

**The Return to the Mother**

**Exegesis Accompanying the Novel**

*And the Word was Song*

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## ABSTRACT

The novel manuscript *And the Word was Song* is a work in five parts, structurally (and very loosely) mirroring the first five books of The Old Testament. It is the story of Lily May, a young woman who travels around the world trying to find meaning in her life after her prostitute, heroin-addicted mother has died.

Throughout her journeys, Lily May comes into contact with people who have issues with sex and / or addiction, always forcing her to remember her mother, a loving yet entirely flawed woman. Some of her fellow travellers are neglected children; some are street-smart gypsies; some are lovers; all are unknowingly Lily May's mother substitutes. Through an impending birth, a return to her childhood home and an unexpected discovery of a half-sister, Lily May is able to end her journey and accept her mother for who she was: an imperfect woman who gave birth to her, then loved and cared for her the best that she could. The story is about spirituality, sexuality, love, addiction, acquiescence — and Elvis. Ultimately it is about mothers.

The exegetical essay is a reflection on the journey from daughter to mother. I discuss the structuring of my novel manuscript and explore ways in which memory is accessed in the recreation of the maternal bond. Through an imaginary conversation with my mother about the legitimacy of psychoanalysis in re-evaluating mothers and maternity, I look at three concepts of mother substitution, considering ways in which the subconscious reconstructs the mother in the relationships women have. I deliberate on homecomings, both literary and personal, and consider the ethics of using my mother's stories to further my own story.

## **DECLARATION**

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

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

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# EXEGETICAL ESSAY

## Chapter 1

### *Redirecting Religion: The Uncharted Path Towards Spiritual Enlightenment*

Before I wrote the first word for the novel manuscript *And the Word was Song*, I knew Lily May. She was an orphaned daughter of a heroin-addicted, prostitute mother. Her mission was to question her life's meaning while she struggled to mourn the death of her mother. I knew she was a traveller and possible exile and that she would have to work hard at reconciling the lost spaces of her home. I also knew her story would be a commentary on organised Christian religion in the Western world.

*This is huge!* I thought, staring at the notes in my journal. I needed a map to give me direction. I needed a structure.

Like many people, regardless of my own wishes, I was given religion at birth. My parents baptised me as a Methodist. As a pre-teen I went through confirmation as a Lutheran because the Lutheran church was the closest to our house. Strange though it is, I never questioned my participation in two different denominations; I simply understood it all as 'Christianity'. I went to church (though rarely). I celebrated Christmas and Easter (though they were more about presents and eggs than Jesus). My parents were Christian and it seemed to me that most of our neighbours and the majority of my classmates must have had some Christian

orientation (because they too decorated for Christmas or said ‘Merry Christmas’ upon leaving for Christmas holidays). So in all my naivety, I somehow assumed I was a Christian, along with most of the people I knew, and I never questioned it.

Until I turned sixteen.

I remember Sabel. We were sneaking cigarettes among the pine trees of an Atlanta, Georgia suburb. When Sabel wasn’t around, word among the other forest-smokers was that he had it rough; his father died when he was in primary school. Still, Sabel was the joker, the constant clown, so our pity for him mixed with surprise because he never spoke about his home life.

It was spring when I heard the news about Sabel’s mother. She had died from a heart attack while having an MRI for possible cancer. Sabel and his four brothers were orphans. By contrast, my biggest worry at home was having to adhere to a bedtime.

It was about this time that I was reading The Book of Job for my English Literature class. Sabel’s lot saddened me. Job’s lot enraged me. I thought God was good, God was great. So how could the same God sacrifice Job’s family, home and health simply as a test of faith? How could the same God leave Sabel and his brothers alone to fend for themselves? To grow into men without the benefit of a father and the love of a mother?

Those were the events that led to my stepping outside the ideological circle of a Westernised, organised Christian religion. I was through with church and Thanksgiving prayers. Aside from the odd expletive, I was entirely through with God. I became a determined atheist. I was free to watch the news with a cynic’s eye and scoff in disbelief at the pomp and ceremony of Pope John Paul the Second, at the social injustices forced upon women in the Middle East, at the ongoing



drama in Palestine and Northern Ireland. These were indignities and absurdities that provoked angry comments from me, a hormonal teenaged girl, to whomever was listening. Now, a seeming lifetime later, I recognise my anger as a negative form of rebellion.

The Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser claimed that ideology is found in the material, rather than in the spiritual. That ideology (read 'religion') 'always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices' (296). This suggests that religion exists because churches, temples and synagogues exist, because communion and prayer exist, because Mecca exists, because an iconic Father, Son or Virgin Mary exists. Because the Bible exists. So when a Christian such as myself (or Lily May) suddenly denounces the religion's apparatuses and practices, what is left? I venture to say it is the spiritual.

*And the Word was Song* began as an attempt to work through my frustrations with my inherited then discarded religion and consequent movement toward a spiritual alternative. The plan for my structure was simple: a five-part journey, mirroring the first five books of the Bible — a modern day biblical myth, if you will. This would allow my protagonist, Lily May, space for transition from the all-accepting Christian child to the woman who comes to understand her true spiritual desire. With the structure set in place, I began writing the story. But as the story began taking over, the structure became a mere skeleton of my original idea.

In his guide to writing fiction, Jack Hodgins writes:

The structure *suggests* something of how you, the writer, see the world — at least at the time of writing .... You are *creating* a world in the reader's mind, and the world you create will likely reflect how

you see the events of your time and the actions of your fellow humans. (172)

I wanted to explore some of the contradictions that the stories of the Bible present to a modern-day society. I wanted to unmask the hypocrisies in what is presented as Christian practice. But Lily May lost the map I gave her. Only she and I really know where I initially intended her to go and only she and I know how far off the path she veered. My mirroring of the first five books of the Bible had become more of a reflection from a smudged window and Lily May grew more real to me as a result.

As we progressed on our respective journeys, the novel manuscript became more conceptual than imitative in its myth-taking, Bible-stealing form. For example, Part I is composed of self-contained adventurous stories that can be likened to the tales of Genesis, from the Garden of Eden to Noah's Ark to Sodom and Gomorrah to Joseph and his dreams. Part II feeds off the idea of Lily May as a Moses-figure attempting to lead Aboriginals away from their white oppressors. Part III utilises the Ten Commandments as its main idea. Though enormously influential in the Christian doctrine, the Ten Commandments is only a small section of Leviticus. In Part IV I rely entirely on one small scene from Numbers. Here I have changed the twelve gifts offered to God to the twelve gifts offered to Lily May. In the final section of the manuscript, the only semblance to Deuteronomy is that, as the Israelites finally reach the Promised Land, Lily May returns home. Though there are plenty of signs throughout the story such as 'salvation' and 'born-again', 'land of milk and honey', '666', they are no more than devices to hint at my mission. I had digressed from my dependence upon the Bible. In fact, Lily May's return to Memphis proves that she abandoned my map

and followed her own story, finding herself returning to her childhood home rather than settling in a new Promised Land.

In allowing Lily May to ignore her map and thus loosening the reins on my intended structure, I have written a story that has less of a focus on a young woman abandoning her religion and more of a focus on a woman discovering her spiritual beliefs. Is there room in our culture for an alternative to a religious ideology, one in which, as suggested in the final motif of *And the Word was Song*, the Mother is Creator and worthy of an absolute love? Can faith in the Mother be a spiritual alternative to faith in God? As both mother and daughter myself, I hope so.

I wanted to use the journey because it made sense to me. By the time I was twenty-two years old, I had lived in nine different cities across the United States. That's one city for every two and a half years, so I think it's safe to say I never had a chance to have a home. I don't have the luxury of closing my eyes and remembering specific trees in my front yard or springtime smells, the colour of my bedroom or the path I took to walk to school. There is very little home-related nostalgia in my life, which perhaps makes it easier for me to cope with living on the other side of the International Date Line from my family. My parents continue to move from state to state and whenever I go 'home' to visit them, I never know where to find the glasses. I have to ask where the bathroom is. I get lost if I go for a walk. It comes as no surprise, then, that I am obsessed with the concept of home in my writing and I find that I am consistently returning to the journey as a way to 'get home'. Through the writing of *And the Word was Song* and the analysis of it as a part of the exegetical process, I have learnt that 'home' is synonymous with 'mother'.

The change that I made from the structural religious concept to the novel manuscript's final maternally spirited outcome was also a journey, albeit an unconscious one. I did not realise I was veering from the plan until quite late in the process. Every instinct I had as a writer pointed me in new directions and, like Lily May, I no longer needed my map.

## Chapter 2

### *Soundtracks, Photographs and Home-cooked Meals: Music and Memory in the Journey*

I want you to follow me on a journey. I am asking you to buy a cross-country bus ticket, walk barefoot on a bitumen road, sail the deep blue oceans, fly the baby blue skies, ride shotgun in a pickup truck. I want you to commit to a one-way, open-ended journey that will last a few weeks and your companion will be someone you have never met before. You will get to know her intimately and you might find you like her. You might not. You may feel her self-indulgence is tiring. Her solutions to problems entirely immature. But remember, she's had it rough. Cut her some slack. At least hear her out. Am I asking too much?

So what would it take to make you jump on board with great enthusiasm, bags packed and heart fluttering? More than simple scenery, perhaps, though I wouldn't call the Australian outback, the Spanish Sierra Morena Mountains, French Polynesian beaches and the mighty Mississippi River simple.

Journeys need momentum and good literature needs sensory detail. If I want you to follow me on this journey and enjoy the ride, I need more than a structure and a narrative to entice you. I need poetry, metaphors, rhythm and pace, portraits, dialogue, smells and taste. So what if I offered you mixed tapes and photo albums? Maybe a packed lunch? Would that be enough? Perhaps not. But it is a start.

I had a fair idea of who Lily May's mother was when I started writing. I mixed and matched stories and images of my mother's mother to give her a dark history.

I then mixed and matched stories and images of my own mother to give her a tender side. Through my fictionalisation of both real-life characters, Lily May's mother made a reasonable impression on me. We, as readers, however, never actually meet Lily May's mother, so how are *we* to obtain any sort of knowledge of who she was? How was I to create a living, breathing character out of an overdosed corpse?

Memory was the key to my problem.

### **Foreground Music in the Back of a Mind**

Three years ago my mom sent me a small care package containing a box of Cheerios (my favourite cereal) and a CD of the Carpenters: *Singles 1969-1981*. At first I thought, 'she just has no clue, does she?' because I have always been into the likes of jazz and bluegrass, soul and hip-hop — the more eclectic variations of musical expression, the furthest from pop one can get. But as I scanned the back of the CD and saw 'We've Only Just Begun', 'Rainy Days and Mondays' and 'Close to You', I realised my mother's gift had very little to do with the actual songs and was more of a gesture of memory, wrapped in a thin plastic disc holder.

'Don't you remember dancing to this with me in Minnesota, when you were about four?' came my mother's voice from the photo of Karen Carpenter on the front of the CD.

'Of course I do! I can picture it perfectly in my mind!' because those were good times. Times from which memories were made. I also remember my mom's tears when we were living in Chicago. Karen Carpenter had just died from complications due to anorexia. My mom had heard about it on the radio as the DJ played 'Goodbye to Love' in memoriam.

‘It would be like ... Olivia Newton-John dying. Think about how sad you’d be.’

And I would have been sad. I was all leg warmers and sweatbands back in the day of ‘Physical’ so I understood my mom perfectly as she sat at the dining room table and cried.

That day she played her Carpenters albums. Each and every one.

So when I played the CD that had come by post all the way from Florida, special delivery to me, in Adelaide, I was amazed at how many songs I knew the words to. How many times I raised my voice to fill the room with an off-key appreciation of the seventies soft pop duo. But I wasn’t, in fact, appreciating the Carpenters at all. I was appreciating my mom and our memories and enjoying our special bond.

Music transforms the moment. It often only takes the first couple of notes and we are transported to younger versions of ourselves, reliving significant memories. Sometimes, however, the significance of a memory recalled by a song is questionable, as music can simply replay everyday snapshots of the years gone by. Music is, therefore, the soundtrack of our lives, reminding us of the people, places and feelings that have played a role in the formation of our present-day selves.

I listen to the Carpenters CD about four times a year, usually when I am alone with my children and can hold them in my arms and dance, and each time, I am enjoying that special bond with my mom, transferring the feeling it gives me to my children, possibly creating a soundtrack for them. Therefore, music is not only important in the retrieval of memories, but also in the making of them.

Because music is such a valuable tool in recapturing my distanced mother, I have given Lily May a soundtrack for the memories of her mother as well. I went to Memphis to gather her songs.

In 1998 I went on a road-trip across America and stopped in Memphis, Tennessee for a couple of days to attend a music festival. It was held on the banks of the Mississippi River, blocks away from the famed Beale Street. I spent most of my time in Memphis in the gospel tent, listening to African American Southern Baptist choirs while world music, local blues, big-named rock stars and jazz musicians filled the other tents. At times I felt hypocritical, given my atheistic stance, but the energy was infectious and I had come to dance.

Whenever I left the festival grounds and wandered down Beale Street, I saw Elvis. Impersonators or mere aficionados with guitars, wax statues, oil paintings, dolls in windows — he was everywhere. I made the connection then that Elvis was more than a man. He was a brand of religion. And his music was more than rock 'n' roll. It was spiritual, because the birth of Elvis begat rock 'n' roll, and the birth of rock 'n' roll begat the rock god:

Rock 'n' roll was the sound of the teenage body, but more specifically the male body. Sound — and sight: young male sexuality gathered in one voice, one body, and worshipped by five thousand girls at once. As venues and audiences got unimaginably bigger, it would be fifteen, twenty, a hundred thousand. Out of the electric foam of myth and cult that raged up round rock 'n' roll, the rock god was born. (Padel 51)



This connection of rock, rock god, God and Elvis works on many levels because Elvis was an extremely religious man and he recorded many gospel albums. He claimed that the gospel churches he attended as a boy were where he learned to express himself musically. And if you've ever been to a gospel church on a Sunday morning or even passed one by on the street (I lived next door to one in Virginia), you know how much expression goes on. There are no solemn dirges and nobody simply stands to sing. There is dancing in those pews and I have to conclude that Elvis didn't become 'Elvis the Pelvis' overnight. In fact in an article detailing the First Annual International Conference on Elvis Presley, journalist Doug Stewart maintains that Elvis 'illustrates the fine line in traditional Southern culture between Puritanism and hedonism, between blues shouting and gospel singing, between Saturday night and Sunday morning' ('Now Playing in Academe: The King of Rock 'n' Roll').

When I decided to write *And the Word was Song*, I chose to set most of it in Memphis because of the music, both the religious fervour of the gospel and the ubiquitous presence of the more-than-a-man Elvis. I wanted to make Elvis stand as a God-figure for Lily May's mother and I wanted to use his music as another means to structure Lily May's journey, adding some much-needed sensory detail to my initially muted map.

In his offering to *The Plain Folk of the South Revisited*, literary critic Bill C Malone writes, '[a] Southerner can escape neither religion nor the music associated with it. Most people learned to sing, or were encouraged to do so, in religious settings' (33-34). In the first chapter of my manuscript, I establish the importance of music in the lives of Lily May and her mother:

My mother instilled in me an ear for music and for that, I am grateful. She sang the loudest in the church choir, even though whispers of her vocation spread like brimstone and fire every Sunday and everyone stole not-so-secret glances at us and the church actually smelled putrid-yellow to me and I felt closed in and uncomfortably hot. No matter how she lived her life, she still went to church every Sunday and prayed to Him to forgive her sins and she still sang the loudest and the proudest and the prettiest of all. I believed in God then. I believed in my mother too. But I don't know if she really believed that anyone, including God, could be more worthy of praise than Elvis, so maybe it didn't matter that nobody really wanted us there. Elvis was the King. (6)

Lullabies in this household were replaced by Elvis songs. One of Lily May's earliest memories is of her mother singing 'In the Ghetto', her tears wetting Lily May's 'little cotton shirts' and her 'little translucent skin' (7).

In her study on sex, gods and rock 'n' roll, entitled *I'm a Man*, poet and pop culture investigator Ruth Padel writes, '[t]he hollow places of woman's isolation resound with echoes. When Ulysses' men hear Circe, she is making the cave-floor echo with song' (93). Though I smash this theory to bits with my introduction of Havehole, the all-lesbian band that Lily May meets on the road (they write and perform their own brash original songs), I acknowledge it in Lily May's mother. Her heroin addiction may be an outlet for her day-to-day struggles but she also has a beautiful voice and Elvis's songs to balance the dark. Her mother sings a happy 'Hound Dog' to signify a good day or, as above, a woeful 'In the Ghetto' to signify her more melancholy moments. With her voice, her life-experience and her

moods, Elvis's songs take on new meanings. His words, her echo. And it is the echo that leaves the lasting impression.

'The dialogue between mother and baby,' writes Suzanne Juhasz, feminist scholar in literature and psychoanalytical theory, 'is the originary use of language for enacting desire and establishing connection, individuation, and (therefore) meaning' (23). So as Lily May struggles to come to terms with her mother and her own identity, song fills the air and Elvis is ever-present. Her mother's harmonic echoes of a life without a conventional romantic love have become Lily May's echoes of a life without the maternal love she needs. And they echo the songs of Elvis.

Even as we are told that Lily May always wanted to sing but never could (after the symbolic burial of her mother), music is all-pervasive. It is a metaphor for Lily May's spiritual condition and a narrative device to enhance her journey. For example, her rejection of her mother leads to a rejection of Elvis, so when she believes herself to be in Eden, the Grateful Dead fill the space that Elvis had left. Lyrics like 'May be going to hell in a bucket, babe / but at least I'm enjoying the ride' ('Hell in a Bucket', *In the Dark*) and 'This must be Heaven / cause here's where the rainbow ends / at last it's the real thing / or close enough to pretend' ('Saint of Circumstance', *Go to Heaven*) encapsulate her feelings in only a couple of lines.

I tried to incorporate music into each chapter of the manuscript though, as in my use of biblical structure and taking into consideration that my use of music is, in fact, a structural device, its use became less frequent as the narrative took over. Less frequent but not less obvious. Every time music is referred to and

especially every time Elvis is mentioned, there is a clear relation to Lily May's spiritual past, becoming or awakening. It is her life's soundtrack.

### **Memory and the Mother in the Kitchen**

When we depend upon our memories to help us recover the past, we are doing so in light of the present. We are living in the moment — breathing the air around us, eating the food before us, viewing the scenery presented to us, taking in the characteristics of the person speaking to us — and we are simultaneously connecting the moment to one of a previous time. The present is always reminding us of our past and, concurrently, shaping it. I think it is impossible to live entirely in the present given that our minds are backlogged with so many images that have associations with the here-and-now. That is why, as she journeys from daughter to mother, Lily May reveals herself to her readers through her memories, driven by her present encounters and, in doing so, exposes her mother, her desire for her mother and ultimately her desire to be a mother.

In the modern world, women went from being homemakers to office workers. Now, after having said to the world that yes, we can 'have it all', many women seem to want to be homemakers again. In such a world, the 'Good Mother' is a complex term. In my grandmother's time, the 1950s, a time when the word 'feminist' was rarely uttered but slowly becoming a threat to the nearly unchallenged patriarchal society, a Good Mother would keep her children happy, healthy and respectable, keep the house clean, appear presentable upon her husband's arrival home from a long-day's work (hairsprayed hair and ironed dress), make dinner, do the dinner-dishes and never complain about how hard life was. My grandmother was a divorced woman struggling with an alcohol

addiction, so she would have been seen as a Bad Mother. In my mother's time, the full swing feminist years of the 1970s, a Good Mother would try to set a positive example for her daughters by getting a job outside of the home and becoming an equal breadwinner to her husband and somehow still find the time to keep her children happy, healthy and somewhat respectable, keep the house clean, appear presentable (hairsprayed hair and ironed suit?), make dinner, do the dinner-dishes and try to keep the complaints about how hard life is at a minimum now that women had gained 'equality'. My mom fit the description perfectly. She was a Good Mother. In my time, what some call the post-feminist first decade of the second millennium, women who engage in paid work rather than full-time child-rearing have to contend with tsking tongues while women who choose child-rearing over the office have to deal with blank stares when their answer to the question 'what do you do' is somehow not enough. For women today, a balance must be found between family and career. Does that mean that my mother — who followed the lead of her feminist sisters and worked full-time (sometimes at night), leaving my brother and I to often make our own school lunches, unlock our own front doors after returning from school and microwave our own frozen dinners — was a Bad Mother when looking from today's balanced perspective? I have often wondered (while wiping banana off chins or lying on my stomach to partake in playtime) how my mother could have possibly chosen to go back to work when I was six weeks old. *I could never do that to my children*, I have thought sternly. But then I would feel immediately jealous as I picked up a broom to begin my daily sweep.

With this conundrum of placement between the home and office now a common problem in today's Western society, the Good Mother must be re-defined

in terms of personhood, rather than physical placement. Today, the Good Mother is ‘the middle-class, married, selfless, loving, attractive, heterosexual, child-centred mother’ (Bretag 21). This is personhood, not placement, but it unfortunately leaves us in a limited space as well. If a woman is poor or single or in a homosexual relationship, does it mean that she is ‘bad’? We must reconsider maternity in today’s world. Through flashbacks of detailed dialogue and in depth descriptions, I have attempted to do this with my representation of Lily May’s mother. She is problematic, does not fit the Good Mother ideal, but from what we can glean from Lily May’s memory, she is a good mother (no capitalisation) where it counts most.

In Joanne Harris’s *Five Quarters of the Orange*, a woman revisits her home and in doing so, revisits her memories of her deceased mother. Food is used to exonerate her mother, who was for the most part indifferent towards her children and therefore, unknowable. It is through her elegant recipes, her love of herbs and vegetables and all the intricacies of food preparation that the woman begins the search for her mother. I liken this to Lily May’s search; however, Lily May’s mother does not create culinary masterpieces. As with my own mother, potato bake would be more her forte. I did not need to make Lily May’s mother a genius in the kitchen. I simply needed to position her in the kitchen.

To further this discussion of food and memory, I include the following short piece of prose writing from New Zealand writer Brigid Lowry, entitled ‘Flimsy Everyday Kitchen Mystery’:

This could mean something, who can say for sure?

Crazy Mother opens the pantry and looks. At random intervals during her suburban days and domestic nights she checks

over the things on the shelves, admires each item, moves them into more pleasing arrangements. Crazy Mother strokes the jars of raisins, coconut, health-giving bran and rhythmical squiggly noodles. In the tin with roses on the lid she hides plastic bags of dates and walnuts and the last four chocolate biscuits. She thinks in terms of combinations: potatoes, carrots, garlic, onions, coconut cream, curry paste. Vegetable curry, Saturday night. Or again: rice, raisins, coconut, cinnamon, sugar. Tonight. Rice pudding. She thinks long-term strategy. If the end of the world comes and all the shops close up they could live on polenta for many days, perhaps for two weeks. She thinks in terms of possibilities: lemon juice, lemon sago, lemon icing, fine zest of lemon on a baked fish.

Add herbs. Sprinkle the quiet afternoons with dried-up rosemary stolen from the bush on the corner. Fill emptiness with rising swelling dough and dust the oily crust of each loaf of bread with tarragon and thyme.

Elsewhere there may be great lonely spaces, clumsy misapprehensions and strange energies, but here, in the whole-earth cupboard, in this orderly library of raw goods, lies a partial attempt at a solid world, a great potential, an abundance of offerings to the demons and the spirits.

Move the cotton oven mitts next to the bowl of lemons. Stand the pepper grinder up and put it beside the wine glasses. Reach out and feel the loaf of bread, touch the handle of the broom. Gently fold the blue checked tea-towel. This is as far as it is

possible to go in creating order in the world. Something wider controls the tides and the seasons.

This could mean something. Who can say for sure? (15)

Upon my first reading of this piece, I found myself cringing because, now a mother, I saw too much of myself and somehow felt dis-empowered in my kitchen-world. Later, however, I felt validated by my kitchen-position as I discovered that she who runs the kitchen runs the house. Lowry's piece goes one step further and suggests that she who runs the kitchen comes as close as she can to running the world. Well, I suppose 'understanding' the world is more apt. In fact scratch all that and say 'finding a place in' the world. My digression indicates how ultimately, for me, dis-empowering living in a kitchen-world can be. In the case of Lily May's mother, however, her connection to the kitchen gives her something solid over which she may take control. She is a prostitute and a heroin addict, a single mother as well; there must be something in her life that is not chaotic.

'Despite their emotional deprivation and their inability to form a female ego-ideal,' writes Estela V. Welldon, in relation to prostitutes she has worked with as a psychiatrist, 'some of these women have achieved the creation of maternal ego-ideal. Regardless of how inconsistent and erratic it is, this has come to their rescue in functioning as mothers' (121). So through having control over her kitchen, hence having control over her house, Lily May's mother becomes a good mother, though she does not fit the Good Mother description:

She wasn't a cheap whore who leaned against some streetlight:

leather-skinned, hairsprayed-stiff, uneducated and ill mannered. No.

She had working-class class. The kind of class that involves a

certain amount of degradation in a nowhere job just to put good



meat on the table every night. Potatoes and a green vegetable. Artichoke leaves dipped in mayonnaise was my favourite. And cheesy potatoes with spicy pork chops. I may have been wearing K-Mart clothes but I was eating Ritz Carlton food. Better, because my mother and I ate ice cream nearly every night before bed. Now I ask you, how many kids are allowed to do that? (2-3)

In fact with most of Lily May's memories, either food or the kitchen is the backdrop. When she asks her mother for a sister: 'The smells of the kitchen were simple: lemon scented Mr Clean softened by a springtime wind and hard boiled eggs mixing with mayonnaise and chopped dill pickles' (9). Or when her mother first admits to using heroin: 'It was ham and string beans with wild rice' (11). When Lily May sees her mother praying with intense passion: 'when she was through, she got up and wiped her face with the back of her sleeves and walked slowly to the kitchen' (15). A discussion on religion and sex: 'We were eating runny scrambled eggs with cheese and tomato' (131). On the anniversary of Elvis's death:

I'm eating with my eyes closed, as if it's a delicacy from the gods.  
I'm seeing green grass and a swing set, I'm feeling sunshine on my pink nose, I'm hearing *Teddy Bear*, I'm smelling my summertime sweat-dripping skin and I'm tasting my mother's grilled peanut butter and banana sandwiches cut in four small pieces. (259)

At one point Lily May says to her audience, 'It's funny how many memories of my mother are in the kitchen' (102). If my argument of the Good Mother holds true, then it isn't funny at all. It makes perfect sense that Lily May would remember fondly her mother as a competent, caring homemaker. If she

were only to remember her in a drug-haze or overly made-up for a night of whoring, then there would be no need for her to care to understand the woman who gave birth to her. She would be content in knowing her as a Bad Mother. It is because Lily May's mother was essentially a good mother (though not a Good Mother) that Lily May remembers smells and tastes and kitchen utensils.

My mother hated to cook. She only cooked on Sundays (well, on the Sundays that we didn't order pizza) and those meals were our only sit-down family meals of the week. But just because she hated to cook does not mean that she was a bad cook. She made delicious and nutritiously balanced dinners. In fact, the recipes Lily May remembers were staples in our house. If I did not specifically write these dinners into the manuscript, I certainly knew that they were the type of dinners Lily May's mother would cook: pork chops, lightly seasoned, with wild rice and corn on the cob; chicken Kiev with mashed potatoes and steamed broccoli and cauliflower with a cheese sauce; ham with a green bean casserole. I think of my mom whenever I eat a green bean casserole.

Food is intended to be part of a solid understanding of home for Lily May. 'I once heard that childhood is found in the belly,' George tells her in Part IV of the manuscript (258). Often I am asked what it is I miss about America. The pizza in the States has a lot of sauce and just a few toppings; I miss the simplicity of American pizza. Mexican food. You can't get black beans like they make in North America and the salsa, even the corn chips, just aren't the same. The original Cheerios. A sugary sort of Cheerios has recently made it over the ocean and onto Australia's grocery shelves but it is nothing like the original and it only

makes me angry. My family and friends send me the original Cheerios in care packages: it is a given for any birthday. And then there is the green bean casserole.

Though Thanksgiving isn't celebrated here in Australia, I have continued to uphold this American tradition every fourth Thursday in November because it reminds me of family and how thankful I am to actually have two families now: one in each continent. Turkey is key for a Thanksgiving dinner, though I've never really liked turkey. Sweet potatoes (yuk!) and stuffing (too much work) are usually on everyone's Thanksgiving menu as well. Less common (but common enough) is the green bean casserole. I have never cooked a Thanksgiving meal in Australia without the green bean casserole, though I have definitely left out the turkey, sweet potato and stuffing. Two cans of water-soaked green beans, a can of cream-of-mushroom soup, bacon bits and fried onions. So utterly American.

After my second year in Australia, I found I was not only making green bean casserole for Thanksgiving but for mid-week dinner parties as well. This is because food is more than just nutrients and taste. Laura Esquivel, author of *Like Water for Chocolate*, writes: 'Each of us has a history, either personal or national, locked inside us, and the key to unlocking that history is food' (qtd. in Kaufman 39). Sure I miss the road-tripping and lakes and rivers and mountains but when I think of home, of my childhood, on a surface level I think of food. And feeding my friends a bit of my history, both national and personal, gives me great pleasure. I am not only allowing them into my world but I am reinforcing that I am American Australian, as I am clearly an American and eating an American dish with my Australian friends in Australia.

David E Sutton has written two books on the subject of memory and he says that food 'does not simply symbolize social bonds and divisions; it

participates in their creation and re-creation' (102). So when George brings Lily May a box of American goodies to share and the two of them are like children at a candy store, wide-eyed over the likes of Cheerios and grape jelly, bacon bits and Ranch dressing, they are not only reminiscing about their American upbringing, they are establishing a present-day connection. George has presented Lily May a means to return to her past and to share in it while she likewise shares in his. And the beauty of it is no words are needed. But when Lily May goes off on her own to use the Jiffy peanut butter to make Elvis's legendary favourite sandwich, the act moves beyond national. As writer Marion Halligan says in *The Taste of Memory*, taste 'is memory, not patriotism .... Memory is different, it is private and individual and possibly eccentric' (192). Yes, green bean casserole reminds me of Thanksgiving and Thanksgiving reminds me of America but green bean casserole also reminds me of my mom, who hated cooking but knew how to open a few good cans and make one great casserole.

Lily May has been displaced from her home and, in order to get to the point of making a new home, she must return to it and embrace it. Jean Starobinski, a scholar known for his work on the history of cultural ideas, is quoted in Roberta Rubenstein's *Home Matters* as saying,

What a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual *place* where he passed his childhood but his youth itself. He is not straining towards something which he can repossess, but toward an age which is forever beyond his reach. (4)

Rubenstein goes on to say;

In a sense, then, nostalgia, or homesickness, whose meaning remains so closely allied with it, is the existential condition of

adulthood. While 'exile' is a freighted term within the context of postcolonial awareness, we are all — regardless of gender, homeland, or place of origin — exiles from childhood. (4-5)

Lily May's mother *is* Lily May's childhood. Therefore, Lily May's actual, geographical home *is* her mother. According to scholar Carol Bardenstein, it is a cultural assumption 'that food is a direct, authentic, and uncomplicated channel to an "originary" world and that food, and the lost world / homeland / home, is "of" or "belongs to" a sphere that is gendered female and maternal' (359). Hence, food, for Lily May, *is* home, her childhood, indeed her mother. So eating the peanut butter and banana sandwich is effectively the consumption of her mother. The mouth takes something other into itself and makes it become a part of itself. In eating a green bean casserole I am ingesting my mother. Preparing a green bean casserole is, for me, a form of role-playing: I am enacting my mother. Like music, the green bean casserole is a way to capture my mother. So in this process, where, then, does my mother end and I begin? It is an important question that Lily May unconsciously considers time and time again, particularly in Part III.

Throughout the manuscript, Lily May longs for the return of her innocence, a time before she was tainted by sexual desires and addiction, a time when her mother was a good mother. In order for Lily May then to find her mother and understand her mother, to reconcile the lost spaces of belonging and home, she must recover her childhood memories. In doing so, she takes us with her. 'Tastes and smells,' writes Halligan, 'transport us, they carry our minds back, we do not so much remember their moments as relive them' (192). In *And the Word was Song*, readers are invited to relive Lily May's memories and perhaps at the end of her

journey, just as they might after eating a deliciously filling meal, some may even feel satisfied.

## Chapter 3

### *Paths of the Journey: Alternative Roads and Replacement Mothers*

When we venture on a journey, we have a plan. We have flight schedules, hotel bookings, road maps and itineraries. There is often very little left to chance when getting from point A to B because we find comfort in the knowledge that we will see the sights we have dreamed about for years or knock on the correct doors of our distant relatives.

When the journey taken is of an inner nature, there are no maps. The journey has not been made before; no one else can claim our personal memories and experiences so no one can provide us with easy routes for our travelling comfort. Because each available path has its own destination, the emotional routes we ultimately choose can have a huge impact on our lives.

Lily May's inner journey is a search for her mother. But how does she find a mother who is dead and how will she find her if she is convinced she is better off without her?

Inner journeys are often embarked upon subconsciously. I did not realise *And the Word was Song* was a personal project at all. I was convinced I was writing a fictional tale that explored sex and religion rather than a fictionalised biography of my own mother and I had no idea that my destination would open up a deeper understanding of the spiritual, maternal bond, both with my mother and with my then unborn son. I had to go through the exegetical process to become aware of what my subconscious wanted me to write. I had to dissect and analyse the manuscript and research the topics that fascinated me about the mother-daughter bond. I then reanalysed the manuscript, this time with more insight into

what I had unwittingly written. And I am happy that my major creative work does not deliver what I originally thought of as my intention: a novel about sex and religion. The topic of 'motherhood' is one to make my own mother proud.

Throughout my childhood, I grew up hearing snippets of my own mother's childhood. Unfortunately most of her hardships were wasted upon me as an adolescent. It wasn't until I was nearing adulthood that I realised how different our childhoods were, how lucky I was and just how strong my mother is.

My mother, Debbie, grew up before her time. With her brother living with her estranged father and no one to help her through the everyday emotions of a child, let alone one who lives with an alcoholic mother, Debbie cared for her own mother, reversing the maternal role. At the same time, she took care of herself. She got herself up in the morning, made her own breakfasts, lunches and dinners and put herself to bed (on more than a few occasions after she put her mother to bed). I remember her telling me that her mother was a good person but she should never have been a mother. She was, perhaps, both a Bad Mother and a bad mother.

The protagonist of my novel manuscript, Lily May, also grew up deprived. Her mother was often absent at night because she was a prostitute and she was hardly there in the day due to her drug-induced hazes. The tricky thing here is that Lily May's mother, despite her absences, is a strongly felt presence in her daily life. Mother and daughter speak about big things and small things and they laugh and they hug and share lovely moments together, dancing or cuddling in front of the television, eating ice cream.

When her mother dies, Lily May needs to find the sort of love to which she has been accustomed. So she travels to many places hoping to find many things,



never actually having a plan or purpose or knowing what it is she is hoping to find. It is not until the final section that she realises she is searching for a mother substitute. The reader, however, may recognise the nature of Lily May's quest earlier.

Memory is strong in Lily May. The reader sees and hears what she recalls, be it in a distant, past tense manner or through present tense, direct dialogue. What Lily May tastes, smells and hears often transport her to bygone days where similar senses were being enjoyed and her mother's presence was real. The woman Lily May meets on her obsessive search for María's mother is one example where it is not what but *who* that triggers her flashbacks: the mother Lily May desires for María is the mother Lily May desires for herself and this is evident through the juxtaposition of present and past similarities, of the here-and-now and what she remembers. But it is in the recurring pursuits for a child, a sister and a lover (and often the three are nearly inseparable) where the reader sees how much the search for a mother substitute has touched nearly every connection Lily May makes with females (and occasionally males) throughout her travels. And it is through these connections and the memories conjured up because of them that Lily May discovers her mother.

Like Lily May, I have been through an inner journey. Becoming pregnant for the first time was painful, in terms of how much I longed for my mother. I wanted her presence at the birth more than ever before. But as I held my son Guthrow for the first time, I forgot about my mom. My child became the focus. And because the love I felt for my son was the most exquisite love I had ever known, my mom reappeared in a different light. My feelings toward her were no longer founded

upon a desire to have her near me but rather a longing to understand her in both her maternal role and as a woman. The exegetical process of examining why I chose to (had to) write about mothers took me further in my journey. Through an examination of my protagonist and of my roles as writer and daughter, I found I had reached a point of admiration. I do not aspire to be like Debbie as either mother or woman because we are different people and I can respect our differences, but I am in awe of the mother and woman that she is. And because of this newfound veneration, I find that I often daydream about seeing her again, meeting on a common ground of understanding and esteem. The following is one such daydream. I like to call it 'Food for Thought'. Snippets of conversations with my mother over the telephone (20, July 2006) or E-mail (21, June 2005 and 3, May 2006) have been reworked to authenticate this daydream.

### **The Child as Mother Substitute**

My mother Debbie is bouncing around the kitchen, preparing food for our family Pick, Nibble and Chat afternoon, which will inevitably work its way into the night. I am discussing with her the many critical mother-daughter theories that I have mulled over for the past two years for the purpose of this exegetical essay. This essay does, after all, expose my mother and our relationship, so perhaps I should give Debbie an opportunity to have a say.

I am keen to introduce her to feminist theorists, my mother claiming to be a feminist herself. I am interested in hearing a non-academic perspective on widely accepted feminist suppositions of mother-daughter relationships. Will any of it make sense to my mother, a woman who has 'been there, done that' without breaking for analysis? Or will she surprise me by demonstrating that she has

analysed her relationship with her mother? Perhaps reveal to me that she has even undergone therapy to cope with underlying issues?

I introduce her to *The Reproduction of Mothering*, by psychoanalytic feminist Nancy Chodorow. ‘She says that “women turn to children to complete a relational triangle, or to recreate a mother-child unity” which means that “mothering is invested with a mother’s often conflictual, ambivalent, yet powerful need for her own mother”’ (212). In this imaginary space and time, Debbie is mixing cream cheese with a packet of powder labelled ‘French Onion Dip’. I haven’t offered to help her. It seems as though I am always watching her at work in her kitchen. Amazed by her mastery of the domestic.

‘Well’, she says, ‘Nancy Whatever-her-name-is probably didn’t grow up with an alcoholic mother.’

I am happy our conversation has turned from my youngest’s bowel movements to Debbie’s relationship with her mother. This somehow seems to be a better accompaniment to the preparation of food and I don’t need to be talking about bowel movements in my daydreams anyway.

‘I still visited my mother after Tony was born but I really just sort of let her go from my mind.’

I am thinking about baby pictures of my brother and imagining my mom, nineteen years old, visiting her mother with a baby balanced on her hip. She was so young. Ten years younger than I was when I had Guthrow, my firstborn.

‘I had other things to think about. She wasn’t my problem anymore.’

But in writing my novel manuscript, I was of the same impression as Chodorow. It all made so much sense to me: when women become pregnant they

long for a reconnection with their mothers. And after the baby is born, women tend to see their mothers in a new, more intense way.

‘You mean you didn’t forgive her or reach some sort of level of understanding or anything?’ I am thinking about this exegesis. I am fixated on Chodorow, wanting her to be right. If she is right, then the ending of my novel manuscript is perfect.

‘I honestly don’t think I was ever angry with my mother.’ She is mixing the dip with ease, because that’s what powered packets allow you to do, while I am questioning whether or not she is still internalising issues with her mother.

I planned Lily May’s story in such a way that each time she got close to a child (indeed, each time she got close to mothering), she backed away. This is because each time she allowed herself to become emotionally involved with a child, she ran the risk of moving toward a better understanding of her mother and, throughout the manuscript, she is convinced she wants to forget her mother. In the scene below, Ginny has just confided in Lily May that, while coping with the suicide of their mother, she and her two sisters had just killed their incestuous father.

Ginny rested her head on my chest for a comfort I could not offer. I didn’t know then but I can clearly see now that I was beginning to harden. On the inside, I was as soft as melting ice cream. But I was pretending to have one of those hard chocolate coatings. The kind you have to use your teeth to penetrate and when you finally break through, your teeth feel the coldness of what’s inside and if you ignore the warning and swallow it fast, you get a headache. I wanted to hold Ginny but I held my guitar. (54)

Lily May's connection with Ginny, in the Appalachian Mountains, is the first instance where we see Lily May's desire to care for someone more vulnerable than herself. Since her mother was no longer there to be her child, perhaps Ginny could fill that space.

A second example is Jimmy, a strong-willed Indigenous Australian seven year-old boy.

Sometimes I pitied him and wanted nothing more than to hold him and smooth his hair and his back and shush him until he showed his softness and finally let his tears go. But sometimes he complained too much and was just so difficult in so many ways that I wanted only to shake him and shake him until he cried. Why was I waiting for that little boy to cry? (127)

Perhaps because so many of her memories with her mother involved tears. When Jimmy does cry, calling out for his mama in the process, Lily May is there for him in just the way she wanted to be in the scene with Ginny. She then has the deepest sleep she's had in months and the following day is like the first spring day after the longest, coldest winter. In fact, after days of waiting for a ride to their destination, two tourists miraculously pick up Lily May and the children. Of course this harmony cannot last. Lily May is not ready to accept the role of mothering because she is not ready to accept her mother. And when Jimmy and his sister defy Lily May's idealistic wishes that they not climb Uluru and respect the children's spiritual elders, her fantasy ends. There is no child. Her anger at the children has nothing to do with their wanting to climb Uluru; it has to do with her mother. As renowned feminist Nancy Friday articulates in *My Mother / My Self*, the anger that daughters display towards others for the inconsequential and trivial

‘is not appropriate. It has been displaced from mother onto someone “safer”’  
(258). Suddenly I am forgiving my mother for all of the times she yelled at me for wearing the wrong clothes or behaving inappropriately, always getting in those famous last words: *What would the neighbours think?* Is it possible she was never angry with me? Is it possible she was angry with her mother because she had to grow up with a reputation that had nothing to do with her and everything to do with the one woman who should have protected her from neighbourhood gossip? Could this be the anger she internalised that manifested itself in our arguments?

‘Well what about Dad?’ I ask.

I can hear the clock chiming that it is nine-thirty in the morning. My dad is on the couch, reading his newspaper, oblivious to the fact that my oldest son is incessantly poking my youngest son’s face. Where is my husband in this flight of the imagination? It doesn’t really matter because this is between my mother and me.

‘What do you mean?’ She pours the dip into the bread bowl and offers it up to my finger.

‘I mean when you fell in love with Dad, did you let go of any negative emotions you felt toward your mother or maybe somehow feel more positively toward her because you were caring for him now?’

‘I told you, Heather, I really don’t think I had anything to let go of. I really don’t think I thought much about her.’

I finish my Cheerios, drink the milk from the bowl, and decide that Cheerios are really no big thing. They just seem important when I am in Australia. Then I dip my finger in the French onion dip. It is delicious. I wish it were eleven o’clock family finger-food time already. I also wish my mom would just

corroborate some of the critics' findings. It would make her understand Lily May a little better, make her understand the manuscript I have written a little better as well.

Even with Lily May's lovers there is a mothering quality that Lily May cannot stifle. Estela Welldon writes: 'In prostitution the woman at times becomes a mother and the man a child' (116). My mother has never behaved like a prostitute but Welldon's assertion makes as much sense without the first two words as it does with them. I want my mom to support my growing excitement with my research findings but she seems content believing that she never held any anger toward her alcoholic mother.

Lily May does behave like a prostitute. This concept of mother-lover-child transference is manifest in Lily May's relationship with Manu, the Spaniard musician, who kept her as his mistress and, in effect, turned her into his whore. Lily May says that he is the 'child that I could never care for' (189).

Following her affair with Manu, Lily May meets George, the man she will learn to love. After his closest friend Taia dies, George is devastated. Again, he is more vulnerable than Lily May, becoming child-like:

He uses both my legs to help him stand and I am happy to be his support. I want to do more. I want to lay his head on my lap, rub his hair, call him pumpkin, tell him everything will be all right. I want to be his lover and his mother. (266)

In part, because she allows herself to do this for him and because she allows George to do the same for her, Lily May and George can become lovers in more than the physical sense; they become lovers in the spiritual sense. In admitting to this love, Lily May finds that not only is she ready to return to her childhood home,

but she is ready to become a mother. Both of these actions will help her find her mother: not the loving mother in the kitchen of her childhood or the despised prostitute-cum-drug addict of her adolescence, but the whole mother. Lily May discovers an understanding of her mother as not a Good Mother or a Bad Mother, but simply a woman who was a mother.

‘So even when Dad’s sick, you don’t care for him like a child?’

‘Of course I do. I think most women do. What’s that have to do with anything?’

The warmth from the pre-heated oven is slight but noticeable as she places the bread bowl on the tray.

‘Nothing, really,’ I say, suddenly confused about the links I have created between my mother and my protagonist. ‘I’m not sure why I’m going on about George.’

‘George?’

‘Dad. I meant to ask you about Tony. When you were pregnant? Any letting go then?’

My mom hands me a cutting board, a knife and some strawberries and cheese.

‘You cut these and I’ll make the cream cheese and sweet chilli dip.’

Another dip with cream cheese? How much cheese can we eat? And with this, Debbie changes the subject to her discovery of cream cheese and sweet chilli. It was a picnic at the beach with a bottle of wine ... and I remain stuck on my exegesis. Even in my daydreams of family get-togethers and deep conversations with my mother, I am stuck on my exegesis.



Lily May's unborn child is not a mother substitute but rather a manifestation of the unconditional love Lily May had been searching for since the untimely death of her mother. Friday writes: 'Before motherhood, we tried to find with men and other women what we missed with mother .... Becoming a mother ends the search' (443). Lily May's unborn child is the impetus for forgiveness, appreciation and acceptance of love, because through this biological connection, a long-awaited understanding is attainable. Isn't this reasonable? Why can't my mom just admit that the birth of her firstborn, my brother Tony, changed the way she viewed her mother?

'Why don't you get it that having a baby didn't change the way I viewed my mother? Having a baby is just ... what it is. Everyone does it.'

Apparently we had ceased talking about cream cheese and sweet chilli.

Truth be told, having a child did not immediately allow me to cease searching for my mother because it is a process with no given timeline and certainly no steady course. I remember when Debbie came to Adelaide to meet Guthrow. He was four months old at the time so I still considered myself to be a very new mother. While I counted down the days until her arrival, I dreamed of her admiring me in my new role, sharing stories of what I was like as a baby, of what she was like as a new mom. I imagined our connection would be stronger than I had ever known it to be. Unfortunately, it wasn't that way.

My mother had a very difficult time with my breastfeeding in public. This is largely due to common assumptions of what is proper in the American society where she lives (however, this could also be a symptom of the 'what will the neighbours think' mentality); in America, women often cover the breast and,

subsequently, the baby's head with a blanket if public feeding is a must. Here, in South Australia, where signs reading 'we welcome breastfeeding mothers' hang in the doorways of established restaurants, most women feel breastfeeding is natural and therefore a mother's breast is natural. Of course this is not always the case but Australians certainly are more accepting than Americans of a hungry baby having his lunch on a public bench or a blanket by the river or even on a crowded train. Whenever my mother and I were out and I breastfed Guthrow, I could feel my mom's eyes scanning the area for people watching, scanning my chest, making sure too much breast was not exposed and the nipple stayed hidden. My breastfeeding in public was a cause of great stress for Debbie, which created an enormous amount of resentment for me. I wanted her to look on lovingly, think *She's still growing this child! How amazing! My little girl is a mother now!* Because this was not the case, the stronger-than-ever connection I wanted never surfaced. In fact, I had never felt such an intense rift between us.

Four months later, this time in America, the rift grew as my mother spoke of her concern for my weight. I was angered that she could not accept that I had gained a lot of weight during my pregnancy and that I hadn't been able to lose it after eight months and I outwardly fought with her because she chose to highlight my weight as a health problem rather than pat my hand and say *The things we do for motherhood!* This time, I was the stressed-out woman and I wouldn't be surprised if she resented my emotional reaction.

During both of these occasions I wanted something idealistic, possibly impractical, between my mother and myself. I wanted us to relate to one another so splendidly that I would stop *needing* her maternal love, allowing our love to grow into something higher. This didn't happen.

It really wasn't until I was pregnant with my second child, Sunny, and Guthrow was two that I began to stop longing for the 'something higher' with my mom. I stopped searching for her as the idealised mother and, through accepting my own many motherly-flaws, began to accept her for who she is: a woman who is a mother and doing the best she can. I let go of my resentment and my stress and began to speak to her on the phone as a friend: ringing up simply to chat about her grandchild and the trials and tribulations Guthrow and I had faced as mother and child that week; or to talk about my second pregnancy, listen to her reminiscings of her own pregnancies; complain about how little time I had to do anything for myself, how consuming motherhood is, how wonderful each day is.

It took two years after my first son's birth for me to stop searching for my mother. I began finding her in my bittersweet tears when I cared for Guthrow while his body burned from a high fever. I found her in my irritation and irrational temper when he misbehaved. I found her in a memory, smiling proudly at me learning the piano, while I smiled proudly at Guthrow learning to walk backwards and sideways. I found her biting the insides of her mouth, holding back her fear as I jumped out of my first aeroplane, biting just as I did the first time Guthrow climbed rocks bigger than his own body. I found her in front of some mindless television drama after a particularly busy day of entertaining children. I found her in our goodnight rituals, in our kisses and hugs and in our laughter. I don't need to go too far to find my mother if I'm feeling particularly lonely. I simply need to find my child.

But is it a coincidence that I was also very much involved with the writing of my exegesis at this time? Can I put it down to the process of moving from an unquestionable love of a tiny baby who is the embodiment of all that is innocent,

good and needful to a more complex love involving everyday feelings of frustration, fear, anger, pride and love for a toddler who is learning to be independent of his mother? Though I agree that women turn to their own children to reconnect with their mothers (which does not mean I distrust Debbie's analysis of her relationship with her mother), I also strongly feel that this particular exegetical subject was a catalyst for acceptance.

### **The Sister as Mother Substitute**

When I try to put myself in my mother's position of being a child and nurturing a woman who had very little, if any, Good Mother-ing qualities, I consider loneliness. How she must have longed for her brother! For someone to share the burden, the fears and tears. For a different familial connection. One that is healthy. So goes the desire of Lily May.

A sister would've been my playmate and friend. Someone I could've bossed around who'd still pray for me at night. A faithful follower. A groupie. Someone I could've said things to — things I couldn't have said to my mother. Like *I just stole some bubble gum from the corner store. Or I like to look at myself in the mirror when I'm naked and imagine I'm the young Elvis Aaron Presley looking at me in my pubescence* and she'd say *What's 'pubescence'?* and I'd say *Grow up, baby. Or I hate it when Mama goes out all night* and she'd say *I hate it too.* (9)

Audre Lorde has a strikingly similar account in her autobiographical *Zami*:

*A True Spelling of My Name*:

When I was around the age of four or five, I would have given anything I had in the world except my mother, in order to have had a friend or a little sister. She would be someone I could talk to and play with, someone close enough in age to me that I would not have to be afraid of her, nor she of me. We would share our secrets with each other. (34)

I think perhaps a little sister is every little girl's desire. But none more so than the daughter of a dependent single mother.

One of the three 'recurring, predictable conditions that allow strong sibling bonds to develop,' according to clinical psychologists Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn, is 'insufficient parental influence' (18). Lily May has no father and the mother she has is undeniably unreliable, both physically and emotionally. Clearly she has 'insufficient parental influence' but unfortunately she has no sibling with which to bond.

I am back in my imagination and things are getting lively. We are making a mess of the well-ordered platters my mother has laid out for us and we have begun to drink our traditional Grasshopper shakes. There is just enough peppermint Schnapps to turn our two o'clock chat into an early afternoon happy hour. My husband has now entered the scene and he talks with my dad about his job. My dad loves this sort of talk. The professional side of life is something he has always had great control over and he enjoys hearing Dash speak as though he does as well. My mom is talking to me about her sister Laurie, whom I haven't yet met. Her speech is full of energy and her eyes are slightly teary.

‘You look just like her,’ she tells me as she douses the bread with the dip and sings *mmm*, rolling her eyes, pleased with the success of the packet’s recipe. ‘I have to remember to get this one again,’ she says quickly.

I am still munching on the Chex mix my mom made from four different types of Chex brand cereal, peanuts and pretzels, a little bit of oil and more than a dash of Worcestershire sauce, all toasted in the oven on low. ‘I love this mix,’ I tell her. ‘I wish we had all the different Chex cereals in Australia.’

When my mom talks about Laurie, it’s as if she is making her up. As if her childhood dream of having an unrestricted love is manifesting in the creation of the phantom sister. Who is this *Laurie*? And where was she when my mom was mothering her own mother?

When Lily May asks her mother if she’ll have another baby so she can have a sister and her mother’s answer is no, Lily May is upset. But she can still dream. After her mother dies, Lily May gives up the dream and unconsciously begins her hunt for a substitute for a sister (hence a substitute for a mother). She spends many years doing this with varying degrees of disappointment, always returning to an overwhelming feeling of loneliness.

In the Australian desert, Lily May is confronted with Annie, Jimmy’s sister. Upon first meeting Annie and realising that both are daughters of substance abusers and both are running away, Lily May thinks, ‘I wanted to take care of her or, even better, I wanted us to take care of each other’ (116). What a pleasant idea. But she retaliates by musing, ‘if I wanted this mystic sister thing to happen, why did I feel so tired of trying? Why was it beginning to feel like a chore?’ Perhaps because the timing isn’t right. Lily May wants so badly to solve her issues with her dead mother by depending upon and being depended upon by someone else

that she gives herself little space to breathe, reflect, cry, appreciate. But even as she recognises that her search for a sister is futile, given her damaged present character, the relationship between Annie and Jimmy is heartbreaking to her: 'I had a sleeping bag; they had each other' (124).

The same tender jealousy exists in Spain, as Lily May meets Renata and Isobel. The ease with which they share their kitchen chores demands this meditation: 'I watched them and wondered, where would I be right now if I'd had a sister?' (210). Later that evening, as the emotions of the day wind down, the line between what it means to have a sister and what it means to have a mother blur as Lily May notices the two sisters snuggling together,

as they probably had their entire lives: on sad days when one had been defeated by a lover or a friend or her own expectations, amid the confusion of puberty and the love-hate quarrels with their mother, or simply during quiet evenings in front of the television ....

'I used to do this when I was a kid,' I said, catching Renata resting her head on Isobel's shoulder. 'With my mother,' I said, not flinching at all. And I turned back to watch the movie. (211)

This train of thought suggests that it is not necessarily a sister that Lily May wants but the sort of loving relationship one should expect from any family member: sister, brother, father (all of whom did not exist for her), mother (who only existed for her in the best of times). Lily May wishes to recapture the feelings of those 'best of times'. She desires her mother.

In *What Women Want Next* sociologist and social commentator Dr Susan Maushart tries to answer what it is that today's women really want and, after nearly two-hundred and fifty pages of discussion, comes to the conclusion that they really

want two things: sleep and other women. I think this is especially true for mothers. Being a mother of a three-year-old and a six-month-old, I am reminded daily (as I am practising my zombie-walk) how much sleep I desire and nightly (as I am planning my imagined luncheon) how much I desire the company of my female friends. In fact, I had always been more comfortable with male companions prior to becoming a mother, and so I had more male friends. Now I only see my male friends when there is a social gathering, never one-on-one. It is the female that I desire. Whether she be a mother or not, I desire her because I desire female nurturing and understanding. Could this be a desire for my mother?

Most women have numerous female acquaintances, a small but significant number of friends and, if they are lucky, one or two 'sisters'. I mean the spiritual sister here. In *Psyche's Sisters*, Christine Downing, Professor of Mythological Studies in Santa Barbara, writes: 'To speak of later women intimates as "sisters" is to acknowledge that this process of [maternal] substitution goes on, that the point was never to remain forever within the original constellation' (169). By the time Lily May lands herself in Moorea and meets Taia, she is old enough to know that she is searching for a sisterly bond. I no longer have to disguise this with symbolism; I can use her words.

Taia knows nothing of my mother but I'm feeling closer to her every day and maybe I'll share my secrets with her. Maybe I'll say to her *I think I could stay with George for a really long time* and Taia will say *I think you should stay with George for a really long time* or I'll tell her *I hated it when my mother left me alone* and Taia will say *I hated it when my mother put me in dresses* and we'll hug like sisters repeating *I know, I know*, just like sisters. (244-245)



Nine years ago I received a phone call from my mother. She had just been informed that she had a sister. She was forty-six years old at the time. This woman, my mother's sister, my aunt, had been searching into the medical history of her biological family (she was adopted at birth). What she found out was that Debbie's mother was her mother. Laurie, my mother's sister, the aunt I have yet to meet, was thirty-seven at the time. That means that my mother was nine years old when her mother had a child. Presumably Debbie was old enough to know what a pregnant woman looks like. However, my mother had no recollection of her mother being pregnant at all. What she did remember was her mother going into hospital to have some varicose veins removed. Thinking back to that time, she began to put things together. Her mother was a tiny woman so a pregnancy bump, covered by a large shirt, might not have been noticeable, especially if there were no other reasons to believe she was pregnant (she was divorced from my mother's father and she did not confide in my mother about men). And when my mother reflected upon walking through miles of rain to visit her mother in hospital, only to be told to go back home and wait for her (she waited for days), she realised her mother had gone away to have Laurie, not to rid herself of varicose veins.

'I blocked it all out! Maybe post-traumatic stress? I don't know but when Laurie rang me, I thought *there's no way*. Then I started to remember everything.'

'You mean the way it really happened?' I ask, not being able to close my mouth. No matter how many times I hear this story, I am amazed.

'The way it really happened.'

So Laurie and my mother decided to meet. Today they are the best of friends, the closest of sisters.

But all of those lost years! How cheated she must feel! She had a sister that she never knew about and her brother lived in another state.

‘Did you ever feel you missed out on having a sibling near when you were growing up? You must have missed your brother.’ We’ve never seen much of my Uncle Terry. I can never work out what their relationship is or what it ever was.

‘I didn’t know any different. It was just me and my mom.’

We are drinking the Grasshoppers through straws. It’s a funny little diversion.

‘Did you have any friends you wished were your sisters?’ Surely she wanted a sister. My character did so wouldn’t she have?

‘I really didn’t have a friend to replace a sibling,’ Debbie says, digging in the Chex mix for a peanut. ‘My mother also moved us around a lot, and of course I couldn’t bring friends home because of the unpredictability of her state, so I really didn’t have life-long friends, only short-time acquaintances.’

Such is Lily May’s fate when her mother is alive. In no childhood memory I gave her is there a ‘sister’, only girls teasing her about her clothes or her mother’s occupation, or girls sharing their perceptions on sex. They are generic characters with no names, no physical characteristics, no substance. They are simply there to help readers understand Lily May.

My mother continues, brushing the Chex mix crumbs with her hand to the edge of the table so she can capture them in her other hand and throw them into the bin. She cleans as she eats. ‘I love Laurie so much and I know that it has a lot to do with not receiving love through my younger years from anyone. She is a part of my mother, which makes our bond so strong, and our love so strong. I know that I

have yours and Tony's and Dad's love which is unconditional, but there is definitely a different need that I have for Laurie's love for me.'

I pick out the pretzels from the Chex mix and dip them into the French onion dip, thinking *Thank goodness I am privileged enough to have had loving parents so that I will never be able to understand her need for Laurie's love. I don't need my brother's love because I have always been lucky enough to have had it, just as I have always been lucky enough to have had my parents' love.* But I did assume that need existed in my re-writing of her story as Lily May's story so it seems I may have done something right.

Finding Jessica proves to be a comfort to Lily May, for they do share the burden of a Bad Mother, even if, like Laurie and my mother, it is after-the-fact. Gaining a sister is an attainment of an immediate love, one that Lily May need not question. And in finding this unquestioning familial love, Lily May ceases to question the love of her mother. So she has not found a *substitute* for her mother; partly through her sister, she has found the means to understand her mother, forgive her mother, appreciate and love her.

'Sometimes I'm angry with her for not telling me about Laurie, but then I am so thankful to her for having Laurie.'

As we move onto the salmon and cream cheese crackers, Debbie makes it clear that meeting and finding love with Laurie did not allow her to understand her mother further or forgive her or appreciate her or love her any more than when she was alive so perhaps my sisterly intentions in *And the Word was Song* are, as with the child, a bit romantic. But I was spot-on about the unconditional love my mom felt with Laurie immediately upon meeting her. It was a gift their mother had

given to them and one that they could gladly accept. I secretly pat myself on the back for that one, then wonder if there was a sale on cream cheese.

### **The Lover as Mother Substitute**

It was 1998, the Year of the Tiger, my Chinese sign, and it was an emotional hell. It was the year I began to write. To really write. I wrote dozens of poems with the aid of a glass of scotch, straight up, no nonsense. I wrote short stories in the bathtub with jazz in the background and bubbles on my pen. I wrote my first novel: a cleansing of the emotional hell. I emailed my parents a short story I had written about a woman who has sex with a very young man who has a tail (a birth defect). It wasn't erotic, really. Really it was about a middle-aged woman who was sure she'd never have children because she was too selfish, because she wasn't the nurturing type, and after the sexual encounter with the young man, she symbolically fucked herself a son. I knew I was brilliant and I wanted my parents to respond with a phone call, something to the tune of 'We just read your story and it's brilliant!' What I got was a phone call from my mother and what she said then, she's now said a dozen times: 'Why do you always have to write about sex?' I could've taken the easy way out and blamed her by asking, 'Why did you give me all of those VC Andrews' books about incest in the attic when I was only twelve?' I could've blamed the American culture in which I grew up: I saw Brook Shields doing something with her boyfriend that made her parents mad in *Endless Love* and something with her marooned friend that made her pregnant in *The Blue Lagoon*; Brenda and Dylan were doing it on *Beverly Hills 90210* and that seemed normal enough for an 8:00 pm time-slot; I owned a few Prince albums. I could've blamed my Chinese horoscope because in the Year of the Tiger, big things were

supposed to happen for me, so not only was it an emotional hell, it was a sexual mess. But none of those (especially the last one) would have made my mother happy. Nor would such flimsy excuses have been sufficient for me.

At the time, I probably couldn't have answered that question with honesty (or without breaking into tears, trying to defend myself — a problem I still have). I probably wasn't too sure why my poems needed 'inside me' and 'sweaty' to describe love or why a character in a story needed to recount her sexual experiences to understand that she was just as mortal as her newly deceased grandfather. All I know is that I was writing. Really writing.

It's 2006. The only reason I even know whose year it is on the Chinese astrological chart is because my husband barracks for the Western Bulldogs and reminds me during every one of their games, 'It's the year of the dog!' I think he's utterly adorable but I've decided that I'm not buying into the Chinese New Year anymore because I'm not Chinese. As for my emotional hell, it worked itself out through the writing of my first novel manuscript, which still sits on a floppy disk while I deliberate whether to mask a few people's identities. A lot has changed in the past eight years and if I ever catch myself thinking about how quickly time flies or how crazy destiny is or what the future could possibly bring, I can always ground myself with the knowledge that my mother is still asking me, 'Why do you always have to write about sex?'

'It was very hard for me to read. There was a lot of stuff I thought was morally wrong' (Johnson E-mail 21, June 2005). This comment from my mother after reading *And the Word was Song* didn't surprise me but, even though I had prepared myself for it, I still felt guilty for putting her through the task. It's true, the manuscript stresses sex. But it is not a sexy manuscript. It is about spirituality.

It is about music. It is about finding a place for oneself in the world. It is about family and love. It is about mothers.

‘My mother was a whore from Memphis and I never knew my father’(2), and with those words I set in place, much to my own mother’s discontent, the sexual overtone. That first sentence allowed me to place Lily May in the position of Sexually Confused and Angry Woman.

‘But why?’ my mom asks. I am back in Florida, in my parents’ immaculate condominium and I imagine Debbie is wiping stray strings of water from around the sink. She is visibly frustrated, seriously cleaning.

‘Because what an interesting protagonist to explore!’ I am on the stool. It is six in the evening and I am eating one of my mother’s seven layer bars. Chocolate chips, coconut, butterscotch chips ... I’ve never been able to say what goes into these bars and I’ve never been able to have just one. ‘She’s damaged and I get to discover her history. I get to make up her problems then try to find some sort of resolution. It’s like finding your way through a foreign city without a map.’

‘A map?’

I’ve lost her to her frustration and cleaning.

I enjoyed writing Lily May’s past. The flashbacks were my favourite scenes. They allowed me to get closer to my character. After writing the one below, I began to understand Lily May’s confusion.

I went to her room. I could say it was because I’d had a bad dream, but that would be a lie. I don’t know why I went to her room. My memory simply begins with me at her doorway, eight years old. At first, she was the same, beautiful woman I knew to be my mother.

Mama. But then she was being hurt. I saw a man's back. He was on top of her. I thought of how heavy he must've been. Her eyes squinted like she wanted to cry, too afraid to make any noise so she just squinted. He was hurting her, I was sure, and I was sure she was dying. I kept thinking *Mama no. Mama no*, scared she was going to die but I didn't say anything. I was afraid I might get into trouble. (5)

At the age of eight, Lily May cannot dissociate sex from death and violence. Eleven years later, during her first sexual experience, the problem remains. Stuey is no longer the tender, optimistic boy, all innocence and big-brotherness; he is 'ugly and distorted'; he is 'a man, heavy on [her] body, hurting [her] insides, tearing [her] vagina into something it wasn't ready to be'; he is 'pushing...dominating' (44). True she is under the influence of LSD at the time but that does not make her experience any less real.

When she becomes pregnant with Stuey's child, she must kill it. During her self-inflicted abortion, she nearly kills herself. Intentionally? I, like the older, reminiscing Lily May, am uncertain of her motives. But if the old saying 'like mother, like daughter' is true, then Lily May, still recovering from her mother's 'suicide', would indeed feel a need to kill herself.

In 'Suicide and Sex: The Cost of Desire (is Death)', academic Holli G. Levitsky writes: 'While the act of suicide is the body's ultimate performative act, for a woman suicide is more than an act; it is a sign, a form of communication between her body and her culture' (29). I am uncomfortable with the assumption that this is unique to women and is not inclusive of men but I am particularly intrigued by the term 'communication' here. Lily May was saying that sex *is* death

and that if she were her mother's daughter, then the life she has chosen for herself (set in place by having sex with Stuey) is too filthy to live.

'Now how's that for not writing about sex?' I ask, pounding my fist on the island-countertop, feeling quite pleased with myself.

'But that sex scene with Stuey was so ... graphic.'

'Explains a lot about her, doesn't it?'

'Well it doesn't explain why she has to sleep with women.'

'No, not entirely. But if you look at it alongside that first memory of her mother "at work" ... ', I do the quotation marks with my fingers but my mom misses it, putting plastic wrap over the Chex mix so we can eat it all day tomorrow as well.

Where I grew up in the Southland of the United States, lesbians and gay men are about as accepted as African Americans. Bigotry is an unfortunate situation that is all too real in the South, so when Lily May meets the five lesbians in the Winnebago, is it surprising that she is uncomfortable?

Lily May cannot dissociate their sexuality from their personalities; hence, she cannot see them as anything other than sexual beings. That is why it makes sense that the women in the Winnebago threaten Lily May in the same way that men do.

I ran my hands under hot water, no soap, just as Cass was doing at that very moment, and I thought about Joanne, who hadn't left the Winnebago as far as I knew and were probably in need of a good hand wash as well....I returned to the present and washed my hands of any guilt I may have had for not trusting the girls in the



Winnebago and I tried to wash them of any apprehension because I really did want to carry on with them. See where they would take me. But I could not wash the fear away and that scared me because I didn't know what I was afraid of. (67-68)

Lily May is afraid of sex and these women, in her naïve understanding of lesbianism, are defined only by their sexuality.

'So why the obsession with María, the driver of the Winnebago?' my mum asks, brows creased in disgust rather than raised in curiosity.

In *A Desire for Women*, Suzanne Juhasz writes that '[t]he mother-infant bond is the first romance' because '[w]hat is romance, after all, but the turning of a subject into an object by way of idealization?' (15). As daughters, we look to our mothers throughout our childhood and imagine ourselves with ample breasts, pubic hair, shaveable legs, musk-scented skin. Our mothers are sexual objects long before we hit puberty because we, ourselves, aspire to be sexual objects. We desire their bodies in hope that we too will be sexy. They are our role models. They are our first romance. And when we realise that our mothers are unattainable, we move on. It could further be argued that we move from the mother to the father but in Lily May's case, there is no father. Because Lily May is a heterosexual character, it would seem likely that her mother substitute would be a man she can trust as well as desire. However to the young Lily May, daughter of a prostitute, 'men were sleazes and nothing more' (102). From her perspective, men denigrate women, make them less than equal, make them less than a dirty semen stain on her mother's blue patchwork quilt. Lily May seeks women even though she is heterosexual. Her confusion about sex is gendered as much as it is due to a physical disgust. Again, to quote Juhasz, 'lesbian desire, like all forms of desire, is

both an understandable extension and a renegotiation of the first love with the mother' (21).

'María is Lily May's first mother substitute.'

'Mother substitute?' My mom looks at me, nose crinkled, as if there could ever be such a thing. 'But what about all that sex with the Spanish woman?'

The seven layer bars are addictive. So is this conversation, though slightly uncomfortable for both of us.

Lily May seeks a female lover substitute in Paloma, but she soon finds that she is forcing the issue. She likens her relationship with Paloma to having a visa: something greater than being a tourist (as with the one-off affair with Consuelo) but she does not want to be naturalised. In fact sex with a woman had become 'noses in places where they didn't belong' (201). She is clearly not, nor can she pretend to be, a lesbian. Juhasz writes,

The infant begins with a somatic relationship to another body that is a woman [the mother], knows sensual pleasure and desire for that body, that experience becomes a template for what sensuality and desire feel like .... It is, therefore, not particularly surprising that a woman would go on feeling this way about the body of another woman .... Desire is, after all, much more complicated than pleasure in the touch of another's flesh; or shall we say, how we name that feeling as pleasure, how we understand and enact our desires, is historically, culturally, socially and psychodynamically as well as somatically constituted. (21)

Through a somewhat long-term relationship with Paloma, Lily May is able to differentiate between pleasure and desire and opts for desire. She *wants* to want a

woman. However, without the pleasure backing those desires, Paloma simply becomes another woman Lily May wishes were someone else. In trying to make Paloma into a mother substitute, Lily May has unwittingly realised that Paloma is no substitute for her mother at all. In fact it comes to light that Lily May enjoys cooking with Paloma, passing peanut shells between their toes under the table and taking silly photos of one another the most and '[i]f our relationship was mostly about those times,' she says, 'I might have stayed in Granada' (201), suggesting Paloma has become the sister substitute.

'A sister?' Debbie's tongue is digging and scooping the seven layer bar's sticky, gooey goodness from her teeth while her hand reaches for her wine, something from the Napa Valley. She is thinking about Laurie and that I am quite possibly obsessed with sex and maybe a little bit crazy.

'See, these mother substitutes often collide because they are really reinventions of her mother.'

Once Lily May has determined she is not a lesbian because she simply does not take overt pleasure in lesbian acts, why does she return to María and reinvent her as a fantasy lesbian lover? Again, pleasure is not desire. While Lily May is on her search for 'María's mother' and becoming more and more disillusioned with her role as mistress / whore, she makes María into her fantasy lover. Because sex with a woman was not an option when María was alive in Part I, Lily May can see her as pure desire; someone she admires and trusts and hence turns into an object (a saviour). The position of female lover is somehow higher on Lily May's pedestal than male lover. This is because, whether she knows it or not, her ultimate pedestal-holder is her mother and by imagining she attained the finest love — both a physical and spiritual one with a form she can more readily relate to —

with María, she can take her mother off of that pedestal, place María there and get on with her life. But María, of course, is dead. She cannot be a mother substitute because she has ceased to be real. This realisation is also a realisation that her mother, as well, no longer exists. She, too, is dead. And it is high time that Lily May learns to deal with her mother's death so that she can in turn deal with her mother.

‘So it's all about her mother? How did you *think* of that?’

‘These people, these memories,’ I say, loving this connection I'm having with my mom, ‘are all pit stops on her way to finding a route out of that foreign city.’

‘Now Moses isn't bad,’ writes author Joseph Heller in his novel *God Knows*, ‘I have to admit, but he's very, very long, and there's a crying need for variation after the Exodus from Egypt’ (5). I feel this is true in the Bible and, recalling that my structure requires Part II to mirror Exodus, I feel that it is true in my manuscript. The journey through Central Australia is long and it is laborious. For me, the writing of it was the same. So when I got to Part III, the section that mirrors the Ten Commandments, I was ready to spice things up. Accepting that she is her mother's daughter at the end of her Australian journey, Lily May embraces sex and exploits it for all that she can. Suddenly I was using words like ‘penis’, ‘phallus’ and ‘cock’, ‘vagina’, ‘pussy’ and ‘cunt’. These are words Lily May thought of as a child when she thought of sex as dirty and disgusting and now, bordering on womanhood, she adopts them into her everyday speech. These are the words I knew would make my mother grimace.

‘Well I didn't get Spain at all.’

I have gotten up to pour myself a wine. I open the cupboard with the plates in it by mistake.

‘Why did you have to use those dirty words?’

British author Anthony Burgess reasons that it is not the sexually overt words that bother the reader but rather the subject of sex itself. ‘Whatever kind of terminology the contemporary novelist employs, he is still being too open about sex’, (Burgess 399). Sex is an awkward topic for most and there is no easy way to lessen its discomforting force. Sex is sex no matter how many pretty colours you use to paint it. If that’s the case, why not try painting it Jackson Pollock-style?

‘Variation can be liberating,’ I say, expecting her not to get it.

‘Are you talking about you and writing or all of the guys Lily May sleeps with in Spain?’

She’s quick, my mom.

‘With the words I chose, I was liberating Lily May and simultaneously liberating myself.’

‘That sounds like some sort of sixties hippie thing. “Sex is liberation”.’ Now she does the finger-quote thing only she does it like a little dance. ‘You just like to write about sex.’

I am remembering something I once read about the writings of Henry Miller. ‘You see sex,’ I said, “‘is both an expression of liberation and freedom, and simultaneously the reverse, a prison of obsession” [(Woolf 170)]. So I know that when sex and sex alone is the goal, the outcome can be disastrous. And I chose to explore that.’

In embracing sex, Lily May also puts her life in danger (as in the scene with the man with the 666 tattooed on his arm who plays a drowning game with

her while they are having sex), thus embracing violence and death. She was adhering to the 'like mother like daughter' adage, which Nancy Friday touches on in *My Mother / My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity*. Friday discusses the melancholic griever:

In the melancholic, grief is not whole-hearted because the ambivalent rage at the bad mother of infancy has not been resolved. Sorrow cannot be fully expressed and so gotten out .... We must deny our hatred for the bad mother more strongly than ever. This repression seems to solve the problem. We begin to walk like mother, talk like her; *we become her*. We take in all those parts that once we hated. In this way, we can answer the self-accusation that we are glad she is dead: we are keeping her alive! (453)

Friday sums up her analysis of the melancholic:

By turning our aggression inward, hating those aspects of her we have introjected, we do not have to see it is really directed at her. We hate ourselves instead. The result is a sadness and self-hate that goes on and on, feelings of futility and bewilderment, flashes of seemingly pointless rage amid a general air of depression. Melancholia. (453)

'Well maybe I'm not normal then because I never did that with my mother.'

A return to her relationship with her mother. Now we're getting somewhere.

'You never hated your mom and rebelled against her by taking on her traits?' I flashback to Adelaide. I am scrubbing the kitchen drawers, wiping off

something sticky and red, wiping frantically, feeling compulsive about my clean kitchen. I am a taller, blonder version of Debbie.

‘Maybe I was just strong?’ My mom shrugs her shoulders.

I wonder if she knows how strong she is.

‘I think Lily May’s strong,’ she continues, and I love that my mother is analysing my over-sexed character, seeing something positive in her. ‘But she was very weak in Spain.’

‘That’s exactly right,’ I say. We clink glasses.

That is why it comes as no surprise that at the end of this debauched but entertaining romp-of-a-section, Lily May is spiritually numb. She has unknowingly degraded herself by repeatedly allowing others to abuse her body, all in the name of her mother. She has had enough of men, had enough of women. She must make amends.

‘So what does she do?’ my mom asks.

‘She falls in love!’ I am hoping this gives my mom a feeling of warmth. I am hoping my gift of a warmth can compete with the one given to her by her third glass of wine.

Sex with George, Lily May’s male lover substitute, is about falling in love. It is about finding a balance and learning to cease viewing sex as death. Once sex becomes life — not only the creation of their child but the emergence of a natural and healthy love — Lily May can return to her mother.

Accepting George’s love wasn’t easy for Lily May. She fights every attempt George makes to bring them closer to having a genuine loving (emotional and physical) relationship. Whenever he challenges her reckless behaviour or

dives into her past, she tries to seduce him. Sex, for her, is the easy way out. It is something she uses with George, not something she has with George. It takes Taia, the trans-gendered mahu, to make Lily May realise that a person can love another without sex, just as a person can have sex with another without being in love. Lily May sees that Taia loves George. And it is a pure love; it does not involve a sexual relationship. Lily May is riddled with jealousy because she cannot have this relationship with George. But when George treats her to a night of unselfish sex (one in which he does not have a desire to orgasm, only to give Lily May an orgasm), she feels she has finally reached equality in bed so she feels she must be in love.

‘That is so simplistic and typical of Lily May’s mixed up sexual world,’ I say, enjoying the tipsy feeling of the wine, coupled with one Grasshopper and a bottle of Sam Adam’s Boston lager, all meeting in a gentle maelstrom, swimming over my skin. ‘In reality, Lily May *is* in love with George and so their sex becomes love-making, thus creating that sexual equality Lily May had been searching for since her first sexual experience!’

My mom laughs a small *ha!* because she is still deciding whether I am obsessed with sex and a little bit crazy.

‘The desire and the pleasure have finally come together and she feels she has found her mother substitute.’

Friday writes:

Being held in our lover’s arms creates a feeling of warmth, love and happiness we have never felt before — or have we? The odd thing is that it is almost familiar. We are pervaded by an eerie sense of having been here before. We have always known this feeling



existed, and have merely been waiting for it to come along again. *It feels right* .... When both elements are present — the nurturing plus the explicitly sexual—the marriage or affair is said to be serious, and continues for some time. (272-273)

I am tempted to ask my mom her thoughts on this, ready to agree with Friday by offering up my own personal anecdote to her theory, but I hold back. I decide that the look on my mother's face is proof that she has decided I am both: obsessed with sex and a little bit crazy.

My mother once told me that in the beginning of her marriage she didn't necessarily love my father but she did love being in love; she loved being married, having children, living in her own house that she had made into a home. Is that surprising considering her upbringing? Is it surprising that my mother married the first man (though an amazing catch of a man he is) who told her he wanted to love and care for her for the rest of his life? Is it surprising at all considering that there was an enormous absence of observable love in her childhood home and that she would take it upon herself to create a home that could promise her an abundance of clearly manifested love while still merely a child herself (she was eighteen when she married)? In many ways, Lily May is my mother. In more ways she is not, but at the heart of Lily May's desire to be independent, ever-resilient and loved unconditionally, she is my mother.

After reading *And the Word was Song*, my mom had this to say: 'I really gained respect for the daughter's strength. She may have been strong and fearless because of her mother's fear and weakness. She was persistent about trying to feel

love, and to give love...' (2005). My mother was talking about Lily May. I could have mistaken this statement for her talking about herself.

## Chapter 4

### *Homecomings and the Return to the Mother: The Ethics and Rewards of Writing the Mother*

Most journeys assume a destination. The heroine of my novel manuscript began her story at 35 Maple Street, Memphis Tennessee, and travelled around the world, searching for a destination. 35 Maple Street, Memphis Tennessee is where her journey ends. Lily May's destination is her home.

Considering my earlier discussion of the ambiguity of 'home' for me, coming from a somewhat nomadic upbringing, I need to define the concept of home represented in *And the Word was Song*. I believe Roberta Rubenstein, Professor of Literature at American University in Washington DC, shares my perception of 'home' as she writes:

Not merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space, *home* is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our psychic vocabularies, given its associations with the most influential, and often most ambivalent, elements of our earliest physical environment and psychological experiences as well as their ripple effect throughout our lives. (1-2)

Home is not simply a dwelling place with four walls and a roof, photographs hung in the hallways and a welcome mat on the doorstep. Rather it is those memories that we have framed in the photographs. It is the significance of the word 'welcome' stitched on that mat. And it is a space from which we cannot run away.

Lily May's home is more than a geographical location in Memphis or a building on 35 Maple Street. It is the emotional space. It is her *mama*.

For me home has always meant love. When I tell people I'm returning to America after a two-year absence, I say 'I'm going to America', not 'I'm going home'. Getting off the airplane in America I say 'It's good to be here again,' rather than 'It's good to be home'. Walking into my parents' new condominium (which is as foreign to my childhood memories as, say, climbing Mt Everest), I say 'I'm home!' It is automatic. My mother and father have instilled the notion of home into my psyche. The same goes for my husband and sons. They are home, and they live in Australia. Is a person allowed to have two homes or is there only one true home? If home is love, then wouldn't it be nice if we all had at *least* two?

Lily May has two. Her home with George has no geographical location and involves no physical structure: it is wherever he is. As she writes to her unborn child, Lily May says '[m]aybe we'll stop a spinning globe and go wherever the finger points. Maybe we'll spill out the tiles of Scrabble and go where the letters spell out. Maybe we'll pack our bags and follow the North Star' (309). There is no promise that the love between George and Lily May will last, however, so at the end of the novel manuscript the reader cannot say that George is Lily May's true and final home. George is a temporary home that possibly could last forever. It is my contention that the truest lasting love is between a mother and her child. Therefore, Lily May's primary home, her true home, is her mother.

Lily May's return to Memphis and the house with the white picket fence (which wasn't as perfect as the cliché suggests) is the final step in finding her mother (home). When she enters the kitchen she can 'almost smell her homemade chicken soup'. In the living room, where she found her mother's body so many years earlier, she finds it hard to breathe (289). And in her mother's old room, as she notices her mother's pictures hanging on the wall of a stranger's room, she

yells out ‘Those were my mama’s!’ (290), finally referring to her as ‘mama’, reverting to childhood through memory. It is not the idea of losing the home, or her mother’s room for that matter, that threatens Lily May; it is the idea of someone stealing the memories of her mama from her.

Literary critic Janis P Stout writes, ‘[t]he return home signifies defeat, frustration, the giving up of freedom. At best it is a disappointment’ (66). Though she is speaking about American literature, this could well be a universal theme. I am reminded of the ending of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. When Jeannette returns home to her mother, surface daily rituals have changed but not much from within. Her mother still has the upper hand and Jeanette is but a mere shadow of the larger-than-life woman who never really gave her an unconditional motherly love. Upon reading the final pages, I felt defeated and frustrated that Jeanette had given up the freedom she sought from her mother and allowed the love for her mother to imprison her. I wanted her to return home, like Lily May, and deal with her mother and, because of it, be free from her mother. As in the ending of *Zami*, when Audre writes of her return home: ‘I saw my mother’s pain, and her blindness, and her strength, and for the first time I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her’ (143). And in finding that freedom, that separation, Lily May is then able to re-bond in a victorious and satisfying way. She is able to return to Memphis, to 35 Maple Street, and feel a real sense of homecoming because she has found her mother: the whore, the addict, the best friend, the woman, her mother. As scholar Heather Ingman comments in relation to Irish women writers, ‘the moment of liberation for the daughter comes when she is able to see her mother as subject, as another suffering, vulnerable, occasionally joyful, woman’ (47). This also works for Lily May. Finally, with the help of George,

Mick and her sister Jessica, Lily May can listen to Elvis, even dance, implying that her spiritual search is also complete. That, and her singing to her unborn child, is proof that for Lily May, her spiritual connection is motherhood; the Mother is the supreme creator and therefore deserving of an unlimited, fulfilling and unconditional love.

The writing of *And the Word was Song* has been a means for me to travel home. In constantly considering and reconsidering Lily May's relationship with her mother, I was reminded of my relationship with my own mother. Though I had created a character in Lily May's mother vastly dissimilar to my mother, I could not dissociate the two. Not only did I draw from my own emotional stock to generate a convincing bond between mother and daughter, I also borrowed my mother's memories and distorted them to fit with Lily May's story. The best example of this is the long-lost sister scenario.

I always wanted to write about my mother and Laurie. I always wanted to explore what kinds of emotions a story like theirs could bring about, particularly when the shared mother is not a Good Mother, but one flawed with addiction. When Sallie Muirden, my external mentor and author of *We Too Shall Be Mothers*, read my manuscript, she said that she had problems with the tumour / pregnancy in terms of credibility. 'How on earth did the mother keep this knowledge from her street-wise daughter? It really does seem improbable' (in correspondence January 14, 2003). My obvious answer was 'but it really happened!'

In his book *Turning Life Into Fiction*, Robin Hemley, editor, author and Director of the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program, addresses the problem of credibility in this way:

[t]he question to ask is, “Is it really believable?” .... The fact that something really happened does not make it good fiction. In fact, it’s irrelevant, at least in terms of the story’s quality. (5)

I went back and added memories, embellished those that were already there and created a fiction that worked for my character, accepting that she had a life of her own.

In her discussion of autobiography, biography and fiction, scholar Alison Donnell considers what is involved in writing the mother. She notes that:

nearly always we have to accept that true and false do not have any meaning in the process of discovery. It is why we have borrowed those memories and the uses to which we have put them that are important .... we borrow them to write our own stories of the self; our identities, like hers, are inter-subjective and interconnected, shaped by and shaping other people’s auto / biographies. (134)

My grandmother was not a heroin addict and prostitute and she did not die on a couch with a crying velvet Elvis above her. Likewise, my mother did not roam the world confused and abused in order to glean some sort of meaning from her mother’s short time with her (my grandmother died prematurely from a bowel leakage at the age of fifty-two). But my grandmother *did* have a second daughter, nine years after giving birth to my mother, and my mother spent most of her life not knowing of her sister’s existence. I borrowed this memory and reworked it because, on the one hand, it seemed to fit organically with where I wanted Lily May to go on her journey. On the other hand, it allowed me to explore certain aspects of my mother. As evidenced by my imaginary conversation with Debbie

over Chex mix and Grasshoppers, it seems I did not complete a sufficiently thorough investigation of the real Debbie Johnson. Rather than representing my mother through her own childhood memories, I warped fact so completely that it would seem I have revealed myself through the process of creating fiction. The question, however, cannot go unasked: do I have the right to borrow from my mother's life?

In considering the ethics of writing the lives of others, Alison Donnell observes that authors undergo a process of

rethinking around the relationship between self, other and writing.

Indeed, it is the confusion over who speaks, for whom and about whom that our assumptions about the ownership of stories and of selves can be rooted. (127)

'Ownership' is the cause for much debate, particularly in feminist, Black, Indigenous and post-colonial writing. The taking of another's story and telling it in one's own voice can be seen as both oppressive and repressive. But what does this mean to the storyteller? That a White woman cannot speak for a Black woman or a woman cannot speak for a man? That to write a story about the injustices of a weaker 'other', the storyteller — in a position of power — must not give voice to the dis-empowered? I believe this attitude is stifling and unproductive and in order to avoid any misconceptions about ownership, it is just as important for the reader to ask the same questions about who is speaking, for whom and about whom, as it is for the writer.

Juhasz, writing about the daughter's journey into the realm of the mother, says that 'the daughter as writer can construct her mother as a person, a like subject, and recognize her in a way that she is usually too threatened to do in



everyday life' (53). My mother is not Lily May. My mother is stronger and certainly less dramatic. The path she chose to take in her life upon leaving home was decidedly less winding and definitely more socially tolerable. But her desire for love and acceptance, for a place in this world, is something I developed imaginatively in creating Lily May. Lily May enabled me to explore my mother's love for me. Juhasz continues with

[w]riting can help [the daughter] see that the woman for whom she searches is a like subject as well as a love object. Yet one subjectivity demands another. Writing becomes the space in which the daughter's own subjectivity can grow. She can give to the mother the woman she knows herself to be, even as she can create the woman she did not really know her mother to be. What is at stake, after all, is relationship: a new kind of intimacy and loving that is life giving rather than life draining. (60)

My mother said this after reading my manuscript:

Someday we will really talk about my past. Quite a story, but I was a survivor because of my strength, and my search to be loved. Look what my guardian Angel found for me, your dad. Look what we did, created you and Tony. (E-mail 21, June 2005)

In *The Ethics of Life Writing*, children's author Claudia Mills writes of the 'complementary source of tension in a writer's life' (105). She states that 'we can't use our most interesting family stories as material, but we can't give them up, either'. The question is do we, as writers, stay true to our family loyalties or do we adhere to our artistic intuition? I think we need to find a balance.

‘Writing from real life,’ writes Hemley, ‘is a constant dialogue between one’s memory and one’s imagination’ (87). In my case, the dialogue is between my mother’s memory and my imagination. I used precious snippets from her life and I believe I handled them with care. By changing the names, places and both the minor and major circumstances of my mother’s memories, it is as if I was exploring what *could* have transpired from certain events in my mother’s life if she had been a different person in a different time and everything around her was different, too.

I asked my mother to read *And the Word was Song* to make sure she did not feel uncomfortable with the treatment of her memories and, as she gave me her permission to submit the manuscript for the PhD as well as for possible publication, it seems I have found a balance. Not only that, I have, as evidenced from my mother’s E-mail, opened up a new avenue in the on-going construction of our bond: a mother and daughter sharing memories. That road was not on the map that I held in my hand when I first began writing *And the Word was Song*, but I am beginning to think that it could be the road leading us toward understanding.

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The novel "And the Word was Song", submitted as part of this thesis, is held in the University of Adelaide Library.