

Here Where We Live: The Evolution of Contemporary White Australian
Writers' Responses to White Settler Status.

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Creative Work: *Here Where We Live.*

A note on the relationship of the short story collection to the exegesis.

The stories in my collection contain aspects of the three different approaches discussed within the exegesis. Discussion of the stories' relationship to the three approaches is included at the end of each chapter. Often a single story will be mentioned as reflecting more than one approach, as in the case of "Night Blindness" (66), which contains elements of all three of the approaches, and "Stuff White People Like" (86), which has elements of both the "contemporary representations" and the "stepping back/stepping forward" approaches.

Despite this overlap, each story can be said to be dominated by a single approach. Therefore the collection is divided into three parts that correspond to the three chapters of the exegesis. The first part, "Ghosts", contains two stories that reference Chapter One's "haunted" approach, with characters in the stories "Drought Core" (55) and "Night Blindness" (66) concerned with metaphysical manifestations of Indigenous people and the Australian landscape, as well as the need to come to terms with the past.

The second part, "Ways We Learn Things" reflects the "contemporary representations" approach, with its emphasis on attempted engagement with Indigenous people and the Australian landscape, accompanied by awkwardness, mistakes and the wish to belong without guilt. These stories all feature a character called Oliver Bentley. The first story, "Stuff White People Like" (86) details Oliver's attempts to come to terms with his white privilege after attending a reconciliation ceremony. "Karko" is about Oliver's discovery of the concept of appropriation as a child on a school field trip. "Free With the Animals" (111) is the story of Oliver's wife Clay's relationship to the Australian desert and its role in her healing from a traumatic past.

The third division of the short story collection, "Country", is a reference to the "stepping back"/"stepping forward" approaches of Chapter Three. Stories "Oak Trees in the Desert" (116) and "Her Thoughts Heading North" (138) feature white and Indigenous characters who are working together towards a common

goal (in this case protecting the landscape from the nuclear industry). The short opening piece “My Good Thing” (150) also belongs to the “stepping back”/“stepping forward” approach. Again it tells of a place where the borders of Indigenous and white experience overlap, in the story of a white woman, an Indigenous man and their child.

It may be noted that some of the stories do not have a blatantly “Indigenous” central theme. The concept of Indigenous invisibility and its relevance to my short story collection has been discussed earlier in the introduction. Other themes present within the collection, such as families, the environment, teaching and relationships occur without reference to the “Indigenous” theme of the exegesis. This is because as a creative work the short story collection contains several themes that were not dictated consciously in their writing. The attitude of white characters towards Indigenous people is just one of these themes, but was the one I found most interesting and hence decided to explore within the exegesis.

Country

My Good Thing

This is my daughter's country.

That mallee sea with the undulating dunes and the rockholes where we take her back to camp. Twice a year at least, but sometimes more. This is her house, here near the sea where the bay sparkles beside one window and the mallee grows straight up to the back door. This is the yard where she plays. These are the dogs, her friends and guardians. These are her dark brown eyes, her chubby bronze hand on my pink freckled arm. These are her father's eyes, her grandmother's eyes, back to the Dreaming, looking out of a face just like mine. Her expressions are my expressions. I carried her, but she comes from this land. She sits on the ground in her dusty baby suit and throws the dirt around. Under the blue hot sky she barely needs a hat. Her eyes take in the view - three-hundred and sixty degrees her own place.

This is my husband. Those are his rockholes as well. This is his height and his long brown hair and his shyness and courtesy. He is in charge of logistics on those trips back to the rockholes. That's his mechanical knowledge, tinkering with the truck. His muscled arms and back carrying water containers and fuel and tarps and tents. That's him making trips to Adelaide for the Native Title Claim. I miss him when he is away. That's him returning to scoop us up, his red-headed wife and his baby girl here on the old sagging verandah, waiting for him to come home.

My daughter's country is lush after the rain. In spring, we bounce along the track past feathery grey desert rose bushes and meadows of paper daisies, yellow, pink, white and purple. We camp in a place we know that's like a gigantic school yard, full of the rules and reasoning of the bush. The sky is a blackboard, predicting rain, blazing with light. We sit my daughter in her cardboard box to keep her safe from scorpions and watch her goggling at the classroom all around. While we set up camp, her grandmother takes her off to pay her respects to the women's rockhole.

That's her grandmother who loves her to death and teaches her the right way to do things. Her young grandmother with her long hair and her beanie, her eyes that fill tragically when she thinks it might all be too late, but who keeps trying anyway. She's the one who tells us when it's time to go back and clean the rockholes twice a year, in autumn and spring. Things can fall into them and drown and decay. Animals. Emus and kangaroos. Camels! You need a strong stomach and a change of clothes to do this sort of work. Nothing can make that smell come off your shoes. My daughter's grandmother smiles after a good day of cleaning. We crack our tinnies and sit around the fire.

Those volunteers from the city are trying kangaroo tail for the first time. They think it's revolting, too rich; I can tell. They make jokes to cover up their embarrassment. One of them keeps looking across at me, trying to work out whether or not I'm Aboriginal. I'm not, it's obvious that I'm not, but they get confused by my daughter's resemblance to the country – I am related to her and she is related to the land. That's when she's happiest, sitting in her box outside. Napping in the shade at noon.

The volunteers carve my daughter a pair of clapping sticks from a certain tree - her grandmother shows them how to select and cut and strip the wood. They painstakingly decorate the sticks with a bit of wire heated to white-hot in the embers. That's the way it's done. Next day my daughter grabs the sticks in her fists and chews the smoky ends with glee. My daughter's chin is covered in drool and her two bottom teeth are beginning to come through.

This country here and down to the sea is good. We don't go further up the track to the north. My daughter's grandmothers and great-grandmothers remember when the country up there was poisoned by the atom bomb tests. Some of my daughter's relations, aunties and cousins, children and great-grandchildren of the women whose country was bombed, have problems now with their reproduction. There are stories passed down about the men in shorts and sandals, driving around in their Jeeps. My daughter's grandfathers and uncles got sick from helping with the clean-up. I am lucky my daughter is strong and healthy.

Down here my daughter's country is good. When our work is done and we are headed home we stop for lunch by a waterless inland lake. The salt is white; there is pig face blooming on the shore. Her grandmother walks off to make an inspection and the volunteers stretch out under a tree and go to sleep in the shade. My husband puts on the baby pack. My daughter faces outwards with her legs dangling. I hold his hand and we walk across the salt until we are tiny dots tethered to our campsite by a wavering line of footprints.

We sit on a little sand island in the middle of the white lake and watch our daughter sleep. Her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks like a pair of dark brown moths. The slow animals of the island go about their business; the insects, the birds searching the flowers for nectar. In the distance we hear the buzz of an engine. Then we see them on the sand dunes, two guys riding dirt bikes up and down the big white dunes. From here you can see the scars forming as the wheels churn for purchase in the sand. My daughter's grandmother will have a sad face when we get back. She will be worried about the damage to the country. We will have to distract her; or we will have to do something about it, like with the rockholes. We will have to take action again.

My mother gets sad as well. That's her on the phone from Adelaide when we get back home. "Where were you?" she says. "You've been gone for days. I couldn't reach you. I was afraid something must have happened." My mother doesn't like it out here. We took her out bush once and she sat on a camp chair glancing around at the invisible night time sounds. My daughter's grandmother, the one from here, told her she herself was worried about the wild dogs at night, especially with a baby around. My mother didn't sleep a wink. She wants to know what I am doing out here. "She's such a sweet girl," she says about my daughter. "Can't you bring her back home?"

When my daughter's grandmother, the one from here, was a girl, she had to hide from the police. They wanted to take her away because her dad was white. My daughter's grandmother ran away with her own grandmother to the bush. For two weeks they hid in the country, up in the mallee, hunting whatever they could find to eat. It was winter and cold. They didn't get caught. My

daughter hears that story and watches her grandmother with her huge serious eyes.

“We’ll visit at Christmas,” I say into the phone, imagining the hasty bundling of the baby, denying everything there on my front porch, the speed and skillfulness of my daughter and her grandmother in flight, hurrying north to safety. Then the long days of waiting, growing thin and sad, holding my husband’s hand on the porch, looking for a puff of dirt in the distance, the triumphant return of the four-wheel drive. How nothing would be right again until I could fit her baby-suited body back into my arms.

This is my daughter’s country, from the poisoned land to the north to the mallee hills and the salty sea. These are her stars and sands and dark brown eyes. This is her home with me.

Ghosts

Drought Core

The night my husband said he was going to leave me we were in the middle of a heatwave. The old gum tree next door creaked and protested at the blasts of wind from the north. I lay in sweat with the fan on, watching him talk. He was sitting up with the seriousness of what he was saying; I was lying down. I lay down in my skin, the sheets between my legs, my hair falling loose. I tried to seduce him; it's the body's way; it's instinctive, to try to buy more time. It worked, but not for good; it worked without consequence, like a one night stand. He took me up, he took me into his arms. I couldn't believe what he was saying; this was the way to deny it. I clung to him, affirming the power I had to keep him with me, weeping to know that immediately afterwards the inevitable end would begin again.

“Shhh,” he said. “You’ll wake the girls.”

At that moment I didn't care. I wished our three children away. I wanted us back to the time before when we were planning our family together. I wanted us to be students again, walking hand in hand and fast uphill, almost running to put ourselves down on the yellow grass behind the big dead gum tree that was our place. Fucking in a hollow at the top of the country with a view spread out for miles, hidden behind the old dead bulk of wood.

There was the contrast of his shoulders, alive and tanned and sweaty, with the blue light of the sky, and then again the contrast of his shoulders, and of the sky, with the old outer bark of the gum tree. I reached up and touched it with my hand. I touched his hot skin. I reached my hand up and touched the sky, watching it between my fingertips. That was where we made our oldest, Jenna.

After, we pulled our jeans up, laughing, and paused to count the rings of the tree where someone had chainsawed the trunk from the roots. “See here,” he said, pointing to a narrow round of wood in the middle, smaller and harder than the big soft rings around it. “This is the drought core.”

A tree grows slow and small and hard in drought, until its main taproot

hits the water table and then it bursts into fast, fat, soft growth. When you cut the tree you can see where this has happened by the shape and hardness of the rings. We were both going to be scientists. We'd learned those facts earlier that day in a lecture.

"Here's where it found water," said the man who would become my husband, the drink to assuage my thirst, and then leave me. I didn't think I was listening hard; I was so close to his skin, absorbing him with all my senses, wanting him again already. But I carry the memory of that day.

From the time he said he was leaving to the time he left, it took a season. By day he was making arrangements to go; by night I was trying to keep him with me, all the while knowing bone deep that we were no longer a couple. I couldn't make a clean break, but it wasn't as bad as it sounds. I was preparing myself, mourning him, adjusting. He let me; we were saying goodbye. It was supposed to be autumn during that time but the whole south of the country was hit by a second, month long heatwave. Terrible fires raged over the boarder, and in our garden the birds stopped singing and even died. Finally, the temperature dropped by thirty degrees in a period of hours. Some unspoken pact was accomplished between us. He had seen us through the heatwaves. Now he was allowed to go.

The girls cried. He cried with his arms around them. My job was to stand in the doorway letting him farewell the kids alone. My body stepped back. I stood in the doorway thinking that the heatwaves would be worse next year. We didn't sign up to face environmental catastrophe together when we married in the 1990s, but that was what I thought of as I watched him hug our children. What about next year? What about in ten years time? I felt like a woman in the middle of a war, a famine, the middle ages, in need of a male protector for me and my children; romance of a completely regressive order neither of us had anticipated in the liberated end of the 20th century.

After the cool change, a freakish high wind brought down big trees stressed past endurance all over town. The emergency services were kept busy slicing them up into manageable rounds. What did I expect? We had been in

drought for six years, since my middle daughter Rhiannon was a baby. But still I drove past turning my head away from the sound of the chainsaws.

That's the thing about climate change, it comes home to you. In our case, literally – the fifth night after my husband's departure, while the children and I were sleeping in the front bedrooms, the old tree next door gave way and smashed through the kitchen roof at the back. I had taken valium to help me sleep; I didn't hear a thing. To my dying day I'll never forget the sight, as I stumbled into the kitchen for my usual morning coffee, of my youngest daughter Sharna, aged three, sitting on a low branch chewing on a gum leaf, centimetres away from the cruel edge of a sheet of tin roofing. I could see straight out the back, through what had once been a wall.

"I'm a koala," she said, happily.

That was it. I called my husband and told him we were leaving too. Appalled, he rushed over to try to persuade me to stay in town. I didn't try to seduce him. The tree had ended everything. He stood there awkwardly, then said I could have the insurance money and left again.

He thought my panic about climate change was exaggerated, and began a series of emails telling me I was nuts.

The girls and I went south anyway.

We went south in search of rain, climate refugees from the arid city where the water was running out. If they would not have a fatherly protector I at least wanted water for the girls so they could have a future. I bought an old farmhouse on the edge of a south-eastern town where the cows grew fat on lush green grass. That was autumn. As soon as we arrived it was clear that it was winter. Time and space made another planet of our world. It rained.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Jenna asked me while I was writing a shopping list. We had been at the farm for two weeks. It was the school holidays and the girls were bored and dismal now that the excitement of the move was over.

“No,” I said automatically, glancing around for the other two. They were outside sailing leaf boats on the rapidly filling horse trough. There were no horses, just the trough. My eldest daughter gave me a thoughtful look and said no more. Scenes of dreariness prevailed. The rain continued, over the top and ironic. *You wanted rain? I’ll give you rain!* said some malicious commentator who had recently moved into my brain. The girls caught a cold they passed back and forth between them like a ball. The house was dark, with a perpetual appearance of twilight. The sound of sneezing was accompanied by drips from the leaking roof.

School began just in time to prevent complete ennui setting in. Jenna reintroduced the topic of ghosts in the car on the way to Sharna’s new kindly. Water was pouring off the road onto fields that looked too full to hold further moisture. The contrast between the sodden green paddocks and grey sky reminded me of a picture book I had been given as a child about nuclear war in England. I wondered morbidly if climate change was so different from a nuclear winter. The fields were studded with Friesian cows. There was something pathetic about the way the wet fur between their stubs of horns gave them all a matted, wig-like hair style. Rhiannon, more cheerily, said they looked like the picture on the ice cream container.

“I *said*, if anyone’s listening,” shouted Jenna, “Sarah said our farm is haunted by Aboriginal ghosts.” Instant attention from her sisters, although Sharna, I’m certain, had no idea what a ghost was.

“Isn’t Sarah Aboriginal herself?” I said irrationally, as if the one fact somehow cancelled out the other.

“That’s how she knows,” said Jenna smoothly.

Sarah was the girl from the next farm over, whom Jenna had befriended on a bike ride during a brief break in the weather. Jenna had been going to Sarah’s house every day since, but so far Sarah hadn’t made an appearance at our place. To be honest, I’d thought she was invented until this morning, when a car pulled up as we were getting ready to leave and Sarah’s Mum wound down the window to ask if the kids wanted a ride to school.

Flustered by this sudden materialisation, I declined. “Tomorrow,” I said, while the girls complained they wanted to go with Sarah today. “There’s no room in the car,” I argued, as Sarah’s Mum reversed out of the driveway with a wave and several kids in the back seat craned to stare. I ignored further protests and wrapped the children round me like a blanket, Sharna solid and regal in her booster seat, Rhiannon blowing her nose loudly into a large silk handkerchief and Jenna riding shotgun, turning back to explain to the others, “See, when our ancestors came to Australia, they kicked all the Aborigines off the land...”

“There’s Sharna’s kindy,” interrupted Rhiannon, the observer, as we roared past the Ngarrindjeri Childcare Centre, hidden behind a clump of bushes. I made a painfully drawn out three-point turn a hundred metres down the road, as the windscreen wipers beat and beat and Jenna continued in a captivating monologue, “Well, they didn’t exactly kick them off, they actually killed them with guns and things like poisoning their bread and so...”

“Ok, we’re here. Finish the story later, Jenna.”

The older two waited in their seats while I replaced Sharna’s missing gumboot and led her into the kindy, past the colourful sign that said something in Ngarrindjeri, followed by a big exclamation mark. I assumed it meant “Welcome!” I hoped so. As I glanced back I saw Jenna climbing into the back seat to continue the conversation with Rhiannon.

When the tree fell and I rushed us down to greener pastures, I’d researched the weather patterns and the prices of land, but not the demographics, and so somehow missed out on the fact that we had moved to one of the biggest Indigenous country centres in the south-east. The kindergarten and school were both Indigenous, most of our neighbours were Indigenous and apparently we had Indigenous ghosts. I imagined my husband scoffing, saying I was corny to be excited by the idea of living in a different culture. Too bad. Sharna was being welcomed into the weaving circle by a woman who introduced herself as Auntie Rae. She had to shout over the sound of the rain on the tin roof.

“Sharna, that’s a pretty name!” Auntie Rae roared, giving me a wink and gesturing to me that I should make a getaway while Sharna was occupied

choosing some coloured reeds. As I beat a hasty retreat my psychic daughter looked up.

“Bye, Mum! See you this arvo when I’ve made my mat!” the observant teacher quickly interjected.

“See you when I’ve made my mat!” Sharna concurred.

The rain was biblical. It made me wonder if a house could drown. Climate change manifests in exaggerations of the norm. My husband emailed me: *It's raining in Adelaide as well. Your move is pointless. What are you doing down there?* The mixture of criticism and concern made me weak and defensive.

Why do you care? I wrote, but didn’t send. The girls and I sat on the couch, the doona over our knees, watching the fire in the pot-belly stove. My husband mocked me when I packed up pieces of the gum tree to take with us, but we had stayed warm every night so far.

I understood his point: we were running away from a global phenomenon, deluding ourselves that anywhere was safe. I remembered the rapid turnover of ideas in my head when I saw the branches of the tree sticking through the kitchen cabinet: *We could go to Tasmania! We could go to Bega. Wherever the rain is.* I quickly dismissed the northern hemisphere. Too overpopulated. Visions of climate refugees turned away mid-ocean and the girls defending the orchard with shotguns. Followed by the understanding that no matter where we found the rain the solution would be temporary. When we married, my husband and I combined our names. “That’s a one-generation fix,” someone said. “Your kids are going to be stuck with the same issue.” How many generations of safety were we buying with this move? There was no escape.

I panicked at the thought, the way Rhiannon panicked the night after Jenna’s ghost story, somehow waking up having grasped the concept of her own death. “It won’t be for a very long time,” I said. Her eyes were dilated into enormous black holes of fear.

“Why did we kill all the Aborigines?” she wanted to know.

“We didn’t kill them all,” I said, then mentally kicked myself. “I mean *we* didn’t kill anyone.”

“Are they angry?” said Rhiannon.

“Are the kids at school angry? The Aboriginal kids at school?”

“Not them,” said Rhiannon impatiently. “The ones we killed.”

“We didn’t kill anyone,” I insisted, like a negotiator talking someone down off a roof. Why can’t we admit it when things are heart-breaking? Rhiannon sat on my knee and cried herself into exhaustion. I remembered the appeal I made to a vague someone when the reality crashed down on top of my house. *Just give me sixty or seventy years of rain so the girls can have a normal life.* The malicious voice had responded immediately: *What about their children?* I flailed around for a come-back. *Maybe something will have happened by then to fix things.* I almost laughed out loud at myself by this point, stuffing the car with pieces of wood and children with a hyphenated surname.

“I want to go back where we came from,” said Rhiannon, waking suddenly in my arms.

“What do you mean, sweetheart?” I said, knowing what she was going to say.

“Back to England with Captain Cook and not kill anyone.”

I looked out the window at the sheets of rain falling past the outside light.

“We can’t go back. We were born here.” I got up and carried Rhiannon over to switch off the light. “And I’m so glad you three were born,” I added hastily.

Too late to say we should never have had them.

I got a guy in to fix the leaks, put up colourful curtains and pictures and lights, unpacked the telly and the DVD player. The commentator in my head wanted me to notice how many of our comforts were powered by electricity. I realised it sounded like my husband and told it to bugger off. I invited Sarah’s

family round for dinner. They declined politely. Jenna looked at me significantly. I'd banned her from talking about ghosts after Rhiannon's freakout.

But I sat alone in the kitchen while the kids were at school and put out my feelers. Sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and a history book from the library, I asked questions into the shadowy room. "Aboriginal ghosts". I tried to picture the families that had lived on this land. Were they from here or had they been pushed into this territory by the European invaders? How had this town become a centralised point of community? How was I so ignorant of the whole history? And why was I consulting a library book instead of any of the Indigenous people we'd met so far?

Did you flee down here too? I asked the room. There were the usual creaks and bangs, but I honestly couldn't feel anything. I reminded myself that I had slept through the destruction of the back half of my house. Too much the rational climate scientist perhaps? I sat very still and listened, but the voices were denied to me.

A scientist gathers information. After school, when we were feeding the damp chickens, I stopped feigning disinterest and asked Jenna what she knew. Jenna scattered the handfuls of feed and the chickens pecked at it greedily, seeming not to mind having to siphon the grain through mud. At first she wouldn't tell. "I know you don't believe me, Mum." She looked pissed-off. I wondered if she thought I was the one who had left her father, rather than the reverse. I made myself humble and waited for information. She sat on the fence and stated the facts with a curious look – a mixture of grief and morbidity. They were pretty horrible. "Back like a hundred and fifty years ago or something the guy who lived here was really mean. There used to be Aboriginal people living all around here but the town was getting in their way and making them have to give up their land and be drunk and dependent and stuff. So they used to come around asking for food. I think it was in the Depression or something."

I ignored the vagueness around dates as Jenna cut to the chase. "Sarah said the guy who lived here got tired of them coming round and gave them poison food to kill them. So he made everyone sick. An old man and a little boy died. But they all knew it was him so they made the place be haunted and the mean

guy, he eventually went mad and jumped down the well.”

“There’s a well?” I said.

“It’s ok, it’s covered up. It’s right up the back near the orchard.” The kids had explored much further afield than I had.

I put my arms around my eldest daughter to stifle an involuntary shiver. “Are you afraid of living here, hon?”

Jenna returned my hug and then jumped down off the fence. “Sarah said the ghosts won’t make us go mad, because we haven’t done anything wrong.”

We haven’t done anything wrong. Justice has been served. I thought back on my day – the kids running out the door as Sarah’s Mum honked from the car, driving with Sharna on the road through the icecream paddocks to the Ngarrindjeri kindy. Sitting in the kitchen straining to feel ghosts. The farmer had drowned himself in the well, and the Ngarrindjeri had survived. Things were still going on. Could it really be this simple? I had brief fantasies of my husband drowning in the bore he’d need to put in imminently to service his lawn in Adelaide, before succumbing to a sense of the deepest peace.

That night it stopped raining. I woke to the sudden silence. But a silence in an old farmhouse isn’t really quiet. I lay listening to the creaks and whispers, tucked under the quilt, my arms wrapped around my body for company. I didn’t like the fact that I was getting used to having the bed to myself; the space to the side of me made me want to get up immediately and seek comfort – see what the dog was doing; check on the girls.

I did the rounds - no one was awake - then went to the kitchen for a cup of tea. I switched on the light and there he was. Not old, but young. His back was to the door and I could see the outline of his shoulders against the cotton shirt. He was shaking, head on hands. We didn’t have Aboriginal ghosts. We had the farmer, and he was weeping with remorse.

That’s what I thought at first, my heart lurching like an animal in my chest, until the figure turned around with a familiar accusatory stare. “You left

the door unlocked,” said my soon to be ex-husband. “I didn’t want to wake you.” Any evidence that he had been crying disappeared as soon as we faced each other.

“No one locks their doors here,” I explained.

He thought that was incredibly dangerous. He wanted me to move back to Adelaide. “What are you doing down here, anyway?” he said. “You’re being ridiculous. And it’s too far for me to drive to see the girls.”

He said that we were living in the middle of a shanty town. When he’d stopped to get directions at the petrol station, everyone was Aboriginal.

“What are you trying to prove?” he asked me, looking around the kitchen. “You’re still white, you know. You’re still responsible for climate change like everyone else.”

He stood up, to make the point more forcefully, leaning over the kitchen table to deliver in person the message that the voice in my head had been so keen to emphasise: “There’s no escape.”

“You’re right,” I said, showing him the door. I locked it and went back to bed, listening to the sound of his car reversing up the drive. In the quiet I could hear his engine all the way down to the main road.

The next day, the girls went crazy with the freedom to play outside and stay dry. I packed them some sandwiches and they were gone all day. Finally I slid along the muddy track out to the orchard to collect them for dinner. They hugged me, clothes and hands covered in mud, then ran on ahead to set the table. Jenna was first, setting the pace. Rhiannon managed to keep up, exerting herself with the extra effort of the middle child. Baby Sharna ran along faithfully, her stumpy legs working the hardest of all, but the ratio of ages ensured she was hopelessly left behind. The older girls noticed and waited for her.

That was when I knew we would be alright.

Spring came. I received my divorce papers. I sent the children up to town on the bus once a month to see their father. His last message to me that was not

strictly about parenting arrangements came via email. *PS*, he wrote, accusatory to the last, *I've had to put in an artificial lawn.*

The summer heat was as merciless here as it was in Adelaide, but the big gum trees when they fell were further from the house. The girls harnessed one up and pretended it was a horse. The orchard still bore fruit. We picked bucket-loads and shared them with to the neighbours. Over the fence, I became friends with Sarah's Mum, Lucille, who was cousins with Aunty Rae. We three met for coffee while our kids played together, always at Lucille's place, never at mine. I didn't ask them about the well, which we reclaimed that summer. Any bones at the bottom had long since dissolved. Our roots hit the water table and our growth was vigorous, and the ghosts in all their manifestations left us alone.

Night Blindness

I was found to be short sighted with a severe astigmatism at the age of five and have needed, but not always worn glasses ever since. My first glasses had pink frames and thick plastic lenses. As I walked out of the optometrist's office the world came into focus for the first time. I held my Dad's hand, looking up at his face and marvelling at the individual flecks of stubble on his jaw, the single thread unravelling from his T-shirt sleeve.

The crowds in Rundle Mall heaved with fearsome detail and I recoiled from their sudden crudeness, moles and acne and crow's feet revealed – individual teeth outlined and saliva flying as they spoke. We passed a glossy shop front and I didn't recognise the crisply outlined child panicking in my reflection. After a while I simply closed my eyes and walked along in self-imposed darkness, holding Dad's hand.

I was practised at this, because as well as being short-sighted, I had night blindness. Every Friday evening, my family drove down from Adelaide to spend the weekend at Hindmarsh Island. By the time we got there it was late. Every Friday night, I held Dad's hand and walked from the ferry landing at Hindmarsh Island, to our shack near the caravan park. Even after the glasses, I still couldn't see in the dark.

The ferry ride across from Goolwa was the highlight of my week. As soon as we were parked I hopped out of the car and went with Dad to chat to the driver. Mum stayed in the car, reading a novel, or listening to the radio, while my younger brother Jason slept in the back seat.

Dad and I let the salty wind loosen our shoulders and unwind our city cares. "Ahhh, take a good deep breath of fresh air, Kelly," Dad said, doing as he suggested himself. I obeyed, filling my lungs to a point just short of hyperventilation. We leaned on the railing, watching the Island getting closer in the dusk. Through the coke-bottle lenses of my glasses, I saw the crisp outlines of

individual waves darken into invisibility beyond the reach of the ferry lights. The ferry driver gave us the local weather report for the following day. In my memory it was always “gunna be a warm one.” By the end of the crossing we were so relaxed that we made a point of sauntering back to the car last, although we were often the first car in the queue to get off.

The ferryman always saluted us, and Dad and I always saluted back. Jason always sat up as we bumped onto the Island, claiming to have been awake the whole time. Mum always turned around and smiled at me.

Once we had driven onto the Island, Dad pulled over and we all got out. Mum got into the driver’s seat. “Are you sure you want to walk?” she said every time. “It’s a really long way.”

We always wanted to walk.

While Mum drove the car to the shack, we would walk from the ferry along the country roads of Hindmarsh Island. The way was lit only by the occasional streetlight, and my night blindness lent a quality to the experience where Dad’s hand felt like the only solid object in a sort of space walk. I’d confidently step out through the undulating hills and fields of stars, the paler colour of the water the only indication of our being still on land and not in outer space.

Meanwhile my other senses were intensified; the Island smelled like cow pasture and something sulphurous behind - the mud flats where the reeds grew. Frogs boomed out and night birds rustled and cawed; as we neared the river bend I heard the fish rising to the surface.

I could hear Dad’s and Jason’s footsteps and conversation, my own breathing, our hearts beating. There was more; I could feel things that were invisible during the day. Where my shoes stepped on the asphalt of the road and with my eyes fixed on the different shades of darkness of the river and the hills, I felt a gentle rhythm, a rising and falling in time with my own breath, but bigger and more complete – the Island breathing.

I was always disappointed to see the light behind the orange curtains of our house upstairs. I let the others go ahead and lingered, sniffing and listening, feeling the cool breeze on my face. Then I ran towards the orange light and with the sudden return of sight, forgot about my personal relationship with the Island until the next night walk, lost in the welcome of family and hot chips on the oilcloth table.

When I was nine and Jason was seven, Mum and Dad split up and I threw my glasses in the river. I was completely surprised. I had seen no sign of their relationship breakdown, unless you counted the fact that they didn't seem to talk very much to each other. They certainly didn't fight. One minute we were in pyjamas for the drive down in the car, Jason's head nodding sweetly on my shoulder, my solid little brother, vulnerable only in repose. The next we were old enough to stay in our school clothes and have showers before bed when we got to the shack, and Dad was leaving, on a Saturday, absurdly *from* Hindmarsh Island, as if the idea of the drive back with us was completely out of the question; as if he couldn't get away fast enough.

The morning he left it was twenty-six degrees warming up to thirty-one; later it would be perfect for a swim in Rodger the Dodger's pool at the Caravan Park. The grassy hills of our part of the Island, dark and solid during our night walks, were revealed as dry and dusty by the morning sun. We got up early as usual and stood at the top of our street surrounded by yellow grass and asphalt roads. My heart beat fast with happiness; Jason was beside me; even the blond hills weren't big enough to hold all our hope for the summer.

So we took it easy, went inside to watch the early morning cartoons on TV. Later we persuaded Mum to give us the money for a bottle of Cottee's Ice Magic, purchased from the caravan park shop, so that we could make home-made milkshakes. I was in the process of doing so with a hand-held egg beater, and interjections from Jason: "Put more ice cream in," "Stop eating all the Milo," "Let me squeeze on the sauce," when Mum called us upstairs for a talk.

Jason had a Milo and milk moustache. After they told us that Dad was leaving, he wiped it off on his arm and told me to come outside. "We're going outside now," Jason said, as if that was his final word. Mum and Dad appeared stupefied, continuing to sit on the couch as I followed my brother down the wooden stairs and out into the front yard. He held the screen door open for me, before deliberately letting it bang, something we were usually conscientious about, because it weakened the frame.

The grass out the front was scratchy and full of bindiis. "I've forgotten my shoes," I said.

"Go back and get 'em," said Jason. "I'll meet you at the jetty."

All of the houses on our side of the Island had their own jetty. Ours was at the end of the road down a sweep of bitumen with loose gravel at the edges, which had caused us to stack our bikes coming down too fast on several occasions. As I put my sandals on I saw Jason through the nylon lace curtain in our room, tearing off down the road on his BMX.

The jetty was our place. It had a gate on one end of it that wasn't attached to anything else, and was, we felt, selfishly padlocked by our parents, who didn't own a boat. For some reason the gate, standing up by itself at the end of the jetty, was rarely opened; to access the jetty we simply held on and swung round it. When I came down the hill I saw Jason sitting on the end of the jetty, his BMX thrown casually into the long grass under the willow tree. I swung myself round the gate and went to sit beside him. We dangled our legs in the water.

"I was gunna watch *Hey Hey it's Saturday* tonight and everything," said Jason eventually. His voice was clear and strong. He wasn't going to give up without a fight.

"We probably still can," I suggested. "It's not like we've done anything wrong. It's not like *we* have." I added, pausing to let the accusation sink in.

A speedboat and water-skier went past. The wake washed against the jetty. We sat in silence, watching the water-skier zipping up and down the stretch

of water opposite, until interrupted by a shrill cry from the top of the hill, where Jason's Hindmarsh Island friend, Wally, was standing astride his bike. "Hey!" he called. Jason might not have played with him in Adelaide, because he was skinny and little and inclined to copy you if he thought you had invented something cool, but he was alright for weekends.

"What are you doing down there? Want to come over to my house, Jase?"

I was less of a fan of Wally, firstly for the reasons mentioned above, but also because he only ever invited Jason to play with him.

Jason stood up. "I probably will," he said. "Our parents are getting a divorce though."

He dropped this bombshell with such dignity that I was impressed and hurriedly got to my feet as well. Although I was the older sibling I felt formless and characterless in the face of Jason's response to the crisis; it seemed natural to follow my younger brother as he wheeled his bike back up the hill to where Wally stood with his eyebrows raised to the top of his stack-hat in shock and surprise.

When we reached him, Wally formally got off his bike and laid it sideways on the ground. Then he took off his stack-hat and put it down on the gravel next to his bike. For the first time ever, he addressed me as well as Jason, and very sincerely said, "My condolences."

No one laughed. "Thank you," Jason said, with equal formality. The boys shook hands.

I mumbled thank you as well. Wally met my eye and blushed. My misery was complete in the knowledge that my parents were separating and a seven year old dork had a crush on me.

Then Dad arrived to say good bye. There was a taxi waiting for him on the main road at the top of the hill. I rushed up to him and he knelt down and held out his arms, but didn't close them round me; he was waiting for Jason to get into the hug as well. Dad's arms were so wide there was probably room in there for

Wally too, who, I noticed, was still standing there with his mouth open, when I looked around to see why Jason wasn't coming over.

Jason's feet were planted firmly on the ground. His flat-top caught the sun. His blue tank top and fluoro-splattered board shorts looked iconic in the brightness of the day. His arms were folded across his chest. He wasn't going to come and hug Dad good bye.

Dad eventually stood up and went over to Jason and Wally. "Bye Wally," he said first. Wally mumbled a response.

"I'll see you soon, Jase," Dad attempted next, trying to pat Jason on the shoulder. Jason just stood there. He stared at Dad, calm and deliberate, with a scorn that seemed to reverse their positions. Dad hung around, for what seemed an unbearably long time, while Jason faced him with an endless look of dignity. Finally I grabbed Dad's hand and walked him over to his taxi. He got in, still looking over his shoulder at Jason, and I went and stood on the grass at the side of the road to wave him off.

Jason was fixed to the gravel with the sun shining down on him. He reminded me of one of the Chinese warriors from the exhibition at the Art Gallery Mum had recently taken me to see, who had stood guard over their Emperor's tomb for thousands of years. Jason looked as if he too was prepared to wait an equally long time for Dad to give up and leave.

But, as the taxi pulled away, my brother began to yell. He stood at the top of the hill and yelled after the departing car. "Piss off, you bloody bastard!" he shouted after Dad, his whole body straining forward towards the road. "Piss off forever, you dickhead!"

He yelled non-stop at the taxi until it disappeared around the corner on the road to the ferry. At one point halfway down the road it stopped and Dad got out, turning as if to come back, or say something, but Jason redoubled his efforts. "Get back in the car, you bastard!" he yelled in his loud seven-year-old's voice. I noticed by this time he was crying, but he maintained his upright posture, still

shouting with his whole body. Dad obeyed. “Go on, get out of here, you dirty little bastard!” Jason yelled until Dad was out of sight.

Only then did Wally remember to close his mouth. He put his arm around Jason, who finally closed his own. “Come over and play at my house,” Wally offered. “You don’t need that bastard anymore.” I noticed Wally’s effortless incorporation of the term “bastard” into his ever-expanding vocabulary. Normally it would be something to laugh at with Jason later. Jason accepted Wally’s invitation. They picked up their bikes and walked off together.

I had no friend. I stood on the hill in my drop-waisted T-shirt dress with my stomach sticking out and my arms by my sides.

I didn’t want to cry, because I knew from experience that my eyelashes would stick to my glasses and the lenses would fog. Instead, I jumped up and ran down the hill to the jetty, swung round the gate, tore off my glasses and threw them in the river. They floated incriminatingly for a moment and then sank from view.

Then I went back up to the house to see what Mum was doing.

The summer before high school, Mum’s new boyfriend, Rusty, appeared on the scene. He was a hippie, and richer than us, which was weird. He also had a mobile phone, which seemed not only weird, but incongruous. The phone at first made him a “wanker” in Jason’s eyes, and in Wally’s, who had remained a loyal friend and was still showing his appreciation by copying everything we said or did.

Personally I thought Rusty’s name was more problematic than his phone, which I liked to borrow so that I could pretend I was an American actress. Rusty lived in a big, architect-designed house on the wild, salt water side of Hindmarsh Island. Mum had met him one weekend at Rodger the Dodger’s Caravan Park and Servo where he regularly stopped for groceries on the way home from his job at the conservation centre in town. His long grey hair was tied in a neat ponytail,

and unlike Dad, who was clean shaven, Rusty had a beard. He had a kind smile, and was a few years older than Mum. He also had two dogs who were rumoured to be half-dingo. Despite the phone and the name, Jason and I liked him pretty quickly.

Those summer holidays, we moved down from town to live in the big wooden house with its huge wide windows that opened onto a view of the samphire and dunes near the Murray Mouth. We liked it at Rusty's; it was sort of like a resort. Jason and I had the whole of the downstairs to ourselves, except once a week when a group of Aboriginal women came over to meet with Rusty and some other people from the conservation centre. They talked in quiet voices about a marina that was going to be built on Rusty's side of the Island, but when Jason and I loitered around to eavesdrop, we were sent off to ride our bikes.

We gravitated back to our old jetty that summer, riding out on the big empty road that crossed the Island from one side to the other. Mum had sold the shack, and the jetty belonged to another family now, but they hardly ever seemed to be there, so we just continued to swing ourselves round the padlocked gate, and it remained our place.

We were sitting on it, swinging our legs and cracking up over Jase's impression of an ad on TV the day I got my period. I think I had jumped up to perform a standing impersonation when Jason said, "Congratulations, Kel, you've got blood on your dress!"

I was mortified, embarrassed and amazed that this watershed had been reached so unobtrusively that I had missed any clue of its impending arrival. What a loser! I quickly sat back down on the jetty for want of some better way to hide what I imagined was a gigantic gory mess. Jason patted me on the back.

"It's ok, Kel. Now you can be like those girls on the ads, and prance around in white pants on a pony."

Despite myself I cracked up again. "Or a bike with a basket on the front! Let's go down to Goolwa beach and go for a ride on the sand!"

Jason giggled, "I'll go and get Wally and we can all be women together!" He leapt up to perform the ad. "Cos I'm a woman – W-O-O-M-A-N!", but I was arrested by a sudden thought. "Jason. I need pads! I can't move!"

"Hey?" said my brother.

"People will see the blood! Listen, you can't get Wally. You have to go up to Rodger's shop and get me some Libra Fleur tampons or something. No – pads; you have to get me some pads. I have to stay here." I was absolutely certain of this.

Jason hesitated for only a minute, weighing up the level of potential ridicule this errand could attract, against my plight. Then he was off up the hill.

I waited on the jetty considering my new status. Everything was bright blue and sunny and glitzy; the sun was starring on the reeds and the water, and the mud below the jetty gave off a warm, riparian smell. I understood that my first menstruation would not be marked by pastel colours and white trousers, but by the solid grey wood of the jetty and the machine-like flap of the pelican landing across the water.

Jason came sprinting back, coyly holding out a plastic bag. He passed it to me around the jetty gate. I still refused to budge. "Lucky it was pocket money day," he puffed. "I didn't have enough change, but Rodger's wife gave it to me for twenty cents off. I got you this as well," he added. There was something heavy in the bottom of the bag. I pulled out the shiny gleam of a Chokito bar. "Women need chocolate when they get their periods," said my little brother.

When did the water start going down around the jetty? This seems to me like just one in a series of questions I cannot answer about my life as I grew up. Sometimes it felt like the only concrete event in my childhood was Dad leaving, because he did it so suddenly and because almost as soon as he was gone – he moved straight to a job in Melbourne - there were no loose ends hanging afterwards. But everything else seemed to have shifted gradually. When did my

hair change from blonde to brown, for example? When did I stop noticing the Island breathing? When did Mum stop loving Dad and when did she start loving Rusty instead? When did I stop caring about any of it? And at what point did I start up again?

For all five years of high school I pretended not to need glasses, which were only worn by squares. With a sense of doing something against my better judgement, I had turned down Victor Harbor High, and accepted Rusty's offer to pay for a boarding school in town. His own grown-up daughters had been there a few years previously and had loved it. Their names were Janey and Primrose, and we had never met.

Right from the start, I hated Janey and Primrose's former school. My marks were terrible whenever copying information from the blackboard was required. I sat up the front and squinted, hazarding wild guesses and listening hard. Homework involving textbooks and photocopied handouts was my saviour. Amazingly, no one at school or home noticed the discrepancy in my results, and I managed to scrape by with average grades overall.

The effort to fit in was wasted, anyway on the girls in my classes, who pretty much dismissed me from day one. I didn't exactly blame them; we seemed to belong to two different species. They wore make-up - mascara, eye-liner and thick foundation, their faces contrasting palely above tanned necks and arms. I was bare-faced, gangly and almost flat-chested; they had boobs, and boyfriends with braying laughs and untucked shirts, who loitered beyond the fence-line at lunchtime and, sniggering, backed up a token pace or two when the teacher on yard duty ordered them to leave. The only boy I knew outside of my family was Wally, who had matured into a *Dungeons-and-Dragons*-playing nerd; at school I lied, claiming to have a surfer boyfriend at Hindmarsh Island. His name was Troy. I don't think anyone believed me.

Every Friday, I felt an enormous weight lift off my shoulders as I boarded the bus to Goolwa. The bus ride down took a lot longer than the drive. In summer, thanks to daylight saving, it was still light by the time I walked onto the ferry as a foot passenger, but on winter evenings I was only just able to make out the ferry lights and stumble aboard. The arrival in the dark reminded me of the night walks with Dad.

Accommodating my night blindness, Rusty would drive over from the far side of the Island to pick me up in the car. He was always friendly, asking me about school and telling me the latest about the marina, which his conservation centre and the group of Indigenous women were trying to stop, but he was usually in a hurry to get back for dinner or a meeting. There was no chance of night walking.

One time he was running late, and I stood in the dark, grateful for the time to wait and feel the water lapping on the edge of the Island, the rustling feathers of the birds settling onto the ferry posts and the rise and fall of the ground beneath my feet. Rusty arrived shortly afterwards, apologising and blotting out the night with his high-beams. That night, before bed, I wandered out to the marshy backyard and stood for a while looking out into the blackness of the dunes. But there was only so far I could venture safely on my own; the circle of light from the house was right at my back, and I missed that walking freedom, stepping out through the universe with Dad.

I went to uni and got a boyfriend. Adam was good-looking and moody and reminded me of a poem I had to read for English called “Father And Child” that went:

She hears me strike the board and say
That she is under ban
Of all good men and women,
Being mentioned with a man
That has the worst of all bad names;
And thereupon replies

That his hair is beautiful,
Cold as the March wind his eyes.

I felt quite pleased that Dad, like Yeats, was not around to strike the board and denounce Adam (the idea of Rusty objecting to him was laughable) - although it was really the last two lines that summed up the way I viewed my black-clad boyfriend, rather than any bad names. It was Adam who noticed that I was squinting all the time and copying his notes rather the blackboard, and who said I should get contacts. I did, and the world refocussed just as it had when I was five.

How things had changed! Adam was two years older than me and was in a band. He hated his parents and approved of Dad's leaving – he wished his own parents would split up, but this was unlikely because they were phonies. He commended my parents' ability to face up to the fact that family life was mostly mainstream bullshit.

I was amazed. My childhood, apart from Dad's leaving, I'd always thought of as sunny. Literally, it seemed in my memory, a world of sunny mornings three seasons long, with a briefly endured winter before another round of steaming asphalt roads, bikes, suntans, sailing and paddle-pops. Even the music had been upbeat – I finally confessed to Adam that while he'd been listening to the Smiths, Beasts of Bourbon, the Pixies, and the Cure, I'd been kissing my Smash Hits poster of New Kids on the Block goodnight and owned every cassage released by Kylie Minogue.

“Who's this?” I'd say, flat on my stomach, reaching under his single bed for the box of whatever weird music was playing on his tape recorder at the time, and he'd say it was Nick Cave or the Falling Joys or Sonic Youth. “It's alternative music,” Adam explained. “From the eighties.”

So there had been this whole world of subtlety and nuance and angst going on while I was still participating in the shiny veneer of the eighties! It made me wonder what else I'd failed to notice, as well as my parents' impending divorce.

“You couldn’t see it coming,” Adam said. “*They* probably couldn’t see it coming. They probably just woke up one day,” he went on, “and realised that you don’t *have* to pretend everything’s great when it’s not.”

Marriages broke up. Sunshine gave you skin cancer. The sea levels were rising, because of global warming, which wasn’t the same thing as the ozone hole, and which I realised Rusty had been going on about at dinner underneath the summer soundtrack of my entire teenage years.

At uni, Adam wasn’t the only one who said everything was bullshit. It was the nineties. Every one of my subjects was based around postmodern theory. Some days I would come out of class so existentially confused that I literally didn’t know who I was. I was simultaneously liberated and terrified. Everything solid, it seemed, was up for grabs.

In this maelstrom of uncertainty Adam and I clung together despite the fact that love, along with everything else definitive, was in doubt. We smoked dope, got drunk, and told each other everything. We lost our virginity, and moved in together, to a flat in one of the southern suburbs near the main road down which my family used to drive to Hindmarsh Island. The flat smelt of smoke and old people, but this seemed somehow to give it an air of authenticity.

Hindmarsh Island was mainstream. I rarely visited.

Sometime in the late nineties, Dad called. He was back from Melbourne for the summer and had hired a yacht for the holidays. He would moor it at the new Hindmarsh Island marina and we could come down and go sailing.

“Ask him about the Bridge Controversy,” Adam goaded, having picked up the gist of the conversation from my replies into the phone.

“What about the bridge, Dad, the Secret Women’s Business?” I stood erect and superior, nonchalant, a mess of nerve endings in a steely package, a robot with a human heart. I twiddled the phone cord between my fingers, making

eye-contact with Adam across the small living room of our horrible, authentic flat.

Adam and I had gone into our honours year and picked the same subjects. We were studying the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Controversy in Anthropology, as it unfolded. We were, naturally, against the bridge, which was being built by a wealthy couple to cater for the extra traffic of their gigantic marina, where my Dad was proposing to moor his yacht. Rusty was heavily involved in the case. His conservation centre was supporting the group of Ngarrindjeri Elders who said that the island was a sacred women's place that must be kept physically separate from the mainland.

I hadn't told Adam that my Mum's boyfriend was one of the main figures in the case against the bridge – which had been won by the marina developers who were now suing everyone who had tried to stop them. This would have made him too confusingly cool, when it was clear to both of us that from his persistently cheerful demeanour Rusty hadn't faced up to the bullshit of life.

Rusty wasn't the only member of my family who defied an easy categorisation. I was confused too about how Jason fitted into the postmodern schema. When the summonses were being given out, they had to be delivered personally to each defendant. Around this time, Jason took on the task of answering the door of the wooden house, while Rusty nicked out the back and paddled away in his canoe. My brother was in year twelve at Victor Harbor High. He was into surfing and girls and defiance, but I knew without asking that he'd think Nick Cave was a "wanker."

"He's sort of like a teenage Storm Boy," I said to Adam, after we watched the movie in Cinema Studies, feeling that this description was inadequate, but less eccentric than describing my brother as a terracotta warrior.

Jason had also received the invitation to go for a sail with Dad, but declined. Dad hadn't thought about the bridge and the marina, only about the excitement of the yacht, back to old times on the Island. A fishing excursion. When I told him I was vegetarian and was boycotting the marina, he was

confused and uncertain, forced suddenly to change tack. Would I still like to come down and have lunch on the yacht? He could sail over to Goolwa and meet me there, that way I wouldn't have to go anywhere near the marina. Again, as on the day he left us standing at the top of the hill, he suddenly seemed like a child. "Can I bring someone?" I asked, making eye contact again with Adam as he rolled a cigarette.

"A boyfriend someone?" said Dad.

"Not exactly," I scoffed, because Adam and I now said we were "seeing each other", not "boyfriend and girlfriend".

"Yeah, bring him along and I'll give him the once-over. See if he's good enough for you! See if we can make a sailor of him. Is he a vegetarian as well?"

Sometimes it was exhausting to be too cool to burst into tears. I gritted my teeth as my contact lenses stung my dry eyes.

But we went. Ironically. In our Doc Martins. A road trip. A "road trip". We were really insufferable, but Dad didn't seem to mind. Although Adam would not be "made a sailor", we deigned to go for a short cruise around the Island with Dad to the west of the marina. I felt confused by the simultaneous company of my father and Adam, as if my past and present selves had blended in a way that didn't make any sense. Neither version seemed convincing.

The bridge was under construction. Its concrete pylons hulked above the mainland and the Island, seeming unnecessarily high and ostentatious. Was there some structural justification for this display, I wondered, or was it just a giant "fuck you" to the detractors?

To my shame, this was our only excursion with Dad and his yacht that summer, the only time we saw him before he went back to Melbourne. I comforted myself that at least, unlike Jason, I had agreed to see him at all, but I maintained an image of Dad waving Adam and me off on the bus back to Adelaide, our patronising goodbyes and cruel analysis of his failure to impress us half the way home, and my sense that, while everyone else in the family had

moved on and matured, Dad was frozen in time back at the age of innocence when he was a young father and husband.

“Do you know what actually happened between Mum and Dad?” I said to Jason last week. I was wearing my new glasses; thick black frames of the type we would have associated with nerds as kids, but which were fashionable again in the 21st Century. We were sitting on the jetty at Hindmarsh Island. The gate had finally been removed and the water level was so low it felt like a stranding. I hadn’t been back to the Island for ten years, since Jason had left home and Mum and Rusty moved up to a tree-change property in the hills. Neither had Jason, though he lived in nearby Port Elliot with his wife and baby daughter. “I feel weird crossing the bridge, you know,” he said. I did too. I’d seen it in photos, and been to the base for the Apology Ceremony in 2007, but felt like crossing myself as we drove over the huge space-age arc, that never seemed to have got beyond what looked like the superimposition of an architect’s drawing.

I was here for work, to take some photos for a report I was writing about the effect of the drought on the Lower Lakes. I’d called Jason up – we spoke on the phone once every month or two – and asked him along for old time’s sake.

“Yeah, I know what happened,” said Jason, seeming surprised. “Dad was having an affair. Mum found out and kicked him out. How come you didn’t know?”

“I never really asked.” I realised this was true as I said it and wondered again why I’d been content to leave such a pivotal event in my life unexamined, but Jason went on. “I’ve been thinking, I might look the old man up on Facebook or something. Invite him to Jacquie’s birthday party.” His daughter was about to turn one, and Mum and Rusty were throwing her a party in the hills. “I felt bad about not asking him to the wedding, afterwards.”

“I’d like to see him again,” I said.

We sat on the jetty and listened to the birds. There were still an amazing number, despite the receding water. I got up and took a few shots of the exposed mud flats.

“How’s work?” Jason asked.

I told him about my job at Rusty’s old conservation centre, trying to figure out about the way people face change. Why some people embrace it and lead the trend in whatever the new product or behaviour is, some go along with it after a while - when everyone else does - and some stick stubbornly to what they know.

The people who embrace change are called “early adaptors”. They’re the ones who, for example, had mobile phones before anyone else, or believed in climate change when it was first publicised, which finally, I told Jason, demystified the seeming incongruity of Rusty the conservationist having a mobile phone in 1989. My work is about applying the research about early adaptors on an individual level to cases of businesses and government.

“Well,” said Jason. “I mean, I know why most people ignore it. It’s too painful to face all that stuff. If you really face it, it breaks your heart.”

He was right, of course. People are motivated by their own small-scale denials and need for short term gratification - a need not to see things, not to let in the dark. A fear that if they admit that night falls at all, it will mean the end of days.

“But then you get over it,” said Jason, putting his arm around me as I suddenly started to cry. “You do, Kel,” Jason insisted, but I couldn’t stop for a while. I was crying for it all, for climate change and the bridge across the water, for Dad leaving and my first pair of pink glasses, for all the other glasses I’d subsequently refused to wear, and everything I’d tried not to see without them.

Finally, I took off my current pair of nerd frames, wiped the lenses, and put them back on again. I attempted a joke. “Have you noticed that whenever someone’s single people always say, “How’s work?”, but when they’re with someone they say, “How’s Karina,” or whatever?”

Jason laughed, undisturbed by my tears. “She’s good. She says hi... Now, how come you never ask me about my work!”

“How’s work?”

He laughed again.

We sat companionably side by side. Everything was the same, but the water had gone down and stranded our childhood. It was like being in a photo of yourself but already knowing the future. I could imagine Jason’s BMX still thrown casually into the long grass to our left under the willow tree, as it had been so many times before. I remembered the day I got my period and shared the Chokito bar with Jason on the jetty, then realised that there was no place I could put the pad on in public anyway, and how we decided that it didn’t matter because if I just didn’t get off my bike at all on the ride home no one would be able to see the back of my dress. I remembered the day that Jason yelled at Dad to piss off forever, and Wally stood there at the top of the hill with his mouth open.

“Hey, Wally’s still got the hots for you,” said Jason, as if reading my thoughts, but apparently continuing with the subject of my relationship status. “I ran into him in Goolwa. He’s an IT consultant. He’s got his own business. He asked how you were. You could be a team. He could do the modelling for you, work out the statistics on the early adaptors.”

We cracked up.

“Remember those night walks with Dad?” Jason said unexpectedly.

Jason would hold Dad’s other hand when we first set out, but being able to see as well at night as in daylight, he quickly got bored and ran ahead. I could hear his high-pitched exclamations, “Hey, a rabbit!” or “Man, did you see that meteor!” in the distance somewhere, but on my own I was blind. If Dad had to let go for any reason I stayed rooted to the spot, like a baby bird fallen from the nest. When this happened I waited calmly in the dark to be found, by Dad or Jase. Inevitably one or both would realise I was stuck and take my hand; immediately

I'd step out again, the point where our hands held glowing like an infra-red source of light, or love. While I was waiting in the dark I stood still and felt the Island breathing. I was never afraid.

Ways We Learn Things

Stuff White People Like

Oliver Bentley, newly trained as a teacher, discovered on his first assignment that he hated being in the classroom. He'd hated it as a child, so was only mildly surprised. The real mystery was why he'd chosen the career in the first place. Oliver resigned, and spent the next six months at home, reading, watching TV and trying to uncover the answer. He was at an impasse. He liked kids, he decided. He liked teaching. He hated school.

Then he read a book called *Last Child in the Woods* and decided to become a Nature School teacher. "Except there are no "woods" in South Australia," said his wife, Clay. "It'll have to be *Last Child in the Mallee*."

"There are "woods" in the Adelaide Hills," said Oliver, unfazed. He felt he was on the verge of a breakthrough, and signed up for online tutorials. "Woods" was American, but so was everything else. The US was the hub of the Nature Schooling movement; its founders were progressive educators, children of the seventies and eighties, who were trying to revive their own free-range childhoods for the current generation of obese social-networkers, plagued by helicopter parenting, depression and ADHD.

Oliver himself had spent a good part of his schooling dosed on Ritalin and being kept inside at lunchtime for disruptive behaviour. It was clear to him now that it was the traditional classroom that had been, and remained, his problem. He imagined himself the instructor of a Forest School, teaching kids outside. He would be muscular and bearded; his pupils, like Hobbits, would sit on benches made of fallen trees.

The movement was in its infancy in Australia, but that meant he could get in on the ground floor. And in fact, as he had suspected, there were two private alternative schools in the Adelaide Hills, each with a highly sought-after Nature School programme, and a state school over in Ceduna that was willing to experiment.

Oliver attended an autumnal training workshop in the Hills, led by an American guru. The ten teachers had charge of a posse of children let loose on a philanthropist's property to jump in waist high flocks of yellow leaves, tramp in mud, and dam small waterfalls, all while learning their times tables, scientific principles, spelling, and anything else the trainee Nature School educators could come up with. The curriculum was limited only by the teachers' creativity and the extremes of weather.

Running through a rain shower behind a pack of four-year-olds with wildly flying hair and ear-splitting shouts of glee, Oliver had one of those moments where you know that you have learned something profoundly new. Up ahead, the kids were crowding round an orange mushroom at the foot of an ancient tree. They shouted to him to come and identify it. Oliver knew he would not go back to the way he used to see the world. He would not go back into the classroom.

But the places at the Steiner and Montessori Schools were snapped up immediately by contacts of the guru. Clay had been right about the mallee. It was going to have to be Ceduna.

Oliver remained enthused. He wrote to the principal at Ceduna and received an invitation to visit the school. The hippie children of the hills had enough attention and resources. Ceduna! He had been there once, to the middle of nowhere, the edge of the mallee and the ocean, to watch an eclipse.

Clay was enthused. They'd be doing something city-like, say walking to meet friends for dinner in Chinatown, and she'd suddenly turn to him and say, "We're going to *Ceduna!*"

They were holding hands and walking half-blind into the golden sunset, so that when she faced him her hair was all backlit and red and haloed. "And you look beautiful!" he said, and picked her up in the street. They laughed their way into the restaurant and alienated their friends by accident, because it really felt that everything had finally fallen into place, and their unwavering certainty was

hard to take. “*Ceduna*,” said their friends, in an entirely different tone from Clay’s.

Clay was an artist. She was trained as a potter and was handy with a set of tools. She was the one who fixed things around the house. She made sculptures out of the spare parts of the washing machine. She did this for fun and to keep busy, but her real work was making bowls. Every now and then she became quiet and thoughtful, like a caterpillar about to undergo a transformation. She ate a lot and was absent-minded. She got up early and went off in the car by herself to go for drives or walks alone. When she came home she was tentative; you could see her nervously teetering on the edge, waiting for the energy to build up to the right level, wondering if today was the day.

And then one morning she’d say “I’m going in!” She’d go into the shed that was her studio and focus all her concentration, all her appreciation of beauty, on the wheel. When she came out she was happy, fulfilled, spent. She was interested in going out to meet friends, and there was a different quality to her listening when she and Oliver chatted over the washing up. And the bowls were firing in the kiln. None of Clay’s work was brightly coloured. It was dusty, arid, delicate and solid all at the same time. Oliver’s favourite bowl was one that looked like the air at sunrise, and felt good to hold in your hands.

“*And*,” said Oliver, “then there’s the Indigenous element. The whole thing with outdoor learning is that it’s way more kinesthetic than indoor, and so it’s really good for Indigenous kids because that group have such a high percentage of kinesthetic learners. And the school is about three-quarters Indigenous. Actually that’s probably why they’re interested in running the programme.”

“Kinesthetic?” said Clay.

“Movement-based,” said Oliver.

Their excitement had reached a peak following the interview in Ceduna, which really was less of an interview and more an orientation, as Oliver was the

only applicant. The principal drove them round the town and showed them their potential house in nearby Thevenard.

Clay couldn't get over the size of the block, the mallee across the road and the sea out of the kitchen window. The principal mentioned whale watching. Clay and Oliver grinned at each other across the battered linoleum floor.

The neighbour's garden was crowded with potted succulents and ginger cats. There was evidence of a campfire in the middle of the yard. All the colours of the faded grass and dirt, the rusted washing line, even the ginger cats and succulents, looked like Clay's bowls. In their own yard, there was a stable-like shed where she'd be able to work, and plenty of abandoned equipment for sculpting.

"You should go to the corroboree on the way home," said the principal, glancing round at his passengers as he completed their tour of the town.

"Corroboree?" Clay said, from the back seat. "Who's having it? Where is it?"

"Out at Uncle's place near Cactus. It's not a private one. Everyone's welcome. It's a healing ceremony for the desert. People are coming from all over the country."

"A healing ceremony?" said Oliver, "Healing from Maralinga or something?"

"Maralinga, climate change, feral animals, you name it," said the principal vaguely.

"It sounds great," said Clay. Oliver could feel her excitement. He was pretty excited himself at the prospect. "Why not?" he said, looking back over at Clay.

So they were technically not on the way home at all as they drove west towards Cactus Beach, which the principal assured them was only about eighty

kilometres out of their way (“Country distances!” said Clay gleefully). It felt as if they were running away. “This will be our neighbourhood though,” Oliver reminded himself and Clay.

The road was straight and clean and infinite, and the sense of space to their left where the cliffs fell to the Bight, to their right where the Nullarbor spun its flatness out towards the border made them feel as if they were flying. Their neighbourhood! Oliver was so high he found himself doing a hundred and fifty k, and had to slow down suddenly as they caught up to a convoy of other cars. “Those people in front are Indigenous!” said Clay triumphantly. “They must be heading for the corroboree!”

“Just follow the cars,” the principal had said, but when they got to the windswept cliff with its orange marker flags flapping in the wind, nothing much seemed to be happening.

A couple of white women, fat and countryish, motioned them into a parking spot. Getting out and stretching, Oliver looked around and noticed that most of the other people were white as well. They looked as if they had driven a long way, and were glancing around in the same furtive manner as Oliver and Clay, assessing the scene while pretending to stretch.

“They’re all middle-class hippies from town,” said Clay in Oliver’s ear. “Man, it’s cold on these cliff tops,” she added as a blast of icy wind caught them by surprise. The sun was low in the sky and the temperature had dropped off sharply. They burrowed in the car boot for jumpers and beanies. The hippie lady Clay had noticed looked chilled in a pair of cotton pants, Birkenstocks and a thin shawl.

“What shall we do?” said Oliver. “Nothing’s happening yet. Shall we go to the sausage sizzle?”

“Yeah, see if we can actually find some Aboriginal people,” said Clay, frankly, which was what Oliver was thinking but was too embarrassed to say.

She smiled at the woman in the shawl, and at an uptight looking blond man with a pony-tail and bare feet, unpacking a swag from his van, but he pretended not to see her. The guy's van had an Aboriginal flag sticker on the back and a sign that said *Magik Happens*.

"Reverse racism happens!" whispered Clay, smothering laughter. "I think we're too white for him, hon." Oliver took her hand, laughing too, as they marched gaily towards the smell of the sausage sizzle. He was so glad she was with him to help him feel better about things.

"White people like getting to things early," he said, as they stood in line.

"Hey?"

"It's from this book I'm reading. I brought it along. *Stuff White People Like*. It's a satire. It's American. Maybe it's Canadian. But anyway, it's extremely applicable to all this here."

"Well, it seems to be. *Everyone* here is white! Maybe we misunderstood Mr What's-his-name. Maybe it's a corroboree for white people. I mean, *he* was white."

They had reached the front of the queue. "Now, what'll it be?" said a smiling Rotary Club volunteer, presiding pinkly over a row of snags.

"What time does the corroboree start?" said Oliver, manipulating a folded up piece of bread around a sausage. The smell of onions was cosy. He felt expectant and a little bit afraid.

"Oh – just after sunset. Down on the beach."

It was too cold to keep still on the cliff top. They walked with their arms around each other. The water and the rocks and the start of sunset looked like an old cracked painting. "Wanna get married?" said Clay, from chattering white teeth, green eyes and bright orange skin, a periodic joke since their actual

wedding. “Hey,” she said suddenly, over his shoulder, as they hugged tight, “There you go.”

A young Indigenous guy was sitting cross-legged on the edge of the cliff, away from the crowds of sausage-eating visitors. He was beautiful in silhouette; Oliver thought that this was mainly because he seemed happy just to sit there, watching the sunset. Not pacing around looking for Aborigines. He was Aboriginal, so he could just sit there and enjoy. Which was something Oliver realised he was unable to do, here or anywhere else.

“It’s nearly sunset - shall we head down to the beach?” he said again.

Clay smiled at him, reading his thoughts, and said, “Sure.”

Suddenly, in the dusk, they started noticing Indigenous people. Teenage girls in tracksuits with long hair and snow-suited siblings on their hips, large women carrying fold-up chairs and blankets, men with pale skin and dark eyes. Old ladies in polar fleece tops and thick glasses. Little boys in red loincloths and body paint, their skin grey with cold. Desert kids with blonde hair and skinny legs running around super-close to the cliff edge, shrieking with excitement. Their mothers, with dark skin and red hair, talking softly in Anangu, calling out sharply to extended family members.

It was dark now. Everyone headed for the cliff path, the white people bringing up the rear.

Oliver didn’t know which fire they should sit beside on the sand. He found himself noticing snidely that all the other white people had cosied in with “their Indigenous contacts”. The thought made him feel ashamed. He and Clay stood awkwardly off to one side as he observed against his will the way the white people seemed extra eager, their eyes glowing expectantly in the firelight, ready to be entertained. The Indigenous people, by contrast, seemed more like attendees at a family picnic. Oliver wished he had a place in the world to feel at home.

“Sit anywhere bro!” a guy called out, and Oliver gratefully chose a position close to one of the fires that wasn’t blocking anyone’s view. He and Clay had to sit on the ground because they didn’t have chairs, and it seemed they were in the children’s section.

And the children’s section contained the range of ages from baby to teenage, all cuddled together, with tiny kids looking after even tinier and everyone nudging and excited. A government minister opened proceedings, speaking a few awkward words that may have been Kokatha into a squealing microphone, and Oliver overheard one of the teenagers mocking his pronunciation with her friends. Clay was entranced by a wild little girl who was running amok and who caught her smile and said boldly, “Hi!”, then ran away screaming with daring and laughter.

“Don’t bother the lady,” said a grandmother, crammed in behind them in a folding chair. Oliver was trying not to lean on her legs.

“I don’t mind,” Clay said.

“That’s alright,” the old lady said. “Come here, sister-girl,” she called, but the wild-child eluded her and ran off with a pair of older brothers.

Clay turned back to talk, her shoulder brushing the old lady’s knee. “Is she your granddaughter?”

“All these are my grand-kids,” the woman bragged proudly.

Clay’s face betrayed surprise.

“Well, not all by blood, in the Aboriginal way - you know,” said the woman. Clay turned back smiling.

Oliver couldn’t get comfortable sitting with his legs crossed on the damp sand. Although it was dark, he couldn’t figure out what expression to make. The corroboree, which he’d imagined would be a sort of smoking ceremony, had turned out to be more like a talent show. He didn’t want to be like the other white people, who were pretending to be moved by the emu and kangaroo dance that he

knew they had seen at every occasion such as this since primary school. He sneaked a look at Clay to see what she thought of it, but her face was out of his line of vision as she snuggled into his side. From the angle of her head she seemed to be gazing at the fire.

There was the usual stuff about walking together and not worrying about the past. The Indigenous speaker didn't mince words about all the terrible things that had happened since white people arrived. The white guests looked very serious at this point, and very willing to laugh gratefully when he joked about forgiveness being the Aboriginal way.

The most interesting bit was when a white nuclear veteran got up and talked about Maralinga. The funniest bits were the jokes that the compères made about each other and the dancers, but the white people spoiled it by laughing too loudly, cracking up sycophantically over the lame routine of a stand-up comedian from Yalata. He noticed that Clay laughed too, but she seemed nice when she did it. Perhaps the other white people seemed nice if you knew them too.

"Wasn't that great!" she said afterwards when they were cuddled on the cliff top in the back of the station wagon. They had one swag between them, and had zipped themselves inside. Clay was lying on top of him and it was the best feeling in the world, hearts together and all their limbs entangled.

"I couldn't get into it as much as I wanted to," Oliver confessed. "I felt kind of awkward."

"But the fire and the water being close by, and sitting around with all the other people, and the *stars*." He hadn't thought of it like that.

"And the dogs," Clay said sleepily.

"I love you," he said.

"I liked the way it was a party," said his wife.

There is a long, straight stretch of road on the way home to Adelaide that runs between Ceduna and Port Augusta. Clay and Oliver drove on it for four hours the following afternoon and didn't see a single other car. The corroboree had dispersed into thin air, dissipating to the four directions along roads that by their size made them feel as if they were driving on them alone.

Clay sat in the passenger seat with her feet out the window and the sunlight streaming in, reading excerpts out loud from *Stuff White People Like*.

"Listen to this - it's hilarious. *If you find yourself trapped in the middle of the woods without electricity, running water, or a car you would likely describe that situation as a 'nightmare' or 'a worst case scenario like after a plane crash or something.'* White people refer to it as 'camping'."

She read on to herself, snorting at regular intervals. Oliver felt like asking her to put the book away, but couldn't quite think why. He could take a joke, couldn't he?

"Hmm, it's a bit close to home, isn't it?" said Clay, echoing his thoughts as usual.

Oliver was grateful to agree. "It's basically about us. Which one?"

"Oh man, *which* one? They're all spot on. Um - 'Gentrification' - that's us moving to Ceduna."

"Thevenard."

"Even worse!"

"I know."

"You said 'being early for things' yesterday. Oh and then, ok, *Being the only white person around*. The corroboree! *In most situations white people are very comforted by seeing their own kind. However, when they are eating at a new ethnic restaurant or travelling to a foreign nation, nothing spoils their fun more than seeing another white person.*"

“I knew that was what was bothering me yesterday, but I felt racist to admit it!”

“It’s not racist exactly is it? It was more fun when the Indigenous people turned up.”

“I don’t know; I’m starting to feel sort of crippled with self-awareness. Is that in there?”

“There’s “self-importance”; that’s kind of related.”

Oliver knew this conversation was bad for him, but somehow couldn’t stop engaging with every point.

“When I was teaching English in Japan,” he said, “I noticed there was this snobbery where other white people who lived there wouldn’t talk to you – they’d just stand there ignoring you as you fumbled with your map, speaking Japanese to their Japanese friends. It was like you’d crashed their party, or shown them up as white by association.”

“That’s in here.”

“What?”

“White people love telling stories about when they were in Japan.”

“I kind of hate that book.”

Oliver looked out the window at the huge flat land, daydreaming, imagining a solar plant reflecting all that sunlight up into space. Looking out the window, feeling the wind on his face, he felt blessed by existing in the huge expanse of space and the means to roar through it at top speed.

But Clay was still chuckling at the book.

“Knowing what’s best for poor people. I think that’s your new job, hon. A great way to make white people feel good is to tell them about situations where poor people changed how they were doing things because they were given the ‘whiter’ option. ‘Back in my old town, people used to shop at Wal Mart and then*

*this non-profit organization came in and set up a special farmers co-op so that we could buy more local produce, and within two weeks the Wal*Mart shut down and we elected our first Democratic representative in 40 years.' White people will first ask which non-profit and are they hiring? Ha ha ha ha ha."*

She looked up suddenly at Oliver's hurt expression. "Sorry, love."

"Do you think I'm like that?"

"Cos you're excited to get to work with Aboriginal kids? No!" She stopped for a minute, trying to piece together her thoughts. "Well, I mean –" she said and stopped again.

"What?" said Oliver.

"Well it's just that Aboriginal people already know about having school outside."

"I know," said Oliver. "So what's your point?"

Clay looked at him again, then said, almost irritably, "Well, you're taking something they've been doing for thousands of years and putting the white seal of approval on it."

"But the missionaries took it away," said Oliver.

He didn't say it, but it was implied, and they didn't know what to do with their horror at the implication: Oliver would be giving it back.

"I think that book's kind of offensive," Oliver said after a five minute silence.

"You're only meant to be offended on other people's behalf, not your own. Proper white people hate themselves."

They laughed again, but the laugh was tired. A poison had entered the sweetness of the day. Clay put the book away and gazed out the window with a thoughtful expression. After a couple of kilometres she propped up on a pillow to

fall asleep. Oliver looked out at the swirling salt bush, glancing over occasionally at Clay, her pale skin protected by the shadow of the pillowcase, her eyes closed, breath rising and falling, a shaft of sunlight making a bright square patch on her arm.

What do I like? said Oliver to himself. I like being outside. The book intruded mockingly: *White people like being outdoors* - but he persisted. I liked it this morning when I got up while Clay was asleep and I stood on the edge of the cliff and the dust was all over my feet, and the wind blew in my hair, and I was hungry for breakfast and life and in love with being here.

I like Clay. Strong Clay. Her strength and certainty and enthusiasm and courage. Her kindness. I don't want to see her crushed and anxious and worried about being a bad person. She is like one of her bowls, hard and fragile and filled around a space of silence, able to brim full or sit quietly around thin air. Able to hold in your hands and cherish. Made of the elements and ancient craft.

Oliver and Clay were married. They had told each other things. He had got terrible marks in primary school and she had had an abortion when she was twenty-five. Clay was the person with whom Oliver had had the longest relationship in his romantic history. The book said that *white people like difficult breakups*, and it was true that before Clay he'd gone through his fair share of emotional upheaval. Wasn't that just normal? said Oliver to himself, but had to smirk remembering numerous angsty coffee dates made to "work stuff out" (*white people like coffee*) and failed attendance at lectures (*white people like Liberal Arts Courses*) due to heartbreak. What else?

I liked it when we made love in the swag last night. The feeling of safety, being wrapped all around by her and the swag and the car and the night. It just made me feel like we made something together. It made me imagine that I could create beautiful things with her. *White people like camping*, you see.

After a while Oliver realised that he was crying.

By nightfall they were on the home straight. Clay woke up at Port Wakefield and came to hug him round his dirty T-shirt as he watched the numbers on the petrol pump click towards full. His mind had been spinning fanciful dreams for a hundred kilometres of highway and blinking lights, half-listening to the community radio station (*white people like public radio*) and inventing certainty and comfort from thin air.

Oliver and Clay sat side by side in the servo roadhouse on matching yellow stools, the light harsh on their cardboard trays of chips, as Clay flipped through a *Women's Weekly*, filled with speculations about baby bumps and miracle pregnancies and getting your body back after birth (*white people hate most other white people*). It all seemed deeply significant to Oliver in his present frame of mind.

“Are you pregnant?” he blurted out.

Clay actually jumped.

“Pregnant! I’m not pregnant. What made you think I was pregnant?” She kept turning the magazine pages, looking down. (*White people like natural childbirth*, Oliver thought, like a nervous tic.) Then she swivelled round on her stool and looked at him. She looked as if she had been caught out being beautiful when she thought no one was watching.

“Would you like it if I was?”

Oliver noticed how Clay phrased the question. To him it seemed brave and optimistic – she was assuming he would like it; she was smiling at him expectantly. Oliver remembered a girlfriend at university who always phrased important questions in the negative. Over refectory coffees and missed lectures, “Do you think I’m smart?” or “Do you think I’m beautiful?” became “You think I’m ugly, don’t you?” or “I know you think I’m stupid.” Oliver was then somehow put in the position of making what should have been affirmations, in the negative as well. In response he’d say, “No!” or “That’s not true!”

It took all of his courage not to whine, for reassurance, “You think I’m racist don’t you?” and instead say simply, “Yes” to Clay.

It was so much more fun to say yes.

Karko

Oliver's Mum had a stupid boss. The night before the class excursion to the Tjilbruke Trail, the boss mixed up the rosters and called Oliver's Mum back in for the night shift. She'd been working all day and was watching TV to relax. Oliver had to get out of bed and go and stay over at Aunty Peta's house again.

Aunty Peta was pretty good if you needed to stay somewhere else away from home all the time. She was probably Oliver's favourite aunt. She tucked him into bed, even though he was eight years old. Aunty Peta straightened back up with an effort, because she was about to have a baby, and it was hard for her to bend. She set her alarm so Oliver wouldn't miss the bus.

"Have you thought of any good names yet?" Oliver asked her on her way out.

Aunty Peta paused with her hand on the light switch and pulled a face. "Not even one. Face it, Ollie, your Mum snapped up the last good boy's name on the planet."

After she'd gone, Oliver lay in the bed in the room that Aunty Peta had made all ready for the baby, with animal curtains and a change table and plastic toys that looked like they'd be fun to play with even if you were older. His room at home had way less things in it than the baby's, and his bed was smaller than Aunty Peta's spare mattress, but it was still a pain to have to be asleep with his bag all packed for the excursion, and then woken up and shifted here in his dressing gown.

Oliver turned around in bed a few times to get comfortable and then started to think about the Tjilbruke Trail. Last week, two Aboriginal guys called Dion and Chris had visited the school and told the grade four class the story of Tjilbruke, the Ibis Man. Tjilbruke was cool. Oliver had liked him straight away and made him into a sort of personal hero, like a guardian angel, but not daggy.

Tjilbruke, the Ibis man, lived in the Dreamtime. Dion explained that the Dreamtime was the past, but was also the future and the here and now at the same time. Oliver sort of got that. It was the way you could be thinking of three things at once, like how long it was until the holidays, what you had for breakfast and what Mr Marin, the teacher, was talking about all at the same time.

Mr Marin told everyone that Oliver lived permanently in the Dreamtime, because he couldn't see how Oliver could look out the window and draw on his pencil case and listen to the story of Tjilbruke all at the same time. Oliver's Dreamtime was why he usually gave the answer after Mr Marin had already gone onto the next question, and why he couldn't sit still at his desk all day. Oliver couldn't explain it, especially when he was in trouble. Mr Marin got the kids to laugh, but Dion hadn't seemed to like the Dreamtime joke.

"The Ancestors walk beside us," Dion had continued, frowning, and it had stuck in Oliver's head. He liked the idea of Tjilbruke walking along beside him on the way to school, maybe riding a bike sometimes if he was running late. Tjilbruke probably had trouble sitting still in class when he was a kid as well.

Tjilbruke had a favourite nephew who was killed for spearing an emu when it was against the law. When he found his nephew, Kulultowi, was dead, Tjilbruke freaked right out. He carried Kulultowi's body down the coast of South Australia, resting and crying all along the way. Every time he stopped to cry, Tjilbruke's tears made fresh water springs in the sand that were still there today. At the end of his journey, Tjilbruke buried his nephew in a cave and then disappeared back into the Dreaming. Tomorrow, Dion and Chris were taking Oliver's class on a bus to follow the Tjilbruke trail.

Oliver lay in the dark and imagined the room filled with giants from the Dreamtime - Tjilbruke must have been gigantic if his tears could make a whole spring! Oliver imagined him human-sized at the same time, able to be and do more than just one thing at once, like Oliver could. Tjilbruke probably had wings and a beak like an ibis, he thought, or maybe just a cloak of ibis feathers. He thought about how Kuliltowi was Tjilbruke's favourite nephew. Aunty Peta's husband, Uncle Max, didn't seem much like he had any favourite nephews.

Oliver's Mum said it was because he was an uncle by marriage, but Aunty Peta was her own sister. Uncle Max wasn't mean or anything. He was just mostly at work and sort of didn't talk. Tjilbruke would be a much better uncle to have, Oliver thought. He was pretty excited about the excursion. The best bit was that they were going to be away from school all day. They were leaving early and wouldn't be back until after dark. For lunch there was going to be a barbecue on the beach. Oliver turned over a few more times. He was thinking about the excursion so much he couldn't get to sleep.

After a while he heard Aunty Peta get up to go to the toilet. He heard Uncle Max come in from work. He heard Aunty Peta get up and go to the toilet again.

When he woke up, he felt grainy and tired, as if he was the one who'd been on the night-shift, but he jumped out of bed and got dressed in less than twenty seconds. "What happened to your jumper, Ollie?" said Aunty Peta at the breakfast table. Oliver looked down and realised he'd forgotten his school jumper when he'd grabbed his clothes in a rush last night. "I left it at home," he said with his mouth full of weetbix. "I don't need it," he added hastily, before Aunty Peta could offer him one of hers.

Despite the alarm clock, they were late getting out the door. Aunty Peta raced them to school in her station wagon. Oliver saw the bus waiting, already full of kids, and jumped out of the car almost before it had stopped. The other kids were grinning and waving out the window, tapping imaginary watches. Aunty Peta patted him on the arm. "You're my favourite nephew," she said, which is what she always said when they said good bye.

"I'm your *only* nephew," Oliver said, which is what he always said back.

"Even if you did take the only good boy's name in the world," Aunty Peta added.

“You’ll think of something,” Oliver said encouragingly, halfway up the bus steps and already greeted by a rousing cheer and a shake of Mr Marin’s head.

“No, not up the back today, Mr Bentley,” he said to Oliver. “I want to keep my eye on you after yesterday’s performance.” Oliver waved to the kids at the back of the bus and fell into the seat up the front that the teacher was pointing to. “Throwing Dion’s spear before we got outside,” Mr Marin elaborated. The class laughed. Oliver’s ears turned red. He was happy when Mr Marin stood up in the aisle and led the class in the song they had been practicing all last week. The bus took off as the kids sang:

*Tjilbruke, the Ibis man,
He carried Kulultowi along the wet sand
And when he cried his tears rolled down
And they turned into fresh water.*

Mr Marin conducted, standing up in the aisle. He held on with one hand during the swervy bits but kept conducting with the other.

Dion and Chris were sitting together in front of the seat Oliver was sitting in by himself. “That Buck Whats-his-name wrote that song,” Oliver heard Chris said to Dion.

“Buck McKenzie,” said Dion.

“Yeah,” said Chris.

Oliver wondered who Buck McKenzie was and considered leaning over the seat to ask, but before he could he realised that Mr Marin was saying something about four dollars for the barbecue lunch. Oliver had forgotten to ask his Mum about it last night. He thought maybe one of the kids might lend him some money, but it was going to be embarrassing to ask.

He sat back and watched the city from up on high in the bus, and after a minute the excitement of the day seeped back in like a colourful wash, turning everything red and orange and yellow and bright. Oliver forgot he was tired. They drove south down the coast, heading further away from the city than he had

ever been without his own family. Oliver's mind raced off the way it sometimes did. Out of the window, a billboard that said "come fly with me" made him think of Tjilbruke's giant ibis wings, but also of the fly that had got on the bus and was buzzing around Mr Marin's head. He was the head of the class, but not the headmaster of the school; school rhymed with fool, which Oliver knew he was, because he was never sure. Shore was by the sea where Tjilbruke would land and fold away his ibis wings. He wished he had remembered the money for lunch.

Every now and then the bus would stop and the kids jump down to listen to Dion tell them that this was the very spot where Tjilbruke had avenged his nephew's death, and this next place was where he had smoked Kuliltowi's body to preserve him, crying the whole time. These places were sacred, Dion said. One of them was near a caravan park, with a concrete sculpture of Tjilbruke to mark the place, but most were at the beach. The bus parked at the top of the esplanade and the kids ran down onto the sand and waited for the next installment.

Dion did all the talking. Chris stood quietly and nodded agreement with the stories, occasionally reminding Dion of things he'd forgotten in a soft voice, but never speaking directly to the children. Oliver looked at the Aboriginal men. Dion was so tall you had to look up to see his face. Chris was shorter and skinnier. He couldn't work out which one he liked best, but you could tell they both were cool. They probably both had favourite nephews, and lent them four dollars when they forgot their lunch money all the time. Maybe he could ask Dion if he had any cash. Or imagine if Tjilbruke was around here somewhere. He'd definitely be the sort of guy you could ask, although he might not carry change.

At lunchtime Mr Marin and the bus driver made a barbecue on the beach and everyone had to queue up and drop their money in an icecream container on the table next to the food. Somehow Oliver was first in line. He thought about saying he wasn't hungry but his stomach was grumbling and the food smelled so good that he just had to come out and say he didn't have any money. The class

groaned at the usual joke, and Mr Marin shook his head again and said Oliver could bring it tomorrow.

Then Chris, still without talking, showed the class how to dig in the wet sand for fresh water. Oliver sat balancing his paper plate of sausage and onion on his knees, watching for the evidence that Tjilbruke was close by. Where Chris was digging in the sand, a shallow hole was filling up with cloudy water. Dion passed a plastic cup around and everyone had a drink. The water was sandy but it didn't taste salty. It was fresh water by the sea. "Those are Tjilbruke's tears," said Dion.

Oliver looked along the beach and imagined Tjilbruke striding down from the north, carrying his nephew, stopping to rest – it was such a long way! - and crying the whole time. There was just no way that fat Uncle Max would be able to make the same journey. Maybe Aunty Peta, at a pinch; she was kind of like a giant in Oliver's mind.

After lunch they all had another turn at throwing Dion's spears. Mr Marin made Oliver go last to show some control. When it was Mr Marin's go, he stood around holding the spear and talking to Chris and Dion for ages before he threw it. Oliver couldn't work out why you wouldn't want to throw it straight away, it was so much fun. He had to jump up and down on the spot to wait for his turn, and when it finally came, he launched it straight away, running on the sand. Mr Marin told him to stop showing off, but Dion laughed and called him a good hunter.

When it was time to get on the bus again Oliver didn't mind sitting down the front so much because he was behind Dion and Chris. He sat and listened to what they were talking about; something about a workshop on the twenty-fifth at the Living Kaurna Cultural Centre. When they fell into silence Oliver felt himself fall into silence as well. He felt cosy and wrapped up in the men and the journey. He sat in his seat and waited for the next place. The whole Tjilbruke Trail made him feel good.

At the end of the day, they came to an ochre cove where Tjilbruke had cried again. Oliver thought this would be a good place for Tjilbruke to have buried Kuliltowi; it was wild and wavy and lonely, and beautiful too - but they were still only halfway to the cave where the burial had finally taken place. They were a really long way from Adelaide. Tjilbruke must have been exhausted by the time he walked all that way. The bus parked a short distance from the cove and the class climbed down, more slowly this time. Mr Marin was looking at his watch. The evening breeze came in from the water and made the hairs stand up on Oliver's arms. Everyone else put on their jumpers. The low sun shone in Oliver's eyes and when he looked back at them, his classmates' faces were pink and orange. Mr Marin's hair was purple. The ochre cove was in shadow. "This is another place where Tjilbruke stopped to cry," said Dion. His face was gold.

The kids listened, fidgeting, as he told them that the cave was made of ochre, a special coloured rock like clay that was very valuable to the Kurna people, who would sometimes mine it from the site and use it to trade with people from other regions. Oliver felt restless all of a sudden. He tried to look like he was listening hard.

"They say the Kurna word for ochre is *karko*," said Dion.

"It's getting a bit boring," thought Oliver. The kids next to him sniggered and Oliver realised he had accidentally said it out loud. He kept getting into trouble for things he'd thought out loud by accident, especially when he was tired, like today. His Mum had said that he might be hyperactive, but Mr Marin said he was just acting up. Luckily Mr Marin was standing on the other side of the group this time. "Why did they want it?" Oliver said quickly, much louder, to show he hadn't been trying to be rude.

Dion explained that ochre was used for painting and ceremonies, body and face paint. It was easy to scoop out of the rock because it was so soft and crumbly.

As Dion finished talking and gave the signal for the class to move over to the cove, the sun changed position so it struck the ochre rocks and turned the cove bright red.

Oliver started running. He raced across the rocky beach to the luminous cove with all the other kids, and it was like running towards a lantern, or right into the sun itself. He got there first and slapped his hand against the damp wall, surrounded by the whooping of the other children and the crashing of the waves.

“Hey!” he said, “You can scoop it out!” Oliver grabbed a small flat stone from the beach and prized off a clod of ochre. The rest of the class followed his lead. Enchanted, Oliver held the ochre up to the sunset. It was soft and plasticky, and left red stains on his hands. He laughed out loud.

Oliver was strong and fast. He felt like he had been cooped up in a cage all day and had now been set free. He sprinted back to the bus to show the treasure to Dion.

The bus was dark inside. Dion was standing at the open door as Oliver panted up the stairs. It was very quiet in the bus. Dion was looking out the doorway at the view of the ocean and the swarm of children ransacking the ochre cove.

He didn't say anything to Oliver, who stood beside him in the doorway. The sun was almost down. Oliver opened his hand. The lump of ochre felt cool and sticky. Out of the sun its brilliance had faded to a purplish brown. “Dion,” said Oliver, but Dion didn't seem to hear. Mr Marin called the rest of the class and the mass of bodies raced back to the bus, excited like Oliver had been, their cold breath showing in the dusk. Eyes alight, they surged up the metal bus steps and around the boy and the man, as Oliver said, “Hey, Dion” again, and tried to give him back the ochre.

For a second Dion just stood there, jostled by the returning kids. Then he looked down at Oliver and said, “It's ok. You'd better keep it.” Oliver thought Dion hadn't understood that he was sorry he'd taken it. He tried to give the ochre

back again, but Dion looked down finally and said again, "You'd better keep it. It's too late now."

The class waited, chatter subsiding, while the bus driver and Chris came back from having a smoke down at the beach. Oliver sat back in the front seat with the lump of ochre in his pocket. His eyes were tired and his arms were cold.

Mr Marin and Dion had a quick chat and decided to call it a day. On the way home, Mr Marin stood up in the aisle again and led the kids in a final chorus of the Tjilbruke song. It was late by the time they got back to school. As the bus pulled into the playground, lit by the lights of the parents' cars, Oliver asked if they would finish the Tjilbruke Trail on another excursion. Everyone laughed, although it wasn't supposed to be funny. Mr Marin said Dion and Chris had to go back to their other jobs now, so probably not.

Uncle Max picked up Oliver in the station wagon. Oliver's Mum had another night at work and Aunty Peta was having a rest before the baby came. When they got back she was in the living room lying on the sofa. Oliver sat down on the floor to have his tea. He was really cold now. He sat on a cushion in front of Aunty Peta, as if she was a campfire. She was wearing a giant orange dress, which reminded Oliver of the cove at sunset, all beautiful and strong and fragile.

He didn't know what to do so he decided to give her the ochre.

It had smeared a bit in his pocket. He held it out to her, squashed and insignificant. It was dull again in the light from the TV.

"What is it?" said Aunty Peta curiously.

"Ochre," Oliver said. "In Kaurna they called it *karko*." He started to tell her the story of the ochre cove, about Mr Marin making him sit up the front of the bus and that he needed four dollars for tomorrow. He wanted to tell her about the look on Dion's face watching the kids out the door of the bus, how they hadn't finished the Tjilbruke Trail before it was time to go back home, and how it felt as if they had left Tjilbruke to cry forever alone by the sea, but something had happened to Aunty Peta and she wasn't listening. She jumped to her feet in a

move that should have been impossible for a woman of her size, and grabbed him by the hands, pulling him to his feet.

“Oliver, you’re a genius!” she exclaimed. Her eyes were bright; she was beaming with excitement and triumph.

Oliver stared. “Karko!” cried Aunty Peta. “It’s perfect! Now I can go ahead and have this baby!”

She raced out of the room to find Uncle Max and tell him that Oliver had thought of the perfect name for his cousin, just in time.

Oliver’s eyes hurt. He looked at the lump of ochre again and decided to throw it away outside.

It was freezing in Aunty Peta’s garden as he chucked the ochre down past the clothesline. Through the lit up kitchen window he could see Aunty Peta sitting on Uncle Max’s knee. They were smiling. Oliver was shivering, and then he was so tired he started to cry. He turned his head to try to get the tears to drop onto the ground, but they dried before they reached the edge of his cheeks. Tjilbruke must have been crying much more than Oliver to make fresh water springs. Maybe one tear of Oliver’s fell on the ground and was instantly absorbed by the grass. He guessed he wasn’t as sad as Tjilbruke had been when Kuliltowi died, but it felt like he was.

Free with the Animals

Clay is heartsick.

Tiny things hurt her. Piercing the poached egg with a spoon before it's ready and seeing the orange yolk run out.

Tiny things ease her. The moisture on the razored edge of the aloe plant, sunlit out of the kitchen window. Clay takes photos for inspiration before she makes her bowls; the colour of the light at the start of the day, the blades of mouse-tail grass blurred by wind in front of the rusty junk in the yard.

Sometimes she just sits on the front step and doesn't try to do anything, just breathes in the dew.

Would she do it again? Yes, if she were herself, again, then.

But having done it once is draining, even after all these years. It makes her lazy, in the way of wasting her talent and being unable to cope with the dishes. She smirks at the irony. Clay loves making bowls, but hates doing the dishes.

Something is trying to catch up to Clay. Oliver wonders when he noticed. Probably around the same time she did, when they had been living in Thevenard a few weeks after starting to talk seriously about having a baby. At first Clay pushes it down; she thinks the feeling comes from outside. She snuggles in closer to Oliver. She fills their lives with ginger kittens and photographs and beautiful pottery on the shelves. Tends the aloe plant given by the neighbours as a house-warming present. Sits on the front step. Forces herself to do the dishes.

The feeling stays. Clay goes for searching walks along the beach and comes back empty-handed. She thinks she is looking for happiness; to Clay you are either happy or sad. The former is good, the latter, where she finds herself.

Oliver thinks that for someone whose creative work is so subtle, so delicately coloured, Clay sees things painfully in black and white.

Every coloured bowl brings the feeling closer, every black and white thought holds it away at arm's length. One afternoon when Oliver is at school teaching, Clay comes in from the stables with another perfect creation. As she puts the bowl down gently on the table, Clay wonders suddenly what it would be like to drop it from a good height and smash it to pieces.

Clay is exhausted. She lays her head down on the kitchen table next to the bowl. The sunlight on her face is as heavy as honey; it presses her into sleep.

She dreams she is free with the animals. She is bare to the sun out in the desert, running mad, back in a time of common ancestry when no one was to blame. The sun is everywhere, blinding her, starrng off the salt. She is squinting and happy, alone at noon.

When she wakes up, Clay realises that the feeling comes from inside herself and is nothing to fear.

Now that she knows what's going on, Clay naps at the table every afternoon, knocked out by a powerful urge to submit to sleep and dreams. In the next dream she is back in the desert, craving a river. Ten years ago, waiting to have the abortion, she also craved a river in a bone dry state. A river to weep beside. Now she wants to be swept away by one, to surf it standing up. She is completely ready to jump in and be borne away - not to die, but to flow with the current over and around the rocks. The bowls, she sees now, have been way too small. A desert canyon is a vessel big enough to hold her tears.

Her dreams oblige; the next afternoon the earth opens onto a raging river, suddenly, that way it can without warning in the desert. Here it is, a flash flood at

the thought of another child. Clay steps quickly into the river and is soon afloat. Her feet sweep from underneath her; it's like labour, a fever, being sick. A boat ride out into the Bight.

Hold on tight.

There is Oliver waving from the bank.

Clay thinks briefly of joining him; but the sides of the canyon are too slippery to climb. "Meet me at the bottom!" she screams and he nods and sets off.

This is Clay's thing. She is totally willing to do this, but not sure how. Surrender is not quite the word; it is more a ride that she is aware of having mounted.

Maybe there's no way to accomplish it deliberately. Maybe it will be literally, in the agony of an actual childbirth. Pain seems to be demanded of her. She wants to cut herself open and free her own screams, but this has already happened, with the operation. "The body remembers," said her soothing acupuncturist.

She thought she had already remembered. "But not your grief," the acupuncturist had said. Accept, accept, accept, pounds the river, with a force that takes her breath away.

Clay accepts that she will never be innocent again, but that is ok, innocence is not the issue; she has learned wisdom beyond innocence, to pretend otherwise is to pretend to be a child, and she wants instead to be a woman, then a mother. Colours come with the dreams.

She wakes in the kitchen. Oliver is banging his bike through the gate outside. The noise irritates her. Things have been annoying her disproportionately since these dreams of the last few weeks. She remembers her rage at the unfairness. At the time she cursed nature for her own womanhood.

She cursed the man in question, cursed herself. The thing that happened was of such an appallingly normal, universal nature that it split the universe in two.

When Oliver comes in the door Clay tells him that there will be no more bowls until she gets her feelings back. She thinks of how she will explain the dreams to him: the need to reclaim her colours. Her rage and crushedness. Her innocence and grief.

“What are you going to do?” says Oliver.

“I don’t know,” says Clay. “But something.”

Will I raft, literally down a river? Will I trek across the salt lakes? Will I go inland, Clay wonders, to the huge inland sea of the desert? Where will this grief be born?

She tells Oliver that she can’t have another baby until she figures out how to stop being an automaton.

“You’re not an automaton,” says Oliver.

“Oh, bugger it,” says Clay, “I’m premenstrual, is what I am.”

“No I’m not, I’m pregnant,” she says a few minutes later.

Because of course it is precisely at the point that Clay stomps off to the toilet expecting to bleed, that she discovers she has already set out on a journey started four weeks ago, so unobtrusively that she hasn’t noticed until now that her familiar small-scale cycles have swung outwards to encompass the turning of the world.

Country

Oak Trees in the Desert

I'm Susanna, a Maralinga-Tjarutja woman from South Australia. The Australian and UK governments tested nuclear weapons on my Country in my Mother's time, and we are still feeling the health and cultural effects today. They moved us off the land, and posted signs telling us to keep away, in English, which we couldn't read. We have moved back since; some of us never left. People don't understand that we love the land, polluted or not, and will always come back.

Bev, from Adelaide, South Australia, is drinking a G&T at 30,000 feet. She is reading the biographies in the programme of the *First Annual Women Against Radioactive Racism Conference* to be held in Monument Valley, Utah. She has been in the air for what feels like days.

Her handbag is on her lap. Inside, her late husband's diary, wrapped in a silk scarf, is tucked between a thick guidebook and several maps. She used to be a geography teacher, but, at seventy-six years old, this is her first trip overseas.

The air hostess passes her a packet of peanuts and a little paper serviette. "You're welcome," she smiles, the caricature Bev was expecting from films and television. Bev and Jim talked about travelling overseas in their retirement, but in the end, momentum slowed and it didn't happen. She toasts him now from the night sky above California: *My darling, this is for you.*

The South Australian Girls are waking up in the seats behind her. Since Adelaide they have been calling Bev "Aunty". She calls them "girls"; an impediment of having taught high-school for twenty-five years is to think of anyone under sixty as a boy or girl. They are Indigenous; she used to say "Aboriginal". It is their first international plane ride too.

"Alright there, Aunty?" calls Susanna, the girl with the green eyes from Oak Valley, for whom Bev feels a special closeness. Jim was stationed at Maralinga during the British Nuclear tests. Bev's geography teacher's brain was

excited to imagine oak trees in the desert, but Susanna has since explained that Australian Desert Oaks are nothing to do with the English variety. Oak Valley is the new community on Maralinga land; the people moved back and built houses there after the clean-up and hand-back. Formerly they were nomadic, and then exiled to Yalata. Bev followed the news reports behind Jim's back. He used to turn the television off, but anyone can read the paper. She nods and smiles, raising her G&T.

"That stuff'll wreck ya, Aunty!" jokes Miriam, the bigger girl with long dark hair, from Roxby Downs. She is against the Olympic Dam uranium mine, she has told Bev, though her husband used to work there.

Bev used to think *her* husband didn't like Indigenous people, until a year ago when she found the diary. Six months ago she contacted the lawyer, who took her to the anti-nuclear meeting where she met an Indigenous person for the first time.

Bev smiles again at Miriam and Susanna and starts to say something, but the plane suddenly makes an elegant swoop, tilting Bev towards the earth in her window seat. The pilot comes on over the public address system, his American accent all western like a cowboy, welcoming them to the United States. "If you look to your right just about now," he says, "you'll see Las Vegas."

Bev peers into the darkness below and is overwhelmed by a sense of their fragility, suspended in their light metal aeroplane. The night-time vastness of Nevada is below, bare of roads, lights, cars and houses; a dark rocky land, a map come to life. People must live there, though; do they feel small? How empty and hidden, how unbearably exposed! And then suddenly there are a million lights, a blazing bowl among the dark hills, towards which the plane is aimed, and she watches Las Vegas swooping up to meet them, clutching her handbag and Jim's diary the way she used to hold his hand.

I'm Miriam, an Arabunna woman from South Australia. The world's biggest uranium mine, Olympic Dam, is on Arabunna land. It takes water from our mound springs and pollutes the country and the people.

Each casino, complete with towers of hotel rooms, is like a separate city. Bev wonders where the water comes from to support this desert oasis. Her giant room has a bed on which she could comfortably lie sideways, if she chose. Her body is on Adelaide time, though, and she finds she cannot sleep. She sits in a chair, an island in an ocean of swirling, psychedelic carpet, flipping through the conference itinerary. Las Vegas, it says, was a popular tourist destination during the nuclear testing era in Nevada. Guests would view the night time bombs, just sixty-five miles away, as the bottles in the bars serving “atomic cocktails” rattled with the proximity of the blasts. Bev can't imagine a similar scenario in the South Australian desert – the absurdity of building a resort town at Maralinga! As for atomic cocktails, the G&T on the plane was enough; what she really needs now is food.

She goes on a quest to find something to eat and becomes lost in the corridors, passing rooms with numbers on their doors in the thousands. The other guests of the famous Circus Circus appear equally lost. They smell like smoke and plod past in plus-sized T-shirts, serious and unsmiling. Having anticipated glamorous celebrity types, Bev feels an Australian judgemental side rising to the fore. In an attempt not to panic at by now being hopelessly lost, she catches the lift down to the ground floor, emerging suddenly in the main casino.

What is that familiar laughter? Bev is ridiculously relieved to round a corner among the blank-faced gamblers and flashing lights and discover the South Australian Girls playing one of the slot machines. “Oy, Aunty!” says Miriam. “It's a “Sex and the City” pokie!”

Jim used to bet on the horses occasionally and Bev used to tease him; now here she is hitting the jackpot in Las Vegas with a line up of blue satin shoes on the second go and laughing raucously with the girls until two in the morning – which may be yesterday at noon for all she can figure out through the waves of jetlag and fatigue.

I'm Nancy O'Halloran, from LA. You might recognise the name. I was a journalist covering the Nevada Nuclear tests in the fifties and sixties. As a member of the press I was invited to tour "Doom Town", a fake US small town constructed in the desert to observe the effects of a nuclear bomb on middle America.

They are joined by some of the US delegates at breakfast next morning, at a pretend café on a fake indoor street with no windows. There is a no-nonsense female journalist of about Bev's age, and another elderly white women in a tracksuit, accompanied by a daughter of about fifty. This pair look like the tourists at the Circus Circus and explain that they have been vacationing from Utah. The daughter wears a new black T-shirt emblazoned with rhinestones that reads "What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas".

Bev very much hopes so. The place confuses her – the combination of adult playground and desperation is as stifling as the ever-present smoke. At 8.30am the party emerges blinking into crisp desert air, filled with filter coffee and fluffy pancakes. The casinos, representing Paris, New York and even Ancient Rome, look to Bev like giant plaster wedding cakes. Susanna points out that the beggars - ignored on the footpath by the steady stream of tourists - are Native American; (Bev used to say "Indian"). Miriam gives some American dollars to a woman sitting on one of the interminable pedestrian bridges, a small child in her lap. Elvis is serenading for cash as well, standing on the corner with a portable PA system. As they board their coach; he salutes them and watches as they fly away along the twelve lane freeway towards the mountains.

I'm Jennifer Tempest. This is Kimberly Tempest, my daughter. We are Downwinders, from Utah. We say we come from the "nuclear sacrifice zone" of the US, because our state was knowingly sacrificed to fallout from the Nevada tests, which would regularly blow north-east during the so-called favourable wind conditions that avoided California and Las Vegas. Cancer

has been in our family for three generations, and it's the same throughout our community.

Bev misses her husband. It's been a little over a year. She pretends to talk to Jim sometimes, keeping him informed about things of interest. She didn't always do this during their marriage, but now that he is dead she feels closer somehow to the real Jim, who faded into the background during his illnesses, withdrawing into his pain.

Bev is standing on the Skywalk, a glass platform above Grand Canyon West, pretending to hold Jim's hand. The Skywalk is run by the Hualapai people; Bev tells Jim that "Hualapai" means "People of the Tall Pines". The Colorado River runs green and still like a solid object from this height. Of course from this height it would be a solid object to fall against. She breathes dizzily at four thousand feet, gazing and gazing at the solid canyon and standing on thin air.

Back on the bus, the South Australian Girls sing "I Still Call Australia Home". The journalist and the Downwinders swap pictures of their pets. Jetlag hits Bev promptly at 5pm and she falls asleep. When she wakes up they are in Utah.

I'm Sally, from the Western Shoshone Nation. My people have been called the most bombed in the United States. Our land houses the Nevada Nuclear Test Range, where to this day the government is still testing nuclear bombs underground. They conducted regular atmospheric tests above ground until 1992. We also have Yucca Mountain on Western Shoshone land, which we have fought for years to prevent becoming a high level nuclear waste dump.

The Monument Valley Hotel is owned by the Navajo Nation. It is cleverly designed to blend unobtrusively into the red rocks. Each room has a bed and a little balcony facing the famous Monument Valley "mittens" of giant red stone. Bev's room smells so strongly of cleaning products that she opens the screen door and lies on the edge of the giant bed closest to the sunset and the sky

and a fresh little breeze rising from the desert. She is still jetlagged and decides to skip dinner - the family-sized portions at lunch were more than enough. Bev feels very content. She lets her breathing rise and fall, lying on top of the pretty Navajo blanket without even bothering to climb underneath.

She dreams of Jim's back. His beautiful young back and the way it felt against her stomach as she held him in their sleep. They fitted together on those hot nights when he was home on leave, he in his shorts and she in her pink nightie with the ties at the front. Mosquitoes would come through the fly-screen, and they would swat them and find tiny bloodstains on their bodies the next morning. He would turn to her, murmuring, and she would hold him against her hair. But then he would turn back and they would re-assume their main position, lying in the dark with his back against her breasts and her arm around his ribs. Her young husband. All his organs were placed neatly inside his body, and his body was breathing quietly; she was his wife; his body was assigned to her care.

Bev wakes in the night. When Jim bolted up in bed from his nightmares she used to wake with him and has never lost the habit. His recurring dream – being forced to line up and witness the mushroom clouds; the x-ray vision of the bones in his hands, though his eyes were closed, his back to the blast and fists ground into sockets as instructed. Then the order to turn and watch, the vision of salt bush rolling towards him like water with the shock waves; soiling himself with fear. He wasn't the only one, he said. You could smell it down the line of men. She would soothe him and hold him and he would fall back to sleep. Bev soothes and holds herself now as the night breeze comes in the window. It is very quiet.

I'm Janis Clearwater, from the Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians of Utah. My land in Skull Valley is earmarked for a short-term nuclear waste dump. The big companies can afford to buy us off. We, like many of you delegates here, are the victims of radioactive racism, which targets some of the most disadvantaged people on earth, exploiting their most precious and often sole resource – land.

It crosses Bev's mind that the red dirt of Monument Valley, Utah, may be radioactive too. It is the first thing she sees when she wakes, a soft powder of red dust on her spotless white pillowcase, blown into the room by the gentle night breeze. When she wakes up in these American beds, Bev doesn't know where she is. From her balcony, just before dawn, she sees the photographers from all over the world for whom this hotel affords the only opportunity to photograph the Valley, standing in a line of fierce concentration, lenses pointed at the pre-dawn horizon, waiting to catch the diamond burst of the sun behind the mittens.

Bev watches the sun come up over breakfast on the balcony with the others. She wonders if their dreams were strange last night too. The Native American waiting staff don't seem to smile much. Bev tries to observe if they are as formal with the South Australian Girls as they are with herself and the white American delegates, but can't decide.

Suddenly the lift opens and several Native American delegates arrive for breakfast. They all have long dark hair, but are dressed in various different styles, from bright coloured blouses and skirts, to T-shirts and jeans. Is there now a subtle change in attitude among the waiting staff, from politeness to recognition? Bev feels lonely, unloved, far from home. It is hard to conjure up Jim at this foreign breakfast table. She bites into her blue corn fry bread.

Welcome! We are Joli Redbird from New Mexico and Faith Nordstrom, presently from Tucson, Arizona. This here is Faith's baby Kirby. He'll be good, we promise! I, Joli, am a proud Navajo woman, and co-organiser of this conference. There is a disused uranium mine in my home town, with tailings blowing radioactive dust onto the houses and the children's play area. I am fighting for a clean-up.

Faith, my co-organiser over there changing Kirby, works at the South Western Nuclear-Free Alliance in Tucson. Her people are from the mid-west where they migrated from Sweden in the 1870s. She's honoured to be here

on Navajo land as one of the co-organisers of the inaugural Women Against Radioactive Racism Conference.

This is Day One. The women take coffees into an impressive hall decorated with rugs and sculptures. It is early; the sun shines in their eyes through the picture windows. The organisers finally appear and the room ignites with enthusiasm at their cheerful welcome. They are young, in their thirties, one with blond hair, glasses and a baby in a sling, and the other a Native American girl, with a modern haircut and big, visible earrings. Bev overhears one of the Hualapai ladies saying to her friend, “Her hair’s too short,” but the friend chuckles forgivingly and tells her to shush.

“Some small points of housekeeping before we start,” the girl with the baby says. “The staff at the hotel have asked us to talk about the swimming pool, which of course is a standard feature in all luxury US hotels.”

A cheer goes up from the audience. It is hot and sticky, outside, even this early in the morning.

“There isn’t one,” says the blonde girl, smiling at the punchline. “Management say this is because they think it’s inappropriate to use thousands of litres of water in the desert, especially when many of their people down in the Valley don’t have access to running water.”

Bev has read this statement in the hotel brochure. A louder cheer goes up, of understanding and recognition.

“There is, however, a spa which will be available for a special women’s hot tub ceremony as a one-off occasion on the last night of the conference.”

Bev is not sure at all about this, but the applause this time is accompanied by foot stamping and whistles, and on this exuberant note the conference officially opens.

Susanna stands and speaks first. "I'm Susanna, a Maralinga-Tjarutja woman from South Australia." Underneath the official presentations, the glasses donned, hands fluttering, holding notes or talking up from facts known by rote, there are the thoughts:

(She is here to represent her mother, a young woman taking shelter on desert winter nights, camping with her family in the dry creeks and the warm craters where the bombs glazed the sand into hollows and caves. Hiding by day from the men in Jeeps. Finally captured and trucked down south, separated from her land by force.)

"I'm Miriam, an Arabunna woman from South Australia."

(They say it's impossible to stop the mine. She is here anyway, trying, for Uncle Kev and all the rest, back home tirelessly drumming up opposition to that huge hole in the ground. It's the same for all these women here. Remember Uncle's "Water Thieves" sign? Here they've dammed the mighty Colorado River. They mine uranium from Indigenous land, just the same as back home.)

The delegates listen intently to each other's introductions. Bev is taking notes in a spiral-bound notebook. Her handbag and the diary are next to her chair. Some of the women stand up to speak. Some stay seated. In the pin-drop silence each woman's turn is honoured. As she gives her formal presentation, each woman listens to her private thoughts.

"I'm Nancy O'Halloran, from LA."

(Or, if you prefer, the journalist who glamorised the desecration of the desert. Do they see her as the enemy? She's paid a price; that's for sure. Speaking clearly, thinking of the hip-flask on the night-stand in her bedroom, wondering how strictly they enforce that dry-zone policy.)

"I'm Jennifer Tempest and this is Kimberly."

(Her daughter stands there simply. The same day the doctor heard Kimmy's heartbeat for the first time Jennifer found out she had cancer. There

was no surprise. Her Mom had cancer; her sister had cancer; her sister in law, a cousin, her best friend. Jenny has lost count of how many times she has braced herself on how many doorsteps, casserole and sympathy at the ready. Somehow she survived to deliver the baby and her daughter has grown up to have cancer as well.)

An alarm on the blonde organiser's mobile phone goes off. "I knew we'd run over time," she says, smiling. "We'll continue after lunch." Bev's stomach tells her that people in Australia are in bed rather than having lunch, but she follows the rest of the women to the buffet. Standing in line, Bev thinks that half of the delegates have been named and accounted for, while the rest are still photographs from the programme brochure, waiting to come to life through the act of speech.

"I'm Sally, from the Western Shoshone Nation."

(She's beyond tired of the bullshit. Custodianship disregarded; fighting every day, tooth and nail, to protect those beloved pieces of bombarded land. They keep refusing the dump, but you can be sure the waste will be going somewhere over the state line; some say it will even make its final way across the ocean, to Australia where these women have already put up their hands and said no.)

"I'm Janis Clearwater, from the Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians of Utah."

(She wants to cry at the memory of the executives with the bullying toothpaste smiles, the wrap-around shades to hide their eyes as they cut the deal. Handshakes all round; those that gave in looking at their feet. Accepting America's waste like a toilet. *Money for your children's' future*, they smiled. *You've done the right thing*.)

After several more delegates have spoken, it is the organisers' turn. The Native American girl goes first.

“My name is Joli Redbird, from New Mexico.”

(She is shy at this conference, her first as a strong activist woman after returning from school in Tucson with short hair and the tools, finally, to begin to help. The Navajo Nation is so huge and varied. Do the old people welcome her; do they approve?)

“My name is Faith Nordstrom - from Tucson, these days, although my folks are mid-western Swedish immigrants.”

(God, her earnestness. And what's with always having to mention her Swedish ancestry? Trying to claim some kind of minority status? Across the room, Joli looks confident and is doing a fantastic job. Was it a mistake to bring Kirby? Where else could she have left him? She just hopes it's not insensitive. All these women whose kids have probably died.)

The sun is shining once again into the women's eyes. Everyone has spoken, except, Bev realises suddenly, herself.

All eyes turn now towards her. She stands, and reads from notes. “I'm Beverly, from Adelaide, South Australia. My husband was an aeroplane mechanic in the Royal Australian Air Force during the British Nuclear Tests at Maralinga and he died because of his involvement there.”

She is trembling, unused to the strangeness, her body bewildered as to why it is not in bed at home in Adelaide. Thinking of Jim, of everything her formal summary doesn't reveal. (His death. The words “may God forgive us,” in his diary. Bev's shame at her own jolly along and dismissal of his anguish, trying to make it all normal and bearable for him.) She sits down and reaches to touch the diary for comfort. Jim holds her hand, whispers, *Proud of you, Bev.*

She is really too old to ride a horse, but the young boy in charge helps her onto a gentle piebald pony. “This is a western saddle, see,” the boy explains, “You just hold onto the pommel.” Bev pretends it is Jim hoisting her skywards, joking, *Way hey and up she rises!*

Once seated she gives herself over to the sure-footed movement of the horse. “You’ll look after me, won’t you,” she says, patting his nodding neck. She takes her place in the line of women riding into the late afternoon sun around the red glowing spikes and dramatic formations of Monument Valley. There are tiny wizened oak trees - the English variety, with acorns and sculpted leaves - growing prostrate among the rocks. Bev points these out with delight to Susanna, who has the horse behind her. Oak trees in the desert! “Oh, I’m homesick now, Aunty,” the Oak Valley girl confides.

The sun is warm on Bev’s face. She squints and smiles, bathing in golden light. Then the evening breeze comes up, shadows start to lengthen and purple. The guide hurries them back towards the hotel in time for dinner and sunset over the Valley.

“I would love to have kids,” Susanna stands, looking confidently around the room on Day Two. “It’s not possible for me to have them biologically though. My Mum was exposed to fallout from the nuclear tests at Maralinga and I’m completely infertile. I’m a fantastic Aunty though.”

Everyone else has a similar story, except for Faith Nordstrom and the struggling baby Kirby. Faith is the first to start crying, jogging the baby up and down. Joli Redbird puts her hand on Faith’s arm, passes her a tissue, then passes the tissues around the room. The stories wash over Bev, the tragedy so uniform that their speakers no longer seem distinct.

“My daughter was born with a rare blood disease. She died when she was seven.”

“I had recurrent miscarriages. I was exposed to the tests in my mother’s womb.”

“My four children all have severe disabilities. I was exposed to the fallout.”

“I had a hysterectomy and a double mastectomy. I was exposed to the fallout.”

“There was an epidemic of still-births in our region just after the fallout blew over us. I’ve seen the graveyard. They call them the Woomera Babies.

Now everyone is crying. The Hualapai women have their hands over their hearts. Joli calls a break and the delegates shuffle towards the tables for refreshments. Coffee and biscuits. Comfort food.

Bev has drunk too much strong filter coffee, eaten too many sweet cream biscuits. She assembles her notes, feeling at sea. She was preparing to make a measured, matter of fact speech, but the women’s stories have exposed the knot inside that she thought would be left in a tangle for the rest of her life. She thought she was the only one it had happened to.

“Thank you ladies,” says Joli Redbird, when they resume their seats, wiping her nose and trying to smile. “I know how hard this is for all of us. We have a few more stories before we break for the day and it’s very important that we all have the chance to share and be heard.”

She introduces Bev, who is so nervous she panics and decides to pretend she is addressing the school assembly (the last time she did so in reality was in 1985). She hopes her voice won’t crack; it is so hot and dry outside and the air-conditioning seems to have broken down.

“We got married when I was twenty-one,” she begins. It is alright once she gets started. “We lived in the northern suburbs of Adelaide - Elizabeth, the City of Roses. There were children playing on the lawn in all the houses in our

street, little boys with neatly parted hair and serious looking girls with ribbons and plaits.”

There is softness in the room, smiles.

“We tried for one of our own,” Bev says. She looks for courage at the faces of the others who have told before her; their gentle eyes help unpick the knot in her chest. She follows the thread towards that private unmentioned thing, never discussed with Jim or anyone else until this moment in this bright, hot room in the American desert.

“It didn’t work. I didn’t go to the doctor about it. I think maybe two or three times, I might have been pregnant.” Bev remembers the fear and excitement, the pride of those brief weeks, spent holding her breath in anticipation. “I didn’t say anything to Jim. I would have surprised him if it had become something definite. It was more just the feeling for a week or two each time that something was different, and the surprise again when it wasn’t.”

The blood. Her paleness and disappointment. The woman next to Bev reaches up and takes her hand, and Bev realises that it is trembling slightly. She hasn’t been fertile for thirty years, but the woman squeezes hard and holds on as if the miscarriages took place yesterday.

“I used to think it was me,” Bev finishes, “But since reading the diary my husband left for me last year, I’ve decided it was probably because of Jim’s work at Maralinga. He had to clean the planes that dropped the bombs, wearing only shorts and sandals, no protective gear, and he was sick so often, all his life afterwards.”

The organiser’s baby squawks suddenly and the tension in the room dissolves into laughter. The baby is passed around, fawned over and cuddled by all the women in turn, then handed back to his mother, who is smiling humbly from behind her glasses.

Back in her room after the day’s emotional session, Bev is hanging some underwear on a clothes horse when she suddenly becomes aware that there is a

scorpion walking across the carpet towards her. A huge, cream coloured scorpion, waving its claws in the air and curving its tail. She hurries out onto the verandah, through the open fly-screen door, and calls for help from the balcony. The South Australian Girls are drinking iced tea on the patio above the view of the mittens. They sprint to Bev's assistance with cries of, "Aunty's in trouble!"

"There's a scorpion on the carpet!" Bev whispers hoarsely, and they laugh: "We know how to deal with those buggers!", "We'll catch him for you, Aunty!" - but even stoic Miriam is taken aback by the size of Bev's scorpion.

"Ok, this is a Utah scorpion," she says, after he has been trapped under a glass.

"Maybe he's a radioactive mutant," says Susanna.

"That's not funny, sis," says Miriam, firmly. Susanna tries to stop laughing, as Miriam pauses, assessing the situation. "I think we need a local for this fella."

So the South Australians call in the Downwinders, and their friend Janis Clearwater from Skull Valley, Utah. Together they sweep the scorpion over the verandah with a broom borrowed from the hotel concierge and a cry of, "Look out below!"

The main hall by Day Three is starting to feel like a second home. The no-nonsense journalist is showing a video clip of a prefabricated town being savaged by a nuclear storm. Bev watches the black and white footage of the rippling buildings, the distressing family of mannequins, still standing, scorched, at the windows, followed hours afterwards by a woman in a frock with a microphone - Nancy O'Halloran, tripping pertly over the debris. Unable to watch the American soldiers being made to crawl through the poison on their stomachs, Bev looks instead at the parcel wrapped in silk, her clenched knuckles holding Jim's diary tightly on her lap.

And then it is her turn again. This is the reason she has come, to deliver a message from the past. Bev wants to call out to her husband now, to tell him she needs him. But it seems that she is the one who is needed in the end. This is what he has asked her to do for him.

“I’m sorry about the language,” she says before starting. “It was written before we knew any better.”

Someone nods encouragingly. “My husband was a good man,” Bev almost whispers. The room is quiet. Bev opens Jim’s diary and reads from the places she has marked.

“Thursday 23rd. Much excitement this afternoon at the discovery of a whole family of Abos camped out in one of the bomb craters.”

A keening cry, a heart-breaking wail goes up from the South Australian Girls. They know this story. More tissues are passed around, as Bev reads on in her late husband’s youthful words.

“Someone’s for it - they were all supposed to have been moved on, but these ones hadn’t. They said the rabbits were good there, slow to run away. Blinded by the blast. Poor stupid buggers thought they’d found some good tucker.”

“I’m sorry,” Bev says to the South Australian girls, to the room.

“Go on, Aunty,” says Susanna with quiet authority. Bev reads:

“Following orders we hosed down the bloke and the boy, didn’t touch the Mum or the girl, then sent them all south. Their dogs had to be shot. They were crying, screaming, they didn’t know what we wanted from them. Didn’t want to go. Charlie and some others had taken photos of them camped out in the crater. They had to hand in the film and we all got told to keep our mouths shut about it. In other words, the consequences would be severe for writing this entry. Put my lack of caution down to the fact that the threat of dishonourable discharge from this horror show has begun to hold a peculiar appeal for me.”

The room is quiet. Bev turns to the second place she has marked in the

diary.

“Monday 5th. I came back from the station early to surprise Bev who was whipping up a cake for my return. I sat at the kitchen table in my shirt-sleeves, rolling a cigarette. I didn’t want to spoil the celebration - I know she doesn’t enjoy listening to complaints about life at Maralinga. Regardless, I launched straight into it, unable to stop my own confession bubbling up like one of those desert springs.”

Bev remembers the day. It was hot. Her feet ached. She had a heavy period, the end of her hopes for a baby after Jim’s last leave.

“I told her about the family in the crater, latest cast members of my nightmares. She laughed gaily with horrified eyes, then asked if they were all right. Had we looked after them and sent them on their way? I told her what I’d heard – that the woman was pregnant and lost the child. She broke down then, and I turned tail and took myself down to the pub. Got drunk. When I went home, at the right time, the time I’d been expected, the cake was cooked and iced. We sat at the table together and ate several slices - it was very good. I told her so, and we’ve since pretended that both my earlier appearance and unorthodox report never took place.”

Bev returns in confusion to the conference room and the delegates, most of whom are crying quietly. She doesn’t know what to do with her hands; her face feels hot; the diary, outrageous.

“Thank you, Aunty,” says Susanna, rising and wiping her face. She leads Bev to her seat amid applause.

She can’t bring herself to sit with the others at afternoon tea. The organisers ensure her privacy - from the corner of her eye Bev sees Faith and Joli gently motioning a couple of concerned delegates away from where she is sitting alone. The journalist, Nancy O’Halloran, barges over anyway, pulling up a chair. “Biscuit?” she offers Bev. Bev takes another biscuit.

“You are a brave woman,” Nancy says then, in her loud, decisive voice. Bev recalls the film and the striking figure she cut among the male journalists reporting on the new nuclear wonder, her Minnie Mouse heels and hair-sprayed ‘do, unruffled even by an atomic blast.

“And I can tell you, because of what I’ve seen first-hand of what our boys – our guinea pigs - had to endure here, in our own godforsaken nuclear testing program, that your husband was also a very brave man.”

“Yes,” Bev murmurs. The biscuit sticks in her throat. She coughs. “We should have spoken up,” she says.

“Look,” the journalist leans forward. “I wrote articles talking up the whole program; that was my brief – I didn’t question it, just gloried in my accomplishments as the only set of ovaries on an all male paper – future hysterectomy notwithstanding.”

“You have done a good thing,” she says again. “I’d like to call in some favours and have your husband’s diary published in the *New York Times*.”

Through crumbs Bev tells her that she’ll think about it and Nancy O’Halloran nods as if she wouldn’t have expected anything less, as if unaware that she is being fobbed off. She strides away, full of purpose and vim. “A *brave woman*,” she says again, over her shoulder.

And Bev can’t pay attention to the next several topics because she hasn’t been brave and hasn’t told anyone the most important thing of all, the thing that is bursting out of her chest looking for wings upon which to take off and take Bev with it, to a place of peace.

She pulls herself together for the evening session – they go on after dinner because there is a last minute addition to the program, a delegate from Japan, here to talk about the children of Fukushima. “The government is monitoring the levels of radiation in the school playgrounds,” says Masaki Norita, a Shinto Priest and mother from Fukushima Prefecture, through a translator. “But

the safe levels keep changing, depending on the readings they find. We are angry; we don't have anyone to trust."

(She is thinking of the daughter she has left at home with strict instructions to wear her mask during the hour allowed outside for physical education class, the maximum daily exposure. Last week it was half an hour; now suddenly it is one hour.)

(The translator is thinking about the possibility of moving to the States, but then remembers nuclear power was invented here. Perhaps Australia?)

"I'm so sorry, sister, I want to formally apologise – there was uranium from my country in the Fukushima power plant," Miriam says.

Masaki Norita bows and the translator explains, "This is not your fault."

"But if you can imagine how it feels," Miriam pleads. "We are responsible for Country but haven't been able to stop the terrible things done in our name with the uranium from our sacred places." She is visibly upset and the translator speaks fast. The Japanese woman gives up bowing eventually and just pats Miriam on the arm. "Thank you," she says.

After so much emotion Bev is more than ready to go back home. But it is the last night, the night of the promised spa, the luxury in the desert, an honour, a special treat for the tired women of the conference, so bruised and so full of life. That is what she thinks as she makes her way along the dusty wheelchair ramp, the cold red concrete smooth under her bare feet, peering anxiously into the shadows for scorpions, her robe clutched tight against the chill of the desert night. She is naked underneath.

Bev is entirely unsure about exposing herself like this to these women, kind as they are, but she seems to be about to do it anyway. "When in Rome," she thinks. She wants their company more than anything else. She looks across the Valley at the monuments, all of which she has learned have sacred meaning. The mittens are black shapes in the near distance, benign but formidable. Wait for daylight, they say. Stay close to the hotel. We are not for you by night.

Splashes, light and laughter as she rounds the corner, that lovely light-hearted laughter, despite the heaviness she knows that each of these women has to bear. The spa is on its own platform. Bev sees the steam rising, the light on the water, and the group of conference women, brown and pink and disrobed, splashing and climbing in.

“Aunty!” someone calls, not even one of the South Australian Girls; this has become her conference nickname and Bev likes it very much. As nonchalantly as possible for a seventy-six year old woman, far from home, whose body has only been seen by one now dead husband since its coming of age in 1957, she takes off her robe and hangs it on a railing. Susanna, smiling, takes her hand and helps her down the stairs into the steaming water; she sits Bev beside her and Miriam from home.

Bev has left her glasses in her room and it takes a while to recognise the rest of the delegates through the steam, transformed without their own glasses and earrings, hair wet, without clothes of any sort. Many remain anonymous, but Bev feels as if she is sitting in a soup of women with a few familiar faces – the journalist sitting across from her, for one, breastless, Bev notices; she is scarred across the chest, but she is smiling. There are other women with scars, with breasts removed. The blonde organiser’s breasts, on the other hand, are resplendent through the steam; of course, she is feeding her baby. There is Masaki Norita, the Japanese delegate, and her translator.

“We have many of these springs in Japan,” she says, when the group is settled. “We call these *onsen*. Natural springs in the mountains. But here it is magnificent to have the *onsen* in the desert.”

It is magnificent simply to sit in the warm water, weightless, bodiless, ageless. It is magnificent to be here, thinks Bev, more *here* than she has been for many years. She vows to start swimming in Adelaide at the pool, to find one with a spa as soon as she gets home.

“We have natural springs out in the rocks, but we don’t visit them at night,” Joli Redbird, the Navajo organiser, explains. “Bad spirits.”

“We’re the same,” says Susanna, from South Australia. “We respect the country. Keep off sacred places at night.”

“This is a good compromise though, *unna*?” says Miriam and the spa dissolves in laughter. *Unna* means “isn’t it?”, “I’m right, aren’t I?”, that sort of affirmation. It makes Bev feel proud to be a South Australian Girl.

She thinks, perhaps, that men don’t readily understand these things. Respect, moderation, keeping away sometimes. What on earth is powering the city of Las Vegas, for example? Whose idea was it to test bombs in the desert?

You can’t just blame the men though, Bev decides. Women who know better still keep quiet, standing by afraid to speak. Bev sighs, but realises as she does so that this is not true of the women soaking with her in the hot tub, all of whom have taken a stand. Whether fifty years late like Bev and the journalist or right from the start like the South Australian Girls, they are women saying something.

“Talking up for Country,” Susanna calls it. Bev knows that every night after the delegates have gone to bed, Susanna, Joli Redbird and Faith Nordstrum have been staying up to draft a media release about the days’ events.

Bev looks across at Nancy O’Halloran, who is closing her eyes, basking in the warmth and buoyancy of the water. She will give her Jim’s diary to publish. She will ask her to help find someone in Australia to publish it too. And she will tell her how it ended, without shame. She will tell them all.

As if reading Bev’s mind, the blonde organiser invites the women to share any closing thoughts for the conference, large or small.

Miriam from South Australia is smiling. “I’m feeling very inspired. I’d like to hold a conference like this back on our country. We’ll go out to the springs – in the daytime of course! - sit around the campfire; I’ll tell you stories about our Dreaming. And we’ll make those whitefellas keep the uranium in the ground. I’m talking about the real whitefellas,” she adds apologetically for the benefit of the white women present. “Not you mob.”

“My husband killed himself last year,” Bev finds herself confessing, suddenly standing up in the middle of the spa. She releases the words to the still desert air above the heated pool. “He left me his diary,” she says. “He had cancer but that didn’t kill him; he did it himself. The diary was his suicide note. Everything finally made sense.”

She sits down again quietly in the water, breathing easily. She can smell sage from somewhere nearby. She feels as if Jim is very close. She feels as if he is almost at peace.

Suddenly she is capsized by a surge of love. The women have risen like a pack of whales – a pack of bears – no, like a pack of women – across the water to surround and hug her.

“Aunty,” they call her, a term of respect for women of knowledge and experience. “Aunty Bev.”

“It’s not your fault,” says Faith Nordstrom.

“Not your fault,” echo the lady delegates of the *First Annual End Radioactive Racism Conference*.

Not your fault, Jim says to Bev, replies Bev quietly to Jim, letting go of his hand.

A timer on the light clicks off to save electricity, so now the women float together in a sea of stars. One of the stars is moving slowly on a predetermined course – a plane crossing the sky; Bev can hear its engine faintly.

She wonders what the spa must look like from up above, this hidden circle of modesty and courage; this secret desert hope. She floats in the arms of women, nine thousand miles from home.

Her Thoughts Heading North

I had quit the movement and I thought that was the end of it, and my soul had gone quiet. I blamed my husband. I blamed my children.

I couldn't remember anything good that I had done to help.

My passion was diluted. My vegetable garden was abundant. I had matured from protesting in the coal pit to community food co-ops and radical home-making. I had written poetry about finding a husband and kids, who quickly materialised in the space left by previous commitments. We were married, they were born and I had forgotten how to spell. I gained ten kilograms.

Things moved on without me. Climate change, marine campaigns, the Murray. South Australian uranium powered the Fukushima meltdown. I still got the emails. I deleted them one by one, never unsubscribing. I was a sleeper cell; the spark smouldered inside me, waiting for a signal, waiting to be pushed too far and to feel the glorious call to action once again. It might not come, I thought.

It's dawn and I am riding on the track heading north, with the sunrise bobbing like a newborn baby's head on the horizon, the feeling of morning crisp on my skin. These are my own woollen sleeves, these are my dirty hands pushing my hair back and feeling it thick and lovely with desert dust. This is the sun's warmth rising on my right cheek; this is my warm breath steaming white into the air. Beside me the others are bleary-eyed silhouettes edged in gold. Someone demands coffee; voices carry.

We are here all thrown together, some prearranged, some hitching, part of a convoy, impromptu, crammed shoulder to shoulder in the tray of the Ute, taking turns to sit in the cabin, bouncing on the ruts and holding on tight. These half-day strangers are my kin, all ages, a dog, all with the same gleam of teeth and eyes, all with the same dust-smear dark and sun-touched skin, beanies pulled low for warmth, polar fleeces zipped up tight, sunnies worn as headbands, ready for later

when the layers will be stripped and the sun will burn.

Someone holds the dog; his eager chest strains against the leather collar. Our faces mirror the dog's expression, innocent and unashamed, rushing to aid the country, out of town among the big spaces, the ancient dirt, giant sky, the changes since last time, now bone dry, now green with rain.

This feeling is love and it is the first loyalty, to the self (I am me, I am still the same, I am exactly the right age, I am who I always have been! Oh sweet first love, how I've missed you!) And to the mother; in the early light the city bullshit drops away; there is only this, rushing ahead to save her, mother earth; this is our church; all activists understand what I am saying.

There is the solidarity of doing right. The risk of self-righteousness we run in the city is tempered out here by our respect for the bare bones of everything important, over which we scramble, in smallness, holding hands.

In the house I felt guilt. My husband and my children were not enough, and the country, instead of living, instead of coming alive with stories and significance and the constant campaigning to keep her safe, began to seem dangerous, a night-time place, a place that was frightening, and I ran home to my veggie patch, eager to be a local somewhere, home inside before dark.

I wrapped the house around us; the bookshelves were filled with children's books and trinkets from the desert places where I had lived outside - the photo of the handstand competition on the mountainside, the clapping-sticks we made out west. Red dirt in a bottle from Aunty Kath's country, one of four sites targeted for the nuclear dump. "Take some with you so you'll remember this place when you go back to town." She was crying, dignified. She looked like my Granny. The dirt we collected was the red that stained everything, covering everything, staining our hands and clothes.

I listed the proposed names to myself like an incantation, keeping my ears pricked over the years for the radio announcing which one would be chosen. None of the names would be the right answer. I watched the sunset out of the window. Walked my children through suburbia. Watched the moon occasionally,

hanging out the washing late at night, and, turning away, as if hurt by a photo of a forgotten lover, went back inside to a child who had woken up with a bad dream, or to my husband's kiss. We were always going camping another year.

When I was an activist we all intended to have veggie patches as an ideal, but we never had time, and we all lived in the cities anyway, in second-floor flats with no gardens. Our balcony tomatoes died while we were out bush and we shrugged apologetically and laughed because we had been up all night blockading the highway near the turn-off to the uranium mine, and the trucks had been delayed by half a day, and we had seen a rain of shooting stars and watched the moon setting, and we knew that the vegetables could wait.

And in those days, too, I dreamed of the future with snot-nosed kids on my knee, bouncing along in the Toyota with the windows open, kids with names like Nina Simone and Baby Jack, with white dusty hair and fearless, cuddly natures, bare feet covered in mud. I dreamed of being loved by a man.

I always imagined them here on Country with me. I always imagined us sleeping round the campfire in our swags. I never imagined leaving. Whenever I went back, even though I spent ninety-five percent of my time in town and five percent in the bush, the town times were contracted in my heart's memory; they were on another, necessary level, like coming up for air, like going to school, like falling asleep. I have been asleep.

My kids have never been bush. I have a blog.

Those days I studied hard and worked hard in a campaign office, sometimes for money; I worked harder for free – I don't know why. There was always a grimy street-view out the window; all the computers had screen-savers of wild country; the pin-boards were thick with campaign stickers and photos of the desert. Everyone smoked and drank too much. All my conversations were about nukes versus renewable energy, especially at parties, but on buses too, at campaign stalls and rallies, rephrasing and repeating and flattering as outreach, as long as they changed their minds and the conservative tide was stopped one drop

at a time. In the middle of a significant dry spell I once refused to have sex with a good looking man who thought nuclear power stations were the solution to climate change.

The ratio of ninety-five to five percent was unworkable. I quit my job. I was so excited to get out, to start my little patch, learn to be a wife, make my family from scratch. And there was the burn-out too, the affair turned sour. I felt weak until I became rebellious. I savoured the peaches and grapes and poetry in the back yard. The edible weeds and bumble bees and the sleeping babies. My husband cooking the tea when I was tired. I was boss of my own empire, with chocolate in the evening and baths to unwind, looking for community in cooking shows and DVDs.

But then there was the endless encouragement my family needed, and my feigned interest in their projects and achievements, the sacrifice of paying attention and the rage that spilled out, at this domestic effort, this pointless outreach while the planet burned around us, this endless waste of time approving of colouring-in books. My husband played computer games as I glowered in the doorway with no way of begging him to give me back the days of meaning, standing on the road, shoulder to shoulder, sunburn, shared water, the night time comfort, sleeping alone in a circle of company – the searing romances, hardy loneliness the default position, strengthened by the shared looks across the horizon, out to the horizon, the possibilities.

“I had no idea the movement was so slutty,” joked my husband.

The endless journal writing by the young women, the serious photography, the seed pods half opened, containing the future DNA that leads to here. The gangly, adolescent style of living, defense against acquiescence, against what it would lead to, against this layer of fat over my bones, this woolly-headedness, this love that abnegates the self, this necessary defection.

Oh, it was easy to dedicate my life to the dust and the dirt and the sky as infinite as my own infinity, as sturdy as my sense of separateness, as simple as being a part of everything and rejecting all offers to select one lover from the vastness of it all.

But then there were the babies, the lure of the call to be a mother, and those activist warrior-women you admired who promised you could have it all – the blockades, the volunteers, the men and women twisted round their little fingers, skinny-dipping in the ocean on training camps and carrying their babies in front-packs with the Aunties to sacred sites; crying at the Aunties’ funerals and standing with megaphones in front of thousands. And smiling. And calling you mate. And letting you into their circle. There was ego there, your hair was long; your boobs were big; your arms were hard, and you wore boots and lots of brown, above which your eyes shone, the result of mastery and pride.

And then it got too much because you weren’t a warrior-woman and you wanted a shower, and you wanted to watch *Big Brother*, and they let you leave. Gave genuine welcomes to you at gatherings, though you couldn’t meet their eyes now because your attendance felt like a token; someone else who’d dropped out was spoken of as “a two-to-three year girl”; and now you had a mortgage, gave generous donations to the campaign centre from your small income and they thanked you. Maybe, you realised one day, they thanked you not for the pay-off, but because they remembered the good job you’d forgotten having done. And you cried.

At this point in some stories there might be a divorce, but we are going back. The call came one night on the late news, a simulated image to tip the scales – a CG truck gliding smoothly into a CG waste repository – all was plastic, shiny grey animation; the dirt and the sky were grey; the toy truck and the innocuous looking barrels of radioactive waste were grey and smooth. Little grey plastic figures received the barrels and looked them over, as if proudly inspecting a vintage.

We have taken our home-grown veggies with us for snacks. We will camp along the highway. My husband will take turns with the rest of us driving the Toyota. In an hour or two the sun will start to blaze; I will transfer Nina and Jack to the cabin, give them fruit juice to keep them hydrated. We will have lunch under a coolabah tree. They will run and exclaim and be exalted. My husband will see me for who I am. There will be enough space for us to understand how

small we are. We will fill each other's horizon. I will pick daisies for him, papery suns, pink and yellow and white; we will shield each other in the night under the stars.

We will drive right out the top of South Australia onto Aboriginal land. There will be the old activist faces from across the country, transforming the grief and outrage into smirks of shared intent. There will be our hosts, the humour and dignity of the Traditional Owners strategising with the big-shot campaigners against the blank grey faces, the plastic simulations, the grey site hidden from the highway so as not to appear real. We will camp every night with fifty others. Our campfires will make patterns, maps of our families. People weren't meant to live separately in houses.

The kids will be baptised in red earth.

I will never forget myself out here. I won't care if I don't see my husband all day, but I will smell his skin in the night and look for his face beside me every morning when the sun comes up. I will never love him as much as I love the earth and that is the right order. It will be like my childhood, when my brother and sister and I happily agreed that we loved our mother best in the world.

We will stop the nuclear waste dump. We will be with the others. We will have each other. We will never be lonely again.