the lounge had dissipated. A giant ball knotted in his stomach. *I want to go home. I want to be in my own bed.*

Raymond heard the chinking of plates and the running of water in the kitchen. He moved to the side of the bed and waited.

Mr Sheen came into the room and turned on the light. 'Are you awake?'

Raymond stayed still.

'Goodnight, my dear,' Mr Sheen said, climbing into the bed.

Mr Sheen's weight caused the bed to sag in the middle. Raymond gripped the side of the mattress to prevent himself from rolling towards him, staying rigid until he heard Mr Sheen's rhythmic snores. Only then did he relax his fingers and let his fatigue take over.

Classical music woke Raymond up. He looked over to the other side of the bed, but Mr Sheen was gone.

'Looking for me?' Mr Sheen asked, appearing at the door. 'Do you want coffee?'

'No thanks.'

'All right then, get up and have some breakfast. We have a big day ahead of us.'

Raymond lay in bed, confused by the array of emotions that competed with each other in his gut and head. A side of him yearned for Mr Sheen's attention – the fuss, the pomp and the way he made him feel as though he was an equal. But, he realised, there were undercurrents – ones that made him squirm and shift in his seat. Ones that probed at him, forcing him to unearth feelings that simmered and brewed beneath orchestrated layers of protection. He closed his eyes and forced himself to think about the twins. Despite the situation he'd left them in, it calmed him to imagine what they were doing.

They were out the door half an hour later. Mr Sheen carried his camera on a strap around his neck.

'You need some mementos,' he said, as they walked toward the bus stop. 'Photos, to help you remember this week. Let's take one now.'

'Ok.'

Mr Sheen removed the camera from around his neck and told Raymond to lean against a giant Moreton Bay fig. 'You're a natural, Raymond,' he said, clicking the camera. 'Now give me a big smile.'

The bus took them through a labyrinth of one-way streets and major thoroughfares before dropping them at the Circular Quay depot. 'Isn't she a beauty?' Mr Sheen said, pointing to the Harbour Bridge. 'Smile,' he said, capturing the moment that Raymond's eyes landed on her.

Mr Sheen led him to the ferry terminal, where he purchased return tickets to Manly. They ran to catch the ferry, making it just in time, and sat at the back of the boat. Seagulls flew past and the blue water slopped around the boat as they chugged out of the harbour.

Raymond was unable to conjure words to describe how he felt, so he sat in silence, basking in the surreal sunshine of first experiences.

They disembarked from the ferry and followed the footpath to the water. 'Right. A walk along the beach and then lunch,' Mr Sheen declared.

'Sydney brings out the best in you and your appetite,' Mr Sheen remarked as Raymond ploughed hungrily through his lunch.

Raymond swallowed. 'I love it here.'

'I can see that, Raymond. It's been good for you to get away. I believe you've dropped the burden of your troubles.'

'Maybe. But anyway, I have to go back.'

'Don't think about that now. This time is precious, Raymond. Who knows when you'll be back, and who knows what's in store for each of us? It's important to enjoy things as they come, especially when you've been dealt a good hand.'

Raymond nodded.

After they'd finished lunch, Mr Sheen ordered himself a coffee and Raymond a bowl of ice cream that arrived drizzled with gooey warmed chocolate in a glass dish, accompanied by a long-handled silver spoon.

'Wow,' Raymond exclaimed.

'Enjoy it,' Mr Sheen said. 'You deserve to be spoiled.'

Raymond piled a generous helping of the ice cream onto the spoon and put it in his mouth.

'Now,' said Mr Sheen. 'About yesterday.'

Raymond took a large spoonful of ice cream.

'When I asked you about matters of the heart, you clammed up and changed. You need to open up, Raymond. It's not healthy to store so much inside. When I was your age I did the same thing and it takes years to rid yourself of its negative effects, if you ever can.'

Raymond put the spoon down, clinking it against the glass bowl.

'You might be fooling others, Raymond. But you don't fool me. I know who you are. I'm the same.'

*Stop.*

'It's okay. We are not alone. There are others like us.'

Raymond hung his head over the fancy bowl.

'I'm here to help you, Raymond. This isn't something you can sweep under the rug. It is who we are. There's no running from it.'

'Please, stop,' Raymond whispered.

'It's not something one can stop, Raymond. It will always be in you, and I want you to know that even though it can be a difficult life, it shouldn't hold you back.'

Raymond picked up his serviette and held it over his face.

'Life has thrown you many curveballs, Raymond. You have to be strong. I've seen how misfortune can make people spiral. Each year I choose a boy to sit in the same seat that you are in now. Some leave with crystallised purpose and understanding, while others flounder and give in too easily. Take the serviette away from your face and look at me. This is important.'

Raymond removed it slowly.

'That's better,' Mr Sheen said. 'It's up to you now. Which path will you choose to follow?'

'I don't know.'

'Yes you do. That has been the purpose of this year. I've shown you your possibility, but I can't do it forever. There are other boys that I must help too.'

'Why did you do it?'

'I did it to help you, Raymond. I did it because I wish someone had done it for me.'

'How did you know?' Raymond asked.

'I knew as soon as I met you. People like us learn to read the signs.'

'What signs?' Raymond asked, horrified by the revelation.

'The way you speak. The nervous dart in your eyes. It's hard to pinpoint it as a specific thing. Knowing comes with years of experience. You learn quickly who is family and who is not.'

Raymond's body heaved.

'Shh,' Mr Sheen said. 'You'll be all right.'

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As soon as Raymond returned from Sydney, Mr Sheen scaled back the frequency of their lunches, and Raymond suspected that he had found someone new to replace him.

He asked Mr Sheen after class one day if he had found another boy. Mr Sheen had put his hand on his shoulder and sighed. 'Oh, Raymond,' he said. 'That's irrelevant. What we have can never be replaced by another. You have to begin to forge your own life. It's not healthy to spend all of your free time with me.'

Raymond had nodded as though he understood, but really, he didn't. He constantly scanned the class, searching for a clue to try and determine if Mr Sheen's newest protégé sat nearby. He experienced pangs of jealousy as he imagined Mr Sheen cocking his head and raising his eyebrows as the new boy broke the rules of etiquette. *Please*, he wanted to say. *Please take me back*.

During the last class, he'd kept his gaze aimed sulkily at his desk, refusing to make eye contact. Mr Sheen had ignored it, but Raymond knew that he'd sensed the discord. He had seen the widening of Mr Sheen's eyes beneath his thick-rimmed glasses, and the small furrows in his forehead. For a brief moment it had made Raymond feel empowered to hold him at arm's length, but then he remembered Mr Sheen's unswerving kindness and the trip to Sydney, and a wash of guilt led him back to his confused emptiness.

After the class, Raymond was left with a stewing stomach, worried by the thought that he might drive Mr Sheen away for good.

*I have to win him back. I have to make him want to be with me.*

Raymond felt a sense of nervous anticipation as he gathered his books for Mr Sheen's next maths class. He'd spent the preceding days practising witty dialogue in his head, hopeful that his humour might resurrect the relationship.

*He needs to see what he's missing. I need to make him laugh.*

Entering the classroom, his head jerked when he saw an unfamiliar man sitting at Mr Sheen's desk.

'Where's Mr Sheen?'

'Mr Sheen?' the new teacher asked.

'Oh. I mean Mr Taylor.'

'He's away.'

'Away?'

'Yes, he's unwell.'

'Unwell?'

'Yes,' the man replied brusquely. 'Enough questions. Go and take your seat.'

It didn't take long for the whispers to start circling the classroom. Raymond heard Mr Sheen's name mentioned in hushed tones.

'What's happened?' he asked the boy sitting next to him.

'The rumour going around is he was bashed on Saturday night. Apparently the police have been to the school.'

Raymond inhaled sharply. 'Bashed? Is he okay?'

'I don't know,' the boy said. 'I'm just telling you what I heard.'

It took Raymond the whole of lunchtime, culminating in a trip to the gossipy school secretary, to string together information. 'He's in the Royal Melbourne Hospital,' she said. 'And he's not in a good way.'

Raymond left school straight away and boarded a city-bound tram. He asked the conductor which stop was nearest to the hospital and sat rigidly in his seat, praying that Mr Sheen would be all right.

Half an hour later, the conductor tapped him on the shoulder and pointed in the direction of the hospital. 'I hope everything's okay,' he said kindly.

'Me too,' Raymond said.

The hospital's main reception was busy, and Raymond had to join a queue to speak to the woman sitting behind the counter. 'Excuse me,' he said, when it was his turn. 'Can you please tell me what room Bruce Taylor is in?'

The woman nodded curtly and flicked through the index of patient cards. 'East wing, level five, room thirty-two,' she said. 'Take the stairs at the end of the corridor.'

Raymond's heart pounded as he took the steps two at a time. When he reached the fifth floor, he leaned against the balustrade, panting, and waited until his breath steadied before entering the ward. Working his way along the rooms, he found number thirty-two.

The door was ajar. Raymond knocked gently and walked in, gasping when he saw Mr Sheen. A white sheet was pulled over his torso, revealing only his bandaged head. His eyes were slits in his swollen face and his once-ruddy skin was covered in purple bruises, with a line of small black stitches running across his left cheek.

'Bruce,' Raymond whispered.

'Mmm,' Mr Sheen groaned.

'It's me, Raymond. Are you okay?'

Mr Sheen opened one of his eyes, revealing only the tiniest sliver of blue. 'Raymond, my dear. What are you doing here?' he croaked.

'I came as soon as I heard.'

'Heard what?' Mr Sheen asked, sounding a little more alert.

'That you were bashed.'

'Who told you that?'

'Everyone at school was talking about it. What happened?'

Mr Sheen sighed. 'Come closer to me, Raymond. You need to listen carefully.'

Raymond walked over to the bed and pulled up a chair. Mr Sheen lifted his hand from under the sheet and held it out to him. His skin felt cold and dry. 'You need to forget some of what I told you. Do you understand me?'

Raymond shook his head. 'What do I need to forget?'

'I mean...I mean that you have to be careful about who you speak to. I know I told you to open up but...it's not safe.' Raymond let go of Mr Sheen's hand.

'Raymond. Listen to me. I'm finished in Melbourne. I have to go. The school obviously knows, so my work as a teacher is over.'

'Knows what?'

'Oh, Raymond. Stop being so naïve. You know perfectly well what I'm saying. This wasn't a random attack. This was because I'm homosexual.'

Raymond shuddered and his mind reeled. *Francis*, he thought, remembering how he had punched his fist into his hand when he'd warned him about the lanes. 'I'm so sorry, Bruce. I'm so very sorry.'

A tear trickled down the side of Mr Sheen's cheek. 'Dear God,' he whispered. 'This isn't your fault, Raymond. It's got nothing to do with you.'

*But it has*, Raymond wanted to say. Instead, he turned his head and stared out of the window at the sky, which was hung with low grey clouds. He cast his mind back to Bondi Beach, where the sky had been a brilliant blue and Mr Sheen had gripped his arm and promised that he'd not to let anything bad happen to him. Not once had he thought that it was Mr Sheen who needed to be protected.

He'd seen Nancy battered and damaged on many occasions, but it had never felt like this. This was something different. It tore at him, making his body flinch as he imagined the moment when the fist had flown through the air, connecting with Mr Sheen's cheek with splitting force.

*How? How could you hurt someone as kind as him?*

He turned back to Mr Sheen, whose eyes fluttered and then closed, his chest slowly rising and falling under the white sheet. He walked over to him and gently brushed his lips across the stringy roughness of the stitches. He wasn't sure why he placed them there. Perhaps, he thought, it was to make an imprint of his pain.



But later, when he sat on the tram travelling home, he realised that he'd done it because he needed to touch the crux of his vulnerability, as a reminder that they were both faced with circumstances that neither of them could control, and shared scars that could never be erased.

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Raymond picked his baby brother up out of the cot, which sat where Francis's bed had once been. His little face was red from crying.

'It's okay, Terrence. I've got you,' he said, and patted his back. 'Let's take you out to see Mum.'

It had been three months since he'd seen Mr Sheen in hospital. There had been no official explanation for his departure at school. The new teacher sat in his seat like it had always been his. The boys in the class had, for the most part, forgotten him. It was only Raymond who thought about him day after day.

He analysed every lunch and conversation, sentence by sentence, venue by venue, Mr Sheen's words constantly looping through his head.

*Don't you trust me, Raymond?*

*Be safe, Raymond.*

*I'll never let anything happen to you, Raymond.*

'Mum, can you hold Terrence while I make his bottle?'

'Yes,' Nancy sighed and held out her arms. 'Hurry up, though,' she added, as Terrence started to grizzle. 'I can't read the paper with him carrying on.'

The formula powder spilled onto the benchtop as Raymond rushed to put it into the bottle. Terrence screwed his face up into a red ball and began to scream loudly.

'Stop it, Terrence,' Nancy said, shaking him.

Raymond screwed the lid on and shook the bottle. 'Give him to me, Mum.'

'Feed him in the lounge. I can't stand the noise.'

Raymond took him from her and cradled him to his chest. 'Shush. It's okay, little fella,' he soothed, taking him through to the lounge. He sat on the couch, tested the temperature of the milk on his wrist and then put the teat into the baby's mouth. The crying stopped instantly. 'That's better. Drink your milk.'

Raymond leaned back into the couch while Terrence guzzled his bottle. He closed his eyes and thought about how Mr Sheen had unearthed his suppressed fears. He'd forced him to dig them up and then made him pile them into useless heaps at the bottom of his gut.

Nothing could be done with this newfound knowledge and awareness. Raymond had been taught, time and time again, by his parents and now by Mr Sheen, that it was better to hide from fear and uncertainty. Stuff it down and hope for the best, regardless of how it might come back to get you later.

Ron walked into the lounge carrying two bottles of beer while Raymond was burping Terrence. 'Here,' he said, passing one to Raymond. 'It's open.'

Raymond glanced in the direction of the kitchen. 'What about Mum?'

'It's only a beer, for god's sake. No harm in one beer. Anyway, its time you had one. You're damn near a man.'

Raymond raised the bottle to his lips and took a tentative sip.

'That's the shot,' Ron said, reaching over to clink his bottle against Raymond's. 'Cheers, mate.'

'Cheers.'

'How good is that?'

Raymond took a larger swig. The beer fizzed pleasantly in his mouth. 'Yeah. It's good.'

'No greater comfort, Raymond. No greater comfort there ever was.'

## Shane

Melbourne, Victoria, 2015

The tram had just rumbled past Luna Park when Shane pressed the Facebook icon on his iPhone. A red squiggly symbol in the left-hand corner of the screen alerted him to an unread message. Shane clicked on it absentmindedly, then blinked twice when he saw who it was from.

'Fuck me,' he whispered to himself.

Hey Shane,

A blast from your past to say g'day. I've been thinking of you lately, and our time at boarding school together. Was it really so long ago? How are you? More to the point, where are you? I'm still hiding out on the family farm. I took over the reins quite a few years ago. What did you end up doing? Looking forward to hearing from you.

Jimmy

Shane clicked onto Jimmy's profile picture and zoomed in on it. *That's him all right*, he thought. Jimmy was leaning lazily over a paddock post. His manly, sun-weathered face peered out from beneath an Akubra hat, half-smiling, looking towards the camera.

Shane read the message again and sighed. *How many years has it been?* He shut his eyes and thought back to their last day together. Jimmy's tear-stained face sprang to mind first, followed by the leering cruelty of Brother O'Flaherty as he'd twisted and manipulated the events that had led to Jimmy's expulsion from boarding school.

A sinkhole of grief had ensued, which Shane's parents had put down to the stormy angst of teenage years. 'Teenagers,' he'd overheard Jenny saying on the telephone. 'It's like drawing water from a stone, getting more than a few syllables from them.'

Jimmy had been the first bud of Shane's sexual awakening. It had been a heart-stumbling, one-sided affair that had made his heart soar and then crash into a flatline of despair.

After Jimmy had been removed from the school, Shane had gone into mourning. He'd moped through the days, and at night, when the curtains were closed, his grief had escalated into panic.

*No-one will ever love me back, he'd thought. I will always be alone.*

School became a bleak reminder of his dalliance with happiness. He made friends because he needed them, not because he wanted them. He progressed through the years, applying himself at exam time to keep his teachers and parents off his back.

His teachers forced him to do subjects that he hated because they thought he was bright. 'A waste of good brains,' one teacher had said, when he'd expressed his desire to pursue the arts in his final years. 'Art is for the namby-pamby boys on the bottom of the academic ladder.'

Shane had retreated into a shell, silently marking off the days until he could escape the institutional shackles that tethered him to his unhappiness.

He'd left for London three months after finishing school, much to Frank's fury.

'Go to university and become an accountant,' Frank had said. 'I didn't pay for your education to have you throw it back in my face.'

There had been a standoff, followed by a full-scale war.

'I'm not a child, Dad!' Shane screamed. 'You don't own me!'

'Piss off then,' Frank snarled. 'Get out of my house.'

'Listen to yourselves,' Jenny said, in an attempt to dispel their fury. 'Maybe he just needs a gap year, Frank.'

'Gap year my arse!' Frank replied. 'That boy has been handled with kid gloves since the day he was born. He's had everything handed to him on a silver platter. You've mollycoddled him for years, Jenny, and this is the result. I've busted my gut providing for him and making compensations. He's always been a nancy boy.'

'Enough!' Jenny said, tearfully. 'Stop it, the pair of you.'

'I'm gone,' Shane yelled, and stormed towards the door. 'Enjoy your miserable life.'

Jenny had run after him down the driveway and shoved fifty dollars into his pocket. 'It's all I have on me. Be safe, Shane. I love you.'

Shane had hitchhiked to Brisbane and found accommodation in a run-down, twelve-dorm backpacker hostel. The next day, he'd gotten a job in a pizza restaurant and squirrelled away every cent he could spare until he'd saved enough to buy a plane ticket to London.

When the plane's wheels had lifted off the tarmac, Shane had pressed his face against the window and viewed the ground below. It had only taken a few minutes for the dots of green to disappear. A tapestry of orange and brown land stretched out beneath him, and he'd stared unblinkingly at the unforgiving landscape until it was hidden beneath the clouds.

*It's not where I belong. It is not who I am.*

\*\*\*

Shane opened the door to his apartment and flicked on the light. Photographs lined the short entrance, hung with precision. There were none of his blood relatives. Those were loosely strewn in a drawer, away from the eyes of questioning friends. Shane's favourite photograph was a black-and-white snap taken by a waiter in Positano. It had been a late dinner, high in mountainous terrain, overlooking the dark stillness of the Mediterranean Sea. Charlie had his arm casually slung around Shane, and dappled light from candles cast a shadow over his tanned skin and ash-coloured hair. They both wore white linen shirts rolled up to the elbows, and held half-drunk glasses of red wine.

A chance encounter had brought Charlie to him five years previously. Shane had slipped into a city bar after a photography shoot had run late on a Thursday evening. He had intended to have one drink and flick quickly through his digital camera. He'd not been paying attention when Charlie had sat on the stool next to him and ordered a scotch on the rocks.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm Charlie.'

Shane, mildly surprised by the attention, had introduced himself.

'Holiday snaps?' Charlie asked, pointing to his camera.

'No. Work.'

'You're a photographer?'

They had stayed in the bar until it closed, their conversation light and warm.

'Last drinks,' the bartender called.

'Can I see you again?' Charlie asked as they parted ways.

'Yes, I'd like that.'

Charlie had punched Shane's number into his mobile. 'I'll call you,' he said. 'Is tomorrow too soon?'

Prior to Charlie, Shane's experience of relationships had been a rocky collection of wild highs and devastating lows. He'd viewed sex as a commodity, offered to placate and barter for what he'd believed would lead him to love.

Charlie's emotionally uncomplicated approach to their relationship had changed that. 'Loving you is easy,' Charlie had said after a year together. 'It's so simple.'

And it was.

Shane walked into the lounge, threw his keys onto the coffee table and sat down on the couch. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he withdrew his phone and reread Jimmy's message before tapping out a reply.

Jimmy,

What a massive (fantastic) surprise to get your message. You're right, it seems like a lifetime ago, that's for sure. I'm really well. Living in Melbourne. I've never been a Northern Queenslander at heart. I prefer hipster cafes and lattes to sugar cane and remote pubs. LOL. Don't worry, I'm clean-shaven, no Ned Kelly hipster beard in sight. I'm a photographer (much to the disappointment of my parents) and loving it. So, so good to hear from you. Tell me a bit more about you and what you've been up to since you 'left' school.

Shane

Charlie got home just as his finger hovered over the send arrow, carrying two large plastic bags laden with takeaway containers. He pushed it and looked up.

‘I’ve brought dinner,’ Charlie said, lifting the bags up. ‘Vietnamese tonight.’

Shane put his phone in his pocket and smiled. ‘Perfect. I’ll get the plates.’

Charlie lit a candle before they sat down to eat at their small kitchen table. ‘How was your day?’ he asked.

Shane snapped apart his wooden chopsticks. ‘Routine. Yours?’

‘Hectic,’ Charlie said, stuffing a miniature spring roll into his mouth.

Charlie worked at an accountancy firm in the city and spent most days with his forehead furrowed, crunching out numbers for clients who refused to pay a cent more than necessary in tax.

They ate dinner, speaking in short sentences, and then curled up together on the couch until Charlie’s weary eyes closed and Shane’s arm felt dead from the weight of his head.

Shane nudged Charlie. ‘Come on, let’s go to bed.’

‘Mm,’ Charlie responded, stretching out his legs.

It wasn’t until they both lay between the cool sheets that Shane told him about Jimmy.

‘Are you okay?’ Charlie asked.

‘Yeah, I think so. It just feels strange to have heard from him after all these years.’

‘You loved him, Shane.’

Shane buried his face into Charlie’s back. ‘In a schoolboy kind of way. Not like this.’

‘You know what they say. The first cut is the deepest.’

‘I suppose, but it’s more than that. I’ve distanced myself from that time and I’m not sure I want to delve back into it.’

‘Sleep on it, my love. Let’s see how you feel in the morning.’

Shane roused when Charlie's alarm went off. He rubbed his eyes and watched while Charlie got dressed. 'Take a sickie,' he jested.

Charlie wound his tie around his neck. 'Ha. I wish. My first meeting is at eight thirty.' Charlie glanced at his watch. 'Shit, no time for breakfast this morning. See you tonight,' he said, leaning over the bed to kiss Shane goodbye.

After Charlie had left, Shane reached over to his bedside table and picked up his phone. There was a reply from Jimmy waiting in his Messenger inbox.

Melbourne, eh? A long way from where I am. A photographer? I wouldn't have picked that. I thought you'd end up in a suit and tie. LOL. I pretty much live and breathe the farm. We mostly run cattle. It's been a tough gig. The drought has halved my stock (and income) but I spose that's farming for you. I've been married and divorced. I have a 10-year-old son, Tom. He's a ripper. He lives with his mum in Brisbane but comes to me during the school holidays. Do you have kids? Married? Any plans to come to Queensland? Who knows, maybe one of these days I might even venture south. It would be great to see you again, mate.

Jimmy

PS: What the fuck is a hipster?

Shane smiled when he read the postscript. *He hasn't changed*, he thought. *Same old Jimmy.*

He levered his body out of bed, his mind hovering between the past and the present, eventually coming to the realisation that Jimmy had never really known him. *Or more to the point*, he ruminated, *he couldn't know me*. They had both been governed by narratives set by time, *which*, he thought, *meant total compliance to what I had to be, not who I was*.

Shane turned on the shower taps, making the water temperature hotter than usual. The sting of it on his back failed to quell Jimmy's questions, which circled over and over in his mind. Married? Kids?



*Should I tell him I'm gay? I haven't seen him for thirty years, who cares what he thinks?*

*I do, came a nagging voice from the back of his head. I care a lot.*

Shane's phone was ringing when he got out of the shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist and ran to answer it. It stopped just as he picked it up. He looked at the screen and saw three missed calls from Jenny.

He called her back straight away. 'Mum, what's wrong? Is it Dad?'

'Hello, love. No, not Dad.'

'What then?'

'It's your dad's brother. He died last night.'

'Dad's brother? My uncle?'

'Yes, love.'

'Shit. How?'

'Not really sure at this stage. Still getting the details.'

'Is Dad all right?'

'Yes, I think so. A bit shaken. There's been no contact for years, so it's all a bit mucky.'

'Where did he live?'

'In Melbourne.'

'Here?'

'Yes.'

'Jeez, Mum. Why didn't you tell me that before now?'

'Your dad didn't have anything to do with him. I didn't really think about it, to be honest. Anyway, the thing is that we have to come to Melbourne. The funeral will be there, and all of the family will be going.'

'The family?'

'Yes, your dad's side.'

'Why the hell is Dad going when he's never had anything to do with them all?'

'It's complicated, Shane. Look, the reason I'm calling is to see if Dad and I can stay with you.'

'You mean us?'

'Yes.'

'Charlie and me?'

'Yes.'

'Dad and you?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't think Dad wanted anything to do with Charlie.'

'He's mellowed a bit.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. And money's a bit tight, Shane. We can't afford the plane fare and a hotel.'

'I see.'

'I'm just being honest, love. It will be good for us all. Dad's not the total monster you make him out to be. He loves you, Shane.'

'I'll talk to Charlie and ring you back.'

Shane spent the day stewing over the phone conversation. His mind drifted to when he'd returned from his youthful escape to London.

'I've been worried sick about you,' Jenny had said, when he'd phoned from Brisbane airport. 'When are you coming home?'

'When Dad treats me like an adult.'

'You're both the same. A pair of hotheads.'

'I'll never be like Dad,' Shane had hissed down the phone.

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Shane had told Jenny over the phone about Charlie, and that he was gay.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm gay, Mum. I have a partner called Charlie.'

He had heard Jenny suck in her breath. 'Sweet Jesus,' she finally said. 'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure.'

'I don't know what to say. How will I tell your father?'

'I don't know, Mum. That's up to you.'

'What about the people at church?'

'What about them?'

'I mean...it's against the teachings in the Bible.'

'Well, that's a choice you have to make. The people at church or your son. I'll leave it with you to decide,' Shane had said, and hung up the phone.

Jenny had called back several hours later.

'Hello, love,' she said quietly. 'I've told your father.'

'And?'

'I'll be honest, he's struggling a bit.'

'And you?'

'I love you, Shane. Just give me time to get used to the idea.'

Frank had called him the next day.

'Shane,' he said gruffly. 'I did my best.'

'Your best at what?'

'To help you.'

'Help with what?'

'I always knew you had something inside you that wasn't quite right. I wanted you to have a respectable life.'

'I have a respectable life now, Dad. Being gay isn't a crime, or something that needed to be corrected.'

'Like I said, I did my best. Everything I've ever done for you is because I wanted what was right.'

'God, Dad. You traumatised me as a kid. You tried to beat the gay out of me.'

'No,' Frank said emphatically. 'I did what any father would do for their kid. I tried to make you normal.'

'I *am* normal. You're the one who's fucking abnormal. It wasn't me who needed help. It was you.'

Frank went silent. Angry tears pricked in Shane's eyes.

'So, you've shacked up with a bloke?' Frank finally said.

'I am living with my partner, Charlie.'

'Partner? Is that what they call them these days?'

'Yeah, Dad. That's what they call them.'

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Shane waited until Charlie got home to tell him about the call from Jenny.

'What's wrong?' Charlie asked as soon as he stepped through the door.

'I had a call from Mum.'

'Is your dad okay?'

'Yeah. His brother died and they want to come here to stay so they can go to the funeral.'

Charlie walked over to him and held out his arms. 'Shane. Do you want them to stay here?'

'No. I mean, I don't know. I told Mum I'd talk to you first.'

'It's not up to me, Shane.'

'I know.'

'It might be good to have them here on your terms.'

'Maybe.'

Shane rang Jenny back later that night.

'You can stay.'

'Thanks, love. We really appreciate it.'

'Dad has to be respectful to Charlie.'

'He will be.'

'I mean it, Mum.'

'I know you do, love. I'll email through all of the details when I know more.'

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Hey Jimmy,

A kid eh? I bet he's just like you. I'd love to see a photo of him. Does he love the farm as much as you do?

I don't have any kids.

I've read and seen some disturbing reports on the news about the drought. Are you okay? I don't think people in the city understand the magnitude and impact of drought until it trickles down and affects them directly.

No plans to come to QLD any time soon. But who knows? Maybe I could be persuaded to see an old friend. It would be great to catch up with you, Jimmy. You were the one thing that made boarding school bearable. Maybe we could meet halfway in Sydney?

Shane

PS: A hipster is no-one you'd ever meet. Typically, they have long beards, drink organic coffee and think they're going to save the world without stepping outside of their neighbourhood café.

Hey Shane,

Thanks for clearing up the mystery around hipsters. I'd love to get hold of one and transport them to the bush for an hour or two. Show them a bit of real life. Get their hands dirty and make them brew a coffee over an open fire.

No kids, ey! Are you married? Girlfriend?

I've got a cousin staying with me next week who's offered to look after the farm for a few days. In light of our conversations, and the fact that I've never been to Melbourne, I was thinking it might be the perfect opportunity for a trip down south. I know you're working, so I'm happy to entertain myself. Hopefully you're free for a beer or three.

There's a few things from our school days that I want to talk with you about.  
Rather say it in person.

No pressure, mate. I know you're probably flat out photographing Melbourne's elite. LOL.

I don't have to stay with you. If it's ok to come, I'll arrange a flight.

Cheers,

Jimmy

Wow Jimmy,

It would be great to see you. I have my parents staying next week, so unfortunately, I can't put you up. I've got a family commitment next Thursday and I have to pick my parents up from the airport on Tuesday, but other than that I could definitely catch up.

Is everything ok? I'm intrigued by what you want to discuss with me in person. There are some things I need to tell you too. All in good time, I suppose.

Shane

Hey Shane,

Sounds like you've got a busy week ahead. I think I'll still come. Who knows when I'll get another chance to leave the farm? I'll book for later in the week. Probably arrive on Thursday and leave Monday.

Speak soon,

Jimmy

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From: Jenny Cole  
Subject: Travel and Funeral Plans  
To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

Just a quick note to say that we have booked to come down next Tuesday. Arriving at 2pm on Virgin. Departing on Sunday. We can get a taxi to your apartment. Funeral is at 10am on Thursday at the funeral home in Coburg (White's). No church service.

He hasn't seen his family since his own dad's funeral, so he's a bit on edge. Hopefully it will all be ok. You know what these things can be like.

Love Mum

PS: Paul isn't coming. He's got too much on at work. It's hard running your own business. He has a lot of staff now and between that and the kids, it's impossible for him to take time off to come to Melbourne.

'A strong latte,' Shane said to the girl behind the café counter at the airport terminal.

'Sugar?'

'No thanks.'

The girl poured the milk into a stainless-steel jug and placed it under the steamer. 'Going somewhere nice?' she asked, speaking loudly over the top of the gurgling milk.

'Picking up.'

The girl looked up and smiled. 'You're kind. It costs a fortune to park here.'

'I'm collecting my parents, so I'm making an exception.'

Shane watched as she artfully turned some of the milky foam into a swirling leaf onto the top of coffee.

'They're lucky they've got you as a son,' she said, fitting the lid on the cup.

'Yeah,' Shane said. 'I'll remember to tell them that.'

The girl passed pushed the coffee towards him. 'There you go. Enjoy every precious second with your parents.'

Shane got to the gate as people were exiting the plane. He stood with his arms crossed, palms to biceps, and waited for his parents. They were the last two off and didn't see him straight away. He observed them with a stab of sadness. Frank's once-erect posture was slightly stooped and Jenny's eyes were wide and darting.

Shane stepped forward and waved.

Jenny's face lit up and she hurried toward him, leaving Frank in her wake. 'My boy,' she said, locking him in a hug. 'I've missed you. So much.'

Shane eyed Frank over Jenny's shoulder. He stood still, gripping his carry-on bag, watching the reunion without any flicker of emotion.

Jenny released Shane from her hold, he inhaled a deep lungful of oxygen and walked over to Frank. 'Hi, Dad.'

'G'day, Shane.'

Shane stretched out his arm. 'Give me your bag.'

Frank clutched the bag close. 'I'm can carry it.'

Jenny frowned and shook her head at Frank. 'He's just trying to help.'

Frank took a deep breath. 'I'm right, mate. Thanks for asking, though.'

'You get in the front, Frank,' Jenny said when they reached the car. 'You boys can catch up while I look at the scenery.'

Frank put on his seatbelt and surveyed the car's interior. His eyes settled on the gold sparkly star that dangled from the rear-vision mirror. 'I don't know how you can live in the city with all the traffic and congestion,' he said, eyes fixed on the star.

*Here we go,* Shane thought.

He sighed, loud enough for Frank to hear and turned the key in the ignition. 'You get used to it. Anyway, I like living here. There's hundreds of great places to eat and things to do.'

'Waste of money eating in restaurants when you can get a perfectly good meal at home,' Frank muttered.



'Well, I'd like to try Japanese food, Shane,' Jenny piped up from the back seat. 'I watched a show on the telly where little plates of food come out on a train.'

Shane nodded. 'Okay, Mum. I'll put it on the list.'

The traffic, as it turned out, was quick to move and it didn't take long to get home. Just before they pulled into the car park underneath his apartment, Shane wondered if he should mention Charlie. Neither of his parents had spoken his name during the trip home and he wanted to say it before they went inside. *It's our home*, he thought, removing the key from the ignition.

'Charlie's at work, so you'll have to meet him later on.'

Frank released his seatbelt. 'What does he do again?'

Jenny rolled her eyes. 'He's an accountant.'

Frank reached over and flicked the gold star with his finger. 'That's right. He's got a good job.'

Shane's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. *Just breathe*, he told himself. *In and out. Nice and steady.*

Shane opened the door to his apartment and inhaled the scent from the vanilla candle he'd left burning. He motioned to the first room directly off the short hall. 'This is where you'll be sleeping. It has an ensuite attached, so you've got your own shower and toilet.'

Jenny smiled and pointed to the vase of irises on their bedside table. 'Oh, Shane, it's lovely. Look, Frank, he's even put flowers in our room.'

'Actually, Charlie bought them for you.'

'Did he?' Frank asked.

'I'll leave you to unpack and go and put the kettle on,' Shane said, walking out of the room, one fist clenched.

He flicked the button on the kettle, got his phone out of his pocket and texted Charlie.

**Shane: They're here 😊**

**Charlie: Are u ok?**

**Shane: Surviving**

**Charlie: How's yr dad been?**

**Shane: Painful**

**Charlie: How?**

**Shane: Just the usual**

**Charlie: Try to hold it together. I'll be home soon.**

**Shane: xxx**

'Tea or coffee?' Shane called out to his parents.

'Tea for me, coffee for Dad,' Jenny answered.

Shane popped a pod into the coffee machine and put a teabag into a cup.

Frank came out of the room first. 'Your mum's still fussing around, hanging up clothes.' He pointed to the coffee machine. 'What's that?'

'It's a Nespresso coffee machine.'

'Do you have any instant?'

'No, sorry. This is all we have.'

'I'll have to make do then.'

Jenny joined them, just as Shane had had finished making her tea.

She picked up the mug and sipped the milky brew. 'Oh, lovely. I was parched.'

Frank took his coffee into the attached lounge and bent down to look at a photo of Charlie, that sat on a small side table.

'That's Charlie,' Shane said.

'Right. He looks like a normal bloke.'

'He is normal, Dad. What were you expecting? A man in a tutu?'

'What time will he be home, love?' Jenny asked.

'He's going to try and knock off early. Hopefully around 5 o'clock.'

Frank yawned, making no attempt to cover his mouth. 'I'm going to have a lie down after this coffee. We've been up since sparrow's fart and I'm tired.'

After Frank left, the tightness in Shane's chest eased. Jenny took their cups over to the kitchen to wash and Shane flopped down on the couch and shut his eyes.

'It's good to see you, Shane,' Jenny said, the cups clinking noisily together in the sink.

'Yeah, Mum. It's good to see you too.'

Jenny removed the cups and placed them upside down onto a tea towel. 'Don't mind your dad,' she said. 'He's trying. It's hard for him. Just be patient. Please, Shane.'

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Shane was chopping carrots when Charlie walked through the door.

Charlie came straight to Shane and sidled up beside him. 'Hey, you,' he said, and kissed Shane on the lips.

Shane's eyes darted over to Frank, who was sitting watching from the couch.

Jenny got out of the armchair, a cheesy smile plastered onto her face. 'Hello, Charlie. I'm Jenny, Shane's mum. Lovely to meet you.'

Charlie walked over to her and kissed her cheek.

Frank stayed put, his eyes moving from Charlie across to Shane and then to a patch on the carpet. Charlie smiled at him and held out his hand. 'Hi. You must be Frank.'

'Yeah,' Frank said, shuffling his body just enough to reach Charlie's hand.

Shane knew what Frank was going to do before their hands connected.

Frank clamped down on his hand. Charlie's body tensed but his face remained impassive. *See, Charlie*, Shane thought.

Charlie withdrew his hand and politely enquired about the trip down from Queensland. Frank responded with a half-lipped smile. 'It was ok, I spose.'

'Glad to hear. Excuse me while I go and get changed out of this suit,' Charlie said.

He emerged from their bedroom a few minutes later wearing ripped jeans and his rainbow-striped 'Vote Yes' windcheater. 'Would you like a drop of red, Frank?' he asked, pausing by the wine cabinet.

'Do you have beer?'

'Yep,' Charlie said. 'We've got Asahi, Coopers or Corona.'

'No Four-X?'

'No, sorry. Remind me to get some for you at the bottle shop tomorrow. Try a Coopers?'

'All right.'

'What about you, Jenny?' Charlie asked.

'Whatever you're opening, Charlie.'

Charlie got a beer out of the fridge and twisted off its lid. 'Do you want a glass, Frank?'

'A glass. Who drinks beer from a glass?'

Shane clenched his hand on the knife and looked down at his knuckles, which had turned white under the pressure.

'I like it straight from the bottle too, Frank,' Charlie said good-naturedly. 'Saves on washing up as well.'

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Shane flipped the doona over. 'How dare he speak to you like that.'

Charlie sat down on the bed and waved his hand dismissively. 'Don't worry about it, Shane. I've dealt with worse than Frank. I actually think he's just scared.'

'Scared of what?'

Charlie leaned over and swiped a kiss over Shane's lips. 'This. Us.'

'He's just a prick.'

'Give him a chance, Shane. Let him get used to us before you cast final judgement. As a side note, your mum is very sweet.'

Shane lay down and put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. 'She can be an absolute pain, too. It gives me the shits how she always tries to prop Dad up. She needs to say what she really thinks for once.'

'Shane, please try to look at the situation through her eyes.'

'You weren't there when I was young. In some ways she was as bad as Dad.'

'I'm not saying that she wasn't. I'm just saying that it's new to both of them and getting mad is counterproductive.'

Shane scowled. 'Whose side are you on, Charlie?'

'You know whose side I'm on. Anyway, this isn't about taking sides. It's about changing mindsets. I want you to have a relationship with them. I'm just trying to help you.'

Shane rolled over, turning his back to Charlie.

Charlie switched off the light, got into bed and pulled the doona up to his chest.

Shane moved his body away from him.

'Seriously, Shane. You're acting just like your dad.'

Shane felt guilty when he woke in the morning. He turned over and faced Charlie. 'Sorry.'

Charlie opened one eye. 'It's all right.'

'Dad pushes my buttons.'

Charlie's eyebrows conveyed mock surprise. 'Really?'

'Shut up.' Shane smiled.

Charlie wrapped Shane in his arms and held him tightly. They lay together, not moving and silent, until Charlie gently kissed Shane's cheek.

'I'm going to be late,' he whispered.

Shane kissed him back and then outlined Charlie's cupid's bow with the tip of his tongue and stroked his day-old stubble with the palm of his hand.

Charlie gently levered his face away and glanced at his watch. 'No time.'

Shane covered Charlie's watch face with his hand and leaned forward, nipping his bottom lip with his teeth. 'There's always time.'

Charlie did not linger afterwards. He got up and walked straight into the ensuite. 'What are you going to do with them today?' he asked, adjusting the water temperature for his shower.

Shane pulled the doona over his face. 'God, a whole day with them,' he groaned.

'Ha. Just keep them busy. Take them into the city and wear them out,' Charlie said, stepping into the warm stream of water.

Shane picked up his phone from beside the bed and flicked through his social media accounts, stopping when he got to Facebook. There was a message from Jimmy.

Mate,

Flying in tomorrow morning. I'm looking forward to it. I know you're busy but was hoping to snare a beer with you sometime on Friday.

Let me know if that suits. No pressure.

Jimmy

Hey Jimmy,

I've taken the week off work so I could spend time with my parents and I'm already dying for an excuse to escape. Could meet you for a bite and a beverage Friday night. Are you staying in the city? If so, we can meet there.

Shane

Jenny had her nose in the pantry when Shane walked into the kitchen for breakfast. 'What are you looking for?'

'Oh, Shane,' she said, startled. 'Nothing...I mean, cereal for your dad. Charlie's such a lovely man,' she gushed, her head now in the crockery cupboard. 'Very handsome, too.'

'Yeah, he is.'

'You sit down, love. I'll make breakfast. Do you mind making the coffee?' Jenny asked, plonking the mug down onto the bench. 'I don't know how to use your fancy machine. I'll buy the coffee Dad likes when we're out today and then I can do it.'

'Sure, whatever works best for Dad.'

'Beaut. I'll get your dad up.'

It was strange to sit sandwiched between his parents around the table. Shane spooned muesli into his mouth and flicked his eyes over to Frank, noting the deep lines carved into his mouth and how, as he exhaled, his breath was stuttered. It had been years since he'd last seen a cigarette dangling from the corner of Frank's mouth, but it was clear to Shane that the damage they'd done was irreversible.

Shane pushed his cereal bowl away, purposefully making it scrape noisily across the table. 'We need to make a plan,' he said abruptly. 'I thought we could have a look around the city today, followed by a relatively early night. Is there anything else that you'd like to do while you're here?'

'Maybe best to play it by ear,' Jenny suggested. 'See how the funeral goes first.'

'Dad?' Shane prompted.

'Yeah, what your mum said.'

'Fair enough. I've got to meet an old friend on Friday night, so will you be okay to fend for yourselves? Charlie will be home.'

'That's fine, love.'

\*\*\*

On the morning of the funeral, Shane woke to Charlie staring at him.

'What?' Shane asked groggily.

'Nothing...well, maybe something.'

'What is it?'

'I'm going to try to come to the funeral. I've got a few meetings lined up at work, but I'll see if I can move them.'

'You don't have to.'

'I know, but I want to. Text me the details and if I can make it, I'll see you there.'

Frank was up and dressed in a navy suit, spooning heaped teaspoons of instant coffee into a mug, when Shane walked into the kitchen.

Shane turned on the coffee machine, inserted a pod and made himself a latte. 'Now that's a coffee,' he said, sipping the foamy milk from the top of the mug

Frank took a sip of his own brew and then began to cough uncontrollably, the thick phlegm rising and falling in his lungs.

'Shit. Are you all right, Dad?'

'Yep,' Frank wheezed.

'That cough doesn't sound too good.'

'Have you got a decent suit to wear today?'

'Yes.'

'Well, stop fussing about me and go and get it on. How long will it take to get over to Coburg in that bloody traffic?'

Shane put down his cup and glared at him.

'How long?' Frank repeated.

'As long as it takes, Dad.'

'I knew it,' Frank complained as they idled, waiting for the traffic to move on Hoddle Street. 'This is why I wanted to leave early. I'm gonna be late for my own brother's bloody funeral.'

'Calm down, Frank,' Jenny said from the back seat. 'Do you know any shortcuts, Shane?'

Shane glanced nervously at the digital clock on the dashboard. They had forty-five minutes until the service started. 'It just bottlenecks here and then it moves,' he said, trying to convince himself as well as Frank that was the case.

Frank leaned over and banged impatiently on the steering wheel. 'Use your bloody horn.'

Shane pushed his leathery hands away. 'What will that do?'

Frank thumped his fist onto the glove box and then let his hands fall limply onto his lap. He turned his head towards the window and stared grim-faced at the stationary car next to them.

After a motionless minute, Shane glanced furtively at Frank. A fine sheen of perspiration veiled his face and a protruding purple vein pulsed, snaking its way



across his right temple. Shane squeezed his eyes open and shut, trying to circuit-break the guilt that had settled in his stomach.

'I'm doing my best, Dad,' Shane appealed.

Frank said nothing.

Shane looked at the rear-vision mirror in the hope that Jenny would convey a message of solidarity, or at least an understanding of the unintentional predicament he'd put them in, but her eyes were shut. Her silent lips mouthed indecipherable words. Shane frowned, trying to make sense of what she was doing, until it dawned on him that she was praying.

The car careered into the funeral home, scraping the side of the hubcap on the kerb, five minutes after the service had commenced. Shane tensed, waiting for the barrage of criticism, but Frank's face remained taut and tight-lipped.

Jenny pressed her face against the window and scanned the car park. 'There's no spots left.'

'You get out. I'll find a park and meet you in there,' Shane said.

Frank got out of the car, slammed the door, and, without waiting for Jenny, strode toward the entrance.

Jenny gave Shane a weak smile as she exited the car. 'See you in there, love. It's all right. It's not your fault.'

Shane reversed out of the drive onto the road. 'Shit,' he said out loud. 'Why does it always go to shit?'

The street was lined with cars and it took two blocks until Shane finally spied a small space. Three poorly executed attempts later, he managed to cram his car into the gap.

A desire for nicotine caused saliva to pool in his mouth. He looked up and down the street, searching in vain for a shop or a pub.

*Nothing. Fuck. Get it together. Breathe.*

The door to the funeral chapel creaked when Shane pushed it open, causing a ripple of turning heads. He saw Charlie sitting in the back row, slid into the seat next to him and hunched his body.

Charlie looked at him, questioning with his eyes. Shane shook his head and shrugged defeatedly. Charlie reached across, took his hand and cupped it warmly between his own.

A man dressed in a sombre suit was standing, talking into the microphone at the front of the room. 'And now,' he said, 'I'd like to call on Francis Cole to deliver the eulogy.'

Frank rose from his seat and walked stiffly to the front of the room. Reaching into his pocket, he took out a wodge of paper and unfolded it. 'Thank you,' he said as the officiant passed him the microphone. He patted his suit pockets and looked out over the small congregation. Locating his glasses, he slowly unfolded the wings, put them on and began to read.

'Thank you for coming today to celebrate and remember the life of my brother, Raymond James Cole. My sisters Susan and Katherine, along with my brother Terrence and I, are grateful for your attendance this morning.

'I thought I'd start off with a brief outline of Raymond's life. Raymond was born in 1955, the second eldest child of our parents, Nancy and Ronald. He grew up in Coburg and attended St John's Primary School, and later St Cuthbert's College. Sorry. Just a minute.'

Frank removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He put the glasses back on and zigzagged his finger down the notes.

'He was a good brother to us all, and a valued son.' He abruptly stopped again, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. 'Apologies,' he said hoarsely.

Charlie squeezed Shane's hand while the room waited.

Frank looked to the roof and then, after a few seconds, folded up the eulogy, put it into his suit pocket and continued without the script.

'The thing is...what I mean is...I didn't see his value at the time. I'm not one for saying much or talking about how I feel. It's not the kind of bloke I am. But today, for Raymond, I'm gonna give it go.

'Our childhood wasn't what you'd call easy. We didn't have much money or any of the trimmings and trappings that kids have these days. It was a different time, and we dealt with what was thrown at us in different ways.

'I left home early. Ran away, in a sense. Not just from the house, but from the responsibility.

'Raymond and I shared a room while I was at home. I'd watch him from time to time. He was different to most of the other blokes I knew. He liked clothes and was always getting Mum to sew him something new to wear.

'He looked after our sisters – and on occasion, he was better at it than Mum. I remember seeing him brush their hair and make their lunch. He was always hanging around the kitchen, head in the sink or the fridge. He even sang in a church choir. I used to rib him about it. Tell him he was strange. But he didn't give two hoots about what I or anyone else thought.

'Our dad hit the bottle quite a bit and...it wasn't good, to say the least. I'd charge at Dad like a bull at a gate. Angry and self-righteous. Thinking I could make him change with my fists. I was all hot air, no substance. I'd tell Raymond to man up. To stick up for Mum. I thought that he was weak because he wasn't confrontational. But now, when I look back at it, I realise that he was a lot stronger than me. He did the hard yards. He stayed and cleaned up the mess. He made sure that everyone else was safe. He kept the wheels moving forward.

'I never said thanks. I never picked up the phone for a chat, or to see how he was. I discarded him. Threw him aside cos I didn't think he measured up.

'I see now that I was wrong. I wish I'd seen it sooner. I wish I'd said goodbye. So many regrets.

'Rest in peace, my brother.'

'Fuck,' Charlie whispered to Shane after the service had concluded. 'That was pretty intense.'

Shane sat glued to his seat, mouth open, staring at Frank, who was wrapped in the embrace of two grey-haired ladies.

'Shane, are you okay?' Charlie asked. Shane nodded stiffly, and Charlie touched him gently on the knee. 'We should go over to your parents.'

'Yeah,' Shane said, and stood up.

Jenny opened her arms and beckoned for him to come to her. 'Shane.'

'Did you know he was going to say that?' Shane asked, pulling back from her hug.

'No,' she said. 'But I'm glad he did. Things have been eating away at him lately. Go to him, Shane. He needs you.'

*Needs me?* Shane thought as he made his way over to Frank. *That would be a first.*

'Dad. Are you all right?'

'I'll live.'

'That was an incredible eulogy.'

Frank nodded. 'It needed to be said.'

'I've never seen you cry.'

Frank's Adam's apple wavered. 'Yeah, well, we all have moments of weakness.'

'That was far from weak, Dad.'

Frank looked at him, unblinking. 'We come from different schools, Shane. You and me, we're cut from different cloth.'

'Are we?'

'Yes.'

'It didn't feel like that when you were speaking.'

'Enough, mate. Go over and introduce yourself to your aunties. You'll like them,' he said, and walked away.

Shane looked around for Charlie and saw him standing by the hot water urn, making a cup of tea.

'Want one?' he mouthed.

Shane nodded gratefully.

Shane felt a tug at his arm and turned around. Jenny was standing behind him with two ladies in tow.

'This is Shane,' Jenny said. 'Shane, these are your aunties, Susan and Katherine. They're twins. I'll leave you to get acquainted while I mingle.'

The aunts' identical, gold-flecked blue eyes scanned him up and down. They clicked their tongues as they surveyed him.

'I'm your Auntie Katherine,' one of them said, and thrust her hand forward. 'It's lovely to meet you after all these years. Your mum tells us that you're a photographer?'

'Um, yes,' Shane said, shaking her hand.

'And I'm your Auntie Susan,' the other woman chimed in. 'What do you photograph?'

'I do portraits and fashion shoots.'

'How times have changed. In our day, people either worked in an office or in a trade. Didn't they, Susan?' Katherine said.

Susan didn't answer. Instead, she took a step forward, placed a hand under Shane's chin and tilted his head backwards. 'Same nose,' she said. 'And face shape.' Shane smiled awkwardly. Susan let go and stepped back. 'He's the splitting image of his Uncle Raymond. Isn't he, Katherine?'

'It's uncanny,' Katherine replied. 'Definitely got Cole blood coursing through those veins.'

'And who's this?' Susan asked as Charlie approached them, balancing two teacups.

'I'm Charlie,' he said with a wide smile. 'Shane's partner.'

'Well, then. You really *are* just like Raymond, Shane,' Susan said with a wink.

'What do you do, Charlie?' Susan asked.

As Charlie launched into an explanation, Shane looked over to Frank, who was deep in conversation with a middle-aged man. Frank had one hand on his hip and the other curled by his side. The man he was talking to had his car keys pointed at Frank's face.

'Tell us about Raymond,' Charlie asked the aunts. 'What was he like?'

The aunts looked at each other and sighed in unison.

'He was gentle and kind,' Susan said. 'A darling to us both.'

'He looked after us and our brother Terrence when we were small,' Katherine said. 'He was always there, making sure we were all right.'

'Terrence used to adore him when he was young. Doted on him, in fact. Sad how things like that change, isn't it?' Susan said ruefully.

'I'm a bit lost,' Shane said. 'Dad's never talked much about his family.'

Susan grimaced. 'Francis...sorry, I should say Frank – that's what your dad calls himself these days, isn't it? Anyway, your dad left before Terrence was born, after a huge altercation with our dad. So it was just me, Katherine, Terrence, and Raymond at home with our parents, who had a lot of...shall we say, problems.'

'Problems?' Shane said.

'Your grandfather was a drinker. It was Raymond who looked after us all. He was more of a parent than they ever were. He'd brush our hair before school, get our lunch and make sure we got off to school on time.' Susan paused and then pointed towards the man who was talking to Shane's dad. 'That's your Uncle Terrence,' she said quietly. 'He calls himself Terry these days. Raymond was fifteen when he was born and he practically brought him up. Fed him his bottle, changed his nappy...'

Katherine dabbed her eyes with a tissue and sighed. 'Raymond gave up a lot for us. The violence and the feeling that he had to protect us all affected him badly. He never felt like he truly fit in anywhere. Stuck in limbo between expectation and his truth. It wasn't like it is today,' she said, her throat catching. 'Terrence is more like your dad. Black and white in most respects. Having said that, your dad appears to have softened. That eulogy was something else. An honest and heartfelt tribute if ever I've heard one. I take my hat off to Francis. It takes courage to admit you were wrong. Terrence doesn't have that in him.'

Susan nodded. 'Terrence blames Raymond's lifestyle choices for everything that went wrong in his life.'

Shane did not understand. 'Lifestyle choices?'

'Raymond was a homosexual. Terrence went from adoring him as a youngster to hating him once he hit school. A few of the boys in his class gave him a hard time about Raymond. Teased him, that sort of stuff. Susan and I left to go to Sydney when Terrence was about ten, but Raymond stayed around Coburg to keep an eye on him. He didn't feel right leaving Terrence alone in the care of our parents. He had

a boyfriend by that stage, and it affected Terrence badly. He shunned Raymond. Wouldn't speak to him, despite what he'd done for him as a child. It broke Raymond's heart.'

'You've got to understand, Shane,' Susan interjected. 'It was a different time. People weren't accepting like they are now. AIDS was splashed all over the newspapers. God's punishment for being gay, they used to say. Terrence still hasn't gotten over it.'

'Then why did he come to the funeral?' Shane asked.

'He's not here for Raymond. It's your dad he wants to see. They've only met at our parents' funerals. Terrence idolises him. Francis...sorry, I mean Frank, was everything Raymond wasn't,' Susan said. 'A man's man in every way.'

Katherine placed her hand on Shane's arm. 'Shane,' she said in a serious tone. 'Keep a wide berth. Your dad might have changed, but Terrence hasn't.'

'Debrief at the tea urn,' Charlie whispered to Shane.

'Thank god you came to bear witness,' Shane said as they walked across the room. 'You couldn't make this shit up if you tried.'

Charlie nodded in agreement. 'There are some serious issues in your dad's family.'

Shane picked up a biscuit and took a bite. 'Yeah, there are. I'm glad you came, Charlie. I didn't realise how much I needed you to see this.'

'Needed me to see it?'

'Yeah. It makes me feel less crazy. It's always been me against them. I'm so sick of the fight.'

'Babe, you're far from crazy, and I've always got your back. There are some things that will never change. You've got to let them go and move forward. It's us now, and that's all that matters.'

Tears welled in Shane's eyes. 'You're right. It's just so fucking hard sometimes. I don't know why Dad affects me so much.'

'He's your dad, that's why.'

'You know, he's never said that he loves me.'

'I know. He does, though. I'm sure of that. He's just useless at communicating it. You heard the eulogy. I think that was for you as much as it was for Raymond.'

'Maybe,' Shane replied. 'But who knows what the fuck he thinks.'

Charlie discreetly nudged Shane. 'Who's that?'

'Who are you talking about?'

'That kid. Eleven o'clock.'

Shane looked over. A tall teenager was leaning against the wall by the exit. 'I don't know. Probably another long-lost relative.'

'Should we go over?' Charlie asked. 'He looks a bit lost.'

'Yeah. Why not?' Shane answered, and brushed the crumbs off his face. 'He's probably as freaked out by the circus as we are.'

They walked over to the boy.

'Hey, mate,' Shane said.

The boy looked at them skittishly.

'What's your name?' Shane asked.

'Patrick.'

'How old are you?'

'Fifteen,' he said, and glanced nervously away from Shane.

'How do you fit in here?'

'I'm here with my dad, Terry.'

'Shit. You're my cousin. Nice to meet you.'

'Yeah...um, you too.'

Shane put his hand on Charlie's shoulder. 'This is Charlie.'

'G'day, Patrick,' Charlie said warmly.

'What year are you in at school?' Shane asked.

'Year Ten.'

'Only a few years to go,' Charlie said. 'Any idea what you want to do afterwards?'

'Play footy,' Patrick said without meeting Shane's eyes.



'You must be good,' Shane said.

Patrick lifted his chin and nodded. 'Yeah, I'm the best at my school.'

'Well, good luck with it,' Shane said. 'Maybe see you at the next family get-together.'

Patrick didn't respond.

'More fine Cole progeny,' Shane said under his breath as they walked away.

Charlie looked at his watch. 'I've got to get back to the office. Will you be okay?'

'Yeah,' Shane said. 'You go. I'm fine.'

'I'll just say goodbye to your dad.'

Frank was still deep in conversation with Terrence.

'Do you think we should interrupt them?' Charlie asked.

'Yeah. He's been speaking to him for ages.'

Shane couldn't see any family resemblance in Terrence. Unlike the rest of the Cole men, Terrence was going bald. Strands of hair had been swept over his head in what Shane thought was a tragic attempt to hide it.

'Excuse me, Dad,' Shane said. 'Charlie's going.'

'Oh, right,' Frank replied. 'Thanks for coming, mate.'

A look of disdain washed over Terrence's face. 'This your boy?'

'Yeah, this is Shane. Shane, this is your Uncle Terrence.'

Terrence scowled. 'Terry,' he corrected.

'Oh, right. Terry,' Frank said.

'Good to meet you, Terry,' Shane said, thinking the exact opposite.

'So, you're Frank's boy? Do ya play footy?'

'No,' Shane answered.

Charlie moved forward. 'Hi,' he said.

'Oh,' Frank said. 'This is Charlie, Shane's um...what do I say again, Shane?'

'Partner, Dad.'

'That's right.'

Terry pointed his car key at Frank. 'You're having a laugh, aren't you?'

Shane balled his hand and raised it slowly to his waist.

Charlie glanced at him and shook his head.

'Fuckin' hell,' Terry said. 'It must run in the bloody family.'

Frank stepped forward. 'Shut your trap, Terrence...or Terry, or whatever the bloody hell you call yourself these days. You're out of line.'

'Jesus. Me, out of line?' Terry said, raising his voice. 'I'm not the one who's out of fuckin' line here! You don't condone this, do ya, Francis?'

'You're insulting my son and his...'

'Partner,' Shane supplied.

'Partner,' Frank repeated. 'You've got a hide, Terry. Don't think for one second you can stand in front of me and speak to my son and his...'

'Partner,' Shane said again before Frank had a chance.

'Bloody hell, Francis. To think I looked up to you. I've listened to you rave on today about what a bloody saint Raymond was, and now this! I bet you even support poofers getting married, don't ya?'

'Piss off, Terry,' Frank said furiously. 'If ya think I'd put you before my son, you're bloody deluded. Go home and crawl under a rock. You and your opinions are not welcome here.'

Terry looked at them all incredulously.

'You're all fucked,' he spat, before storming off. Shane watched as he yanked Patrick by the arm and frog-marched him out of the room.

After Terry left, Shane stood with his mouth gaping.

'Well, today has been a send-off in more ways than one,' Charlie said.

Frank nodded. 'He's a dickhead,'

Shane stared fixedly at Frank. 'Thanks for saying that to Terry, Dad. It means a lot to me.'

Frank glanced down at his watch. 'Shane, go and get your mother and tell her it's time to leave. I'll meet you out the front.'

Shane didn't realise he was crying until Charlie drew him into a hug.

'It's okay, Shane.'

Shane wiped the tears with the back of his hand. 'No, Charlie. It's not okay. None of this is okay. Not my dad, not Terry, not me. What's fucking wrong with the men in my family?'

Charlie rubbed his back. 'Do you want me to come home with you?'

'No, I'll be fine. You need to go back to work.'

\*\*\*

It was a quiet drive back to Shane's apartment from the funeral. Frank stared out the window, and Jenny was uncharacteristically quiet in the back.

When they arrived back home, Frank got out of the car and went straight to the guest room.

'What a day,' Jenny said. 'I've got to get out of these heels and have a cuppa.'

Shane went into the kitchen and turned the kettle on. 'Mum, what was Dad like when you first met him?'

'Oh, Shane. That was so long ago.'

'You don't remember?'

'Of course, I remember. Why do you want to know?'

The kettle reached boiling point. Shane picked it up and poured the water into two cups. 'Because I want to try to understand him,' he said. 'Biscuit?'

'No, I had too many after the funeral.'

Shane took the cups over to the lounge and passed one to Jenny. He put his on the coffee table and sat down on the couch. 'Mum. Terry behaved appallingly to me and Charlie today in front of Dad.'

'He's an odd man, Shane. Don't take any notice of him.'

'I don't care about Terry. He's an idiot. Dad went off at him, really let him have it. It's the first time in my life that I felt like he was on my side. He went to bat for me and then dismissed it like it was nothing.'

'Shane, it's who he is. You've always been hellbent on changing him.'

Shane shut his eyes and thought hard about what Jenny had said. 'No, Mum. That's not true. It's the other way around. You've both tried to change me. It's always been under the guise of doing what's best for me, when really it's always been what's best for you.'

'Please stop, Shane. Why do you always want to dredge up the past? Just let it be.'

Shane sat up straight and faced Jenny. 'Because sweeping it under the rug makes it worse. I can't do it anymore. I'm not looking to lay blame. I'm just trying to understand it so that we can all move on.'

'Oh, Shane. I'm tired.'

'We're all tired, Mum. Think about it. I'll be in my room.'

Shane lay on his bed and thought back to a counselling session he'd attended a few years ago. She'd started the session focussing on the tension in his body.

'Close your eyes. Breathe. In and out, nice and steady. Relax your toes. Now, move on to your feet. Your ankles are next...'

'Now, Shane,' she'd said, after his body had slumped and his mind was still. 'I want you to imagine that you're on a beach. In the distance, you can see your dad trudging through the sand. He's carrying a large trunk that's heavy and cumbersome. It's getting dark and cold, and the wind is howling. He looks frightened and unsure. It's hard for him to continue. What do you want to do? Help him or walk away?'

'Help him,' he'd whispered. 'Help him.'

Afterwards, he'd asked about the point of the exercise.

'It's how I gauge the damage in the relationship,' she answered. 'When people walk away, it means that nothing is salvable. The relationship is dead. My counselling then centres around the process of liberation and the cutting of the family bonds. In your case, I can assume that the ties are damaged but not completely broken. Hope and love are still alive.'

\*\*\*

Charlie woke Shane when he came in from work. 'Hey, wake up. It's after six.'

Shane opened his eyes. 'Gosh,' he said. 'I've been asleep for ages.'

'Your parents are milling around in the kitchen looking for something to eat.'

Shane stretched his limbs and yawned. 'Pass me my phone,' he said. 'We can have some pizza.'

His parents were sitting at the kitchen table. They looked up expectantly when Shane walked into the room.

Jenny looked tired. 'Hi,' she said. 'I wasn't sure if you had anything planned for dinner, so I thought I'd wait until you woke up. Do you want me to make something?'

'I've ordered pizza for us.'

'That's nice. Thanks. Dad doesn't like spice, though.'

'I know. I got some plain ones.'

The pizza arrived half an hour later. Shane waited for Jenny to gush about the delivery service and for Frank to make a comment about the cost, but it didn't happen. Jenny put serviettes down on the table and sat.

'So,' said Charlie. 'Do you have any plans for tomorrow?'

Jenny looked across at his Frank. 'We thought we might go out together, give you a bit of space. Shane's out tomorrow night, so I can cook for the three of us. That's if you're going to be home, Charlie?'

'Yes, I'll be here and that would be great. Thanks, Jenny. By the way, Frank. I bought some Four-X, if you want one?'

Frank stood up and carried his plate to the sink. 'Thanks, but I'm tired. It was a long day. I'm going to bed.'

'This is what they do,' Shane fumed, once they'd turned the television on.

'Do what?' Charlie asked.

'Give me the silent treatment. I asked Mum to talk to me about Dad this afternoon, and she refused. Now she's all bloody sulky. I just want them to tell me what they really think. They owe it to me, Charlie. I'm so sick of the charade.'

'Hey,' Charlie said. 'Calm down. It was a huge day. They've had a myriad of things thrown at them. Just let them process it all.'

Shane shook his head. Fury bubbled inside him and he breathed heavily through his nose. *Stop placating me, Charlie*, he wanted to scream.

Charlie turned on the television with the remote. 'You need something light to take your mind off it.

'Yep,' Shane replied. *Fuck you too, Charlie.*

\*\*\*

Hi Shane,

Looking forward to tonight. Where do you want to meet? I'm staying in the city, just near Flinders St station.

Cheers,

Jimmy

Hey Jimmy,

Let's meet under the clocks, just inside the entrance at the station. You won't miss them. How about 6.30? We can work out where we'll go from there.

Looking forward to it too,

Shane

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Shane got off the tram at Federation Square. He glanced at his watch. He was ten minutes early. He walked across the road and lined up at a kiosk just outside Flinders Street station.

'Yeah,' the woman behind the counter said.

'Just a packet of Dunhill, please.'

'What sort?'

'The nearest,' Shane said, and handed over a fifty-dollar note. 'Oh, and a lighter too please.'

Shane wasted no time. He ripped open the plastic, put a cigarette to his lips and sparked the lighter. He took a drag, slumped against a wall and let the nicotine course through him.

He looked at his watch again and wondered if he had time for another. It was six twenty-five. *Better not*, he thought.

He walked up the steps of the station and saw Jimmy standing under the clocks. He was wearing a checked shirt tucked into a pair of cream moleskins. He looked lean and strong.

'Jimmy!' Shane called out.

'*Mate*,' he replied. 'Look at you.'

Shane held out his hand but Jimmy brushed it aside and wrapped him in a bear hug.

'It's so good to see you, Shane. Really bloody good.'

'You too, Jimmy,' Shane said warmly.

'So, where are you taking me? Straight to the pub, I hope.'

Shane nodded. 'Let's go.'

Shane took him to a pub with a little outdoor beer garden. There were heaters strategically placed between the bench seats, and ashtrays on each table.

'I'll get the first round,' Jimmy said. 'What's your poison?'

'Just a beer, mate. Anything on tap's fine.'

'Back in a minute.'

As soon as Jimmy went to the bar, Shane lit another cigarette. He leaned back on his bench, resting his back against the wall and shut his eyes, each drag feeling better than the last.

Jimmy returned and placed a pint in front of him. 'Here you go, mate. Geez, you're not still on the darts, are you? They're no good for you.'

'No, not really. Just the odd one here and there. Do you want one?' he asked, holding out the pack.

'Why not?' Jimmy chuckled. 'Just for old times' sake, ey?'

They chatted in a light-hearted manner for an hour, reminiscing about their school days.

'So, Shane,' Jimmy said, after a lull in the banter. 'What was it that you wanted to tell me? I'm intrigued.'

The question rattled Shane. He lit another cigarette and blew out a billowy plume of smoke.

'Is everything all right?' Jimmy asked. 'You've got me worried.'

Shane nodded. 'Yep, all good. Just something that I think you should know.'

'What? You know you can trust me, right?'

'Well...the thing is...shit, Jimmy.'

'Just say it, mate. Just get it out.'

'All right. The thing is that I don't have a girlfriend or a wife.'

'So what? Neither do I.'

Shane bit the side of his lip, hard enough to draw blood. The pain taking the edge off his discomfort. 'The reason I don't have one is that I'm gay.'

Jimmy's eyes widened. 'Gay?'

'Yes. Gay.'

Jimmy let out a low whistle. 'Did something happen to you at boarding school, mate? Were you molested?'

'What the fuck, Jimmy? You don't become gay because of molestation. Jesus, mate. I've heard them all, but that one takes the cake.'

'Sorry,' Jimmy said. 'That came out wrong.' He ripped at a coaster. 'I honestly didn't mean it the way it sounded.'

'Do you have a problem with it?'

'No. I just...'

Shane wasn't sure if he really wanted to know the answer. 'Just what?'

Jimmy abruptly stood up. 'Let me get us another beer and collect my thoughts. Back in a minute.'

Shane picked up the coaster that Jimmy had been shredding and tore what was left into tiny pieces. *I can't deal with all of the shit. Why have I let these people back into my life?*

He glanced down at his watch, Jimmy had been gone for at least ten minutes. He picked up his glass, swigged the remaining beer and then gathered his cigarettes and lighter. *I'm done*, he thought. *I'm not waiting around for a feeble excuse.*



Shane was slipping an arm into his coat when Jimmy came back to the table carrying two pints of beer.

‘Sorry, mate. I nipped into the dunnies first. You didn’t think I’d left, did you?’

Shane nodded. ‘Actually, I did.’

‘I wouldn’t do that. You know I wouldn’t do that. I know I owe you an explanation. I’m sorry, mate.’

Shane slumped in his seat. A battle suddenly seemed pointless.

Jimmy took a huge swig of beer. ‘Yeah, always been one to act before I think. Ha – you know that better than most. Right, he said. ‘Before I continue, let me just say that I’m a bit shocked. I never had even the slightest inkling. But it’s all good. Really. I don’t have a problem with it. The reason I asked if you’d been molested was...have you heard about the Royal Commission into sex abuse?’

‘Yeah. It’s been front-page news here.’

‘Well, some of the victims were blokes from our school, and they named Brother O’Flaherty as a perpetrator.’

‘Shit,’ Shane said, eyes wide, mouth hanging open.

‘I know being gay doesn’t mean that you were abused. It just came out wrong.’

‘I get it, Jimmy. It’s okay.’

‘The worst part,’ Jimmy said and then stopped.

‘What?’

Tears filled Jimmy’s eyes. ‘The worst part was...fuck, Shane.’

‘What is it?’

‘He abused Squires. Raped him.’

‘Oh my god.’

‘I can’t forgive myself for being such an arsehole to him.’

‘You didn’t know, Jimmy.’

‘Looking back, it was so obvious. The night stalking. The control he had over Squires. The beatings.’

‘Is he in jail?’

'The bastard died before he could be brought to account.'

Jimmy returned from the bar with another round of drinks.

'I think it's going to be a big night,' he said, sliding the pint of beer across the table. He lifted his drink into the air. 'Cheers, Shane. To old friends and new beginnings.'

'I'll drink to that.'

Jimmy drank half of his beer in one go and then belched loudly in Shane's face.

Shane screwed up his nose and shifted backwards in his seat. 'That's gross.'

'Shit, sorry. I forgot where I was.'

Shane laughed. 'You beer pig.'

'I'm used to hanging out with the blokes at the pub.'

'Um, I'm a bloke and this is a pub, still gross.'

It took Shane a few minutes to get served. He stood in line thinking about what Jimmy had implied.

*You're different to other blokes. You're not a real man.*

'Yes?' the bartender said when it was Shane's turn to order.

'Two scotches. Actually, make them both doubles.'

'No worries, mate,' the bartender replied.

Jimmy was smoking another cigarette when Shane returned. 'Here you go,' he said, passing him the scotch.

Jimmy raised his glass. 'I just don't fully get it, Shane.'

'Get what?'

'Forget it.'

'Just bloody ask. There won't be anything I haven't heard before.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

Jimmy took a deep drag of his cigarette and then scratched his head. 'Are you the woman or the man?'

\*\*\*

Shane climbed into bed in the small hours of the morning. His head spun from the alcohol. He couldn't lie still without feeling sick. He turned over from one side to the other, but the nausea followed him.

'Stop moving,' Charlie said grumpily. 'You're keeping me awake.'

'Shorry,' Shane slurred, trying not to move. His mind spun between Squires, his dad's family and Jimmy. The past and the alcohol swashed together nauseatingly in his stomach until he heaved.

Vomit poured from his mouth and his nostrils onto the bedding and the floor.

'Shane!' Charlie screeched. 'What the hell?'

Shane bolted for the toilet and spewed out what was left in his stomach. He collapsed with his head hung over the bowl and his legs curled around the base.

'Don't move,' Charlie said from the door.

'Mmm,' Shane groaned.

Shane wasn't sure how long he stayed there, but his legs felt numb when Charlie returned.

'Have you finished?' Charlie asked.

'Yep.'

'I've changed the linen.'

'Shanks, Charlie.'

'That's okay.'

'Not jush for cleaning the bed. For everyfing.'

\*\*\*

The Saturday morning hangover was horrendous. Shane's mouth was dry, his head pounded and his stomach lurched.

'I'm going to die,' he croaked.

'Not today,' Charlie said. 'There's two Aspro Clears and a glass of water on your bedside table.'

'Thanks,' Shane said, levering himself upright.

'That was quite a bender,' Charlie noted.

Shane dropped the tablets into the water. 'Yeah, sorry about that.'

Jenny was reading on the couch when Shane padded into the kitchen. She looked up at him, clicking her tongue before she spoke. 'Shane. You look terrible. Did you drink too much last night?'

Shane nodded sullenly. He took a used glass off the sink and filled it with water, feeling the burn from Frank's eyes on his back. *Don't you fucking dare judge me*, he thought, guzzling the water.

'Charlie's booked a table at a restaurant tonight for us all.'

The water rose in Shane's throat, his body quivering in response. 'Great,' he rasped, swallowing the regurgitated liquid. 'That's just great.'

The waiter met them at the door of the restaurant and ushered them to their seats.

'Drinks?' he asked.

'I'll see the wine list,' Charlie said. 'Beer, Frank?'

'Yeah, that'd be good, Charlie. I'll have one of those Coopers. They weren't too bad.'

'And I'll start with a gin and tonic,' Shane said.

Charlie and his parents raised their eyebrows.

'Really?' Charlie asked.

'Yep, hair of the dog and all that.'

'And for you, madam?' the waiter asked.

'I'll have the wine.'

Shane had three gins under his belt by the time the entree arrived.

'Don't you think you should back off a bit?' Charlie asked.

'Nope,' Shane said.

'Listen to Charlie, love,' Jenny pleaded.

'Seriously?' Shane said. 'You're in cahoots with Charlie now? Oh, that's right, I forgot. Charlie's an accountant. Your dream son, hey Mum?'

Frank banged his fist on to the table, causing the wine glasses to wobble. 'Enough, Shane. Don't drag them into it when it's me you're pissed off with.'

'Pissed off? That's an understatement, Dad. This isn't a temporary annoyance. This is a lifetime of shit.'

'What do you want from me, Shane? Put your cards on the table. Go on, man up for once.'

'How dare you!' Shane seethed. 'How fucking *dare* you?'

Charlie reached over and squeezed Shane's leg under the table. 'Come on, Shane,' he said. 'This isn't the right place.'

'Well, where is the right place, Charlie?'

'Just calm down,' Charlie said, his tone attempting to placate.

'Shane,' Frank interjected. 'I know I've made mistakes. I'm not denying that. I was hard on you, that's for sure.'

'Mistakes? What you did was no mistake. It was calculated and systematic.'

'What was?' Frank asked.

'The way you treated me. The way you put me down. Called me a girl. Hit me. Yelled at me. That's not a mistake – that's abuse.'

Shane looked over at Jenny. Her hands were clutched together, her eyes brimming like dams about to break.

'We both love you, Shane,' she said. 'That's not a mistake. We both love you with our whole hearts. We grew up in a different era. It's not an excuse, I know. We truly thought we were helping you. Frank, the boy needs you to open up. He needs you to be honest with him.'

'Shane. Like I said the other day, we're cut from different cloth, and I don't mean that as an insult. I know I wasn't a good father to you. Yes, I tried to change

you. But what you have to know is that I did it for you. Not for show, or for others. I thought I was helping you.'

'Helping me with what?'

Frank pointed his finger at Charlie. 'Not to be... *this*. I saw it in you as a toddler. I tried to frighten it out of you, and when that didn't work I tried other ways to get it out of you.'

Jenny took a sharp breath inwards and opened her mouth as if to speak, her lips moving like a goldfish exposed to the air. Frank reached over and cradled her palm in his hand, his dark eyes finding hers. 'I'm so sorry, love. You don't deserve this. None of you do. I'm sorry for all of it. If I could go back and do it differently, I would. But I can't. I've treated you both badly...and Raymond too.'

## **Shane**

*Melbourne, 2018*

Shane took a sip of his latte, picked up his phone and saw a red icon that indicated that he had a Facebook message.

Hi Shane,

I don't know whether you remember me, but I'm your cousin, Patrick. We met at Uncle Raymond's funeral.

I know I didn't come across very well and I'm sorry about that. It's not really an excuse, but just for the record, my dad (Terry) had just broken up with my mum and had told me not to tell anyone about it and I was feeling very uncomfortable.

After the funeral, Dad went off. He was furious about how your dad spoke about Raymond. He also told me that you were gay. Anyway, the thing is, I am too.

I hope you don't mind that I'm writing to you, especially after how I was at the funeral. I know you live in Melbourne and I wondered if you'd like to catch up sometime?

Cheers,

Patrick Cole.

Hi Patrick,

It's really good to hear from you.

Don't worry about the funeral. I understand that you were in a hard situation. I'm sorry that I didn't think about that at the time.

So, being gay must run in the family (LOL). Of course I'd love to catch up. I live in South Yarra with Charlie. Whereabouts are you? How's your family? What have you been up to?

Best,

Shane

Hi Shane,

It was really good to get your message.

I live with my mum in Fairfield. The other side of the city from you. I went to live with her shortly after the funeral. Things got pretty bad with my dad. To be honest, he's a bit of a psycho. I haven't seen him in over a year. Having a son who's gay hasn't gone down too well with him.

Anyway, it's been really good being with my mum. I've changed schools this year to do my VCE. I go to one in the city which is pretty laid back. I've stopped playing footy and taken up basketball.

My aunties told me that you're a photographer. I'm also interested in photography. Mum bought me a fantastic camera for my birthday.

Anyway, let me know when you're free.

Cheers,

Patrick



**Shane**

*Melbourne, 2019*

TOGETHER WITH  
THEIR FAMILIES  
CHARLIE  
&  
SHANE  
INVITE YOU  
TO CELEBRATE THEIR MARRIAGE  
SATURDAY 23<sup>rd</sup> May  
AT TWO O'CLOCK  
GREEN'S WINERY  
HEALESVILLE  
Reception to follow

\*\*\*

From: Jenny Cole

Subject: Wedding Invitation

To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

Just got a hardcopy of your wedding invitation in the mail. It looks terrific. Dad and I are really looking forward to it. It's so lovely that you've invited his side of the family. I don't think he's ever been to a family do like this before. Have Susan and Katherine accepted?

I've been into Mackay looking for a mother of the groom outfit. I'm going all out. Matching shoes and bag, the works. I saw a beautiful lilac chiffon dress at Watson's Womenswear. I'll send you a photo to see what you think. Have you and Charlie got a colour scheme in mind? I don't want to clash.

Do you have a gift registry? I thought you might have one at that fancy department store we saw in the city. Dad and I would really like to get you

something as a keepsake. I was thinking of a Royal Doulton dinner set. They have some lovely prints these days. Not the florals of the past. Some of the designs are really snazzy. Anyway, let me know what you think.

Oh, and another thing, Dad wants to give you away.

Calm down, I'm just pulling your leg. But he has thought about making a speech. If you'd prefer not, he will understand. Have a think about it and let me know.

Speak soon, love.

Mum xxx

From: Shane Cole

Subject: Re: Wedding Invitation

To: ColeNF@bigpond.com

Hi Mum,

You got me going there for a second. I actually thought you were serious about Dad. It's going to be a pretty casual wedding. No specific colour schemes, etc. Charlie and I will be wearing classic suits with white shirts and no ties. Your dress sounds great. Take a photo and send it to me.

Yep, the aunties have replied and they're coming. Patrick and his mum Leanne have said yes too. I haven't heard back from Paul and Sandy. Do you know if they're planning on coming down? I invited their kids too.

I've caught up with Patrick a few times recently. He's a really nice kid. Terry has refused contact with him since he found out that he was gay. I think it's hurt Patrick more than he lets on. I feel for him.

Yes, Dad can make a speech. Not too long, if that's all right. We want to keep the wedding pretty informal.

No, we don't have a gift registry. To be honest, we're pretty right for kitchen plates, etc. Just having you two come is enough for us both. Really!

Love you,  
Shane xxx

From: Jenny Cole  
Subject: Re: Wedding Invitation  
To: shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi love,

It made me laugh out loud when I read your response to my joke about Dad giving you away. Dad asked me what was funny and when I told him, he even cracked a smile. That's nice that you're happy for him to make a speech. How things have changed!

We really want to get you a present. You're right. You have everything for the kitchen already. What about a cuckoo clock?

Got you again.

Dad wondered if you might like a Weber BBQ? One of those hooded types that you could put on your balcony? I was thinking of something a bit more 'keepsakey'. Dad's very practical. Otherwise, we could just give you some money to do with as you please.

I'm not sure about Paul, Sandy and the kids. His business is hectic and the wedding isn't during the school holidays, which makes it a bit difficult for them all to come. I'll have a talk to them next time they're over. There's nothing that I would love more than to have the whole family together.

Love you,  
Mum xxxx

From: Jimmy Lourey  
Subject: Re: Wedding Invitation  
To shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hey Shane,

Thanks for the invitation. Tom and I would love to come. I've already asked my cousin to look after the farm for the weekend and he's agreed.

I'm so happy for you both and wouldn't miss it for the world.

Cheers,

Jimmy

From: Paul Cole  
Subject: Re: Wedding Invitation  
To shane99.Cole@hotmail.com

Hi Shane,

Thanks for the invitation to your wedding. Unfortunately, we can't come. Work is flat out at that time of the year and it's impossible to get a weekend off. The kids also play sports on Saturday for school.

We hope that it's a good day for you both and we trust that you understand,

Paul.

## **Shane**

*Healesville, Victoria, 2019*

Frank stood up and tapped his spoon against a wineglass. The sharp tinkle drew all eyes to him.

‘Can I have your attention for a few minutes please?’ he said, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a creased piece of paper. ‘I want to start by thanking you all for coming today to celebrate the marriage of our son, Shane, to Charlie. We would particularly like to officially welcome Charlie into the family. He’s a beaut bloke, who in addition to showing us how to minimise our tax, extended us the hand of friendship as soon as we met him. He has become more than a friend to Jenny and me. He has become a son.’

Frank stopped and put down the piece of paper, staring directly at Shane. ‘I don’t need a script to say this. Shane, firstly, I want to congratulate you. Not just for your marriage, but for the person you have become. Ever since you were small, you knew where you were going, even when we didn’t. You have more determination than anyone I know. You are brave, loyal and forgiving.

‘I spent my life telling you how to act and behave. I thought I knew best. I thought that I was teaching you how to be a man. But, Shane, you are more of a man than I have ever been. I love you, I’m proud of you and I thank you and Charlie for allowing me to be a part of your life.

‘Please join me and raise your glasses. To Shane and Charlie.’

**The end**

## Exegesis

## Introduction

This research, presented as a creative product (a novel) with an accompanying exegesis, was inspired by interviews conducted with six openly gay participants who ranged in age at the time of interviewing from fifteen to sixty-five. The novel traces the experiences of three gay characters growing up same-sex attracted in Australia over a span of five decades. Throughout the writing of the novel, I have sought to explore the impacts heteronormativity and heterosexism have had on same-sex-attracted youth/men in an Australian context. A particular focus has been placed on schools, families and communities, and how they work to propagate and regulate hegemonic notions of gendered sexuality. The novel also explores, through the protagonists' experiences, what it has meant to be gay within these domains and discourses.

The questions that framed this research and to which the participants responded were:

- i. To what extent have the school, community and family experiences of gay males changed over the last fifty years in Australia?
- ii. What positive/ negative interactions and experiences did they encounter whilst inhabiting these domains?
- iii. What impact did school, community and family interactions have on their personal lives and relationships?

## Why the Research? – Positionality, Place & Purpose

My formative years took place in a provincial Australian town in the 1980s – a tough terrain to negotiate at the best of times. The community was diverse in terms of religion, politics, education and opportunity, and as a young person, I tried not focus too much on many of the differences. You could always find some commonalities if you dug beyond the surface. There was, however, one exception – gender normalcy – and it governed all our lives. It impacted on me, and even more so on my brother.

My brother was a ‘gender/queer rebel’ who refused to enact the hegemonic version of ‘boyhood’. In our town, regardless of where you came from, gender and sexuality were considered a binary construct. Deviations in any form were not acceptable. It was a regulated unwritten rule. Boys had to be boys; to step outside of the model was perilous. My brother was a rare commodity in our town. He did not lead a duplicitous life. He wore *girl’s* clothes, dyed his hair and attended ballet classes. He was considered *fair game* due to his refusal to conform to the norm, and because of this, he was relegated to the role of an outcast. Retribution for his ‘gender/queer crimes’ came in the form of physical and mental harassment. I looked on in horror as he was ridiculed and on occasion beaten. I loved my brother and wanted to protect him, but I also felt frightened and powerless within our community. I believed that the only way for him to avoid discrimination was to develop a persona which toed a ‘normative line’. In other words, I wanted him to act like a *normal* boy.

The harassment aimed at him invariably spilled over into my own social domain, and I was mocked and tormented for having a brother who was a ‘poof’. Instead of protecting my brother and standing beside him, I ran and hid behind the curtain of heteronormative values and attitudes. My collusion was in part a self-protective measure: it was easier and less traumatic to agree with the majority than to stand alone against them. I was weak, while he remained strong. He bravely stood up in the face of his tormentors and continued to walk in the shoes that fitted him best.

Looking back now, I can see how my understanding and knowledge of sexuality and gender were informed and governed by the heteronormative values and actions of my small-town society. There was a strict code of conduct for boys that was reinforced and maintained by both adults and children. Boys were expected to dress according to gender and play football and cricket, and in our school, the



overt and hidden curriculums both privileged and reinforced heteronormative values (Watson, 2005). We were taught homophobia and heterosexism in explicit and implicit ways, and I remember how teachers named and shamed my brother by calling him a 'fairy' and caned him for not wearing the correct uniform. There were always punitive or social consequences for his deviations from the gender binaries. They were applied as a result of his actions, but also as a warning to others who might dare put a foot over the gender line. Foucault (1977, p. 102) delineates how

One sees that the power relation that underlies the exercise of punishment begins to be duplicated by an object relation in which are caught up not only the crime as a fact to be established according to common norms, but the criminal as an individual to be known according to specific criteria.

Consequently, my brother was 'Othered'. He was considered 'less important, less worthwhile, less consequential, less authorized, and less human based on historically situated markers of social formation' (Yep, 2003, p. 18), which centred on perceptions of dissidence surrounding his gender and sexuality.

Through the conscientisation and (re)experiencing of my childhood interactions with heteronormativity and homophobia, I have come to understand how I too was conditioned to believe that there were penalties for stepping outside of normative realms.

*'Just go home. Why do you do this to yourself? It's not safe,' I whispered.*

*I (re)member, vividly, my gripping panic and the belief that through my dialogue, I was protecting him.*

*'Just ignore them,' my brother said. 'Who cares what they say.'*

*I did.*

*'Ya poofter,' a voice called from the small crowd.*

*The boy behind the voice stepped forward. I froze. The threat of violence surrounded us. My brother stood tall and remained silent. I saw his uncertainty and then how it was replaced with resolve. I turned and ran.*

The complexities of my storied life, and the affective states that have accompanied it, have required unravelling. Before I was able to consciously position myself as an ally, a process of understanding my past actions was required, which involved an epistemic turning point. A critical deconstruction of the habitus of childhood and its

presence in one's adult life was, as Potvin (2016, p. 10) notes, important for people who wish to become allies to begin their journey by telling 'their stories of transgressions and failures'. For me, the sharing of these stories has worked towards building bridges of authenticity and transparency with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ)+ friends, colleagues and acquaintances. It has been a humbling leveller to speak of the past and the shame that I have felt. My 'confessions', however, have been met with kindness and generosity (St Augustine, 1876). Friends and strangers have reassured me that *'it's all part of the journey'*. They seem to innately understand the fluid and shifting nature of an ally identity, and how it is not something that one suddenly arrives at. It twists and turns, and sometimes settles, only to rise again in a new or altered form.

The dominant norms of society followed me out of childhood. As an adult, I continued to feel shackled to my past experiences and the fear that attached to them. An interaction with a gay friend brought this into my consciousness.

*'It will be fun,' he said as he removed a large pair of pink sparkly wings from the backseat of his car.*

*I cringed.*

*'Tallulah Sparkles,' he called. 'Come to daddy.'*

*Tallulah Sparkles, his black English Staffordshire, wagged her tail and obediently approached. It was all part of day's work for her. 'That's my little girl,' he cooed. 'Sit down. Daddy wants to put your wings on.'*

*'Where are we going?' I asked.*

*'Down the street,' he replied as he clipped sparkly pink wings into place.*

*I offered him a thin smile.*

*'Ok,' I said, trying to appear as though it was no big deal. Inside, I was squirming. I did not want to walk down my local street with a dog in pink wings. I looked at my watch. It was half past two, which meant that there would be a lull in the foot traffic. Perhaps we will not be seen, I thought.*

*'What's wrong?' he asked.*

*'Nothing,' I answered dishonestly.*

*'Are you embarrassed?'*

*'No,' I replied, as my cheeks told another story.*

This encounter had a profound impact on me, and became the catalyst for a significant shift in my understanding of and thinking about the genealogy of heteronormative values and culture. Up until this point, I had considered myself to be an LGBTIQ+ ally. After all, I had clapped my hands and waved enthusiastically at the Mardi Gras. But as I stood cringing in the wake of the pink fairy wings, my friend challenged my assumption.

*'Why do you care what other people think?' he asked.*

*'I don't,' I said untruthfully.*

He was right. I did care. A familiar feeling of shame washed over me. It was the past revisited. When he left, later in the afternoon, I slumped on the couch to think and remember.

I drifted back to the past events that were circling in my head. There were glossy memories that were easy to recover, and then there were some that made me shudder. It was not that I had forgotten them; it was that I had chosen to lock them away. But it was time to open the box and 'reinvigorate the past in the present in my on-going dis/ease with the incoherence of normalcy' (Vicars 2011, p. 69). I took a breath and started to sift through my memories, to (re)member and evoke critical consciousness. This self-interrogation and reflection were necessary tools that would help me to understand how patterns of heteronormativity had followed me to a crossroad. Freire (1974, p. 25) delineates how 'the more a person conscientises himself, the more he unveils reality', and for me this became apparent as I shed my normative padding and started to delve into my past.

I felt an overwhelming need to address what I deemed an unblinkered subscription to heteronormativity. I became a social media warrior, trawling through the pages of homophobic Christians, politicians and journalists. I fired off tweets questioning and challenging anti-LGBTIQ+ comments and posts that I believed to be offensive and discriminatory, and engaged in lengthy online debates. However, I soon realised that pointing fingers and calling out homophobia online had the opposite effect from what I intended. It sparked fiercer resistance, and on occasion fuelled deeper detestation of those I thought I was protecting. Further critical self-reflection led me to understand the root and significance of my motivation: I had

become an online warrior whose actions, Penney (2014, p.56) warns, are often fuelled by 'self-satisfying individual expression' which can come 'at the expense of the organisation'. I came to understand that I was rallying against these faceless people for personal gain. Rather than going into bat for the LGBTIQ+ community, I was in part, seeking closure from the past and looking to pay back the emotional debt I felt I owed my brother (Russel, 2011). Becoming an authentic and respectful ally was a complicated and bumpy process (Potvin, 2016).

Reynolds (2010, p. 14) notes how 'the true privilege of being an ally is the fact that we get to choose those moments when we are going to be an ally'. As a white, educated, middle-class, cisgendered woman, I did not have as much at stake as my LGBTIQ+ peers. I could shut my laptop and resume my normative life. I was not harassed as I walked down the street and I was not the subject of roaring political debates playing out on prime-time television. During my period of militant online activity, not once did anyone with whom I sparred say 'Oh, I see your point', or 'You're right, I will stop being homophobic'. I began to question the legitimacy of what I was trying to achieve. How was I bringing benefit to the LGBTIQ+ community? What are the characteristics of a 'good' ally? I wanted to commit as a full-time ally, rather than one who dipped in and out based on my personal and emotional needs.

By questioning my privileges and how they operate within different facets of my life worlds, I came to understand how, in some contexts and situations, my voice can be more powerful than those of the LGBTIQ+ community. Because I speak out of and from a position of privilege, what I say and do can have a greater impact and a wider reach than their voices. My partner's family are devout Christians who see homosexuality as a sin. In the early years of our relationship, I therefore avoided the topic of my brother. I did not want to have uncomfortable conversations, and neither did they. They had never met a *homosexual*, and their beliefs and feelings about sexuality and gender came from interpretations of the Bible and their church community. In thinking about this, I came to understand how heteronormativity and homophobia feast on silence as much as on overt enactments, and how I had an opportunity to use my voice and my privilege to provide them with an account of the impact of these attitudes and beliefs. I broached the subject and asked them to read an auto-ethnographical account of my brother's and my experience that I wrote during my Master of Education degree.

My sister-in-law was profoundly moved by the story. *'I did not stop to think about how people like your brother could be so affected by my beliefs,'* she said to me. It was a turning point for her, and demonstrated to me how I could use my privilege in a non-confrontational manner to evoke change.

The lessons I have learned over the years have led me to where I stand as an ally today. I have adjusted my stance and no longer stand on a pulpit screaming to be heard. Instead, I have focussed my academic lens on and utilised my privilege to narrate stories, to shine light on neglected understandings and perspectives and to enlighten and promote awareness of heteronormative discourse (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Storied lives act 'as both a means for knowing and a way of telling about the social world' (Bochner 2012, p. 155). I was drawn to arts-based research because it both offered me the scope and flexibility to (re)present my research participants' stories creatively and provided the opportunity to add greater texture and meaning to their lives and life worlds. My chosen methodology – research as fiction – gave me the ability to honour their lives in a way that traditional methodologies could not (Jones, 2007). The stories that were told to me were layered, nuanced and rich. They deserved to be showcased through a medium that could give life to their complexities.

Coye (1997, p. 22), reflecting on Boyer's (1990) notion of scholarship, writes that it is 'crucially important to the health of our communities, the nation, and the academy for scholars to use the knowledge in their fields to benefit society and ... universities and their graduates must connect with the concerns and challenges faced by the wider community.' It is under this banner, and with the intent to bring change to thought and action, that I have embarked on this research. It is my greatest hope that this work will create new knowledge, invoke deep thought and promote a stronger understanding of what it has meant to be gay in Australia over the last fifty years.

In my literature review, I will therefore explore Australia's LGBTIQ+ history and the influence of sociocultural factors and legislative governance to give context to the life worlds and experiences of my research participants as articulated in field texts. I will also provide a brief history of Western LGBTIQ+ scholarship to illustrate the evolution of medical and psychological attitudes and thinking about 'homosexuality', and a critical examination of socially constructed notions of masculinity and sexuality

and how they have propagated a sense of Otherness in LGBTIQ+ people. The detrimental effects of Othering, such as stress and lack of self-worth, are examined from a cause-and-effect perspective. I will also explore essentialist notions of sexuality and gender and how they are woven into the fabric of school discourse and act as a form of social control over LGBTIQ+ students and teachers.

The methodology chapter of this exegesis documents the theoretical underpinnings that have shaped my thinking and guided my research approach. It explores how my methodology – research as fiction – has evolved historically, and how I have drawn on the work of qualitative scholarship to locate my practice. The methods section details how I recruited the research participants and justifies the necessity of a small sample group. It also provides an explanation for the interview technique I utilised to conduct the research, and documents how the novel emerged from the resulting field texts. Additionally, I provide a commentary on how I wrestled with various methodological dilemmas and worked to overcome these.

The analysis and discussion chapter details how I utilised the field texts to identify the focal points that scaffold the novel. I provide a comprehensive analysis of the main themes that emerged, along with commentary about how these frame the novel. I also discuss how I (re)presented the participants' stories by drawing on an array of literary techniques to capture the essence of what was told to me. Lastly, I discuss the importance of resonance and how the novel offers an opportunity to achieve this. Veering away from traditional forms of (re)presentation, I discuss the benefit of utilising a creative methodology that has wider appeal and a greater chance of circulation.

## Literature Review

### ***It Ain't No Mardi Gras Here – A (Brief) Australian Context***

*Mr Sheen lifted his hand from under the sheet and held it out to him. His skin felt cold and dry. 'You need to forget some of what I told you. Do you understand me?'*

*Raymond shook his head. 'What do I need to forget?'*

*'I mean...I mean that you have to be careful about who you speak to. I know I told you to open up but...it's not safe.'*

*(Excerpt from the novel: The Ties that Bind)*

It is difficult to provide a 'grand' narrative of Australia's gay history due to the geographical and legislative differences that characterise the federation. In providing an account of pivotal moments in the history of homosexuality in Australia, it is therefore important to understand that the view of Australia as the gay Mardi Gras capital of the world is a chimera, and a recent invention. As both a continent and a country, Australia has a dark history in which homophobic narratives and legislation have both reflected and propelled prejudicial attitudes and behaviours towards gay men and lesbians. The genealogy of this discourse can be traced back to the arrival of the First Fleet.

Homosexual behaviour, under the influence of colonial Judeo-Christianity, was widely considered perverse and an aberration of nature, a term that Boswell (1980) references as having been popularised in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to name non-procreative sexual activities. The first governor of Australia, Captain Arthur Phillip, declared in 1787:

*...there are two crimes that could merit death. Murder and sodomy. For either crime I would wish to confine the criminal until an opportunity offered of delivering him as a prisoner to the natives of New Zealand and let them eat him (cited in Power, 2011, p. 5).*

The hegemony of Judeo-Christian values imported from the British motherland was part of the endeavour to affirm the notion of Australia as terra nullius, and in doing so to assert a moral code to tame and civilise both unruly immigrants and Indigenous Australians (Aldrich, 2002). Early ethnographic accounts recorded by colonial

authorities indicated the presence of immoral practices among convict-settlers. Hughes (1987, pp. 267–268) notes the prevalence of sodomy amongst convicts, stockmen, coal miners and road workers, and recalls how ‘one eyewitness bewailed the horrid propensities of the navvies who rejoiced in their assignations, one towards the other, in the Blue Mountains near Sydney’. Historically, there are limited accounts of older Indigenous men taking young male ‘wives’ as well as being involved with casual male-to-male sexual activity (Aldrich, 2002; Bongiorno, 2013). Eradicating homosexual behaviours can therefore be understood as part of the colonising project. Taming the Indigenous population was a dominant settler narrative, and controlling Indigenous sexuality was an integral part of that story. Part of the narrative of colonial control was the introduction of legislation that sought to regulate sexual behaviour, and in doing so to criminalise individuals who did not manifest and reproduce normalcy.

Australia’s long and pervading attitude to ‘homosexuality’ was entrenched as part of the eighteenth-century Victorian regulation of sensuality and sexuality, which propagated moral boundaries and sexual codes of conduct. Sexuality in Victorian times was seen as a powerful force that was best controlled and regulated through legalised, heterosexual marriage unions, and deviations were considered aberrations from moral conduct (Seidman, 1990; Epstein, 2003). The Victorian legacy, for the most part, positioned sexuality within the domains of medicine and psychology. The cause of homosexuality became a *prima facie* concern, and accordingly it was studied scientifically and medically by way of norms and dysfunctions, and/or psychologically as a matter of the mind and human relational connections (Epstein, 2003; Richters, 2001).

Foucault (1984) identified that views on homosexuality changed in the nineteenth century, from a focus on the ‘sinful’ act of sodomy to a medical view of homosexuality as a condition. He wrote that:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (1984, p. 43).

The notion of an identifiable homosexual person was a relative latecomer to Australia. In 1883, the Criminal Amendment Act referred to homosexual behaviours



as opposed to homosexual individuals, and homosexual acts were downgraded from capital offences to ones punishable by life imprisonment (Wotherspoon, 2016). Nevertheless, thanks to the continuing influence of the colonial mindset during the first half of the nineteenth century, a medicalised view of homosexuals as a deviant species was commonplace in Australia – an opinion reinforced by widespread media and societal condemnation from conservative and religious organisations across the country (Power, 2011).

Despite the propagation of the Victorian concept of homosexuality as a medical condition, there were a handful of academics in Europe who had begun advocating the modern, demedicalised conception of sexuality from the late eighteenth century onwards. One of the first was Krafft-Ebing, an Austrian professor who specialised in the field of psychiatry. Using case studies and clinical observation as a way of humanising homosexuality, Kraft-Ebbing published the first edition of his book *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Clinical-Forensic Study* in 1886. *Psychopathia Sexualis* coined the words *homosexual* (adjective) and *homosexuality* (noun), and was written to serve as a reference point for criminal and medical assessments of homosexuality (Oosterhuis, 2012). Kraft-Ebbing radically delineated homosexuality as an abnormality (in later additions he altered this to a differentiation) that occurred in utero, and argued that homosexuality was therefore a part of nature, and accordingly should not be condemned (Bauer, 2003).

Magnus Hirschfeld, a homosexual German physician, wrote extensively about sexuality in pre-World War 2 Germany (Galupo et al., 2014). Hirschfeld's understanding of homosexuality was formulated by combining science with empirical observation in order to categorise and research variations of sexuality. The significance of Hirschfeld's work was his use of observation and science and his steadfast belief that activism towards the acceptance of variations of sexuality could be achieved (Dose, 2004; Mancini, 2010). Although groundbreaking, his work was abruptly stopped by the Nazis. Alfred Kinsey's later, revolutionary publication of the Kinsey Scale in 1949 built on this to categorise sexual behaviour on a scale of 1–10, demonstrating the fluid and diverse nature of sexuality (Klein, Sepekoff & Wolf, 1985; Seidman, 1994). The Kinsey Scale evolved from a series of in-depth interviews that laid the foundations for subsequent research into sexuality, and positioned 'sex [a]s

a normal biologic function, acceptable in whatever form it is manifested' (Kinsey et al., 1948, p. 263).

### ***Scandalous Stories***

Despite developments in thinking that argued for greater tolerance in line with Foucault's (1984) notion of the homosexual as a species, throughout the 1920s and into the 1940s Australian media displayed entrenched pejorative attitudes to homosexuals. In addition, their reporting on men who had been charged with sexual offences in public domains, resulted in swift moral panic and backlash (Wotherspoon, 2016). As Brickell (2008, p. 148) notes, 'even though the basics of cruising in public places had changed little over 60 or 70 years ... cities and towns had grown in size and offered a greater range of space in which to pursue sex and sociability ... Even though definitions of same-sex desire began to take shape early in the century, male homosexuality often remained unnoticed in everyday life'. But in the 1950s, once it was made visible by the Australian media, police began to actively target homosexuals by raiding parks and other known haunts where they congregated for sexual liaisons (Robinson, 2008). Tovey (2015), in his memoir, discusses the impact of this on a homosexual adolescent in Melbourne in the early 1950s. He recalls how in 1951 he was arrested at a party organised by a drag queen and the arresting police insisted that he plead guilty to the 'abominable crime of buggery' to implicate the party's host. Despite not having had sexual relations, he was given two options: confess to the act of 'buggery' and receive a warning or deny the 'crime' and go to jail (Tovey, 2015, p. 3).

Such pernicious reporting on gay men by the press fed into continued moral outrage, with organisations such as the Australian Country Women's Society calling for more stringent penalties to be put in place for those caught engaging in homosexual activities (Power, 2011). The criminalisation of homosexuality in Australia varied from state to state, and this has meant that the experiences of gay men differ widely depending on their geographical urban or rural location. Contextualising the legislative variances to which gay men have been subject makes it possible to understand the chequered history of homosexual law reform in Australia. By the late 1960s, for example, the Homosexual Law Reform Society of the Australian Capital Territory (HRLS) had been formed in response to the arrest of two men caught as they began to engage in a consenting sexual act in a parked car,

in a quiet dirt road on the outskirts of Canberra (Willet, 2019). The society was founded by educated, politically motivated activists and was the first lobby group established in Australia to campaign for legal reform. Influenced by grassroots organisations overseas, most notably the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, it aimed to unite homosexuals and educate heterosexuals by providing society with a more realistic and refined picture of what it actually meant to be homosexual (Meeker, 2001; Peacock, 2016; Willet, 2019).

Beatrice Faust, a human rights campaigner and member of the Melbourne-based lesbian group the Daughters of Bilitis, became the most notable spokesperson for the initial politicisation of gay rights in Australia (Willet, 2019). The Australasian Lesbian Movement was formed in 1969 as a branch of the Daughters of Bilitis (Ross, 2009). This was the start of Australia's period of political ferment, and marked a change in gay- and lesbian-identifying people agitating to be legally recognised and for categories of stigmatisation to be removed. However, the burgeoning gay rights movement in Australia lagged behind the American frontier (Willet, 1997).

The 1950s had heralded a new wave of research and activism in North America. This contrasted with the Australian academy, where only a handful of academic papers had been published about homosexuality from a medical point of view (Willet, 1997). Advancements in thinking had rejected medicalised views of homosexuality during the first half of the nineteenth century. Freud had concluded that sexual orientation, specifically homosexuality, was very difficult to change and as a result should not be considered a shameful affliction or a mental disorder (Baughey-Gill, 2011). Studies conducted by North American psychiatrists built on Freud's conclusions, and Professor Evelyn Hooker's 1957 landmark research into heterosexual and homosexual men's mental health demonstrated how sexuality played no part in determining the difference between the two. However, Hooker's (1957, p. 29) conclusion that 'homosexuality as a clinical entity does not exist, [due to how] its forms are as varied as are those of heterosexuality' failed to make headway in Australia, where attitudes to homosexuality, for the most part, remained locked in a resolute belief that it was a moral aberration (Willet, 1997).

By the late 60s, North American scholars began to write about the sociocultural role of homosexuality. Notably, Mary McIntosh, a sociologist and criminologist, challenged the deviant categorisation of homosexuals favoured by scholars of her

era in her 1968 paper, 'The homosexual role'. She argued that this typecasting was constructed to exert social control and to segregate homosexuals from heterosexuals. She believed that scholars should instead use a sociological lens to view homosexuals and the way their lives are socially constructed. Macintosh (1968) critiqued the work of Kinsey et al. (1948) and argued that it served simply as a scale, rather than taking into account socially situated contexts, times and events, stating:

For it is not until he sees homosexuals as a social category, rather than a medical or psychiatric one, that the sociologist can begin to ask the right questions about the specific content of the homosexual role and about the organisations and functions of homosexual groups (p. 192).

The shift away from viewing homosexuality as a medical condition and towards sociological understandings was highlighted after the 1968 Stonewall riots (Stein & Plummer, 1994). The Stonewall riots were triggered by a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a Mafia-run gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York. It was viewed as a turning point for the emergent global gay community due to the community's refusal to passively accept the homophobic treatment meted out by police. Armstrong and Cragg (2006) articulate that although this was not the birthplace of gay liberation, it marked a turning point around which the gay community coalesced with a stronger sense of political purpose. Escoffier (1993, p. 10) elucidates how the Stonewall riots led to a change in the way gays and lesbians were positioned, and how new paradigms and models were constructed that represented a move towards 'a socio-psychological model of authentic selfhood'. This led to socially constructed theories of identity, and increasingly a sociological lens was applied to examine the complexities of gay lives (Stein & Plummer, 1994).

In the 1970s, North American sociologists began to look in earnest at the homosexual. This early research typically looked at homosexual males, who had been viewed in the context of 'creature[s] of the sexual underworld of hustlers, prostitutes, prison, tea rooms, baths and bars' (Seidman, 1994, p. 170; see also Humphreys, 1975). Researchers of the 1970s, such as Cass (1979) and Plummer (1975), examined the construction of sexual identity and stigma and the ways it was bound to culture and history. This departure from the 'deviant' lens marked a willingness in the academy to make gay and lesbian lives visible in everyday contexts (Epstein, 1994).

The demonstrable shift in how the Australian public began to alter its perceptions of homosexuality was in part due to scholarship that informed the efforts and activities of grassroots organisations such as the Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP). CAMP emerged in 1971 to actively campaign for Australian gay liberation (Power, 2011; Robinson, 2008). Their fight centred on changing the attitudes of the 'baby boomer' generation, which did not see sexuality as a legitimate or authentic part of an identity (Robinson, 2008). As CAMP lobbied for gay people to emerge from the closet, they set up groups in schools, churches and other foundational institutions that concentrated on dispelling stereotypical perceptions of homosexuality (Robinson, 2008).

### ***The Emergence of the Closet as Queer Trope***

'Coming out' is often viewed as a celebratory step, in which public declarations of sexuality are represented as a stance that denotes truthfulness, empowerment and liberation. 'The notion of the closet', according to Siedman (2004, p. 30), 'makes sense only in relation to another concept: heterosexual domination'. Siedman (2004) posits that residing 'in the closet' involves a concerted effort, where one is coerced into adapting to a society that systematically governs and enforces a heterosexual way of life. The 'closet', therefore, can be viewed as a trope of protection, where (for the purposes of this study) gay men attempt to hide from the powerful regime of heterosexuality. Fuss (1991), however, contends that we need to challenge this understanding of the hetero/homo binary and expose the weak foundations that propagate this dualistic notion. Fuss (1991, p. 4) argues that coming out is not an act where the individual sheds one identity for another, or inhabits space on the heterosexual inside. Instead, she says, 'to be out is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible' (Fuss, 1991, p. 4). Rasmussen (2004) advocates that this understanding should be challenged due to the ways in which LGBTQ+ people's experiences are so innately different and often fraught with their own unique sets of trials and tribulations. For many same-sex-attracted youth, 'coming out' involves the risk of nonacceptance, with their attendant financial, emotional and educational security needs put at stake (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Rasmussen (2004, p. 146) notes that these practical considerations involved with 'coming out' are often more complicated than 'young people's negotiations of the

in/out binary'. For many LGBTIQ+ youth, the idea of revealing sexual orientation is untenable because there is much more to lose than to gain by coming out.

Fuss (1991, p. 2) argues that heterosexuality relies on its polar opposite, homosexuality, to preserve and legitimise the 'institution and identity' of heterosexuality as 'both a practice and a system'. This is ratified by applying 'languages and laws' that act as fortification to '[protect] itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality' (Fuss, 1991, p. 2). Fuss directs us to examine how these sociocultural forces work to maintain and propagate hetero/homo binaries, and why the hegemonic inside (heterosexuality) has been appropriated as the most desirable place to dwell. Fuss (1991, p. 3) explains that 'borders are notoriously unstable ... and sexualities [are] rarely secure', and it is this instability that makes the divide between the hetero/homo territories so rigid and strong on one hand, and so vulnerable on the other. The inside (hetero) works hard to protect itself from the outside (homo), in perpetual fear that if the wall should crumble and the hetero/homo binary logic be disrupted, the underbelly of this carefully constructed fortification will be 'turn[ed] inside out' to '[expose] its critical operations and interior machinery' (Fuss, 1991, p. 1).

Even when LGBTIQ+ youth make the decision to come out, there is a perpetual opening and shutting of the closet door because there is always someone new to encounter and hence someone new to tell. Sedgwick (1990, p. 81) writes that there is always a 'double-edged potential for injury in the scene for gay coming out' due to how the disclosure implicates the person who is told. Queer people have no control over how the revelation will be received, or how the information will be disseminated. Sedgwick (1990, p. 81) argues that as a result, 'coming out' for LGBTQ+ people can be an ongoing process, which at times is not feasible or safe.

### ***Legislative Action and Consequences***

Making visible the machinery of the inside/out dialectic was a strategic operation of early Australian gay and lesbian activists who were involved with CAMP. CAMP had a visible presence at the first Australian Mardi Gras, which took place in Sydney in 1978 to commemorate the 1968 Stonewall riots in New York. Making visible an LGB presence was, in the Australian context, a dangerous activity that had personal and professional repercussions. History has recorded how police violently set upon the marchers, dragging many back to police headquarters to be charged under the

Summary Offences Act 1970 (NSW), which gave them broad powers to arrest protesters for anything they considered 'offensive behaviour' (Methven, 2018). Activists were randomly pulled from the police holding cell and beaten throughout the night before being released the next morning. The next day, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published the names of those who had been arrested, involuntarily outing them to their friends, families and employers. This resulted in fractured relationships and the loss of employment for many (Power, 2011). Most notably at risk were lesbian and gay teachers (Bull et al., 1991; Power, 2011).

In 1973, the HLRS lobbied for the decriminalisation of homosexuality, prompting the then Prime Minister, John Gorton, to put forward a conscience vote motion in the House of Representatives to decriminalise consensual homosexual acts that took place in private domains. It was passed by sixty-four votes to forty; however, it took twenty-two years for all Australian states to enact the repeal, with Tasmania being the last state to remove sexual acts between consenting adults as a criminal offence, in 1991 (Power, 2011; Willet, 2013). It is a notable feature of the Australian context that changes in legislation followed changes in attitudes towards homosexuality, and that these attitudes varied widely from state to state:

- South Australia Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act 1975
- Australian Capital Territory Law Reform (Sexual Behaviour) Ordinance 1976
- Victoria: Crimes (Sexual Offences) Act 1980
- Northern Territory: Criminal Code Act 1983
- New South Wales: Crimes (Amendment) Act 1984
- Queensland: Criminal Code Act: Criminal Code and Another Act Amendment Act 1990
- Western Australia: Law Reform (Decriminalisation of Sodomy) Act 1989
- Tasmania: Criminal Code Amendment Act 1997 (cited in Carbery, 2010)

The most notable implications for those revealed to be homosexual were for individuals working in the field of education. To be a teacher and visible as a homosexual was very risky in terms of ongoing employment. Graduate teacher Greg Weir, an out gay man, was refused employment in 1976 by the Queensland

government due to his involvement with the Kelvin Grove Homosexual and Lesbian group (a support group based at the Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education, where he completed his teacher training). He was supported by the Australian Union of Students, which actively campaigned against his mistreatment, and broader activism emerged among those involved with the union. This drew public attention to employment discrimination and the lack of legal protection afforded to gay teachers (Moore, 2007). Weir's case was a landmark event for other gay teachers' right to employment, and both brought Australian media attention to the newly coined term gay rights and inspired greater activism and protests across Australia. For example, it led to the formation of the Melbourne Gay Teachers' Group, which actively campaigned for the right to job security for lesbian and gay teachers (Power, 2011). However, entrenched attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality were not easily displaced, and in 1979, the then Victorian Minister of Education sent a memorandum to all schools in the state ordering principals not to stock any books or materials that encouraged or promoted homosexuality (Marshall, 2014).

### ***One Step Forward, Many Back***

Positive attitudinal shifts towards homosexuals across Australia were not uniform or widespread. In the 1980s, a further reinforcement of the Liberal (conservative) government's staunch anti-homosexual stance was made easier due to the pervasive presence of the HIV virus, which had started to permeate a moral panic narrative within Australian society. As AIDS became synonymous with gay men, the work of gay liberationists in the previous decades, which had focussed on legislative reforms, took a different turn. Australian community-based activists took their lead from North American groups such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation, which had been instrumental in petitioning the US government for healthcare reforms.

During this decade, gay men were universally represented by the media as 'AIDS carriers responsible for the infection of innocent heterosexual people through their reckless sexual activity' (Lupton, 1999, p. 51). Lupton described how the press sensationalised pieces that vilified gay men and their communities and ignored the toll the virus took on their lives. Focussing instead on the notion of innocent victims, the then Queensland Minister for Health, Brian Austin, called a media conference in 1984 to announce to the Australian public that three babies had died as a result of an infected blood transfusion (Robinson, 2010). An open letter by the father of one of



the affected babies was published in the *Mid-Week Truth* (a sensationalist, conservative and bigoted publication), which ran the story with a front-page headline that read 'Die You Deviate' (cited in Ware, 2017, p. 477). This characterised the ensuing moral panic and reflected a public sentiment echoed in the rise of vigilante anti-gay groups, which took to the streets and to gay bashing as a form of retribution (Power, 2011; Robinson, 2008; Schenkel, 2017). Moral panic and fearmongering by religious groups and conservative sectors of the media called for a return to Victorian era values and strict adherence to Biblical notions of chastity and fidelity (Lupton, 1993; Robinson, 2008).

The overwhelming homophobic commentary in the Australian press during this decade stirred LGB activists to develop a grassroots response that was designed to pressure the government into providing adequate short- and long-term healthcare funding, as well as pastoral care for those affected by the disease (Bowtell, 2005, p. 18). In 1982, in the state of Victoria, the Victorian AIDS Action Committee was formed in response to the political and social climate (Robinson, 2010). However, across Australia, state governments varied in terms of support and attitudinal reactions. In particular, in Queensland, where male homosexuality remained illegal, Joh Bjelke-Peterson, a National Party ultra-conservative, used homophobic rhetoric to win government. He and his party were hostile to anything linked to HIV/AIDS care, prevention or education. Bjelke-Petersen described homosexual people as 'insulting evil animals who should go back to New South Wales and Victoria where they came from in the first place' (cited in Robinson, 2010, p. 187). In 1984, an Australian AIDS Task Force was created; however, the obstructionist nature of the Queensland government and its refusal to meet with its own state's AIDS Council made it difficult to implement a coordinated state/national response to the disease (Robinson, 2010). To counteract homophobic media narratives and the demonising rhetoric about gay men in politically far-right states such as Queensland, LGB activist groups banded together to present the personal face of the epidemic and counter the faceless casting of gay men as 'deviants,' which had long held sway in legislation.

### ***It's a Straight Man's World***

Legislative battles around the issue of homosexuality have continued to rage in Australia, reinforcing explicit and entrenched homophobic attitudes. In 1993, the gay panic defence was called into question in Mudgee, New South Wales. Malcolm

Green murdered Donald Gillies because, he alleged, Gillies entered his bedroom naked and made sexual advances towards him. An ensuing legal battle occurred that resulted in a retrial due to a judge's decision that information about Green's childhood sexual abuse should not have been kept from the jury. The judge argued that it was a pivotal part of the reason he committed the murder. In the new trial, Green was found guilty of manslaughter, a reduced conviction due to what his defence team argued was provocation. The Honourable Justice Kirby, an openly gay man in the judiciary, was only one of three sitting judges to dispute the finding and warned of the implications of such a decision. He remarked that in a heterosexual case of a similar nature, such an excuse for violence would be unacceptable. In the following decades, this defence was made legally redundant by all states except for South Australia, which at the time of writing is in the process of officially abolishing the gay panic defence from state legislation (Garbarino & De Lara, 2003; McGeary & Fitz-Gibbon, 2018).

### ***A Darkened New Dawn***

Legislative battles around the issue of homosexuality emerged into the Australian public domain again in 2004 with the battle for the legalisation of gay marriage. Debated by a predominantly heterosexual Australia, the argument garnered divisive media commentary. The then Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, declared that the institution of marriage was a sanctity that could only take place between a man and a woman. For conservative heterosexuals, the idea of legally recognised same-sex relationships attacked the core of idealised notions of masculinity and patriarchy and created fear that both could become redundant (Edwards 2007). In 2017, 61.6 % of the Australian population voted for gay marriage; however, the debate that preceded the ruling was unrelenting and damaging, with many LGBTIQ+ individuals reporting stigma related stress as a result of homophobic reporting, advertising and discussion (Ecker et al., 2019). Chonody et al.'s (2020) study of the effects on the LGBTIQ+ community during the Australian gay marriage plebiscite reported that interpersonal microaggressions (that is, day-to-day forms of subtle or unconscious discrimination often articulated in language) were heightened during the lead-up to the vote (Nadal et al., 2020). This had a detrimental effect on LGBTIQ+ people, as described by a participant in Chonody et al.'s study (2020, p. 58), who

said that ‘this postal farce has done nothing but erode the Australian people’s sense of community and turn what were once friendly neighbours against one another’.

The battle for LGBTIQ+ rights still rages in Australia. Conservative watchdogs continue to vote for legislation that diminishes the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. For example, in 2019, in Queensland, the Health Legislation Amendment Bill 2019 (QLD) was passed by a narrow majority. Although this legislation prohibits shock therapy treatments for LGBTIQ+ youth, it does not ban conversion therapy that takes place outside of healthcare domains. Despite small legislative wins, there also continues to be policy presented to parliament designed to impede the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. Mark Latham, the ex-leader of the Australian Labor Party and current New South Wales leader of the One Nation Party, introduced the Education Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill 2020 (NSW), which, if instated, will prohibit teaching about gender fluidity in schools across the state of New South Wales.

### ***Diggers, Mates and ‘Queer’ Fellas***

It is also important to consider how compulsory heterosexuality has been positioned as a pervading feature of the psyche of same-sex-attracted men in Australian culture. Despite developing affirmative attitudes towards the LGBTIQ+ community, or, as Waling (2019, p. 158) suggests, the ‘devolution of the Australian masculine ideal’ in Australia, there remains an explicit and implicit expectation for men/boys to display traditional traits of manhood that work to ‘prove’ heterosexuality. In a country in which the derogatory term *poofter* is the preferred nomenclature with which to police heterosexual masculinity, the interpellation of *poofter* brings weighted pressure for Australian *boys to be boys* (Dowsett, 2003).

*If you’re going to a school for boys, then you need to start acting like one. No crying, no mincing and no bloody girls’ activities. Do you know what I’m saying?*

*(Excerpt from the novel: The Ties that Bind)*

Gender inequality and the historical role and reproduction of men’s social dominance has been the subject of much feminist analysis and critical study. Feminist theorists have written extensively from female perspectives about the inequalities and injustices women face in the social world, as a way of illuminating and agitating against the oppressive social forces that hamper their lives. Research about men by men, however, has shifted in focus over the last few decades, from the nascent

Men's Studies (sometimes called Masculinity Studies) to Critical Studies of Men and Masculinity (Connell, 2005; Hearn, 1997, 2004). Men's Studies did not problematise the category of men theoretically, due to how men were mostly represented in standalone contexts rather than through a feminist lens of gender theory and practice (Hearn, 2004, 2013). Critical Men's Studies, on the other hand, provided critiques (predominantly by feminist, queer and gay scholars) of men/masculinity, gender and social hierarchy, and how power operates within these categories (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2004, 2013).

The fluidity of masculinity, along with its historical and discursive positioning as a social practice, makes it impossible to link masculinity to a specific point of origin, or to view it as a static binary that lies solely in opposition to femininity (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2013; Dutro, 2002; Jewkes et al., 2015). Connell (2005) developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which referred to the legitimisation of a dominant form of masculinity in society and culture 'which is always constructed in relation to various subordinate masculinities as well as in relation to women' (Connell, 2013, p. 183). The concept arose from the Gramscian notion of hegemony, which explicated how power in classed societies is maintained and regulated as a form of control (Demetriou, 2001; Gramsci & Hoare, 1971).

Connell's (1983, 1998) examination of the ethnographic field work of researchers from the 1970s and 1980s, which focussed on gender hierarchies within schools, workplaces and local communities, helped to formulate her theory of masculinities (Cockburn, 1983; Kessler et al., 1982). She deduced that there were plural forms of masculinity within discursive social hierarchies and that the differences in masculinities (hegemonic and non-hegemonic) contributed to the reproduction of power and social dominance over both women and those men who embodied subordinate forms of masculinity, such as those who are same-sex attracted (Connell, 1983; Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005). Connell and Messerschmitt (2005, p. 832) have expounded that all men position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity, which they understand to be 'a pattern of practice' rather than 'a set of role expectations or an identity'. Connell (2008, p. 133) delineates how 'masculinities exist as patterns of body-reflexive practice, involving characteristic postures, muscular tensions and specific skills' that are learned and sculpted in physical education classes. The value placed on enactments of physical

dominance is often transferred to adolescent male peer groups, where this becomes a prized indicator of masculine worth, and the inability to replicate and perform or authentically pass as masculine can result in abjection from the social group.

Attempts to pass as normatively male can contribute to experiences of psychological dissonance and minority stress (Connell, 2008). Studies show that when same-sex attracted people have a strong community/family connection or access to online and other support networks, the impact of minority stress is reduced and there is less prevalence of poor mental health and substance dependency (Chonody et al, 2020; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Swannell et al., 2016).

Critics of Connell's theory of masculinity questioned the static typology attached to the representation of a dominant form of masculinity (Demetriou, 2001; Martin, 1988). Connell and Messerschmitt (2005, p. 838) responded to this by saying that 'hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of actual men. [However], these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies and desires'. Demetriou (2001, p. 348) proposed that hegemonic masculinity should instead be understood as a 'hybrid bloc that unites various and diverse practices in order to construct the best possible strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy'. He explains that the core dynamics of hegemonic masculinity are internal hegemony (where the dominant group of men rule over the others) and external hegemony (where institutions governed by men hold dominance over women). The internal component of hegemonic masculinity, Demetriou (2001, p. 348) states, should be viewed as a 'hybrid bloc which is made up of both straight and gay, both black and white elements and practice'.

Although hegemonic masculinity works to keep the tenors and foundations of patriarchy in operation, it does not, according to Demetriou (2001), necessarily evolve from practices and discourses associated with epic masculinities, or in other words, those associated with traditional, white heterosexuals (Halberstam, 2019). The power of hegemonic masculinity lies in its ability to constantly change and adapt to different sets of circumstances, geographies and discourses. Messner (2007) shows how masculinity can be sculpted to reflect and appeal to an alteration in public ideals and standards. Using the example of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Messner (2007) discusses how Schwarzenegger's steroid-laden macho routine, played out in movies and politics, shifted over time to a more centric and emotional enactment of

masculinity. These appropriations of softer, feminine attributes obscure gender boundaries rather than acting as a catalyst for dismantling the power and dominance of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Hegemonic masculinity, viewed through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conceptualisation of social power and control, explicates a discussion of majority/molar and minority/molecular social and political positions and understandings. Molar refers to the formation of such things as class, race and gender, while the molecular is concerned with how lived experiences can agitate these structures and alter perceptions of molar entities (Hickey-Moody, 2019). A majoritarian position is best understood as one's ability to access dominant and powerful social and political domains, and MacCormack (2001, p. 2) suggests that 'the majoritarian is not a self-evident or *a priori* position, rather it is the particularity of a moment, however extended or brief, where a specific form of body is dominant'. While Deleuze and Guattari do not specifically refer to hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities, the majoritarian can be viewed as the dominant performance of masculinity, modelled repetitively by men, for men, in a variety of social and political locations, which 'is not measured by physical mass, rather by cultural power' (Hickey-Moody, 2019, p. 22). The minoritarian can be thought of as members of a subculture, watching, learning and appropriating to the best of their ability what it means to 'become' 'a man'. Davis and Vicars (2014) draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of becoming to describe minoritarian experiences of childhood surrounding the deviation from expected enactments of hegemonic forms of masculinity. They elucidate that the effect that suburban politics of masculinity had on them was 'a process of metamorphosis', where one is 'touched and bruised by external forces...' (Davis & Vicars, 2014, p. 80). They write of falling between the gaps of masculinity, belonging neither to the minority in the traditional sense of the word, nor to the majority. Instead, they inhabited what Secor & Linz (2017, p. 568) describe as 'a space of betweenness, a no-man's land that requires special tools to hold open.' In this context, they held a political position, rather than one oppositional to the majority. It was a transformative space, 'in-between the border or line of flight or descent' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 293), where one arrives, conscious of displacement, en route to 'becoming other, becoming different' (Davis & Vicars, 2014, p. 748).

### ***Mates or Fremenies?***

Gorman-Murray (2013, p. 215) uses the term relational masculinities in his study on gay-straight friendships to provide a theoretical framework and explanation for his thinking about how the geographies of everyday life impact on those relationships. His study found that most straight–gay friendships arise as a result of external forces, e.g., living next door to each other, children’s friendships, etc., rather than as an organic construct. Gorman-Murray also determined that a higher proportion of straight men were more comfortable when gay men adhered to certain unwritten rules pertaining to traditional constructs of masculinity. For example, friendships with straight-acting gay men were reported to be easier to maintain due to how they reinforced gender norms and put straight men at ease (Gorman-Murray, 2013). Tillman-Healy’s (2001) research into gay and straight friendships found that friendships between gay and straight men were a rare occurrence due to how these relationships challenged heteronormative notions of intimacy between males. She suggests that the friendships she forged with gay men were ‘strikingly similar to’ those with ‘my male straight friends’ and proposed that it is straight men’s fear of how their own masculinity might be perceived, and the feeling of vulnerability that this entails, that prevents gay-straight male friendships from blossoming (Tillman-Healy, p. 194). The contextual examination of masculinity in both of these contexts demonstrates the power of situatedness and how the geography of the everyday can provide a critical understanding of new pro-gay hetero-masculinities as a performative construction (Gorman-Murray, 2013, p. 222).

### ***Minority Stress and Stigma***

*‘How are you sitting?’*

*Shane glanced down at his legs and uncrossed them.*

*‘That’s better. Only women cross their legs. It’s the attention to detail,*

*Shane. You won’t have me to help when you’re at boarding school.’*

*(Excerpt from the novel: The Ties that Bind)*

It is claimed that while LGBTIQ+ people experience many common forms of minority stress, such as discrimination, isolation and hate crimes, some unique manifestations of minority stress only pertain to LGBTIQ+ identifying individuals (McConnell et al., 2018). Internalised homophobia, characterised by the internal

mental conflict between experiencing homosexual desires and feeling the need to conform to the heteronormative norm, has been noted as a key factor that contributes to minority stress. It has been claimed that internalised homophobia arises as a result of affective states such as shame and self-hatred, induced by the binary of how homosexuality lies in opposition to heteronormative cultural norms (Herek et al., 1998).

The concealing of one's sexuality identity in order to pass as heterosexual is a feature of internalised homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality, which, it has been said is enacted in the daily lives of LGBTIQ+ individuals who remain closeted (Herek, 2004). The advancement of feminist scholarship in the 1970s challenged the cultural understandings of sexuality and gender, and Rich's (1980, p. 645) conception of compulsory heterosexuality can be read as a foundational text for rethinking 'marginalizing and sanctioning' heterogendered norms. Rich's contention is that heterosexuality is not a natural condition, but a political institution designed to exert power and control in order to keep patriarchy alive.

Evidence suggests that the stress of passing is as impactful on mental health as overt acts of discrimination and harassment, due to how passing/identity concealment can lead to social isolation and loneliness (Bos et al., 2008; Bariola et al., 2016; Cole et al., 1996; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Rood et al., 2017). In particular, LGBTIQ+ youth who pass can find it difficult to maintain friendships or pursue extracurricular activities and interests due to an innate fear of inadvertently revealing their sexual identity (Panchankis, 2007). In many instances, the home environment is where passing behaviours are initially learned.

The affective dimension of compulsory heterosexuality is found in the material expressions of heteronormativity. Within institutional frameworks and social environments, heteronormativity can have a significant impact on LGBTIQ+ people (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Rich, 1980). Sexual minority status in conjunction with exposure to distal (externalised forms of discrimination and prejudice) and proximal stressors (internalised feelings of rejection, self-doubt, etc) has been shown to have deleterious effects on LGBTIQ+ individuals' health and wellbeing (Perales & Todd, 2018). In schools, for example, same-sex-attracted youth are routinely subjected to distal stressors deriving from external forces that are beyond their control (Garcia et al., 2020; Hillier et al., 2010). These may include



verbal and physical harassment and ostracism from their peers. The flow-on effect of these experiences is the harbouring of proximal stressors, which leads to the internalisation of affective states such as self-doubt, isolation and poor self-esteem. Studies show that as a result of these combative forces, compared to their straight counterparts, the Australian LGBTQ+ population 'experience poorer mental health, psychological distress, life satisfaction, and safety satisfaction' (Perales & Todd, 2018, p. 192; Powdthavee & Wooden, 2005; Wishhart et al, 2020). Although cultural norms are often not reflected in legislation and policies, they are regularly the driving force behind their construction (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016). Structural stigma, which refers to 'societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatised', is a significant factor in the phenomenon that is known as passing (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014, p. 2). Leary (1999, p. 85) defines passing as 'a cultural performance whereby one member of a defined social group masquerades as another in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group'. Pachankis (2007, p. 328) claims that efforts to conceal a sexual stigma require day-to-day attention and monitoring, which in itself is a stressor, and describes how 'in every new situation that is encountered, such individuals must decide who among the present company knows of their stigma, who may suspect this stigma, and who has no suspicion of the stigma'.

For many queer youth and adults, there is a constant exterior and interior battle that affects the working mechanism of how they view themselves in relation to others (Meyer, 1995). Meyer's seminal study about minority stress, which derives from psychological and social stigmatisation, claims that it is caused by exposure to external environmental triggers and is not related to any underlying or inherent psychological conditions (Lea et al., 2014; Meyer, 1995, 2015). Minority stress primarily functions on two different levels: the micro-level and the macro-level. The micro-level relates to interpersonal relationships and the macro-level pertains to the effect of institutional heterosexualising discourses and environments (Perales & Todd, 2018).

### ***Model Families***

Marriage and parenthood are considered foundational heterosexual domains, and challenges to these social institutions from the LGBTIQ+ community are considered

an aberration from moral conduct, an attitude that has discursively prevailed and permeated modern society (Epstein, 2003). Within the perception of the traditional family, heteronormativity is reinforced from an early age. Taking the nuclear family as a concept through which heteronormative values, assumptions and expectations operate, McNeill (2013, p. 883) explains how 'heteronormative families are characterized as "functional", "stable", and "consistent", and align with normative conceptions of what makes a "good" family'. In contrast, same-sex families do not fit normative models and are often viewed as 'dysfunctional', 'unstable' and 'inconsistent'.

Social role theory (Eagly, 1997; Eagly & Wood, 2012) provides a framework for understanding how the 'normalised' function and duty of a family is to reinforce and maintain essentialist understandings of gender roles and the behavioural norms that accompany them. Eagly & Wood (2012) contend that this stems from how biological differences in sex are mirrored in society's beliefs about and perceptions of how gendered roles should be enacted and essentialised within their life domains. Flowers and Buston's (2001, p. 56) study found that growing up gay in straight families can lead to an intense sense of isolation, and often 'the only place with which to engage with homosexual desires may be the psyche'. Vicars' (2007) semi-autobiographical research into gay men's adolescent environments delineates how heteronormative practices in the home impacted on his own life and how the only way to escape the rigour of compulsory heterosexuality was through reading books. He noted how books 'offered me a refuge from a domination of logic and became a location from which I began to start to question the social and cultural practices that policed my everyday life' (Vicars, 2007, p. 1). Growing up gay in a heterosexual family can, for some, prove to be extremely problematic, and in my autoethnographic account (van Toledo, 2017) of growing up with a gay brother in the 1970s and 1980s in provincial Australia, I demonstrated how a culture of heteronormativity produced homophobic attitudes and actions that led to my brother's and my alienation from our community and an internalised sense of guilt and shame. I explain how 'teetering between [an] innate sense of protective love for [my gay brother] ... and a desire to operate without prejudice ... left [me] confused, shamed and frightened' (van Toledo, 2017, p. 120). I did not know anyone with whom I could share my thoughts and feelings regarding my initial encounters and experiences with homosexuality. With

the power of hindsight, I often ponder on how things might have been different if, in school or in my wider community, there had been a support mechanism. Instead, I bottled up my fear and shame and subscribed to the homophobic and heteronormative rhetoric that was routinely disseminated amongst my peers and within my wider community.

### ***Schooling Sexuality – A Dangerous Knowledge***

*'Why?'*

*'I think you know why.'*

*'No, I don't. That's why I asked.'*

*'Don't be insolent. I know all about your perverted little competition.'*

*'You're the one who's perverted,' Jimmy mumbled.*

*Brother O'Flaherty lurched forward and hit him on the side of the head with an open hand. 'Don't you dare speak to me that way.'*

*(Excerpt from the novel: The Ties that Bind)*

In contemporary Western societies, the notion of childhood is often synonymous with that of innocence. Childhood as a category of belonging has become increasingly regulated and governed (Robinson, 2013). The regulation of schools in matters pertaining to sexuality has had a powerful and long-lasting impact. It is here that we find the panoptic gaze and interpellations of moral entrepreneurs in matters that align to children and sexuality (Robinson, 2013). Surveillance and regulation have meant that 'the child has become the target of political, social, educational and legal regulations' (Robinson, 2013, p. 5), and that when sexuality and childhood are juxtaposed, a resulting 'moral panic' often ensues (Cohen, 1972). Accordingly, there has been an enduring institutional focus aimed at preserving children's innocence as form of boundary maintenance (Epstein, Flynn & Telford, 2002).

Ferfolja (2007, p. 148) writes how in 'Australia, Western discourses of childhood prevail, constructing youth as innocent, vulnerable, asexual, unknowing, in need of protection from moral turpitude, and in binary opposition to adults'. Epstein, Flynn and Telford (2002) argue that this notion of innocence was developed as a way of maintaining authority over and ignorance of sexual behaviour and identity.

Foucault (1990) posited that power does not repress sexuality, but productively operates as a conduit for social control, and that the discourse surrounding sexuality propagates moral boundaries and sexual codes of conduct. Such reproduction can be keenly observed in the schooling of heterogendered sexuality in the hidden curriculum. Walton (2005, p. 18) explains the concept of the hidden curriculum as 'learning that takes place within the perimeter of school that is not recorded or reflected within the official curriculum'. Despite the fact that this kind of learning is off the record, it remains an impactful conduit for learning that reinforces and propagates hegemonic sociocultural values.

Navigating the hidden curriculum for LGBTIQ+ youth can be difficult and damaging in terms of both academic success and social advancement (Ullman, 2015; Walton, 2005). Ferfolja (2007) has argued this is due to how heterosexuality is privileged in many aspects of curriculum while non-normative sexualities are tacitly hidden. Walton's (2005) study found particularly apparent silences in sex education classes, where instructions and discussion centred on heterosexual depictions and explanations of reproduction and sexual health. Walton draws attention to the epistemic silences in the wider curriculum across differing cognate disciplines, and cites significant historical moments, using the example of the Holocaust, to articulate queer omissions. He notes that along with the Jews, *homosexuals* were targeted by the Nazis but that this important part of LGBTIQ+ history is rarely made a point of focus within history syllabus. Cahill and Theilheimer (1999) ask us to consider why it is more difficult to imagine children acting out the events of the Stonewall riots in 1968 than those of other historical uprisings, and the answer can be found in the way schools and governments favour the promotion of normative sexuality because it 'offer[s] a framework of legitimacy that produces the symbolic and material exclusion of non-heteronormative families [from] full participation in the nation and in their communities' (McNeill, 2103, p. 839). In conjunction with this promotion of heterosexuality, the 'official' curriculum also 'serves in part to prepare students for dominant and subordinate positions' in society (McLaren, 2003, p. 212). In other words, the 'official' curriculum could be considered an implicit prototype of how heteronormative society operates and where LGBTIQ+ people fall within that structure.

De Palma and Atkinson's (2009) research into heteronormative environments in primary schools casts light on how essentialist notions of sexuality and gender are strongly interwoven into the fabric of school discourse. Once heteronormativity becomes institutionalised, the processes and culture that keep it in operation are understood by those who inhabit the domain as the 'norm' rather than as a socially constructed environment. Kjaran's (2017) study of the embodied experiences of LGBTIQ+ high school students examined how visual symbols and informal aspects of school life such as posters, yearbooks and conversations contribute to the maintenance of institutionalised heteronormativity within the hidden curriculum. An exemplar of this was how social events in Icelandic high schools uniformly depicted heterosexual couples in their advertising, erasing sexually variant students in the process. De Palma and Atkinson's (2009) research demonstrated that in order to combat and change heteronormative culture in schools, a collegial/whole-school approach is required. They stress that heteronormativity must be consciously and critically deconstructed from the top down, otherwise teachers will often consider it too subversive and risky to tackle on their own (De Palma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 846). There also needs to be an emphasis on listening to the embodied experiences of LGBTIQ+ students, in conjunction with an array of gender and sexually diverse resources/materials made available to teachers, to quell the impact and dominance of heteronormativity that is found in the hidden and official curriculums (De Palma & Atkinson, 2009; Kjaran, 2017).

The sexual 'norm' reproduced in student conversations was explained by a gay participant in Kjaran's study of the production of heteronormativity in Icelandic high schools, who stated:

The kids at school talk very openly about their sex life [of heterosexual students] and of others and it was expected that I did the same. I couldn't do this, I couldn't participate in this kind of discussion, and I felt therefore somehow different, like I was less valued as a man (Kjaran, 2017, p. 99).

### ***School – The Not-So-Best Years of Your Life***

The regulation of schools in matters pertaining to sexuality has had a powerful and long-lasting impact, and has shaped the formulation and adoption of inclusive practices in Australian educational contexts and overseas. In Australia, the Safe

Schools Program, which centred around inclusive curriculum practice for all children regardless of sexual orientation, was shut down as a result of a moral outrage and panic that schools were trying to sexualise children (Law, 2017). Educational research throughout the 1990s and 2000s consistently demonstrated that LGBTIQ+ youth in Australian schools were at risk, with suicidal behaviour and self-harm tendencies at levels disproportionate to those of their heterosexual peers (Castro & Sujak 2014; Jones et al., 2014; Loutzenheiser, 2015). Hillier et al.'s (2010) study of LGBTIQ+ youth in Australian schools demonstrated and documented the urgent need for inclusive and focussed curriculum to support the needs of LGBTIQ+ students, their friends and families. The recommendation was to simultaneously educate and foster a discourse to critically examine the power and effect of heteronormativity (SSCA, n.d.). The Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) was formed in response to this and implemented in schools in Victoria in 2010, then Australia-wide in 2013, with religious schools being exempted from participating.

In a backlash by Australian conservative groups, pressure was placed on the program's funded viability, which contributed to the subsequent withdrawal of it as a national program. The eradication of a national approach exemplifies how surveillance and regulation by schools and governments favour the promotion of heterosexuality (Robinson, 2013, p. 5). Ezer et al.'s (2019) study demonstrates how current Australian teachers often feel confused and hesitant when interpreting and implementing sections of the Australian Curriculum. They contend that the authors of the curriculum should be required to use explicit language in subjects such as sexuality studies, to ensure that sexuality is taught in a non-controversial manner. They posit that unless steps such as these are taken and room is made 'for a progressive and inclusive' approach to teaching and learning, the negative impact of heteronormativity on LGBTIQ+ students within the Australian education system will not be eradicated (Ezer et al., p. 554).

Schooling across all phases of compulsory education in Australia does not, I suggest, adequately engage young LGBTIQ+ people in positive and productive social and academic experiences of learning (Grant et al., 2019; Lea et al., 2014). They continue to be placed at a disadvantage by an education system that often fails to recognise how their embodied performances of dissonant gender and sexuality can contribute to deficit perceptions of their personal value, strengths and needs at

an institutional level. Consequently, these young LGBTIQ+ people who are positioned as the educational Other tend to be treated as a social liability to the everyday business of school (Slee, 2013).

### ***Encounters of the Other Kind***

At an individual level, the category of educational Other comprises students who are disenfranchised and marginalised within schools through social divisions and hierarchies of worth (Gergen & Dixon-Román, 2014). At a systemic level, the educational Other is routinely perpetuated by an education system that inscribes narrow conceptions of schooling and school success to ensure that the performativity of advantage and disadvantage is reinforced. The concept of Othering has a primeval genealogy that can make belonging a tricky path to navigate. De Beauvoir (2010, p. 26) writes that 'no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself'. This assists in understanding how the concept of the Other refers to those that do not represent the norm but instead reside in the marginalised spaces of society (Kumashiro, 2000). Otherness is, therefore, bound by power relations where the known and unknown are set apart and cast as opposites (Creutz-Kämppi, 2008, p. 297).

The reductive action of Othering habitually involves a linguistic interpellation of difference, and Guralnik & Simeon (2010, p. 407) discuss how interpellation is 'the very mechanism through which ideology takes hold of the individual [and is] the authoritative voice of the State [that] recognises the individual and hails him into social existence', while simultaneously casting out the Other. When one is named as Other, or in the context of this study as 'homosexual,' then 'one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse' (Butler, 2011, p. 116).

This interpellation of deficit and the development of a pejorative nomenclature functions as a means of division and of boundary-making, of them from us, which works to create a hierarchical social order. The propagation of moral boundaries during the Victorian era created a category synonymous with deviance, with those who were identified as *homosexuals* being socially shamed (Hirschmann, 2013). Thereafter, those who were identified as belonging to that group were relegated to the bottom echelons of society. Althusser and Brewster (2001) contend that interpellation works best when it is invisible, in that people repressively accept that in

a heteronormative culture, queer is Other. Althusser and Brewster (2001, p. 86) argue that:

It follows that, in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce it must therefore reproduce:

1. the productive forces
2. the existing relations of production.

Okolie (2003, p. 2) adds to Althusser and Brewster's notion by writing that 'Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin as the Other only exists relative to the self and vice versa'. The inequitable power distribution between what/who is in (heterosexuality/heterosexuals) and what/who is out (homosexuality/homosexuals) makes it near impossible for queer Others to prescribe their own norms within dominant discourse (Kumashiro, 1999; Okolie, 2003; Staszak, 2009).

Rothmann and Simmonds' (2015) study of pre-service teachers and their language shows how the use of linguistic tools to objectify LGBTIQ+ individuals worked to maintain the separation between them and us and establish dehumanising language norms. Participants in the research, who consisted of fourth-year education students, were given a fictitious scenario that centred around teaching LGBTIQ+ students, despite being religiously opposed to the idea. The participants collated responses demonstrated that a large proportion used objectifying 'terms such as "it", "things", "stuff", "they", "issue" and "them"' in relation to LGBTIQ+ people (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015, p. 119). Such dehumanising language removes threads of emotional connection and works effectively to distance them from us. This type of disconnection, along with scant knowledge of the Other, simplifies this process of stereotyping, objectifying and generalising by removing inter-subjective accountability and placing emphasis on differences, rather than the intersections of connectedness (Creutz-Kämppi, 2008; Okolie, 2003).

### ***It's You, Not Me***

The queer Other continuously schooled by the pervading forces of heteronormativity and sexual dissidence is not only considered as Other; it is felt as Other too. The most powerful parts in the heteronormative script always go to heterosexual protagonists, whereas the sexual subalterns 'are displaced, discounted and excluded



from society's institutional and social echelons' to maintain heteronormative power, and the notion of the sexual subaltern is specifically designed to validate us in relation to them (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

Hegemonic educational discourses have tended to link disadvantage with disengagement and have focussed on educational interventions designed to address the changes that disadvantaged students need to make to conform to the dominant discourse of schooling (Graham, 2019). With such a narrow, deficit view of LGBTIQ+ students being perpetuated, it is not surprising that little headway has been made in producing more positive and engaging educational experiences for queer students, either at the level of schooling or at the systemic level of addressing inequity in educational provision (Ferfolja, 2007; Hillier et al., 2010; Ullman, 2015; Robinson et al., 2014).

Studies have shown that LGBTIQ+ youth often have difficulty fully participating, both socially and academically, in schooling institutions (Garcia et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2014; Ullman, 2015). Most schooling environments structurally maintain heteronormative discourses, which for queer youth can contribute to social and educational disenfranchisement and a sense of not belonging (Kosciw, Palmer & Kull, 2015). This can also impact LGBTIQ+ teachers, and Grace and Benson (2000) have documented firsthand accounts of LGBTIQ+ teachers and the professional implications surrounding revelations of sexuality. The narratives demonstrate how for some teachers, being out eclipses their identity as a teacher. LGBTIQ+ teachers in Australia also continue to be vulnerable to discrimination due to the fact that the *Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Status Amendment Act 2013* has an exemption that continues to allow religious schools and organisations to discriminate based on sexual orientation.

### **And...**

This review of the literature has traced the genealogy of the LGBTIQ+ experience in Australia. While it articulates some significant advancements in legislative and sociocultural attitudes and inclusive practices, it also demonstrates that there remains a lot to be done. Schools continue to lag in terms of inclusivity and policy to protect the fundamental right to active and meaningful participation for LGBTIQ+ students. The mental health of LGBTIQ+ youth remains at alarmingly poor levels and the divisions between straight and same-sex attracted youth is still firmly cemented

(Loutzenheiser, 2015; Mongelli et al., 2019). Neo-conservative voices are growing louder, and legislation that will work to impede the educational and social experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth swirls menacingly close to fruition (Rawlings & Loveday, 2021). Touted as the place where everyone gets a 'fair go', Australia is very selective about to whom this actually applies.

## Methodology

### *(In)Citing the Norms: Mapping Methodology*

Coming to research as a novice researcher, I am mindful of the methodological norms that structure research endeavour. I am equally mindful of the criticisms that come with the choice to transgress them. Norms, it has been argued, are not passive descriptors of conduct that lie idly, waiting to be used. They are instead managers of conduct, which ‘command, oblige, recommend [and] guide’ not only the self, but others as well (Korsgaard, 1992, p. 22). Broome (2013, p. 8) argues that the words ‘ought and should are everyday normative words that we often confuse with right and wrong’. Thinking about the notions of right and wrong in relation to my research journey has to some extent involved me in decolonising acts.

The spectre of Cartesian rationalism has haunted me throughout this research journey, and there have been numerous times when I have felt I was on shaky ground. I have been mindfully aware that there are those who would ask of what I have done, ‘Is this research?’ However, the voices of others who ask questions about what counts as research have guided me beyond methodological enclosure and towards rethinking not only what I have done, but how I tell the stories of my informants’ lives. As St Pierre (2018, p. 604) has elucidated:

The *experimentation* required in post qualitative inquiry cannot be accomplished within the methodological enclosure. This experimental work is risky, creative, surprising, and remarkable. It cannot be measured, predicted, controlled, systematised, formalised, described in a textbook, or called forth by preexisting, approved methodological processes, methods, and practice...

The principal purpose of this research, which is presented as an ethnographic, semi-fictionalised novel and an accompanying exegesis, is to creatively open emotive thoroughfares of experiencing, understanding and connecting to what it has meant to be a gay male in Australian schools, communities and families over the past fifty years. The novel has been written to engage with critical reflection on how the historical effects of heteronormative beliefs, attitudes and practices have shaped and impacted the lives of same-sex-attracted youth. It was organised around the following questions:

- i. To what extent have the school, community and family experiences of gay males changed over the last fifty years in Australia?
- ii. What positive/ negative interactions and experiences did they encounter whilst inhabiting these domains?
- iii. What impact did school, community and family interactions have on their personal lives and relationships?

Being willing to challenge notions of established research procedure and jettison my preconceived thoughts and values has involved me in a sustained thinking-through and reflection on how I understand the methodological process. To (re)present my own story as researcher, and as a way of recording my methodological process, I wrote consistently in a fieldwork journal. Such critical reflexivity is described by Lincoln et al. (2011, p. 143) as 'a conscious experiencing of the self as both an inquirer and respondent, as a teacher and a learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself.' During the infancy of my research, my journal was filled with big-picture (ontological) questions. My first entry reads: *How on earth am I going to do this?* As I progressed, the nature of my writing changed. Throughout the fieldwork stage, my entries were often businesslike. There are pages filled with lists of possible participants and details about their lives, their ages and backgrounds. Notes accompany these bullet points, recording elements of telephone conversations and titbits that I thought could be useful seeds for the novel. There are sections recording emerging themes and pages where I have scolded myself for butting in during an interview. There are thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of protagonists, where I have painted narrative portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) of what they might look like, what their quirks are, etc. The strength of the journal is in how it provided me with a space to engage in self-dialogue and reflexively evaluate each stage of the research process. My vulnerabilities, fears and uncertainties coalesced with my critical reflections, theoretical understandings and methodological considerations. The journal guided me, corrected me and counselled me. It is a hotchpotch of messy scribbles and at the same time, neat, linear and organised – a reflection, I might add, of my research in general. Throughout this journey I also documented my uncertainty in a succession of reflections that I titled 'Notes to Self'.

## **Notes to Self**

*How on earth am I going to do this? Sitting here amongst a multitude of ideas and readings, I can't find a clear direction. What I am starting to realise is that there is no defined path. I read books and academic articles and keep asking myself, 'what does this mean in relation to what I want to do?' There are so many conflicting thoughts, directive offerings and well-intended pieces of advice offered to novice researchers, and yet I don't feel any specific clarity. I suppose, if I'm honest, I'm looking for a neatly defined plan of action. A magical book to appear and spell it all out for me. Ha-ha...wishful thinking. Mark keeps telling me to read my way through it. There is no right or wrong way to do this. It's making MY way of doing it justifiable, in terms of my methodological process. He said that research of this kind is not a linear process and I have to get that out of my head. My anxiety is through the roof. I can't imagine the end in any shape or form.*

My research journey has taught me that vulnerability is a temporal concept; however, Young (2012) and Sparkes (1996) advise that researchers should not be afraid to reveal themselves, their experiences or their investments within their work. I have come to understand how knowledge is situated and comes from multiple perspectives and a range of positions that consider how experiences are embodied within unique social, historical and geographical locations. Haraway (1988, p. 579) writes that when we understand how situated knowledges come from a range of perspectives and positions, we are given an 'adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and as a critical, reflexive relation to our own [lives] as well as [the lives of] others'. I have come to understand how situatedness can be a productive condition for making meaning.

## **Positionality, Working the Field and Vulnerability**

As a nascent enquirer, I placed an emphasis on mutual storytelling prior to the interview stage. In telephone conversations before and between interviews, I shared my own situated experience of growing up with a self-identified gay brother in a provincial Australian town during the 1970s and 1980s. My own experiences of watching my gay brother's struggles in his schools and community have been indelibly imprinted on me. These historical experiences of his predicaments and my emotions attached to them, mingled with those described by the research

participants as I wrote the novel. Acknowledging this mutuality of experience helped me to develop an inter-subjective bridge where ‘the attribution of intentionality, feelings and beliefs’ (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010, p. 3) acknowledges and cements the collectiveness of experience (Herda, 1999). I was mindful that my own experiences of heteronormativity brought with them a particular narrative viewpoint, and in the early stages of my field work I pondered: Can I write myself into the process? Do I run the risk of negating the validity of the research? What are the rules? Who does the research represent? After mulling over these questions for some time, I was suddenly struck by the realisation that despite my extensive reading and perceived understanding of the methodology that I had selected, I was doubting the validity of my own authorial presence, which once again activated my methodological uncertainties.

The premise that qualitative and quantitative research should be evaluated by the same criteria can be traced back to the earliest moment of qualitative inquiry, in the early nineteenth century. During this traditional period, ethnographic researchers wrote from colonising perspectives, adhering to traditional notions of scientific validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). There have been eight moments of qualitative enquiry since then, but of particular relevance to this study is the fourth moment: the crisis of representation, which focussed on the predicaments of legitimisation, representation and praxis. The crisis of representation occurred throughout the paradigm wars, which took place during the postmodern resistance of the 1970s and 1980s. These wars challenged neo-liberal discourse and those who believed that research should be firmly rooted in scientific paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The opposing positivist/qualitative views of the world and of how social reality should be (re)presented and described in texts were not easily reconciled (Denzin, 2010; Sparkes, 1995). Sparkes (1995, p. 159) notes that ‘it was not just the ideas themselves that came under attack but also the paradigmatic style in which ideas were represented in terms of how researchers “write” (explain, describe, index) the social world’.

The postexperimental sixth moment (1995-2000) of qualitative enquiry, which advocated for new ways of knowing, understanding and framing the empirical world, paved the way for the advent of research such as mine. Researchers moved past traditional forms of (re)presentation, exploring an array of exciting and creative

methods such as fictional ethnography, poetry and performative texts as they investigated alternate ways of interpreting and representing the human condition (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Opening up these possibilities has led to the methodologically contested present, which has been characterised as a period of conflict and tension due to a positivist reining-in that disputes the value of qualitative research and calls for evidence-based practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Denzin (2001, p. 326) contends that 'in the seventh moment, the criteria for evaluating critical qualitative work are moral and ethical', and embedded in 'political, ethical, and aesthetic' understandings that 'nothing is value free [and that] knowledge is power'.

As we traverse the period of the eighth 'moment', there is a call for, amongst other things, critical conversations to be had about sexuality. From my research's conception to now, I have been aware of the overlapping impact each of the moments of qualitative inquiry has had on my ability to enact this study. Despite each moment having been contested from both sides of the divide, some scholars in the field have steadfastly challenged traditional notions of validity and legitimacy throughout, and by doing so have opened up methodological possibilities that have enabled research such as this to exist. The research has come into fruition in the eighth moment of qualitative inquiry, which is 'concerned with moral discourse, with the development of sacred textualities' that do not ostracise or delegitimise people's experiences of the world on the basis of their sexuality (race, gender, (dis)ability, etc.) but firmly embeds it in principles and practices of social justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

My subconscious absorption of the criticisms that fiction as a research practice draws from academic fields is/was aligned with orthodox paradigms of 'reliability, validity and objectivity' (Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 17). Central to these criticisms is the role of the researcher, who comes under particular scrutiny. There is an expectation that 'once the researcher has finished the job of collecting the data, he or she simply vanish[es]' (Sparkes, 1995, p. 162). In contrast, Jones (2015) discusses how neo emotivism acts as a way of toughening up academically and putting one's own voice into the narrative. To toughen up, I have actively veered away from the constraints and barriers of traditional writing protocols along with the quest for quantitative academic validity, and instead have deliberately evoked

vulnerable elements of self within the novel. Blackman (2007) argues that researchers often feel they must maintain an outsider's perspective, not revealing their own personal and emotional connections within the research. However, in the novel, the description of adult Raymond, whose life ends because of spiralling addiction, is loosely based on my own brother's decline. I deliberated about whether to add this dimension to the story, mindful of Behar's (1996, p. 14) warning that 'vulnerability does not mean that anything goes ... The exposure of self has to take us to somewhere that we couldn't otherwise get to [and] should not be written [as] decorative flourish [or for] exposure for its own sake.' Nevertheless, I believe that including this element of self-experience not only added to the story but also highlights my willingness to expose my own vulnerabilities as a researcher, and, in the spirit of collaboration, put them on the line.



## Methods

This study drew on the experiential narratives of a small sample of gay youth past and present to interrogate the everyday practices of heteronormativity in educational, familial and community domains in Australia. To enact this research, I interviewed five self-identified gay men who were adolescents during the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s, and one self-identified gay teen who at the time of interviewing was enrolled in a secondary school. Prior to the interviews, I had not met any of the participants, with the exception of the fifteen-year-old, whom I had met briefly at a social engagement years before.

The small sample of participants was a deliberate part of the study's design, as I wanted to convey rich, thick, detailed 'ethnographic miniatures' of lived experiences (Geertz, 1973, p. 318). A larger sample would have diluted the quality of the interviews and prevented me from gaining in-depth insight into the participants' sociocultural and affective experiences, beliefs and attitudes (Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey, 2016). As Geertz (1973, p. 319) writes, 'small facts can speak to large issues', and I contend that small sample groups can be representative of the world at large.

To recruit participants, I utilised a snowball sampling technique, contacting people through the social networking application Facebook. Noy (2008, p. 329) argues that in qualitative research, the snowball sampling design 'brings to the fore two relevant concepts: social knowledge ... [and] power relations' due to how the initial seeds use their natural social networks rather than those of the researcher. I veered away from selecting participants that I knew, with the exception of the fifteen-year-old participant, because I wanted to create a diverse group from backgrounds and locations that did not align with my own. Facebook afforded me, for the most part, the opportunity to cast a wide net. As a result, I secured participants who had grown up in the city and the country, and who came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Interestingly, most were lapsed Catholics, which in retrospect provided a point of experiential comparison. The only area where diversity was lacking was in ethnicity, with most participants identifying as having white Anglo-Saxon heritage. All participants identified as gay and were out to their families and friends, and those who were employed reported being out in the workplace.

I sent out a direct message to fifty seeds/friends, outlining my research and specifying the age categories that I was targeting. I included my email address and encouraged anyone who wished to participate to use it to contact me. Taking the interaction offline was a purposeful measure, as affirmed by Sadler, Lee and Fullerton (2010), who discuss how it protects privacy and avoids the risk of potential disclosure of personal information to others. Despite receiving a plethora of emails from men aged between twenty and forty who were eager to participate in the study, there was a distinct lack of response from men aged fifty to seventy, which correlates with Kosiniski et al's (2015) finding that Facebook is a younger person's domain and accordingly not an efficient way to reach a mature demographic when looking for research participants. I therefore emailed some people I knew aged fifty to seventy, and successfully recruited participants through these contacts. It was also extremely difficult to find participants under the age of eighteen. Due to ethical requirements, I was unable to approach potential candidates in this age bracket directly. I wrote letters to various organisations such as Minus 18 (a social/ support group for LGBTIQ+ teens) but did not get any responses. The teenager that I recruited came via a friend who had mentioned the study to his parents. To counteract the lack of younger participants, I also recruited an eighteen-year-old, who was close in age to the younger demographic that I was targeting.

### ***Interviewing***

The narratives in the novel were drawn from the interviews, which utilised Wengraf's (2001) Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). The purpose of the BNIM is to draw out autonomous narratives from participants with minimal researcher intervention, for the purpose of inducing unadulterated responses from the participant's own cultural and emotional perspectives. The only input from the researcher occurs after the first interview, when chronologically recorded notes can be referred to as a means of extrapolating further details from the narrative.

I purposefully chose to move away from the structured/semi-structured interview format due to how questions that are devised by the researcher are often based on assumptions about what participants' lives might be like (Jones, 2003). The BNIM was therefore not only a strategy for resisting the imprint of my own sociological preconceptions of heteronormativity but also a way to ensure that I

captured the unique experiences and positionalities of the participants' lives, in their own words and from their own perspectives (Jones, 2003).

I planned to meet with each participant for four one-hour sessions, taking place once a fortnight for two months. I met with all participants as planned. Before meeting them, I telephoned and spoke to them about the areas of their lives that I wanted to focus on, and explained that I would not be asking a series of questions, but would prefer them to give me an oral narrative of their recollections of their adolescent family, school and community. Goodson and Sikes (2016) stress the importance of providing participants with questions and instructions prior to the interview stage. I therefore sent the following to participants one week prior to our first face-to-face meetings, to act as a prompt (the format was edited slightly for the fifteen-year-old participant, who was still in the midst of his schooling):

- i. When we meet, I will not be interviewing you in the traditional sense, rather, I would like for you to tell me your stories, from your own perspective. I will be recording your narratives and for the most part, will not have much input as you speak.
- ii. Please select some artefacts that you have preserved from your adolescence. The focus for the study is on school, community and family. Artefacts may include such things as: school reports, class photos, family photos, books that you read, records/ cassettes/CDs that you listened to. Think carefully about the artefact and what it might reveal or prompt from your memory. For example, a class photo may reveal religious symbols, uniforms and school mottos, which may remind you of your school's traditions and ethos. View these artefacts as the seed for your stories. You may wish to bring them with you to our meeting.
- iii. I would also like you to think of pivotal moments in your adolescence. The following questions are prompts to help you to start thinking. It might help to jot some of your answers down on a notepad. What are your most vivid memories of school, your family and of your community? When were you happiest in these domains? When were you saddest? Who were your friends? What were your teachers like? How did your teachers/friends/family treat you? What was your family dynamic like? What were their attitudes to homosexuality? Did you attend church? What

did you think about religion? What impact did school/ family/community interactions have on your personal life and relationships?

- iv. Of course, you are welcome to think of other areas that may be relevant, or that you wish to discuss, and you are not required to share anything that you want to remain private. Remember that this is your story, not mine.

For the narratives to unfold, Wengraf (2001) stresses the importance of restraint. Researchers need to resist the urge to fill gaps and silences during the interviews. This proved more difficult than I had imagined. There were four interviews scheduled with each informant, and although I had explained how the interviews would be conducted, it did not go exactly to plan. In the first interviews, all of the participants stopped at various points in their narratives and waited for me to comment. My journal entry after one describes my struggle to maintain my silence. It reads:

*Well, that was much harder than I expected. Had my first interview with xxxx today and it did not go as planned. I thought it would be easy to sit back and just listen. WRONG. Xxxx kept looking at me as though he wanted me to say something in response to his revelations and asked for my opinion about parts of his story. I reiterated how the BNMI worked and he carried on. I gave him weak smiles and tried hard to use body language to validate what he was saying. I felt very uncomfortable. At one stage he had tears in his eyes and I just couldn't help myself. I swooped in and filled the space with comforting words and a story of similarity. I botched it. It didn't feel right to sit in silence. Kind of unethical... Anyway, once he had recovered, he told me some good stories but I felt disappointed that I did not enact the BNIM as planned.*

The BNIM's strength is in how it allows researchers to see what Jones (2003, p. 61) describes as 'the gestalt of participant's stories', which Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 34) describe as 'a whole which is more than the sum of its parts, an order or hidden agenda informing each person's life'. As a researcher, I saw the merits of this interviewing technique and how it opened up deeper possibility for analysis; however, as my reflections show, it was much harder to enact that I had anticipated.

After I had conducted the interviews, I began to organise and reflexively examine the participants' memories of the past. The interviews that I painstakingly transcribed and read were collated and stacked into neat piles. A kaleidoscope of stories, locations, eras, characters, schools and families circled in my head as I

wondered how to ‘use the details from the real world ... to reimagine what “real worlds” are’ (Leavy, 2015, pp. 57-58). Denzin (2009, p. 223) explains that the ‘interview elicits interpretations of the world, because it is itself an object of interpretation’. Accordingly, I came to view the interviews from this study as mediums that produced a performative text, which worked to enact stories from the world rather than to mirror them (Jones, 2017).

All interviews were audio-recorded. Initially, I used the voice recognition software Dragonspeak to transcribe the interviews, but gave up after the first transcript proved to be riddled with errors, and did them manually instead. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Typing the stories as I listened to them helped me to think about turns of phrase, slang and other era-related dialogue, and I also transcribed orthographically, meaning that I used symbols (e.g., dashes, underscores, etc.) to record dialogic expressions. These included pauses, laughter, word emphasis, etc. After completing each transcription, which usually took a couple of days, I emailed them to the participants. I thought it was important that they have them as soon as possible, so that they could retract or discuss any revelations that had been shared. I arranged to have a follow-up call with each participant after they received their transcript, which helped with the development of an inter-subjective bridge (Herda, 1999) and also increased rapport. During these telephone calls, participants reflected on their stories and how it felt to (re)live past events. For some, it was an emotionally confronting experience. I recorded the following in my journal:

*xxxx telephoned me this afternoon. He was extremely emotional about what he had told me. He said that it had made him reflect on his childhood and how he had repressed so many memories. He told me that he had always told people he had been fine at school but now he realised, he was anything but fine. He said that pretending to be happy had been part of a long-standing routine.*

After completing all of the interviews, I listened to them each day through headphones on my daily walk. This close listening further connected me to the stories. As the participants spoke, I embodied the stories and tuned into their affective states, the rise and fall of their voices and the gaps between words and sentences. Many of these voiced nuances had not resonated with me during the interviews or the transcription period.

Once I had re-listened to the recordings, I set about collating the transcripts according to the ages of the participants. Each group represented a historical time period: Group 1, 1970-1980; Group 2, 1980-2000; and Group 3, 2000-2015.

One of the biggest hurdles I faced when planning the novel was how to represent the intergenerational aspects of the participants' stories. Initially, I thought I might write three short stories in one volume, but this seemed too disjointed. I ploughed ahead, hoping an idea about how all the stories could connect would emerge as I wrote. I began with Patrick's story, which actually started life as Archer's story. The participant who is represented by Archer was very difficult to interview; his pain from his schooling experience was raw and he was guarded in what he chose to reveal. I struggled to get a good sense of who he was, how he felt and what he was thinking. This came out as I wrote his story, which felt hollow and contrived. Eventually, I had the idea of flipping the characters and using a fictitious protagonist (Patrick) instead, and placing Archer in a secondary role. Patrick was created from an amalgamation of stories that participants had told me about bullies at their schools.

The participant who provided the impetus for Raymond's story was very forthcoming in his interviews; however, his stories altered with each retelling. In the first interview, he painted a picture of a supportive mother, but in subsequent meetings changed his description of her to '*a cold and spiteful woman who deserved what she got.*' Thankfully, my methodology allowed me to play with both descriptions and gave me scope to (re)present the heart of the interview.

There are parts of all my participants in the novel. Some are represented by their vulnerabilities, others by events and places. There are fictional elements woven through, sometimes as fine threads, other times as thick stitches. The novel is a story that also tells a bigger story, and the answers to my research questions can be found within it.

### ***(Re)constructing LGBTIQ+ Lives: Identity or Identification***

This research works to unsettle and flesh out subjugated knowledge and social biases by making the embodied life worlds of participants visible. Lather (1992, p. 92) writes that research of this kind is antithetical to the ideology of social sciences, which adheres to 'researcher neutrality and objectivity ... [due to how it]

challenges the status quo and contributes to a more egalitarian social order'. Accordingly, this research should be evaluated through a poststructuralist lens that flows from the performative text, 'stressing subjectivity, emotionality, feeling, and other antifoundational criteria' (Denzin, 1997, p. 9).

All lives are woven together into a tapestry of (often) conflicting identities. Some of these relate to personal features that frame our lives, such as race, gender, sexuality and spirituality, while others are connected to the world at large, such as work, hobbies and religion (McNair, 2017). Valentine (2007) writes about the fluid and constantly changing complexities of intersections in people's lives and identities. Using case studies to support her findings, she argues that people view themselves differently in different social locations and as a result can experience varying forms of oppression and/or inclusion depending on the space they occupy.

Within this research, all of the participants identified that their sexuality was an overarching presence in their adolescence, despite it being hidden from their families and peers (with the exception of the youngest participant, who 'came out' at fifteen). They consistently spoke of an internal/external battle to present as straight due to the belief that it was a safer option, or in some cases the *only* option. A primary reason given for not revealing this part of their identity was fear of how they might be viewed by others. The youngest participant (represented as Archer in the novel) discussed in one interview how before he came out he identified as an emo, which he described as '*wearing black clothes, listening to hardcore music that had depressing lyrics and never smiling*'. He said that presenting as an emo would '*stop people from thinking I was gay. It kind of seemed more easier at school to be emo than to be gay.*' Through the characters of Archer and Patrick in the novel, I worked to expose the complexities that young gay people feel in relation to their identity, bringing to the forefront the angst, fear and thought processes involved with reconciling their sexuality and their identity through the juxtaposition of real-life experiences and online identities.

The multiplicity of identity intersections and geographies attached to queer lives is often neglected and overshadowed by the focus placed on LGBTIQ+ people's sexual identity, which Taylor (2010, p. 38) argues spotlights just one 'spoke on the intersectional wheel'. Richardson (1998) posits that this spotlight on sexual identity can have dangerous and oppressive implications for LGBTIQ+ people, and affect

their ability to participate fully in society. Participants involved with this research often spoke about how after they came out, their sexual identity eclipsed other aspects of their lives. One participant noted how

*After I told my parents I was gay, most of what I said or did, seemed to come back to it. It wasn't just what they said but it was how they acted. Like they never asked if I had a boyfriend or if I told them about a social event, they never asked who was there. Before I came out they were more interested in those kind of details.*

Intersectionality comes from a critical paradigm that acts to demarginalise minority groups, and in doing so to act against oppression. It is how the micro-level of social identities (such as race, class and sexuality) interreacts with the macro-level of society's structures (such as racism, classism and heterosexism) and the resulting social inequalities and injustices that are exposed (Crenshaw 1991; Chan & Erby, 2017; Taylor, 2010).

### **Life History**

A life history focus has been employed to illuminate and interrogate the educational and community discourses bound to the participants' storied lives (Samuel, 2009). Life history is distinct in that it always pertains to the story of a life, from a singular perspective, and comes into being because of the questions asked about events that occurred during that life (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Sikes and Everington (2001) argue that life history is dependent on participant collaboration and an understanding that the processes involved in their retelling stem from their history and life. Tamboukou (2010, p. 222) notes that the meanings that derive from life history narratives are:

only accessible to the tellers and listeners of the stories, not to their protagonists. This is because human beings live fragmented lives whose meaning always evade them; they thus need others to tell their stories and create archives for historical understanding.

There is no right way to elicit life history narratives; rather, Goodson and Sikes (2016) argue that instead, researchers should determine whether they are the right person for the job. By this they mean that a life history researcher should have certain attributes, such as the ability to be an attentive listener, someone that a participant can feel comfortable talking to, and if appropriate, willing to share stories



from their own life. My preparation for the life history interviews was therefore as important as the interviews themselves. Developing rapport and trust with the participants before the interview stage became a crucial part of the process. Sharing my own story and the impetus for the research during pre-interview telephone conversations not only broke the ice but forged a sense of comradeship, and when participants came to the interviews there was already a point of connection, which alleviated some of the getting-to-know-you awkwardness. For the most part, participants did not display outward signs of nervousness; however, they all described in one way or another how the unearthing of the past involved a high degree of 'emotional labour' (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 322). Despite experiencing considerable emotional upheaval, they also acknowledged a sense of unburdening, with one participant saying, '*It actually feels good to get some of these things off my chest. It was a long time ago. I try not to dwell on things, but they happened, you know.*' Accordingly, it was important for me as the researcher to remember how life history narratives not only 'describe events [but] ... also act as validations for events' too (Harnett, 2016, p. 167).

Goodson and Sikes (2016, p. 79) write that 'the prime focus in a [life history] interview should be to encourage the flow of recall and reminiscence'. To do this, I adopted an unstructured approach to the interviews, to encourage unadulterated narrative flow. There were occasions when participants went off topic and spoke about things such as a planned holiday. At first this meandering concerned me, but after the first few interviews I realised it was all part of warming up, and on occasion a story that I initially assumed was irrelevant proved simply to be a way of becoming emotionally prepared to delve into a particularly harrowing account of the past. I learned that no story was in fact irrelevant. Rather, each participant had different processes and methods that they utilised to get to the critical event of a story, or to make sense of the past in relation to their current lives (Goodman & Sikes, 2016, p. 72). As Nietzsche (1874, p. 7) contends, 'we require history for life and action' and proposes that 'we cannot escape the past, but neither can we deny it, instead we should use it critically, as a way of shaping our future'.

The performative nature of the telling of the participants' life histories emerged during the interviewing process. For example, one participant initially told a story in such a matter-of-fact way that it did not register as a monumental event. Later,

however, he described in more detail the affective implications of the situation and how deeply it had penetrated his psyche, so that although the events of the story were essentially the same, my interpretation of it was altered. This participant's version of the events was 'essentially situational and indexical' (Sikes, 2000, p. 261). Neither account was untrue; rather, each demonstrated how there are multiple versions of selves, and how they are subjectively revealed and performed depends on the context and situation in which they are told (Denzin, 2009).

Life history is a powerful methodology for situating personal narratives in a wider context, which in this research is the evolution of Australia's social and cultural trajectory. When I started this research, I did not think about Australia as a character. It was not until I had gathered all of the field texts that I realised it was a central part of the story. In thinking about how to convey the impact of Australia on the lives of the participants, I drew on the country's landscape and some of the harsher aspects of its climate. The weather in the novel is either hot or cold, representing the anger and hostility of Australians' attitudes and actions towards LGBTIQ+ people across time. The characters are often uncomfortable in their climate: Raymond spends much of his time feeling cold, while Shane swelters in the heat and humidity of Queensland's tropical weather and Patrick is forced by his father to take a cold shower, his skin reacting to the freezing water. These sensory experiences were crafted to draw attention to how it feels to be uncomfortable in one's own skin due to forces outside of one's control.

### ***Arts-Based Research***

Artists have always been the real purveyors of the news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation (Dewey, 1954, p. 184).

Jones (2017, p. 2) articulates that arts-based research in social sciences is not 'art for art's sake', but rather an opportunity to explore performative potentials creatively, 'within certain boundaries while, at the same time, somehow changing them'. As a researcher, I was immediately drawn to this prospect as it enabled me to veer away from what Bochner and Ellis (1998) describe as the vacuous method of writing that is often employed within fields of social science. Traditional, mapped scientific reporting, I believed, would not work in the context of this research to adequately explore, probe and understand the complexities and nuances of the lived

experiences of the participants. Barone and Eisner (2011, p. 96) state that arts-based research is 'not aimed at a quest towards certainty. Its purpose may instead be described as the enhancement of perspectives'. Accordingly, elements of arts-based research 'may take liberties with the world as it is seen' to embellish or bring attention to a point, or to extend questioning that may not occur otherwise (Barone & Eisner, p. 100).

To enact these elements of arts-based research, I have methodologically aligned with Banks and Banks (1998) and Leavy (2016), who have advocated fiction as a social research practice and suggested that it can work to contextualise and (re)present life histories. Entwining life history and fiction aligns with Denzin's (2001, p. 324) seventh moment of inquiry, which he describes as 'a period of ferment and explosion' used in qualitative enquiry to 'examine new ways of making the practices of critical qualitative inquiry central to the workings of a free democratic society'. This is exemplified by Leavy (2019), who drew from life history interviews as well as her own experiences as an undergraduate teacher to write the novel *Film*. Her book showcases how the literary tools of fiction, such as plot, tension and composite characters, can be used to explore broad social themes such as power, gender and popular culture. Leavy (2019, p. 2929) writes that fiction offers a lot more scope for researchers than non-fiction due to its ability to portray people's interiority, and that it has the 'potential to make micro-macro links' by giving readers insight into what a person says and does in relation to what they are feeling and thinking.

Drawing on Leavy's (2019) approach to novel-writing as social research, I utilised participants' stories, the artefacts they brought to the interviews and my historical experiences of growing up with a gay brother in a provincial town to provide multifaceted insights into the lived experiences of the participants' life worlds.

Tracy (1995, p. 209) contends that significant research must 'bring clarity to confusion, make visible what is hidden or inappropriately ignored, and generate a sense of insight and deepened understanding'. Although it is considered a contemporary approach to research, the technique of (re)presenting empirical data in the form of an ethnographic fictionalised novel goes back to the pioneering work of Zora Neal Hurston and Willard Waller. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) explores themes such as race and gender embodied in the Florida landscape of the 1930s and exemplified the power and role of narrative writing in ethnography.

Waller, a sociologist in the 1930s, used ethnographic fiction to give personalised insights into teachers and their pedagogies with the 'hope that his book would help to reform teaching and learning in American schools' (Cohen, 1989, p. 33). Connecting to these early traditions of representational writing of ethnographic fiction, my novel blends fiction with the environmental, cognitive and affective states of my participants' lives as a way of re/producing holistic portraits of what it means and has meant to be gay in Australian schools, communities and families (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Pajak, 2012).

### ***Fiction as Research***

In the academic world, researchers are storytellers, learning about others and sharing what they have learned. Whether we go into the field in an ethnographic study or conduct oral history interviews, we are charged with telling the stories of others in creative, expressive, dynamic, and authentic ways (Leavy, 2015, p. 45).

As a method of inquiry, writing fiction has been considered 'outside the boundaries of what is constituted as acceptable by the knowledge making communities' (Usher, 1997, p. 35). I contend that the stories this research aims to disseminate are already outside the boundaries of general awareness, and they need to be (re)presented in a medium that makes them accessible to readers in and outside of scholarly domains. Bell and Pahl (2018) write that there is a prodigious privileging within conventional circles of academia that thwarts access for those outside of scholarly realms. Academic papers are often stylistically dense, verbose and only reachable by those with tools of experience. Jones (2006, p. 70) discusses how his frustration with feeling boxed in by traditional forms of research representation led him to performative texts, which 'honour the people who [give] interviews ... they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help bring into being what they also discover' (Jones, 2006, p. 70).

Fiction as research offers an array of possibilities due to its unique and significant strengths. Foremost is its ability to open up readers to imaginative worlds that they may not have experienced (Leavy, 2016). Camargo-Borges (2017, pp. 92-93) writes that when unbridled:

imagination adopts a fluid and less fixed view of meaning, encouraging ingenuity, spontaneity, and novelty. Through imagination we can form

new images and scenarios never thought of before and, by imagining these images and scenarios, we open the opportunity to bring them into reality.

Banks and Banks (1998, p. 11) argue that research that does not arouse the 'emotional texture of human experience' fails to tell the complete story. As participants (re)experienced their past during the interview phase of the research, I was struck by how their stories incorporated all of the elements (e.g., plot, character development, climactic scenes and tangible imagery) I would expect to find in good quality fiction. Hanging on their words and imagining the worlds that they described reminded me of how good storytelling conveys immediate insights into life experiences and '[allows] readers to imaginatively feel their way into the experiences that are being described by the author' (Denzin, 1997, p. 12). According to Sparkes (1997), there is an expectation that powerful fiction will emotionally entwine readers to characters and their worlds, and in doing so provide them with a vantage point to reflect on their own lives and positioning. Hence 'fiction is both a form of writing and a way of reading' too (Leavy, 2016, p. 20).

I drew on fiction writing techniques to create believable characters, scenes and settings, using selective vocabulary such as era-specific terminology and stylistic devices such as foreshadowing, suspense and verisimilitude to bring the reader into the story alongside the characters. Watson (2021, p. 7) describes this combination of processes as crafting a poetic, where fiction 'evoke[s] rather than denote[s] meaning'. For any work of fiction, it is important to provide the reader with a structure that builds the plot in an engaging manner, while simultaneously revealing the complexities attached to the lives of the characters. For example, Raymond's story and his relationship with Mr Sheen have all the ingredients of what Barthes (1974) refers to as a writerly text. The literary devices employed to create a reader's meaning-making autonomy required me to craft a 'complex arrangement of delays, detours, suspense, foreshadowing, etc. that produces "temporal distension" within the text' for the reader (Collington, 2001, p. 223; Ricoeur, 1985).

Ricoeur's (1985) conception of the above-mentioned literary devices draws on notions of emplotment and temporality. Emplotment refers to how the actions of the characters work towards advancing the plot, not only by what they do but also by what they represent in terms of emotional and moral development. The character of

Shane embodies the notion of emplotment due to how his actions work to bring light to the conflict between what he wants to do and what he is expected to do.

Foreshadowing rising tensions through the actions of Shane and his father was a purposeful technique designed to draw the reader into that tension. The instability of such a fractious relationship is compounded not only by how the reader thinks about actions and events as they unfold, but also how they think about how they might be resolved. Ricoeur's (1985) notion of temporality also comes into play here as the reader experiences time on three levels: the being-here, as time is played out in the plot, and in this situation in Shane's world; the not-being-there, in the sense that reader is not actually there because they inhabit their world and the time attached to that; and finally, as previously mentioned, the temporal sequence attached to a moral and social dilemma, where the reader moves forward in the novel to approximate what might happen in terms of a resolution (Dowling, 2011).

### ***Writing the Novel from the Field Texts***

Saying the word data, as I began to comb through the field texts, did not feel right. It conjured thoughts of lineal structure, systematic processes and positivist notions. I racked my brains trying to think of a word to better describe the content of my field texts, unambiguously. Eventually, I drew on Derrida's (1976) notion of *sous rature*, which denotes necessity rather than adequacy, and decided to use the word data for purposes of clarity.

When thinking about the data, I drew on Kincheloe's (2001) notion of bricolage, which comes from a French term and means making use of available tools to complete a task. To avoid superficiality, according to Kincheloe, a bricoleur must look beyond the boundaries of a specific discipline, cast the gaze further afield and adopt an interdisciplinary approach to research. With this in mind, I resolved to move beyond traditional processes of data collection and draw on abstract forms of representation. Kincheloe (2001, p. 689) writes that bricoleurs 'must realise that knowledge is always in process, developing, culturally specific, and power-inscribed', and that to prepare adequately for the research process, researchers must be 'attuned to dynamic relationships connecting individuals, their contexts, and their activities instead of focusing on these separate entities in isolation from one another'.

I therefore became conscious that there were other ways to get at the data that could illuminate and enhance what I had already found (Leavy, 2016). Initially, I had

thought that my data rested in the interviews and artefacts and my journal entries; however, I grew to realise that when creating a performance text to represent data, there is also a need to let the data develop in its own right. By this, I mean that in order to provide the complexities needed to represent the participants and their stories in my novel, I had to draw on not only the information I had unearthed in my literature review but also my own experiences. Leavy (2016) warns that when relying solely on participant-generated data to create a text, there is a danger that the researcher will try to cram everything into a small pool of characters/ settings and scenes. When this occurs, the researcher runs the risk of creating stereotypes, which can diminish the integrity of what the participants have shared.

The bully Patrick, in Archer's story, is a prime example of delving creatively into the field texts to resist a stereotypical portrayal. Patrick was born because of an interview with a participant who, when speaking of a childhood tormentor, said

*I am sure bullies have their own complicated histories and backstories. I think that this needs to be addressed in the novel, otherwise it becomes one dimensional and lacks the social empathy that we should apply to anyone in crisis.* (Participant C)

I agreed, and the character of Patrick was born. Patrick is pushed by his patriarchal father to become a champion football player whilst nursing his own secrets and doubts surrounding his sexuality. To write Patrick into the novel, I used the participant's comment as a seed, which germinated my own and participants' collections of *homophobic* bullies that I/we had encountered in the past. Combining these elements, I then drew on my literature review to add a layered complexity to Patrick's story. Although Patrick is mostly a fictitious character, he is an integral part of the novel due to the questions he raises about assumptions of knowing and the necessity of wider considerations surrounding inherent problems associated with bullying and normative depictions of masculinity.

Patrick illustrates how power is attached to specific identities, and the sometimes-problematic nature of the intersections of identities. I worked to illuminate within the narrative the precarious nature of the social capital Patrick has accrued because of his sporting ability. Hence, his story becomes a battle between his sexual identity and his sporting identity. In writing from this perspective, I have tried to demonstrate 'the mutually constructed nature of social division and the ways these

are experienced, reproduced and resisted in everyday life', and instead of viewing intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm, recognise it as 'a lived experience' where intersections are viewed in social and historical context (Taylor, 2010, pp. 37–38). Without the flexibility of an arts-based approach, Patrick would/could not have existed.

When crafting Shane's story, I tried to understand and get to the heart of Frank's (Shane's father) unrelenting determination to make Shane into a man. To do this, I drew on Butler's (1999) notion of gender performativity and Foucault's (1978) explanation of how of power operates in relation to sexuality. Foucault (1978) argued that the notion of sexuality as a modern production had been transformed from a physical act (sex) that one engages in, to an epistemic evaluation where our sexuality tells us who we are in relation to others – or on the flipside, what our sexuality tells others about us. Butler (1991, p. 160) claims that identity categories such as male and female 'are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary', and in her exploration of gender performativity, she negates essentialist understandings of gender binaries and naturalist assumptions that gender and sex are biologically constructed phenomena. She argues that the performance of sexuality and gender is not to be understood as an act that one opts to do, but 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990, pp. 43-44).

Butler's (1988) theory of performativity draws on Austin's (1962) speech act theory, which examines how language performs actions. However, Butler does not subscribe to Austin's notion that performative utterances are intentional spoken acts (Brickell, 2008). Instead, Butler (1998) understands the repetition of language to be a regulatory illusion, which in relation to gender and sexuality, and in this context, masculinity, 'relies on a cultural code and a shared body of knowledge about how the male [and female] body works in the world' (Davis & Vicars, 2014, p. 85). In this sense, performatives not only work to communicate one's gender identity to others, but also, through constant acts of repetition, actually create it. Althusser's notion of interpellation 'derive[s] from the idea that any language, whether it be verbal, visual, tactile, or whatever, is part of social relations and that in communicating with someone we are reproducing social relationships' (Fiske, 2004, p. 1271). Gillespie



and Cornish (2010, p. 34) have noted how ‘utterances do not only reflect their audience, but they reflect their historical and social context’. Some phrases and words in the novel are indicative of specific eras and the cultural attitudes that infiltrated those times. This helped me to think about the pivotal role utterances and performances of gender and sexuality have had on the Australian cultural landscape, which enabled me to write from both the dominant cultural perspective and from the protagonist’s subaltern experiences.

Spivak (1988, 2005, p. 476) coined the term ‘the subaltern’ to describe ‘a position without identity’, and its usage in the field of sexuality has provided a lens through which to look at how ‘subalternity... do[es] not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action’, or in other words, how it prevents sexual minority voices from being heard and from taking action to overcome their status and rectify their situation. The participants in this research all described having subaltern experiences at school and at home due to the weight and bearing their sexuality had on their ability to participate in those discourses. One of the goals of the novel was to provide readers with the opportunity to develop insights into how it might feel to be without voice and agency. As I wrote, I wanted readers to think about their own experiences alongside those of the protagonists. To do this, I paid particular attention to providing rich narrative descriptions of everyday discourses, such as schools and homes, that most readers would be familiar with. I intentionally framed events and actions within these everyday locations to draw the reader’s attention to how their own experiences in those domains and situations differed from those experienced by subaltern Others (Spivak, 2005).

## ***Ethics***

An essential component of this research was the submission of ethics compliance documentation. To complete this process and obtain ethics approval (Human Research Ethics Committee: Approval Number HRE17-222), I followed the guidelines as set out in *The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007). However, as I began reading around ethical conduct in arts-based research, I developed an understanding that ethical research is not simply about ticking boxes and adhering to specified formalities before one begins fieldwork. It requires ongoing and continuous reflexivity throughout and beyond the life of the research, in which one is critically conscious of the participant/researcher

relationship, the potential for power imbalances and the unwitting ascent of privileged assumptions (Kuri, 2020).

Because one of the research participants was a minor, there was extra rigour involved in the formal aspects of ethics compliance. Bound by the requirement of parental consent (there are ways around this, but they are time-consuming and usually considered too risky in studies involving minors), I was only able to recruit minor participants whose parents were aware and supportive of their sexual orientation. This altered the vision I had of actively seeking representations of diversity in the family experiences of minor participants. It also made me question the ethical underpinnings of the stipulation made by the ethics committee. Is it ethical to deny teenage voices based on the fact that their parents do not know that they are gay? Are the voices of those not in supportive home environments not as important to hear? This 'gate keeping' (Sikes & Piper, 2010, p. 207) is consequential for researchers and their quest for academic freedom due to how the positional power attached to a small group of people can impact the quest for knowledge and impactful thinking and lead to changes in attitudes and practice. One of the overarching aims of the research was to give voice to those who lacked the power or the platform to speak of their experiences, yet they were denied the opportunity to speak by a body that was constituted to protect them.

The safety and security of all participants is always a priority; after all, the primary adage of ethics in research is to do no harm. However, I found that the adult participants involved with this body of work were not as concerned by the risk of deductive exposure as the minor participant was. Hemming (2009, p. 33) argues that those who write the texts are 'the ones who ultimately determine how and to what extent people "speak out" about themselves'. With that in mind, I deliberately altered such things as the physical characteristics of my protagonists and their family dynamics, to minimise any chance of outside recognition. I also regularly sent copies of the drafts that I was working on to each participant for their approval before the words were set in ink. Interestingly, some of the participants did not comment on the drafts, and after a while, did not respond to the emails. Regardless, I sent final drafts to each participant and asked them to let me know if there were any sections that they wanted altered or left out. I was conscious of the novel's potential to impact on

their lives and relationships, and wanted to make sure that they were comfortable with the result (Sikes, 2012).

With regard to the minor participant, some (re)experienced stories detailed in the transcripts were rewritten to represent themes rather than adhering to specific events, not only to protect him from disclosure but to minimise any emotional pain. His vulnerability gave me pause, not only in terms of how I represented him in the novel, but also in terms of how I approached the practice of reflexively applying situated ethics. Ebrahim (2010, p. 289) describes situated ethics as ‘the notion that all ethical acts are constructed and practiced in particular contexts where researchers make in situ decisions’. Not long after I sat down with the minor participant, such ethical ‘in situ decisions’ were swirling in my head. As the minor (re)experienced events from his school without elaborating on the affective state attached to them, my initial impulse was to probe for more details in subsequent interviews. However, as the interview progressed, I became aware of the level of discomfort that he displayed when talking about events that were rooted in emotional pain and made the decision to work with what he was prepared to tell me, rather than what I wanted to hear.

Wolcott’s (2002) account of a young squatter in *Sneaky kid and its aftermath: ethics and intimacy in fieldwork*, shows how fictionalised stories can examine and explore the intricacies and complexities of human lives. Wolcott’s interviews with a young squatter demonstrate the ethical importance of diverse ways of knowing. Walcott used the squatter’s firsthand experience to trace the failures and inadequacies of American schooling systems and communities, and in doing so was able to probe his lived experience to generate rich data that could not have been generated using traditional research techniques (Kuri, 2020). This research is based on a similar ethical duty of care, one that champions and exposes marginal stories and experiences, and in doing so responds to heteronormative assumptions and the power imbalances that have occurred/do occur because of them.

## Analysis & Discussion

### *Working the Field Texts*

The participant interviews and resulting field texts framed my research and provided the impetus for the novel. The emergent nature of my research meant that I did not go in search of predetermined themes; rather, I let them to rise to the surface through my deep involvement and familiarity with the field texts. This was achieved by reading and rereading them, listening to them, and consciously placing myself within the stories to imagine how it might feel to engage with the life worlds of the participants. And my analysis did not simply rest with the field texts and interviews; rather, they became a part of my writing process, in both the novel and my reflective journal. This is described by Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2018, p. 1415) as a creative analytical process (CAP) in which ‘the writing process and the writing product [are] deeply intertwined; both are privileged’. My interpretation of the field texts changed several times as I wrote. The emphasis I placed on events, people, time and affective states ebbed and flowed, meandering in several directions until the stories crystallised in my head and on paper. Richardson and Adams St. Pierre’s (2018, p. 1417) notion of crystallisation, in the context of this research, can be explained as the novel providing the reader ‘with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic’.

Brown (2012, p. 541) contends that ‘there is a steadfast consensus that for geographies of sexuality to be truly queer they cannot focus exclusively on sexuality per se but must also consider its connection with other dimensions of identity’. In order to deconstruct the finite category of sexuality, it was essential to take into account how all identity attributes and discourses of belonging contributed to the queer lives of those interviewed (Fotopoulou, 2012). Thinking about the blurred intersectional lines of identity was paramount as I began to formulate how I would (re)present the multifaceted elements of lives as they had been described to me. I was aware of the importance of unearthing queer counternarratives in an effort to disrupt the status quo and challenge hegemonic conjectures about what such lives might be like. One way that I enacted this was to emphasise how the geographical and historical contexts of each story in the novel shaped the lives of the participants. Within the novel, Australia is given an identity, and my writing reflects the effect that has on thinking, attitudes and actions across the decades. This macro-identity was a

carefully constructed literary device, purposefully woven throughout the text to demonstrate the impact that cultural appropriation of heteronormativity has on assumptions and understandings of social and political discourse.

Immersing myself in the CAP process brought into focus the significance of Australia as an overseeing entity in the participants' lives. Australia's heterogeneous nature meant that there were vast differences in how participants narrated their youth, and in thinking carefully about this, I came to realise that the novel had to represent not only the participants but also Australia in all its shapes and temporal forms. As I wrote, read and listened, I identified several significant themes and focal points that would form the basis of the novel: the politics, the years that governed youth, the conflict, the solidarity. Voices telling their own stories, while simultaneously telling us a larger social 'truth'.

### ***Analysis***

In the following section, I provide an analysis of the themes that emerged from my reading of the field texts. For clarity, each participants has been assigned a letter that corresponds with their age group:

- i. Participants A and B experienced youth in the 1970s.
- ii. Participants C and D experienced youth in the 1980s.
- iii. Participants E and F experienced youth in the 2010s.

School, sport and sex education emerged as one domain, where the fear of being outed hindered the ability to participate. Family life was reported by many to be battle ground, ruled by an expectation to adhere to heterosexual norms. Religion was discussed as having a negative effect on the psyche as well as being riddled with hypocrisy. Finally, geographical location was described as being particularly impactful for those dwelling in rural/provincial locations.

### ***Schooling***

Participants who experienced youth and attended high school in the 1970s did not describe instances of bullying based on the enaction and intonation of 'homophobia'. The 1970s were pre-AIDS, and as discussed in my literature review, the sexual liberation had, for some social groups, created a relaxing of attitudes toward homosexuals in Australia (Wotherspoon, 2016). Based on the interviews, I suggest

that this trickled down only in the form of silence in schools and the home, which stood in place of overt homophobia. Suppressing sexuality had a layered impact on social and academic advancement. Being out was not socially viable, and participants expressed an inability to fully participate with their peers socially, which led to disengagement from school and thwarted academic advancement:

*I don't remember anyone getting a hard time because of their sexuality. I didn't think it was necessary to tell my friends that I was gay and even now when I think about it, I wasn't really socialising with many of the people from school. Looking back on it, was probably that I wasn't comfortable going out with the boys from school and I didn't have a core group of friends. I was a bit of a loner and didn't involve myself much in school life, which was probably why I left school as soon as I could.*  
(Participant B)

Rolling forward a decade, participants who attended secondary school the 1980s reported a different experience from those in the 1970s. The AIDS epidemic had changed the Australian social landscape and ramped up incidents of homophobic language and behaviour (Power, 2011). Participants from this era talked of having to hide their sexuality and seeing firsthand (in school and at home) the negative impact of being gay. Homophobic language was used routinely in schools, and being – or being or thought of as – gay meant total social ostracism. Both participants discussed the pressure to do subjects and sports deemed to be ‘masculine’. Participant D remembered being forced to pursue science subjects rather than the arts, and remarked that it changed the trajectory of his career options in later years.

Although the youngest participants described a liberalising of familial attitudes and actions, this contrasted significantly with their experiences of school. Both reported that being considered gay led to ostracism from and harassment by peers. They recalled how teachers often did nothing to support them after incidents of bullying, noting that there were no clear policies put in place at their schools (Participant F later changed schools) to deal with discriminatory behaviour and/or language referring to their sexual orientation. Participant F said:

*Some teachers told me just to ignore it [derogatory remarks about his sexuality]. You can't ignore it. To ignore it is very like primary school, where that's what you're told to do. What a lot of adults fail to understand*

*is that that doesn't work, you can't just ignore it. There was no choice but to accept it.*

Participant E went to a coeducational school and Participant F began his secondary schooling at an all-boys school, leaving in Year 9 to go to a progressive (coeducational) school. Finding friendship within the male cohort at these schools was described as impossible because:

*None of the boys wanted to have someone who was considered gay as a friend, because that would make them a target too. (Participant E)*

Participant F's parents removed him from the school after a significant bullying incident. They shopped around and found a school that was an active participant in the Safe Schools Program, promoting inclusion for LGBTIQ+ students. Both participants stressed the importance of having anti-discrimination policies in place in schools and the need for a top-down approach to inclusion within the school hierarchy. The social and academic benefits of this were evidenced by Participant F, who experienced firsthand the difference between a school that adopted inclusionary policies and one that did not. Once established in a Safe School, he reported forming meaningful friendships with male and female students and improved his academic results significantly due to feeling safe and secure. He noted:

*When I was at my old school, I was doing pretty average with my work. It was always the same at every parent teacher interview. "He could do well if you put in more effort". I was passing, except for maths but I was always in the 60s or below. At that time, I just didn't care enough, and I hated it...but now I'm at a school where my parents are not even paying fees, just elective fees and books and I'm doing really well because I'm not worrying about all the other shit.*

Although Australian society has progressed in terms of LGBTIQ+ rights, the experiences of Participants E and F demonstrate that there is still considerable work to be done. For them, school was still a dangerous zone, with social consequences meted out for enactments of sexuality that fell outside the homo/heterosexual binary. The novel documents the similarities and differences in the schooling experiences of all participants, asking the question: *How much has changed over a fifty-year period for same-sex attracted youth in schools?* However, I purposefully did not attempt to answer this in a specific and direct manner. Rather, it is explored through teaching pedagogies, school culture and the effect both have on the protagonists in terms of

self-worth, self-efficacy and self-actualisation across the different eras (Bandura, 1992; Maslow, 1943).

### **Sex Education – The Heterosexist Version**

Sex education, for all participants, was taught in a manner that reinforced notions of morality and advocated heterosexual orientation. For the oldest participants, it was described as being taught in a fleeting manner that focussed on the birds and the bees with Catholic undertones. Participant B remembered being given a book called *Catholic Boy's Guide to Adolescence*, which centred around abstinence before marriage and reinforced an obligatory adherence to heterosexual practices (Connell, 1995). Although both participants recalled having (homo)sexual urges, they both stated that there was nowhere to obtain information about their desires other than what they could garner from peers: *'They only talked about girls, who were completely objectified. Sex was talked about in vulgar kind of way. I couldn't relate to it at all. It was horrifying to me'* (Participant A).

In the 1980s, sex education was entrenched in the curriculum; however, the participants talked about it being fearmongering and biologically focussed. The mechanical and reproductive elements were emphasised, and there was no reference to pleasure, love or respect. This reflected the pervading sociocultural climate, where homosexuality was synonymous with the AIDS virus. Within the novel, Shane is confronted by the parochial mentality of men from a religious order who proclaim that there is no protection from the insidious homosexual virus: this mirrors an event in one of the transcripts and sheds light on the effect of such instruction. These views were also described by participants as having had a long-term negative effect on how they perceived themselves in relation to their sexuality:

*In those classes (sex education) I wished that I was a woman, because you can hide the fact that you don't enjoy sex, because there is no requirement of interaction, and I could never fake an erection. That terrified me. If I was a woman, I could just lay there and do what was expected, which is terrible now to think about.* (Participant C)

*There are opposite end points of comparison for Participant E's and F's experiences of sex education in school. At their mainstream schools, the focus of sex education was on safe heterosexual sex (i.e., avoiding sexually transmitted diseases), contraception to prevent pregnancy and heterosexual*



*notions of biological function. However, when Participant F moved to a school that utilised the inclusion resources outlined by the Safe School Coalition documentation, the focus shifted:*

*At my new school sex education was about it being safe and being loving but they didn't bring up anything like that at my old school. They talked about homosexuality at my new school too. They focussed on it being safe, loving and that consent was always a focus. (Participant F)*

*The emphasis this school placed on emotional and physical welfare and sexual diversity produced a positive change in how Participant F viewed himself and his sexual identity. The online messages exchanged by Patrick and Archer in the novel (re)present the shift in the mindsets of both boys over time. Archer's move to a new school where he is validated shows Patrick that there is a world where he too can exist free from many of the heterosexist shackles that he accepts as givens.*

### **Winning At All Costs – Sport**

Interestingly, all participants shared negative connotations with school sport, despite whether they were good at it or not. Participants who were already targeted at school because of assumptions made about their sexuality reported that organised school sport made them feel particularly vulnerable, and more exposed to bullying and name calling:

*I think that's why didn't like school sports because the reins were off. Whereas if I had my class structure, even if I knew someone was going to be awful, I was emotionally prepared. (Participant D)*

Participant F reported that his peers' mindset changed considerably during sport due to what he described as *pack mentality*. Heterosexist language was bandied around, with phrases like: *You dropped it you fag* and, *You're playing like a poof*, used routinely. This was not reserved for those they perceived as gay; rather, it applied to all. Storr et al.'s (2021) study of LGBTIQ+ youth in Australian sport reports that this type of behaviour and vernacular is expected and normalised in sport, leaving LGBT+ youth reluctant or frightened to participate:

*We played basketball once and I was told that I was not good enough. I was pushed to the sideline, and the teacher brought a different guy in and that was awful. He (the teacher) viewed me as a weak little boy. He*

*was so friendly with the other boys; he would always laugh when they would make jokes about me. There was a big difference to the way he treated me and the other boys.* (Participant E)

Participants C, D, E and F described how physical education teachers often covertly empowered heterosexist language and conduct, either by brushing it off as a joke or by ignoring it altogether. For them, one of the most problematic parts of school sport was its compulsory aspect, which forced them to contend with heterosexist conduct. The lack of protection in this environment not only caused considerable damage to their self-esteem, but also, for the most part, turned them off team sport in general. Those who went on to engage in regular physical activity did so in a solitary manner, for example in a gym. One participant described how the trauma of being bullied in this context has permeated his psyche: *I often have anxiety when I see groups of men together. Especially in sports uniforms* (Participant F).

### **Family Affairs**

What became obvious in the field texts was the overarching influence and control fathers had on many of the participants' lives. The father/gay son relationship was revealed as a complex and often fractious dynamic, particularly for the participants who experienced youth in the 1980s when homophobic attitudes and societal fearmongering were generated by the arrival of the AIDS virus in Australia (the early part of Shane's story reflects this period). Participant C spoke about the changing nature of the rules his father had in relation to the performance of masculinity and the lack of definition surrounding what was acceptable or not, which left him feeling anxious and unsure of how he should behave. Bourdieu's (2001, p. 9) notion that 'the strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification' is explored throughout the novel through Patrick's and Shane's fathers, Terry and Frank. Both closely monitor their sons throughout their formative years. There is an expectation that Shane and Patrick will reproduce and enact hegemonic versions of masculinity that allow for no deviation from heterosexuality. Patrick, the champion football player, must be the best at all costs to fill the void and feeling of inferiority in Terry's life. Frank, on the other hand, sees it as his duty to teach Shane how to be a man, handing out punitive consequences for any perceived deviation. Both fathers claim that doing so is in their sons' best interests, when really it comes from a self-serving motivation: it is their perception of their self-worth that is on the

line, rather than their sons'. Neither man questions his motivation, feeling that it is his right/job as a father to turn out a fanciful version of himself and how he aspires to be seen.

Having a gay son was, according to Participants C and D, considered a great social shame, and the lack of community acceptance of homosexuality fuelled both of their fathers to harshly sanction behaviour they considered effeminate. In later years, both remarked that their fathers said that they did this out of care and concern, and thought that it was in their best interests. Both participants recalled that their mothers did not defend them during altercations, but also that they were not as aggressive in their pursuit of what Participant C describes as '*turning me straight*'.

The participants who were teens in the 2010s described the support of their mothers as consistent, and for the most part positive. There was a notable shift in maternal attitude and actions compared to previous generations, with these participants describing their mothers as allies and as unconcerned by any social implications that might arise from having a gay son. The participants' fathers, however, had different attitudes to their sexuality. Participant E reported that his father was embarrassed by (what he perceived as) feminine character traits he displayed and suggested (rather than ordered) that he *tone it down* when in public. In contrast, Participant F's father was a strong advocate and actively championed his right to participate in school and community domains without adverse effect. Compared to previous generations (1980s fathers), the combined attitudes of these fathers suggest a waning of the fear attached to the social stigma of having a gay son, as well as a notable reduction in hostile and aggressive enforcement of heterosexual rules and conventions. Additionally, Participant F described his extended family as strong allies who viewed his sexuality as non-defining. He recalled, '*When my mum told my uncle that I was gay, he said, "That matters to me as much as what I'm going to put on my toast in the morning"*'. However, both participants described their fathers as lenient in comparison to those of their gay peers. Words such as lucky and not typical were used in relation to their family experiences: '*The way my dad is to me is very unique. I have friends whose dads treat them like shit, just because they're gay. I know I'm lucky to have a dad who doesn't care*' (Participant F). The notion of good fortune in relation to parental acceptance of sexuality suggests that the participants view this kind of support as

conditional, and not something to be taken for granted. They recognised that there is still plenty of bigotry about amongst parents of children in this generation, and as such, landing parents not like that is 'lucky'.

In the context of the family environment, neither of the oldest participants articulated that their parents made any overt mention of non-normative enactments of sexuality. Despite Participant A's family not mentioning homosexuality in any shape or form, however, he was tacitly aware that there was no room for revelations about his sexuality: *'Even though nothing was ever said. I just knew it was something that was wrong and best kept to myself'*. The nature of Participant B's home environment, which was governed by incidents of domestic violence, meant that any concerns he had might have had about discovery were superseded by the chaos in his home. He said, *'My parents were totally consumed by each other's behaviour, so me being gay was never on their radar'*.

### ***Religion – A Panoptic Presence***

The influence of religion on participants' life worlds varied considerably. They (this was unintentional sampling) were predominantly born and raised Catholic, with some more devout than others. The youngest participants were the least influenced by religious practice, with one having no religious affiliation and the other describing his family as *'lapsed Catholics'* despite sending him (initially) to a conservative Catholic school that integrated religious beliefs and traditions into day-to-day routine.

All the participants who were baptised Catholic reported that in some form or another, Catholicism had had a detrimental effect on their lives. For many, this effect came predominantly from the Catholic belief that homosexuality is/was a sin. This was described by Participant D as an *internal torture* that embedded fear and anxiety into his head and heart. Other participants spoke of being convinced that unless they lived what they deemed a *good Catholic life*, or in other words a heterosexual life, they would end up going to Hell. Participant D described his association with the church as attending a *twenty-year conversion therapy camp*:

*It wasn't like there were sermons delivered that expressly told me that being gay was wrong. It was more subtle than that. It was drummed into me that good Catholics were expected to...you know...get married, have kids and all those things that straight people do. Being gay and Catholic was not viable.*

The younger participants expressed a strong perception of hypocrisy in relation to both church doctrines and the attitudes and actions of the church community. Notions of kindness and compassion for *those less fortunate* were perceived as a double standard, and it was noted that: *'people in church talk a lot about caring for other people but I didn't feel like they cared about me'* (Participant F). For some participants, this led to feelings of anger, but for others it reinforced the belief that being gay was sinful: *'It was like being a paedophile, in that you didn't feel like you could expect or ask for any compassion, kindness or help from people in the church'* (Participant D).

Interestingly, despite their negative experiences, some participants reported that they continued to pray to a higher being when troubled: *'It's just ingrained. I suppose I don't really buy into the whole Jesus, God and Mary thing, but I hope that there's something beyond this'* (Participant A). I would suggest that despite their negative experiences, some participants were able to compartmentalise, replacing the formal, indoctrinated beliefs of religion with a non-denominational form of Christianity and/or a personal sense of spirituality. When reflecting on their experiences in relation to how they now feel about religion, the clear message from all participants was that religion and spirituality should be more concerned with kindness, compassion and accepting differences, rather than judgement and binary rules that lead to division and categories of 'them and us.'

### ***I Still Call Australia Home***

Australia's diverse and sizeable geography meant that there was a vast difference in where participants lived and the effect their locations had on their life world experiences along with the era in which each participant experienced youth. Some participants' teenage years were marked by the crushing weight of rampant homophobia, whereas for others there were glimmers of a new dawn and the feeling that once out of youth, their sexuality would fade into the background and assume a less central role in their lives.

Participants who grew up in rural/regional locations described feeling claustrophobic in their small communities, as they offered little variation in attitudes towards sexuality. The close-mindedness and dominant viewpoints were described as deeply inscribed. Any perceived challenge by people who moved beyond the binaries of heterosexuality was reported to have social consequences:

*I remember my grandmother and aunts talking about this guy called Bevan who was selling menswear in Mackay, and my grandmother said, "Oh, he's a funny fella". My aunt and my mother spoke in whispery tones when they talked about him. (Participant D)*

The social rigidity of small-town life, coupled with a lack of obvious sexual diversity, meant that participants had little opportunity to meet, see or interact with anyone not heterosexual. Although they acknowledged that there must have been other gay people in their communities, the enforcement of socially acceptable performances of sexuality (heterosexuality) forced people into hiding. This lack of gay visibility promoted a sense of wrongdoing in relation to being gay and shut down thoughts of living as anything other than heterosexual. Participant D described living in two worlds: *'one was real, and the other was in my head'*. It was in his head that he allowed himself the luxury of imagining what it might mean to be gay: *'I became infatuated with Greg Louganis the diver. I can't even remember which Olympics it was but as soon as I saw him on television, I became infatuated and fantasied about him all the time'*.

Although city-dwelling participants echoed some of these sentiments, some of the older participants also reported that their exposure to a larger social network provided an opportunity to observe queer people outside of their social/family circles. Participant B, who grew up in the 1970s, recalled how knowing that two teachers at his school were lesbians helped to normalise his sexuality:

*Seeing them made me feel ... you know, not as alone. I mean if the teachers were lesbian then it made it all seem less like a big deal. I never said anything to them, but I knew they were gay ladies. You know what a gaydar is? You just know. (Participant B)*

For the youngest participant, living in the city gave him access to support groups and LGBTIQ+ social networks that were not available to his country peers. He reported that going to Minus 18 (an organisation that hosts events and support for LGBTIQ+ teens) gave him the opportunity to speak with other gay youth about issues that straight teens did not understand:

*I had a very interesting conversation with someone at Minus 18, once. He's gay as well, and he said he uses that word [gay] as well about himself. But he was like, "But I don't like it when straight people use it". I was like "Why?", but then I thought about it, and I said, "Well I don't*

*mind it when people say it in a certain way, there are certain ways to say things". (Participant F)*

Participant E's involvement with Minus 18 not only enabled him to make friends but also provided him with the ability to counteract the negativity experienced in his school life. Meeting other gay youth led to online connections that were readily available and enabled him to continue discussion about his sexuality, unpack problems and seek ongoing support. Rural youth who do not have access to such organisations in a physical sense are cut off from the opportunity to find peers who might understand what they are going through. Morandini et al.'s (2015) study reports that this invisibility for rural Australian LGBTIQ+ youth heightens stigma and ostracism, and has led to a greater incident of poor mental health and suicide amongst rural gay teens. This study correlated with multiple participants' accounts of rural/regional experiences of youth, as they all fled to the city as soon as they were able:

*At that period of my life, I didn't think that the whole world was a horrible place, but I knew for sure that it was horrible to be gay where I lived. I left as soon as I could. (Participant C)*

Although the city was seen as a more desirable location to reside, participants reported that *where* they lived in conjunction with *when* they lived told a more complete story of how they were shaped by growing up in Australia.

### ***Temporality***

During the last fifty years Australia has undergone many social and political changes. For each participant, the era of their youth was marked with its own set of contextual challenges. Many of their experiences were shaped by Australia's political and social landscape, which in turn shaped their understanding of themselves in relation to others. As mentioned previously, the 1980s and 1990s were particularly turbulent for participants. The AIDS epidemic had a rippling social effect, with some state governments introducing legislation that actively discriminated against the LGBTIQ+ community. Participants who lived during this time described how these laws and their anti-gay message (coming loud and clear from the Queensland government in particular) emboldened vigilante groups: *'I remember the AIDS Council had their windows smashed in in Townsville and I just got this overwhelming sense of brutal homophobia in that part of Australia'* (Participant D).

For the participants who experienced youth in the 2000s, the impact of the gay marriage debate, which generated intense media coverage, public debate and social media commentary, was described as *'stressful and frustrating'*. There was a feeling of being spotlighted and an expectation to weigh in on the debate: *'It was like...just because I'm gay, people brought it up with me all the time'* (Participant E). The gay marriage debate also spilled over into renewed opposition to the Safe Schools Program, which was particularly stressful for Participant F. His firsthand experience of the benefit of the Program's inclusive policy added to his feelings of frustration and anger. In particular, the contentious and oppositional campaign led by religious and conservative groups was perceived as a targeted attack that made him worry that his Safe School might be jeopardised: *'Why do people care so much about things that have nothing to do with them? Anyway, aren't Christians and religious people supposed to be kind?'* (Participant F).

Regardless of the era or location that participants inhabited, there was a commonly echoed sentiment that being gay involved constant navigation and negotiation of often-unstable political and social turf. It is interesting that despite the many social advancements that have been made legislatively in Australia, it was the youngest participants and not the oldest who reported that their sexuality had had a negative effect on their ability to participate in school. The political and social kickbacks, I would suggest, have been the driving forces behind these experiences. The golden age of the 1970s was but a brief period in which Australia seemed to relax a little, and participants were not as defined by their sexuality as subsequent generations. But unlike participants from the 1980s, Participant E, at fifteen, was developing confidence in who he was and what it means to be gay. Despite experiences of adversity in his early teens, his outlook on life has changed. His new development of self-worth and self-assurance is testimony to what an LGBTIQ+ life can and should look like. He is one of the self-described *lucky ones* who exemplifies what can happen when schools, peers and families align, support and advocate inclusively for LGBTIQ+ youth:

*Mum and Dad gave me this book called This Book is Gay, and everyone should read it. It doesn't just cover the acts of sex... it goes into all sorts of questions and thoughts you might have. It has a section that says welcome to the members club, and it has another bit where it says let's play the name game, it covers stereotypes. It explains that when you*



*come out, you get to meet people like you which is really good. Like, as I get older, I can choose who I am around and where I want work, and that makes me feel, you know...happy.* (Participant E)

### ***Sexuality – Beyond the Straight and Narrow***

The participants in the study rejected the notion of childhood innocence, with all expressing that they regularly thought about their sexuality in their youth. There was a strong sense that disapproval of same-sex attraction, whether conveyed by omission or by explicit instruction, had a detrimental effect on self-perception and self-esteem. The absence of discussion and transparency around anything other than heterosexuality featured strongly in the field texts. I therefore juxtaposed the constant reinforcement of heterosexuality with the inner dialogue of the protagonists in my novel. We see this in how Shane wrestles with his attraction for the archetype of heterosexuality, Jimmy. Shane perceives his external world to be entirely heterosexual. The sex education he receives at school, his family and his peers all ply him with overt and covert messages that lead him to believe that to get on in the world, heterosexuality is compulsory (Rich, 1980).

Passing as heterosexual was considered by participants to be an essential part of surviving youth. The only exception to this was in the case of the youngest participant, who after moving to an inclusive school felt comfortable with revealing his sexual identity in that environment. Some participants imagined a gay life beyond the confines of their family and school lives, whereas for others, the thought of being true to their sexual identity was unfathomable. It took years for those participants to come out after leaving these environments, and even then, doing so was fraught with emotional upheaval and family rejection. All participants consider that they have permanent scarring from youth, despite years (for some) of ongoing therapy:

*For the most part I'm fine but then every once and a while, I am transported back to childhood. The triggers are varied but the feeling is always the same. Fear, anxiety and the overwhelming feeling that I don't belong* (Participant C).

## Discussion

‘The Road Not Taken’

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Frost (2013, p. 8)

### ***Releasing Myself from Methodological Tethers***

After collecting the field texts, my head swirled (anxiously) with thoughts about utilising the right methodological process of analysis to write the novel. I began by reading an array of scholarly literature, with my eyes fixed on illustrious social science research methodologies that offered certainty and stability. I was seeking explanation of how to enact conventional rules of writing and analysis, or in other words, the rules of old (St. Pierre, 2020). Deleuze and Parnet’s (2002, p. 8) adage that ‘to encounter is to find, to capture, to steal, but there is no method for finding other than a long preparation’ proved to be accurate, as it took extensive reading to see how research such as mine can be conducted without methodological constraint. Armed with this knowledge and an adjustment of mindset, I was able to see past the realm of the old (the preexisting methodological approaches used in social science research) and enter that of the new; a postfoundational approach to research, which is not a rejection of the old, but rather a thoroughfare to doing things differently (St Pierre, 2021).

Postfoundational research does not rely on paradigmatic inscriptions of method; rather, it draws on philosophical concepts that advocate the importance of fluidity, liminality and the reorientation of thought (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994; St Pierre, 2021). Thinking beyond what is already known and from outside methodological structure are hallmarks of postfoundationalism. In this research, I have come to realise that writing, interpreting and analysis are ongoing processes that rely on reflexivity and can change and shift depending on who the reader/researcher/participant is, how they are feeling and how experience may have shaped their interpretation. Something might mean one thing to one person, but hold

an entirely different meaning for another, depending on how they are situated in the world (Sikes & Goodson, 2016).

In this research, meaning-making is best understood through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, which describes how individual experience affects how one reads the world (Howell, 2012; Ricoeur, 2004). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's interpretive philosophical work surrounding phenomenological hermeneutics, I contend that there are no rules or procedures that humans follow to make meaning; rather, understanding comes from an individual reading of how one is placed in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). The 'here and now' of personal experience means that one can never view a situation from an objective standpoint (Howell, 2012, p. 62). We are all intrinsically linked to the world we live in, and therefore we all view it from a subjective position, where our own unique historical lived experiences determine how we interpret and make meaning from any given situation. Ricoeur (1992) argues that an individual's interpretation of the world will always be different to another's due to the uniqueness of human experience, and accordingly, 'the more one interprets the more one finds not the fixed meaning of a text, or of the world, but only other interpretations' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2014, p. 107). Therefore, the purpose of my novel was not to answer questions and throw up certainties, but to engage with meandering thoughts, to challenge what is thought to be known.

The novel can therefore be seen as emergent. When I first put pen to paper, I did not have a plan, just a loose collection of thoughts that spilled onto the page in random groups of words and messy paragraphs. I did not know how all the stories would be linked, or how the novel might end. I did not have a clear image of who the characters were, what they might sound like or how they might look. My writing started experimentally, constantly changing direction and speed until gradually I began to see and hear who the characters were, what they might say and what they might do.

I did not write the novel to mirror the interview transcripts. Rather, I wrote it in parts as a response to the emotions and essence of stories conveyed to me by the interview participants. Some events in the novel are closely aligned with the field texts, while others are fictional, but written from a participant's position or perspective. As I listened to the audio of the interviews, I often was drawn to the catches in throats, the silences between sentences and the retrospective chuckles

that peppered some stories. These affective states often held more meaning for me than the narratives that followed. Tracking my emotional responses to the transcripts, I noted parts of the transcript that stirred me and asked myself: *What is it about this that hits my gut?* I then used my journal to flesh out my thoughts, writing notes about how a feeling could be used in the narrative. Guilt, shame and fear were the core of some passages, with the narrative often built around an affective state rather than an event.

### ***Representation & Verisimilitude***

Postmodern and poststructuralist approaches to qualitative research such as this are often negatively critiqued as not being rooted in quantifiable constructs of reality, proof and truth (Banks & Banks, 1998; Jacobson & Larsen, 2014). Sparkes (1995) argues that there is a place for a variety of forms of representation in qualitative research. He argues that instead of viewing one as more legitimate than the other (e.g., classic forms over arts-based forms) we should instead consider them all as pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle, with their own merits and viabilities as forms of social description.

All of the interview participants described how their sexuality has, in one form or another, impeded their ability to participate in their life worlds. Accordingly, the novel has not been written to read the world from a specific vantage point, view through a specific lens or tell a certain story. Instead, I suggest, it 'is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted "stabilities"' (Nash & Browne 2010, p. 7; see also McRuer, 2002). By fictionalising the participants' stories, I have given readers a key to enter their worlds virtually, and in doing so unlock their imagination to picture what those lives might be like. Leavy (2013) claims that to do this, the writer must delve into the nitty-gritty of stories and create characters that have emotional depth and are believable as people that readers might know from their own worlds. Dadds (2008, p. 280) writes that:

Empathetic validity is used to transform the emotional dispositions of people towards each other, such that more positive feelings are created between them in the form of greater empathy. Related to the growth of empathy is the enhancement of interpersonal understanding and compassion.

Lather (2012) argues that in these neo-liberal times, to understand the world we must venture past quantifiable notions that claim certainty about knowledge and instead place emphasis on affective states such as empathy. When a reader connects on an emotional level with a story and the characters within it, they get to view that person and their life world through a different set of eyes. Bruner (2010, p. 46) states that ‘the stories we tell ourselves and each other are judged on a criterion of verisimilitude rather than upon the more demanding criterion of verifiability.’

Verisimilitude is created when the reader is drawn into an authentic, sensory experience, and the point of fictional ethnographic writing is to enable an approximation of a lived experience, and by inhabiting that life to examine the bigger ‘truths’ of the human condition. Creating verisimilitude within this novel was a laborious process that involved all-encompassing research. As I planned the novel, I was aware of the importance of creating lifelike descriptions of characters and their sociocultural worlds within the plots and settings (Leavy, 2016). To research Raymond’s surrounds, for example, I used the Internet, reference books and the participants’ artefacts as ethnographic tools. I catalogued photographs that provided visual images of houses, streetscapes and fashion, which assisted me in writing from a 1970s perspective. I would often stop writing mid-sentence and ask myself: *What would Raymond wear? How would it make him feel?* Not until I could visualise him, his actions and his words, would I continue to write. My aim was to transport the audience into Raymond’s world through descriptions that were ‘so transparent, natural, and real that we’ve forgotten they’re fictions. We accept them as truth’ (St Pierre, 2011, p. 623). Of specific note was Raymond’s relationship with Mr Sheen. As the participant told me this story, I was certain that Mr Sheen was a predator, and waited with bated breath for a final revelation that would confirm my suspicions. This did not occur, and the participant declared that Mr Sheen had *honest intentions*, but in a subsequent interview he revealed that (re)experiencing that part of his youth had made him start to question himself and his perception of it. ‘*Nothing happened between us so I’d say it was above board*’, he said during our last meeting.

I felt torn about how to (re)present this in the novel. My journal entry reflects my dilemma:

*I kept waiting for xxxx to tell me that the teacher sexually abused him and when he stopped talking, my mouth hung open. The story screamed of grooming but xxxx spoke about it in such an affirming way. If he'd been the underage participant in this research, I'd have felt compelled to report it under the mandatory reporting act. I really don't know how to make sense of this story, let alone write about it.*

After a certain amount of deliberation, I concluded that it was not my reading of the participant's recollection that was paramount, but my ability to recount it in accordance with how it was (re)presented to me. This conceptualising aligned with Jones (2012), who deems that to engage contextually with research we must be prepared to distance ourselves from linear interpretations of the world and the communities that inhabit them. Challenging notions of established research precedents? and being 'willing to jettison some of the baggage of the old academic rigor and dry procedural ethics' helped to finally reconcile my decision to remove my preconceived thoughts and values from the equation and write the story from the participants' adolescent perspective (Jones, 2012, p. 4).

Ethnographic narratives, it has been suggested, go beyond visualising representations of a story and require thick descriptions to attend to the intricacies that bring stories alive (Geertz, 1973). Denzin (1989, p. 83) notes:

A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.

Utilising thick descriptions within the novel has enabled me to breathe life into its narratives and contextualise the experiential temporality of the social nature of humans. Thick descriptions not only bring characters alive in the mind but also in the heart, where they resonate and live beyond the reading process.

### ***Resonance: A Messy Affair***

One of the underlying goals of this research has been to disseminate firsthand accounts of the effects of heteronormativity to people who may not understand or have thought about the impact that everyday words, actions and attitudes can have on the lives of same-sex-attracted people. Jones (2006, p. 67) describes arts-based research such as this as a way of ‘exploring the possibilities of “performative” social science’. When researchers deviate from traditional, mapped scientific reporting of human relationships and positioning, they open further possibilities for the construction of knowledge due to the widening scope for audience participation and the injected appeal of creative (re)presentations of life experiences.

Leavy (2017) explains how literary neuroscience (that is, the effects different forms of reading have on the brain) has demonstrated how fiction has greater impact on levels of reading engagement than other forms of prose. She writes that ‘fiction is a vehicle not only for greater immersion in what we read, but also what we get out of what we read’ (Leavy, 2016, p. 194). Creative approaches to research such as this invite readers to ‘fill gaps in the text with personal meanings’, and the interplay between what is known and what is found is enhanced by aesthetic attention to rich description, which works to draw readers into another’s world (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 97). In this research, emphasis has been placed on involving the reader in the text as an active participant, making their own interpretive meaning and ascertaining how their positionality is juxtaposed with those whom they are reading about. This is evidenced in how the ambiguities of Mr Sheen and Raymond’s relationship requires the reader to write themselves into the text, and formulate their own meaning and understanding of the relationship.

Barthes (1974) contends that a writerly text requires a reader’s active participation and involvement as writer and co-producer, unlike a readerly text, which is a passive site already inscribed with preordained outcomes and static meanings. Barthes (1974, pp. 4-5) describes the ideal text as one that does not distinguish between the writer and the reader due to how:

the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be

the main one; the codes it mobilises extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable ...

Barthes's notion of the writerly text can be linked to Bourriaude's (2002) theoretical concept of relational aesthetics, which postulates a foundation for the intermingling of art, human condition and social context. Art as relational is 'art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space' (Bourriaude, 2002, p. 14). The power of this fusion, he asserts, is not in the emotional response or the participatory element of the spectator; it is their agency and what occurs because of the interaction that is paramount: 'what matters is what is done with this type of emotion: what [the emotions] are steered towards, how the artist organises them among themselves, and to what intent' (Bourriaude, 2002, p. 64).

The novel as a research process and product should therefore be viewed as a series of contextual threads woven together to recreate the past with the hope of reflexively changing the future (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013). Its purpose does not rest with the interaction that occurs between the reader and the text; its power is in how it moves beyond the reading and opens institutional dialogue, questions and accountability, as well as how it resonates in the heart and the head. Bourriaude (2002) reinforces this in his understanding of how agency can occur as art and act as a conduit between social context, human condition and interpretation.

### ***And So What?***

Living in a particular moment where research such as this is contested, I feel compelled to both defend its purpose and advocate for its importance. Writing a novel to (re)present the experiences of my research participants has shown me its value across many levels. To begin with, it is an affirmation and testimony of lives that have historically been erased from general view. In order to progress as an inclusive society, we first have to understand how it feels to occupy lives that are unfamiliar. A novel puts readers into the shoes of those others and works to connect affective commonalities that all humans experience in their lives. Feeling Other, feeling displaced and feeling alone are not states exclusive to LGBTIQ+ people. Tapping into the mutuality of experience helps to break down barriers and open people up to other ways of knowing and thinking. The characters in the novel provide this thoroughfare in ways that traditional forms of research cannot.



Already, my novel has been read by many people from outside the academy. The feedback has been immediate and profound. Had I sent a document of 100,000 words articulating my findings via tables, percentages and clipped scholarly anecdotes, I can guarantee that the thesis would be left unread in inboxes, and later binned. The true purpose of research is to make change, and in this case, to make a difference to marginalised lives. Research as fiction has power in its potential for dissemination. It is accessible, readable and interesting. It probes and explores the crevices that traditional research cannot. The novel tells an Australian story that is an integral part of our cultural tapestry. Research of this kind should be championed rather than maligned. Moving forward, I aim to document my journey and write papers that demonstrate its place and importance in the academic and social world.

## Conclusion

By confessing, by exposing, and by witnessing, performative writers pursue their scholarly interests. In doing so, what might have remained hidden is made public, what might have stayed buried is put under examination, what might have been kept as personal commitment becomes public testimony (Pelias, 2005, p. 421).

I knew right from the start that I wanted this research to provoke thought and convey a different vision of the world, stirring readers to imagine their lives in tandem with those they were reading about (Nayebzadah, 2016). With this goal in mind, I came to realise that how I (re)presented my findings was as important as the findings themselves. After much deliberation and reading, I settled on fiction as a medium of (re)presentation. In my mind, fiction was an engaging means of relaying the emotional and cognitive texture of the research participants' stories and had wider appeal in terms of readership that what Denzin (1989, p. 69) describes as traditional 'glossed narrative reports'.

Before the interviewing process began, I expected that the resulting field texts would be filled with stories of distressing experiences. I envisioned that the novel would be in the same vein. What I found, however, was that while the participants told me some harrowing stories, these were peppered with humility, strength and humour. I therefore realised that the novel had to (re)present these multifaceted and nuanced aspects of their lives. In other words, I had to make their stories speak to others as they spoke to me.

I set to work and produced a first chapter that was...well, not the best. It evidenced my inexperience as a writer and a propensity for telling rather than showing. I came to realise that writing of this kind is hard – a long and arduous process. It took hundreds of pages and a willingness to start again, time and time again, until eventually the voices of the participants began to emerge through the characters and their life worlds. The participants told me many powerful stories that spoke of specific times and people. In effect, they told the larger story of a place called Australia and how it has shaped the lives of gay men and youth over the last fifty years.

In writing this exegesis, I have worked to demonstrate how ethnographic narrative fiction can be utilised in research to (re)present the lived experiences of

participants. Research as fiction has shown itself to be a flexible and fluid form of (re)presentation with the capability to evoke responses, explore the complexities of meaning and produce change in how one thinks about the lives and experiences of others. In this research, the novel acts as a (re)presentation of the participants' voices and experiences. It can also be seen as a catalyst to open dialogue, invite questions and provide opportunities to challenge existing understandings of and assumptions about what it might mean to occupy the participants' lives.

Fiction as research has provided me with the methodological flexibility to creatively and engagingly (re)present the participants' lived experiences. It has also worked to 'reveal the significance of the particular, small, and intimate in counterpoint to grand, totalising meta-narratives' (Jacobson & Larson, 2014, p. 180). Coalescing in the overarching context of Australia's changing and often turbulent political and social culture, the novel serves to capture the intricacies of the participants' lives in a series of carefully crafted miniature narrative portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). By tracing the everyday elements of the protagonists' lives as they navigate terrains of time and place, I show how the influence of the grand narratives of place and temporality work together to organise an understanding of the participants' experiences of self in society. The novel traces the dialectic between the centre and the periphery through the lives and experiences of three central characters.

The questions posed in this research are explored in the novel through the characters and their life world encounters. Although the questions are broad in design, the small size of the participant group enabled me to gain deep insight into what it has meant to be a gay man in Australia over the last five decades. In saying that, I do not claim that the novel answers these questions in their entirety. In many ways, the questions are rhetorical, and invite further questioning of Australian society and culture. They are:

- i. To what extent have school, community and family experiences of gay males changed over the last 50 years in Australia?
- ii. What positive/ negative interactions and experiences did they encounter whilst inhabiting these domains?
- iii. What impact did school, community and family interactions have on their personal lives and relationships?

These questions were formulated with Freire's (1974) concept of conscientisation in mind, which advocates the necessity of an informed understanding of power and its structures to combat injustice or oppression. The research explores the notion of conscientisation in two ways. The first is through its characters, as they transition from naïve acceptance of institutional regulation and reinforcement of heterosexuality to an understanding of how these systems of power have thwarted their development. The second is through the journey of the reader, and how the novel brings into their consciousness, through the characters' experiences, the effects of institutions such as family, church and school that work to maintain and propagate hetero/homo binaries (Fuss, 1991).

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the legitimacy of arts-based research in social sciences has been subject to scrutiny and disapproval. One focal point of this has been the dichotomy between fact and fiction, and how fiction lies in opposition to notions of truth and objectivity (Nayebzadah, 2016). When thinking about this in relation to the participants' life history interviews, I became cognisant of how each interview was a subjective account of times, places, events and people. Each story was told by the participants in their words and from their memories. Parts of some stories sounded far-fetched, reminding me of the saying that truth is often stranger than fiction. However, what I have come to realise is that storytelling is not about the micro details – the linear adherences to dates, timelines and getting people's names right. Rather, it is about the conveyance of life experiences, with messages that resonate long after a book has been put down. It is about plausibility rather than truth, and engagement rather than dryness. Fact and fiction are complementary to each other. Each has its purpose, and in the context of this research, the novel can be seen as an engaging field text translation tool that draws on the best elements of fiction to tell a powerful Australian story (Banks & Banks, 1998; Leavy 2013; Watson, 2021).

### ***Now What?***

The underlying aim of this research was to conduct a critical examination of Australian society, culture and institutions over the last fifty years, and the effect these norms and establishments have had on the lives of its participants. I wanted the novel to provide a window into the internal mechanisms of schools, families, churches and other sociocultural discourses and how they operate to reinforce and

regulate heteronormative values. The research explores the regulation of sexuality on many levels. It shows, through characters and plot, how attitudes and practices have been influenced by time and place. It also delves into political and hegemonic notions of masculinity and how they work in conjunction with each other to reproduce and maintain control over the lives of gay youth. The novel not only speaks for itself in terms of the findings, it also speaks back to heteronormative discourse and the limitations such a binary view of sexuality places on the lives of gay youth.

This research has caused me to reflect on the past and project to the future. Although the novel represents some significant social change in attitudes and practice, it also highlights that the lives of gay youth are still impeded, particularly in schools. One of the strongest messages that arose from this research is the need to implement a national approach to inclusion for LGBTIQ+ students/teachers/families in Australian schools. This research has demonstrated the urgent necessity of an Australia-wide school policy that ensures LGBTIQ+ students are supported and included. Ezer et al. (2019) argue that if clear guidelines were available providing explicit instruction about how progressive, inclusionary measures for LGBTIQ+ students could be implemented, much of the confusion and tentativeness that teachers report feeling pertaining to teaching about sexuality would be alleviated. The Australian Curriculum states that it is tailored to reflect real-life context, yet LGBTIQ+ perspectives and history (e.g., the repercussions of the first Australian Mardi Gras in 1978) are erased along with specific mention of LGBTIQ+ inclusion (ACARA, n.d.). Unless LGBTIQ+ content is included, what hope do we have of changing systemic heteronormative/ heterosexist practices and beliefs? There is a wealth of research and evidence telling us that LGBTIQ+ youth are at risk in and out of schools and are much more vulnerable to harassment and denigration than their heterosexual peers, yet there remains considerable resistance to making changes to current practice and policy (Castro & Sujak 2014; Jones et al, 2014; Loutzenheiser 2015).

Epstein & Johnson (1998, p. 1) write that 'putting the terms "schooling" and "sexuality" together is the stuff of which scandal can be, and often is, made'. Australian politics/politicians, religious organisations and neo-conservative groups have worked relentlessly to foster views that programs that promote LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in schools will lead to the indoctrination of 'homosexuality' (Rawlings &

Loveday, 2021). In direct response to such moral panics, The Education Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill 2020 was introduced to the New South Wales state parliament by Mark Latham, the former federal Opposition Leader (now a member of One Nation, an alt-right political party). Its intent is to prevent schools from teaching students about gender and sexual fluidity, in effect adversely impacting LGBTIQ+ students' ability to feel included and heard within school contexts. If the legislation is passed, it will add further weight to the schooling experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth.

In undertaking this research, I have become very aware of the need for constructive and authentic education surrounding LGBTIQ+ lives and history. I have worked hard to create verisimilitude in the novel with the intent of transporting readers into the individual experiences and life worlds of gay men in Australia over the last fifty years. It is my hope that the novel will help readers to understand how Australia as a country has shaped gay lives, and in doing so, give pause to reflect. As the novel shows, negative attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ people are often passed from generation to generation, and unless we as a society circuit-break the perpetuation of heteronormativity and heterosexism, these attitudes and practices will continue.

Research such as this contributes to understanding from insider accounts of what it means to be gay, and going forward, I strongly believe that there needs to be more of it. Moving away from traditional forms of research reporting and utilising mediums that have wider appeal will have, in my opinion, more impact. I see merit in creating an abridged version of the novel – for example, one that is aimed at young adult readers.

The accumulation of my own experiences and those about whom I have written has reshaped my view of what it means to be an ally. I have learned the importance of listening and supporting as well as of taking action. It runs deeper than an afternoon at the Mardi Gras; it is a lifelong commitment that involves speaking up when others are silent and being prepared to be honest about our own contributions to heteronormative actions, attitudes and discourses. It is about solidarity and privilege, and how, when the two are combined, they can become a powerful force. It is also about kindness, forgiveness and gentleness. It is about questioning and changing decades of systemic subscription to binary understandings of gender and

sexuality. Mostly, for me, it is about doing my best to make sure that the voices and stories of my research participants and people like them are heard.

### ***Recommendations***

Having concluded this research, I see the necessity for an Australia-wide mandatory approach to inclusive policy and practice that supports and empowers LGBTIQ+ teachers, students and families in schools. Whole-school policies that encompass all year levels are integral to the safety and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ students. To support all LGBTIQ+ students, there can be no exemptions (such as current ones based on religious beliefs).

Sex and relationship education must move past binary notions of gender and sexuality and be framed by fluid understandings of love and respect as the foundation of all relationships. For this to occur, LGBTIQ+ lives need to be specifically acknowledged in the Australian Curriculum, and clear guidelines set out that remove ambiguities about what should/should not be discussed in classrooms.

The promotion and creation of Gay/Straight Alliances in all schools is key to developing authentic relationships across student cohorts and teaching staff. Having identifiable allies in all schools, among teaching staff and students, will ensure that LGBTIQ+ students have strong support networks and advocates who are committed to their welfare.

There are also simple ways that schools and community groups such as sporting clubs can show support of the LGBTIQ+ community, such as displaying symbols including rainbows on walls and in club/school communications to demonstrate positive approaches to inclusivity. Although to some, this might be considered tokenistic, such symbolism is at least a start to breaking down some of the barriers to inclusion. The focus participants placed on sport/sporting organisations as domains from which they felt ostracised demonstrates the importance of these organisations indicating support for LGBTIQ+ people. It also works to chip away at the heterosexist behaviour and language within them.

### ***Limitations***

Very little feedback was generated from the novel drafts that I sent to participants throughout the research. I think that discussion and response would have added value to my writing process. There were times when I was not sure how

a character might respond to an event, and having insider insight would have helped ensure authenticity. As a straight woman writing about gay men, I did not have an innate knowledge/sense of how it feels to be young and gay. Having feedback to ensure that what I wrote was in line with how participants felt would have been beneficial. Although I did a lot of research about era-specific language etc., having ongoing input and critique would have helped refine my understanding and (re)presentation of the field texts.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

When I started this research, my supervisor said to me that work of this nature and length will change you. At the time, I did not appreciate or understand how transformative it would be. Not only has it given me a deep insight into LGBTIQ+ lives and the obstacles they have historically faced, it has changed my relationship with myself and the world around me.

I have come to realise that knowledge and learning are never conclusive. How I view the world has become grounded in subjectivity. My thoughts have become more unstable and less rigidly aligned to preconceived notions of what is right and wrong. I have opened myself up to fluidity and have become less inclined to speak authoritatively about the world as I thought I knew it. I have questioned myself and my relationships with those around me. I have dug into sedimented layers of experience and tried hard to understand how history has shaped me and others, and how it leads us to the present. I am fragile but also strong. I am confused but also clear. I am not the person I once was.



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