

Form in Fiction:
The Development of 'I dream of Magda'

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Abstract

People who write books are invariably asked how they do it, by people who read them, in a similar way, for example, to how pilots might be asked ‘How *do* you fly a plane?’ by passengers who couldn’t imagine steering several tonnes of metal through the sky at 30,000 feet.

Although there is a consistent, if complicated, logic to the flying of planes, I’m not sure there is a definitive one with regards to writing books. Creative processes, in whatever genre, are by their own nature constantly evolving and redefining their own boundaries.

I decided to remain acutely aware of the creative processes involved with writing the novel for my PhD, ‘I Dream of Magda’. I also made note of external inspirations and practical considerations I encountered along the way. This resulting exegesis is an attempt to explore the genesis and creative evolution of my novel. Specifically, it will address the various challenges and benefits involved in writing the novel to a pre-determined form, which, in this case, was the musical form ‘sonata’, adapted for literary expression.

In the end, it may not be any more helpful in addressing a general question on how to write a book, but it should go a long way to explaining how the initial idea for this book, in particular, took off and eventually flew at 70,000 words.

Statement of Originality

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

I give consent to this copy of my thesis being available for loan when deposited in the University Library.

Stefan Lashchuk_____

September 2008

Form in Fiction: The Development of ‘I Dream of Magda’

Introduction

In this exegesis I will attempt to explain how I crafted my novel ‘I Dream of Magda’ from the original concept of writing to a pre-determined form. I will explore the various challenges that arose throughout the project—such as the balancing of different narrative voices, maintaining momentum and pace within my set structure and achieving both a technical and emotional resolution in my work.

The story itself is primarily that of two brothers sharing a house together, George and Matthew Harrison. Both are young men, in their twenties, and have recently suffered substantial emotional traumas. The younger brother, George, is a twenty-six-year-old man who works in a bowling alley and is afraid of the dark. Reeling from a broken heart and still coping with the trauma of a childhood home invasion, he finds rare solace in the giant painting of an alien that sits outside his room.

Matthew Harrison has his own demons to deal with. He has recently lost the love of his life in a car accident—an accident he was lucky to survive himself. Unable to face life without his one shining light, he retreats into a world of constant sleep in which he dreams about having an intimate relationship with Australian comedienne Magda Szubanski. Her humour and warmth shine through in Matthew’s dreams so much so that they fast become the only place he feels content.

As things progress, George meets Stacey, who’s also getting over her ex, and the two of them form a mutually beneficial friendship that causes George to ponder whether he will ever be able to get over his previous love. Meanwhile, Matthew

retreats further and further into his imagined relationship with Magda, and at the same time the full tragedy of his real life losses begin to surface, making him contemplate the idea of ‘sleeping forever’. And so as one brother’s life looks like finally getting itself together, the other brother’s life looks like falling apart, until the whole situation reaches a dangerous and mysterious climax.

‘I Dream of Magda’ is a deliberately a humourous and tragic novel. It deals with the loss of love and the process of grieving. It explores the pain that the death of a parent can leave for the family they leave behind. It also aims to show that sometimes the families that are closest are the ones who seem the farthest apart.

It is essential to point out that while the final manuscript eventually went on to win the 2007 Australian/Vogel award, and thus ended up being professionally edited and published through Allen & Unwin, the manuscript I will be submitting for my PhD remains completely my own work. It had not, at time of completion, undergone any level of professional edit—though of course, as with all novels, I sought general feedback from various readers from time to time. The submitted, unedited manuscript thus remains considerably different to the later, finished novel.

To b, or not to b? : A musical and literary merging

The idea of writing a novel in sonata form originated from a series of conversations with my mother (a highly accomplished musician) in which we were discussing the presence of form and structure relative to the creative process itself, and whether different types of creative expression (be it visual art, music or text etc) necessarily warranted using different, established types of form and structure specific to each craft.

This line of thought led to us ruminating on whether it might be possible (or indeed, common) to transpose and adapt structural and formal tools from one kind of creative expression to another. If so, would the end result be effective or perhaps seem contrived? And, importantly, from a practical sense—how would it affect the creative process along the way?

In terms of beginning the actual project, I initially decided upon using a known *musical* form, as opposed to, say a *visual* form. On a personal level, the connection between music and literature for me has long been both inspirational and experiential. I have written music (and lyrics) for over fifteen years in a series of bands and have taken an almost obsessive interest in the craft of songwriting—in particular, the different *ways* in which I could start out writing a song, the different limitations I could set myself, to force myself in certain directions.

Importantly, too, both music and literature exist as essentially time-driven narratives. It was this which convinced me that the idea of a structural, formal crossover would be somewhat more achievable than with other genres. As Calvin Brown says, in his article ‘The Poetic Use of Musical Forms’:

“It is immediately obvious that music and literature are alike in one fundamental characteristic in which they differ from painting, sculpture and architecture: they extend and develop in time rather than in space. By this very fact, they have certain general processes in common: for example, they require of their audience both memory and anticipation.” (Brown, 1944, p87)

With this in mind, I decided to choose a musical form with which to work. While reading through various books on different forms I stumbled across a few passages in ‘Understanding Music’ by composer and broadcaster Antony Hopkins

which immediately grabbed my attention. In explaining the various sections of the musical form 'sonata', he began likening them to the writing of a novel.

"The Exposition is like the first chapters of a novel in which we meet the characters and learn of their background; the Development reveals hidden aspects, changes their relationships, introduces surprise twists and turns, journeys to unexpected places and so on."

(Hopkins, 1979, p72)

In the various books I had explored thus far, this was the first time I had seen someone draw such distinct parallels between musical and literary form. I read on:

"If in the Exposition we met the essential characters in this particular plot, in the Development we learned a great deal about them... (then)... in the Recapitulation we will look at them in quite a different light since not only do we know more about them but we ourselves have had our emotions played upon. If we have been properly involved in the drama...whatever emotional condition we were in at the start of the work will have become subtly changed."

(Hopkins, 1979, pg74-75)

Hopkins' reference to 'characters' as such, was obviously just his way of describing musical themes in more accessible way for his audience. It convinced me though, that if I wanted to embark on a project involving the adaptation from the musical to the literary, then I could take the musical sonata form and apply this metaphor in reverse. i.e. use the structure and behaviour of the musical sonata form to explain and dictate the journey of my characters.

At this stage—and, in hindsight, perhaps somewhat naively—I was also initially interested in whether the novel, by virtue of being written in musical form would then read somehow 'musically'. By this, I mean: would readers be able to read

the novel in a similar way to which they might listen to music? Would readers be more acutely aware of the inherent rhythms, pauses and thematic changes in the piece? I believe it's fair to say that most readers experience the 'rhythm' of prose—even if they are not necessarily aware of the fact that they are doing so at the time of reading. I was interested in whether I could make the rhythms/pauses/thematic changes seem more pronounced somehow—to the point where a reader could actually recognise the novel as being written in 'sonata' form.

As I mentioned before, it turned out to be, of course, a little ambitious of me to expect the reader to engage with the novel on this level. While rhythmic and structural frameworks can no doubt be a vital part of experiencing poetry, a novel is simply too long a narrative to maintain a constant clear 'musical' engagement with a reader, in terms of them being aware of a deliberate form. And ultimately, even if they were able to remain aware, I am not sure whether this awareness would add anything to their experience of the novel.

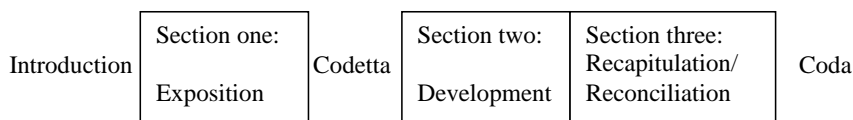
With this in mind, I eventually abandoned focusing on the specific 'sonata' aspect of my idea, and shifted instead to simply experiencing and documenting the limitations/liberations involved with writing a novel to a pre-determined form—the exact nature of which form being irrelevant, the main point being that my PhD became no longer specifically about the relationship between a musical and literary form, but rather, more simply, the experiment of trying to write to a pre-determined form itself.

Having said that, as I had been writing with adherence to the basic sonata form for nearly two years, I obviously decided to keep going with it, and thus it is still necessary to outline the model which I used to write the novel, because it goes a great deal towards explaining how in fact I developed every aspect of the book.

Sonata Form: A Basic Definition

There have been many variations on the basic sonata form throughout the centuries, though all adhere to a basic rule—that the sonata form primarily denotes a musical form with three sections: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. The additional use of an Introduction and/or Codettas/Codas is optional. Below I have a very simple visual guide explaining a basic version of the sonata form. Rather than be drawn entirely from one source, the model is a simplified combination of various similar models I found through a number of sources, including texts and online sources, and is the model I eventually settled to use as a reference when writing my novel.

Figure 1: Basic Sonata Form



I will now give a brief explanation of these various stages in the *musical* use of the sonata form. Once again, I will deliberately keep my explanation of these stages to a fairly general level, as it would be not only impractical to go into any great length about the countless possible variations on the basic sonata structure, but irrelevant with regards to the extent to which I used the form when writing the novel.

Introduction: Optional. Largely self-explanatory, it sets up the piece, and it may or may not refer to material introduced in the Exposition.

Exposition: This is where the main thematic material for the movement is introduced. The material consists of a 'first subject group', consisting of one or more themes, and a 'second subject group', which is introduced in a different key from the first.¹

Codetta: A musical full stop, in this case signifying the end of the Exposition, working independently of the other themes.

Development: In this section, one or any of the themes introduced in the Exposition may be altered and developed in any way. Essentially this is a way of making the music *go* somewhere different.

Reconciliation/Recapitulation: This section re-introduces the first subject group in the key that it was originally known. The second subject group also returns, only it must now be in the same key as the first subject group.

Coda: Optional. A musical full stop to the piece and, once again, works independently of the thematic requirements.

¹ In variances on the form, it is possible that other subject groups are introduced, but I was only ever dealing with two – which is by far the most common - so I have explained it as such.

The basis of my literary adaptation of the sonata form rested on the principle of replacing the first and second subject groups with two (initially) distinct narrative voices. The introduction and the second coda sections were optional and so weren't ever of any real concern, though I did end up writing an introduction for the book—the scene of a car accident. Incidentally, the narrative style of the introduction was deliberately written differently to the rest of the novel—being in the 'third person', rather than the ensuing 'first' person narratives.

I also decided to use the second coda section as a mixture between Matthew Harrison's 'awake' and 'asleep' realities, to deliberately leave the novel's ending ambiguous and open to reader interpretation.

The main challenge though, was to write two different narrative voices, and work out how to take them through the three steps of their initial introduction, their development and their eventual reconciliation. I decided on making the 'first subject' narrative the voice of an awake person (George) while the 'second subject' narrative would be written from the perspective of somebody who is asleep (Matthew)—in essence, a series of dreams. There were other deliberate ways in which I emphasised the difference between the two narrative voices. George's voice was not only an 'awake' voice, but it was deliberately pacy, confronting in terms of language, edgy, occasionally angry, and always forthright:

Thank you for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

Think good thoughts.

I've already come four times tonight. It'd be something of an achievement if I was actually coming *with* someone. But I'm not. I'm lying alone in my bed and it's three in the morning. I don't know why I keep masturbating. I'm not even horny. I'm just agitated to the point of torture. Stretched out on a posturepedic rack, on a fine line between insomnia and sexual depravity. I'm more than single. I'm a living, breathing, wanking dictionary definition of the word.

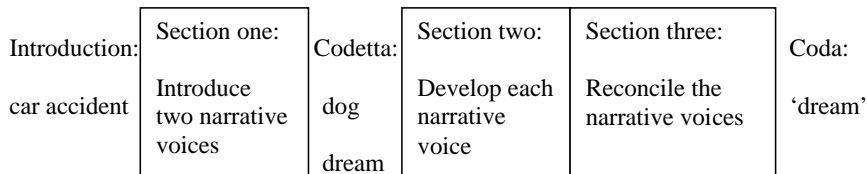
Matthew's initial, 'asleep' voice on the other hand was deliberately innocent, wistful and non-confrontational. Pace was no so much a concern as was a gentle, consistent, lyrical rhythm:

magda lets go of my hand and lies back in the water she spreads her legs out and lets
me pull her towards me i hold her gently under her hips as she bobs up and down so gently that
she can't even really feel it but just enough so that she doesn't float away from me magda closes
her eyes and she looks like she is sleeping
apart from the gentle slap of tiny waves all is still and all is quiet and i feel like i know the meaning of
forever
we are barely touching just my fingertips against her wet skin like fleshy flames slow-dancing with
one another i feel weightless in the cool water she looks like a tiny baby stretching out in the
womb of the world and i dare not even breathe i so badly don't want to spoil the moment

As the voices gradually develop towards the reconciliation stage, George's voice slowly loses some of its edge, some of its panicked urgency, while Matthew's increasingly becomes more immediate and even begins to show some of the 'anger' traits of the awake narrative. I will allude further to these developments at a later stage.

Firstly, though, just as I gave a brief visual tool to describe the musical sonata form, I will now present a modified graphic that explains the basic line I followed when adapting this to my literary expression:

Figure 2: Adaptation of Sonata Form



And also, a brief explanation as to how I managed to remain consistent with the basic stages of sonata form:

Introduction (Car accident): This section differs from the rest of the novel as it is the only time a third person, omniscient narrative voice is used. However, it is still generally consistent with the tone of the book, with its mixture of humour, romance and tragedy.

Exposition (Section I): I used this section to introduce the two narrative voices—that of George (first subject), and of his brother, Matthew (second subject). George’s voice is the first heard, it is far more immediate and aggressive than Matthew’s voice. It is the ‘awake’ voice. Matthew’s voice on the other hand, is wistful, gentle, poetic and certainly initially in some ways, childish and innocent. It is the ‘asleep’ voice.

Codetta (Dog dream): At more than 1500 words long, it is by far the longest dream narrative, and also different to the others in that it introduces the first real sense of tragedy into Matthew’s dream consciousness. It signifies the end of the previously

ongoing innocence in his dreams, and is also a full stop for his relationship with Magda.

Development (Section II): I used this section to develop the narrative voices. Primarily I was concerned with developing the characters and consciousnesses within the respective styles of narrative voice. I didn't want to change the *way* I was telling the story, just *what* I was telling. It was important to use this section to reveal more about the characters' hopes and fears, their successes and failures. Particularly with Matthew, I tried to slowly reveal that his attempt to ignore life by sleeping was not going to work for him. I did this by making his dreams gradually become far more dark, graphic and in some cases, terrifying. Where George was concerned I introduced a couple of external factors that consequently forced him to start dealing with some of his problems, rather than keep treading water.

Reconciliation/Recapitulation (Section III): This section provided the biggest initial challenge with trying to match the sonata form in a literary sense. To properly reconcile the first subject and second subject narrative voices in this section, I had to make the second subject narrative voice switch to the same 'key' as the first subject narrative voice. Put another way, this meant that the 'dream' narrative voice had to become an 'awake' narrative voice. This presented some problems, the specifics of which I shall discuss later. But it was this basic, essential requirement that had a huge impact on the way the novel was written. In fact, the whole plan of the novel effectively hinged on me being able to successfully negotiate this section.

Coda (Final, ambiguous ‘dream’): It had been my intention from quite early on to end the novel somewhat ambiguously. Having the option of a narratively independent full stop for the book was probably the best thing about writing to this particular pre-determined form.

I’ve scene the light: Introducing a Filmic Sensibility

Having decided on a general form with which to proceed, I began to think about the way in which I wanted to write the novel. Ideally, I was interested in writing it with the idea of turning it into a film. In fact, not long prior to commencing my PhD in Creative Writing, I had actually been attempting to write a screenplay. However, once I began the PhD, I decided to revert to writing prose. Quite simply, this decision was far less one of creative aesthetic than it was one of practicality. I basically just decided to stick with my strengths, having grown in confidence with my prose-writing since having my Masters’ manuscript published the previous year.

The point I was at now, however, was that I knew although I was going to write a novel in sonata form, I also knew I still wanted to take a filmic approach somehow. That is, I wanted to create a number of small, *exclusive* scenes—scenes that could, should the need ever arise, be easily distinguished, adapted and shot to film, rather than larger ideas that would have to be recognised and extracted from a lengthy intertwined narrative clutter.

As I embarked on the novel, I began writing down various scene ideas, without actually knowing how or why they would fit in to the finished work—if at all. If I thought of a potential scene, I would simply record it, and flesh it out at a later date. Below is a brief selection from my original list. Some of these scenes were eventually

written, some had already been written and were eventually deleted, and some were never written at all.

From a file created on 4th, September, 2005:

Scenes that need to be written:

- (1) george and Stacey either talking about or interacting with jeff: this needs to be a trigger for a strong scene describing matthew and george's closeness. George's loss.
- (2) a scene in which matthew was only smiling when he was watching 'Kath and Kim', hence his need for magda – or at least just something that indicates what magda meant to him.
- (3) The train surfing scene needs to be changed to that of matthew simply standing in the tunnel.
- (4) Perhaps the council guy needs to pay a friendly visit (this scene can be recalled) to george about the tree at some stage.
- (5) A scene where everyone is sitting around laughing at magda. Dad, and then anna, or just either or?
- (6) Scene of magda, george, dad and mum (anna?) riding horses along the beach (epilogue?)
- (7) Matthew visiting mum when awake
- (8) Fuckorama scene
- (9) Scene with Leonard being taken away for questioning

In effect, even though the novel contains no 'chapters' as such, these scenes themselves could be said to be mini-chapters of sorts, and were usually self-contained enough to be able to be sliced up and swapped around to different parts of the narrative to tighten or balance the structure if need be. Indeed, as I wrote the first draft I constantly went back and updated this list of scenes. Thus, I was able to stand back and look at the pacing, structure and plot 'from above', so to speak, and was able to

either delete or swap a number of scenes to ensure that the narrative eventually unfolded in the correct way.

This, of course, is not an entirely uncommon strategy to make use of when writing a novel, but I definitely feel I exaggerated my attention to it, much more so than I had with my previous novel and other manuscripts. In effect, the very act of writing to the pre-determined form almost necessitated such an approach. I simply couldn't write a single continuous narrative and let the book take me where it wanted to, lest I ended up somewhere from where I had already had planned to be—and I'm not just talking about the whole work in general, but within each specific stage as well. It was almost like I had to create a whole lot of jigsaw pieces, make several puzzles and *then* put the puzzles themselves together to reach the final big picture.

In a sense though, this enforced discipline was strangely liberating. I felt like I was the one in control. Like I already had been given all the answers—I just had to choose the right ones to use.

Here is one of my later scene list files (obviously *very* heavily updated from the original file). I have deliberately left my comments visible to give an insight into how I continued playing around with the list of scenes, even at that late stage:

SCENE LIST

Introduction: the accident

Section A: Exposition

1. introduction to: george, selphie situation, leonard, bowling alley, stacey, tree situation
2. introduction to: matthew, magda, dream sequences
3. dog, number 48, first mention of bizarre childhood, parents, interaction with matthew, insights/differences with matthew, selphie stuff

Comment [S1]: Delete: selphie stuff

4. primary school dream
5. introduction to george's night-time paranoia, selphie/joshua, insight into matthew/his accident, mum
6. beach dream, first time matthew and magda become romantic
7. start of bin job, stace asks for a date, juxtaposition of past & present relationship scenes with matthew
8. the bishon frese dream: horses stampeding
9. selphie memories, reason for george's night-time paranoia, insight into family life
10. peas dream, magda meets mum and dad, comedy relief.
11. bin-cleaning, visit stacey's house, hint of dad's fate, stacey/george romance starts
12. insight into matthew/anna's relationship, the link to magda, more information about dad, mum, boys relationship with dad and boats, god reference (needed???) , hangs up jeans to set next george scene
13. cemetery dream, matthew has wet dream about magda
14. george freaking out at perceived intruder, more bin-cleaning, insight into Leonard, stace and george try and fail to take their 'romance' to next level, george confronts matthew in bathroom, insight into george's obsessiveness, george and stace fuck

Comment [S2]: Delete: primary school dream

Comment [S3]: Move: the bishon frees dream: horses stampeding

Comment [S4]: Delete: the link to magda

Comment [S5]: Delete: god reference (needed???)

CODA: desert dream, magda disappears

Comment [S6]: Delete: desert dream

Comment [S7]: Insert: bichon frees dream, horses stampeding

Section B: Development

1. dump runs, insights into mum, dad, selphie, george re building stuff, first mention of real prowler, cleaning shit of walls, hints that leonard is a pervert, insights into george and matthew's past relationship, more paranoia, more difficulties with fucking stace
2. coffee dream: the bastard makes a hell of a splash metaphor
3. start of tree saga, stace and george trying to connect, 'practice' comes up for first time, more dad and selphie insights, dad suicide revisited
4. anna dream
5. george's first prowler search, insights into anna and what she meant to the family, first barry stand-off, selphie call, still half stuck with her but slowly accepting presence of stacey, second prowler search when gets wrong man
6. barbecue dream

Comment [S8]: Insert: start of tree saga

Comment [S9]: Move: start of tree saga

Comment [S10]: Insert: first barry stand-off

Comment [S11]: Insert: george's first prowler search. Add: george and Stacey trying to connect.

Comment [S12]: Move: george's first prowler search

Comment [S13]: Move: first barry stand-off

7. second barry stand-off, loss of tree, calls stace, party, insight into growing stace and george relationship
8. half-awake dream: looking for anna
9. george nabs the prowler (matthew)

Comment [S14]: Insert: dad resolution? (sort of)

Section C: Recapitulation

1. begins in exactly same style of Section A, george confronts matthew.
2. introduction to matthew's awake voice, his memories and thoughts as opposed to his dreams, explain crash, hints at molestation of george
3. matthew and stacey hit slight awkward patch
4. matthew visits mum, shows her 'other side'
5. george stacks wood, introduction to him going to actually build stuff
6. matthew home ruminating about death: huntsman tool
7. george starts building, stacey arrives and smooths over rough patch with matthew
8. matthew describes love voices
9. george and stacey dirty talk
10. matthew can't sleep
11. george wakes early for work, thinks about stace, leonard gets busted by cops, george quits his job
12. matthew lost in own head, decides on suicide
13. george's selphie resolution, begins to let himself feel close to stacey
14. matthew begins suicide bid
15. george notices matthew leaving, george lays out his cards with stacey
16. matthew gets sleeping pills
17. george starts building in storm, dad resolution? (sort of), mum turns up
18. matthew gets in boat and swallows pills
19. george and mum look for him: "we'll go where anna died"
20. matthew falls asleep in boat, has dream in which magda reappears, is able to release his sadness with her
21. george and mum stand and watch the storm and think about matthew

Comment [S15]: Insert: matthew and Stacey hit slightly awkward patch

Comment [S16]: Delete: matthew and Stacey hit slightly awkward patch

Comment [S17]: Delete: hints at molestation of george

Comment [S18]: Move: matthew and Stacey hit slightly awkward patch.

Comment [S19]: Insert: George goes to visit Stacey and has slightly awkward moment

Comment [S20]: Delete: with matthew

Comment [S21]: Insert: with george

Comment [S22]: Delete: Leonard gets busted by cops

Comment [S23]: Delete: george's selphie resolution

Comment [S24]: Move: dad resolution? (sort of)

22. matthew is either asleep and dreaming, or awake, he reunites with george and his mum on the beach, and out of the corner of his eye, he sees magda—is she the real magda? or is he dreaming at the bottom of the sea?

Writing a list of interchangeable scenes like this was only one way in which I adopted a ‘filmic’ approach to writing the novel to its pre-determined form. For example, I also deliberately begin the book as a film will often start—with a quick, gripping initial scene, leading to a ‘scrolling’ title, before the actual ‘film’ or in this case, book, gets underway—in the same way, for example, that a James Bond film typically begins. In ‘I Dream of Magda’, I wrote the introduction first, and then inserted a title page before the first section. It should be noted that my publishers, Allen & Unwin, who far from shared my enthusiasm about all this, removed the inserted title page in the final printed version, and the initial scene was given the title of ‘prologue’. Nevertheless, this is not how it was originally written.

Initially I began attempting this ‘filmic’ style of writing because I was influenced by the fact that I had, as I mentioned before, been toying with the idea of writing an actual film script for some time before I began my PhD. It was a film script which was to be specifically tailored for Australian actor/comedienne Magda Szubanski.

Muse and Literature: Magda Szubanski

Why Szubanski? Well, on a personal level, I have always had a genuine admiration and appreciation for her—perhaps in particular, for her ability to laugh at herself and her willingness to look utterly silly (and in some cases, grotesque!) in front of an audience of millions. She is one person that I find will nearly always make me

chuckle, and the many characters she has played over the years have worked their way into my psyche on a fairly significant level.

Through her numerous comedic pursuits, she kept me laughing as I grew up through some reasonably difficult times, and though I am not prone to idolisation nor false beliefs about the interactive potential between a viewer and a television personality, it has to be said I have always, from a distance, looked at Szubanski with a strange sense of affection. In a way—and there is no other way of putting this—on a very basic sincere (and possibly cheesy!) level, by involving her in my work, I felt like I was expressing my affection, as well as my appreciation for her own work.

I first had the idea of writing a piece based on Szubanski about six years ago. Initially I attempted to write a film, in which I imagined she would star. Below is my first written record of this idea, though I do remember thinking of it somewhat earlier on. It's interesting to see how certain elements of the initial idea are still able to be found within what ended up as a novel.

This is from a file created on August 20th, 2003:

I Dream of Magda... ..

A modern love story

Film about a young man's relationship with TV star Magda Szubanski. First meets her at a party, they fall in love. Humorous moments include revisiting some of her previous incarnations, such as "pet, love" when meeting his parents, Perhaps intimacy with Pixie-Anne. Two things must be mentioned: boat/swimming and flower/bird. Film ends when young man goes searching for flower/bird and has an accident. Realising he will never see Magda again, he cries an ocean, which she, sensing he is in pain, overcomes her fear of drowning to boat/swim across it. that's where the film ends.

There were always going to be, of course, ethical issues concerning my portrayal of Magda Szubanski herself ². I had no access to, or knowledge of, Magda Szubanski, the *actual person*—I couldn't possibly presume to capture the 'real' essence of her personality, nor could I rightly make public assumptions as to what that essence was. The only access I had to Magda Szubanski was the same as most people: through her portrayal of fictional characters on screen or stage. In fact, I had initially thought of side-stepping the ethical issues involved with writing about Magda herself by simply using these various characters of hers throughout the dreams: characters such as Sharon Stryzlecki from 'Kath and Kim', or Pixie-Ann Wheatley from 'Fast Forward'. In the end I felt, however, that this would raise even more complicated issues in terms of breaches of copyright etc, so I decided not to run with it.

In terms of writing about Magda, then, I decided that she should only feature in the dream sequences rather than throughout the whole narrative. This decision to portray Magda only in a 'dream' sense and not a 'real' one worked for two reasons. Firstly it meant that I wasn't limited by the reality of her existence in a practical sense (i.e. obviously, the real Magda Szubanski can't cry an ocean of tears), but more importantly, in an ethical sense. It meant I could make her think or feel or do anything—through Matthew's eyes—and the reader would understand that it was from *his* perspective, and wouldn't necessarily have to reflect Madga's real-life persona in any way. In fact, her existence in Matthew's dreams and the way she behaves actually directly reflects *his* own experiences of joy and devastation. Her behaviour reveals *his* needs and motivations, not her own. She becomes the perfect conduit for his state of

² It's worth recounting that when the Vogel award was announced publicly, Szubanski was actually interviewed on ABC news, and asked how she felt about being portrayed by somebody else. Her reply was to say she felt flattered, though a little weird because she was so used to things being the other way around.

mind, and of course, ultimately, it is what she symbolises that is important, not her actual identity as Magda Szubanski.³

I have a dream: Introducing the Hyper-real

I went on from my initial idea to write several attempts at a screenplay involving Magda. Unfortunately I never really got past the first few pages. Importantly, however—though I wasn't to know it at the time—I was already experimenting with the sort of imagery I wanted to present—the same sort of hyper-real imagery that ended up being an intrinsic part of the eventual novel.

This next excerpt is from an early screenplay attempt (November 7th, 2003) and is a pointed example of the direction in which I was heading. The scene takes place with a young man doing his usual Monday morning bus ride to the city:⁴

:

Bus Driver: First, though, I'm afraid I must undertake the journey of getting this bus into the city.

The driver slides the coins into the correct slots and hands Gavin a ticket.

Gavin: (chirpily) Thanks mate. Keep smiling.

³ There is one time that Szubanski might be said to be appearing in reality, as herself, and that is in the final sequence, when she meets the Harrison family on the beach. However, for several reasons, this is not an issue. Firstly it is unclear whether Matthew is actually dreaming or awake. Secondly, in his state of mind, had he actually been awake, it is more than possible he could have imagined that he saw Magda, when in fact the person in question could have simply been someone that resembled her slightly.

⁴ The scene itself originated from trying to conceptually compare the dullness of John Brack's "Collins St 5pm" with the wild colourful rush of love. (The girl in the scene, by the way, in the apricot sweater, I imagined at the time as being Magda Szubanski dressed unconvincingly, though charmingly as a teenager)

The camera follows Gavin as he takes the ticket and walks along the aisle to the last empty seat. All the other people on the bus are men, wearing dark suits and sporting neat moustaches. Every man has meticulously neat short hair and a briefcase on his lap. They stare at Gavin disapprovingly as he makes his way up the aisle. Gavin sits and smiles broadly to himself as he looks out of the window. It is grey and misty, spitting with rain outside. The bus begins to pull away.

Gavin's voice-over: Oh wonderful Monday. Oh glorious wonderful Monday. Thankyou for being Monday.

CUT TO

EXTERIOR. OUTSIDE BUS STOP 37—DAY

The bus is seen pulling away. In the background sitting against a tree is a small boy with a slingshot and a bag of overripe plums. He is taking aim at the back of the bus. He fires a shot which hits the back window advertisement, specifically, the picture of a model on the side of her right cheek. The image of the woman appears to actually feel the plum hit her. She winces and frowns. The boy stands up and walks away, humming "Waltzing Matilda".

CUT TO

INTERIOR. INSIDE BUS.

Gavin is still looking out of the window. In the grey distance, there is a girl dressed in an apricot sweater. She is standing on the corner of a crossroads staring at the ground and doing a weird little self-involved dance. As the bus gets closer, the film slows down and we get to fully appreciate the unique beauty of this girl in the apricot sweater.

Gavin's voice-over: Oh, glorious Monday. Oh wonderful Monday!

The camera pans back to Gavin's lovestruck face and the film begins to speed up again faster than it was before and Gavin's hair begins to blow about, at first gently, then wildly, and then his eyes open wide and he lets out an almighty scream—

GAVIN: AAA!

CUT TO

EXTERIOR. ROLLERCOASTER.

—the camera pulls back and reveals that Gavin and all of the moustached men are on a rollercoaster, thundering down a massive hill. We follow the rollercoaster ride until the end as the carriage crashes gently into the final dock. There is a hiss—

CUT TO

EXTERIOR. CITY STREET. OUTSIDE BUS.

—the hiss is the sound of the bus doors opening. Gavin steps off, looking absolutely exhilarated. He strides towards and past camera. The moustached men get off after him, looking much the worse for wear. Their hairdos are all ruffled, briefcase have been opened, papers have been carelessly stuffed back in. One man is covered in another man's vomit. One man is crying like a baby. The camera surveys the scene, then zip zooms in on the bus driver, who has stepped off the bus and is stretching.

So, what was starting to emerge as a consistent factor in this, and my other abandoned screenplay draft attempts, was the strong realisation that I wanted to experiment with this sort of hyper-real imagery. The best way I could describe the sort of imagery that was in my head at the time would be to refer to the work of Australian artist Louise Hearman.

It has been said of Hearman that when an artist concentrates so strongly on elements of reality, they become hyper-real (McDonald, 1993, p53). With her portraiture work in particular, she can at times focus so intensely on her subject that the result transcends mere representation of the subject, and takes on a life and meaning of its own. Nine-year- old children can become ghost-like figures, elderly men can have the appearance of young boys exuding haloed light, middle-aged businessmen can become a literal part of the urban background surrounding them.

My own focus on the portrait of Matthew was distilled to the point where I was only allowed to write about what was going on in his subconscious mind. I consequently created this hyper-real world, where the various ‘real’ motivations, history and emotions that he had were able to be distorted and mixed-up together, along with recurring images and motifs so that they did indeed take on a life of their own—aside from what was happening in any ‘reality’ that George was watching Matthew experiencing.

At this point, while I knew I was committed on some level to playing with hyper-real imagery, such as visually changing a bus ride to a rollercoaster ride, I hadn’t yet become interested in using ‘dreams’ per se, as an expressive tool at that point, and there was good reason for this. I have always strongly believed that while it is always fascinating enough to waffle on about your own dreams, there a few things more boring than listening to someone else’s. I had also been talking to another student at the time who told me of their plan to write an entire novel in dream form—specifically, it was about an elderly woman who dreams of an old Aboriginal ghost who, through their dream journey together, teaches her the spirit of reconciliation. My initial thought was that such a project would be a disaster—the very idea of writing a whole book as if it was a dream would be nigh on impossible in terms of creating and

maintaining plot and character development, and even if it *were* possible, surely it would bore a reader to tears.

I strongly wanted to retain that factor though, where normal life was juxtaposed with the inexplicable (let's call it the bus ride/rollercoaster factor). At that point, by sheer coincidence, I was re-reading my favourite ever book, a book that I had read in high school which probably set me on the path to wanting to be a writer of sorts. The book was *Birdy*, by 'William Wharton'—the pen name used by American-born writer and artist Albert du Aime.

Essentially, *Birdy* is a book about the reunion and growth of two childhood friends. In terms of it being chiefly about a relationship between two main protagonists, it is very similarly themed to my novel, where the story ultimately centres on the evolving relationship between Matthew and George, albeit against the respective backgrounds of their current individual circumstances, rather than their shared recollections of the past. It is also similar to my novel in the sense that it deals with varying degrees of human madness.

Wharton's book is narrated by Al, injured and traumatised, fresh from fighting in the Second World War, as he attempts to re-establish contact with his school-time friend 'Birdy'. Birdy is languishing silently in a mental institution, spending countless hours perched on the end of his bed as a bird might, defecating on the floor and speaking to no one, not even Al.

As Al strives to elicit a human response from Birdy, he begins recounting moments from their childhood together, moments which helped define who they have grown into as men. As the book progresses, Birdy begins recounting in his own mind some of his own memories from that time. Most of Birdy's recollections in some way reveal his childhood obsession with birds, and with wanting to fly.

The narrative eventually begins to include a series of dreams Birdy had as a boy—dreams about actually *being* a bird, in a loving partnership with another bird, where they communicate with each other, fly together, sing together—even breed together. Not only does this introduce the bus ride/rollercoaster factor, but the intensity of detail in these dreams of Birdy’s give them the hyper-reality that I was looking for in my own writing:

When, at last, we are dry, we sit on a perch beside each other and preen our feathers. It is a wonderful feeling to pull the slightly wet feather through my beak, feeling the individual branchings and lining them up.

I want very much to do a most unbirdlike thing; to preen Perta’s feathers. Except for feeding, singing, peep-peep-peeping and fucking, birds show no other signs of affection I’ve ever seen. I want to caress Perta the way a boy would caress a girl, but I have only my beak and my feet. It would seem so natural to take one of her feathers into my mouth and straighten it with the tender edges of my beak. This is a place where the bird and the boy are different. (Wharton, 1979, p202, 203)

As the focus on the elements of reality serves to make the dreams hyper-real, it also ironically serves to make the dreams less ‘dream-like’. By that, I mean there is far less general ‘unreality’ than you might expect to find in dreams— though everything of course is in an unreal context. However, the potential wishy-washiness of Wharton’s dream narrative is heavily negated by the detail he uses. I tried to emulate this combination of unreality and detail when writing some of my own dreams for Matthew.

Firstly, detail:

see that hole?

across the other side of the tracks there's a huge corrugated iron fence it's white all over
bland at least three metres tall and ten metres long in the bottom right hand corner
there's a small deliberately cut hole the bottom half of the hole is taken up by a flat rectangular
drainpipe there's about a 10 x 20 cm gap at the top
yes i see it what about it?
keep watching that hole

And in the same dream, unreality:

all around us is a sea of tiny white fluffy dogs scrambling for our attention jumping up and down
loving life they stretch as far as we can see they are all around us and
every second there seems to be more of them god there must be ten thousand of them maybe
twenty thousand they've swelled beneath our feet and lifted us up on to their tiny backs
it's like we are standing on clouds

After reading through the dreams in *Birdy*, my initial reservations about writing in dream form began to subside. Admittedly as a reader, I did find the dreams at times slightly less interesting than the other parts of the narrative but at the same time I couldn't see how the book could be complete without them. They were integral in showing the reader inside Birdy's head, as he refused to speak for himself for almost the whole novel—much like my protagonist Matthew who only very rarely speaks in my novel.

Also, though I had toyed with writing the whole book with a consistent bus ride/rollercoaster factor throughout, I had strong concerns that I wouldn't be able to maintain such a narrative at any great length, as I was very unused to writing in that kind of voice. At least if I broke a main 'normal' narrative up with some surreal

dreams, I would be able to retain my usual, practised, stronger voice and yet still include an aspect of the bus ride/rollercoaster factor within the book.

Two voices at once: Distinguishing Matthew from George

Originally, the book was to be written in two different narrative voices, each representing the perspective of a different character. In my earlier drafts though, for whatever reason, I was hell-bent on confusing the reader into initially believing that the dream narrative was also George's, and not his brother Matthew's. I deliberately jumped between the voices with an intentionally strong sense of flow, so that the reader would think they came from the same character. My plan was that two-thirds of the way through the book I would suddenly reveal the dream narrative to be the voice of Matthew and take the readers by surprise, and they would be suddenly awake to the heavy presence of Matthew in the novel, and of course, it would all make perfect sense. Unfortunately, this all completely fell apart when my initial readers read the whole book convinced that they had only been reading the voice of George.

And so, though this line of thinking ended up failing, it ironically became the reason for the aesthetically altered structure of the dream narrative voice. At no stage did I want to have to get rid of Matthew's voice in the book, and make the whole narrative a swap between George's reality and his dream world. And yet, I was being repeatedly told that readers simply could not distinguish between the two voices. Furthermore, I had effectively written the whole novel (albeit it in first draft form) and I was very pleased with the dream narrative and was extremely reluctant to completely change it—and to be honest, I wasn't even sure that I knew how to.

I tried a range of different ways of subtly re-writing the dreams, to make them more ‘Matthew-sounding’ but nothing was working. At a point where I had to begin seriously considering making George the novel’s sole narrator, I eventually struck upon a possible solution purely by chance. At the time I was reading *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by American writer Jonathan Safran Foer. I didn’t particularly like the book very much but I was actually very interested in the visual aesthetic he applied to his work, whether it be the style of font used, the layout of words on a page, or the use of actual graphics themselves.

Safran Foer thought nothing of breaking away from conventional textual layout if he thought doing so could add strength to the narrative. At one stage in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, one of his characters starts talking about when he began a habit of writing down phrases in a blank notepad so that he could show them to people in conversation instead of actually having to speak the words. To emphasise the point, Safran inserts nine pages in a row at the end of the chapter—each one an otherwise blank page with a single simple phrase in the middle—phrases as simple as “I want two rolls”, or “Help” or “Ha ha ha!” (Foer, 2005, p19, 26, 27)

In another part of the book, he has his text gradually being overwritten by other text, sparsely at first, and then more densely until, three pages later a page of the book resembles nothing but an almost completely black mesh of unreadable ink. In another part of the book he has editorial corrections to a letter circled in actual red-coloured ink.

While, to be honest, I found a few of Safran Foer’s text experiments a bit naff, the aesthetic effect of them was not lost on me. I could immediately see how these somewhat simple techniques could somehow made the book seem more alive, more *real*. When it succeeded, Safran Foer’s method of literally translating the textual

confusion into a visually experienceable exercise could draw the reader further into the narrative.

At times, his way of suddenly turning things on their head also completely changed the rhythm of how I was reading, as if my eyes and brain had been deliberately made to stop and take things in, or readjust. This jolted me into thinking that this was something that I could do too: change the way that I presented my text to actually *physically represent* the context of what I was writing about, as well as give the reader a chance to experience a different rhythm from what they were used to.

I began examining ways I could incorporate more lateral ways of thinking about text presentation into dealing with the current challenges of my own novel. Firstly, I stripped all of the punctuation from the dream narrative and began looking at ways I could alter the text aesthetically. I played with everything from font sizes to extensive use of bullets to trying to write full pages of text but with leaving lots of space between words so that I was left with big blank shapes in the middle.

The following example is from an experiment I did regarding the latter—trying to leave big pea-shaped circles within the text for the dream Matthew has about flicking peas at his dead dad:

i've invited magda over to meet my parents it seems a pretty logical next step my
dad's at the dinner table but he's been dead for a good few years so he won't be saying
much that's okay i'm not worried about whether he joins in the
conversation or not the thing i am worried about is that mum's
just brought a big bowl of peas to the table she knows i hate peas i
wonder if she has deliberately brought them out to embarrass me in
front of magda or because she thinks they'll help build up my great big matthew

muscles i give mum a look when she puts the bowl down but she just smiles and says
they're for your father dear and trots back out magda must have
seen the look i gave because she asks me what's wrong *i don't eat*
peas i say *why not? i don't know i just don't like* them *that's all*
mum comes right back in with a second bigger bowl of peas *actually*
mum i say *i think we're okay for peas at the moment they're for your father dear* she
says again *oh peas eat your peas* says magda with a cheeky smile *peas do for me* i
smile back tensely *i can't not even for you* just moments later mum's back again

Laying out the text like this, however, proved to be highly time-consuming and ineffective to the point of being detrimental to the story. i.e. if you weren't told that the great missing chunks of text were meant to resemble peas you might even think there had been a printing mistake. Furthermore, peas were the first shapes I attempted and as they were hard and unconvincing enough, I was hardly going to bother with other more difficult motifs like gravestones, coffee cups, boats and barbecues...

In the end, the solution was to keep everything simple and just work around the basic premise of having no punctuation in the dream narrative. I had noticed by this time that, in particular, by having all of its capital letters removed, Matthew's voice had somehow lost its sense of authority as well. Of course this entirely suited my plan to have Matthew's narrative voice as a gentle, unaggressive, wistful one.

Eventually I decided to replace most apostrophes for practicality's sake, but for the most part, the Matthew narrative remains raw, unpunctuated, lower-case text. Using TAB spaces instead of normal spaces gave the prose a rhythm which at first look can seem a bit disjointed, random and unpredictable. However, it must be said, the different-sized gaps between the sentences were all deliberately thought out.

Laying out the prose as I did was the closest that writing the novel ever became to being a ‘musical’ exercise. Normally with prose, there are certain rhythms inherent in the words on the page, and this often depends on the words used, the punctuation, switches to dialogue (which obviously has its own rhythm too), and so forth. A lot of this rhythm is created as you are actually writing the prose. Having the bulk of the Matthew narrative already written, though, meant that I created the rhythm in a different way.

By using the TAB key as a space bar, and in some cases, placing the virtually punctuationless words around the page during the Matthew narratives, I almost had a sense of detachment from the meaning of the text, from the context of the words themselves, and though I still on some level was reading things through and altering the TAB spaces to suit the rhythm accordingly, on other levels it was a highly visual exercise, as in what looked *better* on the page. And often the visual aesthetics were a huge part of creating a certain feel for a scene, such as in the following example:

mum turns back around and looks at the pea embedded in my dead father’s face but she doesn’t so much as even raise an eyebrow she just heads out of the room again to get what i can only guess will be another bowl of peas

ping!

ping!

ping!

three more peas fly at my father two miss but one sticks to

his chin and for the first time in his life the man looks kind of silly sitting there dead with two peas
stuck in his face
magda giggles *join the dots* she says

or as in this excerpt:

everything is dead still and dead quiet so quiet that i can hear my dad in the next room
he's stirring his coffee
i can hear the handle of his teaspoon clinking slowly against the rim of the cup
clink clink clink
it's a like a clock ticking but not a normal sort of clock that ticks every second it's more like a clock
for when time slows down so that it ticks every few seconds or so
it's regular enough though
clink clink clink
if that clock set the time for everyone and everything it would be like we all were living dog
years or something except they'd be dad years years where everything drags and nothing seems
to happen
nothing good and nothing bad
nothing

The interesting thing was that at the time, I wasn't quite aware of how integral the layout of the Matthew narrative was to the way it was read. Several months ago, however, I received a hard copy from Allen & Unwin containing a basic copy edit for me to look over. Due to a software changeover error, their printed hard copy had all of the Matthew narrative printed line by line, instead of having the TAB spacing and layout as I had submitted them. The end result was as follows.

mum turns back around and looks at the pea embedded in my dead father's face but she doesn't so much as even raise an eyebrow

she just heads out of the room again to get what i can only guess will be another bowl of peas

ping!

ping!

ping!

three more peas fly at my father

two miss but one sticks to his chin and for the first time in his life the man looks kind of silly sitting there dead with two peas stuck in his face

magda giggles

join the dots she says

and

everything is dead still and dead quiet

so quiet that i can hear my dad in the next room

he's stirring his coffee

i can hear the handle of his teaspoon clinking slowly against the rim of the cup

clink

clink

clink

it's a like a clock ticking but not a normal sort of clock that ticks every second

it's more like a clock for when time slows down so that it ticks every few seconds or so

it's regular enough though

clink

clink

clink

if that clock set the time for everyone and everything it would be like we all were living dog years or something except they'd be dad years

years where everything drags and nothing seems to happen

nothing good and nothing bad

nothing

The difference, in my eyes, is huge. The TAB-spaced version of each excerpt is ‘alive’ and vital. The other versions read as ‘dead’, lifeless.

So, by having most of its punctuation and the consequent restrictions removed, the dream narrative voice was free to do what it wanted on the page. It could set its own ‘visual’ rhythm. Once I had found this style with which to write Matthew’s voice, the dreams really started taking on a life of their own—though by deciding to use this style itself, I was immediately faced with a new challenge.

Having associated the raw lower-case prose with hyper-reality and Matthew’s dream world—as opposed to George’s ‘awake’ voice, I had to make sure that I didn’t confuse the reader in section three of the novel, where Matthew does in fact switch to narrating from his own ‘awake’ perspective. Essentially, I solved this challenge by making sure I linked each Matthew section very carefully with the physical goings on around him, and made him observe them in a way that it became obvious he was awake. Here is an example of a transition between both of the ‘awake’ George and Matthew voices, beginning with George’s voice:

George:

No answer.

I grab the door handle. Open the door with a slow creak. I look back around the room. There’s half eaten food on plates all over the floor. Tissues and pizza boxes and empty cans and dirty clothes strewn everywhere. It’s a disgrace. My big brother’s stuck in his own little messed up world at the moment where nothing matters and I don’t know how to get him out. I step out of the room and shut the door behind me.

*

Matthew:

i listen to the door shut wonder what i'm going to do now wonder why i even give a shit after
all there's no point in thinking ahead all i've got are memories now there's no future all
my thoughts are running into one
 i don't like being awake things are so much clearer when i'm sleeping thoughts are
clearer they are just *there* they just exist like the empty cans on my desk like the shit
all over my floor i can't even remember how any of this fucking mess got here as far as i
know it's been here forever just like my thoughts
 anna didn't even want to go for a drive

Once it was clear to the reader that Matthew was now awake, I could ease up a bit on stating the obvious and concentrate more on writing the story. It was vitally important to set it all up correctly though, for later scenes—such as the one when Matthew visits his mum—would have lost huge amounts of emotional resonance if they were perceived as dreams.

Here comes the (younger) son: The development of George Harrison

In terms of writing the George narrative, most of the development came relatively late in the process. Initially, as can be inferred from the title 'I Dream of Magda', the book was intended to be predominantly about Matthew. It was to rely

heavily on the ‘dream’ voice to sustain the overall narrative. Even up until quite a late draft stage, almost half of the then 65,000 words were dream narrative.

However, after receiving unanimous feedback from test readers saying that the dreams were “too long” and “becoming boring”, I began to toy with the idea of cutting them back. It didn’t immediately occur to me that I would also need then, to expand and develop the George sections, something which for some reason—to be honest, I suspect a touch of laziness on my part—I seemed to have been avoiding. A response from a fiction editor at a major publishing house gave me the motivation I needed. Regarding the dream narrative, he wrote:

A little of this kind of fantasy/escape goes a long way, unless it's echoing off the 'real' story more strongly. And it's inclined to suck some of the energy out of the real story - it seems to mean that the rest of the book cruises a little comfortably from incident to incident. To put it another way, perhaps because the Magda sections are outlandish, the rest of the novel becomes a little conventional... If you'll permit me a recommendation, I'd try cutting the Magda sections to a paragraph or a page at most, which would force the rest of the story to take up the narrative slack and imaginative challenge, and take you deeper into George.⁵

Initially I didn’t know how to respond to this suggestion. I had always felt that the dream narrative, while not necessarily the most engaging aspect of the novel, was crucial to its overall balance—and was in fact, in many ways the novel’s *essence*—

⁵ Incidentally, the editorial team at Allen & Unwin, and the Vogel judges, eventually took this editor’s line of thought even further with regards to my finished manuscript. Within a few days of winning the 2007 Vogel literary award I received a phone call from a senior fiction editor at Allen & Unwin, asking me how I felt about the possibility of the dream sequences being cut out all together. Apparently the unanimous feeling between the Vogel judges and the editorial staff was that the dreams didn’t quite work somehow—people were far more interested in the George narrative. I asked for some time to think about it, and thankfully, by the time we spoke again, several other test readers had finished the novel and come back with very positive feedback regarding the dreams.

hence the title: 'I Dream of Magda'. I had serious reservations about diluting its role in the book.

It was obvious, though, that George needed to become a much more significant presence. Unfortunately though, I had no idea where to start. I have to say it was probably the biggest challenge I faced when writing the novel—having it ostensibly finished in my mind and then coming to the realisation that I needed to cut about 20,000 words and replace them with 20,000 more—while retaining the framework and sonata structure that I had laid out.

To meet the challenge, I started at the most basic level possible, and actually counted the amount of words I was working with. The actual figure, in fact, was George's voice: 40,124 words. Matthew's voice: 27,256 words. It perhaps seems over-the-top, inorganic and maybe even counter-productive to actually count the number of words for each narrative but in fact I found it incredibly helpful. It gave me a tangible challenge to work with. I actually even laid out the word count, section by section. Here is my initial count for section one of the novel:

1. intro: 415
2. george: 2080
3. matthew: 622
4. george: 953
5. matthew: 603
6. george: 1531
7. matthew: 1672
8. george: 1814
9. matthew: 655

10. george: 1464
11. matthew: 961
12. george: 2839
13. matthew: 1195
14. george: 966
15. matthew: 1209
16. george: 4089
17. matthew: 889
18. george: 2970
19. matthew: 637
20. george: 1504

(George:17,500 words vs Matthew: 8,300 words)

By doing this, it made it easier for me to see exactly the sections where I needed to work on and expand the George narrative first. It really was one of those ways of completing the task by taking small steps instead of being overwhelmed by the mountain and not knowing where to start. As I went on, I would recount the words every so often to confirm my progression, another important process, as I had been writing the novel for so long, it was easy to fall under the illusion that I wasn't really going anywhere with it. The initial count of the section above eventually ended up as:

1. intro: 411
2. george: 2081
3. matthew: 597

4. george: 6247
5. matthew: 500
6. george: 6207
7. matthew: 1225
8. george: 6395
9. matthew: 556
10. george: 5976

(George 26,800 words vs Matthew 2,800 words)

This process had a huge impact on the feel of the novel. Early drafts had predominantly consisted of Matthew's dreams, and George's musings, with neither Matthew or George having much 'action' in their narrative. For much of the first section, George, in particular—even though he was the 'awake' character—had remained a heavily analytical, introspective character, anchored in his past. He swapped a lot between reminiscing about his failed relationship and talking about his dysfunctional family. Even as he ended up in bed with Stacey—an occurrence that would not even have come about had she not actively pursued him—he remained stuck mentally with his ex:

Stacey's squirming underneath me. 'Fuck me, George! I want you to fuck me *hard!*'

I respond by thrusting as hard as I can.

'Fuck me George! Fuck me!'

And I do. I fuck as hard as I can until I come. Then I drop my head down next to Stacey's and breathe deep breaths of hair product. We lie there for a while, smelling each other. Listening to each other breathe. Without even thinking, I suddenly twitch my right breast against her shoulder, 'One,' I

whisper. My stomach against hers. 'Two'. My chin against her neck. 'Three.' My right forearm against her left. 'Four.'

'George,' she moves her arms and wraps them around me, smiling. 'George, what are you doing?'

'Nothing,' I say. 'I'm sorry. I don't know.'

It's not really until the 'Development' section that George begins showing signs that he is going to attempt to take back some control of his own thoughts and actions. That his frozen state of mind is beginning to thaw:

We each hold on as tight as we can to our own bucket of shit, as if our lives depended on it.. Mum does it. Matthew does it. Dad held on to his more desperately than anyone. I do it too. But at least I'm aware that I do. And whether Selphie thought so or not, I do actually try not to get too obsessive about things. I try—but at the same time, I'm careful not to try too hard. Someone once told me that the harder you try not to be like your parents the more you end up like them. So I deliberately don't try too hard.

But still, it initially remains very introspective stuff. To really develop the character of George and improve the novel, I would. in effect, to paraphrase the aforementioned fiction editor, need to develop the actual *plot*. I would need to make things happen.

And so the George narrative begins picking up the pace during the development stage, through George's involvement a series of sub-plots. The most significant example of this is his decision to physically go out and hunt for the local prowler. But there are also other ways in which he takes action: protesting against the cutting down of his 'first kiss' tree, being honest with Stacey about his reservations re their 'relationship' and supporting his Mum by cleaning up her junk.

Even as George continues to develop though, it's as if he is doing it in a kind of 'slow motion'. As if he's taking two steps forward and one step back most of the time. Probably the biggest reason for this 'slow motion' development is that the sub-plots themselves were never going to be allowed to take the book anywhere *too* different. If you like—in driving the narrative forward, I had one foot gently pressed on the brake the whole time.

Although, they weren't allowed to actually take the book anywhere, the sub-plots were at the same time, immensely important. They needed to be there to create this huge sense of anticipation, to keep the narrative engaging. The threat of the prowler had to seem real—to *be* real—even though in the end it all but disappears from the story. Yes, George catches Matthew as a 'prowler', but was he really the prowler mentioned in the news? Actually I hadn't intended him to be, but I conveniently don't mention the threat of an actual real prowler again once the development section is over—even though it drives a lot of that particular section.

Similarly with the saving of the tree. As mentioned before, this was deliberately included to inject a bit of humour. But really, the repeated stand-offs between George and Busybody Barry amount to what is ultimately an anti-climax of sorts: George's cuffs are removed almost immediately and the tree is cut down. And once again, this scenario/issue doesn't really get a mention for the rest of the book, although George does collect the wood at a later stage and build a chair, which he then gives to Stacey, as it turns out—but this was less an attempt to milk the tree sub-plot than it was a deliberate way of showing his growth in the light of a statement he makes in the first section:

'Oh, cut it out. Anyway, he made me a chair so I kind of felt like doing something nice for him.'

‘He what? A chair? What the fuck did he do that for?’

‘Never mind, George. You just don’t get it.’

‘But why did he make you a chair? Who the fuck makes someone a chair?’

With regards to George’s developing relationship with Stacey, this was fine to continue on in the third section because ultimately it wasn’t going to affect the form of the novel. Even this though, reaches no real resolution. There is no definite agreement between George and Stacey to pursue, or not pursue, a relationship together. Once again, the development of their relationship is more about the anticipation of potential. In fact, most of the development of George was about his potential being shown—without him necessarily realising it. It was the best way to do things in terms of not affecting the ending too much.

Rewriting and fleshing out the George narrative in the development section of the novel was the most difficult of the challenges I faced. I probably amassed upwards of 100,000 off-cut words for this section. I tried introducing all manner of plot lines and characters to get things moving, including having George find a mentally impaired girlfriend for Matthew (discarded on the grounds that it was possibly the most clichéd and predictable thing I’d ever written), having George object at his ex-girlfriend’s wedding (too sit-com dumb) having Matthew climb into a lion’s cage at the zoo (too unbelievable), having George join an internet dating service (too trite), having George break his leg (too impractical), having Matthew train-surf in his sleep (yeah, right)...the list goes on.

While there were varying reasons for rejecting a lot of this material, the main brick wall I kept running into was the fact that just about every possible situation I invented ended up threatening to somehow impact on the form of the novel. Most of the potential scenarios I toyed with gave me a strong uneasy feeling that they could

take the book or the characters off in another direction. While of course I was interested in following these sub-plots to see where they would ultimately take me—and often did, I always just had to scrub them and start again, because effectively, I had already written the ending, and anything that happened needed to fit into my basic plan.

So, although George undergoes a fair amount of development, it's probably more similar to the twisted and forced development of bound feet more than it is a case of realising an unlimited world of potential as a character. And I see nothing wrong with this. In fact, if anything, it makes him more real. I know few people who, in life, aren't bound at some level of their own personal development by their self-perceived limitations. And though the character of George was restricted from growing due to mainly my practical form/writing reasons, he seems to me very much a character who would have found rapid growth a near impossibility anyway.

A Picture of Him: The Development of Matthew Harrison

Matthew's own narrative development is particularly stunted during the first two sections of the book. There *are* points of development—perhaps best described as development within his psyche—while he is dreaming, but otherwise, for most of the first two sections of the book, as a character, he primarily just exists, pulsing in the background, waiting to do something. It's no coincidence that when his narrative voice eventually awakens in the third section, that things happen considerably quickly from then on. For the first two thirds, though, the narrative remains basically a series of snapshots of his state of mind.

My initial idea for writing the character of Matthew was that, unable to face the reality of his situation, he would retreat into a 'safe' world of sleep and dreams, only to have the exact same situation hunt him down in his own mind. Sleep no longer being a place of refuge, Matthew would *have* to stay awake long enough to face his reality.

In the first, Exposition, section, the narrative centres around his relationship with Magda. The reader is met with a series of vignettes which have a vague but genuine linear narrative. i.e. Matthew meets Magda, Matthew dates Magda, Magda meets Matthew's parents, Matthew falls in love with Magda. The vignettes set him up as a character, and serve to almost take the reader into a safe and happy world with him, similar to the one that he has lost.

Then, in the codetta, Magda, the source of his contentment, suddenly disappears from his life:

magda i say *there's a train coming we've got to get the dogs off the tracks*
train? she says *i can't hear a train*
she must be deaf the rumble is getting so loud it sounds like a thousand horses stampeding all at
once
surely you can hear that i say *listen*
she cocks her ear—who needs ears? i can feel the rumble in my chest
nup she says *i can't hear a thing over all this noise!*
you're kidding me i say thinking i must be crazy but one look up the tracks tells me i'm not
there's a train coming all right it's a freight train and by god is it thundering or what
there! i shout and point *magda! it's right fucking there!*
she's looking right up the tracks with me but she doesn't seem to be able to see it
she looks confused but there's no time to argue about things so i jump down off the dogs and start
trying to herd the main pack off the tracks i pick up the nearest dog at my feet and literally throw it
out of the way but another one takes its place immediately so i pick up and throw that one as well

all the while i'm screaming at the rest of them to move pleading desperately as i throw
as many out of the way as i can but it's like using a coffee cup to bucket water out of a sinking ship
i can't make a dent in the sea of white fluff
magda! i scream help me for fuck's sake!
but she's gone she's disappeared i look around
magda?
the train is almost there
and then it is and it's not a train at all it's a stampede of a thousand black horses
and then it's a train again and then it's not and then it is and then i just don't know

In the next, Development, section, the first three vignettes suggest no linear connection whatsoever. They are simply snapshots of his state of mind

- (1) Matthew dreaming about his dead father
- (2) Matthew dreaming about losing Anna
- (3) Matthew dreaming about his mother and father's tempestuous relationship

By taking away the linear connection, I was trying to create a real sense of Matthew being trapped in his depression, unable to move forward, not only in real life, but mentally in his own mind. It was important to recognise the juxtaposition between this 'motionless' narrative with the increasing action in George's development. I felt that although it did slow the pace of the book somewhat overall, it enhances the sense of Matthew's heaviness hanging over everything.

It had been the progression of his imaginary relationship with Magda that had given Matthew's narrative its drive in the first section. And yet, the narrative had been far from containing actual action. Then, from the moment the second, 'development', section of the book begins, Matthew's dreams lose any sense of narrative drive and

action whatsoever and simply mutate into independent expressions of grief, self-loathing and anger, far from the innocent, loving encounters that preceded.

It's interesting that this loss of narrative drive occurs in what is supposed to be the 'development' section. Of course, that the dreams take a dramatic turn for the worse means there technically is some development within Matthew's mind, but once that trend is established, there is absolutely no linear development in the Matthew narrative itself per se. Instead, the Matthew narrative in this section more resembles a series of different perspectives of the same photograph, rather than being a continuous linear narrative. Originally when I began writing the book, as I mentioned earlier, I was very interested in writing something 'filmic'. However in terms of writing the development section of the Matthew narrative, I was actually influenced more by the concept of photography than anything else. There is something about the seeming lack of activity—and yet undeniable goings on—in photographs that I wanted to try to capture. By this, I mean, that often the eye can be attracted to various aspects within an actual photograph—rather than focus on the photograph itself as a whole image. The whole image itself never changes—only perhaps, the way we see it does, after repeated closer examinations.

In the same way, I was trying to focus on the different areas inside Matthew's psyche during the development section. During this section, he remained a sort of human 'photograph'. He didn't necessarily evolve as a character at all, but the reader got to see various aspects of *why* he was like he was.

Of course, there is only so much inactivity you can present on a page and hope to retain reader interest. So it was imperative that if the Matthew narrative effectively came to a halt action-wise, that it would have sit much more sparsely within the overall narrative. It's no accident then, that the respective word count in the

development section ended up as: George narrative: 23,942 vs Matthew narrative: 1,699.

This word count, by the way, does not include the 300-odd word sleepwalking incident that happens right at the end of the section. This is the only time anything really develops *tangibly*, where there is *action* within the Matthew narrative—when he takes his first, sleepwalking, steps to try and physically escape the horror in his mind for the first time:

i'm out here in the darkness in the middle of nowhere
in the middle of a black
desert

i can feel the wind blowing through my body i wish it would blow me away lift me up high and throw me back down on my life smash me into a million pieces like she was smashed

i try and let it lift me try and leap and get carried away i run along in the rain along a dark street i've never seen a street so dark i run across grass grass that is blacker and thicker than the night blacker and thicker and darker than pool water i feel like i'm going to sink into it with every step have to keep running i tell myself have to fly i run across train tracks where thousands of dogs have died and i run across roads where the cars headlights fly by like bright yellow fireflies the horns are like a symphony my head swells with their blaring and feels like it's going to explode if she was here she'd be able to play conductor or something she'd make them sound like the sweetest symphony ever god how i wish she were here without her
all i can hear is noise

With regards to the third, Recapitulation, section, I felt it was important to maintain the raw disjointed lower-case prose, even though Matthew was now awake, partly as a measure of consistency, but also partly to emphasise his unstable, disjointed state of mind. His thoughts are often very stop-start and he tends to focus on the details of what he sees:

environment around him in incredible and it has to be said, pointless levels of detail. He interrupted his long sad story about himself more than a few times to randomly point out to us such things as “The window frames in this room are too dusty” or “There’s a crack in the ceiling, can you see that?”

I have never forgotten the way he spoke, and it is the way I wanted Matthew’s ‘awake’ voice to read.

Of course, the other reason for maintaining the visual aesthetics of the Matthew narrative for the third section was because in the final pages of the book, I wanted it to remain ambiguous as to whether Matthew was in fact awake or asleep. If he was asleep, it would mean he was imagining his reunion with his mother and brother, as he sunk towards the bottom of the sea to die. If he was awake, it meant he had been washed up on the beach and survived his suicide attempt. I felt that maintaining this ambiguity was the only the way I could end the book dramatically without crossing the line over into melodrama or schmaltzy happy-endingness.

A Quick Note on Humour

It was important as well to try and increase the comedy value during the book, to counteract the darkness of Matthew’s dreams and George’s neuroses. The main way I did this was to flesh out the character of Stacey. She provides a humorous antidote to George’s (and Matthew’s) moroseness—particularly in moments where humour seems almost inappropriate, such as when she catches George in a state of paranoia, sneaking around the house and checking the cupboards for potential prowlers:

I take the box back into the kitchen to put it on the sink and I notice that one of the saucepan cupboards is slightly ajar. I can't remember whether it was like that or not. I know it's completely ridiculous to think that someone might have gone and removed the saucepans while I was walking around the house. That they might have been able to quietly stash them somewhere and then creep into the crawlspace without me seeing or hearing a thing. I put the box down and take another look. It's impossible. No way. But then I think—what if they did? What if this fucking Aitken Street prowler's been sneaking from room to room while I was mucking around with window jammers? What if he took the opportunity to crawl in there while I was in Matthew's room? As much as I try to resist I find that I can't. I simply have to check to make sure. So I go over to the cupboard and I say quietly, 'You'd better hope you're not in there motherfucker,' and I quickly yank the cupboard door open.

There's nothing in there but a pile of saucepans.

'Everything okay?' Stacey's standing in the kitchen doorway. Wrapped in a towel.

'Yeah, fine. Just um... checking on these saucepans.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'Nah, nothing.'

'Are they well? Are they happy?'

'What? Who?... *What?*'

'The saucepans. How are they doing? I mean, you should know—you were just having a conversation with them, weren't you?'

'I'm not sure what you mean...'

'Sure thing George,' she smiles. 'Next time say hi from me. Tell the big one I'm sorry about giving him a hard time the other night. Tell him I was only stirring.' She giggles.

Stacey's refusal to join George with his almost self-indulgently over-pessimistic view of things is hugely important because she gives the reader someone to relate to that won't take everything so seriously. It actually allows the reader to tolerate George's self obsession much more willingly. As Stacey tells George later on:

'It's all right George. You'll get over yourself. Everyone does eventually.'

The other method I used to introduce a certain obvious level of humour was by creating the power struggle between George and Busybody Barry. Once again, it was important to have a character negate George's sense of self-importance (even if he did it through displaying his own similar sense of self-importance), otherwise the novel risked becoming an exercise in self-indulgence.

Finally, the character of George and Matthew's mother, Eileen, was vital to the book, in that she embodied the very essence of the tragi-comic:

I remember when I first saw her standing there looking at us, a big toothy grin on her face, hands on her hips. It was strange. She almost looked like she was, well, *excited*. She was still holding onto her shopping bags, of which there seemed to be about fifteen—probably ten full of empty fucking jars.

'What *are* you boys *doing*?' she said. Her eyes bulged with energy and she held her grin as she spoke. She was looking at us as if it wasn't the most obvious thing in the whole wide fucking world what we were doing. Like she was waiting for some big surprise or for an invitation to join our secret game.

'What in Ugly Dave's name *are* you two naughty boys doing?'

'What does it look like, Mum?' Matthew looked up and wiped his brow on his filthy glove. '*Somebody's* got to clean up this hole you live in.'

'Hole?' said Mum. 'Hole?' She burst into laughter. A kind of disturbing, inane laughter. 'Is that what you call it? A hole?'

'Mum.' I said. 'It's just the council... you know?'

She was still laughing. 'Hole? Is that what you call this. My *hole*? I love it!'

She held out her shopping bags. 'Here you two boys, take these from your poor old mother will you? Crikey, I think my arms are about to fall off.'

Matthew looked at me and nodded. We took our gloves off and went to grab the bags from Mum. 'Ooh,' she said, rubbing her flabby, determined biceps. 'That's better.' And then she laughed. 'I thought my arms were about to fall off. And then I would have been in trouble, wouldn't I? If my arms

fell off? Eh? I wouldn't have been able to dig myself out of my own hole!' She kept laughing and staring right into my eyes.

There is little value in examining and analysing the humour with regards to the structural focus of this exegesis. However, it is worth mentioning, as the novel's form didn't allow for a racy, engaging plot—the need to retain a strong sense of humour throughout the novel was ever-present in my mind as I was conscious of providing other reasons for the reader to keep reading.

Beginning at the End: Form and Fiction

It's worth recounting here how the idea of knowing the ending before the rest of the book was written was a seed planted in my head long before I had even actually settled on attempting to write a novel in a pre-prescribed form.

A few years ago when I was doing my Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, I had a very interesting conversation about the Creative process with my then professor, Tom Shapcott. He had brought in a guest speaker (whose name I have unfortunately forgotten) to talk to us about the process of writing a novel. The speaker had written several novels and insisted that he knew how each one was going to finish before he effectively started it. In fact he went further and advised our class that there was no way we could hope to start seriously working on a novel unless we had already decided how it was going to finish.

After the class I approached Professor Shapcott about this and told him that I thought the speaker was absolutely right, that it all made perfect sense. Professor Shapcott shook his head and said it was the worst piece of writing advice he had ever

heard. His own advice was to let the book write itself, to let the characters take you where they wanted to go.

Hence, with my first (Masters) novel, *The Goddamn Bus of Happiness* (2005) I did precisely that. I just kept writing and writing and I never knew, or worried about, where it was going to end. Looking back at *The Goddamn Bus of Happiness* now I can see that for the first twelve chapters, it appears to be going nowhere. This is because each chapter was in itself largely an unrelated anecdote that I had just decided to flesh out. The actual cohesion between chapters only came much later with some major rewriting. The fact that I was writing the book in chapters itself made it easier not to have to worry at the time about things being cohesive in a larger context. Each chapter could by and large be its own little story.

With 'I Dream of Magda', on the other hand, there are no chapters—just the aforementioned sections, each section being about 20,000 words long. The only 'breaks' as such in the narrative come from the switch between the two narrative voices, and sometimes this doesn't happen at all for many thousands of words. This often meant that the action had to be continuous. Even flashbacks to past events in George's life had to somehow relate to whatever situation he was experiencing in the present. With *The Goddamn Bus of Happiness*, if I wanted to add a contextually irrelevant flashback in the main narrative, all I had to do was to begin a new chapter. With 'I Dream of Magda', I was constantly racking my brains for ways in which to introduce windows to the Harrisons' past that were still relevant to the present context.

There were times when I stretched this a bit, as has been pointed out by various trial readers. Probably the worst example is when George recounts the story of going out in the green rowboat and getting drunk with Matthew. This was a vital part of their story that simply needed to be told because it went a long way to describing the sort of

relationship they had, and also to the way that they dealt with grief, not to mention introducing the green rowboat as an important prop in the story. Try as I might though, I couldn't quite find the right way to trigger the story off and return from it. In the end I settled for:

There's nothing to do though, but start. I sigh and start clearing one of the sinks out so I can fill it with hot water and stick some of the dishes in to soak.

As I reach down into the murky cold water to fish for the plug, my hand brushes against something slimy. Something revolting—a leaf of soaking lettuce or maybe somebody's used serviette. It feels like seaweed or something, wrapped around my fingers, stuck to them. Disgusting. Reminds me of that time me and Matthew went down to the jetty in the middle of the night and hung out for a few hours in his favourite green rowboat.

And to return to the main narrative:

I sat there, exhausted, but at least not puking anymore, with my hand dangling in the cool water, letting the disgusting seaweed wrap itself around my fingers, letting my older brother pull us back.

I hold all the gunk aside from the plughole so that the cold dirty water can drain out. Then I fish the soggy pile of leftovers, serviettes, teabags and whatever out of the sink and fling it in the garbage bin. It sticks to the side and then slips down slowly. I empty the sink of dirty dishes and I give the hot water a blast to wash any remaining gunk down the plughole.

Not the most convincing of links, but not a bad effort, considering.

While I wasn't writing in chapters as such, the chance to go off on a tangent now and then inside Matthew's head gave me some great opportunities to create a greater cohesion within the overall work. There are deliberately a number of recurring motifs and situations: butterflies, boats, sailing, trains, peas, dishes, dogs, the ocean,

water etc. Both the main back-stories in the development section were inspired directly from motifs/situations within Matthew's dreams.

The End of the End: Recapitulation/Reconciliation

The Recapitulation stage, while presenting the biggest initial challenge with regards to writing to the sonata form, was ultimately the easiest section to write, once the hurdle of how to reconcile the narrative voices had been overcome. To stay true to the ideals of the sonata form, it was important to begin the section in a manner similar to the opening of the Exposition section, while at the same time being slightly different. The idea being, of course, to reintroduce the George narrative as it originally appeared. Notice then, how similar the respective openings to the George narratives are in these stages:

Firstly, the Exposition opening:

Thank you for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

Think good thoughts.

I've already come four times tonight. It'd be something of an achievement if I was actually coming *with* someone. But I'm not. I'm lying alone in my bed and it's three in the morning. I don't know why I keep masturbating. I'm not even horny. I'm just agitated to the point of torture. Stretched out on a posturepedic rack, on a fine line between insomnia and sexual depravity. I'm more than single. I'm a living, breathing, wanking dictionary definition of the word.

And the Recapitulation opening:

Thankyou for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Stacey.

Think good thoughts.

I lie back in bed and stare at the ceiling. I'm still coming down from the buckets of vodka and home-grown weed and I'm mentally and physically spent. Finding it impossible to sleep. My head is buzzing. It's a useless buzzing—like a TV that's been left on late at night and has turned to one of those fucking moronic cash-quiz shows—but it's enough to keep me up for now. My eyes feel too heavy to keep open but every time I shut them I get queasy—like I did that night with Matthew out in the green rowboat. I have to keep reminding myself I am not in a rowboat... that I am in a bed. I do my best to ignore the buzzing and the sick feeling in my stomach, and eventually, eventually, I am able to keep my eyes shut long enough to get to sleep.

Of course the most important part of writing to form in this stage was that the 'key' of Matthew's voice had to reconcile with the 'key' of George's voice. As I have mentioned before, this meant that he had to wake up. Once I had solved the problem of how to make it clear that Matthew was now speaking in his 'awake' voice, it was fairly easy to finish the book. I was no longer hindered by the 'too many dreams' factor, and so I was finally free to expand on Matthew's state of mind as much as I liked. It's interesting to note the eventual word count of the two narratives during the third and final section: George: 7808 vs Matthew: 6382.

Not only did Matthew start figuring much more prominently in the third section, but the swaps between the two narratives became much more frequent, with

some sections only lasting a couple of hundred words or so. This was extremely important in terms of speeding up the pace of the third section.

The narrative premise of the third section is very basic: George quits his job and starts thinking seriously about a relationship with Stacey, Matthew attempts suicide. And the resulting word count reflects this: 13,000 out of the total of 68,000 across the whole novel—which means that the Recapitulation section is only about half as long as each of the two preceding sections. However, unlike when I deliberately focused on word count to expand the other sections, this came about more as a natural consequence of trying to maintain the pace and simplicity of the section.

In terms of the actual ending itself, I prefer to think of this as a final Coda, as the voice used is neither necessarily Matthew's awake or asleep voice. This ambiguity, as I have previously mentioned, was vital in maintaining the drama of the situation without finding a predictable resolution. It's interesting to see how far back I had envisaged a similar type of ending—as I have previously shown in this essay, the first idea I ever had for the concept of the Magda project mentions:

Realising he will never see Magda again, he cries an ocean, which she, sensing he is in pain, overcomes her fear of drowning to boat/swim across it. that's where the film ends.

In the novel, of course, it is Magda who is crying an ocean of tears, but the similarity is obvious. The rest of the facets of the ending, such as the ambiguity, the reappearance of Magda on the beach, the involvement of George and the newly determined Mrs Harrison were all developed along the way but the original image of an ocean of tears was something I was very interested in exploring, and was perhaps part of the initial inspiration for me to explore the possibilities of writing the hyper-real.

Though I had struck upon this idea for the ending fairly early on, I hadn't considered the possibility of Matthew being dead or alive necessarily. I was a bit loath to make him either, as making him dead would leave the novel on too depressing a note, whereas making him definitely alive might be too predictable and ultimately unsatisfying. Interestingly, I realised eventually that I didn't have to do either.

The contrasts between George and Matthew's voices and indeed their characters put a strong binary thread through the novel, as did the literal textual form and formlessness of their respective narratives. While George was awake and lived in the real world, Matthew was always asleep and existed in a reality of his own. As a character, George was active in determining—or at least reacting to—much of his own fate. Even when it seemed like the world was getting too much for him to handle, he was always at least making plans, having dreams, taking chances to find his way through things:

That's what I want to do one day, I guess. Learn how to build stuff for real. Not just models. And not boring shit like houses and offices. Interesting things like bridges and dams and towers and castles. And I will one day. I'll build stuff. Stuff that doesn't fall apart.

Matthew, on the other hand occasionally whimpered a protest, but ultimately seemed resigned to losing his control over his circumstances—even in his dreams:

the thing i am worried about is that mum's just brought a big bowl of peas to the table she knows i hate peas i wonder if she's deliberately brought them out to embarrass me in front of magda or because she thinks they'll help build up my great big matthew muscles i give mum a look when she puts the bowl down but she just smiles and says *they're for your father dear* and trots back out magda must have seen the look i gave because she asks me what's wrong

i don't eat peas i say

why not?

i don't know i just don't like them that's all

mum comes right back in with a second bigger bowl of peas

actually mum i say i think we're okay for peas at the moment

they're for your father dear she says again

In terms of reconciling George and Matthew as narrative voices with regards to the sonata model, obviously that was done when I made Matthew's voice an 'awake' one. In terms of reconciling them as characters, although there is no definite resolution at the book's end, I feel there are more than enough hints to show that these two characters are beginning to grow closer again, having spent so long in conflict with one another. If they aren't able to express their love for each other openly and mutually, then at least they are privately. This actually extends to Eileen Harrison as well. The fact that George and Eileen search so feverishly for Matthew reiterates their depth of feeling for him—even if they haven't been able to express it in the right way so far. But they are not alone in having that feeling. As Matthew says:

i wonder how the huntsman mother is dealing with the death of her babies

maybe she's sleeping she looks asleep she hasn't moved for a few days maybe she's dead as well

if she isn't dead and if george is building an ark i'm going to put her in a jar and take her with us

and of course george would come too because it's his ark and i know we would take mum as well because even though she is crazy she still loves us

In this way, I feel I have addressed any reader's need for some sort of resolution between the characters, if not for their actual situation.

Conclusion

Writing 'I Dream of Magda' to a pre-determined form was a vastly different novel-writing experience compared with my previous efforts. I liken it to trying to write a song using, say, only three strings on a guitar. The creative effort is at once limited, but by the same token, knowing the boundaries within which you are working allows you to delve deeper into what you are doing. It forces you to concentrate on refining what you have come up with, rather than dart off in another direction if something simply isn't working. At times, writing the novel in this way was incredibly frustrating, so much so, that I doubt whether I would ever attempt something similar. However, compared with my previous novel, 'I Dream of Magda' seems to have far more layers and depth to it.

As I look at it now, the novel primarily exists as a series of snapshots of a dysfunctional family. If there is any movement per se, it seems more like the narrative is going around in circles, or at least remains largely resolutionless. Interestingly, this forced me to be as engaging as possible—without a pacy, punchy developing plot to hold the readers' attention, I had to find other means of holding it. Partly this meant making the characters as interesting and readable as possible, but partly it meant not getting bogged down in any one scene or idea for too long. In a way, writing to form made me at least create the illusion that the novel was actually going somewhere. And of course, in a sense, it *does* go somewhere—only, if you stand back and look at the bigger picture, it takes a lot of time getting there.

When my mother and I began talking all those years ago about whether it would be possible to transpose and adapt structural and formal tools from one kind of creative expression to another, I had initially thought it improbable and possibly a waste of time. Having managed to write the novel in sonata form, however, I have come to the conclusion that it is, at the very least, an exercise worth undertaking. No doubt, 'I Dream of Magda' is by far the most difficult novel I have written, and to be honest, had I not committed to writing it in the pre-determined form as part of the PhD program, I definitely would have given up on doing so at the halfway mark or earlier.

However, having now finished it as originally intended, I can see great value in the places I was forced to go creatively, though I am fairly sure no reader will ever quite be aware of the thought and planning that went into writing the novel in sonata form.

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'*Our lips will be together...*' he sang at the top of his voice, and leant over to plant a grinning exaggerated smooch on the girl in the black velvet dress sitting next to him. She kissed him back, but only for a second before gently pushing him away, shaking her head and smiling. 'Keep your eyes on the road.'

He leant back in his seat, reached down to crank the brand spanking new radio just one extra notch and continued singing at the top of his voice, even though he was becoming unsure of the lyrics: '*Come on sweet girl, we know we're okay...something-something... hey-hey-hey!*' and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, '*Our lips will be together, forever...*'

'You're such a dag.' She patted his leg.

He killed the volume a bit. 'That's okay, at least I'll never marry a dag.'

'And what makes you think I will?'

'Well, you will if you end up marrying me.'

She smiled. 'I hope to God that's not your idea of a proposal.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, girl. Got another kiss for your daggy boyfriend, then?' He turned his head, closed his eyes and puckered once again, teasingly.

'Hey... don't. Open your eyes.'

'Oh, come on... didn't you know it's international *kiss-a-dag* day, after all!'

'Look, I'm serious. Keep your eyes on the—'

But he ignored her for a second too long.

He'd remember certain things particularly vividly later. The noise: the agonised whinnying and the crashes and thuds that seemed to come from everywhere all at once. He'd remember the glistening sweat on the beast's hindquarters, of all things. His girlfriend's scream piercing his ears so violently that he was almost strangely thankful when a frantic kicking hoof found its way to the side of her head and rendered her limp and mute. He'd remember getting out of what used to be a car and looking at the bloody matted hair stuck to the duco, the smashed windscreen, the dashboard. He'd remember the sound of the horse. The tortured dying whines. It had disappeared from sight, probably on the ground behind the car somewhere. He'd remember the sound and the smell and the sheer amount of his own blood. Remember looking down at his pants around his ankles and his piss streaming down to mix with his blood in the hot summer dirt. He'd remember seeing a bone sticking out from somewhere. He'd remember throwing back his head and just screaming.

i dream of magda...

I

Thank you for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

Think good thoughts.

I've already come four times tonight. It'd be something of an achievement if I was actually coming *with* someone. But I'm not. I'm lying alone in my bed and it's three in the morning. I don't know why I keep masturbating. I'm not even horny. I'm just agitated to the point of torture. Stretched out on a posturepedic rack, on a fine line between insomnia and sexual depravity. I'm more than single. I'm a living, breathing, wanking dictionary definition of the word.

I get up. Go to the toilet. Piss against the inside of the bowl. I don't want to make noise by streaming into the water, in case there's some dirty pervert cunt standing outside my bathroom window in the middle of the night, waiting to hear me piss. Waiting for me to go back to bed and fall asleep so he can creep into my room and watch me sleeping. Fuck him. Let the cunt come. Let any dirty pervert cunt come into my room at night. I'll kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

When I finish pissing I don't flush. I don't want to make any noise in case I miss hearing someone jemmy a window open on the other side of the house. I'll flush in the morning.

I climb back into bed and try to think good thoughts. I put my face on the mattress where Selphie lay last night. I close my eyes and picture the skin on her back and take a deep breath of her smell. It's my fix. Like a smoker's morning puff. A sailor's first real burst of sea air. Good thoughts. I let her memory wash over me. My memories of Selphie are so strong that they are enough to make me temporarily forget she's gone. Enough to make me temporarily stop worrying about dirty pervert cunts standing outside my window. Long enough for me to get to sleep.

In the morning when I wake, I go to the bathroom and flush the toilet. I try to wipe the toothpaste stains off the mirror but end up just smearing them more. I look at myself behind the smears. There's a rash creeping up from my neck to my face. I must have had another allergic reaction to something, I don't know exactly what. I'm allergic to lots of things. I must have really got a dose of something though. This rash isn't just on my neck and face. It's on other parts of my body too. Funny how it

spreads sometimes, almost symmetrically. Like butterfly markings. On the backs of my upper arms I've got two rash circles the size of 50 cent pieces. I was leaning with my arms folded on the counter at work yesterday and a customer jokingly asked me if they were cigar burns. I said yes, they were. It kind of killed the conversation, but I wasn't in the mood for one anyway.

I work in a café in a bowling alley. I basically make toasted sandwiches for a living. I'm bloody good at it, but I'd wanna be, with the prices we charge. Like all of our food, the toasted sandwiches are ridiculously overpriced. Light years ahead of the CPI. Normal people rarely fork out for anything more than a cup of coke. That's okay with management. They're aiming at a far more lucrative market: league bowlers. League bowlers are a special breed. Most of them don't spend enough time in the real world to know what a reasonable price is. And anyway, they don't really think about how much money they're handing over. They're only thinking about their next frame. So you can charge them anything, as long as you smile respectfully when you do it.

I get to work ten minutes late. No big deal. It's Tuesday morning and dead as shit. Usually when it's like this I hide out in the back kitchen, pretending to do stuff. Smoking. The centre manager, Leonard Smaha, is always on the look-out for slack staff. He's an asshole, even when he's not trying to be, which is pretty rare for him. He walks around with a 'Leonard Athletic' brand t-shirt on, one that has the name "LEONARD" emblazoned across the front. He doesn't see the funny side of wearing a t-shirt with his name on it. He just seriously likes the look, the sound, the presence of "LEONARD". The other thing he likes is getting in my face. 'George', he barks through the kitchen intercom, 'Georgie m'boy, what are you up to out there? You smoking?'

I press the talk button. 'No, Leonard,' I say, and release the button and throw half a cigarette into the sink. It hisses to a quick death, drowns in a tepid liquid graveyard full of food scraps and used teabags.

The customer bell jingles. I nearly fall on my arse as I turn to head for the front counter, but I catch myself on the sink just in time. The tiled back kitchen floor is like an ice rink at the moment. The tap on the oil drum fell off yesterday when I was getting fresh stuff to put in the deep fryer. I poured salt everywhere and swept it up, of course, but the floor's still slippery.

One of the regular league bowlers, Stacey Stewart, is leaning across the multi-coloured linoleum moat that surrounds the café service counter. None of the league

bowlers ever step on that linoleum when they are wearing their bowling shoes. Just in case there's a camouflaged sticky mess that will spoil the smooth leather sole on their sliding shoe and send them arse up on the lane.

Stacey looks agitated. Probably not bowling well. 'Small bucket of hot chips and a toasted cheese sandwich, thanks mate,' she tries to smile, urgently, and hands me ten dollars fifty-five with her right hand, her bowling hand, encased in a steel wrist support device called "The Enforcer". Bowling products all have macho, powerful names: "The Hammer", "The Terminator", "The Destroyer". I take the money from "The Enforcer" and tell Stacey the food'll be a few minutes. She nods and pushes herself back from the counter. Struts back to the lanes. She looks pretty in that black bowling skirt of hers. I wonder if she's got a boyfriend. Probably.

I turn and head for the freezer. Grab a bag of hot chips and dump a load in the deep fryer. The frozen chips sizzle in the fresh oil. They always taste nicer in fresh oil. I put a few extra in for myself and get the toasted cheese sangers underway.

While the food's cooking I start emptying out my pockets, just for something to do. Most of the stuff I carry around with me you can't fit into a pocket so there's not much in there. Keys, a little bit of money, some cigarette butts cos I never litter, and a scrunched up piece of paper. A scrunched up piece of paper that says they're taking out our tree. Mine and Selphie's tree.

It's a notice from the Yarra council. There's a list of possible reasons why they're getting rid of our tree: "poor/hazardous structural defects", "inappropriate species for location", "pest/diseased". Each reason has a little box next to it that's either ticked or not. The reason with the box ticked is "dying/dead".

It was the tree in which me and Selphie had our first kiss. There's a yellow rope that the neighbours tied on to one of the main branches so their kids could climb up and sit on it. One day me and Selph hoisted ourselves up and sat up there. We weren't very high off the ground but we were still on top of the world. It was the first time we kissed, after all. I still look at that tree every morning when I wake up.

When I got the council notice the first thing I did was call Selphie. 'They're cutting down our tree,' I told her.

'Which tree's that?'

'The one outside my balcony. Our first kiss tree.'

'Oh... why?'

'They've ticked a box saying it's "dying/dead".'

‘Oh... well... maybe it is.’

‘Yeah, I know, but...’

‘Don’t worry too much, George. It’s a nice tree, with some good memories, but at the end of the day, it’s just a tree.’

I asked her whether she wanted to come around and have a commiseratory bottle of wine with me. I didn’t really think she would but she said okay. That’s why she was at my house last night. Even though we’ve been broken up for the last six months.

It was strange, sitting out on the balcony, sharing that bottle of red with Selphie. It was something that, for whatever reason, we never really did much when we were seeing each other—sit down and just chew the fat and drink wine together. Not that we really chewed the fat much that night anyway. She got a phone call halfway through her second glass. She sounded really pleased and excited to hear from whoever it was. I remember the first time she sounded that excited to hear from me.

When she hung up, I asked her who it was.

‘Just a friend, George.’

‘Oh. Okay.’

I asked whether she wanted to climb the tree one more time for old time’s sake.

‘I don’t think so, George. It’s dark. And anyway, I thought you said those branches were dead. They might not hold us anymore. Plus, I’m wearing my new stockings and I have to go out later on.’

‘To meet your friend?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Who is he?’

‘George, don’t. Why don’t you pour me another glass of wine?’

So I did and we sat there and finished the bottle off. Rather quickly. Then Selphie stood up. ‘Well, I’d better go.’

‘Why so soon?’

‘I told you, George. I’m going out.’

And even though I knew I sounded pathetic, I said it anyway. ‘Selph, I know it’s over with us, but will you lie down with me one more time? For old time’s sake? Just five minutes. I promise. No funny business. I won’t try anything. Just lie with me.’

She gave me a look. One that said she cared about me even though she had other things to do in her life now. It wasn't the look I craved. The one I *used* to get from her. The one that said she wanted to be with me, instead of felt she had to.

'Sure, George,' she said. 'I can lie down with you for five minutes. If it's not going to make things harder for you than they already are.'

'Couldn't be harder,' I half-joked. 'Thanks.'

So we went into the bedroom and we lay down next to each other. Like stiff mummies. I had one eye on the clock and I could see that Selph was checking her watch from time to time. I shut my eyes for a moment and listened to her breathe. Smelt her perfume.

'You look really good tonight,' I said, with my eyes still shut.

She seemed surprised, and a little guarded—as if I shouldn't be noticing how she looked anymore. 'Thanks,' she said. It was the sort of thank you that you say when someone gives you a present you don't really like.

With under a minute left, I quickly leant over and put my head on her chest. just under her breast. She tensed up just for a second and then when she realised I wasn't trying anything, she relaxed and lifted her hand up to gently stroke my head. 'Oh, George,' she said. She knew it was my favourite place in the world. Lying there with my head on her heart. And I guess I just needed to be there one more time before I wasn't allowed to be there again.

The smell of burning bread catches my nose. I rush to the grill. 'Fuck.' The sandwiches have had it. Stacey Stewart's heading back from the lanes.

'Be another five or so,' I call to her. 'Pretty busy.'

She nods and waves acknowledgement and turns around. I chuck out the burnt stuff, wipe down the grill and start again. Like I said before: I'm bloody good at making cheese toasted sandwiches. I'm just better at it when I don't get distracted by other stuff.

*

in a sleeping bag for some reason it's pulled right up to my chest and my arms are
hanging out i have no idea why
it's a brown furry sleeping bag must look like a giant caterpillar or something

i don't know what i'm doing there on the steps in my old house in a brown furry sleeping bag and i sure don't know what *she's* doing there with me

hello matthew harrison she says and wipes her nose on her sleeve she's wearing a pair of light blue satin silk pyjamas covered in huge black dots there are two little lace butterfly wings on her back she looks quite spiffy she's trying to hold a serious face but quite frankly she's not really pulling it off there's an unmistakable smile hidden somewhere under that feigned seriousness (a smile so bright it shines through her eyes like beams from a lighthouse)

excuse me... aren't you—

she nods

—magda szubanski? what are you doing here?

she doesn't answer just stares back at me still fruitlessly trying to conceal that inner smile of hers

what are you doing here? i say again looking up at her like a lost puppy *this is my house*

magda stares at me for a moment and then suddenly she loses her serious façade and she lets herself laugh it's an immediately big hearty magda laugh *i don't know...* she laughs *i really don't know at all*

i smile because it's impossible not to smile when magda szubanski laughs then i find myself wanting to chuckle but i hold it back *i mean... what the hell are you doing here?* i say *this is my house!* and i put on a look of feigned amazement that i imagine she'd enjoy—and she does enjoy—she rocks back on the stairs and laughs even harder *i tell you... i don't know* she laughs *i really don't*

now ms magda i say as my chest tightens with impending guffaws of my own *i really want you to tell me... what the hell are you doing here? what the hell are you doing here? in my house of all places... i mean... what the hell?*

stop it! she shrieks *stop it i tell you i don't know! stop pulling that face please stop it!* she's snorting now and the tears are beginning to run from her eyes

i reach my fingers up to feel my face i can feel how comical it must look how the skin is stretched around my confounded expression how my raised eyebrows and my dropped jaw feel like bookends around the funniest goddamn look of amazement that you ever could see now i really want to laugh

i let my fingertips gently tickle across my face dance over my cheeks and hover in front of the air puffing out of my mouth as i struggle to contain myself then i put my thumbs to my temples and wiggle my fingers like little antelope horns

what—are—you—doing—here? i say slowly bugging my eyes out as far as i can stretching my mouth as wide as i can with every syllable fighting against the surge of laughter trying to escape my throat

stop it matthew! stop it! she howls *stop pulling those faces!* she falls back sprawled at the top of the stairs guffawing for all she is worth it's the sort of laugh that looks like it hurts her whole body is convulsing and she's exhaling a never-ending spasm of moans and sighs and it almost sounds as if she is crying

*

The bells are clanging and the lights are flashing and the boom gates are lowering. I curse myself for stopping at the fish and chip shop. With a hamburger in one hand and a minimum chips in the other and an open can of Coke under my arm, I jog half-heartedly towards the station. The banked-up peak-hour traffic stretches out in the lane alongside me. I try to keep chewing while I huff and puff past the car drivers. Out of the corner of my eye I can see a few of them watching me, probably either silently willing me on, or thinking I should give up. Their opinions are irrelevant, though. I know I'm too late already. I know how much flashing-light time you've got before that train pulls in. I catch the fucking thing five days a week, sometimes six. I want to stop jogging and take a bite of my hamburger, but I can feel everyone's eyes on me so I keep the show going for them. Keep it going until I'm only fifteen metres away and the train rumbles through. I'm actually closer than I thought I'd get. If I dropped everything and sprinted now, I'd just about make it. But I'm hungry and anyway, I can't be fucked sprinting. I stomp to a halt and put on a suitably disappointed look for the drivers and readjust the coke under my arm. Weave my way through the stationary traffic and cross to the other side of the road.

There's only one thing I don't like about catching the train home, and that's walking home from the train station. To get home, I take a little dirt path that runs between the train line and the back fences of the adjoining houses. I have to walk past a bastard of a dog who lives behind a big brush back fence that runs along a section of

the path. It's a big mother fucker bastard of a dog. It has a bark that comes from the bowels. It begins with a low, throaty I'm-gonna-kill-you bay for blood, and quickly erupts into a relentless blood-curdling gnashing of teeth and frenzied howl of protective insanity.

Every time I go past, I slow my pace and walk as quietly as I can. Just for a bit of peace more than anything else. That loud barking made me jump about ten feet in the air the first few times, but these days it's not particularly scary. I mean, it's a big fence. I feel pretty safe walking past. I just get annoyed sometimes, like when I'm daydreaming and I forget to walk past quietly and all of a sudden my heart's in my throat again.

I've walked around the block and sussed out which house it belongs to. Number 48. I don't know why I bothered to do that. I guess I've just always been interested in who the fuck would want to own such a menacing piece of shit.

There's a message on the machine when I get home. It's from Selphie. She says she's coming over tomorrow to pick up her fridge. The second-hand piece of shit fridge we bought together has been 'hers' since we broke up. It's fair enough, I guess. She said I could keep the defective washing machine. We had bought them both together cos we'd been planning on living with each other eventually but when our relationship fell apart, we decided to keep one thing each. Actually, it was her who did all the deciding. Dividing whitegoods is about as final statement as you can make in a relationship without kids. I didn't want to help decide who got what. It just didn't feel right. Anyway, it would have made it look like I was going along with the whole thing.

Mum said me and Matthew can have the spare fridge in her garage. Said she hasn't really used it since Dad died. Yeah right, like it ever got 'used' before anyway. Dad kept bottles of ginger ale in there. It was literally brimming with the bastards for years. We couldn't fit anything else in it. I don't know why he kept all those bottles of ginger ale in the fridge. No one in our house drank the stuff. Not even Dad. He said he kept them there in case we had unexpected guests. And to be fair, I guess if anyone ever came around to our house looking for forty-six ice-cold bottles of home brand ginger ale, we had it. No one came to our house though. My mum and dad didn't really have any good friends and by the time me and Matthew did, we knew better than to bring them into the bizarre shitstorm we grew up in.

My bet is those bottles of ginger ale are still there, though. Still there in that fridge where the old man left them, fourteen years, three months and seventeen days ago. Just like me and Mum and Matthew are still here. Still not believing that he's gone. And, in a way, still not believing that he was ever really here in the first place.

Anyway, I guess it was lucky me and Selph didn't have kids. It was hard enough deciding what to do with the African child we'd been sponsoring for the last eighteen months. I wrote to Nkaba a few weeks back and told her me and Selph were breaking up but that we still both cared about her very much and that it wouldn't affect our relationship—or our sponsorship for that matter. Nkaba wrote back and said there's a new water well in her village and that she's going to school three days a week. She also sent a lovely photo of a goat. I offered the goat picture to Selphie but she said Nkaba had already sent her a letter as well with a picture of a different goat in it. Gotta hand it to the kid. Looks like she's adapting to the situation just fine, which is more than I can say for me at the moment.

I open my—well, *her* fridge and take a look inside. It's a fucking disgrace. How did I ever let it get like this? Selphie would freak at me if I tried to hand it over looking like that. I'll have to clean it.

I check the freezer. There's nothing in it but a ton of built-up ice and half a box of paddlepops and some reddish-coloured frozen mass in a tupperware container embedded in the ice which could be (a) bolognese sauce (b) apricot chicken (c) minestrone soup or (d) some lame-ass stew combination containing all of the above. That one'll have to be solved with a defrost.

I switch the power off and start emptying the fridge. Most of the stuff I'm just going to have to chuck out. I won't be able to get Mum's fridge until later this week. Pretty much everything I would have had to chuck out anyway. Most of the badly glad-wrapped solid foods have taken on a kind of wet form. Even the ham drips when I hold it up.

I fill nearly a whole garbage bag with crap. Soggy vegetables all turned to a wet dark brown. Leftovers so old that I have to throw the bowls containing them into the bin as well rather than attempt to wash them. The only usable stuff left is some milk, margarine, some jam, half a bottle of Coke and an apple Danish.

The Danish itself is probably only technically useable as a hammer or something. It's been sitting there for nearly eight months and it looks disgusting. I guess I just couldn't bring myself to throw it out. I bought it as a surprise for Selphie

once because she had got a distinction for a uni paper or something but she said she didn't want to eat it.

'George, you shouldn't buy me things like that,' she said. 'I'll get fat.'

I told her I didn't care if she got fat. That I didn't care if she turned into the fattest person in the world and had a double page spread in *The Guinness Book of Records*. That I would still love every inch of her no matter what she looked like. When you say something sweet like that and you mean it, I think you are at least supposed to get a smile or something. Selphie just rolled her eyes impatiently and told me again that she didn't want to get fat. I guess that was the first time I had an inkling that maybe she didn't care as much what I thought of her anymore. An inkling that maybe she wanted to look 'not fat' for someone else.

I take the mouldy rock-hard Danish and chuck it in the bin with the other crap. Then I open the Coke to have a swig but it's gone flat so I tip it down the sink and chuck the bottle in the recycle box. Have a drink of water from the tap and start to work on the freezer.

There's no quick and easy way of doing it. I fill up a saucepan with boiling water and stick it in and shut the door. Give it ten minutes and then refill it and do it again. Then I start chipping away at the ice with a spatula thing. Matthew comes out to the kitchen and has a look in the fridge. 'Whadja do with my Coke?' he says.

'It was flat. I dumped it.'

'It wasn't flat.'

'It was,' I say. 'I tried it.'

'Can you do me a favour?' he says in particularly stiff voice. 'Can you not throw out my stuff without asking me?'

'It was fucking flat man. I'll get you another one.'

'Can you *not* throw out my stuff without asking me?'

'Relax mate,' I smile. 'It's not like I do it all the time. Anyway—'

'George.' There's an edge to his voice. 'Can you *not* throw out my stuff without asking me?'

'Okay,' I sigh. 'I won't throw out your stuff without asking you.'

'Thank you,' he says and turns around and goes back to his room and shuts the door loudly.

I never knew my brother could be such a bad-tempered fucking prick. It's a side of him that didn't exist before the accident. The doctors said that he would be

under a lot of what they call “post traumatic stress” or something like that. They said it might be quite a while before he was anywhere near being back to his old self. Fuck me if it hasn’t been six months and it seems like he’s getting worse.

The ice is starting to melt away a bit now. Coming off easier. I rip out the tupperware container and open it. First guess is always the best. It’s bolognese. I’ve no fucking idea how long it’s been there. Probably a while though. It looks a bit dodgy but I’ll still chance it for tea tomorrow.

By the time I finish defrosting the freezer the paddlepops have half melted into flat chocolate discs. They look like someone’s stepped on them. I decide to turn the power back on for the night. May as well try salvaging what’s left of them. And as crap a freezer as it is, the ice won’t build back up before tomorrow morning. Not too badly anyway.

*

I stand naked in front of the mirror. The rash that was creeping up from my neck to my face has died down a bit. That’s good. It’s still on my arms and legs a bit though. And there’s a little bit that’s started to appear on the side of my chest. It doesn’t really itch but I put ointment on it anyway.

My chest jiggles a bit as I rub in the ointment. It doesn’t jiggle a *lot*. But enough to make me suddenly paranoid about man-boobs. I wince, and cup the flesh around my nipples. Try to ascertain their level of boobiness. I turn my head slightly and try to keep my reflected face out of my line of vision—to see whether it’s possible to temporarily fool myself that the lumps of flesh in my hands could actually be mistaken for women’s breasts. I can’t help suddenly smiling as I catch myself in the mirror, standing there clutching at my chest, looking at myself sideways like a fucking freak.

‘George.’

‘What?’ I turn, still with my ‘breasts’ in my hands to find Matthew standing, averting his gaze from me, holding out a phone. Two years ago if my brother caught me standing in front of the mirror squeezing at the flab on my chest he would have ripped shit out of me for weeks.

‘Phone,’ he says.

I can’t help chuckling. ‘Sorry... I was just...um...’

‘Phone,’ he says again, a little more impatiently. ‘Here.’

He thrusts the phone closer to me. He’s still looking the other way. I shrug and take it from him and he walks quickly out of the room.

‘Hello?’

‘George... .. It’s Selphie.’

Like she needs to tell me it’s her. Like that voice doesn’t send the proverbial tremor through my whole fucking soul the second I hear it. Still, I try and sound casual. Tremorless. ‘Hey, Selph. What’s up?’

‘Not much. What are you doing?’

‘I was just... er... oh, nothing really.’

‘Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you got my message.’

‘Yeah, I got it.’

‘So are you going to be there in the morning?’

‘I’ll be here, yeah. What time?’

‘Pretty early I think. I’ve got a pretty full on day tomorrow so I want to get it out of the way.’

Get *it* out of the way, I think, or *me*? ‘No worries. I’ll be here early.’

‘Thanks George.’

‘How are you, anyway?’

‘Oh, you know.’

I don’t know. I *want* to know. I want to know everything she’s been feeling and everything she’s been thinking and I want her to want to tell me all about it. I want to be that person again—the one that used to listen to her talk about her day, every day.

She coughs. ‘And so... how are you?’

‘Great,’ I lie. I’m about to try and think of something interesting to say but she cuts me off.

‘Well, that’s good to hear, George. So I’ll see you tomorrow then?’

‘Oh. Yeah. Tomorrow. Sure.’

‘Bye George.’

‘Bye Selph.’

I listen to her hang up. Wonder what she’s doing now. Getting on with her life, I suppose. Maybe even with someone else who is about to listen to her talk about her day.

I take the phone back out into the hallway and then head back into the bathroom to clean my teeth. Think about what I can do to stop myself thinking about her. Read a book or something. Watch TV. Sleep. Have a lobotomy. Get a life.

*

we're standing in the middle of the oval of my old primary school
everything looks lush the sky is a never-ending swirling melt of pinks
and blues and whites and colours that i've never even seen before the grass is
greener than i thought grass could ever be it's so green i can taste it there are
thousands of invisible birds in the sky (i can't see them but i know they are there
because they are singing they are loud and shrill and relentless and not in an
unpleasant way but like some kind of everywhere orchestra and i can feel their
symphony reverberate through my flesh and it lifts my whole being and i feel as if i
am floating though somehow my feet are still firmly entrenched in the thick green
grass)

i stretch my hands out in the air and suddenly i can feel the blood
rushing around my body
pumping around and around to the rhythm of the birds' song

my smile is shining out a glow at least six inches from my face there are thousands
of tiny dust particles dancing in the glow of my smile they look like stars in my
own miniature private galaxy i reach up to wave my hand through the galaxy
and am immediately surprised to see that my jacket sleeve has suddenly become too
big for me it's hanging down a good half a metre past my hand as if i was a small
boy wearing my dad's best suit (the one he wore in the casket)

i look down at my trousers they stretch out about a metre past where my legs end
what's going on ms magda? i say and turn to look at her but she's not there anymore

instead

there is a little girl standing in her place the girl looks about eight years old

she's got a round little cherub face and a pudding bowl haircut that slopes up the back of her head into a rounded conical point she's got a cheeky sparkle in her eyes and a glow in her cheeks she's wearing magda's dress wrapping it around herself like a big polka-dotted quilt snuggling into warmth she's smiling but i'm not sure whether she's smiling at me or just happily lost in her own little world and then the dress around her suddenly swells up and envelops her and as it does it fills out into a bubbling sphere and the sphere begins to roll away in the wind (it bounces and swirls and dances away from me dances dances dances on the tips of that green green grass) *magda!* i shout *come back!*

*

'Matt? Was that you?'

No answer.

I'm sure I heard something. I decide to get up and check. Have to make sure. Otherwise I'll never get to sleep tonight. I reach under the bed and grab my torch. Flick it on. Get up and walk past the giant painting of the naked alien that stands outside my bedroom door. I stop and turn and shine my torch across the canvas. Slowly. Up and down. I feel less nervous already. There's something peaceful about that alien and I always feel like it's somehow keeping me safe. It's painted on a board about twelve feet tall and about a foot wide. One of my friends did it and gave it to me for my birthday years ago. When I first saw it I pointed out that it had breasts and a penis. My friend said that made it androgynous. I wouldn't know. I'm not the artist type. I just took his word for it and stuck it outside my room in the hallway. And that's where it's been ever since. Watching over me.

I tiptoe through the house to the back door and check that it's firmly locked. Then I go into the spare room, flick the light on and check the window stopper is in place. I take care not to brush the curtains open in case there's someone looking through the window from outside, waiting to catch a glimpse of me. Then I check the bathroom, the kitchen and the laundry. I open the door to each room and check behind it to see if anyone is standing there. I make sure all the window stoppers are in place. I check the side-laundry door is locked. I check inside any cupboards that might be big enough for someone to hide in. And as I check each new dark corner I tell myself automatically, robotically: *kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie*. I check every room,

lock and crawl space in the house until I'm satisfied no one's broken in. I even check Matthew's room. I don't check his window but I open his door just to see that no one's in there and well, that he's okay. I don't really know why I worry about him being okay. I mean, the guy's already been clinically dead once, any other state he could be in for the rest of his life would have to seem relatively okay. But he's my brother and I love him so I worry.

He's asleep. Apart from turning into a rude fucking prick, he's been sleeping a lot lately. It's more than I can say for myself. I don't know. There's something about being on my own at night again, now that Selphie's left me, that makes me edgy about closing my eyes for any length of time. I didn't feel the need to check the house for the whole three years when we were together. I never felt like anything bad could ever happen when she was lying next to me. Something about her being gone now though makes me feel like I have to keep looking over my shoulder. As if something bad is following me. As if the whole bucket of shit is going to come down over me again.

I give the front door a final check and I climb back into my still warmish bed. The clock-radio says it's just past five a.m. I'm half-tempted to lean over and turn the radio on, but I don't. Must at least pretend to myself that I want to sleep. I turn over and shut my eyes.

Thank you for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

Think good thoughts.

*

I'm bleary-eyed and pretty useless in the morning when Selphie comes over. She's brought someone called Joshua to help move her fridge. She tells me he's an old friend, and that she thinks I've met him once before. Old friend my arse. I've known Selphie for four years. She's never mentioned anyone called Joshua before, and I've certainly never met him.

‘G’day George,’ he says, with a firm grip. ‘How are ya?’ He speaks in a tone of voice just confident enough to let it slip that he’s sleeping with my girlfriend. Well, my *ex*-girlfriend.

‘Good to meet you, mate,’ I lie. ‘Doin’ well.’

Half an hour later, Joshua takes off with the fridge in the back of his truck. I had offered to go with him and help but he reckoned he’s got some mates waiting back at his house. His house? What does that mean—*his* house? Selphie sees the look on my face. She rolls her eyes. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not moving in with him.’

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘I wasn’t thinking that you were.’

‘Yes you were. And I can’t believe that you would even care if I was. Come on, George. It’s been six months. Don’t you think it’s time we both moved on?’

‘I wasn’t... I *didn’t* care.’

‘He’s just doing me a favour, okay? He’s just gonna look after my fridge for a while.’

‘I could have done that for you.’

‘George, I just don’t think it’s such a good idea for you and I to still have that link.’

‘Tell that to my paddlepops. Want one by the way? They’re kind of past their half-life.’

‘No thanks George.’ She sighs. ‘And look, I’m sorry about the paddlepops. I’m sorry I didn’t give you more warning about the fridge. It’s just that Joshua happens to need it quite badly.’

‘I thought you said he was doing you a favour?’

‘Well he is in a way. I mean, his fridge just broke down so he offered to look after mine.’

‘That was nice of him.’

‘Oh, cut it out. Anyway, he made me a chair so I kind of felt like doing something nice for him.’

‘He what? A chair? What the fuck did he do that for?’

‘Never mind, George. You just don’t get it.’

‘But why did he make you a chair? Who the fuck makes someone a chair?’

‘He’s just a nice guy, George. Some people don’t need a reason. And would you mind not swearing at me like that? You swear way too much, you know.’

‘I mean, at the very least he could make you a dining setting. What the fuck are you going to do with a single chair?’

‘Sit on it, George.’

‘Oh, touché.’

For a moment we stop and look at each other. We’re standing two feet apart and we’ll probably never get closer than that for the rest of our lives.

‘Anyway, I’ll seeya, George.’ And then Selphie just turns and goes. I shit you not. She just turns and goes. After three years of being together and six months of being broken up. Three years and six months has to be worth more than a turn and go. A goodbye hug, maybe? A peck on the cheek? A final tounge-down-throat release of passion? Anything but a turn and go. Apparently not though. I watch her get into to her green Torana with its rusted doors and dodgy starter motor. We used to drive places together in that Torana. One time the engine conked out while we were going up a hill in the middle of winter in the rain and the dark and peak hour traffic. There was nowhere to pull over on that stretch of road, so all we could do was roll backwards down the hill and hope the stream of pissed off drivers didn’t hit us on their way up. Horns blared as people swung out past us, hurling abuse as they flew by. There was nothing else we could do but hold hands and hope that we made it to the bottom without getting cleaned up.

‘George... George!’ Selphie has wound down her window and is staring at me.

‘What is it?’ And then I realise. Of course. We’re going to do that final tear-jerking kiss through the front window before she sadly pulls away, asking herself just what the hell she is doing. She’s looking up at me with those big sad beautiful eyes of hers. I stride over, giving a slight shake of the head, and the sigh of a man who cares about the one he loves so much that he’s willing to let her go wherever she thinks she needs to—even if, deep in her heart, she doesn’t really want to. I suddenly think of that Sting song: *If you love somebody, set them free*. I take a deep breath. Sting would be proud of me today.

‘You gonna be okay?’ I say.

‘Yeah. I’m fine. Just the car. It won’t start again. Can you give me a push?’

‘Oh... yeah... sure thing.’ I go around behind the Torana and heave myself into it. Luckily, the road’s got a bit of a slope to it. I’m a little puffed, but I manage to get enough momentum to get the Torana going fast enough for Selphie to drop the clutch and start it up. I try and jog up to the window to give her a peck on the cheek to

remember me by but I can't keep up so I give her boot a friendly tap and stand in the middle of my street, waving her off, waiting for the courtesy beep. It doesn't come. Just like her for the last six months. Well, at least not with me.

*

Matthew hangs out at the bowling alley pretty often. He hasn't worked since the accident. It's not surprising really. He's only been able to get around properly for the last six months and he still has to use a walking stick. Anyway, he reckons his brain gets tired really easily these days. That he can't concentrate on stuff for too long without getting a headache. It's hard to know whether he's talking shit about those headaches or not. He seems to be able to concentrate on the fucking video games at the bowling alley all right. Not that I'm having a go at him for not working—I wouldn't blame him if he never wanted to work again after what he went through, losing Anna and all that. I just hope he doesn't think he has to talk shit to me. He never used to talk shit to me when we were growing up.

But he hardly says a word to me these days, let alone talks shit. I thought he was quiet when he first moved in, but he's only getting worse. The way he's going he'll probably stop talking altogether soon. He's getting more like Dad used to be every day. Going further and further inside his own head. And I worry that if he doesn't snap out of it that he'll fucking well end up like Dad. And then Mum and me really will go loopy.

It's like I hardly even know the guy at all anymore. Whenever he's home he stays in his room, sleeping or watching TV. I can't seem to get through to him. I mean, I keep trying, but at the same time, I don't want to push it too hard. Not like Mum does. When Matthew had the accident she was all over him like that rash on my arms. Practically dragged him out of the hospital bed to come and live with her. The poor bastard could barely breathe. As soon as he managed to start walking again he came knocking on my door. I don't think he really *wanted* to live with me or anything. I just think he figured it was less fucked up than living with Mum. Mum can drive people nuts sometimes, whether she means to or not.

She's always been a bit crazy. I don't mean, like, shit-in-her-hand-and-throw-it-against-the-wall type of crazy. She's just weird. Don't get me wrong. She's tried to be a saint to her kids. She still tells me at least once a month that she'd die for us. It's

pretty good having a Mum like that. Only sometimes I wish she'd try to relax for us as well. But she's just on her own trip. Don't ask me where some of her stuff comes from. Like, for some reason, she smiles when she's sad. She laughs when she's angry. Fucked if I know why. All I know is that the more upset she gets, the more cheery she acts. But it's not just that. She's strange in lots of ways. Like she always sings loudly when she's cleaning her house or whatever. At the top of her voice. The sort of happy shit songs you hear in musicals: fucking *Climb Every Mountain* and *Oklahoma* and stuff like that. She loves that shit where things always work out—even if they really don't sometimes. She loves the she'll-be-apples-knock-em-dead-break-a-leg sort of go-getter mentality. She'd see a sunny side up of the fucking Holocaust.

First time she saw Matthew in the hospital she wasn't quiet or whatever, like you might think. She literally gave a squeal and ran over to his bed. 'Look at you!' she squealed. 'Look at my little boy!' She was all excited, like he was dressed up as one of the three wise men for a primary school nativity play instead of lying twisted beneath a white sheet with a tube in his arm, zonked up to the eyeballs on morphine. He probably couldn't even hear her, let alone answer. It didn't stop Mum yabbering on at the top of her voice though, oblivious to the disapproving looks from the other people visiting their loved ones in the beds around us. She was overflowing with enthusiasm, telling Matthew about how she'd painted one of the bedrooms blue for him now that he'd be coming back to stay. How she'd even got the pool cleaned professionally so he'd be able to get back in and swim and 'start building up those great big Matthew muscles,' as she calls them. 'Come on,' she said, squeezing his bicep so hard that if he was awake he would have winced. 'When are you going to build up those great big Matthew muscles for your mother?' And she looked around at me with a full-on grin spread wide across her cheeks. 'Do you think he's going to build them up?' She asked me in the sort of voice that you might use when addressing an energised puppy. A kind of excited patronising type of baby-talk. 'Do you think he will?' she said to me, eyebrows raised. 'Do you think, eh?' She poked me in the ribs. Hard. And then without waiting for my answer she turned back to my brother. 'He doesn't think you will,' she told him, still smiling broadly. Then she laughed and slapped her leg. 'He doesn't think you can do it, eh? What about that? Your own brother doesn't believe in you!'

'Mum,' I said. 'Doctor reckons he can't quite hear us yet. Probably in the next few days.'

‘Oh piffle,’ she chuckled. ‘He’s my son. He can hear me.’ And she wiped the dribble from his chin and carried on, telling Matthew about her fights with the neighbours and how the local council was giving her grief and about how it was going to be great to have a big strong lad around to help her around the house again just like the old days. Then she said that they should start taking music lessons together. She said she’d been thinking of getting some formal singing training and she thought Matthew might want to learn the trumpet or something so he could play along with her. By the end of it, I started actually thinking that on some level, Matthew *could* hear her. I noticed after Mum had been carrying on and on and on in his ear for about twenty minutes that he began to sweat. His hands started to twitch slightly with every raised decibel. With every new enthusiastic suggestion. It figured. He might have been so whacked out of it on drugs that he couldn’t open his eyes or make a sound, but he wasn’t so out of it that my Mum still couldn’t drive him crazy.

It was Easter when he was in the hospital. He looked terrible that first couple of days. Couldn’t even speak or anything. He had a badly fractured skull and a knee shattered beyond recognition. It was nearly three weeks before he started getting better. The doctors said that he was unbelievably lucky not to get permanent brain damage or spinal damage or something. They said it’s not everyone who can survive a six hundred kilogram horse jumping on top of them. They were right about that. Anna didn’t survive it. And Matthew still doesn’t talk about her. Won’t even let anyone mention her name.

At the time, in an attempt to take Matthew’s mind off his dead girlfriend, Mum filled his hospital room with Easter eggs. No shit—Matthew got more Easter eggs that year than the two of us got combined in our whole lives previously. Still, he was so black inside at the time he could barely bring himself to eat normal food let alone gorge himself on chocolate eggs. I don’t think he ate a single one before he was discharged.

When he left the hospital he went to live with Mum until he could manage to get himself the fuck over to my place. Mum tried to make him stay but he wouldn’t. I could tell that it broke her heart to see him leaving because she hardly stopped chuckling the whole time she helped him drop his stuff off at my house. I don’t know why she helped him move anyway. After being married to my Dad all that time, you’d think she was finished with looking after people who break her heart.

*

you know matthew i think you're divine she says
her voice floats up to the sky

i think you are more than divine i say into my sandy towel *magda my dear*

we're at the beach and the sun is beating a silent rhythm on the sand
magda's lying on her back and she's taken her bathing top off and her breasts are
slumped over her sides baking slowly like misshapen vanilla puddings in an
unforgiving blue sky oven there are some cute little wrinkles around her left
nipple i can't take my eyes off that nipple and it seems to be looking back at
me i've always thought of nipples as eyes for some reason (maybe i've read too
many mary leunig cartoons) magda flips her head over towards me smiles and
stretches *god it's hot... do you want to go for a swim?*

in there? the sea looks far too choppy to swim in safely (it always looks
choppy in my dreams these days)

of course in there matthew where else?

but it's too choppy

she puts on a thick scottish accent and tightens her mouth and bobs her head around
it's not too choppy me chappy—not too choppy at all

i smile she keeps talking *now chop chop me chappy chop along chop chop*
chop 'til you drop

okay magda okay i stand up still smiling and hold out my hand for her to pull
herself up

chop, chop, chop, chop, choppity ploppity loppity plop! she sings as we stride
towards the ocean *loppity doppity—*

stoppity stop! i shout and laugh and swing her hand backwards and forwards
by the time we reach the water's edge the choppiness has somehow
disappeared the sea has become calm the tide laps gently at our feet

i look at magda *i love how you can always make me laugh* i say
she squeezes my hand and speaks to me in her normal voice *come with me*
matthew she smiles and steps forward pulling me into the sea with her it didn't
feel like we dropped but suddenly we're up to our necks magda lets go of my hand

He hears me come in and he doesn't look up, just raises his hand as if to tell me to wait silently. I pretend not to see.

'What's up?' I say, turning to shut the door behind me.

He doesn't answer, just keeps his hand up until I turn back around and there's no way I can miss it. 'Okay if I sit down, then?' I say. No answer, though he does lower his hand. I sigh and take a seat.

I don't understand. Either the papers he's reading *are* important, in which case he shouldn't have started looking at them less than a minute after he'd asked me in for a meeting, or they're *not* important, in which case he shouldn't be studying them so intently, acting like he's a big bloody multi-national CEO or something.

Of course, I know he's doing it for show. I know he's acting like that because he likes me to think that his job's really important. Unfortunately for him, I don't give a shit. I just wish he wouldn't keep grunting as he reads. He sounds like a fat dog masturbating itself against the grass.

'What've you got there?' I say, and peek over. Leonard tries to slip the papers under another pile but he's too slow. He's been reading a flier for a carpet steam-cleaning service.

'Thinking of cleaning the carpets?'

'Thinking of cleaning the whole place, actually George,' he says, with a smile that somehow bothers me. 'That's why I brought you into my office today. I've got an important job for you.'

'What is it?'

'Let me just say this first, George. Let me just say, look, I know get stuck into you sometimes. I know I like to have a bit of fun. Call you silly names now and then and all that sort of thing.'

I shrug.

'But it's only because I value you as a member of my staff, you know that don't you?'

'Um... yeah... I guess so.'

'And the point is George... the point is... I've been keeping my eye on you George, and believe me, you run rings around some of the other guys here. Absolute rings. You're the best café worker we've got.'

I find it hard not to take the compliment, even if it is coming from a complete dick. 'Thanks,' I say, and I guess I mean it.

‘We love you around here, George,’ he goes on. ‘Me and the rest of the senior staff. We love your work.’ He gives me a big bright smile and slaps his palms twice, hard on the desk: bang, *bang!* ‘Love it,’ he smiles.

‘Thanks Leonard,’ I say. And, to my slight annoyance, I can’t help feeling just a little bit chuffed.

‘No, we really do, George,’ he says. He lowers his voice. It cracks a little as he talks. ‘I’m not just saying it. We really do love you around here.’ He’s looking me dead in the eye. He’s getting way too serious. He actually looks like he’s about to cry or something. Damn, it would have been nice to feel a bit chuffed for a while longer before I started feeling weirded out. Leonard is such a dick, he even stuffs up pep talks.

‘Thanks Leonard,’ I say again. I don’t know really what else to say. I want to get back to the café. ‘Um... shall I go now then?’

‘I know we’ve got you rostered on evenings for the next fortnight, George, but how would you like to work days instead?’

‘But I just switched around from—’

‘Never mind that you just switched, George.’

‘But the roster says—’

‘Never you mind what the roster says, George. I’ve got an important job that needs doing during the day, and I think you’re just the man to do it? Got me?’

‘Okay...’ I say. ‘Gotcha.’

‘Good man, George,’ he says. ‘I’ll sort out the new roster. Come in tomorrow at nine, and we’ll start you off.’

‘Can I ask what the job is?’

He sits there for a moment, like he’s weighing up whether to tell me or not. Then suddenly he stands up straight, like a judge rising to his feet. ‘Come with me,’ he says, and strides around his desk and out the office door, without even looking to see if I’m behind him. I jump to my feet and follow.

‘See that?’ He thrusts a pointed finger at one of the bowling centre rubbish bins and walks past it without breaking stride for a second.

‘Yep,’ I say, trying to keep pace behind him.

‘And that?’ Points at another one.

‘Yep.’

‘And that?’

‘Yep.’

He stops and turns to face me and puts his hands on his hips. ‘How old do you think this bowling centre is, George?’

I shrug. ‘I don’t know... twenty years old?’

‘This bowling centre is thirty-one years old, George.’

‘Thirty-one? Really?’

‘Thirty-one. And do you see all these bins?’ He motions up and down the centre floor. ‘These bins are thirty-one years old too.’

I don’t like where this is going. I’m not sure why yet.

‘You want me to get rid of them?’ I say, a little hopefully.

‘Bloody Hell, George!’ he says. ‘Can’t do that! These bins are expensive, my boy. And apart from anything else—they’re vintage!’

‘So... what, then?’ I don’t want to know.

‘Well, the thing is George, they’re starting to stink up the place. Some of the customers are complaining. Can you smell them George?’

‘What? The customers?’

He flashes a frown at me. ‘Be serious, George, that’s what you’re here for.’

‘Sorry.’

I take a deep nasal breath of the bowling centre air. I suppose it ponges just a little bit, but that’s just the smell of the place, I reckon. ‘Nup, I can’t smell anything,’ I say.

‘Well, I can. And so can the customers. And you know what that means, don’t you?’

I think I do but I can’t bring myself to say it.

‘These bins haven’t been cleaned in thirty-one years George, and you’re just the man for the job.’

‘Oh... okay.’ And I’m too stunned to say anything else.

‘Nine in the morning George. I’ll get one of the girls to look after the café for the next couple of weeks and we’ll set you up in the carpark with some cleaning gear. Sound good?’

‘Well...I...’

‘Good man. Remember George-a-rina, we love your work.’ He cracks a big smile and cocks his thumbs and points his fingers at me like little guns. ‘We love you mate,’ he says, and then turns on his heels and strides away.

I head back to the café where Stacey Stewart is standing by the *Back in five mins* sign. ‘Where have you been?’ she asks.

‘Sorry, with the boss.’

‘It’s okay,’ she smiles. ‘I know how it is.’ She points at the sign and her smile gets a bit cheekier. ‘But I’ve been standing here for longer than five minutes. I think you should make it up to me.’

‘Oh yeah?’ I shrug. ‘How? You want a discount or something?’

‘How about you buy me a beer sometime?’

I didn’t see that one coming. For the second time in as many minutes I don’t know what to say. Somehow I manage to get my tongue working. ‘Sure, maybe one time after knock-off this week.’

‘Well, obviously I’ll be in to bowl again, so I’ll keep an eye out...’

‘Cool.’

‘Cool... and...’

‘Yes?’

‘Can I order a toasted cheese sandwich, thanks?’

‘Sure.’

She hands me some money. ‘I’ll be back in a minute, then.’

I check her out as she struts back to the lanes. She always struts, whether she looks happy or sad, tired or energetic. Some people just have a way of walking, and Stacey Stewart struts. I have to say though, I’m feeling a little bit like strutting myself at the moment. If I can manage to keep the thought of cleaning those bins out of my mind for a while.

*

After my shift, as I head to the train station, I spot Matthew walking up ahead of me. I guess he was playing the video games again today. I didn’t even notice him. Except for that thing with Leonard, I was pretty much stuck out the back of the kitchen most of the time.

He must have stopped at the McDonald’s next door. I can see him holding a brown take-away bag and a large soft-drink cup. I walk faster and catch up to him.

‘Hey man. You still eating that shit?’

No answer. He just glances at me as he takes a sip of his Coke. He's looks like he's struggling to carry the bag and the cup with his walking stick.

'You want a hand with that? I'll carry something if you want.'

He keeps sipping at his Coke. Doesn't look at me or answer. Just twists his face into a dismissive scowl. I don't bother asking again. Try and think of something else to say.

'I'm surprised they even let you back in there,' I joke.

Years ago, Matthew was officially banned from the local McDonald's for putting two gherkins on the tops of the golden arches in the window so that they looked like tiny green nipples on a big pair of golden tits. It looked hilarious but the manager, who was far less "Krazee" than her name-tag suggested, wasn't impressed. She told Matthew to leave and not come back. I doubt the ban still stands though. Krazee probably doesn't even work there anymore. Even if she did, it's not like she'd recognise my brother from back then. I hardly recognise him myself.

We get to the station and we sit down on a bench. Matthew starts ripping into his Big Mac. Shoving soggy fries into his mouth like he's been starving himself for the last three weeks.

'So how'd you go on the games today?'

He looks up at me, annoyed. 'George, man. I'm trying to eat here.'

'Sorry.'

But then he must feel guilty or something because he swallows his mouthful. 'Played okay. That Hyperdrive stage is bullshit.' Takes another bite and speaks with his mouth full. 'It's a rip off.'

'I should speak to the maintenance guy and see whether he'll open it up with the keys for you. Give you some free credits.'

Matthew mumbles and nods.

'Let me know next time your heading down there and I'll see what I can do, anyway.'

No answer.

There's quite a few people milling around the train station. Always is at this time of night. Lots of school kids going home from sports practice and office workers that come from the connecting city bus. Sometimes I look at these people and I wonder what you have to do to have a life like that? I mean, they all look so *normal*. Mr Businessman is over there smiling and talking on his mobile phone, dressed in a

nice suit. There's a bunch of schoolboys playing hackysack with someone's pencil case and having a good old fucking laugh—especially when the case breaks open and spills biro's all over the train tracks. Even the two schoolgirls sneaking a smoke by the shelter look perfectly content in their own rebellious way. All of these people seem, I don't know, so fucking *carefree*.

And then there's Matthew and me:

'Watcha doin' tonight? Anything?'

'Fuck's sakes, George. I said I was trying to eat, okay?'

'Sorry.'

I wait until the train arrives and Matthew finishes his food before I speak again. We get on the train and take a bench seat. Face each other—not cos we particularly like facing each other, but cos we both like to sit by the window.

'So what *are* you doin' tonight?'

He shrugs. 'Dunno. Probably just crash I reckon.'

'Wanna grab a DVD or something? Hang out for a bit.'

'Nah, not really. Pretty tired man.'

'It's only six o'clock mate.'

He just shrugs.

I know once we get home he'll disappear to his room so I figure I may as well talk to him while I can. 'How's the leg going?'

'All right,' he says.

'Does it hurt?'

He shrugs.

'Is that a yes or a no?'

He fidgets with his walking stick. 'Fuck, George—can't we talk about *you* for once? Why do we always have to talk about *me*?'

It's not like we've spoken for more than ten minutes about Matthew in the last six months, but I don't think there's much use in arguing the point.

'Okay,' I say. And then without thinking: 'Well, I met this girl today. Wants to go have a drink with me. She's pretty fucking hot too.'

He looks away. I see his hand clench the top of the walking stick.

'I mean... you know... she's all *right*. She's not *that* hot.'

He doesn't say anything else. Just sits there and stares out the window, tapping his walking stick impatiently on the train floor every now and then. I sit and try to

think of something else to say. I can't. We don't speak again until the train pulls into our station. I stand up and move to the door. Matthew stays put.

'Coming?'

'I want to keep riding for a while.'

'Where to?'

He shrugs. 'I don't know. Further.'

The only thing further up the line worth visiting is the old hills. But it's too dark now to even contemplate that.

'It's dark mate. You can't see anything out there.'

'You think I don't know it's dark?' he sneers. 'Go on, George. Go home. I'll be back later.'

'You don't want me to come with?'

'Go home little brother.'

I nod and open the doors, step off the train. He hasn't called me 'little brother' for a long time. He said it almost meanly, like he was reminding me of my place. I stand there on the station as it pulls away in the darkness again, taking him with it. I wonder where it's taking him. Whether he's actually going to have a wander around the old hills, in the dark with that fucking walking stick of his. I wouldn't put it past him, the crazy bastard.

The old hills is where we used to play sometimes as kids on the weekends. To get there we'd have to catch the train up past the third—and longest—tunnel from Mum and Dad's house. Then we'd have to get off at the next station and walk all the way back through the tunnel to the other side. It was a scary journey for a couple of kids, but it wasn't like we could go over the top instead. There were sheer rock faces blocking access from every possible angle.

Whenever we used to walk through the tunnel Matthew used to wait until we were about halfway in and then pretend he could hear a train coming. No matter how many times he did it, he'd always get me believing him. And then I'd start panicking. And he'd egg my panic on and we would both sprint through to the other side. Sprint through to the sunlight where he would stand, panting, cocking his ear and tell me with a grin: 'Must have been the wind again, little brother.'

The hills on the other side of the tunnel were a kid's paradise. There were steep rocky slopes to climb, trees to swing from and caves to explore. Deep in the gully there was a filthy sort of creek, complete with giant tadpoles and invisible but

deafening frogs. There was even the wreck of a car down by the creek. We always used to wonder how it got there, not having any idea where the nearest roads were. I suppose there might have been one running next to the parts where we couldn't climb but we certainly never heard any signs of traffic when we played in the old hills. How that bombed out old car found its way down to the creek was a mystery we never solved.

We hardly ever saw anyone else hanging out around the old hills. I don't know why. Maybe it was the risky journey through the tunnel that kept people away. Or maybe it was just that no one was interested playing in the wreck of a car by a filthy creek. Either way, the old hills were usually deserted except for my brother and me. The only people we ever saw out there were the odd strange lone bushwalker or birdwatcher passing through. Except for one time, that is.

It was a brilliant sunny day and we were carefully making our way up one of the rocky slopes when we heard a shout: 'Hey you! *Faggots!*' followed by a round of mocking laughter. We looked up to see a bunch of rough-looking older boys sitting at the top of the hill. They were carrying on—smoking, drinking and pushing each other around. They looked a bit like they could be trouble.

My brother looked at me. 'Whaddaya reckon?'

I shrugged. 'Shall we fuck off, then?'

'Yeah. May as well. Too hot out here today anyway.'

Almost immediately after we'd started climbing back down towards the tunnel I heard something thud into some nearby bushes and, from above, a big cry of 'Oooooooh!'

I looked up. The older boys had all stood up and were looking back down at us. 'Look out, you fucking faggots!' yelled one of them. I turned back around and ignored him and kept heading down the hill with Matthew. I didn't actually see what happened next. I just heard a massive smashing of glass and then a huge cheer from the top of the hill. I looked around to see a few big brown shards of a Victoria Bitter bottle lying only metres away.

'Shit,' I said. 'They're throwin' bottles.'

'Fuckin' idiots', said Matthew.

Then one of them decided to throw a *full* bottle of beer. It smashed so close to us that it sent a huge spray of beer onto Matthew's legs. There was another round of

cheering. The boys were yelling out all sorts of shit, they were flashing their arses at us, calling us names.

Me and Matthew stood up straight on the slope to face them, to give ourselves a better chance of dodging their missiles. Bottle after bottle flew towards us, but we quickly realised it wasn't too hard to avoid them—and thankfully, there were no more full ones. Anyway, it started to get kind of fun. Matthew was really enjoying himself. He started giving the older boys the finger. He even bent over and flashed his own arse. I couldn't help laughing. We started to yell shit back to them.

'Fuck off motherfuckers!'

'Go fuck yourselves!'

They didn't seem too happy at all about our lack of respect but me and Matthew weren't worried. We knew the old hills like the back of our hand. We'd have been on the other side of the tunnel and on the next train before those drunken shitheads even made it to the bottom of the hill. And that was a good thing too, because one of them looked like he'd decided to come after us.

'Cheeky little shits!' he yelled, and started to climb down.

'Come on Matthew,' I said, 'Let's get out of here,' and I started scrambling down the hill.

'It's cool,' Matthew chuckled, as he grabbed my arm. 'Check it out.'

I looked up. The boy hadn't gotten very far. He must have immediately lost his footing and gone arse-up. Probably would have rolled all the way to the bottom too if he hadn't managed to grab on to a tree root poking out of the dirt. We stood there laughing as we watched him kick his legs frantically, trying to push himself back up to level ground.

'Ya stupid dickhead!' yelled Matthew. Then he turned to me. 'Look out, okay little brother?'

I knew what he meant. The rock was all pretty loose on this side of the tunnel. It made for dangerous climbing. When the drunk bloke stumbled and kicked his legs to get a grip, he would have definitely dislodged some of the rocks near the top of the hill. It wouldn't be anything serious, but enough for us to want to keep our eyes open.

I stood there watching as a mini-avalanche started sliding towards us. It was made up of mainly smaller stones—no bigger than my ten-year-old fist—that bounced and skipped and tumbled down the slope. Some stopped before they reached us. Others continued past us and onto the creek below. A couple danced right past our

shins. There must have been thirty of them. Forty maybe. I don't know. I chuckled to myself as I watched them go by 'Ya stupid dickhead,' I said, under my breath.

Thing is, I was so busy keeping my eye on the smaller rocks that I didn't notice the drunk guy's kicking and scrambling had also dislodged something else. Something that had taken a much longer time to roll over and slowly gain momentum. By the time this thing had started slowly bounding down the slope towards me, I wasn't even looking. I was looking back at Matthew, wondering why he was lying down behind a nearby log, wondering why the fuck he was getting so worried about a bunch of falling pebbles.

He looked up at me. 'George!' he said, looking completely surprised to see me still standing there. 'Get out of the fucking way!'

I thought he was joking or something. Like he always did about the oncoming trains. I stood there, shielding the sun from my eyes. 'What?' I said.

Then I turned and saw it. A rock. A *big* rock. About as big as a fucking big television. And if it had started moving slowly, it certainly wasn't moving slowly anymore. It had picked up speed and was literally bouncing like a giant jagged black snowball, rocketing down the slope towards me. I froze. It seemed to be right on target to hit me. If one bounce sent it slightly off track then the next somehow threw it right back on. I stood and watched it. I could even hear the drunken louts yelling at me to get out of the fucking way. I don't know why I didn't. I just couldn't move.

And then all I saw was dust and dirt in my eyes as my face slammed into the ground and someone held me down fast. I tried to lift my head from the rocks that were cutting into my face but I was being pressed down too hard. Seconds later the pressure released.

There was a big cheer from the top of the hill.

'You fucking idiot,' hissed Matthew, pulling me up by my jumper. We stood and watched the boulder continue down the hill, flying with a massive thwack into the side of the bombed out car. It caved in the whole fucking driver's side door. There was another raucous cheer from above us.

'You fucking idiot,' said Matthew again. But he was smiling, shaking his head. 'That was too close.'

It wasn't too hard to explain the cuts on my face later on to Mum. Me and Matthew were always getting into scrapes. Mum just gave me the Dettol treatment and

packed us off to bed. Dad was having a shit day apparently and they didn't want any noise.

*

It's a quarter to nine in the morning and I should be getting ready to clean bins, but I'm not. I'm at home lying in bed, looking at mine and Selphie's tree. I can't believe they're going to cut that thing down and I don't want to think about it so I roll back over onto my stomach. Stretch my arms and legs out. God, there's so much space in my bed. It still feels strange, even after six months. It feels wrong. Especially in the morning. That's maybe the thing I miss most about Selphie, our mornings in bed together. When she thought she looked horrible and I thought she was a vision. I take a deep breath of the sheets. Her smell's still there, only just, but enough to almost make me believe she's with me. Enough, at least, to make me horny.

I know it probably isn't a healthy thing to do—to wank to the smell of your ex-girlfriend—but I figure, like her, it will soon be gone, and then I won't be able to anymore, so I may as well be intimate on some level with her while I can. Anyway, I can feel weird about it later. Right now, I just miss her, and anyway, I don't want to wank about total strangers. I haven't been turned on by meaningless fantasies for years.

And so I lie there and I think about some of the things me and Selphie used to do together on mornings like this. I start off thinking of some sex stuff but then my mind skips right through that and I get to the part when we used to hold each other after sex and we would count the points where our bodies were touching. I'd tense my chest at the point her head was resting on it and I'd say 'One.' Nudge her thigh with my groin and say 'Two.' Squeeze her hand and say 'Three,' and so on. The most points we were ever touching at was twenty-six. Selphie never used to count aloud with me. She'd just murmur if she thought I'd already named one, or give a slight happy giggle if we were nearing a record and I was getting desperate to find another point of contact. She made me feel like she was in her safest, most favourite place in the world when we played that game. I could feel her whole body relax. I could feel the warmth of her slow contented breath on my skin. And when we'd counted up all the points she'd let me slip down and rest my head on her chest. Let me go back to my own favourite place in the whole world where I could hear her heart beat echo gently

through my head. Where my head would rise and fall with her beautiful calm breaths. Where it was like putting your ear to a shell and hearing the ocean except that if Selphie's heart was the shell, then what I heard was the tide of life itself. A tide I could have listened to forever.

I don't feel like wanking anymore. Lucky, cos the phone starts ringing. I bet it's fucking Leonard. I shut my eyes tightly and try to block the impending day out of my mind. Listen for the beep on the answering machine.

'George? Are you there? George?'

Yep. Leonard.

'George? It's Leonard Smaha here... I believe we'd arranged for you to come in on the day shift today... I hope it was—'

I shove my head under the pillow and keep it there until I'm sure he would have hung up. Then I go take a shower. I sit on the shower floor and lean back against the wall tiles.

God, I'm tired.

I didn't sleep too well last night. Kept hearing noises. Hallway creaks, wind in the trees, that sort of thing. And even though my logic told me what the noises were, part of me couldn't be absolutely sure they weren't coming from a dirty pervert hiding around the corner or creeping up the hallway. I hate lying in bed feeling scared like that. I feel like such a weak piece of shit. And I don't know why those scared feelings have come back again.

I can remember everything about that night. The night when it was so hot I decided to sleep out in the air-conditioned granny flat instead of toughing it out in my sweatbox of a bedroom. I can remember it so vividly that even now, if I shut my eyes and think about it, I can still feel it like I was there. I can still feel those hands.

The first time I became aware of what was happening on that night was when I woke to unfamiliar fingers pulling and squeezing at my cock. I tried to sit up. 'What the hell?' I mumbled, still half-asleep. In a flash those fingers left my cock and slapped themselves hard around the front of my face, engulfing my head like one of the creatures from the movie *Alien*. They slammed me back against the pillow with such force that I cricked my neck. I woke up, fully.

'Shut up if you want to live.' It was a whisper, but it's resonated louder in my head than any sound I've heard since. I lay there silently as the fingers grabbed at my cock again. It seemed to be getting hard. Maybe it was a natural reaction to getting

played with. My cock was pretty much hard on a regular basis whether it was getting played with or not at that time anyway. I was thirteen years old, after all. I'd even been having wet dreams. But this wasn't a dream. I knew very well that I was awake. Those fingers kept squeezing and pumping just under the head of my cock. They were the fucking essence of 'pinch me, I'm dreaming'. And then, as if they'd tired of that particular game, the fingers suddenly tucked my cock back into my undies, and reached down to give my balls a lingering rub through the blue cotton.

I heard a belt loosen. Pants unzip. Felt a hot breath at my belly. Felt it move slowly and deliberately up to the top of my chest. Then I felt a tongue lick at my neck. It was licking hard and fast like the tongue of a neurotic cat. I lay there, still as a rock, trying to ignore the deep guttural breaths and moans and the odd kiss and nibble on my ear. Trying to ignore the rhythm of something else happening in the darkness. Trying, strangely, to remember whether I'd finished my Maths homework properly.

Moments later I was lying there staring at the ceiling, a scream running around and around inside my chest while something warm and wet ran over it and trickled down to my neck. I lay there, as still as a corpse, and felt the weight shift off my bed. Listened to the quiet jangle of the belt. The zipping up of the pants. The quiet coughs and sighs and mumbles.

Even when I saw the shadow leaving, I lay there, not moving a muscle in the dark. I was petrified stiff. My chest and neck were covered in sticky globs and a slight film of saliva. Eventually the breeze from the air-conditioner started to send a chill across my damp skin. It was enough to snap me into some sort of action. I sat up slowly and crawled off the fold-up bed. I was too scared to think straight. Scared to the bone. Scared to the point of passing out. All I could think about was finding my clothes and getting back to the main house. But I started to wonder whether the shadow would be waiting outside the door for me. I don't know how long it took before I finally got up the courage to make a dash for the back door. Probably only minutes but it felt like the rest of my life.

I went straight to my parents' bedroom. I didn't go inside though. I stood at their door for a minute or two and then I turned around and went to the bathroom. Ran the tap and splashed the water up against my neck and chest. I can't even remember whether it felt cold or not. Then I went into my bedroom and shut the door and got into bed. I left the light on all night but still couldn't get to sleep.

my knees and fall asleep and only wake up when I heard their alarm go off in the morning. Then I would have to jump up and scuttle back to bed before they opened their door.

*

i've invited magda over to meet my parents it seems the logical next step dad's at the dinner table but he's been dead for a good few years so he won't be saying much that's okay he never said much at the dinner table anyway most of the time he never used to even bother joining the rest of us for dinner he just ate on his own in his study so i'm not worried about whether he joins in the conversation or not the thing i am worried about is that mum's just brought a big bowl of peas to the table she knows i hate peas i wonder if she's deliberately brought them out to embarrass me in front of magda or because she thinks they'll help build up my great big matthew muscles i give mum a look when she puts the bowl down but she just smiles and says *they're for your father dear* and trots back out

magda must have seen the look i gave because she asks me what's wrong

i don't eat peas i say

why not?

i don't know i just don't like them that's all

mum comes right back in with a second bigger bowl of peas

actually mum i say *i think we're okay for peas at the moment*

they're for your father dear she says again

oh peas eat your peas says magda with a cheeky smile *peas do for me*

i smile back tensely *i can't not even for you*

just moments later mum's back again with—i can't believe it—another even bigger bowl of peas just how many of these things does she think we are going to get through?

mum i say *what the bloody hell do you plan to do with all these peas?*

once again she tells me *they're for your father dear* as she heads back out the room

i turn to magda *i'm sorry i'm sure she'll bring something else out now*

you know what? says magda *i don't really like peas either not this many anyway* she mutters to herself *hmmm we have way too many peas at this table*

for my liking *way too many peas indeed* and then she looks like she's
thinking for a moment and then suddenly she picks up a pea and puts it in the curve of
her fork then to my horror she lifts the fork up and takes aim at my dead father
magda i hiss what do you think you are doing?

ping!

she flicks the fork and bounces a pea right off my dead
father's nose

apparently your dad likes them though she giggles and picks up another to
take aim

magda! i say in a loud whisper my mother comes back in the
room with yet another great bowl of peas and plonks them right down in front of me
i don't say anything i don't even look at her this time so worried am i that she will
see my girlfriend flicking peas at my dead dad i stare at the bowl in front
of me

they're for your father dear mum tells me again and turns to leave the room

ping!

magda scones dad a belter in the forehead
it doesn't rebound it actually embeds in his frown it's stuck there

magda! i hiss

but i am trying not to smile

mum turns back around and looks at the pea embedded in my dead father's face but
she doesn't so much as even raise an eyebrow she just heads out of the room
again to get what i can only guess will be another bowl of peas

ping!

ping!

ping!

three more peas fly at my father two miss but one sticks to
his chin and for the first time in his life the man looks kind of silly sitting there dead
with two peas stuck in his face

magda giggles *join the dots* she says

i don't think you should be flicking peas at my dead father i say

well would you rather eat them then? she says

i look down at the bowls of peas

tiny green ugly not-really-round-like-they-should-be vegetables

they sicken me peas do

no i say *i am not going to eat my peas* i don't say it in the sort of voice that a
five-year-old says to his parents knowing that he'll be missing out on chocolate ice-
cream at the end of the night i say it in the sort of voice that leads men into

battle i stand up and thump my fist on the table *i am NOT going to eat my peas!*

another pea whistles past my dad's left ear

nearly got 'im says magda

i have to admit it does look kind of fun irresistible even

i sit back down and i pick up my fork and a pea

and i take aim

ping!

my pea sails over dad's shoulder

a bit far to the right i think says magda

i try again and this time i get him right in the eye and it sticks there like a green cyst

it looks so terrible that i wince and almost apologise almost

good shot giggles magda

thanks i say

the table is covered in bowls of peas now and still mum keeps going for more
magda and i are non-stop plucking and flicking and giggling and my dad is sitting
there stuck in his chair while more and more peas become stuck in his face

every time mum comes back in the room she looks over at my pea-faced dad
and i think out of the corner of my eye i'm even beginning to see her crack a smile
now and then magda's going no-holds barred she even asks mum to
bring her another fork as she's bent hers out of shape so mum brings her a fork and

then keeps going back for more and more peas and more and more and more peas and it's not until the bowls of peas are covering every available space on the table that mum finally allows herself to relax and then she stands behind us clapping her hands in glee and gushing *they're for your father dear oh they're for your FATHER!* dad's expression hasn't changed (it never did much when he was alive anyway) he looks bored he always did but somehow i'm still surprised i wouldn't have thought someone who is being used as target practice could ever look bored but it doesn't really matter what he looks like the more peas we hit him with the closer we get to covering up that bored expression on his face and the more we fling the better we get every now and then we smack one so hard it dislodges a few more and they drop everywhere whenever this happens we don't get frustrated we just start laughing and my mum laughs the hardest *they're for your father* she laughs *for your father!* and me and magda are just flicking peas for all we are worth and my hands are getting stiff and my fingers are raw but somehow i know that we aren't going to stop until we've gone through every damn bowl of peas on that table because this is the most fun we've had at a family dinner in years

*

When I eventually get to the bowling alley, Leonard's already brought three bins out into the carpark for me and set up a bucket of water and a couple of scourers and connected a hose. He doesn't ask why I'm late. I think he's just relieved to see that I actually turned up. 'Go for it,' he tells me in his most motivational voice, 'Let's see what you can do.'

I take the lid off the first bin and lift out the inner metal rectangular receptacle. Fuck me dead. The grime on the walls of the inner receptacle is at least half a centimetre thick. It's hard and set like hashish residue stuck to the inside of a cone. I have a go with the scourer and I'm disgusted within seconds. It's like trying to clean an ashtray that's been alternately left out in the sun and then the rain and then the sun again for thirty years, which I guess is not far from what it is. The smell is incredible and it gets worse as I stir up all the mess inside. The most awful part is that the bins are about three feet tall, which means that to reach the bottom of them I have to literally lean the full length of my arm inside which means of course that my face is

only centimetres from the top. I turn my face away as much as I can but I can't escape the thick, almost suffocating stench of thirty years worth of shit with every breath.

Pretty soon I give up on the scourer and go back inside the kitchen to find a metal scraper. But this just slides over the gunk. Leonard pops his head out to see my attempts at scraping and gives a wink and says I'm free to do it how I like but that I'll probably find it easier with the scourers. 'Scrapers will just slide all over the place, George,' he says.

'No worries, mate,' I manage. 'I'll see how I go.' I already know I'm going back to the scourers, just not until he pisses off again.

And so that's how I spend the next six hours. I get, no shit, four bins done, and even then I don't get them done very well. I can't really scrub the gunk off the bottom because my arms aren't quite long enough to reach with any real power. My armpits are sore and chafed from rubbing against the tops of the bins. Leonard comes out to check my progress. 'Good stuff, George. Good stuff mate. But you've missed a bit on the bottom with these ones.'

'It's hard to reach,' I say as I wipe the sweat from my forehead.

'Trick is George,' he says, 'is you gotta scrub hard when you make contact. Get as much off as you can *while* you can.'

'Uh huh.'

'You gotta reach down as far as you can, George, and then scrub *hard*. That's the way to get the stuff off. That's the trick.'

I tell him through gritted teeth that that's basically what I'm doing.

'Good. Keep it up, George. Have another crack at the bottoms of those three and then there's only twenty-six more to go.' He winks and smiles and trots back off inside.

I'm never been a big fan of my job. Times like this I wonder why I even bother sticking around.

'Now there's a man who looks like he'd enjoy a beer.'

I turn to see Stacey Stewart strutting past with her bowling ball case trundling behind her. The sun's getting low in the sky so I have to shield my eyes with my gloved hand to look at her properly.

'Somebody say "beer"?' I smile.

'Yeah—remember? You owe me one. You nearly finished?'

I tell her I'll be done in ten. She says to hurry up and she'll wait in the car. I know her car. It's the white Volvo with the "I HATE YOUR BAND" sticker on it.

'Sure thing,' I say, 'Thanks,' and I lug the bins inside as quickly as I can and chuck the bucket and stuff out the back of the kitchen. I rip off my shirt and grab the dishwashing detergent and lather up my arms, armpits, chest and face until I'm sure I've got rid of most of the smell and then I rinse it off and dry myself with the kitchen tea-towels. Then I whack my shirt back on and head out back through the café and into the bowling centre so I can leave by the main doors. I stride to Stacey's white Volvo. She leans over and unlocks the door for me and I climb inside.

'Thought ya weren't comin' there for a minute,' she chirps with a smile.

'Sorry,' I say. 'Just cleaning myself up a bit.'

'Mmm,' she says. 'You smell nice.'

'It's Palmolive Lemon Fresh. Concentrate.'

'My favourite.'

I smile and lean back in the seat and stretch and then rub my biceps. My arms are damn sore from scrubbing those fucking bins.

Stacey starts up the car. 'Now,' she says, 'Where to?'

'I'm easy. Your call.'

She thinks about it for a moment. 'Well, how about we go to my house?'

*

I can't believe it. We're at Number 48. The house with that big motherfucker dog. I can't fucking believe it.

'Do you own a big dog?' I say, as we walk up the drive.

'Yeah, we've got one,' says Stacey. 'How did you know?'

'Oh, I walk past the back of your house on my way home from the train station sometimes.'

She laughs. 'I bet she's scared the shit out of you then. She loves scaring the shit out of people. She's a funny bugger.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'Funny bugger.'

Well, I'd always wondered who would own such a beast and now I know. It's the Stewart families of the world. Stacey told me in the car on the way over that she lives with her Mum and Dad and her brother Jeff. Even though the two 'kids' are both

over twenty-one—Jeff’s actually forty— they all still live in the same house. They’re somewhat of a close family. They’re all mad bowlers too, Stacey says.

They’re all mad *something* I think, as we walk in the front door to be greeted by a life-size cardboard cut-out of Elvis pinned up on the hallway wall. It’s not Elvis when he was looking good either. It’s Elvis in his fat years. When he was eating fried banana and peanut butter sandwiches for breakfast and swallowing every colour of the pill-rainbow for lunch and tea.

We leave the king and walk down the hallway into the lounge room—which itself actually smells like a bit like a fucking fried banana and peanut butter sandwich. Well, a bit like that and a bit like a museum. Stacey’s Mum is standing in front of the muted telly doing the ironing. I know her name is Judy from seeing it on her sequinned bowling shirt—which she happens to still be wearing, by the way.

Bob Stewart, Stacey’s rather large, heavily sideburned father, is sitting on his couch, reading the paper. Also wearing his bowling shirt.

‘Mum... Bob... this is George,’ says Stacey.

Without looking up, both of them give me a kind of a friendly grunt and then carry on as if I’d never walked in. Mr Stewart keeps his eyes on the paper. Mrs Stewart keeps on ironing. Stacey suddenly sighs and marches up the corridor with her bowling bag. I don’t know whether to follow or not and by the time I can decide, she’s already disappeared into one of the rooms, so I just stand there and wait for her to come back, listening to the hiss of the iron and the occasional rustle of a sports section. Stare at sideburns. After a few minutes I realise the ironing and the paper-rustling are somehow in tune together. It almost sound mechanical. Like I am in the middle of a clock or something. One that is set to Stewart-Mean-Time.

It seems like forever before Stacey reappears. She goes straight to the fridge in the adjoining kitchen and grabs a couple of beers. ‘Okay, Bob?’ she says, holding them up.

Bob Stewart looks up from his paper and grumbles. ‘They’re me last two.’

‘So?’ says Stacey. ‘You can pick some more up, can’t you? The walk will do you good.’

He grumbles something about stealing beers and gets back to his reading.

I hold up my hand. ‘No, look, it’s okay, I don’t really feel like a beer anyway.’

‘Oh get off it. Yes you do,’ says Stacey. ‘Don’t worry, they’re only Bob’s.’

‘You sure, Mr Stewart?’ I say. Then I try and make a joke. ‘I mean, far be it from me to come between a man and his last two beers...’

He doesn’t answer or look at me. He can only be distracted from the paper for so long, it seems, even by beer. Stacey grabs me by the arm and says ‘Come on, let’s go out the back.’

‘Out the back? Where the dog is?’

‘Yeah, don’t worry, she won’t bite.’

‘Sure, okay.’

As we’re walking down the corridor, I say to Stacey that I don’t feel all that comfortable about drinking her dad’s last two beers.

‘Don’t worry,’ she says. ‘He’ll get some more.’

‘But that’s not the point,’ I say. ‘Anyway, I thought it was me who was supposed to give *you* a beer, not the other way around.’

‘You know what?’ she says. ‘You’re right.’ Then she smiles cheekily and shrugs. ‘Oh well, I guess you owe me two now. Come on.’ And she drags me outside to meet the big motherfucker dog that lives behind that brush fence.

*

I like dogs. In fact I’ve always wanted one but I could never have owned one. I’m allergic to most animals, you see. I can’t even pat the things without getting itchy—and if I have to share a room with one of them for more than five minutes, my nose will start running like a fucking tap. It’s always been a quiet source of annoyance for me because it means the only things I can ever pat are people, and when you’re single that doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for being affectionate. It even works against me when I’m in a relationship. Selphie used to get sick of me stroking her and cuddling her all the time. She said I was cramping her space. I don’t blame her. She’s not a fucking dog. But I couldn’t help it. I’m an affectionate guy. An affectionate guy who’s allergic to just about everything cuddleable. Anyway. I fucking loved her.

As soon as me and Stacey step outside with our beers that big motherfucker dog comes bounding up, all tongue and mute growl and excitement. The damn thing’s literally shivering all over, it’s so wound up. I take a step back as it makes a beeline for my knees. It’s no good though. I’ve left my hand dangling near its massive pink

tongue and before I can wrest it away it's covered in a huge transparent liquid pile of dog drool.

'Damn,' I say as I lift my hand out of further slobbering reach.

'Don't worry, she really won't bite,' says Stacey.

'I'm not worried,' I say, as the beast starts to slobber and sniff at my other hand. 'It's just that I'm allergic to dogs, you know. If she licks me I might break out into a rash or something.'

'Oh, you poor darling. Do you want me to put her inside?'

Here's the thing. Yes, I do want to be in a non-dog environment. It would be nice if she took him inside. My slobbered-on hand is already starting to tingle. But at the same time, I don't want to be known as a "poor darling". I mean, it's all so wimpy, and it's annoying because it's something I don't even have a choice at being wimpy about. It's not my fucking fault I was born with a genetic system that reacts to whatever dogs carry in their saliva. It's not like I *chose* to be allergic.

'Come on Simba, we're going to put you inside. George doesn't like big dogs like you.'

'It's not that I don't like them. I'm allergic is all.'

'Come on girl. Come on.'

Stacey grabs Simba by the collar and half-drags her into the laundry. Simba looks at me confusedly as she scuttles into the laundry. I look back apologetically for kicking her out of her own backyard and sit down on the edge of the Stewarts' trampoline and open Mr Stewart's beer. Stacey comes back out a few minutes later, having apparently relayed the news of my allergy to the Stewart household. 'Bob can't believe you're allergic to dogs.'

'Well, it's true,' I say.

'Mum can't believe it either.'

'Uh huh.'

'Did you open my beer for me?'

'Sure.' I hand her mine and reach for the other one.

'Thanks.' She clinks hers against my bottle. 'Cheers, George.'

'Cheers Stacey.'

So we lie out on the trampoline for while and we talk and we drink our beers. It's okay conversation—not mindblowing, but okay, considering it's the first time we've really met and there was nothing particular we had in common that brought us

together in the first place—other than the fact that she bowls where I work. I ask her how long she's been bowling and she says since she was seven years old. She was in the Junior State bowling team three years running but she hasn't really taken it seriously for the last five or so years. i.e. she only plays in three leagues at the moment. I ask her why she wears a wrist support and she says she wears it to support her wrist. Like I said: okay conversation but not mindblowing.

She asks me about my dog allergy. I tell her it's not just dogs. I'm allergic to cats as well. And cows and horses and grass and dust mites and yeast and fish and a few other things as well.

'Fish?'

'Yeah, fish.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'So you can't eat fish then?'

'Nup.'

'What happens if you do?'

I tell her that if I eat fish my throat swells up and my trachea can become blocked and I can die from suffocation. I say it sort of matter-of-factly as if I've already lived through several fish-related near-death experiences.

'Has it ever happened?'

'Well, not exactly.'

'So how do you know you're allergic?'

I tell her it runs in the family. That my dad was so allergic to fish he once kicked me and Matthew and Matthew's friend out of the car on our way home from the Hungry Jack's drive-thru because Matthew's friend had the audacity to unwrap his Whaler burger while sitting in the back seat. It's a true story. We had to walk the last two kilometres home and when we got back my dad was vomiting in the toilet.

'And that was just from the fumes of somebody's Whaler in the back seat,' I say. 'Imagine what would happen if he ever took a bite of something like that.' It sounds like I'm talking bullshit and I guess, in a way, I am. Only, not in the way she's probably thinking. I'm talking bullshit because I'm not telling her the whole story. Sometimes it's easier to do that with what happened with Dad.

'Did you get sick as well?'

'Well, no, but I was younger then.'

‘So you only developed your allergy to fish when you got older?’ Stacey laughs. ‘And you’ve never had a reaction? Ever contemplated the fact that you might be full of shit, George?’

I hold up the hand that Simba had been slobbering over. There’s already some visible reddening and a slight swelling. Only a minor reaction, but it’s enough to prove a point. ‘Look,’ I say. ‘Allergic to dogs. Allergic to fish. End of story.’

It’s getting cool out in the backyard. The sun’s pissed off behind some clouds somewhere and it doesn’t look like it’s going to be back out in a hurry. Judy Stewart opens the laundry door and Simba comes bounding out again, heading straight for us.

‘Mum! Don’t let her out. I told you, George is allergic!’

‘It’s okay,’ I say, but I shift towards the centre of the trampoline.

Judy Stewart ignores her daughter’s protests. ‘I’m about to start making tea. Does your friend eat?’

‘Yep,’ says Stacey.

‘Right, then.’ Judy turns and heads back inside.

Stacey turns to me. ‘You want to stay for tea, don’t you, George?’ she smiles.

I nod. ‘Yeah, why not? Thanks.’

We sit for while on the trampoline, drinking our beers, not saying much, listening to Simba go insane any time somebody walks past the other side of the Stewarts’ back fence. Eventually Stacey stands up and stretches. She looks pretty sexy when she stretches. Like a ballet dancer limbering up. ‘Maybe we should go and hang out in my room,’ she says. ‘We can get a rest from Simba and it’ll be a bit warmer in there anyway.’

‘Okay,’ I say, and we head inside.

I don’t really get a chance to see what the inside of her room looks like for more than a few seconds because as soon as Stacey closes her door behind us she’s upon me. She kisses me. Not hard, but well, fast. Her mouth feels hot against mine. And eager. It really feels like she really *wants* to kiss me. It doesn’t feel anything like my last few kisses with Selphie. In the later part of our relationship I often got the feeling that Selphie didn’t like kissing me. Some might say this is a twenty-foot-high-flashing-neon sign that something was wrong with the relationship but I guess I couldn’t bring myself to face it at the time. I clung to the memories of those earlier passionate Selphie kisses almost as much as I clung to her lips every time she tried to

gently but firmly pull away. Now I'm starting to remember what it was it should have been like. Kisses should always be as alive as Stacey Stewart's.

She kisses and kisses and kisses and I kiss her back. Then she stands back and smiles. She lifts up my t-shirt and makes me hold it up. Then she lifts up her own, stretches her bra up over to expose her breasts and quickly presses them up against me, leaning her head forward to rest on my shoulder. Her nipples feel just as eager as her mouth did. We stand like that for about a minute or so, not speaking, just breathing and then I feel the pressure of her bedroom door trying to open against my back.

'You two in there?'

'Yes Bob.' Stacey's covers herself back up in a flash and we step away from the door. Mr Stewart pops his head in. 'Well, get a move on. What are you doing in there anyway?'

'We were just kissing,' says Stacey. I shoot her a look.

Mr Stewart grunts. 'Whatever. Tea's in two minutes. Your mother's cooked up some Whiting for us.' He shuts the door and walks off down the hall.

'Are you serious?' I say quietly.

'What?' giggles Stacey. 'He wouldn't mind us kissing. He likes you. I can tell.'

'Not that,' I say. 'The Whiting. Fucking fish.'

Stacey opens the door and I follow her down the hall. 'Don't worry. Just don't eat it,' she offers, as we walk in to the family room.

'Eat what?' says Judy.

'George is allergic to fish.'

'I thought he was allergic to dogs.'

'He is, but he's allergic to fish as well.'

Normally I'm not bad at speaking for myself but I'm not being given a lot of opportunity at the present time.

'How can someone be allergic to both dogs *and* fish? That's just ridiculous.'

'His dad once had to kick him out of the car because he had a Filet-0-Fish or something.'

'His dad had to *what*? That's ridiculous. Really?'

'Yeah, really.'

I find my voice. 'Actually... um, it was a Whaler...'

'What's a Whaler?' Bob Stewart looks up from his paper.

‘It’s like... well... it’s a sort of fish burger.’

‘Oh never mind,’ says Judy. ‘I’ll just have to fry you up some chippies or something. Like I do for the neighbours’ kids. They don’t like fish either.’

Did she say ‘chippies’?

‘It’s not that I don’t like it,’ I try to smile. Then I put on a serious voice. ‘It’s just that, well, it could be very dangerous for me to eat it. I could actually have a severe reaction and stop breathing.’

‘Rubbish.’ Bob Stewart throws his paper down on the coffee table and strides over. ‘If you don’t like fish, you don’t like fish. Fry the boy up some chippies, love, and let’s eat. I’m starving.’

So we sit at the table and the Stewart’s tuck into their Whiting. I help myself to some salad. Every now and then Mrs Stewart gets up to tend to my frying chips. When they’re ready she bring them over to me in a big bowl with a painting of a Thomas the Tank Engine on it. Then she sits down and digs her fork into a piece of her Whiting and shakes her head gently. There’s the hint of a grunt from Mr Stewart but thankfully my allergies don’t get another mention for the rest of the meal.

Later, when me and Stace are lingering outside in the driveway, I kiss her. We kiss more slowly this time, and only once. Then I turn and go. My head feels weird. I wasn’t expecting this to happen. I’m still thinking about Selphie ninety percent of the time. I have to admit though. I’m also thinking about those nipples pressing against my chest.

*

I get home to find Matthew on the couch eating a bowl of leftover taco meat. He’s not using taco shells because there aren’t any left. He’s eating it cold, straight from the bowl with the leftover bits of last night’s soggy tomato and lettuce and grated cheese. I say “cold” by the way, but it’s not even that. We haven’t got Mum’s fridge yet. That meat has just been sitting outside on the bench all day. It’s probably gone off. Not that you could probably taste the difference with the amount of chilli we put in our tacos.

‘Are you sure you want to eat that?’ I smile. ‘I mean, we’ve already got Mum, we don’t need any more fucking mad cow disease in the family now, do we?’

No answer. He doesn’t even look up to nod a hello. I just stand there.

I suddenly notice how much my clothes stink. Palmolive Lemon Fresh or not, I still smell like a bin. I wonder if the Suttons could smell me as much as I can.

‘Matthew. Can you smell anything, man? Do I stink?’

It’s as if I was talking to myself. He sits there feeding his face, like he’s in a trance or something. I don’t know how to talk to him anymore. Fuck. I mean I always used to know how to talk to him. Even when we were both totally in love with our girlfriends, we were still fucking close. We’d still hang out all the time. It’d just be us and the girls. Like we were mates or something.

Sometimes Mum would insist that we bring Anna and Selphie over to her place for dinner. The girls always thought we ate like pigs at those dinners. We did—shovelling food into our mouths as fast as we could. Talking with our mouths full. Encouraging everyone else to shut up and chow down. Thing was, the girls didn’t realise we were always in an unspoken race against the clock. We could hear Mum ticking away with each chew. She’d just sit there and grin and tick. She’d hardly touch the food on her plate. She’d just fucking tick.

And Me and Matthew knew, that if she ever went off with the girls around, she’d take everyone with her. She’d take us all down. We *knew* it, and that’s why we ate like pigs, just so we could get everyone the fuck away from the dinner table and out in front of the telly where it was safe. Where Mum could be distracted by unreality. Where she could forget about being crazy for a while and just enjoy the latest comedy show. Where she could rock back and forth, wheezing and cackling like a kookaburra with a head cold. Sure, she still sounded a *little* bit crazy, but once you got used to it, it was all good. In fact, it was better than good. It was *great* to see her laugh like that. To all laugh along with her. To almost feel like a normal family crowded around the telly. Sometimes on those nights, me and Matthew used to catch each other’s eye as we sat there with our arms around our girlfriends, and we couldn’t help smiling at each other because things were just too cool. It sounds fucking stupid to say, but on those nights, things even seemed like they might work out all right for us and Mum.

I remember whenever Anna got up to go to the toilet or something how Matthew’s eyes used to follow her out of the room. Hang at the doorway until she came back in. Man I knew that guy was in love. I’ve never seen anyone in our family look that fucking happy and I felt lucky to be around it. I felt like if Matthew could be that happy then maybe the rest of us could be as well. I wish Dad had hung around

long enough to see it too. Maybe then he would have pulled through whatever it was that he couldn't.

Dad used to get down on himself a lot. I supposed it wasn't easy living with someone as mad as my mum. He'd get *really* down sometimes but he'd always pull himself back up somehow. But then one day he couldn't anymore. It was after his parents died. They died suddenly, within in a month of each other. It wasn't like they were old or anything, either. They were in their fifties, both of them. Grandpa fell asleep one day in his car in his garage and never woke up. Nana died of a broken heart a month later. Well, a broken heart and a shot-diddly-ot liver, Mum said. Dad's hair went grey almost overnight after that. And he went black.

We would have waited forever for him to come out of it. But Dad didn't make forever. Didn't even get close. I don't know why. Sometimes I reckon he got too used to being black. Got so used to it after a while that he didn't want to be anything else. Sometimes I think he even liked it. I guess cause it meant he could stop caring about things. Stop caring about himself. Stop caring about us. And eventually stop caring about even living. Sometimes he would stay so far inside his own head it was as if he could pretend the rest of the world didn't exist. He'd could sit for hours in a chair and look right through everyone. Look right through them to nothing. I think he started doing that at work even. I think that's why they fired him.

He didn't care when he got fired. It just meant he didn't have to wear suits anymore. He started walking around the house in tracksuit pants and sandals and an old t-shirt that said he loved New York. He looked like a mental patient. I don't know where he got the t-shirt. He'd never been to New York. The furthest he ever went was to Tasmania when him and Mum went on their honeymoon. They went to Tasmania because Dad wanted to sail them across Bass Straight. I don't think they could find a sailboat in the end, so I think they ended up settling for the ferry.

Dad was pretty keen on his boats. Probably the only thing we boys ever had in common with him was the boat thing. Or maybe that was the only thing he would share with us. I don't know. All I know is he talked about sailing boats a lot and he loved building models of them. He once built a huge model ship that was about three feet high. It was an old sailing ship, with real working sails and everything. That was back in the days when he was sort of happy. When he even used to sit at the table and eat with us. I was too young to remember much of then, but I do remember him telling me over a roast dinner once that he used to dream of joining the Navy and sailing

around the world. ‘Like the song says,’ he told me—and he even sang it: ‘*In the Navy, you can sail the seven seas, in the Navy, you can do just as you please...*’ And of course my Mum joined in: ‘*In the gravy, you can see all of your peas...*’ and she started cracking up at her own joke. She did her big sick hippo snort-and-wheeze-fest. Dad smiled at the joke but he didn’t laugh. He just sat there, fork in hand, shifting his peas around in the gravy like they were little green boats on a flat brown sea.

I watch Matthew trying to scoop up the soggy bits of lettuce from the fucking mess on his plate. I stand there watching him until he manages to get some and shove it into his mouth. A stray bit of taco meat rolls down his chin and drops onto his lap. He doesn’t notice. Fuck. He still eats like a pig, whether Mum’s ticking away next to him or not.

‘Catch ya, later then,’ I say.

I take my dirty clothes to the laundry. Stick them in the washing machine. *My* washing machine. Then I go and get dressed and head to my room to lie down for a while. I think about checking the house out instead of lying around but there’s not really any point. I could check the windows were all locked up and then walk back in here and someone could jemmy a window open and I wouldn’t even hear it over the washing machine. I wouldn’t hear a fucking thing until it was too late.

I wait until the washing cycle’s finished and then I give the house a good, proper check. Then I hang my wet jeans up over the chair beside my bed. They probably won’t dry before tomorrow but I reckon I should wear one of my old shitty pairs anyway. Should have worn them in the first place, cleaning fucking bins. Fuck Leonard. I should just quit, but I won’t. I don’t know what else I would do anyway. I climb into bed and turn off my bedside light.

Thank you for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

Think good thoughts.

*

we're in a cemetery the one next to mum and dad's house it's dark but
not spooky like you might think a cemetery should be
magda looks magnificent she's wearing a purple one-piece velvet dress with
fishnet stockings she's put on make-up and done her hair and everything she
looks like she should be going to the premiere of a film walking along a red carpet
instead of the dusty gravel that crunches under our feet
we come to a gravestone:

in loving memory
brian harrison
1948 – 1992
loved dearly by wife eileen,
missed by sons matthew and george
rest in peas

magda squeezes my hand and i let her lead me on until we are deep in the middle of
the cemetery there's gravestones lit up in the moonlight as far as the eye can see

we are at the centre of the dead

let's sit down she says so we do

it's a little chilly not like the middle of winter or anything but just a little chilly
the night's got a bit of bite to it

aren't you cold? i say

a little

she shifts closer to me and i feel her arm against mine

look at the moon she says *it's smiling*

it is smiling the moon has a face and it's smiling down upon us but it's not
looking at us it's got its eyes shut

why has the moon got its eyes shut? i ask

magda sighs a chuckle *oh you duffer* she says *because it's being polite respecting
our privacy*

what do you mean?

she doesn't say anything just lies back on the concrete slab we are sitting
on and reaches her hand up and strokes my back it's a stroke that somehow pulls
me down next to her and suddenly i realise we are kissing the cool hard surface we
are lying on only serves to make the kisses seem even hotter wetter smoother hotter
wetter smoother and we kiss and kiss and kiss under the smiling moon i move
down and peel her fishnets and her knickers off magda lifts her dress up above her
waist and she opens her legs and if we were two flames slow-dancing with one another
a week ago we've now become white-hot coals at the base of the biggest fire there's
ever been i'm inside her in the moonlight rocking together with her
like we are in a cradle hanging from the tallest bough on the windiest day

hold on to me matthew she says *hold on tight* i hold on tight and i rock and i
kiss and i shut my eyes and it's almost like i'm wrapped in a cocoon again
a big warm wet slippery cocoon i can feel arms and legs wrapped around me and
a heartbeat that pulses through my head i can barely breathe but somehow i feel
like i don't need to it's like magda can breathe for me she's breathing faster now
faster and faster we're rocking faster i feel like it's never going to end and then it does
i come
i come inside her
i can feel the arms and legs that were wrapped around me have now
released their intense pressure
and now they are just stroking my body in any way they are able to
i feel like i have wings

*

Something brushes gently across my face. I open my eyes and a wave of absolute fear
pins me to the mattress. There's someone in my fucking room. I can see his legs. He's
standing next to my bed. I can hardly breathe. A million panicked thoughts run
through my mind. It's happening again. A filthy fucking pervert come to fuck with me
while I sleep. I feel sick. Like I'm going to vomit my heart. I'm sure I would, too, if I
wasn't so paralysed with panic.

I lie still and watch his legs. I daren't lift my head to look at the rest of him
because I don't want him to know I'm awake. I don't want him to think he has to pin
my head against the pillow. Or even worse—smack me into unconsciousness. He's

just standing there, three feet away from my bed. Why is he just standing there? Is he just taking a good look at me before he gets to work? Maybe he's wondering whether he woke me. Maybe I just stopped snoring. Fuck, maybe he can see that my eyes are open. Fuck of course he can. Fuck he's about to jump me.

I feel a surge of adrenalin shoot through me. As if someone had filled a syringe with too many years of pent up fear and anger and stabbed the needle deep into my paralysed heart. In less than a second I go from lying wrapped up in my quilt to standing on my feet. There's a baseball bat I keep on the floor next to my bed. I must have sucked it to me with Jedi-like ability for I am now gripping it with both hands swinging it for all I am worth. Swinging it at the dirty cunt who dared to stroke my hair while I slept. Who dared to prey upon me, to fuck with me.

As I swing my bat back and forth, I'm mildly aware of my pre-sleep mantra: *kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie*, but the thought of actually not killing Matthew and Selphie, as opposed to anyone else, doesn't register in my mind. I'm only concerned with bringing my attacker down. I'm aiming at the only part of the man I can see: his legs. There's so much crashing and banging that I can't even hear him yell for mercy. I can only hear myself screaming: 'Fucking cunt! I'll fucking kill you! You're fucking dead!' or sometimes I'm not even screaming actual words. Just hollering as I swing that bat again and again, making absolutely sure that I'm rendering my attacker useless before he can touch me. I don't know how long I beat him for. Maybe it was just a couple of blows in the end, maybe three dozen. I'm not thinking in numbers. I back away from the dark lifeless shape on my floor and I stand with my back against my cupboard. I'm crying. Sobbing. 'Come on you fucking cunt! Get the fuck up! Come on and I'll fucking kill you, you cunt!'

The legs don't move. I keep crying but I dare not even take my hands off the bat to wipe my eyes. I don't know how long I stand there yelling at this prick on the floor before my door opens. 'Matthew!' I yell. 'Call the fuckin' cops!'

The light flicks on.

'What the fuck?' says Matthew.

In front of me on the floor is a chair. Broken in pieces. The extendable lamp I keep next to my bed has come loose at the joint and drooped down so the shade is resting on my pillow. Tangled up in pieces of broken chair is my pair of jeans that I had hung out to dry.

‘You okay? What’s going on?’ says Matthew, rubbing his eyes. ‘What do you mean—call the fuckin’ cops?’

‘Don’t worry,’ I say quickly, turning my face so he doesn’t see I’ve been crying. ‘Don’t worry, go back to bed.’

He stands there for few seconds. ‘Whatever, George,’ he says. Then he leaves and shuts the door behind him. I wipe my eyes and then I take three steps towards the extendable lamp and smash it beyond repair with one swing of the bat. Then I turn off the main light and put the bat back under my bed and climb under my covers. Shut my eyes.

Thankyou for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie.

Think good thoughts.

*

The first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning is the tree outside my bedroom window. I remember making sure I was facing it as I tried to fall asleep. I always gravitate towards mine and Selphie’s tree if I’m feeling bad at night. I don’t know why. It just makes me feel safe or something. Like fire probably did for cavemen. I don’t know what I’m going to gravitate to when it’s gone.

The sun’s shining in from behind the branches. Lighting up my room, bright like a camera shoot. The broken chair and smashed-to-pieces lamp look like they’re part of some trendy magazine setting. Like you’d expect to see a pair of designer underwear slung across the chair leg or something. I guess that would make me the model in the shoot. Some model: a naked splotchy anxiety-ridden freak with possible man-boobs.

I shouldn’t beat myself up too much though. Probably sometime in the not-too-distant future, the naked-splotchy-anxious-freak-man-boob thing will be a bona fide fucking look. Like the Kate Moss waif look or something. Maybe I shouldn’t worry about quitting the bowling alley. Maybe one day some talent scout will come in and snap me up. Make me a fucking superstar.

I get up and look in the mirror. My eyes are all bloodshot. Dull white light hiding among hundreds of tiny red branches. I always get bloodshot eyes when I've had a bad sleep. I make a note to myself: get good sleeps once international modelling career takes off.

I start thinking about last night. I don't put any pressure myself. Don't beat myself up for flipping out like that. It is what it is. I just don't know whether I should try and do something positive to try and deal with my night time paranoia or to just forget about it and get on with things. It's gone away before so maybe if I try and get my shit together it will go away again.

I've got to focus on the good stuff. I remember I saw an interview with someone once. They said something like they have eight good things happening in their life at any one time, and two bad things, and that what they did to make it through the hard days is to concentrate on the good things. I sometimes think a lot of people's lives are more like eight bad and two good, but I get their point. I shut my eyes and concentrate on two good things in my life... Matthew's alive... that's the first... concentrate... concentrate... Selphie likes me... that's the second... no... shit... I mean Stacey likes me... that's the second... I say it quietly to myself a few times: *Matthew's alive and Stacey likes me... Matthew's alive and Stacey likes me... Matthew's alive and Stacey likes me...* then I get up and get dressed and take my chair and lamp out by the side of the house. Dump them in a heap.

They look pretty junky like that, but they won't be there long. I do a bit of a dump run for Mum on a regular basis so I'll just drag them along with me next time.

Matthew's at the breakfast table eating toast when I go back inside. I feel awkward. He's going to think I'm a freak or something for carrying on last night like that. I start wondering how I'm going to explain myself.

Then I realise I won't have to. He's as uncomfortable being around me right now as I am with him. Of course. I should have known he would be. That's just how he is these days. He looks up at me as I stand in the kitchen and rifle through the bread bin. I look back at him. There's this little flicker in his eyes, like an over-patted cat gets sometimes while it's deciding to keep purring or get the claws out. Then he shoves the rest of his piece of toast in his mouth, turns his head stands up and heads back to his room.

*

I've got bins to clean. Man I thought the first three were disgusting, but the one I'm doing now takes the cake. It's as if it's been the bowlers' bin of choice for the last thirty years. It's impossible to ignore the stench. Even when I try and breathe shallow, it's like sucking down the some horribly potent drug. The kind where the smoke sits and festers at the bottom of your lungs like a chemical experiment in a test tube. In the end I give up on the shallow breathing and inhale normally, hoping that I'll get used to it after a few minutes. It takes almost half an hour, but I sort of do, although it's probably no more pleasant than a suicider getting used to the smell of carbon-monoxide—and probably only slightly less dangerous.

'Hoy Georgie boy!'

I stop what I'm doing and look up. Leonard's standing there with a golf club in his hand, a bag of clubs by his side. He's dudded up in some pretty stupid-looking clothes and he's wearing a cap. A "LEONARD ATHLETIC" fucking cap.

He breaks out into a sleazy grin when he sees my face. 'Didn't get much sleep, eh?' he says.

'What?'

'You look tired son. What—did ya get a bit of action last night? Get some titties, did ya?'

I swear that's what he says: "titties". He's a forty-something year old man with a sixteen year old daughter and he's in the midst of his second marriage. And he uses the word "titties".

'What?'

'You *did* get some tittie action then.' He chuckles and prods me in the gut with his three-wood. Playfully but hard. 'Come on then, Georgie. What were they like? Were they good titties, Georgie boy, eh? Were they good?'

What can I say? There's an idiot standing over me with a golf club. He prods me again. 'Eh? Good titties mate?' He's grinning at me as if he thinks he's one of the lads sharing a laugh about some conquest or other. Like we're on the same level or something. It's ridiculous. Even if, in some totally fucked up world, even if I *were* 'one of the lads' and wanted to share a laugh about some 'titties', Leonard is the last person on earth I would do it with. But I swear, if he prods me once more with that fucking golf club I'll say something stupid and be out of a job, so instead I say

whatever it is he wants to hear, just so he'll go away. 'Yeah,' I say, and force a smile. 'Got some great titties last night.'

But he doesn't go away. He just lifts up his three-wood and lays it across the back of his shoulders. 'Ah,' he says, with creepy satisfaction, 'I can always tell a tittie face. Bags under the eyes in the morning means you've had funbags knocking your face all night, doesn't it? Eh?'

'I guess it does, mate.' I start scrubbing the bin again. It suddenly doesn't seem that bad anymore.

'Titties, titties, titties,' he murmurs, and then he just stands there, watching me scrub. Fuck. If he hangs around much longer he'll just keep carrying on—even worse—he might start giving me cleaning tips again. I glance up at him. 'Was there something else, Leonard?'

Leonard looks temporarily fazed by my intrusion into whatever fucked up suburban loser midlife crisis daydream he was stuck in the middle of. But he quickly snaps back on his confident manager's face. 'Catch ya later, George-a-rina,' he says, and heads back inside.

Half an hour later I finish the bin and head in to take a piss break. On my way back out I see Stacey Stewart leaning over the linoleum moat around the café counter. 'Heya Stace.'

She turns her head and smiles. 'Hi George.' She doesn't push herself back away from the counter though, just keeps leaning forward with her head turned, looking at me.

I wonder whether we should be kissing each other hello or something. I mean, we've already kissed twice before so I guess that means something, doesn't it? But while I'm standing there fucking around with whether I should try and give her a kiss or not, she turns back to face the counter. I stand there trying to think of something to say while the seconds tick by.

'Service in this place is shit,' I eventually say.

She grins, 'It's usually better,' and asks me how the bins are going. I tell her they're a pain in the arse. She asks me whether, sore arse or not, I'd reckon I might be feeling like a drink after work. 'But maybe at your house this time,' she says. 'Bob's doing my head in today.'

'Sure,' I say. 'My house is fine with me.'

‘Georgie Porgie! It’s a bit early for pudding and pie! Leonard’s walking briskly past on his way to his office. A big dumbass grin on his face. He looks at his watch. ‘Lunch time isn’t for another hour mate.’ I hate the way he manages to grin when basically he’s still just busting my chops. Fat cunt.

I manage some sort of a smile back. ‘Not eating yet, Leonard,’ I say. ‘Just chatting for a second.’ He cocks his fingers like little guns and points at me as he keeps walking. ‘Kissing the girls, eh?’ he says, still grinning. ‘Well, don’t be too long.’ Then he disappears into his office.

‘Is he for real?’ Stacey, rolling her eyes.

‘I’m afraid so.’

She jingles the change in her hand, the one not cased in “The Enforcer.” ‘So,’ she says. ‘We on then?’

‘We’re on.’

I turn to go.

‘Hey,’ she says.

‘What?’

‘Well, I don’t know. Aren’t you even going to—*kiss the girl?*’

‘Yeah,’ I say. And I lean in close and she turns her head and we kiss. Just like that.

‘Thanks,’ she says and gives me a cheeky smile.

‘Thank *you*,’ I say.

‘Don’t go making ’em cry now, Georgie Porgie!’ It’s Leonard again, leaning out of his office doorway, holding a clipboard and still wearing that big dumbass grin on his face. I start thinking about how much I would love to take a big scourer and scrub that grin from his rosy fat fucking cheeks. Instead I give him a nod and a wave and then I reach down and squeeze Stacey’s hand. ‘Better go,’ I say.

*

It’s dark when Me and Stace get to my house. Not late, but dark. Matthew isn’t around. He must have gone to bed. I’m kind of glad. I was wondering how he’d feel about me bringing Stacey over. It’s not that I think he’d freak out or anything anyway. Just that I reckon he’d find it hard to see me hanging out with a pretty girl, drinking

wine, talking and kissing and all that shit. It'd remind him about the sort of life he used to have.

My arms and my back are sore from scrubbing and I feel a bit crook in the guts. Most of all though, I'm hungry.

'So, Stace... what d'ya wanna eat?'

'Whaddya got?'

We decide to have homemade pizzas. My secret is I use Roma tomatoes with freshly chopped basil for the base. You could put cardboard on for the topping and it would still taste pretty fucking good. Plus, they only take twenty minutes tops to make. Nearly as quick as a toasted fucking sandwich. Before you know it we're stuffing our faces.

'Mmm,' says Stacey, finishing off the last of her second pocket-sized pizza.

'Glass of red?'

'Why not?'

'Why not indeed.' We pour ourselves a couple of glasses and head to the lounge room to slump on the couch. Stacey leans her head on my shoulder as we sip and talk. It's nice, if a little strange, being there with her like that. I'm not really sure if we should be doing it or not. I mean, it feels 'right' enough, I suppose. But, you know, it's not like we're familiar lovers coming home to each other—we're still getting to *know* each other. Also, as hard as I try not to think about it, part of me can't help wondering whether this is the sort of thing Selphie and Joshua are doing right now as well. And, I can't help wondering, are they doing it better than us?

'Hey,' says Stace, suddenly. 'Didn't you say you live with your brother?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, where is he?'

'He's gone to bed, I reckon.'

'This early?'

'Yep.'

'Oh well.' Stacey shrugs and picks up her wine glass. She takes a sip. 'So we're alone?'

'Yeah, I guess we are.'

'Lucky for us, then,' she smiles.

Before I can say anything back, she snuggles up to kiss me. Not a fast kiss, like the first one, and not a slow kiss like the driveway one. Somewhere in between.

Somewhere in between with lots of tongue. I reach down and feel for the carpet with my wine glass and then reach up to hold the back of her head. Her hair feels slightly sticky with product. Thick and strong. I massage it and hold her face to mine and I'm somewhere between being lost in the moment and being acutely aware that this person is not Selphie. I try and think only about the moment.

If this was a movie I would have loved to cut straight to the part where we were naked. Unfortunately we were going to have to go through the whole bit of getting undressed. I never know how to do that bit. With other girls I've tried a hundred ways but never got it right. I'd undress myself first. Undress them first. Ask them to undress for me. I always got the feeling with Selphie that I was doing something wrong. One time when I jumped on her and tried to rip her clothes off in a fit of passion she looked annoyed and told me 'This is fucked up, George. This is really fucked up.' I'd apologised and moved to the edge of the bed and waited for her to struggle out of her jeans, listened to her sighing with frustration all the way at my teenage-like inability to undress her naturally—in the heat of the moment.

I can't even tell you how it happens with Stacey. Maybe it's cos I'm not thinking so much about it. Maybe it's cos I simply don't care so much. All I know is one moment we are kissing on the couch, the next we are wrapped up in each other's nakedness, sliding and rubbing against each other with all the grace and abandon of the last two monkeys on earth. I feel her all over like a blind man. Her thighs are so much thicker than Selphie's. Her breasts smaller but nipples seem much larger. Her skin is smoother. She feels round-shaped, sort of. Not round in a roly-poly way, just kind of circular. Selphie had harder edges.

I don't hear the front door open.

'Oh for fuck's sake. Do you have to do that on the fucking couch? I have to eat there, you know.'

'Matthew! Shit, sorry man. I thought you were in bed asleep.'

Stacey starts laughing. She's curled herself against the backing of the couch and she's looking over her shoulder. 'Hi, George's brother, I'm Stacey,' she says. 'Sorry about the couch. We were about to move, honestly.'

'Yeah, whatever,' says Matthew, and heads to his room. He doesn't quite slam the door but shuts it with enough force to let me know he expects us dressed or out of the lounge room in minutes.

'Come on,' says Stacey, and grabs her clothes. 'Where's your room, then?'

‘Follow me,’ I say, and head down the hall. But I can’t help thinking that somehow I wish that was it. That she was going home now. I feel like one of those explorers who can never quite climb Everest. That keep going up to a certain height and then coming back down to base camp to reflect and then try again another day.

You see, I’m well aware that it sounds pathetic—and it’s been something I’ve been trying not to think about since me and Stacey first kissed—but the truth is I’m starting to wonder whether I can even do it with other women. Whether I’ll ever actually be able to sleep with anyone but Selphie. I feel unbelievably stupid about this but I know it’s a factor. There have been other girls I have had my chances with in the last six months while me and Selphie were breaking up. I only saw them once or twice each. When it came down to it, my body didn’t respond to them because they weren’t Selphie. I ended up having to make excuses and get out of there. It was fine, even wildly romantic, I guess, when Selphie loved me—to think that she was the only woman on earth who could arouse me. Unfortunately, as she has long since moved on and is currently having sex with someone else, my inability to maintain an erection with other women could now be described as best, mildly annoying, and at worst, psychologically disturbing.

We’re forging our way up the slope though. We head into my room and she turns the light off and I hear her crawl over on to the bed. I take off my clothes in the darkness and crawl into bed. I don’t go straight under the covers. I kind of try and lean over and find some sort of snuggling position with Stacey. Try to get excited. All I can think about is: *will I get it up for her?* We kiss for a bit. She doesn’t taste like Selphie. Doesn’t smell like her either. How could she?

Nothing happens. I pull back. ‘Look,’ I say. ‘I’m actually really fucking tired.’

‘Sure,’ she says, without missing a beat. ‘Well, if you’re tired, let’s get some sleep.’

She withdraws her hands from me and pulls back so suddenly I can’t help feeling strangely rejected. I can tell she’s still facing me in the darkness.

‘I mean, I do like you and everything,’ I eventually say. ‘I’m just tired, that’s all.’

She doesn’t answer. I lie back with my eyes shut, listening to her breathing. She breathes differently to Selphie. Even her weight in the bed feels different. Everything feels different. I feel like getting up. I don’t know if I can handle this. I lie there feeling hopeless.

After a while Stacey crawls over and lies against me. She snuggles into me. It feels nice but I don't know, just so *strange*. Like if you've been eating nothing but strawberries for hours and you suddenly fill your mouth with salted peanuts. Not that I'm comparing Stacey to salted peanuts. Or Selphie to strawberries for that matter. It just all feels strange. And I just want to sleep. And eventually, that's what I do.

*

'You okay, George?' A voice, gently in my ear.

For a split second I think it's Selphie before I catch myself. I sit up. 'Yeah, I'm fine I think.'

'You're all sweaty. You've been talking in your sleep.'

I rub my face. It's wet. So is my chest. I am sweating. I don't know why. I guess I just have rough sleeps sometimes.

'Want a drink of water.'

'Yeah, it's okay, I'll get it.'

I get up and go to the bathroom. The light's on but the door's open so I go in. Matthew's naked, standing on the edge of the bath, holding on to the wall, looking at himself in the mirror. I stop dead when I see him. I haven't seen him properly since the accident. It's a bit of a shock to see him like that. His leg really is sticking out at an awkward angle and there are huge jagged scars all over it. But somehow, even with his bad leg with the incredible scarring, he looks kind of dainty, the way he's standing there examining himself, perched naked on the edge of the bath like a butterfly resting on a leaf. Like a wounded butterfly. In a twisted way, he almost looks peaceful, the way he's staring at his own body without expression. But the peace drains from his eyes when he notices me, standing there watching him. His whole body tenses and his eyes flash with anger and he screams at me, 'Get out!'

The ferocity of his scream takes me by surprise so completely that I can't move. I'm paralysed, unable to immediately respond. He jumps down from the bath's edge and takes two steps towards me and shoves me with a force so hard that I'm thrown hard against the cupboard outside in the hall. The blue glass candelabra we keep on top of the cupboard tips over and smashes to pieces on the ground. 'Get out!' he screams again and slams the door so hard that the locking mechanism breaks. Then I hear him drop to the floor with his back against the bathroom door. I just sit there in

shock and silence for a few minutes and then I hear him start to cry. ‘Matthew?’ I say. ‘Are you okay? I’m sorry. Is there something I can do?’

‘Just stay away,’ he cries. ‘Just fucking stay away. Go to bed. Leave me alone.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No. Just leave me alone. Please.’

Slowly I get up. I hate leaving him there like that but I know it’s all he wants right now. All he needs. I head back to my room. I’ll clean up the candelabra tomorrow.

*

In the morning I lie in bed and look at the tree outside my window. I wonder why it died like that. None of the other trees on this street have died. Just that one. I wonder why me and Selphie died. I asked her once when we were driving home from somewhere and she said she didn’t know. Just that she wasn’t happy when she was with me. Or more to the point, that she was happier when she *wasn’t* with me. ‘You’re too obsessive, George,’ she said. ‘You’re too full on sometimes. I just want to relax and enjoy life with someone.’

‘Obsessed? Who’s obsessed?’

‘Not “obsessed”. Obsessive. And you’ve got so much *anger* in you. It’s not healthy, you know?’

‘Obsessed? With what? With you?’

‘Not “obsessed”, George! *Obsessive*.’

‘How am I obsessive? And how the fuck am I *angry*?’

‘I don’t know. In lots of ways. You can’t let anything go. You think about things too much. And you either absolutely love something or completely hate it. There’s no in between with you, George. No relaxing about things.’

‘What you do mean I can’t let things go?’

‘Like that guy who told you off for juggling fruit in his shop.’

‘*That wanker? What about him?*’ I remember that bad-tempered old bastard. He caught me juggling lemons in his fruit shop once. Came over and told me off. Really sternly and loudly and in front of all the customers. Told me if he caught me juggling in his fruit shop again that he’d kick me out. He was fucking grumpy and fucking rude and he completely ruined my day. Apart from anything else he made me

look like a complete child in front of Selphie. ‘Look Selph, the guy just ruined my entire day okay? Really brought me down.’

‘Yeah sure, George. But you didn’t have to go on about it so much afterwards.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘George! Two years later you’re still giving the finger every time you walk past his shop.’

‘Yeah, well, he deserved it.’

‘He probably doesn’t even work there anymore.’

‘So maybe the people working there now are wankers and I’m just getting in first.’

‘First for what, George? God, you’re such a *child* sometimes.’

‘I was joking, Selph.’

Sometimes Selph didn’t get my jokes. Or if she did, she didn’t appreciate them. Or maybe they just weren’t funny. Or maybe they just weren’t actually jokes. Maybe I *was* just angry sometimes. I don’t know. It was just my way. I mean, I was never angry with Selph. I made sure I never was, even if I was having a really shit black day. I guess I wasn’t even that angry at the fruit shop guy. Probably just at the world and the pervert and with Mum and Dad and shit like that.

I feel a cool kiss on my neck. ‘Morning mister.’

‘Morning Stace.’

‘Sleep well in the end?’

‘Yeah, pretty well, I guess.’

She sighs. ‘Still tired, then?’

‘A little.’

‘That’s okay. I’ll wake you up.’

She rolls slowly on to her back and pulls me close to her. I take the hint and lose myself in the smoothness of her skin. In the coolness of it. I rub my face gently across her chest. I feel her nipple tickle against my cheek and slip my mouth over it. I can smell her odour as I kiss. Breathe it into me. I try to remind myself to *enjoy* the fact that this is not Selphie, rather than be distracted by it. I need to be able to enjoy this. Otherwise I’m just crazy aren’t I? Obsessed with my ex-girlfriend. Then Selphie would be right I guess. I am fucking obsessive. But what if it’s not obsession? What if I just love her, fuck it? I stop kissing for a second. My mind’s scrambled again.

‘George? Are you okay?’

‘What? Yeah, fine. Sorry.’

‘George. Really, if you don’t feel like doing anyth—’

‘No, it’s just—’

‘I mean, I like you George, you know, but I’m not going to be shattered. I’m just feeling horny.’ She smiles cheekily and tickles my belly gently. ‘I always get horny in the mornings.’

She reaches down and grabs me. I can actually feel myself getting hard. That’s a start. A *great* start.

‘So,’ she says. ‘You want to?’

‘I want to,’ I find myself saying. ‘I really, really want to.’

‘Shhh, then.’

I lie there and let her wrap herself around me. I’m letting her kiss me and I’m kissing her and I’m find myself briefly thinking that this is so far from love but at least it proves I’m not an obsessed freak. Before I know it, she’s straddling me. I’m inside Stacey. She’s making all the right noises and I can hear myself making them as well. It’s weird though. I find myself looking at her, thinking, who is this person? Who is this person I am making love with? And for some reason I briefly think about that fucking prick in the fruit shop. What the fuck was his problem? It still bugs me.

‘I want you on top, George.’

‘Sure.’

We twist around and I’m in her again. I’m hard as I get and I grip the top of her head. Feel her hair product in my fingers. I thrust and I thrust. Stacey’s squirming underneath me. ‘Fuck me, George! I want you to fuck me hard!’

I respond by thrusting as hard as I can.

‘Fuck me George! Fuck me!’

And I do. I fuck as hard as I can until I come. Then I drop my head down next to Stacey’s and breathe deep breaths of hair product. We lie there for a while, smelling each other. Listening to each other breathe. Without even thinking, I suddenly twitch my right breast against her shoulder, ‘One,’ I whisper. My stomach against hers.

‘Two’. My chin against her neck. ‘Three.’ My right forearm against her left. ‘Four.’

‘George,’ she moves her arms and wraps them around me, smiling. ‘George, what are you doing?’

‘Nothing,’ I say. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t know.’

Codetta

it feels like a first and last date all at once she's strapped into the front seat of my car humming away to herself

what's the tune magda?

she stops humming

where are you taking me today matthew?

to a special place i say i want to make you laugh

don't be silly she says no one can make anybody laugh not unless the other person wants to

okay then i say do you want to laugh?

maybe

well then i guarantee you will laugh at this

one minute ago we were driving up a hill heading towards the carpark where i first smelt what a girl smells like where i first smelt what i smell like but we are not there now we are not even in a car anymore we are miles away standing leaning on a piece of wire strung between two rusted iron pickets its part of the fence that lines the train track not far from my old house you can barely see the old station fifty metres or so up on the right it's almost hidden under overgrown weeds and grass

see that hole?

across the other side of the tracks there's a huge corrugated iron fence it's white all over bland at least three metres tall and ten metres long in the bottom right hand corner there's a small deliberately cut hole (about 20 x 20 cm) the bottom half of the hole is taken up by a flat rectangular drainpipe there's about a 10 x 20 cm gap at the top

yes i see it what about it?

keep watching that hole

i have a rock in my hand i lift my arm and throw the rock as hard as i can at that great white corrugated iron fence it makes a hell of a bang when it hits

now wait and watch the hole

we stand quietly waiting and watching nothing happens at first and then
finally from behind the fence comes a pitter patter of tiny footsteps like
strengthening rain the pitter patter slowly turns into a downpour of excited feet
scraping against concrete unable to move as fast as the mind that is driving them and
then suddenly the sound of the scrapes makes an urgent change in pitch and intensity
and it now sounds as if the feet can no longer STOP moving as fast as the mind that
was driving them and then there's a horrible bang against the other side of that fence
that's even louder than the one from the rock
and then the yaps start

they are relentless passionate determined but we can't see where they come from
because the fence is in the way

what is it? what? says magda

shhhh i tell her and aim another rock nearer the base of the fence—BANG!

the small hole above the drainpipe is filled suddenly as if by overflowing popcorn with
the squeezed fluffy face of a bichon frese puppy he can't fit all of the hair on his
head through the hole—but not for lack of trying he's yapping overtime and staring
fiercely with his tiny black eyes at the two strange people leaning on the wire fence
along the tracks outside his property he yaps and yaps and yaps and even with all the
yapping we can hear him scraping desperately against the corrugated iron trying to
push himself through to our side to see us off

magda is laughing—not raucously but she is laughing—*he's so cute* she says and as if
he had heard her and been mightily offended the bichon frese starts yapping even
louder even more indignantly he's yapping so loud it almost sounds like a
thousand dogs yapping at once i start laughing as well *he is cute isn't he?* and i
put my fingers to my ears *but bloody loud*

oh, never mind that she says *i could just pick him up and hug him to death* and
she turns to me and laughs *i really could, you know?* i can only just hear her because
the dog is making so much noise i raise my voice *do you know what?* i say *that's*
exactly the way i feel about you

what?! shouts magda *what did you say?!* i lean over and shout in her ear *that's*
exactly the way i feel about you!

oh! she laughs she can't really say anything back because the noise is
becoming way too much but she squeezes my hand it's a squeeze which sends

a strange shiver of warmth
through my whole body
from head to toe

i squeeze back and smile at her and turn to look at the fence and i can hardly believe
my eyes because the fence is starting to lean over towards us the bichon frese
must be pushing so hard that the fence is actually starting to fall over

that fence is going to fall over! i shout almost with glee and then it does fall
over it collapses and topples onto the tracks like it was a prop on a hollywood movie
set it falls flat down with a big fwumph! then i see that behind it there isn't
just the one dog but about a thousand little bichon freses and they are all yapping only
they don't seem to be yapping angrily they are yapping for joy and they bound
over the tracks and sprint towards us

magda lets go of my hand *oh! aren't they gorgeous!* and she opens her arms up and i
open mine and the leaders of the pack leap up into them and they are flashing their
pink tongues at our faces and all around us is a sea of tiny white fluffy dogs
scrambling for our attention jumping up and down loving life they stretch
as far as we can see they are all around us and every second there seems to be more
of them god there must be ten thousand of them maybe twenty thousand

they've swelled beneath our feet and lifted us up on to their tiny backs
it's like we are standing on clouds it seriously feels like we are three miles high in
the sky on a pillow network of clouds i can't stop laughing
neither can magda—she's laughing raucously now and i don't blame her
it's all so wonderful

the thunder seems distant at first but it soon gets closer it's a strange kind of
thunder a particularly foreboding one there isn't any silence between the
rumbles it's like one great big blare one angry drum roll there is no rain no
lightning and i'm wondering just why there is thunder on a sunny day such as this and
then i realise that it's not thunder i'm hearing at all

it's the sound of a train
there's a train coming

but these dogs are everywhere they're running all over the tracks

*magda i say there's a train coming we've got to get the dogs off the tracks
train?* she says *i can't hear a train*

she must be deaf the rumble is getting so loud it sounds like a thousand horses stampeding all at once

surely you can hear that i say listen

she cocks her ear—who needs ears? i can feel the rumble in my chest

nup she says i can't hear a thing over all this noise!

you're kidding me i say thinking i must be crazy but one look up the tracks tells me i'm not there's a train coming all right it's a freight train and by god is it thundering or what

there! i shout and point magda! it's right fucking there!

she's looking right up the tracks with me but she doesn't seem to be able to see it she looks confused but there's no time to argue about things so i jump down off the dogs and start trying to herd the main pack off the tracks i pick up the nearest dog at my feet and literally throw it out of the way but another one takes its place immediately so i pick up and throw that one as well all the while i'm screaming at the rest of them to move pleading desperately as i throw as many out of the way as i can but it's like using a coffee cup to bucket water out of a sinking ship i can't make a dent in the sea of white fluff

magda! i scream help me for fuck's sake!

but she's gone she's disappeared i look around

magda?

the train is almost there

and then it is and it's not a train at all it's a stampede of a thousand black horses and then it's a train again and then it's not and then it is and then i just don't know

the noise is paralysing i stand and watch as it carves through the sea of white fluff turning it to red the sound of it all blasts my ears

a thousand dismembered puppies spin through the air its rumbling still but getting quieter and then it's gone as quickly as it came and all it has left behind is a flattened out mishmash of fur and blood and bone like a macabre crop circle

there is no more yapping the thousands of puppies still left behind are all sitting up on their hind legs

like tiny men now

silent

II

I lie in bed with one eye on mine and Selphie's tree while Stace lies sleeping next to me. I'm lying there looking at the tree, wondering why it has to be cut down. Dead or dying or not, it's still a nice tree. Christ, it still means something. I lean over and fiddle around on the bedside table. Find the scrunched up Council notice. I unscrunch and scan for a number to call. Grab my mobile and punch it in.

'Hello, Lance Parker speaking.'

'Yeah, hi,' I say. 'You the bloke coming to cut down my tree?'

There's a pause. 'Where do you live, mate?'

I tell him my address. Then I tell him I don't want the tree cut down. I tell him it's a beautiful tree and that I'm not even sure if it's actually dead. 'There's still a few leaves on it,' I tell him.

'Is there a pink dot spray-painted on the trunk?'

I look out the window. 'Yeah.'

'Then it's dead.'

'Well, even if it is,' I tell him. 'I'd still rather you didn't cut it down.'

'Why not?'

'Personal reasons.'

He tells me I'm going to have to do better than that. I tell him it was the tree I had my first kiss with my ex-girlfriend in. That it means a lot to me. That I'm not quite over her yet. That I still need to wake up and look at the tree every morning. I tell him that sure, one day I'll be able to let it all go—probably even sooner rather than later. But I say that, right at the moment, the tree has a kind of spiritual meaning for me. It's all about growth and memories and that sort of thing. I tell him all I'm really asking for is a stay of execution. Just a few weeks, maybe a couple more months, but definitely no longer than a year or two.

When I finish my spiel, there's a long pause on the end of the line. I have a glimmer of hope. Maybe this guy understands what it's like to have your heart broken. I decide to not say anything else. I just sit politely and wait for his response.

'Mate, you there?' he eventually says. 'Sorry—had to take a call on the other line. Look we're pretty busy here right now. Was there anything else you wanted?'

'Well, no,' I say. 'Just the tree—'

'Mate, that tree is dead. It's been pink-dotted. It's coming down. Sorry, there's nothing else to it.'

'Yes, but—'

‘All right mate. Thanks. Bye now.’ He hangs up. Prick.

Stacey yawns and rubs her eyes. ‘What’s all this about a tree?’

‘Hey? Oh yeah.’ I nod towards the window. ‘They’re going to take that one out. Reckon it’s dead or dying or something.’

She props herself up on one elbow and looks out the window. ‘Really? But it’s still such a nice looking thing. Even without leaves.’

‘It’s still got leaves,’ I say. ‘Just not many.’

‘Where?’

‘Up there. Near the top. See?’ I point.

‘Oh yeah,’ she says. ‘I guess there are a couple there.’

‘You *guess*?’

Stacey leans back on the mattress and yawns again. ‘Yeah, I *guess*.’ She doesn’t really sound like she gives a shit. Fair enough. It’s not like it’s *her* first kiss tree. Anyway, her not giving a shit isn’t what’s bothering me right now.

What’s bothering me is how that Lance Parker character just dismissed my request like that—without even listening. It bugs me that he thinks the best way to deal with a concerned member of the general public is just to hang up on them. Anyway, what’s so wrong with wanting to save a tree—even a dead one? I mean, it’s still pretty in its own way. And the branches still look strong enough. I can’t see any of them falling off any time in the near future.

The more I think about things, the more annoyed I get. And the more annoyed I get, the more I feel like doing something about it all.

‘Hey, I’m getting up for a sec,’ I say.

Stacey groans. ‘Do you have to? I’m so comfortable right now...’

‘Just for a few minutes,’ I say. ‘I’ll be back.’

She mutters something and shifts her head from my shoulder back to the pillow.

I get up and throw some clothes on and head to the laundry. Find a bottle of turps and a rag. Then I go outside to the tree. That’s one pretty big fluorescent pink mark of death they’ve left there. I tip some turps into the rag and start scrubbing. My arm immediately starts to ache. I think I’ve fucked what few arm muscles I have somehow from scrubbing those bins.

It takes a little while but I get it so the dot looks like it’s never been there. Once the turps dries you wouldn’t know the difference between this condemned tree

and the one twenty metres up the road, except of course, that this one's got hardly any leaves. It's a good job. I go back inside to my bedroom. Stacey must have got sick of waiting for me. She's already gotten out of bed and jumped in the shower.

I decide to give Selphie a quick call. Not about anything emotional. I just need to borrow her car. I've got the day off and I want to head to Mum's to do a dump run this arvo. To clean out some of the junk in her yard. I admit there's probably a part of me that chooses to ring Selphie instead of someone else because it gives me an excuse to be involved in her life on some level. But you know, at the same time, we always used to use her Torana, so maybe I'm just being consistent.

So I ring her and I'm more than a little surprised to hear that she doesn't want a bar of it. Doesn't want to lend me her car, even though she admits she's not even using it today anyway. Even though it's going to be at her place all afternoon, sitting in the driveway.

'But you're not even driving it today, Selph,' I say. 'And anyway, this isn't exactly for me. This is for Mum—you know what she's like with her bloody rubbish piling up everywhere.'

'This isn't fair, George,' she says. 'You're my *ex*-boyfriend. I shouldn't have to worry about my *ex*-boyfriend asking me for favours, you know? I just don't need it.'

'Jeez, Selph,' I say. I lower my voice, try to sound a bit hurt—which to be honest, I actually am. 'I thought I was more important than that to you.'

'George!' She actually raises her voice close to a yell. Not the reaction I was necessarily expecting. 'Just *don't*, okay? God, you're really stressing me out, you know?' There's a shitload of tension coming at me down the phone line now. She's upset. Upset about fucking what, I wonder. It's not like I'm giving her a hard time. It's not like I'm trying to get back together with her. I'm just asking a fucking favour. Like any 'friend' would.

'Jeez Selph. It's not like it's a big deal. Anyway, I'd help you out if *you* needed something.'

'But I don't *need* anything from you, George!'

'Yeah, but I'm just saying, if you did.'

'But, *George...*' she pauses for a second to regain her composure. 'Please try and understand—I don't.'

'Yeah, but, I don't know... one day you might.'

‘Look, George. I’ve said no. Please try and respect that. I’m really busy right now, okay?’

‘Look, Selph—’

‘Okay, goodbye, George.’

And then she hangs up on me. She actually hangs up on me. And for the first time something penetrates my thick fucking skull that she really isn’t interested in being a part of my life anymore. On any level. She’s been nice enough about it for a while I guess. But apparently nice doesn’t cut it anymore. I hang up the receiver and sit there, stunned.

‘Who was that, George?’ Stacey walks casually back in the room, naked, drying her hair, letting it all hang out. When she’s finished drying her hair she chucks her towel on the floor and bends over in front of me and starts rummaging around in her bag. Not able to find what she’s after she curses and drops into an ape-like squat as she continues to rummage. Fucking hell. I was with Selphie for three years and she never once felt comfortable enough walk around naked in front of me. I’m with Stacey for five minutes and it’s like we’re at a fucking nudist camp. She looks up ‘So who was it?’

‘What?’

‘On the phone...’

‘Oh... um... nothing... no one really.’

She comes and sits down next to me and pats my leg. ‘Hey—are you okay? You sound a little strange.’

I pull myself together and tell her it’s not a big deal. Just that I’m a bit stressed cause I am supposed to be doing the dump run for Mum but I can’t find a car to use for the day.

‘Well, why didn’t you say so?’

‘Huh?’

‘Well, you can borrow the beast if you like.’

‘The Volvo?’

‘Yeah, why not? I’m bowling league with Mum and Bob today so I can just catch a ride with them. Easy.’

‘Shit. Well... if you’re sure?’

‘Sure I’m sure. It’s no biggie. Just drop me off home on the way, and you can bring the car back around when you’re done.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘You’re a nice person.’

She smiles and rolls her eyes. ‘Tell me something I don’t know. Now, if I can just find my fucking hairbrush.’

‘It’s on the sink.’

‘Right. Ta.’

So twenty minutes later I’m reversing the Volvo back out of Stacey’s driveway. I give her a toot and blow her a kiss goodbye. She blows me one back. Just to be cute, I pretend it hits my cheek as if it had been blown too forcefully and suddenly reel back hard in my seat like I’ve been shot in the face. Unfortunately as I do, I lose my grip on the steering wheel and instead of braking I accidentally stamp on the gas. The Volvo kicks into action and swings back violently. The steering wheel spins out of control. For about two seconds I sit paralysed in the lurching beast. I feel like I’m about to throw up. Then I suddenly come to my senses and slam both feet on the brake pedal and screech to a jolting halt in the middle of the street. I yell out the window: ‘Sorry, about that!’ and try to give Stacey a reassuring wave.

My near miss doesn’t appear to have fazed her. She’s standing there giggling, shaking her head. ‘You’re an idiot, George!’ she yells back. ‘You should have seen the look on your face!’ Then, still giggling, she turns around and goes inside.

I like her.

I’m thinking about that as I head off to Mum’s house. Thinking about that, and about the fact that I am now officially a fucking Volvo driver. Worse—a Volvo *stationwagon* driver. I suppose though, I’m actually pretty lucky it’s a stationwagon. It means I’m going to be able to fit in heaps more stuff than I could in the Torana anyway—especially seeing as I’ll have the passenger seat spare as well. Might even be able to get away with just a couple of trips.

It used to be Matthew who’d drive when we took Mum’s junk to the dump. He doesn’t drive anymore though. He doesn’t even come and help. I don’t know whether he just can’t cause of his injuries and stuff or whether he just doesn’t have enough mental energy to be able to give a fuck anymore. Anyway, it’s not the sort of thing I want to hassle him about at the moment so I just shut up and do it on my own.

Mum didn’t always have a junk fetish. It just kind of turned out that way. Years ago, she was one of the first to jump on the recycling bandwagon. She used to keep all our old newspapers, boxes and bottles out in the shed and once a month she’d load them all into the car and take them to the recycling depot. I don’t think she got

any money or anything for the stuff, or if she did, it wasn't much. Money wasn't the point. At least I don't think it was. I don't actually know what the point of it was. Sometimes Mum just *did* things.

We might have known it would lead somewhere crazy—Mum could never keep things on a purely normal level for long. Maybe Dad knew what was coming all along. Maybe that's why he stopped building his model boats in the shed. Maybe he knew it wouldn't be long before he'd run out of room anyway

I can't remember exactly when Mum started getting obsessive about recycling. If I had to say, it was probably around the time Dad turned black. For whatever reason though, she really did start getting ants in her pants about the whole thing. Started fretting about whether the neighbours were recycling or not—and I'm not just talking about our immediate neighbours. I'm talking about people that lived three blocks down the street. People we'd never met before in our fucking *lives*.

It wasn't long before Mum started spending every rubbish night going through all the bins on our street and taking out anything recyclable. She thought she was being careful not to be seen, but she was kidding herself. Even the kids at my school used to call her "the bag lady". Still, she'd do her best to keep a low profile. She'd even get up and put on her rubber gloves and do it by torchlight in the middle of the night sometimes. And on the mornings after bin nights our breakfast conversations were more or less the same:

'Brian?' Mum might say. 'Brian? Do you know the people at number twelve went through eighteen bottles of cola last week? I mean, really—*eighteen* bottles!'

At best, Dad would nod and grunt.

'Brian, are you listening? I said *eighteen bottles* they went through.'

No answer.

'I suppose they might have had some sort of party or barbecue or something. Do you think they did? Brian? A party or a barbecue? Do you think?'

No answer.

'Maybe we should have a barbecue one of these days, Brian? What say you, old man? I mean, we have such a glorious paved area out the back there—it just makes one want to sing *tra-la-LA-la-LA* with *JOY*, Brian—and you haven't even tried out the new barbecue yet, you big ol' lazybones!'

Dad would eventually respond by saying he was late for work, and get up and leave the rest of his fried eggs and the debate about possible parties at number twelve

to the three of us. At least, that's what he did when he still had his job. After he got fired he didn't usually bother joining us for breakfast. Actually I don't even think he ate it himself most of the time.

Mum didn't go completely nuts on the whole junk thing until after Dad died. When he died, something inside her short-circuited. Some switch within her turned itself on 'COLLECT OVERDRIVE'. I don't just mean she collected *recyclable* stuff either. I mean she started bringing home just about anything, as long as it was virtually or completely useless—bar literal rotting garbage. Her favourite things were still old newspapers and bottles, but you name it: jars, cracked flowerpots, scrap pieces of metal, broken furniture, wire, grass clippings, *whatever*— Mum started 'collecting' it all. And what's more, she stopped taking anything to the recycling depot and started hoarding it instead.

After she'd filled the shed to bursting point she took to piling it up in the back yard. Then the side of the house and then it was the front yard. I don't know where she got it all from. I reckon she must have raided the neighbours' bins one too many times though. I reckon one of them complained. I reckon one of them probably recognised their empty dozen bottles of West Coast Cooler lining our front wall and decided they'd had enough of the weirdo woman at number six.

Whatever happened, a man from the council came over to personally ask Mum to dispose of her junk. His name was Barry. Mum always referred to him as "Busybody Barry" and when she said his name she'd say it with a disgusted screwed up face as if she'd just bitten into an onion. She still managed to somehow smile though. And I knew that meant she didn't like him. 'Busybody Barry says I've got two weeks,' she'd tell me, with her twisted onion smile. 'Can you believe a body could be that busy? Can you?'

So a few days after we heard that Barry paid his third and threatened-to-be-final visit, me and Matthew did our first dump run. Of course, we couldn't do it with Mum around. She'd never have allowed it. We had to wait until she was away shopping for the afternoon and then we went around and took as much as we could to the dump before she got back. It took three trailer-loads just to clear the driveway. Another four to get access to the side of the house. We would have done a few more too, if Mum hadn't come home from the shops and interrupted us.

I remember when I first saw her standing there looking at us, a big toothy grin on her face, hands on her hips. It was strange. She almost looked like she was, well,

excited. She was still holding onto her shopping bags, of which there seemed to be about fifteen—probably ten full of empty fucking jars.

‘What *are* you boys *doing*?’ she said. Her eyes bulged with energy and she held her grin as she spoke. She was looking at us as if it wasn’t the most obvious thing in the whole wide fucking world what we were doing. Like she was waiting for some big surprise or for an invitation to join our secret game.

‘What in Ugly Dave’s name *are* you two naughty boys doing?’

‘What does it look like, Mum?’ Matthew looked up and wiped his brow on his filthy glove. ‘*Somebody’s* got to clean up this hole you live in.’

‘Hole?’ said Mum. ‘Hole?’ She burst into laughter. A kind of disturbing, inane laughter. ‘Is that what you call it? A hole?’

‘Mum.’ I said. ‘It’s just the council... you know?’

She was still laughing. ‘Hole? Is that what you call this. My *hole*? I love it!’

She held out her shopping bags. ‘Here you two boys, take these from your poor old mother will you? Crikey, I think my arms are about to fall off.’

Matthew looked at me and nodded. We took our gloves off and went to grab the bags from Mum. ‘Ooh,’ she said, rubbing her flabby, determined biceps. ‘That’s better.’ And then she laughed. ‘I thought my arms were about to fall off. And then I would have been in trouble, wouldn’t I? If my arms fell off? Eh? I wouldn’t have been able to dig myself out of my own hole!’ She kept laughing and staring right into my eyes.

I remember looking around at my brother, hoping he would say something useful but he just rolled his eyes and headed inside with the shopping. Clean-up was over for the day.

*

When I get to Mum’s with my huge canvas bags in my hand, I start wondering if I’m going to be met with the usual mountain of junk in the backyard. Or if there’s a chance she’s been collecting less lately. If there’s a chance she’s actually let that stupid habit of hers go.

I doubt it. That’d be some kind of a miracle. No one in our family’s ever really been able to let anything go. Stupid habits. Obsessions. Pain. We each hold on as tight

as we can to our own bucket of shit, as if our lives depended on it. Mum does it. Matthew does it. Dad held on to his more desperately than anyone.

I do it too. But at least I'm aware that I do. And whether Selphie thought so or not, I do actually try not to get too obsessive about things. I try—but at the same time, I'm careful not to try too hard. Someone once told me that the harder you try not to be like your parents the more you end up like them. So I deliberately don't try too hard. It's like I'm riding in a train carriage on the same track as them, hoping that somewhere along the way the lines will divert, the carriages will unlink and I'll slip off in another direction. It's wishful thinking maybe—but what else can you do?

I head around the back to be greeted by the usual mess. I drop the huge canvas bags on the ground, stand there with my hands on my hips and sigh. There's a shitload of newspapers this month. How anybody can get their hands on that many newspapers in a single month I will never know. I'm going to have to distribute them evenly between the bags. They get heavy enough already when they're full. Heavy enough so I have to drag them.

I start with the nearest pile. It's a hot day and I'm sweating within minutes. It's not exactly my idea of a good time but I suppose things could be worse. At least I don't have to deal with any interruptions from Mum. She doesn't come out on dump days anymore. It used to be a nightmare. She used to hassle the shit out of Matthew and me whenever we tried to clean up. She'd hang around like a giant European wasp, in her Betty Boop apron, trying to drive us wild with distraction. Tell us we couldn't take certain jars. Tell us we couldn't take piles of newspapers until she'd sorted through them. Tell us we were Busybody Barry's slave boys. Once she even threatened to burn the whole place down rather than let us clean it up. Matthew shrugged and handed her a match.

Somewhere along the way she started just leaving us to it. I think she probably just thought we'd stop bothering with it all one day. Anyway, it seemed as long as we left a reasonable amount of rubbish in and around the shed she was somehow satisfied enough not to kick up a fuss.

These days whenever she hears me come over on a Sunday she just sits in her bedroom and watches her musicals on the DVD player. She turns them up extra loud so I can hear from the other side of the brick wall. So I know that she knows that I'm there. She's watching *The Sound of Music* today. Great. I'll probably have songs about bright copper fucking kettles stuck in my head for the next week.

The day wears on. I fill bag after bag. By the time I've finished the second dump run, I've got the piles down by about half. I could do another run and get them down even more but Mum's re-watching her favourite scene for the umpteenth time and I need some serious relief from the problem of Maria thumping through that bedroom wall. Christ, I mean—how do you hold a moonbeam in your hand? Who *gives* a fuck?

I head to the local pub where the focus is less on how to hold fucking moonbeams, and more on how to make a fantastic steak sandwich. In fact, they make the best steak sandwiches going around. Better than the ones I make, anyway. And they have free newspapers for the punters.

My mobile rings as I'm working my way through the food and peeling my way through a slightly sticky sports section. The punter before me was a messy bastard all right. I answer my phone without checking who it is.

'Hello?'

'George?'

It's Leonard.

Damn.

'Listen up, George,' he barks at me.

I say that he "barks", but it's not really a bark—it's more like a yap. He yaps like one of those fucking annoying tiny little dogs that should be cats. The ones that wear stupid little woollen dog jackets and piss everywhere when they get excited. The ones that run around in circles as they go crazy at you through the back windscreens of European luxury vehicles. 'George,' he yaps. 'Can you do a shift tonight? Karen called in sick and we're short.'

'Oh, well—'

'Hang on a second George. Just hang on, will you?'

'But I—'

'Hang *on* George. I won't be a minute.'

I hear Leonard put the phone down. That would be just like him to ring me up while I'm eating my lunch, ask me for a fucking favour and then put me on hold. I sit there waiting for him, wondering whether I should do the shift or not. If it was just to help Leonard out, I think I'd make up some excuse, but I don't mind covering for Karen. She's pretty cool. She's the assistant manager of the bowling café. She's also a thirty-three year-old virgin. It's virginity by choice. I mean, it's not like she's a

particularly unattractive person in terms of looks or behaviour. She's a bit of a mix—a bouncy bright-eyed woman with flanks like a pony. She's got a raucous laugh and she has a nice face, if you can turn a blind eye to the 80s hairdo and the slight moustache. She told me once she's just been waiting for the right man and the wedding night. Frank, her current fiancé, spent three and half years waiting for her to say yes. You should have seen the smile on his face when he was walking around telling people that she'd accepted his proposal. Good fucking luck to them, I reckon. It still amazes me though, that they'd be prepared to wait for someone that long. Jeez, I hope it's worth it.

'George? George? Are you with me?'

'Yes Leonard, I'm here.'

'My question is not whether you're there, George. My question is: Are you *with me?*'

Sigh. 'I'm with you Leonard.'

'Good. Now listen. I need you down here pronto, George, do you hear me? Pronto! It's an emergency Georgie-boy!'

I shrug. What the hell else have I got to do anyway? 'Okay Leonard,' I say. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'*Thank* you George.' Leonard hangs up.

I sit and finish my steak sandwich. Keep flicking through the paper. I'm not really reading it. Just kind of scanning. Then my eyes stop dead. Stop fucking *dead*. A tiny article. Tucked away down the bottom corner somewhere:

Serial Prowler seen in Aitken Street

Police have confirmed that a serial prowler has been operating in the local area. The prowler has been seen peering into the windows of sleeping occupants. Police are appealing to anyone with any information to contact them. The public are advised not to confront the prowler as it is not known whether he poses a threat.

Fuck. Aitken Street. That's just five minutes' walk from where I live. There's a prowler wandering around at night, just five minutes from where I sleep. A fucking prowler. In my area. *Motherfucker*.

I continue my meal in disbelief. My brain is spinning. What the fuck does this mean? How the fuck am I going to get to sleep knowing there's a prowler out there? In *my* fucking neighbourhood!

I'll kill the fucking cunt.

I will *kill* the fucking cunt.

I quickly finish the rest of my food and then get up and leave. I know Leonard wants me at work as soon as possible but fuck him. I have to stop at a take-away joint on the way home and pick up some chicken and chips for Matthew. He won't have eaten dinner. I know because he only really eats when I cook. Otherwise he just picks on whatever he can find in the fridge, and we still don't have a fridge at the moment.

I get home and I go to his room and knock. He doesn't tell me to come in but I open the door, just to check if he's there. He's there, all right. Curled up and completely hidden under his quilt cocoon like a giant freak human caterpillar.

'What you doing?' I say. 'Going to bed already?'

'Yeah,' says a muffled voice from somewhere beneath the doona. 'Tired.'

'Mate, it's not even six o'clock.'

'Tired.'

'You want some chicken and chips? I picked some up for ya.'

'Later.'

'It's pretty good,' I say. 'Wing piece. Make sure you have a crack at it while it's still hot.'

No answer.

'Matt?'

No answer.

'Oh, well, just don't let it get too cold, all right?'

He sits bolt upright and rips the doona from around his head so I can see the anger in his eyes. 'For fuck's sake, I said I'll eat *later*. Now can you fuck *off* please and let me get some sleep!'

'Sure' I say, and then mutter to myself, maybe just loud enough so he can hear it. 'Jeez. Keep your fucking panties on.' And then I feel bad for doing so. I know he's in a shit space right now.

He lies back down and yanks the quilt back up over his head. 'Just fuck off. *Please,*' he mumbles through the stuffing.

'Sure thing, brother.' I leave and shut his door behind me and head to my room to get changed. Walk through the kitchen to see the usual fucking mess. Matthew's barely done the dishes since he's been here. Nothing too different about that I guess—it's always really been me who's done the dishes in my family. And shit, there were always more than enough dishes to do when I was growing up.

For some reason, pretty soon after Dad stopped eating with the rest of us, Mum started loading the dinner table with a lot more dishes. It got so that cleaning up after dinner for just her and me and Matthew was like cleaning up after a Christmas banquet for ten, night after night after night. I don't know why she started using so many. Whatever the reason, her new motto seemed to be: *why use one fucking dish when you can use seven?* Even the stuff she laid out on the table was divided into several smaller dishes. Instead of say, putting a heap of potatoes into one big bowl, she'd ration it out into three or four smaller ones. And she gave us all side plates, bread plates, butter bowls, multiple cutlery, you fucking name it.

Because Matthew had some serious homework happening at that time, it was me who got the job of clearing the table every night. I ended up making it into a kind of game. I tried to stack everything up, not only so that it fitted on the sink, but so that it looked nice as well. It was always a challenge though. A bit like playing Jenga and Pick Up Sticks at the same time. Some of those dish-stack structures I used to create were works of fucking genius. Architectural landmarks. I used to stand back and marvel at how I even did it sometimes. I guess I just have a knack for putting things together. Building stuff.

That's what I want to do one day, I guess. Learn how to build stuff for real. Not just models. And not boring shit like houses and offices. Interesting things like bridges and dams and towers and castles. And I will one day. I'll build stuff. Stuff that doesn't fall apart.

I call Stacey to work out how to get her car back and it turns out she's bowling in an evening league tonight as well as her normal afternoon one. Perfect. I can drive it to work and she can take it home when she's finished.

Twenty minutes later I'm walking into the café kitchen, yawning, and at the same time grimacing at the sink overflowing with dirty coffee cups and plates and saucers and shit. This amount of dishes puts even my mum's nightly banquets to

shame. It's a mountain of china. A fucking great *wall* of china. And it's a rookie job of stacking as well. I already know that there's going to be a few broken cups under that lot. Gonna take me half an hour just to pull it all apart and put it back together properly so I can start washing it. There's nothing to do though, but start. I sigh and start clearing one of the sinks out so I can fill it with hot water and stick some of the dishes in to soak.

As I reach down into the murky cold water to fish for the plug, my hand brushes against something slimy. Something revolting—a leaf of soaking lettuce or maybe somebody's used serviette. It feels like seaweed or something, wrapped around my fingers, stuck to them. Disgusting. Reminds me of that time me and Matthew went down to the jetty in the middle of the night and hung out for a few hours in his favourite green rowboat.

We'd been getting drunk together. Not just drinking. Getting *drunk*. Neither of us usually drank much alcohol. We'd both tried it before and we weren't that interested. But it was few weeks after Dad died and getting drunk just seemed like the thing to do. We left Mum with her piles of junk and we snuck down to the beach with some hot chips and a four litre cask of goon. We had no plans to take the boat out to sea or anything, just sit in it and drink while it was tied to the jetty.

Before I knew it we'd drunk most of the wine, we'd finished the chips and we were lying on our backs in that green fucking rowboat, bobbing up and down in the dark on the sea, staring at the stars. For two teenagers, we'd done pretty well—scoring grog, food and our own private boat. The only thing we hadn't managed to do was have a conversation about *him*. That part wasn't really my fault. Any time I tried to bring anything up about Dad, Matthew told me to can it and have another drink.

And so I lay there, staring at the stars, trying to think of something else to talk about when it became suddenly and violently apparent that lying on my back in a rocking boat after a belly full of wine and chips was perhaps not the absolute smartest fucking thing I'd done thus far in my relatively short life.

Somehow I managed to get to my knees just before I started heaving untold amounts of puke over the side. It was the foulest-tasting stuff that had ever passed my lips. Had it been the middle of the day, even the most starving of circling seagulls would have passed it up without a second thought. And every foul gurgle and spit only made me need to do it more.

Matthew sat up and gave a drunken snort of a laugh. Patted me hard on the back. ‘Get it all out mate,’ he said. ‘And don’t worry, we’ve got plenty more grog to fill you back up.’ Then he sat back in the boat and took another swig and broke into a piss-take sea shanty: “*What shall we do with the drunken sailor*”.

Mum used to sing her own version of that song now and then, whenever Dad had a few drinks—and I don’t mean if he was *drunk*. Even if he’d just sat down to have his first cold beer after a long hot day my Mum could appear out of nowhere and hover around him, swinging her flabby arms and mock-stomping her feet and winking and nudging and singing her lungs out with a great big smile on her face:

*What shall we do with a drunk called Brian?
What shall we do with a drunk called Brian?
What shall we do with a drunk called Brian?
Ear-lie in the evening!*

And, of course, Dad would put up with it for as long as he could, until eventually, he’d put down his beer and leave to find somewhere more peaceful, and Mum would sing after him as he left:

*Hooray, and up he rises!
Hooray, and up he rises!
Hooray, and up he rises!
Ear-lie in the evening!*

I was non-stop puking and trying not to listen to my brother singing the original shanty in the deepest mariner slur his sixteen-year-old voice could muster. He was almost having fun. He’d pause now and then, to time his ‘*Too—ray, and up she rises*’ to go along with my retches.

And then he stopped—to get stuck into the wine for a bit, I assumed—and for a little while, all I could hear was the waves slapping against the bottom of the boat and all I could feel was the few remaining contents of my stomach slapping around inside me.

‘Thank fuck for that,’ I managed, eventually. ‘Prick.’
‘Shut up, George.’

I looked back at him and wiped my mouth. Then immediately hung my head back over the side and let fly with some more fish bait.

‘I said: *Shutup!*’

There was a seriousness in his voice so I tried harder to hold myself together. Again I wiped spew from the side of my mouth. ‘What is it?’

‘I can’t fucking believe it,’ he said. ‘I think we’re drifting out to sea. The rope must have come loose.’

I looked back at the jetty. Although the moon was out, it was a pretty dark night and I was drunk. It was hard to gauge whether we were ten feet away or forty.

‘Bullshit,’ I said.

‘We fucking *are*, man. We’re fucking drifting.’

I kept quiet and listened to the waves slapping against the side of the boat. I don’t know why I chose ‘listening’ as a way to work out whether we were moving farther away from shore or not. It’s just what I did at the time. And as I listened to those waves slapping against the boat, I suddenly felt terribly alone. And it suddenly became very fucking crystal clear that we were in fact, drifting out to sea.

‘Shit,’ I said. ‘Where’s the fucking oars?’

‘There aren’t any.’

‘What do you mean—*there aren’t any?*’

‘There aren’t any. Whoever owns this boat locks them away in the boathouse overnight. I know cause I’ve been down here trying to steal this thing before.’

I had a sick feeling in my guts. And it wasn’t just because of the puking. ‘Well what the fuck do we do, then?’

‘Start paddling mate. Start fucking paddling!’

In a flash both of us were leaning over the side of the boat pumping our arms through the water as strongly as we could. But it didn’t seem to matter how hard we tried. We just didn’t seem to be going anywhere. The exertion was making me feel crooked by the minute. I heaved up a couple more chunks. Wiped my face on my shoulder and tried to catch some deep breaths. I wasn’t about to stop paddling though. Not with Matthew yelling at me like a madman from behind. ‘Keep going little brother! Keep fucking going!’

I paddled and paddled and paddled but it felt useless. As if we weren’t moving an inch. The current must have been too strong. We still seemed just as far away from the jetty as we had been minutes before. ‘Keep going little brother!’ yelled Matthew,

again. I was almost out of breath but I kept paddling and paddling until I was about to collapse and then I stopped for a few seconds. ‘Fuck,’ I panted. ‘Fuck, man, are we screwed or what?’ I hung over the edge of the boat like that, panting, my head spinning, waiting for an answer. I could hear that Matthew had stopped paddling as well. I started thinking about how far we were going to drift. Whether they’d ever find us. Whether we’d just get dumped by a big wave out in the middle of nowhere and end up drowning, never to be seen again. Mum would be so devastated she’d probably wet herself laughing at the funeral.

And then I thought I heard what sounded like a chuckle. I turned around to see Matthew sitting up at the back of the boat. He was dangling an oar in the water. We did have them after all. I knew straight away the bastard must have been quietly pushing back the other way the whole time I was paddling. I could tell from the big red plonk-stained grin on his face.

I shook my head at him but I couldn’t help smiling a bit. ‘You’re an asshole.’

He laughed and put on a piss-weak pirate voice: ‘*Aaargh... don’t ye be mouthin’ off to your cap’n like that or ye will surely have to walk the plank!*’ Then he threw me the cask, went over to the front of the boat and fished a thick rope out of the water. Started pulling us along it, all the way back to the jetty. In my drunken state I’d missed the fact that he’d never untethered us in the first place. I sat there, exhausted, but at least not puking anymore, with my hand dangling in the cool water, letting the disgusting seaweed wrap itself around my fingers, letting my older brother pull us back.

I hold all the gunk aside from the plughole so that the cold dirty water can drain out. Then I fish the soggy pile of leftovers, serviettes, teabags and whatever out of the sink and fling it in the garbage bin. It sticks to the side and then slips down slowly. I empty the sink of dirty dishes and I give the hot water a blast to wash any remaining gunk down the plughole. My hands feel disgusting and they smell disgusting. It’s going to be a long night.

The bell on the counter rings. I poke my head around the corner to see Stacey leaning across the linoleum floor.

‘Hello stranger. I thought I saw you come in,’ she smiles.

‘Good evening madam.’

‘How are ya tonight?’

‘I’m okay.’

‘And how is my beloved beast?’

‘I just told you—I’m okay, thank you.’

‘Very funny, mister.’

‘Oh—you mean the *car*?’ I say, with a cheeky smile. ‘She’s all good. Ran like a dream. And hey—thanks again.’

‘You are very welcome,’ she says. Then she sighs: ‘I can’t believe your arsehole boss is making you work on your day off. You would’ve thought he’d know you spend enough time here already.’

‘I reckon,’ I say. ‘Shit time to come in, too. Kitchen’s a disaster. Gonna be a real dog of a night, I can tell you.’

‘Poor ol’ thing,’ she smiles. ‘What time do—’

‘George! Yo! Georgie-boy!’ It’s Leonard. I tell Stace I’ll catch up with her later and I quickly duck my head back from around the corner.

‘George! Where are you?’

I don’t make a sound. I know I can’t avoid him all night but at least I can try for as long as possible. I actually contemplate climbing up on the sink and hiding behind that fucking mountain of dishes. But there’s no time. Leonard comes bounding into the kitchen. ‘Sheez, George, you really gotta try and keep on top of this mess, you know?’

‘Leonard,’ I say. ‘I only just got here. You only rang me up an hour ago.’

‘How long since you started, George?’

‘I don’t know, about ten minutes.’

Leonard sticks his piggy chin out thoughtfully and nods and looks around and then he says, ‘Anyway, you’ll need to leave this for the moment, George. I have an important job for you.’

‘But Leonard,’ I say, and point to the stack of dishes. ‘It’s going to take me all night just to clean *this* up. Can’t the other job wait until tomorrow?’

‘Not this one, my boy,’ says Leonard. ‘Anyway, you can stay back late and finish up here if you like.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ I mutter.

‘It’s a bit of a bugger this job, George, but you’ll be right, it’s just one of those things.’

What could be more of a bugger than cleaning thirty bins, I think to myself. Bring it fucking on.

We start heading out of the kitchen together. Leonard stares straight ahead as he talks. ‘Normally I’d get one of the chickies to do it George but there’s only us fellas in here tonight.’

Right at that moment, Liiza, Leonard’s wife, bustles out of the office with a pile of what looks like junk mail clutched to her chest.

‘Except for Liiza, of course,’ says Leonard, ‘but she’s working on some very important documents at the moment so I’m afraid I’m going to have to use you instead.’

‘So what is it that you want me to do?’ I ask. It suddenly dawns on me that Leonard and I are striding urgently in the direction of the ladies’ toilets. We walk all the way up to the entrance and then Leonard suddenly stops and puts his hand on my shoulder. Turns me to face him so he can look me in the eye. ‘Fucker of a job mate,’ he says—and it’s the first time I’ve ever heard him swear like that—‘but someone’s gotta do it.’ Then he swings open the door to the ladies’ toilets and ushers me inside. He pushes the door shut quickly behind him and steers me into the main area, where all the cubicles are. I can’t remember ever being in the ladies’ room before so I’m initially quite curious. Initially. About half a second later I find that I can’t think about what being in a ladies’ room is actually like because the part of my brain that thinks has only got one thought running through it: There is *shit everywhere*...

When I say there is “shit” everywhere, I mean it literally. It’s smeared on the mirrors, over the cubicle doors, in big streaks on the floor. There’s obscenities fingerpainted in the excrement on the walls. Across the main bathroom mirror somebody’s smeared the words “DIRTY PRICK” in shit. If I hadn’t have seen how disgusting this was I wouldn’t have believed it.

‘Some stupid kids probably just having a laugh,’ says Leonard. He hands me a pair of pink rubber gloves. ‘I’d wear these if I were you. You should be able to get it all off with that.’ He points to a bucket, a mop and a sponge. ‘I’ll go and watch the café for you until you get back.’

I don’t say anything. I just stand there and take the gloves and listen to the door swing shut behind me. I probably stand there for a few minutes while I try and get my head around what the next hour of my life is going to be like. Then I put on my gloves and get to work.

It’s closer to two hours in the end. I spend most of the time dry-retching with my eyes shut. To make matters worse I have Liiza coming in every twenty minutes

asking when I'm going to be finished so she can stop escorting women to the men's room and get back to her documents. I eventually tell her that instead of reading junk mail she's welcome to come and help me get it done quicker. She pretends not to hear me but at least she doesn't bother me again.

It's nearly ten o'clock before I get back to the café. I'm not in the best of moods. In fact, I feel pretty much like a man who's spent almost two hours cleaning other people's shit off walls.

Leonard's leaning against the counter, stuffing his face with hot chips when I walk in. When he sees me he immediately stands up straight and assures me he would have started cleaning up the kitchen but that he's been flat out cooking all night. I can't even be bothered pretending to believe him. 'Yeah, right,' I say and walk straight past him back out to the great wall of china. Fill up the sink with hot water and fresh suds. The counter bell rings just as I'm getting started. Fuck it all. Whoever it is I'm telling them no more hot food tonight anyway. I head out to the counter. It's not a normal customer. It's Stacey.

'Hey, Stace.' There must be something about the tone of my voice.

'What's wrong?' she says.

'Don't ask.'

'Are you going to be long?' she says. 'Wanna go for a drink somewhere when you knock off?'

'Can't. I'll be fucking ages. Probably miss the last train and everything.'

'Really?' she says. She looks at her watch. 'Well, you know, I suppose I can wait for you if you like. Give you a lift back to your place.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah, I don't want to go home right now anyway. Mum and Bob are playing Texas Hold 'em with some crazy friends of theirs. They'll be carrying on all bloody night.'

'All right,' I say. 'Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.'

'No worries,' she says. 'Mind if I grab a toasted cheese sandwich while I wait.'

'On the house,' I say. 'Just keep it to yourself. I don't want anyone else getting a taste for 'em.'

And so Stace waits for me while I work my way through the mountain of dishes. I make her a sandwich and keep her plied with free coffees and have a couple

for myself on the side. I work pretty hard and fast but it's still after midnight by the time I'm finished with everything.

When we get home the house is dark. Matthew must be asleep. Stace says she needs to take a shower. I guess that means she's staying over. I kind of knew she would. I'm not sure where we are going with this and I'm not even sure we are going anywhere. The only thing I am sure about is that I'm going to need a long shower myself after scrubbing those toilets tonight so I let her go first.

While she's in the shower I can't help but start thinking about that prowler on Aitken Street. I decide I'd better walk around and give the house a quick check. Just in case. I know it sounds kind of paranoid, but at least I'm not as bad as I used to be. I used to walk around the house with a carving knife and even check inside all of the cupboards in the kitchen for fuck's sake. As if someone was going to remove all of the dinner plates and cups and stash them somewhere, and then crawl into the empty space and wait for me to go to sleep so they could sneak into my room and fuck with me.

I walk through the kitchen. The cupboards all look pretty shut to me, though I don't look closely. I don't bother checking inside them. Like I said, I'm not as paranoid these days. I still check the pantry though. Nothing dangerous in there except for the twenty-something packets of stuff that are ten years past their use-by dates. I leave the kitchen and start to check the rest of the house. The wooden floors creak as I walk around. It's weird, when I enter a dark room they creak and they sound kind of foreboding but as soon as I switch the light on the creaks sound warm and welcoming. I wonder why that is. I hope it doesn't mean I'm just a grown man who's afraid of the dark.

I sometimes worry that I'm going to switch a light on to find someone standing in front of me with a shocked look on their face. And then that look's going to turn from shock to either anger or desperation. And either way, they're going to try and take me out. That's why I always turn the lights on with one fist raised so that I can be ready for them when they attack me. But it's not really a matter of being paranoid. More like being prepared.

And so it's a pretty casual check of the house. All the curtains are drawn tight. There's no gaps for anyone to see through. The window stoppers are in place. I can feel them by reaching behind the curtains with my fingers. I sometimes wonder if anyone's watching my fingers from behind the other side of the pane. I doubt it. But just in case, I raise my middle finger as I check a few. Just to show them that I'm not

scared. When I get to Matthew's room, I notice his bedroom light is shining through the gap underneath his door. I knock but there's no answer. I open the door quietly. He's flat on his back on top of his quilt in his underwear, zonked. The chicken and chips I left is still in a box on the floor. He's had a few chips but the chicken's hardly been touched. Oh well, at least he's eating *something*. I clear it out and turn off his light and shut the door. He half-groans for a second but doesn't stir too much.

I take the box back into the kitchen to put it on the sink and I notice that one of the saucepan cupboards is slightly ajar. I can't remember whether it was like that or not. I know it's completely ridiculous to think that someone might have gone and removed the saucepans while I was walking around the house. That they might have been able to quietly stash them somewhere and then creep into the crawlspace without me seeing or hearing a thing. I put the box down and take another look. It's impossible. No way. But then I think—what if they did? What if this fucking Aitken Street prowler's been sneaking from room to room while I was mucking around with window stoppers? What if he took the opportunity to crawl in there while I was in Matthew's room? As much as I try to resist I find that I can't. I simply have to check to make sure. So I go over to the cupboard and I say quietly, 'You'd better hope you're not in there motherfucker,' and I quickly yank the cupboard door open.

There's nothing in there but a pile of saucepans.

'Everything okay?' Stacey's standing in the kitchen doorway. Wrapped in a towel.

'Yeah, fine. Just um... checking on these saucepans.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'Nah, nothing.'

'Are they well? Are they happy?'

'What? Who?... *What?*'

'The saucepans. How are they doing? I mean, you should know—you were just having a conversation with them, weren't you?'

'I'm not sure what you mean...'

'Sure thing George,' she smiles. 'Next time say hi from me. Tell the big one I'm sorry about giving him a hard time the other night. Tell him I was only stirring.' She giggles.

'Look, I wasn't talking to the saucepans. I really don't know what the fuck you are on about.'

She shrugs, still smiling. 'Whatever you say, George. You gonna take a shower?'

'Yeah. I am.'

I walk past her to the bathroom. Get in the shower and start scrubbing the day away. Standing under the hot water, I wonder for a few moments whether I checked the house properly but then I figure Stacey is around so if anyone was out there then she'd probably hear anyway. When I finish my shower I dry off and stand in front of the mirror. There's some sort of allergic rash on my arms that looks pretty bad tonight. Doesn't itch much. Just looks weird. Splotchy. I think it's starting to come up on my legs as well. I have some ointment that I can use when it gets like this. I figure I may as well put some on. It's greasy. Like Vaseline or something. Feels pretty gross but it helps. I grease up my arms and my legs with quite a thick coat and then I go into the bedroom and climb into bed. As soon as I do, Stacey snuggles up against me. I'd forgotten she would probably do that.

'Eew, what's that?' she says, feeling my arm.

'Sorry, just some stuff I have to put on my skin now and then. It's pretty gross, I know.'

'Yeah, it is gross. You feel all oily or something.'

'Yeah, I know. It's all over my legs as well.'

'What about here?' she teases, grabbing gently between my legs.

'It's not there.' I can't help smiling in the darkness.

'Good,' she says, and she turns around and pushes back against me. Curles up into a sort of ball and starts rubbing herself up and down against my cock. Pretty soon she reaches back and slips me inside her. I lie on my side and hold my slippery arms behind my head and push my oiled legs back so I can avoid touching Stacey with my grossness while she grinds herself slowly against me. I watch her grinding in the moonlight. It's weird being inside her like that. It's a new record of sorts: touching in one place only. It feels strange, like we're connected but somehow still apart. Like we're two circles that have been placed next to one another and pushed together so that we overlap just slightly at the edge. With Selphie it was like we were two circles sitting right on top of one another. Like we were two completely different worlds trying to be one together. With Stacey it's not so much two worlds being squeezed into one as it is two worlds drifting into each other's orbits for a while.

faster the coffee is turning into some sort of mini-whirlpool i can see the hole forming at the centre
the swirling is getting faster and faster and it's almost as if dad isn't stirring anymore but just holding on to the spoon as the coffee current swirls it around and around and the spoon isn't clinking against the cup rim anymore but just giving a long ugly scrape now and then that makes my teeth hurt and the little model boat is caught up in it all and it's heading to the centre and it's going to disappear down that black little hole
it's trying to avoid being sucked down as if there is a tiny crew on board fighting to keep it afloat but it's too late because the suck of the swirl is too powerful and in a split second the black hole at the centre of the cup swallows up the boat like the whale swallowing
brian
my dad doesn't say anything
just lets go of the spoon and throws himself into the coffee to find his boat
gotta hand it to him—
the bastard makes a terrific splash when he goes under

*

In the morning, I wake before she does. I get out of bed and stand naked at the window. Feel the sun shine in on my skin. It's warm and soothing, even somehow stupidly uplifting. It's as if I've accidentally stumbled across a moment of utter peace. I try to make it last as long as possible. I stand there, not thinking, just breathing in the sunlight, until a cloud gets in the way.

I turn around just as Stacey begins to stir. She stretches out and yawns. Opens her eyes, blinks a couple of times and looks over at me. Lies there in silence. I can feel the way she is looking at me. She's not just looking in my direction. She's really looking *at* me. Checking me out as a naked human being. I stand there and let her look. I'm not the best looking man in the world but I'm not the worst either. And I don't get embarrassed about my splotchy arms and legs. They are what they are. And anyway, even if I was worried about my looks, even if I was embarrassed, I'd still stand there for her. I know what it's like to want to look at someone. Selph never used to let me just simply look at her nakedness. She always made me feel like I was a

pervert or something. But it wasn't anything dirty like that. I just thought she was beautiful.

'You've actually got really nice skin,' says Stace.

'Turn it up.'

'No, I mean, where the rash isn't. Your skin's really smooth in parts. It's almost like a girl's skin.'

'Fucking hell. Thanks a lot!' I climb back into bed and turn away from her. 'Show's over.'

Stacey laughs gently. 'No, George. Don't worry. I didn't mean anything bad by that. It's just that boys usually have this gross rough skin. I hate touching it. But I like touching yours. It's soft and it's clean.' She runs a hand across my back. 'I really like it.'

I don't say anything but I reach my hand up so she can run her fingers along it. She grabs it gently, runs the tips of her fingers along the inside of my palm. Kneads my bunched fingers. Strokes them.

'Your hands are rough, though,' she says.

'Is that gross?'

'No, I like smooth skin but I don't mind rough hands. You've got good rough man's hands.'

'Well, I hope that makes up for my girl's body.'

She laughs. 'Shut up.'

'Must be all that bullshit hard labour I do. Scrubbing dishes, bins and shit off walls.'

'That *is* bullshit work, you know?' she says. 'I mean—for what you're getting paid, anyway.'

'You think I should try for something else?'

'Maybe. What do you think? What would you do anyway?'

'I don't know.' I lie there and think about it for a moment or two. 'I guess I'm interested in building stuff.'

'What? Like an architect, or an engineer?'

'Sort of.'

'Like a construction worker?'

'Yeah, sort of but not really.'

'Well what, then?'

So I tell Stace about this guy I read about once who lived on the fifth floor of an apartment building somewhere in Latvia or something. Anyway, he rigged up some sort of platform outside his apartment window and—no shit—he built a boat outside, hanging five floors above the street below. I don't know if he had council approval or whatever. All I know is that he did it. I've seen the photos. And it wasn't just a pissy little rowboat either. It was a decent-sized vessel with sleeping quarters and a mast and everything. It took him nearly sixteen years to build. Anyway, when he finished, he had it lowered to the ground, then he took it to sea and sailed around the world.

'You want to build a boat on your balcony and sail it around the world?'

'I don't know. Maybe. I'm not really into boats that much anymore.'

'It's quicker to take a plane, you know. Why don't you build a plane instead? You could build one of those new airbuses.'

'Oh, ha ha. Hilarious.'

'I'm sorry, George,' she laughs—not meanly, just a nice laugh. 'It's just that it's a hell of a plan.'

'It's not a plan. I mean, I don't want to literally build a fucking *boat*. Just something, I guess.'

After a while of not saying anything to each other, we become closer again. Stacey leans over and puts her head on my chest. I close my eyes and stroke her hair. We go into that space where you never quite know what's happening until something else is, and then you don't quite know that's happening either. Sort of like Rapid Eye Movement or something, only it's about slow cuddles and full-on kisses instead of closing eyes and dreaming. And however we end up getting there, at some point or another I realise we are full-on kissing as if it's the only thing either of us have ever known.

Well, at least we are for a few fleeting seconds. I silently curse my senses for catching up to the situation. I can't believe that as soon as I realise the touch of her lips on mine, the cool of her skin on my fingertips, that I can still be so distinctly physically aware that this person is not Selphie. I stop kissing.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'Maybe we shouldn't keep doing this. Being together, I mean.'

'Why not?'

'It's a long story,' I say. 'There was someone else. Someone I'm not really over yet.'

Stacey immediately buries her head in my chest and groans. She's half chuckling as well.

'It's not meant to be funny,' I say. Then I can't help smiling. 'I mean, it's pathetic, yes, but not funny.'

'Oh, George, it's not that. It's just that well... let's just say I know what you mean at the moment.'

'What? You still getting over someone too?'

She nods her head slowly, gently against my chest, and sighs.

'So what are you doing here, then?'

'I don't know.'

'No, really...'

Stacey looks up at me and smiles a bit sheepishly and shrugs. 'Probably the same as you.'

'Oh yeah? And what's that?'

'I don't know—maybe we're just practising.'

'Practising what?'

'Not being with them.'

'Is that really what you're doing with me?'

'I don't know. I really don't know what I'm doing at the moment at all. I'm just trying to get on with my life, I guess. You know, go forward. Whatever.'

'Whatever?'

'Well you know, George,' she shrugs. 'I'm a grown woman. I have needs. It's not just guys that have to get off, you know. If I'm on the horn and I don't get to fuck, I go crazy.'

I lie back and stretch out. 'Oh yeah, well, I guess I understand that part, but—'

'But what?'

'Well... I don't know—why practise with *me*?'

Stacey grins. 'Believe me George, there's nothing more sexy than a man who knows how to make a decent cheese toasted sandwich.'

'Yeah, yeah...very funny. You're on fire today, you know?'

She lies there quietly for a minute or two. 'Oh, I don't know, George,' she finally says. 'Does it matter? Anyway, it doesn't mean I'm falling in love with you or anything, so don't start getting all serious on me, okay?'

I shrug. 'Okay.'

'I mean it George.'

'Okay, *okay*. I promise. Nothing serious.'

'Good.' She moves up and lays her head on my shoulder. Not in a sexy way. Just lays it there like she's willing to talk more but she doesn't really mind if we don't right now.

*

Later that night I find myself lying alone in the dark again. Stacey stayed for dinner but she thought it would be a better idea if she slept at home tonight. I wish I'd asked her to stay. Serious or not, I always sleep better when there's someone next to me.

As it is, there's not and it's nearly midnight and I've been lying here for hours. Broken my record of wanks by so far I think I've started coming air. It's no fucking use though. I can't make myself relax. Can't sleep. Sleep seems as likely for me as travelling to the fucking moon looming outside my window. My mind keeps going from Selphie to my dad to Stacey to the prowler and back again. I feel like I should do something. Like I *have* to do *something*. I'm so restless it's killing me.

I don't actually make a decision to do anything. I just suddenly get up and turn my bedroom light on and start rummaging through my cupboard. I drag out my old overcoat and grab a pair of black jeans and a black t-shirt. I know what I am about to do but I don't want to think about it too much otherwise I don't reckon I'll go through with it. I have a pair of handcuffs from when me and Selphie used to mess around in bed. We both tried handcuffing each other at some stage but in the end it just got kind of dumb and impractical and uncomfortable, so I shoved the cuffs down the back of my sock drawer and forgot about them. Until now. I take them out of the drawer and stick them in my back pocket. Then I grab my baseball bat from under the bed. But then I start thinking: I don't want to be walking around the streets in the dead of night with a fucking baseball bat—I'll look like a freak. So I shove it back under the bed and I go into the kitchen and I grab a knife. I'm not planning to stab anyone or anything, I'll just take it with me in case I need it. You never know what kind of crazy fuck you might meet wandering around the streets in the middle of the night.

It's pretty cold out. I wrap my overcoat around me and shuffle along the side of the road through the lightly spitting rain. There's a few puddles on the ground so I try

to step around them. I've got a hole in one of my boots. I manage okay for a while but sure enough I miss a few and pretty soon my sock's soaking wet and I can hear my foot squelching against the inside of my boot with each step. I try and walk as softly as I can, to minimise the squelching. Not that there's many people around to hear it right now. You don't really get many people out on the streets around here after midnight. Just the odd person out walking their dog. Mostly the dogs you see being walked at this time of night are huge. It must be a good time of night to walk big dogs. Yeah, to walk big dogs and to perve on people in their bedrooms.

I don't know what I am going to do if I see the prowler. I'll probably just keep an eye on him and call the cops and let them deal with it. I guess I just hope he doesn't see me first. But then, there's not much chance of that. I might be shuffling and squelching around like a tramp but inside my heart is fucking racing. I'm scanning the shadows like a night cat on the hunt. My senses are working overtime. I feel strangely more alive than I have for years. I feel like I could hear, see, even smell someone coming from miles away.

And then I do. Well, I *see* them—and it's not exactly miles—more like about forty metres. Anyway, I don't exactly have to be a cat on the prowl to see them because they're striding in full view towards me under one of the rare, bright streetlights on this particular street. Sure enough it's someone walking a dog. And sure enough, it's a fucking big dog.

I quickly step over a small fence and crouch down in the shadows of somebody's garden. I don't want to be seen by any dog-walkers out this late. They might start a conversation with me. Ask me what I'm doing. And I don't really have an answer for them. What can I tell them? That I'm looking for a prowler? They'd just think that I'm weird or something.

I stay crouched as the dog-walker passes. Shit, that's a big dog all right. So big it almost looks like a fucking pony. It passes so close that I can hear its panting as it splashes through the puddles. Even though I only catch a quick glimpse of it under the flickering streetlight, I can tell it's a Rhodesian Ridgeback. I know my dog breeds. Like I said, I've always liked dogs. I only never got one cause of the allergies.

I keep low until I see them go around the corner. Then I head back out as quietly as I can and keep walking. I try to walk down as many different streets in the general area as I can, even Aitken Street, though I figure the prowler would have to be pretty ballsy or stupid to risk being seen around there again. I check around the general

area of any house I see with lights on. It eventually gets to a point though, where there are less and less houses with any lights on at all, so I decide I may as well start heading in the general direction of my own house. At three in the morning, I'm walking back down my street with the knife still hidden in my overcoat, the pair of handcuffs in my pocket and my sock so sopping wet it's started hanging out of the hole in my boot. It's been a pointless night, but probably only slightly more pointless than ejaculating air.

*

The next morning—well, extremely *late* morning—Stacey bounces into my room and jumps on the bed and wakes me up. 'Hey! Sleepyhead!'

I pretend to be asleep.

'Lazy-arse! Wake up!' She reaches under the doona to tickle me.

'Stace! Don't!'

'Well, wake up,' she says.

'I will, I will. Just give me a minute.'

'Jesus George, what are you still doing in bed?' she says, and heads into the bathroom. 'It's almost midday.'

'Never mind that,' I say. 'How the fuck did you get in the house?'

'Your brother let me in.'

'What's he doing?'

She shrugs. 'Lying on the couch, watching telly. With the volume down.'

'Sounds like him.' I stretch and yawn. 'What are you doing here anyway?'

She gives me a look like I am an idiot for asking but she doesn't get a chance to say anything straight away because her phone rings. She fishes around her bag, pulls it out and answers. 'Hello? Oh, hi Bob.'

I get up to take a piss. The toilet floor tiles are freezing cold against my bare feet. I shiver. Stand and aim for the side of the bowl while I listen to Stacey's staccato responses from the other room: 'Yeah, Bob. No, Bob. Okay, Bob. Well, let me know Bob.....I don't know Bob....Okay Bob. Just call me back Bob... Right, Bob. Talk later then.' She hangs up.

'Why do you call your dad "Bob"?' I ask from the bathroom, still pissing.

I hear her kick off her shoes. Listen to her belt drop to the floor. Listen to her sliding out of her jeans and unzipping her top and climbing under the doona. ‘Ooooh, it’s warm in here. No wonder you stayed in bed so late.’

‘Stace? Why do you call him Bob?’

‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘Cos he’s a dag.’

I suppose that’s a good enough reason as any. I never called my dad anything but ‘Dad’. His name was Eric, but I never actually heard anyone call him that—Dad didn’t ever bring anyone over to our house. And Mum didn’t call him by his real name. She had a million names for him—most of them stupid—but never ‘Eric’. On any given day you might hear her call him “sugarjag”, “Mr Hairy Harry Harrison”, “Mr Bump-a-luffagus”, “snow-pea”, “Captain Donovan”, “funky chunky Chihuahua”, “Chief Sitting Bull”, “Moonface Mr Mollison”. Her list of stupid names for Dad was endless.

The only ‘normal’ name she ever called him on a regular basis was the apparently randomly chosen ‘Brian’. Go fucking figure. Maybe she just liked the sound of the name. I don’t think Dad liked being called ‘Brian’ much. But he’d tolerate it most of the time. Only every now and then would it annoy him to the point that he’d leave the room. Every now and then at dinner, after one too many Brians, he’d stand up and glare around at us all and then walk out. And Mum would watch him go. She’d get all excited. ‘What’s wrong? Where are you going?’ she’d call after him, clasping her hands together, with a big grin on her face, ‘What’s wrong fluffy-plum!?’

I’ve got an old photo of Dad somewhere. It’s of him on a pushbike in the 1950s, when he was just about ten years old. On the back of the photo it says: *Eric, first bike*, and the date. He’s got a massive smile on his face. His feet aren’t even touching the ground. I still look at that photo sometimes and wonder who that fucking kid was and how he ended up being my dad. Wonder how he got to the point where he decided he didn’t want to be my dad anymore. That he didn’t want to be *anyone*. Not even Brian.

‘You coming back to bed anytime this century?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

I go back to the bedroom and climb under the doona and snuggle against her. She squeals. ‘Ah! You are *so* cold, mister!’ But rather than push me back, she pulls me closer to her. Salted peanuts. That used to be me who was always the warmest in bed.

Selphie would always get terribly cold feet due to poor circulation and for some reason my feet were always reasonably warm. Probably cause I'm such an overheated wound-up son-of-a-bitch. Anyway, every night we went to bed together, we'd lie with the tops of my feet against her freezing soles and within minutes we'd be sleeping at the same temperature. Two pieces of the same human jigsaw.

Stuff like that really made me think Selphie was the one for me. I used to have visions of what she would look like after having our baby. Lying there in a hospital bed, puffy-eyed, deliriously happy in a calm way only Selphie could be. Squeezing my hand and believing in us. When I thought about that I became so happy inside that I could feel the world rushing around my ears. As if life itself was just a big multicoloured sea of illusions crashing down around me, around Selph, around our child as if we were the only real things. I used to picture her as a mother and my heart would nearly burst. I could picture her face and remember every pore in her beautiful skin. Skin that I can still feel at the tips of my fingers when I shut my eyes. Just being around her made me feel strong.

When she left me I felt physically sick for weeks. It was the same feeling I had when my dad died, and the same feeling I had after the night I woke up with that guy in my room.

Stacey ruffles her fingers through my hair. 'Georgie-boy, are you with me?'

'Don't say that. Leonard says that.'

'What?'

'He says: *Are you with me?*'

'Oh. Does he just? You mean like this?' Stace slips her arm around me and suddenly thrusts her pelvis forward against my arse and whispers in my ear in a kind of mock deep husky voice. 'Hey, Georgie-boy, are you *with* me?'

'Seriously. Don't. That's an image I *so* do not want to have.'

'Oh, come on, Georgie-Porgie. Tell me you're with me. Tell me you are!' She starts dry humping me under the quilt.

'Stace... fuck... come on.'

'You want me to fuck, Georgie? You want me to fuck, huh?' She's giggling now as she humps me. I can't giggle with her though. Even though she's being funny. I just don't feel like I can join in on the fun. It doesn't seem right. I don't know, like I shouldn't be enjoying myself too much with her yet, or something.

'Come on Georgie-Porgie. Leonard wants to fuck.'

I roll over to face her. ‘Yes, okay Stace, you are *very* fucking funny, okay? Ha ha.’ I’m trying to sound annoyed, but somehow when I see the cheeky look on her face, I can’t help smiling.

She grins back and reaches up and gently fingers the corners of my smile. ‘So it *does* smile, does it?’

‘Yes,’ I say. I roll my eyes. ‘Sorry.’ I grab her hands and take them back down under the quilt and clasp them in mine. ‘I just don’t know what the fuck’s going on in my head right now.’

‘It’s all right George,’ she chuckles. ‘You’ll get over yourself. Everyone does eventually.’

I don’t answer that one. We lie there for a little while without saying much. She’s half-right, I probably will get over myself one day. But she’s wrong about the other part. Not everyone does eventually. My dad didn’t “get over himself”.

No, the thing my dad did, was, knowing full well he was violently allergic to fish, waited until the rest of us were at parent/teacher night and then went and cooked himself a big slap-up fucking meal of salmon up on the barbecue—the same barbecue he’d never once bothered to use before in his life—and then sat in his study and cleaned the entire fucking plate and washed it down with a bottle of whiskey. For dad to eat a whole bunch of salmon was probably the same as your normal suicide swallowing a bottle of cleaning fluid. The effect that fish had on his system was severe. I found out later he’d probably gone into some sort of shock. I didn’t know that at the time, though, and Mum kept the details from us for years. All I knew at the time is that when we all walked back into the study he looked like was sitting there with a big wet smile on his massive swollen face. I say “looked like” because it wasn’t really a smile. It was more a kind of desperate grimace held fast by a mixture of fish pieces and vomit he must have desperately tried to keep shoving back into his mouth and swallowing even though his body must have been trying nearly as hard to reject it.

Part of me thinks he probably was smiling in a way—I mean, the man must have known he was going to die at some point. And in the end, I think that was what he wanted. Badly. In fact, if he’d wanted to live about a tenth as much as he wanted to die, he probably would have ended up a pretty good dad.

Stacey yawns and stretches and rubs her head against me.

‘Hey, Stace,’ I say, and stroke her hair. ‘Do you want to hang out today?’

‘Sure. That’s what we’re doing aren’t we?’

‘I mean get out of bed and actually go and—I don’t know—*do* something together?’

‘Oh, okay. Sure.’

‘Now?’

‘Soon,’ she says, and pulls me on to my back, shifts up to straddle me. Leans forward and kisses my neck. ‘Soon’.

*

i’m in the backyard at mum and dad’s house in the middle of the night just sitting there watching and listening it’s dark for the moment because the moon is hidden behind some heavy cloud the pool water is black it’s like someone has filled the pool with oil it’s darker than the night all of a sudden i hear muffled voices it’s two people coming up the driveway i can just make out their silhouettes they’re carrying something it kind of looks like a stretcher

these people look like they’re doing some sort of wrong deed like they are trying not to get caught doing something bad they talk in hushed tones i shrink back into the shadows they lay the stretcher down with its head end resting on the pool edge then they both grab onto the other end they look like they’re struggling to heave something up and then

it hits me

there is a body on that stretcher

my heart leaps into my mouth i want to shrink back further into the shadows i want to disappear but i’m transfixed they’re really struggling to lift their end up for some reason that person on the stretcher must have suddenly become enormously heavier i can hear them straining straining to lift slowly then as they manage to lift one end up past their waists the body starts to slide ever so slowly inch by inch and it hits me

they’re dumping a body in my mum and dad’s pool

i don’t have time to think about what this means because the very next moment the moon comes out from behind the clouds and shines down brightly upon the whole scene i can’t help seeing the face on the stretcher and when i do i want to close my eyes and keep them closed forever

but there it is

holding my vision hostage
shining white translucent in the moonlight
eyes shut and hair neatly parted
lips softly apart so that i can see a fragment of the smile that used to melt me
i can feel her just by looking at her
i can feel the warmth of her cheek on my fingertips
i can still smell her neck it's a smell i used to love but i now feel myself choking
on i feel a tear slip slowly down my cheek as my breathless voice barely registers
a croak

anna?

with a final gasp they hoist the stretcher to the required angle and in a single
motion anna's body slides out of the moonlight and into the black water without
making a sound not even so much as a single splash

*

I'm lying in bed, alone. Me and Stace didn't end up getting a chance to hang
out together after all. Bob rang back. She has to fill his spot in one of his bowling
teams because his gout's playing up. I wanted to hang out with her today, but I don't
really mind, to tell the truth. I'm still pretty knackered from being out all night last
night. Not that I'm likely to get any sleep right now though. Any chance of me
sleeping is being soundly ruled out by the repetitive loud knocking on our front door.

I'm trying to ignore it but I know whoever it is is a determined bastard. I can
tell just by the knock. It's slow and steady and loud, and it resonates persistence and
confidence. It tells me: you *will* answer me.

Fuck it all. I toss off my doona. 'Coming!' I yell. The knock stops
immediately, almost *respectfully*—and yet I know, it will only stop temporarily.

I stumble downstairs in my jocks. Matthew is lying on the couch. The curtains
are drawn. The muted TV is flickering in the darkness.

'Fucking hell mate. You could have at least got the door,' I say.

He doesn't answer. Of course, I didn't expect him to. He's asleep. Snoring like
a fucking train.

The knock starts up again, slightly faster. Slightly louder. ‘All right, all right!’ I yell, and stomp over to open the front door. ‘I said I was coming!’

The man standing on my doorstep is wearing a fucking hard hat, for some reason. He’s also wearing a suit with an identification tag on it. He looks at me standing there in my jocks, half-asleep, squinting at his name.

‘Barry Ferguson,’ he tells me, sternly. ‘Council.’

I nod, and I also get a sudden, strong feeling that he might just be *the* ‘Busybody Barry’ that Mum always complained about. The fucking original guy. I can’t be sure cause I never actually met old Busybody Barry. I just remember Mum saying there was something she didn’t like about him from the moment she saw him. ‘Some people are just like that,’ she said. ‘They invite repulsion.’

I’m not quite sure what it is that’s immediately off-putting about the man standing in front of me. Maybe it’s the badge he’s wearing on his tie. It’s a big badge—a *huge* badge—with a picture of himself on it. It’s not part of his identification tag set-up, by the way. It’s not an official badge at all. It’s round and it looks home-made, like a fucking eighties cheer squad duffle coat item. I wonder if maybe he’s wearing it so people can tell what his hair looks like when he’s not wearing that ridiculously big hard hat of his. That hat bugs me even more than the badge. I mean, why the fuck is he wearing a hard hat in the middle of a suburban street? Is he seriously expecting something to fall on his head? I look from Barry’s badge to the clear blue sky as he starts telling me about how someone’s been seen cleaning the pink dot off the tree in front of my house. He wants to know whether I know anything about it. He asks in a way that suggests that of course I know something about it.

‘No idea what you’re talking about,’ I grumble, still looking above his head.

‘What tree?’

‘The dead one right there,’ he points. ‘Right outside your balcony.’

I drop my gaze. ‘That one?’ I say. ‘Doesn’t look dead to me.’

‘Doesn’t look dead to you?’

I shake my head.

‘It’s dead, buddy-o. Believe me.’

I shrug. ‘Whatever.’

Barry adjusts his hard hat. ‘Our arborist says he got a call from someone living at this address, asking him not to cut it down,’ he says. ‘Did that call come from you?’

I tell him I don’t know anything about pink dots and dead trees.

‘You don’t know anything about pink dots and dead trees?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you should know that this tree is being cut down because the dead limbs represent a danger to the immediate community.’

‘Uh huh.’

‘You should also know that we have re-marked it with another pink dot and that it is an offence to interfere with council activity.’

‘Uh huh.’

He stands there for a while, looking at me looking at him. He doesn’t say anything. Just stands there and stares at me, stony-faced. He’s obviously trying to look intimidating. He’s trying to make me think about the serious consequences of interfering with council activity. But I can’t be intimidated right now. For a start, I’m too tired. And anyway, I still can’t think of much else other than the fact that he’s wearing a fucking hard hat in the middle of a suburban street. ‘Hey Barry,’ I say, ‘What’s with the hat?’

Barry’s left cheek twitches slightly. He reaches up and adjusts his headgear
‘This hat?’

‘Yeah, that hat. What’s with it?’

‘Council regulations.’

‘Oh, come on. Really?’

‘Really.’

‘I mean, it’s not like we’re on a construction site or something.’

‘Council regulations.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

Barry stands there and looks at me. Adjusts his hat again. Sizes me up for a second. Eventually he says: ‘Look, I like wearing my hat, okay?’

‘Well,’ I say, ‘I guess I like my tree.’

He snorts. ‘There’s your problem, buddy-o,’ he says. ‘*That* tree is not *your* tree. It belongs to the council. It is *council property*.’

I’m sorely tempted to bring up the petty but probably correct assumption that his hat, is not, in fact, *his* hat but council property as well. I only hold back because with a guy like him I can’t be 100% sure I’d be right. Anyway, I doubt whether I’d get a word in now—Barry looks to be on some kind of roll. He leans in to me and his voice drops to a painstakingly slow, eerie half-whisper: ‘*The... council’s... tree...*

is... dead...’ he says, in his best impression of Clint Eastwood. And I have to admit, repulsive fuckwit or not, the man does a pretty good Eastwood impression. Then he cocks his head to the side and stares into my eyes. Not menacingly, but enough for me to know he’s capable of being a menace. I match his gaze, try to advertise my own menace potential.

We stand there for a few moments eyeballing each other until I’ve had enough of Busybody Barry and his staring games and his big cheer squad badge and his stupid unnecessary hat and I step back and start to slowly shut the door on him. Then I go back up to my room and peek through the gap in the curtains, watch him turn on his heels and walk slowly to his car. I quickly put on my jeans. Fuck him and his pink dots. By the time I hear his car start up and drive off I’m already in the laundry unscrewing the bottle of turps.

*

It’s weird. I know I shouldn’t be calling her, but somehow it’s as if I have no choice. Like I’ve been quietly ignoring the urge to call her again since the last time we spoke and it’s suddenly grabbed a hold of me in a weak moment. It’s like smoking. It’s the same force of habit that’s making me call. It feels exactly like when I once quit the fags for two weeks and then suddenly found myself at a party, realising I had a cigarette in my mouth again. It’s like I never saw it coming—this sneaky, desperate moment of weakness—even though somehow I’ve known it was coming the whole time.

I’ll admit it—it’s the first step towards recovery—our relationship is a habit that I haven’t quite kicked. And just like when I started smoking again at the party, I’m now aware I am ‘addicted’ to that relationship on some level, ‘addicted’ to her somehow. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not stalker-like. It’s just that when I fell in love with her, I *really* fell in. And it takes time to climb back out. To quit being in love with someone. If you even can, that is.

Having said that, I do actually think I will eventually quit being in love with her. It’s made it somewhat easier that she’s given me the love equivalent of emphysema. I just can’t quit yet. Not today. Not right now. I’m still very much at the stage where I need a fix now and then, however small—and however bad it will make me feel afterwards for weakening. I pick up the phone and dial.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi Selph. It’s me. George.’

‘Oh, hi George.’

Her voice sounds different. Friendly enough but passionless. Like a bank teller greeting customer number thirty-eight for the day. It’s immediately disconcerting. Passively harsh. Straight away I feel stupid for ringing but there’s something stronger inside me working—or *not* working—that pushes me through to say what I feel I have to say. Actually, I wasn’t even aware I wanted to say it—until I do: ‘I just wanted to say sorry.’

‘Oh, George. What for?’

‘I don’t know. Sorry about asking you for the car. And, you know, everything else. I’m just sorry I wasn’t good enough for you, I guess.’

‘Oh, George.’

‘No, I mean. I know I’m a good person. I know I am. I just wish I could have shown you that more.’

‘George, don’t.’ She sighs. ‘Look, you *are* a good person. And you were good to me. I don’t know, it just...’

I think she’s expecting me to cut her off. To jump in with a question so that she doesn’t have to say what it “just” was. I don’t say anything. I hang there on the line and listen to the silence. Wait for her try to give the answer that neither of us know. It doesn’t come.

‘George?’

‘Yeah?’

‘You there?’

‘Yeah.’

This time she doesn’t say anything else. It’s left to me to break the silence. ‘Anyway, that’s all I rang to say. You know, that I’m sorry.’

‘George, don’t be sorry.’

‘Well, I am. I thought you were the one. And please know I still love you. I just need you to know. I have to make it clear, that’s all. That I love you and that I’d do anything for you whether we are together or not.’

‘I know you would George. And you know I still care about you too. And I’m sorry about the other day too. I just think, you know... it’s better if we have some space between us right now.’

‘Yeah... I know. Anyway. I guess I’d better go. Unless you want to keep talking.’

‘No, that’s okay George. You go. And you take care of yourself, okay?’

‘You too Selph.’

‘Bye, George.’

‘Bye.’

I hang up and sigh. Walk around the house replaying the conversation over and over and over in my head, analysing every word, every inflexion, the tone of her voice. I wonder if I could have done better. I chide myself for not being able to resist ringing her in the first place. For apologising for not being good enough. What the fuck is all that about? What an arse. What a complete *arse*. I mean, yeah, that’s the way to win her back mate. Really fucking impressive line: *I’m sorry I wasn’t good enough*. Why not just admit to being the world’s biggest fucking loser. That’ll *really* get her juices flowing.

It bugs me though, because I kind of know it’s true. The thing about not being good enough—or at least feeling like I’m not. I’ve pretty much felt like that ever since Dad went. I think it’s a feeling he left in all of us. His legacy to his family. Sometimes I look at my Mum and I wonder how she does it. How she can have a shred of belief in herself and her life and who she is when the father of her children would rather end his life than carry it on with her. I wonder whether deep down she blames herself or whether maybe she blames me and Matthew or if she just blames Dad for being weak as piss.

I head back to my room and climb out of my jeans and jump under the covers. I lie on my stomach on the half where Stacey was lying only hours before and I put my face hard in the pillow and suck in the smell of her hair product. Then I move my face down to where her body lay and I can just get sense of her smell there as well—it’s faint but still distinctly Stacey. It’s a new smell. One I probably wouldn’t have even been able to pick up on a few weeks ago. I find myself suddenly smiling. I shift my head back up to the pillow and wrap the doona around me and before I know it, I’m asleep.

*

It's nearly dark when I wake. But still, I'm in no rush to get up. It's not like I haven't just wasted the entire day anyway. I lie in bed, eyeing my digital bedside clock. I like that digital clock a lot. It hums. It's face isn't made up of electric lights. It's got the numbers painted over little plastic flaps which click over each minute. It's a relic from the late 70s and it loses about a minute a day but I know I'll never get rid of it.

The time is 7:16. Or as I sometimes call it: seven minus one equals six. In a minute it will be seven times one equals seven. After that it will be seven plus one equals eight. After that it gets a little complicated. Think twenty-four hour time. One plus nine minus one equals nine. I think I've worked out a sum equation for every time digit-combination possible. It's not that I am a maths nerd or anything. It's just something I started doing years ago in the early hours of the morning when I was too scared to sleep and there wasn't much else to do but lie in bed and look at the clock. These days I can barely look at a digital clock without doing a sum in my head.

After I have a wank and a shower and something to eat, I start thinking about heading out and looking for the prowler again. Decide that I may as well. Matthew's already asleep and there's not much else happening. I suppose I could give Stacey a call but we probably shouldn't overdo things. I'm not sure how much two people are meant to see each other when they are just practising not being with someone else.

I decide not to take the knife tonight. It feels too weird carrying it around. I don't think I could bring myself to stab someone anyway. The baseball bat will do. I gaffa tape my bat to the inside flap of my overcoat. That way I don't have to walk around with it in my hand all night. I'm glad I don't have to. I mean, wandering around the streets carrying a baseball bat? Fuck. People might think I'm some sort of loony if they saw me, and I'm not.

It's dark outside. No moon or anything. A perfect prowling night. I head down my street. Walk a few blocks. No one's around—there's not even a dog-walker to be seen. I'm not surprised. You can almost *feel* the heaviness in the sky. Probably won't be too long before it rains. I should have brought an umbrella or something. Well, not an umbrella, because I don't actually have one. But maybe I could have worn something over my clothes.

I feel a drop of rain on my face. I'm not that far from home.

I decide to stop off home and get my raincoat. Just as I round the corner of my street, I see him. The fucking bastard. He's standing at the side of a house. He's got a

torch and he's shining it on the electricity box on the house's side wall. Probably gonna cut the power and wait for someone to come out and then clobber them and then who knows? I read somewhere once these guys robbed someone by cutting off their power and then when the people came outside they just did them over with a samurai sword and went in the house and helped themselves.

This fucking cunt ain't no robber though.

I take quick, quiet strides across the front lawn. When I get to the dark figure by the electricity box, I bring my baseball bat up ready to smack it as hard as I can in the back of his legs. I stop for a moment before I swing though because I realise I'm shaking. I've never bashed someone before. Unless you call a chair a someone.

As I'm standing there getting up the nerve to bring him down, he suddenly turns around and sees me. Immediately he drops his torch. 'Don't hurt me, please don't hurt me!' There's real panic in his voice. I wasn't expecting that.

I stand there with my bat poised.

'Please don't hurt me,' he trembles. 'I have a family.'

I have this sudden immense feeling of power. The torch light is shining up at the side of this man's face so that I can just make out his eyes. I've never seen such fear in someone's eyes. And I've certainly never seen someone so fucking afraid of me.

'A family is no excuse,' I say, quietly. I feel like a fucking hitman.

'No excuse for what?' he pleads. 'For what? I haven't done anything.'

I hear a door open somewhere. A woman's voice. 'Neville, is that you. Love?'

'Get inside!' the man hollers. His fright seems to have immediately morphed into adrenalin-infused concern. 'Get inside, Cathy! Now! Call the police!'

I'm not sure what's going on. Then I hear another scream, just like the prowler's scream but this time it's from the woman. I don't even realise she's upon me until her fists start pounding against my chest and face. She's crying. 'Get away!' she hollers at me. 'Leave him alone!'

'Cathy, get inside! Now! Stop that!'

I've got one arm up shielding my face a bit. I'm trying to keep an eye on the prowler and keep my bat raised but this woman isn't looking like stopping soon. I push her back by the shoulder and she tumbles to the ground. 'Fuckin' watch it!' I yell. 'You fuckin' crazy bitch.'

he's dead mum i say remember?

it's as if she hadn't heard me

and what about you then? are you going to stand there all day too or are you going to jump in the pool darling? why don't you just jump in? go on it's a lovely day for it

i'm all right i say just want to stand for a while

oh go on jump in it's a lovely day for it isn't it a lovely day for it brian?

dad doesn't answer he just stands dead by the barbecue

brian! brian darling are you going to start cooking that barbecue or not?

i look back down at the pool the sunlight sparkling from the surface makes me squint my eyes i stare down at the water with my eyes squinted somehow the sparkling sunlight and the reflections from the dust in the air and the slight movement of the water all combine and for a few seconds it becomes the perfect image of her face right there in front of me laying on the water she looks angelic she's smiling i keep my eyes squinted

anna my darling i say

i know it's just an image of her i know she's not really there she's gone far away slipped into darkness but still i feel i have to speak to her
go on says my mother jump in! don't just stand there all day like your father does!

quiet mum!

brian! darling will you please put something on that damn barbecue!

mum!

i wish she'd shut up for once i have to concentrate on maintaining the exact right level of squint when my eyelids flicker even slightly the image of anna morphs the smile disappears she almost looks in pain if my eyelids flicker too much i lose her altogether i stand there and maintain the squint even though my back is starting to hurt even though my bad leg is starting to ache even though i feel slightly dizzy out there in the hot sun i stand there for as long as i can lost in the image of her and then suddenly i blink without meaning to and she's gone
shit i try to squint again but it's so hard to concentrate with all the noise going on

mum's laughing *brian! brian! love! for fuck's sake you sonofabitch! are you going to cook that barbecue or not or am i going to have to cook it for you you dead motherfucker!*

mum! please! i'm trying to concentrate

oh, sorry dear! she sing-songs concentrate away! then she turns to my dad with a big grin on her face now look here you loveless cunt you dead shit! you'd better start cooking that goddamn fucking barbecue

i try to keep my eyes squinted but it's too hard with everything going on i open my eyes and stare at the pool and all i can see is myself reflected in the water naked ugly scarred frightened there's a cloud coming over the sky it starts to rain thick rain starts pelting my skin my face my bad leg thick red rain it's smacking in through the surface of the water like birds committing suicide

turning the water red i see myself in the red reflection and i fall go under fight for breath i don't know how long i'm under there i feel like i'm going to die at some point i feel like i want to except i know that i can't suddenly my head is back above the surface and i'm looking across to the barbecue where my mum has my dad's head sizzling on the grill i can see the look on his face as he sizzles away he looks bored and unimpressed

mum's got his arms and legs lined up next to each other like giant sausages she's got his torso hanging on a big butcher's hook thick droplets of red rain dripping from him

how's the water son? she sings out gleefully warm enough for you?

*

A sharp rap on the door wakes me up. Not that I was really asleep. I hardly slept a wink when I got home last night. Kept wondering if a cop was going to come knocking with my baseball bat in one hand and a pair of cuffs in the other. Fuck. I suppose there could even be a cop on the front porch right now. I wonder what I'll do if there is. I start imagining what it would be like to have a stand-off with the police. I could refuse to come out of the house. Maybe I'd even take a hostage. But who? Matthew? Even if I could wake him up he'd just tell me to piss off. Nah, fuck it, I wouldn't need a hostage. I'd just maybe tell them I had a gun or something. That if they took another step forward I'd do myself in.

Then maybe they'd call in the armed response squad and there'd be this big convoy of cop cars out the front. It would make the news and everything. Maybe they'd call my mum in. Maybe they'd even call Selphie in to negotiate with me.

I can see it now: the flashing lights, the crowds of nosey neighbours, the scene-of-crime tape everywhere. Selphie standing behind the nearest cop car, her jacket wrapped tightly around her, a megaphone held to her mouth.

'George!' she'd say. 'George! What do you think you are doing!'

And, just like they do in the movies, I'd be standing inside with my back to the wall. I'd yell back over my shoulder through a window: 'I'm not coming out until you give me another chance, Selph! I'd rather die than go on without you! I swear it!'

There'd be a short pause, and then: 'George!' she'd say back. 'Sorry, but do you mind if I go now? Joshua's having me over for coffee. He grew the beans himself. He's even named his latest brew after me—isn't that amazing?'

'Who the fuck makes their own coffee beans?' I'd yell back. 'And fuck, seriously, who would name a *brew* after someone?'

'He's just a nice guy, George. Some people don't need a reason.'

'Yeah, but I mean—fucking coffee beans? What the fuck is that all about?'

But she wouldn't reply, she'd already be gone. Off to drink her namesake coffee. And then the cops would put Mum on the megaphone and within ten minutes I'd be walking out to a hail of capsicum spray because even that would be slightly less painful than hearing another of Mum's renditions of *'Tomorrow.'*

I suppose in the end, a stand-off with the cops wouldn't be worth it.

I drag myself out of bed, whack on some jeans and go to the front door. It's not a cop. It's my very own Busybody Barry. He's looking very serious and holding a pen and a clipboard. He's still wearing his hard hat too.

'Yes? What is it?'

'Barry Ferguson,' he says, without looking up. 'Council.'

'Yes, I do remember you, Barry,' I say. 'And I see you are still wearing your safety hat. How very sensible of you.'

He ignores my jibe and taps his pen against his clipboard. 'Our arborist came to cut down that tree again yesterday,' he says.

I shield my eyes from the sun and peer out across the garden. The first kiss tree is still there. 'Well, Barry, it looks like my tree's still there.'

'The *council's* tree is still there because when our arborist came out once again yesterday to cut it down he couldn't see a tree with a big pink dot on it. Now, what can you tell me about that?'

'Mate, I don't know a thing about pink dots,' I tell him. 'Not a bloody thing.'

'Well let me tell you something about pink dots,' he says. 'There's going to be one heck of a big pink dot on that tree outside your balcony in about five minutes. What's more, I'm going to sit across the road in my car and watch that it doesn't disappear for the next half an hour while I wait for our arborist to come back out here. I have assured him we will have a tree for him to cut down by the time he arrives.' He looks me up and down, 'And listen up *buddy-o*—you may not like the fact that this is happening. You may not like it one little bit. But let me guarantee you, it *is* happening. Now if I were you, I would go back to bed. That tree is not your problem anymore.' Then he turns and goes.

Maybe I'm just tired and I've had enough. Maybe I just don't like Busybody Barry and I want to piss him off. Maybe I'm still half stuck in the fantasy of having a stand-off with the cops. Or maybe it's because like Selphie says, I'm obsessive. Either way. I don't want to let him win just yet.

Barry said the arborist would be here in half an hour. It takes me five minutes to get dressed properly. I have something quick to eat—I don't know how long I'm going to have to last without food once I get started. I get to the tree with about ten minutes to spare. Barry's already been at it with the pink spray paint. He's standing over by his car with his arms folded, a smug look on his face.

'Mate!' I give him a big so-friendly-it's-cheeky wave.

'What's up pal?' He looks slightly concerned. 'What are you playing at now?'

'Just this,' I holler back and I reach into my pocket and bring out my old pair of handcuffs and quickly slip my wrist in one of them. I wrap my arms around the tree and slip my other wrist in. In a matter of seconds I've handcuffed myself around the trunk. That'll show 'em. Fuck Barry and fuck that arborist. This is mine and Selphie's tree. For now and for ever. It's the only thing of her that I've got left.

'Are you for real mate?' Barry walks over and stands next to me. He's actually taken his hat off. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs and shakes his head. 'And how long do you think this is going to last?'

I shrug. 'As long as I want it to.' I'm a little annoyed at my answer. I sound like a school kid.

‘As long as you want it to,’ he repeats, almost uninterestedly. Then he shrugs and leaves me there cuffed to the tree and slowly makes his way back over to his car. He’s on his mobile phone. I watch him for a few minutes talking to someone and then turn my face around to rest my other cheek on the tree.

Five minutes later the sun start’s burning my other cheek so I turn back to Barry. He’s standing about three feet away. I didn’t even hear him approach.

‘Finished on the phone?’ I say.

‘Finished on the phone,’ he says.

He obviously isn’t interested in any further conversation with me. He wanders back over to his car and climbs back in. When my head’s still facing in his direction, I can see him occasionally checking the rearview mirror. I’m a bit concerned at about how little Barry appears to give a shit, but, I guess, at least he hasn’t tried to get rid of me yet.

I hear my front door open. It’s Matthew. He backs out of the doorway, pulls the door shut behind him. He doesn’t look at me, just keeps staring straight at the ground as he walks down the driveway. He’s limping a bit but he’s still moving pretty fast. I think about yelling out hello or something but then again I don’t really want my brother to see me chained to a tree, so I decide to keep quiet and if he sees me I’ll come up with an excuse. I don’t think he’s going to see me though. He still hasn’t looked up from the ground. He’s got his hands in his pockets and he’s muttering to himself. God, he looks like a bit of a freak.

There’s a truck pulling up. It must be the arborist. He gets out of the truck and goes over to Barry. They talk for a few moments. There’s another, younger, guy with them as well. They look back at me from time to time. The arborist is shrugging a lot and waving his hands about. Good. I’ve got them rattled. My neck’s getting sore so I turn my head the other way and wait for the thunder to come down. It must be five minutes before I hear footsteps approaching.

‘Gotta give him credit. He doesn’t give up.’

I turn my head back to see the three fellas standing there. Barry, the arborist—an older bloke, maybe fifty—and a kid about eighteen. The kid’s looking at the ground and sucking on a cigarette and he looks like he’s trying not to smile. Like for some reason he finds the situation funny but he’s trying to act professional or something—or maybe he’s been warned not to antagonise a potential head case.

‘G’day mate,’ the arborist says to me.

I nod at him with quiet defiance.

‘Mate, I’m only going to ask you once, all right? Have you got keys to those cuffs of yours?’

‘Nup,’ I lie. ‘I chucked ’em.’

‘All right then, mate.’ And with that he pulls out a pair of bolt-cutters from behind his back and goes around the other side of the tree and snips straight through my fucking handcuff chains. I’m detached from the tree less than a second. Then he steps back and says ‘Mate, sorry but you’d better be on your way now. This tree’s going to go.’

I look at them not really knowing what to say. The young guy explodes a guffaw against the back of his hand and doubles over.

‘Shut the fuck up Franger,’ says the arborist. Then he looks back at me. ‘Okay mate, on your bike,’ he says. ‘We got work to do.’ He doesn’t say it meanly but he says it in a tone of voice that lets me know he means business. I look from him to Barry to the young bloke to the tree. Short of trying to physically stop these guys, there’s nothing I can do. And it’s not like I could stop them anyway. I could barely stop an elderly woman from slapping me around the head when I had a fucking baseball bat on me.

I give the tree a final tap and shuffle slowly back to the house. Go inside and sit down on the couch. It’s not too long before a chainsaw and some other fucking screaming machine start up. I peek out of the window to see the old guy hanging from a hoist somewhere near the top of the tree, picking and choosing the right branches to lop. The young guy’s picking the shit up off the side of the road and feeding it into a wood chipper. Barry’s nowhere to be seen. So that’s it. That’s the end of the kiss tree. The end of me and Selphie. Ground to fucking mulch.

I can’t watch anymore. I just sit and listen to them turn our tree into mulch for a while. About ten minutes later there’s a sort of a loud crunching sound and then silence. I can hear raised voices. It’s the older bloke getting stuck into Franger. I can’t quite hear what he’s saying but he’s not happy. I take another peek out of the window. It looks like the chipper’s stopped or something. Maybe it’s fucked. There’s still a whole bunch of branches to be cut down. I smile. This tree’s not going down without a fight. I wonder if that means they’ll stop for the day. I only wonder that for a second though because the chainsaw starts up again. The branches are still coming off. Instead of mulching them though, Franger’s taking them as they fall and piling them up just

out of the way. Guess they'll come back for them later. Fuck this. I go to the phone and dial Stacey. She picks up. 'Hello?'

'Hello stranger,' I say.

'Hello stranger yourself.'

I ask her if she's up for a bit of practice. Tell her I could sure do with some. Right fucking now, as a matter of fact.

'I can't right now.'

'Oh.'

'Sorry. I'd like to but I can't. I have to help Jeff with his school assignments so that he can have his party tonight.'

'This is your forty-year-old brother Jeff we are talking about, right?'

'Yeah. He went back to finish adult high school this year.'

'Oh right. Oh well, good on him.'

'But you can come around later tonight if you want.'

'To the party?'

'Yeah.'

'Love to.'

She tells me Jeff's party is pretty much going to be a bunch of old-school metal freaks. She reckons she'll appreciate some normal company. I tell her I'm not exactly normal but that I'll be there. I tell her a party sounds like just what I need. I don't really feel like discussing the legitimacy of my allergy claims all night though. 'Are your folks going to be hanging around?'

'Bob'n'Mum are away for a few days. Camping and caravan show somewhere. Coast is clear.'

'Cool. What time should I come then?'

'I don't know. Eight's fine. Or later if you want. Anytime.'

'Eight sounds good. Seeya then stranger.'

I can almost hear her smile. 'Seeya then stranger yourself.'

*

I'm there at eight on the dot. I don't believe in being fashionably late. I can't stand how people can think it's okay to keep someone waiting who's invited them to a party. I remember when Selphie once threw a party for her birthday. She invited like

fifty people or something and literally two hours in, still no one had turned up. And look, I know there's far more serious problems going on in the world like wars and shit and people starving all over the fucking place, but it's still no fun for anyone to spend two hours contemplating whether they actually have any friends or not. I think I felt like crying more than she did, just watching her fuss around with stupid stuff like alphabetising the CDs and positioning all the food bowls into equilateral triangles and making sure there was enough ice for the fifteenth time and every so often checking to see if anyone was walking up the driveway. I hated to see her carry on like that with her with her eyes slightly glassed over, determined not to be upset—yet. To watch her try to smile every time we made eye contact, a smile that as much of a question as it was a statement: it will be okay won't it? People do like me, they will come?

People did come, eventually. Maybe not fifty, but there were enough to make that smile more sure of itself and genuine. Enough to answer the question and reaffirm the statement. Enough so that eventually the only glassy eyes in the house were due to an over-consumption of alcohol and other substances, not an under-arrival of guests. But I still never forgot the dreaded anticipation of that afternoon and it's kind of been a thing with me ever since not to put anyone else through it.

I needn't have worried about Jeff Stewart though. I can hear music pumping and people yelling and laughing from number 48 when I'm still about three blocks away. When I reach the front door I start wondering if anyone's even going to hear me knocking while Motorhead's *Ace of Spades* is being played full bore but I don't have to wait for long because the door opens for me.

'Hi George!' It's Stace. She seems genuinely glad to see me. Comes straight to me and gives me a big hug and everything. I haven't had a welcome like that for a while.

'Hey Stace.' I hug her back and find my fingers ruffling through her hair, sticky with hair product. It feels familiar, in a strange way.

'What's in the bag?'

'Vodka.'

'Yum.' She steps back and takes my hand. 'Come on, George. These guys are all dags. Let's hang out in my room for a while.'

'Sure, thanks.' We push our way through a crowd of headbanging stoners in the corridor and get in and shut the door behind us. Stace flicks on the light. I look around her room. I didn't really notice how freaked out everything was the last time I

was in here. There are plastic figurines everywhere—on the dressers, cupboards and bedside table: Princess Leah chained to Jabba the Hut. Papa Smurf and Mama Smurf blu-tacked into a compromising position. Lego people wielding knives. There's tiny white stickers or something stuck all over the ceiling and an R2-D2 telephone next to the bed. There are posters of what appear to be bands on the walls. Nearly all the band members on the posters are leaning forward and look like they have blood or maybe strawberry topping dripping out of their mouths. The bedspread is purple. There's a jar with a dead spider in it on the dresser.

'I got a latch on the door.'

'You did?'

'Yeah. I got sick of Bob and Mum popping their head in every five minutes.'

'Oh, cool.'

'Plus, it means Jeff and his dumbass mates won't bother us if we want to be on our own.'

'Oh, cool... do we want to be on our own?'

'I don't know,' she says, cheekily, shifting nearer to me on the bed. 'Do we?'

'How about a drink?'

'Fucking good idea. Just let me get some glasses.'

I wait on the bed checking out the plastic figurines while Stace heads out to the kitchen to get some glasses. She leaves the door open. I can hear laughter and smell dope from the lounge room. I'm almost thinking I should get up and shut the door. I don't really feel like meeting anyone just yet, should they happen to walk past. I don't need to worry. Stace is back in a flash, snorting with laughter herself and yelling out some rude shit to some guy who apparently goes by the name of 'Doobie.'

She pours two shots of vodka and we cheers each other and scoll them. Straightaway we do it again.

'Doobie's such a fuckwit,' says Stace, pouring a third. 'Forty-eight going on thirteen.'

'My Dad didn't even make forty-eight,' I say, not really knowing why I do.

'Really?'

'Really.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know he'd passed away.'

'He's been dead since I was fourteen.'

'No shit. How... um...' She trails off.

‘What? How’d he die?’

‘No, it’s okay. Sorry,’ she says. ‘You don’t have to tell me that.’

I take another shot of vodka. ‘Remember how I told you he was allergic to fish?’

‘Yeah. What happened? Did he accidentally eat some?’

‘Not exactly,’ I say. ‘He ate it deliberately. Cooked his own last meal.’

‘You mean he killed himself by eating *fish*?’

‘Yeah, he must’ve really wanted to go. He fucking hated even the smell of the stuff.’

Stacey doesn’t say anything for a second. She just takes a sip of her vodka, and then looks at me and kind of tilts her head. Her mouth tightens. And then without warning, while I’m sitting there feeling sorry for myself, she suddenly bursts into laughter. Spits her vodka all over the purple bedspread. ‘Oh shit, George, I’m sorry,’ she says. But she can’t help laughing still.

I try hard to be annoyed. I try really hard. But there’s something about her laugh that makes me want to laugh too. Even if it’s wrong. Even if it’s not even funny. It would just be nice to laugh again properly. And before I know it I’ve started as well.

‘Sorry,’ squeals Stacey, when she can catch her breath. ‘But are you making this up George?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘It really happened. And I know... it’s—’

And then we both say it at the same time: ‘*fucking ridiculous!*’ and then we sit there on the bed laughing our arses off. I don’t even care what it’s all about anymore. It just feels right to laugh with her and so I let myself. I laugh myself out. And when I do, I look over at Stacey who’s wiping her eyes. ‘Oh, shit, George,’ she says. ‘I am sorry, really... it’s just... the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard...’ and she starts to chuckle again but she’s reached that point where she hasn’t got any more left in her so she stops. ‘No,’ she says. ‘I *am* sorry. I don’t know why I’m even laughing really. I think I was just in a funny mood and that happened to set me off.’

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘It’s good.’

And it does feel good. Fucking hell, I mean, what else can you do but laugh anyway? At least then you can feel like it’s not your fault.

We cuddle up a bit and have a few more glasses of vodka, slowly, lying back on the bed. I’ve got my head in the crook of Stacey’s arm. I have to lift my head to drink but I’m so comfortable and secure and safe there that I end up just trying to

reach over and leave my vodka on the bedside table. When she sees that I can't, Stace leans over and takes it from my hand and manages to place it down. She finishes her drink and puts down the glass as well. I reach around and cuddle up to her. Smell her smell, let her run her fingers through my hair. We lie like that for a little while.

'Do me a favour, Stace,' I say.

'What's that?'

'Laugh at me more often.'

'Any time,' she says. 'And hey—it's not like I'm ever going to run out of reasons.'

'Gee, thanks.'

'Hey—move your head for a bit,' she says. 'I want to show you something.'

'But I'm so comfortable here.'

'You'll like this.'

'Okay, okay.' I move my head and she hops up to switch the light off.

Straightaway I see them. Hundreds of glowing stars above our heads. They're stuck all over the roof. They're everywhere. It's fucking amazing.

I feel Stace slip her arm back under my head. 'So, what do you think?'

'It's fucking amazing.'

'I love sleeping under the stars.'

I chuckle. 'Me too.'

'Wanna go to sleep?'

'Not really.'

'Wanna practice?' She laughs quietly.

I smile in the dark. 'Maybe later?'

She waits a few moments and then she says, 'Maybe.' She says it gently.

There's a knock on the door. It's Jeff. Talking in a weird voice, or maybe that's just his normal one. 'Hey you two,' he giggles. 'What's going on in there?'

The door opens.

'Shit,' says Stace. 'Forgot to latch it.'

The light comes on. Jeff's standing there, red-eyed with a beer in his hand and a massive grin under his huge David Boon moustache. He looks at me and grins.

'Chippies Boy!' he yells. 'I heard all about you man!' Then he takes a running jump and lands right between me and Stace. 'Want some chippies?!'

'For fuck's sake, Jeffrey!' yells Stace. 'Fucking watch it!'

‘How the fuck are ya, Chippies Boy?!!!’

‘I’m good mate, I’m good.’

‘Did someone say “Chippies”?’ A freak in a cowboy hat pokes his head around the corner. Turns and calls back over his shoulder. ‘Hey lads! Chippies!’

Stacey groans. Within seconds we’ve got about a dozen stoned forty-somethings piling in the room, laughing and yelling and looking around for chips, asking Jeff what the fuck he’s talking about. Jeff’s lying on the bed chuckling to himself in a stupor. Stace looks at me and shrugs. ‘Wanna ’nother drink?’

‘I reckon so.’

We squeeze up together on the edge of the bed and take turns swigging from the bottle. Someone hands me a cone and although I don’t smoke that shit much I take it anyway. Start laughing again at some point. Sit there getting ripped and pissed off my face with Stace and Jeff and Doobie and whoever else the fuck wants to join in, which is pretty much everyone. And for about three hours, Matthew, Selphie, my mum and my dad and my prowler couldn’t be further from my mind.

*

all i know is that one moment i was with her and the next i’m out here in the darkness in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a black desert i can feel the wind blowing through my body i wish it would blow me away lift me up high and throw me back down on my life smash me into a million pieces like she was smashed

i try and let it lift me try and leap and get carried away i run along in the rain along a dark street i’ve never seen a street so dark i run across grass grass that is blacker and thicker than the night blacker and thicker and darker than pool water i feel like i’m going to sink into it with every step have to keep running i tell myself have to fly i run across train tracks where thousands of dogs have died and i run across roads where the cars headlights fly by like bright yellow fireflies the horns are like a symphony my head swells with their blaring and feels like it’s going to explode if magda were here she’d be able to play conductor or something she’d make them sound like the sweetest symphony ever god how i wish she were here without her without anna all i can hear is noise

i run and run and run and run and run and run and i keep running i don’t know what i’m running away from or running to i just keep running and the darkness pours

down around me and then i stop there's a light at the end of a tunnel a light in the darkness i go into the tunnel and walk towards the light someone is there

magda?

but it's not magda

i can't believe my eyes

it's my anna

she's lying in front of me asleep i know she's asleep and not dead
anymore because she's breathing her eyes are shut she looks so peaceful
oh god i could just look at her all night i never want to wake up never
ever i dare not even breathe her name i remember that time seeing her in the
pool how mum's yelling made her go away

i will not breathe a word

i will not stop looking

i will not stop concentrating

i will just simply look at her

*

Jeff and Stacey's party starts winding down at four-thirty in the morning when the cops pay a visit for the second time. I'm nearly on my way out anyway, in all senses of the word. I've had way too much to drink. I've also been smoking way too much dope. I'm lying on the bed with Stace, rubbing my throat, staring at the stars on the ceiling. The other guys are all out the backyard except for Jeff who's out on the porch trying unsuccessfully to convince the cops to have a can of Bourbon and Cola.

My throat is seriously sore. Even on the outside, which is just plain weird. I haven't smoked dope for a while. I was having a massive coughing fit about half an hour ago and I felt something give way. It felt like I tore my epiglottis or something. Maybe I'm imagining things because I'm so fucking out of it, but either way, I can hardly speak. I can only talk in a low hiss.

I lean over and give Stacey a kiss on the cheek and manage to whisper that I'm heading home. She's pretty zonked but she pulls herself together long enough to give me a hug and says we'll catch up soon.

Ten minutes later I'm doing my best to stumble home, still holding my throat, when I see this dark shape standing outside somebody's house. He's just standing

there, looking through the window. I stop in my tracks—well, I stop and *sway* in my tracks. I can't believe my fucking eyes. It's the prowler. This time I'm sure it's him. The guy's not fixing a fuse box. He's peering through a fucking window. Leaning forward so that his nose is touching the pane. Thank fuck I am still completely loaded so I have a bit of Dutch courage about me. Not like when I couldn't go that last guy with the baseball bat.

I break into a stumbling run. The closer I get, the more sure I am of what I'm doing. And somehow also the less. I don't have my cuffs anymore but I reckon if I can take him out I can hold him properly until the cops get there. I duck my head and increase my speed.

He makes a sound like he's had the wind knocked out of him as I tackle him to the ground. We hit the damp grass like the proverbial two sacks of spuds. I can't get a proper grip on him though. He twists and turns like a snake. A dirty pervert cunt snake. Every time I get a handle on him he seems to break free. Only thing is, he doesn't seem to be trying to get away. He's trying to pin me instead. I wrestle with him as best I can but he's good.

'You fucking prick,' I hiss.

He doesn't say anything back. Just growls like a fucking wild animal and fights back even harder. We're rolling around on the grass in the darkness and my ears are hot from being held in his headlock. I raise my knee, not in one attempt at nailing the groin, but repeatedly, in an effort to do as much damage as I can to whatever part of this fucker's body I can manage to reach. Somehow the bastard manages to wriggle away from my wrecking ball knee but as he does so I manage to slide out of the headlock and wrap my own arms around his head. We're kind of lying on our sides like two Greco-Roman wrestlers. His arms and head locked in my own. I'm unable to move much and neither is he. The only way I can get a better grip on him is if I release the one I've got, and there's no way I'm doing that. I feel like a snake myself. Like a boa constrictor on L-plates. I can hear the fucker grunting into my arms. He knows he's not going anywhere for now. He's got about as much chance as a fish flapping on the deck of a trawler.

'Shut up,' I hiss. 'Shut the fuck up!'

Surprisingly he does shut up. I keep my grip firm and start thinking about my options. I try to call for help but with my throat how it is, all I can manage is a pathetic whispered hiss. Fuck. I think about reasoning with him and trying to get him to

accompany me to a police station? Or is that the most unlikely stupid idea that someone could only come up with after drinking a ridiculous amount of vodka and smoking copious amounts of drugs? It doesn't matter anyway—I can't talk, therefore I can't reason. In the end I decide I've got no option but to sit it out and wait for someone to come by so *they* can call the cops.

So I lie there in the dark on the damp grass with this fucking pervert locked in my arms and all I can think is that I have to stay awake or I'll lose him. Every now and then he makes a sly attempt at a sudden twist or something to pry himself from my grip, but I'm on to him. I'm used to going to bed on edge. I can be ready all night if I have to. So he tries a few funny games. He's doesn't say much though. Just mumbles some shit into my arms. I hiss at him to shut the fuck up. And then I notice he hasn't said anything or made any sudden movements for a while. I know he's okay though cos I can hear him breathing. I lie there for a while and try to think good thoughts and then I realise that's he's not just breathing anymore, he actually sounds like he's snoring. The bastard has fallen asleep in my arms.

At least that's what I think for about the first thirty seconds. I know it must be a ruse though. He's just pretending, waiting for me fall for his bullshit and relax enough so he can make his break. I figure I'll just keep my grip. I wasn't born yesterday. I lie back on the grass and I keep my grip and I let the damp grass soak through my jeans. It's strange. I'm closer than to a prowler than I've been since I was thirteen years old and for some reason I don't feel scared at all. I lie there and wait for the sun to come up.

I'm nearly asleep by the time it does. Nearly asleep and freezing my fucking balls off. The prowler really is asleep, I think. He must have been trying to fake it for so long that he forgot where he was and just nodded off. I release my grip a bit, just to see whether he tries anything. He doesn't, just rolls his head back on the grass and—*fuck...*

It's Matthew.

The prowler is my *brother*.

'Matt,' I hiss. 'Wake up. Wake up.'

I have to shake him for a few moments but he comes to. Rubs his eyes and looks up at me as if he's seeing me for the first time in a long time. 'George?'

'What the fuck are you doing out here?'

'What the fuck are *you* doing out here?'

We just lie there looking at each other confusedly for a few moments and then Matthew stands up. 'I'm going home,' he says.

I just sit up on the grass and watch him, dazed, as he makes his way off the property towards the road. He turns back to me just before he gets there. 'Coming, George?' he says.

'Yeah, I guess.'

And so I get up and join him and together we walk home and we don't say a word to each other the whole way, and when we get home we go into our separate rooms and go to bed.

*

III

Thankyou for watching over me, my androgynous alien friend.

Kill anyone but Matthew and Selphie and Stacey.

Think good thoughts.

I lie back in bed and stare at the ceiling. I'm still coming down from the buckets of vodka and home-grown weed and I'm mentally and physically spent. Finding it impossible to sleep. My head is buzzing. It's a useless buzzing—like a TV that's been left on late at night and has turned to one of those fucking moronic cash-quiz shows—but it's enough to keep me up for now. My eyes feel too heavy to keep open but every time I shut them I get queasy—like I did that night with Matthew out in the green rowboat. I have to keep reminding myself I am not in a rowboat... that I am in a bed. I do my best to ignore the buzzing and the sick feeling in my stomach, and eventually, eventually, I am able keep my eyes shut long enough to get to sleep.

When I surface sometime the next afternoon I go out to the kitchen to find Matthew sitting at the breakfast table, eating. He doesn't look up at me when I walk in. He can try and ignore me all he likes though. I'm in no mood to bullshit around today. Anyway, this shit has gone too far.

'What the fuck is going on with you?' I say, and I sit down opposite him.

He shoves his plate forward and gets up. Goes to his room and shuts the door and leaves me there. Fuck that. I get up and follow him. Open his door and walk straight in. 'I asked you a fucking question man. Hey?

No answer. He climbs into his bed and pulls the quilt up over his head. I walk over and rip it off. 'I said what the fuck is going on with you? Why the fuck are you out at four-thirty in the morning peering through somebody's window?' Hey?'

No answer. He just lies there, staring into space.

'You fucking listen to me,' I say. 'Whether you are a cripple or not, I am going to start smashing you if you don't start talking.'

Nothing. He just lies on his bed and pretends I'm not there.

I'm all talk, I wouldn't ever smash my brother even if he wasn't a cripple. I love him too much. He probably knows it. 'Fuck this,' I say, and I shut the door and I sit down and lean back against it. 'You're not leaving this room until you talk to me.'

And don't think you can force your way past. I pinned you last night and I can do it again.'

'Just fuck off, George, will you?'

'No.'

'Seriously, just fuck off. I'm not in the mood.'

'I'm not going to fuck off Matt. Not this time. You can fucking count on it.'

He tries his version of being polite: 'George, look, can you just fuck off please?'

'No.'

'Fuck off, man.'

'No.'

'Fuck off.'

'No. I'm not going to.'

He lies there and doesn't say anything for a while. He doesn't feel like talking and when Matthew doesn't feel like doing something these days, he basically doesn't do it. But *fuck* what he does-and-doesn't feel like today. We're having this conversation whether he likes it or not.

'Well?' I say. 'You going to answer me?'

'What do I have to do to get you to fuck off, George?'

'Easy. Tell me what you were doing out perving through that window last night.'

'I wasn't perving.'

'Well it sure fucking looked like it.'

'I wasn't perving.'

'Well what then?'

'If I tell you, will you please fuck off?'

'No problem. I'll fuck off all you want.'

So he says he was sort of sleepwalking or something. Says he saw Anna through a window somewhere. And that he wasn't perving on anyone, just watching Anna. He says he probably just passed out with his face pressed against the window, standing up. A sort of half-asleep slumber. 'Okay, little brother?' he says. 'I was sleepwalking. Will you fuck off now?'

'You reckon you saw Anna? Are you out of your fucking mind?'

He doesn't say anything.

‘Mate,’ I say. ‘She’s dead.’

‘Oh, *really?*’ he says. ‘Fuckwit.’

‘Well what the fuck are you talking about, then? And then I lower my voice. ‘I mean, are you okay?’

‘Don’t worry,’ he says. And then he sits up in bed, even more annoyed. ‘Stop worrying about me! And stop asking me things all the time. I’ve answered your question so now can you just please *fuck off!*’ Then he lies back down and wraps himself in his quilt and I know I’m not going to get anymore out of him.

I sit against the door for a few minutes. Leave him alone. I suppose as little sense as his story makes, it still makes more sense than him being a pervert. I know he’s been missing Anna. I know it’s been driving him crazy. I just didn’t know how crazy.

I stand up. ‘Mate, if you ever want to talk, I’m here. I’ll share it with you. You know, share the pain.’ I know I sound like fucking Oprah or something but I don’t know how else to put it. Don’t know how to let him know I give a shit more directly than that.

I hear his voice, muffled and aggressive, from beneath the quilt. ‘For fuck’s sake, George...there’s nothing *to* share. If you’re really so desperate to do something for me, just *please... fuck off!*’

‘Sure... but... well... I’m here for you if you need it. Okay?’

No answer.

I grab the door handle. Open the door with a slow creak. I look back around the room. There’s half eaten food on plates all over the floor. Tissues and pizza boxes and empty cans and dirty clothes strewn everywhere. It’s a disgrace. My big brother’s stuck in his own little messed up world at the moment where nothing matters and I don’t know how to get him out. I step out of the room and quietly shut the door behind me.

*

i listen to the door shut wonder what i’m going to do now wonder why i even
give a shit after all there’s no point in thinking ahead all i’ve got are
memories now there’s no future all my thoughts are running into one

i don't like being awake things are so much clearer when i'm sleeping
thoughts are clearer they are just *there* they just exist like the empty cans
on my desk like the shit all over my floor i can't even remember how any of
this fucking mess got here as far as i know it's been here forever just
like my thoughts

anna didn't even want to go for a drive
she didn't even want to fucking *go*
it was me that wanted to go i'd never driven a convertible before
the man at the hire shop said driving a convertible was as much fun as having
sex he took me aside when anna wasn't listening and said *son it's as much fun as
having sex* and he winked at me and smiled i could see in his eyes that he wouldn't
have minded having sex with anna i could see from the way he looked at her with
his cheap suit and his bugs bunny tie and his motel bedroom fucking eyes i
tried not to think about it when he described driving a convertible as having sex i
tried not to think about it when he smiled at us when we signed the rental agreement
and walked out of there

what's your problem? anna said when we pulled away in the car
i said *nothing*
she said *that's right nothing you're getting all jealous over nothing*
i said i wasn't getting jealous just that the car rental guy was a fuckwit
he was nice she said *he gave us a good price*
i said *he gave you a good price but for me well i had to pay the price of him
leering at my fucking girlfriend for half an hour*
why didn't you say something then?
i said i wanted to make sure we got the car she said i shouldn't have bothered
because she didn't really feel like going for a drive anyway
i didn't answer then because i didn't want to get in an argument with her because i
wanted the day to be special

i had the ring in my pocket and it had slipped down to the side of the pocket
and it was digging into my leg i kept having to lean over and try and shift it
what are you doing? she said *why don't you just sit still?* after that i didn't want to
raise any suspicion i wanted to surprise her so i sat still for a while with it digging
into my leg we were driving up into the country to this really nice spot that i once
went with mum and george when we were young it was a good spot to play cricket

in me and george played a lot of cricket when we were kids especially in the back yard at home we played every day after school until the sun went down the only time we didn't play was when mrs what's-her-face's son was out in the garden next door because mum wouldn't let us play then because mum said mrs what's-her-face's son was a bad man and that he'd been in jail for being a bad man and so we weren't allowed to play cricket when he was in the back yard next door because she didn't want us talking to him

anna didn't want me talking to her for the moment she wasn't mad but i think she was getting tired of me i was scared of her getting tired of me too soon so i didn't say anything for a while i kept driving with that ring digging into my leg and i was hoping she was enjoying the sight of the fields rushing by the sun was all over those fields they were golden brown i didn't know what was growing in those fields but whatever it was it looked beautiful when it grew i asked anna if i could turn the radio on and she said okay there was a song by *the go-gos* playing anna loved music from the 80s and i was glad there was a song by *the go-gos* on because it would cheer her up i started singing along to it in a stupid voice and out of the corner of my eye i saw her smile i knew she definitely wasn't mad at me and maybe not even tired of me i carried on singing the ring was really digging into my leg i was going to have to shift soon or move it or something but i didn't want to draw attention to it so i carried on singing we were only about fifteen minutes away from the spot

*

I called Mum and told her about Matthew being out in the street falling asleep on someone's window. I wasn't dobbing him in or anything. I just don't know what else to do right now. Mum said not to give him a hard time about it. She said everyone grieves in their own way. Then she asked me if I wanted to come over and join her for a nice big slice of fish pie. I told her not today. I'd already promised to help Stacey clean her place up before her folks got back.

I get to Stacey's place as she's heaving a huge garbage bag up into a green bin. I reach in and give her a hand lifting it and after we dump it inside, I kind of stand there for a second hoping she is going to give me a hug hello or something like she always does. But she doesn't. She just walks straight past me back inside. I shrug and

follow her in to survey the rest of the damage. Jeff's standing in the lounge with a silly grin on his face. 'Hey, Chippies,' he says. 'How're they hanging?'

'Fine Jeff,' I say. 'How are you?'

'Wasted,' he grins. 'Wanna pipe?'

'Nah, it's okay,' I tell him.

'Wanna drink?'

'Nah it's okay,' I say again.

He mumbles something and goes out into the kitchen. I look around the room and then at Stace. 'Well, it's not going to be quite as bad as cleaning shit off walls,' I say. 'But it's still a fair job.'

'Yep,' says Stace.

We stand there with hands on hips, looking around, wondering where to start.

'Why don't we start with the backyard?' says Stace.

'What about Simba?'

'Oh, George,' she giggles, and whacks me on the arm. 'I told you last night—Mum and Bob took her with them. Don't you remember? You must. You were pissing on every tree you could see because you wanted her to freak out about losing her territory when she got back.'

I laugh. 'Nup. Don't remember a thing. But, you know, I was pretty wasted.'

'You sure were. Do you seriously not remember anything at all?'

'Not really. Should I?'

She grabs my arm. 'George—do you remember telling me you loved me?'

Shit. My heart leaps up to my throat. I don't know what to say. 'Stace... I... um—'

She giggles. 'It's all right George, I'm kidding.'

I try to smile. 'Yeah, of course, I know.' Thank God.

'But you did say some very sweet things, you know, George Harrison.'

'Did I?'

'Yes. But watch it,' she smiles. 'You were almost getting serious.'

Jeff walks back in and kicks the vacuum cleaner alive. He holds up the nozzle. 'Hey man,' he yells over the whining, grinding engine. 'This vacuum cleaner really sucks man!'

I nod at him. It's not worth trying to reply over the racket the vacuum cleaner's making.

‘Get it, Chippies?’ he yells. ‘It really *sucks*, man! This vacuum cleaner. It *sucks* man!’ and then he breaks into one of his big stoned guffaws.

‘Come on,’ Stacey gestures, ‘Let’s lose the loser,’ and we head out past her brother to the backyard.

It’s a mess out there. Beer bottles, mixer cans and overflowing improvised ashtrays everywhere. A superhighway of ants teeming beneath what’s left of the lamb on the spit. It’s going to be difficult, but by no means impossible. Particularly for someone like me who’s had loads of practice clearing up junk.

‘Those guys can be such pigs,’ says Stace, as she whips out a garbage bag and starts scraping off a thick gooey mess from the top of a leaning tower of plastic plates. ‘We should try to re-use these plates, you know?’

‘Yep,’ I say. ‘Except for the ones that are doubled as ash-trays.’

Stacey shrugs. ‘Well, we’ll just reuse them as ash-trays.’

So we go about our business, cleaning the yard. and between the two of us, we’ve got the lot pretty much clean in a couple of hours.

‘Now what?’ says Stace.

‘I dunno. Guess I’ll just head off home, then.’

I don’t know why I said that. I was kind of hoping to stay for a beer.

‘All right then, George,’ she says. ‘Thanks for helping out.’ She smiles.

‘No worries.’ I start heading out around the side of the house. I find myself wishing for a moment that she’ll stop me and invite me to stay for dinner or something. Or maybe just ask if I want to go out and have a beer on the trampoline. But she doesn’t stop me. She just kind of stands there. As I step out the front gate I realise I should have at least kissed her goodbye or something like that. I start thinking I should almost go back and do it. But that would be weird I guess. So I don’t. I just put my hands in my pockets and get the fuck out of there.

*

hello? she says

mum i say i want to come around for a bit

why of course! she says and she starts singing *we’ll have tea for two and two for tea just me and you and just you and me.*

i don't listen to her finish the song i just hang up the phone and get my things together and set off for her place

when i get to mum's house i check the mailbox it's stuffed full of junk mail there's a free calendar there's a home hardware brochure they have spades on special for fourteen dollars there's also a voucher for a haircut at 25% off and some readers digest thing saying that you can win a million dollars or something there's a target brochure with a picture of someone on a mini-trampoline on the front that guy looks like a friend of mine i used to know he was okay too podgy to be a model though i always thought there's also a take-away menu for a new chinese restaurant i throw the take-away menu and the haircut voucher straight into the recycle bin in mum's driveway she doesn't eat chinese and she cuts her own hair i hold on to the rest though because mum loves reading junk mail she always has

i ring the doorbell it makes the usual chime the melody of greensleeves the batteries must be flat or something because it sounds out of tune mum doesn't come to the door for the whole time it's playing then it finishes

i look up at the grey sky it's been grey for the last few days

i push the annoying greensleeves doorbell thing again and look down at the porch the porch is covered in little brown pine needle things well not covered but there's quite a few of them hanging around the sides of the straw doormat the doormat says *happy house* on it it's a little faded but you can still make it out okay if you try

mum answers the door *well if it isn't my biggest boy!*

hi mum

what a lovely surprise!

you knew I was coming

oh, of course, of course, but it's still such a lovely surprise to see you!

she's kind of hugging me but kind of not she's just leaning forward and rubbing my forearms she has the usual insane look of excitement in her eye and if her eyes weren't already big enough they get magnified even more by those thick glasses she always wears

we go inside where she's already set out a big jug of lemonade and a plate of biscuits the plate of biscuits is sitting on a placemat next to an empty glass the placemat is one of those old australian souvenir type ones the ones that have a

picture by frederick mccubbin or pro hart or someone on them i can't see what's on this one because the plate with the biscuits is hiding it the tablecloth underneath the placemat is red and white chequered squares it's the same one that's been on the table for twenty years it has a little hole in one of the corners from where it tore on something i know there's a faint red wine stain in the shape of africa on one of the overhanging flaps i can't see it so it's probably on the other side

take a seat wherever you like mum says chirpily *though i do recommend this side of the table* she leans to whisper loudly into my ear *it's away from the stain!* then she stands up and announces in a loud voice as if there were other people to hear what she now had to say *there's a lovely view of the pool don't you think?*

i sit in my chair the one i've always sat in
lemonade? biscuits?

i take a bite of a biscuit it's a kingston biscuit kind of an anzac taste with chocolate cream or something in the middle i can feel it crunch between my teeth if i shut my eyes i can imagine i'm crunching through gravel or maybe there's gravel crunching in my mouth i don't know i can hear mum pouring the lemonade into the glass she's dolloping it like milk i wait for the sound of the fizz to settle

mum? i say

hang on donkey kong she sings *i'd better just wipe this down first*

she's spilt great drops of lemonade everywhere they sit on the red and white chequered tablecloth like giant carbonated teardrops shimmering in the light coming through the dining room window

mum hums to herself as she heads to the kitchen to get a sponge she wipes down the plastic tablecloth back and forth and back and forth and back and forth it starts squeaking as she does it like when a car windscreen wipers are on and the windscreen isn't wet enough when she's finished i watch her take the sponge back into the kitchen and i watch her come back out and sit down with me at the table and then i swallow what biscuit i have left in my mouth and wash it down with a swig of lemonade the glass is sticky against my hand so i wipe it on my jeans

mum i say

yes my biggest boy? she winks at me and grins

mum i miss anna

she doesn't chuckle before she answers i thought she might but she doesn't she just looks at me through those big thick glasses of hers with an anticipatory smile as if i'm part way through telling a joke or something then she says to me quietly *i know you do my boy* and she ruffles her fingers through my hair and then hangs her mouth back in the same anticipatory smile her eyes brighten a little as she sits there watching me my mum has kind eyes beneath the craziness kind and sad eyes i look from her eyes to her hands which are ever so slightly clasped rubbing gently but firmly against one another my mum's got wrinkled hands they are wrinkled and spotted with moles and they are strong she could knead dough and scrape dirt and open jars with those hands she has i've watched her do that stuff many times i take another biscuit crunch it quietly look back at my mum's crazy kind eyes she sort of raises her eyebrows at me excitedly and looks at me as if to say she's still waiting for the end of some joke i know she doesn't think it's funny that i miss anna it's just that i don't think she can ever show me her anything but her cheery face it's as if her cheery face fell apart at the seams then so would she

ohhhhh cheer up buttercup she says

she's still sitting there with a grin on her face i've got half a jug of lemonade left but i'm full up on biscuits for the moment

now mum claps her hands together as if she can sense my loss of appetite *have we had enough to eat?*

when i don't answer she gives a little chuckle and pokes me in the ribs *have we? have we then? eh?*

i draw back i look at her she looks back at me and we kind of sit there for a few moments just looking at each other she still has a smile on her face but it's not so big now and it's not the sort of smile that looks like it's waiting for the end of a joke it's a tired smile she looks too tired from life to be able to help me in any way i don't even know why i came to see her about anna i don't know what i expected her to say maybe just because she's lost someone she loved too maybe

i want to cry but i can't i feel like my head is going to burst from the build up of uncried tears like it's going to literally swell up and explode i just wish someone could provide me with the trigger to cry

i think you're going great guns says my mum gently and pats me on the leg
great guns

no i'm not i say i'm going shit guns

oh matthew she says and she puts her arm around me and puts her head on my
shoulder and starts crooning softly *grey skies are going to clear up* *put on a*
happy face

i stand up mum *don't start with that stuff*

she looks surprised *matthew?* she's still smiling though

just *don't start with that*

start with what?

the singing

what do you mean?

look mum i say it might work for you but it didn't work for dad and it's not
going to work for me

and then suddenly the smile disappears like the sun behind the clouds and my mum's
face suddenly looks so dark that you'd swear that smile never existed

you'd swear the sun never existed

she sits there staring at me with that face as if i've broken some unspoken

commandment by mentioning him i sit there and stare right back at her

feeling slightly unsettled because i know that i have it's happened before in

what's left of our family mentioning dad and in particular the possibility that he

might have killed himself has been taboo since the day that we all know for a fact that

he killed himself still george and me talk about him now and then anyway

i mean why the fuck not? he was our dad whenever we do mum goes into

her silence game she just sits there and stares at the offender until he has had

enough and then she gets up and starts pottering about the room or something leaving

us there feeling guilty for our sin i'm kind of sick of that shit though

what? i say i'm starting to feel annoyed *what's your problem?*

mum doesn't say anything just sits there dark face staring at me and the
longer she stares at me the less she appears to be looking at me in less than a

minute she is looking right through me as if i'm not there anymore i sit there

and let her look right through me sometimes i feel like i can see right through her

too i sit there and i stare and i know that i'm not going to stop staring back this

time now that i've lost my father and my anna i've got nothing left to lose

least of all a fucking staring competition she must realise it too because she suddenly gets up *i've got things to do* she says *have you finished?* she doesn't say it in her sing-song voice she says it professionally as if she is a teacher or something but she doesn't even sound polite or friendly like most of my old teachers she sounds angry but i don't care because i'm suddenly angry too *this is bullshit i say aren't you ever going to talk about dad?* she leans over and grabs my plate and the lemonade jug she doesn't look at me just busies herself gathering the dishes and mutters under her breath *i have things to do matthew things to do i'm going to have to ask you to leave now mum* i say again *are you ever going to—* *please leave now matthew* she still hasn't raised her voice *no* i tell her *i want to talk about dad i want to talk about anna i want* i don't get to finish i'm cut short by the sound of the lemonade jug smashing against the dining room window it makes a hell of a racket i look up slowly there's not much of a hole in the window probably not even enough room for the face of a bichon frise most of the jug hasn't actually gone through just the odd broken bit the rest of it's lying at the foot of the window there's a huge sticky mess there and some of it has splashed back on to the tablecloth mum looks down at the tablecloth then she turns and heads into the kitchen to get the sponge i get up and start walking towards the door there's a picture of my mum and my dad sitting on the tv that i see as i walk out neither of them are smiling my mum's face in the photo looks like it did a few moments ago the tired smile face i go through the screen door and shut it behind me to the sound of my biscuit plate shattering against a wall

*

I'm standing in my room looking out the window. The arborist guys still haven't come back to pick up the bits of wood they couldn't mulch last time. There's quite a few pieces there. All different sizes.

When I've finished my coffee I go down and I get those bits of wood and I take them out into the back yard. Matthew comes out the back while I'm stacking it up.

'What you doin' that for?'

I shrug. 'Just feel like it, I guess. Where you been?'

'Mum's.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'How is she?'

'Crazy as fucking usual. I'm going to bed.'

'It's the middle of the fucking day mate.'

Matthew shrugs and heads to bed. I'm standing there in the back yard looking at all these bits of wood. I can already see how they might all fit together—or at least how some of the pieces might. There's a saw and a hammer and some nails in the shed so I go and grab them out. I'm not doing anything else today anyway. I don't know what I'm going to make. Just something. I get the saw and I start cutting up the longer branches into even lengths. About two foot long each.

*

i know george isn't trying to give me a hard time it is the middle of the day but for me it always feels like the middle of the night at the moment i head to my room and climb into bed and stare up at the ceiling there's a huntsman spider that has been sitting up in the corner for the last few weeks i've been watching it when i can't sleep i think it must have been pregnant at some stage it had some sort of cocoon thing growing for a while it looked like a little ball of cotton wool or something one day when i looked up the cocoon thing had hatched and there were heaps of tiny spiders that came out of it i didn't see them come out i only saw them around on the ceiling next to their mother the thing was—by the time i saw them they weren't alive anymore for some reason they had all died at first i thought they were just staying still but i realised that tiny spiders like that wouldn't stay still if they were alive they'd be running about and doing tiny spider things

i stare up at the ceiling at the mother huntsman and her dead babies i think deep down she knows they aren't alive but it's like she's in some sort of denial she's still up there in the corner among all her dead babies as if she somehow believes that they are going to start moving again

they're not though
once something is dead it is dead
i can hear george fucking around in the backyard it's right outside my window
he's been going for a while now with all that sawing and hammering going on
you'd think he was building an ark or something maybe he is maybe he knows
i'm about to burst with a million tears and he's building an ark so that we can float
away on them float away to another place if he is building an ark i hope he's
planning on putting a bed in there cos i plan to be doing a lot of sleeping whether i'm
floating away or not i pull my head under the covers it's getting harder and
harder to sleep these days but at the same time it's also getting harder and harder
being awake everything's hard i know mum takes the pills when she can't sleep
so i could always get some off her but what do you take when it's too hard to be
awake? there's no pill for that
i wonder how the huntsman mother is dealing with the death of her babies
maybe she's sleeping she looks asleep she hasn't moved for a few days
maybe she's dead as well
if she isn't dead and if george is building an ark i'm going to put her in a jar and take
her with us and of course george would come too because it's his ark
and i know we would take mum as well because even though she is crazy she
still loves us

*

I don't know what I'm building yet. I'm just nailing the bits of wood that I cut
together. Like in a big bundle. The nails are big and thick and they hold the wood fast.
It's pretty awkward trying to line everything up correctly but I manage to get it all
happening eventually. I stand back and look at my work. I don't know exactly what it
is. It's basically just a round bundle of about twenty two-foot long branches. It almost
looks well, like a kind of a tree stump. It looks kind of stupid but I like it anyway. I
like it because I built it. I sit down on it and I have a cigarette.

I'm sitting on my new chair of sorts smoking a cigarette and I hear footsteps
crunching up the gravel driveway. For a split second I find myself thinking it might be
Selphie. It's a pretty stupid thought and I don't even know why I have it. And it's not
so much a wish anymore as it is a habit. A thought addiction. Anyway, I already know

get in the space between two people beneath the sheets so the warmth is like an invisible coat that you can kind of taste and all your smells and dreams are mixed up together in it and the only way you could possibly become closer is if you break through the warmth to each other

*

‘Fuck me George. Fuck me hard.’

Stacey’s lying on her back on my bed with her legs splayed in the air. I’m lying on top of her, thrusting, watching her face. She’s looks kind of intense. I keep trying to make eye contact with her but she won’t look at me for some reason. She seems determined to keep looking over my shoulder.

‘Fuck me!’

I give up on trying to make eye contact and just bury my head in the pillow next to her face and concentrate on my rhythm. Stacey’s got her arms wrapped loosely around me. It’s as if she wants to feel my back knocking against her wrists. I turn my head briefly and look up at one of her legs. It’s stuck out high and wide—almost as if she’s trying to separate it from her body. It looks pretty fucking sexy, the way it’s stuck out, almost twitching with determination to be spread as wide as it can. I turn back and bury my face right next to her ear. Get a huge whiff of hair product and sweat.

‘Fuck me, oh *fuck* me,’ she says again. Her voice is aching.

I feel suddenly animal. In the moment. I breathe deeply into her ear. ‘You like that? That feel good?’

She doesn’t say anything back. I start wondering if I’ve said something stupid. I keep thrusting but I try not to think about it too much. Then I think maybe she didn’t hear me cause we’re making a fair bit of noise. So I think fuck it. I’ll say it again. This time I breathe right into her ear. ‘You like that do you? Having me inside you?’

‘Mmmm...’ she breathes. ‘Mmm... I do... I do...’

I don’t know quite why I say what I do next. Possibly the only way I can justify it is by admitting that I never really understood dirty talk in the first place. I’ve never really known what to say. It could be that. Or it could be that I’m an idiot. Either way, I have no excuse. ‘Fuck yeah,’ I breathe into Stacey’s ear. ‘It’s a real Fuckorama, isn’t it?’

And as soon as those words leave my lips, I start cursing myself. And seriously questioning the meaning of what I've just said. Fuckorama? What the fuck is a Fuckorama? Is it like a wrestling thing? Is it like the cage of death? Do you wear fucking roller skates at a Fuckorama? I'm so caught up with my own embarrassment that I don't even notice Stacey letting go of my back and turning her head to the side. I keep thrusting hoping that somehow she'll answer me at least with a moan or something. Anything to put a full stop to my own stupid words reverberating in my head.

She finally does put a full stop to the words. After about thirty more seconds of my increasingly desperate silent thrusting and her increasingly irregular heavy breathing she suddenly emits a small giggle. I keep thrusting, trying to pretend to myself it wasn't a giggle but a kind of sexual squeal. But the longer I keep thrusting and trying to pretend, the more ridiculous I feel. And then I let a small chuckle slip of my own. I stop thrusting and I feel her legs drop to the bed and I groan and I start to laugh into the pillow next to her head. I can feel her whole body starting to tense up.

'I'm sorry... did you say... "Fuckorama"?' she suddenly blurts with another, definite, giggle.

'I think so,' I groan. 'I didn't really mean to...'

'No, seriously, George,' she says. Her giggles are becoming laughs.

'Fuckorama?'

I push my face into her pillow. 'I know,' I groan again. I roll off her and lie there on my side watching her as she turns to face me. She's laughing loud and hard like she's really enjoying laughing. It's a beautifully happy laugh. I don't mind the fact that she's sort of laughing at me. I just like hearing people laugh like that.

So I turn over onto my back and listen until her laugh downgrades to a chuckle and then a giggle, and then finally peters out to nothing and then she snuggles up to me, smiling. 'I'm sorry, George,' she says. 'I don't mean to laugh at you.'

'Yes you do,' I smile. She can't see me smile but she can probably hear it in my voice. 'And I don't mind, remember?'

She giggles again, just slightly. 'But, really, I don't. It was just a very strange thing to say, that's all.'

'I'm aware of that,' I say. 'I don't even know why I said it. It just popped out. I guess I'm just a bit of a dick sometimes.'

'No George,' she says. 'You're just a funny man. I like that about you.'

I can't remember being funny around Stacey. I mean, I think I have an okay sense of humour, but I can't remember being particularly funny around her. Maybe she means funny not in a 'ha ha' sense but funny in a 'weird' sense. It doesn't really matter though. What seems to really matter to me at the moment is the last thing she said: that she *likes* that about me.

I don't say anything else and she doesn't say anything else and so the words: 'I *like* that about you' keep reverberating around and around in my head like they are waiting for a full stop but I'm not sure whether I want to give them one yet so I keep my mouth shut and I lie there with Stace and listen to her breathe and let myself feel her fingers stroking the top of my hand.

*

it's dark outside though there's a moon far off in the sky i'm finding it hard to sleep
again not because of any other reason than i'm awake there's no wind around at
all tonight everything is more still than a life drawing it's so still and
quiet that i can hear traffic from the main road which is two blocks away

there's not a lot of traffic at this time in the morning just a car rushing through
the darkness every now and then if i concentrate hard enough i can make
myself think that the passing cars are breaking waves i lie there and
listen to the sound of each wave breaking in between the breaking waves i imagine
the black water being sucked silently back out to sea imagine myself being sucked out
with it the tide tonight is such a slow moving tide and i lie and listen to it until the
moon starts to disappear until the breaking waves become more frequent as the
early birds begin their day i lie and listen to the tide move until the sun comes up
and then i finally fall asleep

*

The next morning I wake up about ten minutes before the alarm is set to go off. I lie there thinking for a while. Thinking I haven't really checked the house for the last few days. Wondering why. I hear some sort of creak out in the kitchen. I start thinking whether I should get up and check but I decide to get up and have a shower instead. At

least I will in a few minutes. I just want to enjoy the warmth of the bed for a little bit longer.

I have to be in at the bowling alley super early today. I'm starting at six. Leonard said he had a special job for me to do. I asked him what but he said he'd let me know when I got there.

I lie there with my eyes shut for a few minutes feeling the warmth of Stacey's back against my arm. I must doze off at some point because I don't open my eyes again until the alarm goes off. I fumble for the off switch as Stacey groans and curls into me. I put my arm around her and kiss the top of her head. Don't know why. It just feels like the natural thing to do. Then I untangle myself from her curl and head to the bathroom. Turn on the light and look at myself in the mirror. Not a fucking rash to be seen at the moment. I've getting rings under my eyes but I guess I'm looking okay considering I've only really had about four hours sleep. Me and Stacey lay talking for ages after the whole dirty talk debacle. We even made love again. But we kept our mouths shut and we got through the whole thing without so much as a snicker.

She still didn't look at me while we were doing it though. Still wouldn't make eye contact. I asked her why later on and she said she wasn't ready to yet. She said that staring into someone's eyes while she's making love is the most intense thing she can do. That she only does it if she loves someone. I guess that's fair enough. I was thinking about how she said the word 'yet' though. And if it means that she thinks one day that she could do that with me. That she could love me. And I start thinking about whether I could love her as I climb into the shower. Just for a second I think about whether there might be a dirty pervert standing outside the window in the 5am darkness, waiting to hear me turn the taps on. Imagining me naked and wet. But I only think about that for a second. I'm too tired and I've got too much else on my mind to be worried about that for now.

Stacey's still asleep when I head off. I get to the bowling alley and the only car in the car park is Leonard's. I have to stand and knock loudly on the front glass doors until he eventually wanders out of his office and lets me in.

'Hey, Georgie boy,' he says.

'Hey, Leonard.'

'Get yourself a coffee, and meet me down back.' he says. 'Got a big day ahead.'

So I go and get myself a coffee and head down the back of the bowling alley. There's a little door you can go through that takes you out behind the lanes and it leads around to where all the automatic pin-resetting machines are. There's also a few hundred spare bowling pins lined up on shelves on the back wall. They're old ones that have been used for years and they all scratched and dirty from being hammered by bowling balls and jumbled around in the machines for a fucking eternity. Leonard's standing out the back by the pin shelves having a cigarette.

'I didn't know you smoked,' I say.

'Only in the mornings,' he says. 'Want one?'

I look at the packet in his hand. Fucking menthol cigarettes. Typical Leonard.

'I've got my own,' I say, and take one out and light it up.

'Now,' says Leonard. 'The job.'

'The job,' I say.

He gestures towards the pin-rack. 'Basically, George, it's a scrubbing day.'

'A scrubbing day?'

'These pins. They need a clean.'

'Oh... you're serious?'

'George,' he says and leans forward right up to my face. 'I've never been more serious about anything in my life.' Then he chuckles out a drag. 'There's a chamois there, and you can get yourself a bucket of warm water. You don't have to worry about getting the dirt out that's in the actual scratches themselves. Just the general black marks will be good enough. No one can see the dirt in the scratches from the other end of the lanes anyway.'

'Oh, okay.'

Of course, you can finish your cigarette first if you like.'

'Oh, okay.'

'And just be careful. The maintenance guy is going to be in here working on some of the machines from about eight o'clock. Try and stay out of his way. He doesn't like people being in his "jurisdiction", as he calls it.'

'Oh, okay.'

'I'll be back in about an hour to see how you're getting along.' He flicks his cigarette butt to the floor and marches back out the side door. I stand there for about three or four minutes, surveying the hundreds of pins I am supposed to spend the day

scrubbing. 'Day' my arse. I could scrub for the next forty-eight hours straight and still not get through half of them.

I'm back out in the carpark before I've even finished my cigarette. I let myself out the back entrance. I don't even bother telling Leonard I'm gone. The sun is coming up and I'm wondering whether Stacey will still be in my bed when I get home. I could do with a few more hours sleep. And I've got some pretty fucking strong memories of how warm that bed was this morning.

*

the sunlight is burning my eyelids by that i don't mean that my eyelids are hot
i mean they are sizzling like fish on a grill at least that's what it feels like
i open them and for a second all i see is a white flash and then red dots as i
shut them again and then i think of anna when the red dots are gone
i open my eyes again and i look at the ceiling the mother huntsman is
still there she's moved slightly though she isn't dead her babies haven't
moved they still are i think of anna i hear the front door open and
shut somebody's home i listen to whoever it is go into the bathroom it
must be george he never shuts the bathroom door when he takes a piss
i want to call out his name
want him to come and hold me in his arms
to hold me in his arms so that i can finally cry
i want to tell him all about anna
i want to tell him about the time that me and anna went to the pub and we had a
pizza by an open fireplace and anna looked so beautiful she was like an angel in a red
woollen top and a winter skirt and a smile that made me want to fall over
i want to tell george how we ate pizza by the fireplace and that when we finished i put
the cardboard pizza box on the fire and i think it got sucked up by the wind in the
chimney somehow and then about five minutes later someone came in and said we had
to evacuate because the pub chimney had caught fire i want to tell george about
how me and anna had to pretend it wasn't us that started the fire as we stood in the
crowd of half-drunk people outside and waited for the fire brigade to come and put the
chimney out that it was the first time we held hands and when we did my own
chimney caught fire and no one could ever put it out i want to tell

george about when i forgot to get mum flowers for mothers' day and how mum got so upset she couldn't stop laughing for hours and i was in tears because i felt like a terrible son and so anna came around and she made these beautiful flowers out of coloured paper and she made stalks for them and everything and it took her hours and then when i took them in to mum and said i was sorry mum was so touched that she stopped laughing and just gave me a hug i want to tell george about the first time me and anna made love about every time we made love and how every time we made love i would fall apart and put myself back together again so i could do it all over again

i want to tell george all of this and i want to cry i want to cry but i can't i don't know why i can't but i just can't sometimes i think i don't want to be close to george anymore because i think i don't want to be close to anyone because they all leave the face of my fucked up world anyway and so i lie in bed and listen to him finish his piss and then i hear him walk back to his room and shut the door and i think if i can't be close to anyone anymore then what's the fucking point of it all and then i remember that i all have to do is sleep forever

*

I get home and Stacey is still in my bed. She doesn't seem that surprised to see me back so soon. 'When you said that asshole had another job for you, I was wondering how bad it would be,' she says. 'What was it this time? Scrubbing his undies?'

'Wasn't that bad,' I chuckle, and then shudder. What could be?

'So did you quit?'

'Sort of. I just left.' I sit down on the bed and Stacey moves around and lays her head in my lap. 'I'm glad,' she says. 'You were too good for that crap.'

'How do you know?'

'I just know.'

'But you hardly know me at all. I mean...'

She laughs. 'Don't worry, George. I know you well enough.' Then she lifts my t-shirt up a little bit and kisses my belly. 'Coming back under the covers, then, Mr Fuckorama?'

'Yes. But can I ask you a favour?'

‘What?’

‘Please don’t mention that again. I feel enough of a loser as it is.’

‘I thought you liked it when I laugh at you?’

‘I do. Just not about that. It’ll ruin our sex life.’

She giggles. ‘Well, we can’t have that... okay... I’ll try, but I’m not promising anything,’ and she uncurls herself from my lap and turns herself around to stretch out.

I lean down to take off my shoes and socks, struggle out of my jeans and throw my t-shirt on the floor. Snuggle up to her back. I kiss the back of her neck and then I lean back to have a good look at her back. I hadn’t noticed her back before. Not like it is. She has a large mole just to the left of her spine. There are the tiniest, almost invisible, white hairs like you see on a caterpillar running across the backs of her shoulders. Her spine itself is barely visible, there are dimples in her shoulder blades. There are heaps of smaller moles everywhere. Small enough so that you would really have to look at her back to really notice them, but once you do, their number seems infinite.

‘How many moles do you have on your back?’ I say, suddenly.

She giggles a purr. ‘I don’t know. Why don’t you count them if you really want to know?’

I lean forward and kiss the big one. ‘One,’ I say. Move slightly to the left and kiss again, for slightly longer. ‘Two.’ Move down and to the right, press my lips firmly and suck a gentle kiss. ‘Three.’ I tongue kiss numbers four, five and six.

I get to number ten before she turns around to kiss me back. And while we are kissing, all I can think about is that I am going to have to start counting all over again another time. And that I’m looking forward to it.

*

i look up at the mother huntsman she hasn’t moved she’s probably died of a
broken heart i know i won’t be able to sleep unless i do something i want to
sleep want to fall asleep and dream i know i won’t be able to sleep i get
up and get dressed

*

I hear the front door shut. Matthew must be going out somewhere. I hope he brought an umbrella with him because the look of that sky out the window tells me it's going to be pissing down pretty soon.

Stace hops out of bed. 'I gotta head off.'

'Where?'

'Home,' she says. 'I have some stuff to do.'

'Hey, if you want,' I say, 'You can come back later, sleep over again.'

'Oh, gee, *thanks*,' she says in a fake dumb voice.

'No, I mean... '

'Uh huh?' She seems far more interested in getting her bra and t-shirt looking and feeling just right than she does in this conversation.

'I mean, well... you know how we've been "practising"?''

'You want to stop?'

'No, it's not that. I mean, I want to keep practising.'

'Well, what then?'

'It's just that I want us to stop practising "not being with them".'

'I'm not sure I get you, George.' She's not looking at me. She's biting on a hairclip while she pulls her hair back and stares in the mirror.

'Well, I was thinking maybe we could start practising *being* with each other.'

'Oh. You mean—like a couple?' There's something in her voice that sounds like she's not into it. I take a backwards step. 'No, yeah, I mean... well you know what I mean... '

Stace fixes her hair and then looks around the room for her socks and shoes. When she finds them, she grabs them and sits down on the bed and puts them on. It seems to take forever. Then she stands up and starts looking around the room again.

'Have you seen my purse?'

I point to the corner of the room. 'Over there.'

'Thank you.' She goes and gets it and comes and gives me a peck on the cheek and starts strutting towards the door. I start wondering whether she's going to suddenly pretend that she hasn't heard my question at all, but just before she gets to the door, she turns and says. 'I know what you mean, George. But I would need some serious time to think about that, okay?'

'Okay.'

She turns to go. But then she stops suddenly and struts back over to me. She leans forward, lifts my chin with her finger and gives me a quick but firm kiss on the lips. Then she stands up straight, looks me in the eyes. She's not smiling at me or anything. Her face is completely deadpan. She stands there for a few moments and then gives my hair a quick ruffle before she walks straight out the door and leaves the house.

I look out the window where the tree used to be. The sky is heavy and thick, like it's about to burst and yet you can still see the sun sitting fair in the middle of it. It's bright and somehow dark all at the same time.

*

it's started raining by the time i get to mum's i don't have an umbrella my jeans and my t-shirt are pretty wet but it doesn't really matter what matters is my sneakers are wet too and i have to make sure they don't squeak too much on mum's floors because i don't want her to hear me i go around the backyard there are bottles everywhere fucking bottles everywhere and there's only one message between them and only mum knows what it is i walk past her bedroom window stop and look at her for just a second she's reading probably the bible she's got some earphones in probably listening to one of her musical tapes or something good she won't hear my sneakers for shit then i get to where the dining room is and i reach in through the hole that she smashed in it earlier that afternoon and unlock the double doors and let myself in i know where she keeps her pills i won't have to go past her bedroom door the bathroom is next door but it's closer i'll just have to make sure i am quiet in case she takes those fucking headphones off i get to the bathroom and i find the pills and i grab a couple of full bottles and i get the fuck out of there

*

All the tools are where I left them. I stand and survey the sticks I have left. I reckon I have more than enough to make at least a couple more chairs. Maybe I could even make a whole set of them. Or maybe I'll just try making something else.

It's cold. It's raining. Fucking hammering down. The thunder's been ripping through the sky like gunshots and the lightning is so full on that it reminds me of the kind you see in cartoons when it's goes through people's bodies and lights up their black skeleton inside. Wherever Matthew was going, I hope he's there by now. Umbrella or not, he'd be a fucking drowned rat.

It was a good thing I stashed all the wood deep under the veranda, out of the wet. I grab a couple of sticks and a nail and hammer and I sit down. The wind's really starting to pick up, but I don't mind. The veranda's big enough so that the rain doesn't blow in much. Anyway, I like being outside in strange weather like this. Somehow the sun out there has refused to die. The backyard and the sky have a dangerous but exhilarating glow. The way everything looks so bright even in the middle of this storm, it makes me feel alive.

As I sit there contemplating what to build next, I suddenly think I hear my name being yelled out over the pouring rain but I figure it's just the wind and the thunder playing tricks on my ears so I ignore it. But then I hear it again. And again. I look up. There's my mum. Standing in front of me. Soaking wet in her dressing gown. She's not smiling or anything.

'George!' she yells.

'Mum, what are you doing here?' I down tools and usher her inside. She's literally dripping wet. 'Sit down,' I say. 'Have a cup of tea. I'll find you something dry to put on.'

'Stop,' she says. 'Just stop.'

'Seriously,' I say. 'You have to get out of those wet clothes. You're soaked through.'

'Just stop, George! Where's Matthew. Is he here?'

'He went out,' I say. 'Now, please, Mum. Listen to me. Go to the bathroom and get yourself in a shower or something. You'll make yourself sick like that.'

'No. George,' she says, with a voice I haven't heard for years. 'You need to listen to me.'

*

i stand on the jetty in the pouring rain and look back at the beach the beach is empty
there's no one around the wind whips around my face the waves are so

big they crash against the side of the jetty so that the spray washes all over me it
doesn't matter i'm soaked through to my skin anyway i look down at the
boat tied up at the end of the jetty bobbing violently on the shifting sea i knew it
would be there it's like it's waiting for me it's old and wooden and the paint
is peeling off it's green paint like the green paint on the windowsills at mum's
house i climb in and untie the rope sit down i can feel the dampness of the
seat through my trousers it must have been raining earlier when i wasn't here
it's a hard row out into the sea fighting against those massive waves i
don't row out very far but i don't really need to anyway the sea is deep enough
where i am i lie back in the rocking boat and look at the sky i can see anna's
face in the clouds for a few moments but they change back to nothing again her
face was only there for the shortest time and now it will always be nothing
i listen to the waves slap against the boat feel the spray on my face like a fairy kiss
from an angel the boat's rocking around quite a bit more now as if it's trying to urge
me on i don't need any more urging on though the nothingness is urging enough
i pull the bottles out of my pocket and empty them into my hand and i take
them all as fast as i can feel them bottlenecking in my throat i need
water to help me swallow but i didn't bring any so i lean over and scoop some from
the sea and that's seems to help and with each pill that slips down inside my
chest i find myself feeling another pang of relief i lift my head back to the
sky and let the rain fall in my mouth and then i rinse and spit and lie back and wait to
sleep wait for a big wave to rise beneath me and roll the boat over send me into the
black angry water
i'll hardly make a splash

*

Matthew is in trouble. Mum knows it. Partly because she's his mother. Partly because she knows he's been at her house earlier. Partly because she knows that he's taken a couple of bottles of her sleeping pills with him.

We don't say much while we are in the car. She looks pretty freaked out. So freaked out she doesn't even sing. The only time I've ever seen her look like this is the night that Dad died.

We've already been looking down around the train tracks. Already been to the house where I found Matthew peering through the window. We've got the car heater cranking but we're still both shivering because we're soaked through. Mum's trying to drive as best she can but it's difficult with the rain pouring like it is. We check the old school. The old closed down train station. Anywhere we think Matthew might have gone. We even go up to Windy Point car park. Matthew told me once he lost his cherry there. Not the sort of place where you'd expect someone would want to end it all but I guess you never really know.

'Think George, for Christ's sake,' says my Mum. God I have never heard her sound so serious. It's almost as if she is normal. 'Think. Is there anywhere else he might have gone?'

I sit there staring at the drops pelting the other side of the windscreen. Trying to think of where he might have gone and also worried that we can't see more than six feet of the road in front of us in this rain. Think there's every chance we could have a fucking accident or something. And then it hits me like a two-tonne fucking horse. 'Fuck,' I say. 'Of course. He's gone where Anna died.'

*

i'm in my mum and dad's pool treading crystal clear water everything
is so still and beautiful and quiet that i can hear a butterfly panicking as it drowns it's
not far from where i am i watch it flailing about uselessly on the surface if i
scooped it up with my hands and flung it over the edge of the pool it might just survive
but we are both in the deep end and i don't have a free hand *don't worry*
butterfly i tell it *we'll go down together and together we will rise* it panics something
back to me but i don't understand it i can feel the pool beginning to swell i
can't see where the water is coming from but it's definitely deeper than it used to be
there's a strange smell in the air and it's not so quiet anymore
something's alive and something's happening the water keeps swelling
lifting me and the butterfly higher and higher the water is overlapping
the pool's edge the butterfly has stopped panicking but i don't know if that is
because it is dead or it just doesn't care anymore the water is spilling out of the
pool now all through mum and dad's backyard i'm struggling to stay
above it but i'm still fighting the butterfly looks at me and winks *don't worry*

it says *we'll go down together and together we will rise* i nod i stop treading
water i stop struggling and wait to sink down into the depths of the pool but don't
sink i keep rising with the water it's as high as mum's house now we are
higher than the roof i suddenly realise there is water as far as i can see the only
thing i can see that isn't water is the top of a very tall tree i can only just see
the butterfly now it's far away from me seems to be getting pulled in the
other direction i feel myself being pulled toward the top of the very tall tree as i
drift closer i can see a figure in the tree and then all of a sudden i go under
i get a mouthful of water it doesn't taste like mum and dad's chlorine pool
water it tastes salty i kick my legs and surface again spit the salty water
out i rub my eyes and try to focus on the figure in the tree and i realise

it's magda

she's clinging to the top branches she hasn't seen me yet doesn't see me
until the water drags and lifts me right up next to her then she turns her head
and i can see that she is crying crying great huge tears that run down her cheeks
and join the swell i am swimming in there is literally a waterfall of her tears running
down those cheeks and with every moment that passes the sea of her tears rises

mr harrison she sobs she seems surprised to see me she looks at
me with those great tears in her eyes *what are you doing here?*

ms szubanski i say *why are you crying?*

oh mr harrison *i'm crying for you of course*

and the ocean of her tears rises further and lifts me up to that tallest branch and
i reach out and i grab it and i pull myself up to magda and we hold each other and
suddenly i start crying too big waterfall tears running down my face we hold
each other and we kiss and we cry and we rock together in the highest branches of the
tallest tree and below us the ocean of our tears stretches out like the end of all things
i try to tell her i love her but i can't because the sobs are choking my throat
she doesn't say anything back to me
just squeezes me tighter and lets me cry

*

We stand there. Right at the spot where Anna died. I know it's the exact spot because there's even a makeshift headstone there. We all know Matthew put that there but he never told us about it. I just noticed it one day when I came up to see the accident scene again and to think things through. The headstone's still here but there's no sign of Matthew. I jump over the fence and have a look in the adjacent field but I don't search too much. If he was going to come all the way here then you would have thought he'd pretty much want to be right on the spot where she died. Not twenty metres away.

I hate it. I fucking hate it but he isn't here. 'He isn't here,' I say to Mum. She nods silently. We stand there for a few moments. At least it's not pouring down with rain in the hills. It's drizzling but not pouring. The storm has drifted. You can see it from where we are standing. It's blown down to the coast. Down to the sea. It looks simply beautiful. It's strange seeing a storm for what it actually is, seeing it from a distance. It's such a different view from when you are in the middle of one. When you are in the middle of a storm all you can see is the shit fly. All you can feel is the cold rain and the winds of fury hammering at you. When you look at a storm from afar, you can see it for what it is: a fucking powerful, aching, magnificent necessity of life.

Mum's looking at the storm as well. For a moment, we just stand there looking at it. Not thinking about Matthew and only thinking of him.

*

it's cold and i'm wet i'm lying in sand but i'm not at the bottom of the sea
i'm on a beach my mouth tastes like vomit and seawater and sand my
head hurts and i'm tingling all over out of the corner of my eye i can see a
giant green butterfly it's not far from me lying on the beach turned on its
side some of it is split apart there's broken butterfly wood and wings
everywhere *we'll go down together and together we will rise* i murmur
and i smile the rain is pelting my face and the wind is blowing sand in my eyes
but it doesn't matter anymore it doesn't matter because she won't leave
me again and even if she did i'd have forever to look for her because i know i'll
never wake up now

i hear my name and i shift my gaze to see my mum and george standing above me
soaking in the rain i smile i would have missed them both i'm glad
they are in my forever dream

oh matthew says my mum at least she's got her clothes on now
she's crying

i've never seen her cry before
not even in my dreams

i'm so sorry she says *i'm so so sorry*

she's crying harder than the rain is falling from the sky tears are streaming
down her cheeks *i'm sorry* she says again george is just standing there with
one hand in his pocket and the other arm around my mum's shoulders he looks
like he's crying as well i think i might be crying too but i can't tell because my
face is soaking wet anyway

can you get up? george leans down and offers me his hand i take it his
hand is somehow warm when everything else seems so cold he helps me to my
feet and my mum immediately grabs me in a bear hug she presses her face
against mine and squeezes me tight i can feel her tears against my cheeks
i know i'm crying too now i don't know why maybe because it all feels so real
mum steps back and finds george with her other arm and draws us both into
her the three of us stand there holding each other in the pouring rain in my dream
no one says anything except mum *i'm so so sorry* she says again *my beautiful*

boys

i don't know how long we stand there in the rain i have my head on mum's
shoulder eventually i lift it and that's when i see magda she's standing
there behind my mum in the pouring rain she looks at me like she doesn't
know who i am like i'm just some guy crying in a three way hug on the beach in
the middle of a storm when she notices me looking straight back at her she seems
embarrassed or something she drops her eyes and turns away starts walking
back up the beach

ms szubanski, wait for me i say but she doesn't turn around

i don't think she can hear me over the pouring rain