

... *fuga* ...a novel

**The Musicalisation of  
...*fuga*: how music  
influenced and shaped the  
writing of a novel...an exegesis**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Statement of Originality</b> .....	iii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iv
<b>... fuga</b> .....	1
<b>The Musicalisation of ... fuga: how music influenced and shaped the writing of a novel</b> .....	180
<b>Introduction</b> .....	181
<b>Chapter One</b>	
Music and Words – a theoretical framework for musicalisation.....	185
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
The Berg Violin Concerto – using real music for narrative purposes.....	197
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
The Artifice of Fugue – narrative form and meaning.....	213
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<i>Limina</i> – fictional music as a voice for the fiction.....	230
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
<i>Sing me a song to make death tolerable</i> - verbal music as a vehicle for grief...	241
<b>The Speechless Full Moon Comes Out Now</b> (a musical conclusion).....	254
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	255

## ABSTRACT

Eva Byrne is twenty-five years old, a gifted violinist forging a career in London, when her life begins to unravel in the wake of traumatic events. Ostensibly a novel about music, ... *fuga* equally explores the territory of loss, identity, memory and place. Eva's close first person journal dissembles and reconstructs the personal narrative that has shaped her life and her choices, interweaving past and present in a destabilised interior monologue that is frequently at odds with the more public dialogue offered through interspersed letters, interviews, reviews and blogs. In Part One, Eva finds herself on the remote Orkney island of Hoy. Offered sanctuary at the home of her good friend, the eminent composer, Fergus Cunningham, she attempts to grapple with the recent events that have sparked her spiral into a not unfamiliar pattern of self-destruction. Part Two sees Eva returning to Australia, attempting to reconcile with more distant events that she has spent nine years in London trying to forget.

The exegetical essay, 'The Musicalisation of ... *fuga*: how music influenced and shaped the writing of a novel', explores the idea of 'musicalisation': how the metaphoric appropriation of musical ideas and strategies within a novelistic narrative helped to shape the novel's ideas and form. Beginning with a theoretical introduction to the idea of musicalisation, and incorporating a broader literary and theoretical context, each subsequent chapter of the exegesis then uses a key work of music, or a key musical idea relevant to the writing of ... *fuga*, to further elucidate the ideas regarding musicalisation that the writing of the novel generated, and which in turn inspired both the theoretical research and the ongoing creative work. It is as much an exploration of my development as a writer as it is an exploration of the novel that eventually emerged from this development. In a broader sense it is an exploration of the art of the novel – what a novel is, and what a novel does – since, as a first-time novelist, this was the question central to my process.

## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

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

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*... fuga*

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## **On Eating My Own Words**

**by Gordon Fenton**

I know I have a reputation for honesty bordering on cruelty but I am also more than willing to eat humble pie on those (rare) occasions when I am proven wrong. Today's story is one such occasion. Many years ago, I wrote an article about a teenage British-Australian violinist called Eva Byrne, daughter of the much more famous violinist, Timothy Byrne. I doubt that you'll remember, but she performed at the Proms that year. I can't recall what she played, but I do remember writing a scathing attack of her lacklustre performance, a prime example of the classical music industry's decline into pop culture commercialisation, saccharine repertoire to satisfy the masses, and reviews which were more focussed on the finery of the performer's evening dress than the standard of her actual performance. This young lady, I predicted, would make one or two CDs with airbrushed pouty covers, sticking to the lightweight repertoire within her range, and within a few years would vanish from the public eye, replaced by a younger version of herself. Pity she was not more like her father, who had done a spectacular London debut when he was a mere teenager himself (Beethoven – and I remember it vividly to this day). But all the advantages bestowed by the famous, connected father were wasted on this young woman – the talent simply wasn't there.

I wrote my column and forgot about the forgettable Eva Byrne. Then last week I chanced upon an articulate, acerbic blog by the afore-mentioned and took the time to follow the link through to her website. Contrary to what I had predicted Eva Byrne did not waste her time capitalising on early media attention. In fact, she did the opposite – she removed herself from the public eye and worked. Two years ago, at the age of twenty-three, she completed postgraduate studies at the RAM (Royal Academy of Music), where she had also completed her undergraduate studies, with a year in Vienna in between. She's done a Wigmore Hall debut and collected a number of prizes along the way.

For all of this, and despite the famous father, no managers or recording contracts were waiting in the wings when she graduated. As she states in one of her blogs, and we know this to be true, our young performers are expected to go a long way on their own these days – managers and record companies come calling only when you've proved yourself a sure thing. After all, how many superlative solo violinists per generation can the music industry support, particularly when those of the previous generation, Eva Byrne's father included, remain prominent?

According to Byrne's blog, of all the gifted and technically skilled violinists she started out with as an undergraduate at the RAM she is the only one still 'mad enough' (her words) to be trying for a solo career. And not, by her own admission, because she is any more likely to succeed. She persists out of pure obtuseness, she suggests. Stubbornness. She professes herself to be useless in the rank and file, temperamentally better suited to situations that allow her to keep creative control. A glance at her Wigmore debut program gives some insight – works for solo violin by fellow Australians Peter Sculthorpe and Brett Dean, interspersed with a number of Bach's works for solo violin and, rather controversially (although favourably received, at least in the couple of reviews posted on her website) her own improvisations on these works.

I was curious after reading all of this to hear for myself how (or indeed whether) the forgettable Ms Byrne had managed to transform herself into something quite other. A glance at her hectic performance schedule tells me she's been much in demand these past few months and will continue to be well into next year. Most prominent in the schedule was an upcoming Edinburgh performance of the Berg Violin Concerto with the Scottish Philharmonia: this to coincide with the launch of her first CD, made independently, sans contract, which is a story in its own right.

Stubborn indeed, to take on such an ambitious project as an independent recording – one wonders what the orchestral fees alone must have cost. Byrne's rationale of course is that recording is the way to be heard – a successful recording will launch her career and bring her to



the attention of managers and recording labels. She has worked resolutely over a couple of years (including plenty of hours in the rank and file of many of our better and lesser known orchestras) and also gained sponsorship from the RAM and other corporate sources to raise what must have amounted to many tens of thousands of dollars in order to fund her venture.

A vanity project you might say, but there is clearly more to it than that. Her descriptions of the music and the recording process are infused with passion and reveal both her depth of knowledge about the works she performs and her fastidious attention to detail. Berg's Violin Concerto having been a passion of hers since she studied with George Behrendt in Vienna, this was an obvious choice for a first recording. She pairs it with an incandescent work for solo violin, titled *Limina*, which was written especially for her by Orcadian composer, Sir Fergus Cunningham, and which, according to Byrne's blog, 'extends the theme of transfiguration evident in the final moments of Berg's harrowing, death-themed concerto'. Byrne made several trips to Orkney to work with Cunningham before recording this work (read her blogs for some interesting anecdotes), which was premiered back in June at the St Magnus Festival in Orkney.

All very impressive, at least on paper. And a glance at the CD itself reveals a complete absence of evening dresses and airbrushing; in fact, the one photo of Byrne, on the back cover, recedes rather ephemerally into the general black and white pastiche – evocative images of graveyard angels, angled sky, shadow, light and so on. Prominent on the front cover are black and white photo images of Alban Berg and the young Manon Gropius, whose death from polio famously inspired his concerto. To the memory of an angel...Berg's own words of dedication, are in larger font than Byrne's own name – I think she makes her intentions clear. I cannot help but wonder if she took my ancient criticism to heart...

I admit I listened to the CD with some trepidation – I'd come to admire Byrne's pluck over the course of all this reading and had no wish to damn her again. But with all the will in the world a project like hers could easily have ended badly.

I'm pleased to report that it didn't. Byrne's recording is masterful, the overwhelmingly positive reviews she is already receiving richly deserved. She will perform the Berg with the Scottish Philharmonia in Edinburgh next week, Thurs Nov 18<sup>th</sup>, Greyfriar's Kirk, 8pm. I suggest if you are in the vicinity that this is a must-see – here is a young woman (and yes, I am ingesting my long-ago words as I speak) capable of an extraordinary future. My apologies to you, Ms Byrne, for my previous naysaying – I wish you all the best.

## *Hoy, November*

### *Monday*

You would peel away the weather and the wild sea and hear the deep silence of this place, but I was never Zen enough, was I, Mama? Too much music, Eva, *on and on about the music*. Fergus quotes Rumi at me: *your old life was a frantic running from silence*, and I think of you, Mama, running toward the silence like it was life itself.

It's been years since I called you 'Mama'.

This place is mapped into Fergus's face, creviced and ruinous, eyes that have taken on the sea and a jutting cliff of a chin. I sleep on the icy palette in the tiny bedroom and Fergus sleeps on his couch in the living room. The cushions are feather down, he doesn't complain. Most nights he's up anyway with the muse. I hear him at his Steinway, picking things out, muttering and humming, shuffling back and forth to his desk, which is where I most often find him asleep in the mornings, his rag-and-bone body bent over his pages. I prise them from under him and, wrapping them safe inside my coat, bring them down here to the bothy on the beach, down where the pink stones chock like babbling babies in the shore break.

The beach bothy is another salvaged ruin like Fergus's; this was a crofter's village once – people shared these tiny dwellings with their cattle and the generations of their kin. Now some community-minded person has fitted the bothy out with sealed windows and a table and a bench and a scruffy leather chair by the fireplace. Nobody else comes because it's winter, so I can work here undisturbed while Fergus sleeps. I've cleaned away bottles, a couple of used condoms, butts, a makeshift bong and some screwed up scraps of terrible poetry, relics from summer parties. I've got a store of peat and broken up boxes for the fire and a blanket I wrap myself in and fingerless gloves to stop my hands from freezing while I work. I copy Fergus's pages note for note, all his

little mice-turd trails. I follow them up and down the many staves, straightening and aligning, making them beautiful, applying myself to the task like the earnest schoolgirl I never was. Fergus has offered to pay me for this work but I won't let him. Stupid, I need the money. But I'm indebted enough to him, and anyway it gives me something to do when I'm not pinning my own mess to the page in these random spurts and scattergun sputterings, memories crude as butterflies pinned under glass, but what else do I have? What else do we ever have?

Fergus is writing a fugue, ancient form buried under the contemporary fragmentation, voices shifting in mirrors, in truncated flights and sudden fusions. He is a Catholic, Fergus, don't ask me why. For the beauty, he tells me. Mystery is a fundamental human need, according to Fergus. To his credit he doesn't talk about God and he doesn't pretend to have answers, just that he straddles this space between earth and the numinous, insisting on the possibility of an underlying, unfathomable order. It's there in his music, which is esteemed enough that he is Sir Fergus Cunningham to the world, compelled from time to time to don a suit and attend his own premieres or go to tea parties with the Queen, when really all he wants is to be here, perched watchfully over the Atlantic, listening. 'Taking dictation,' he said to me once. 'And if you believe it is that simple,' he added, 'you've not a feckin' clue.'

Well, I know it's not that simple from working with him on *Limina*. That performance seems a lifetime ago rather than a few short months, but I have been very busy since, fucking my life over with consummate and indiscriminate abandon, it's not surprising that the time has simply flown by. I'd not given a single thought to Fergus until I looked out from the stage in Edinburgh the other night and saw him, beaming in that way he does. I suppose what he was seeing was the silly, flippant girl he's always professed to adore and not the wreckage I've since become.

So perhaps I came here seeking lost innocence, I have no idea. Perhaps I just wanted to be smiled at for a change. I should be in London. I should be in Australia, more to the point. Instead this polar extreme, this island of untrammelled expanses and black hills and water that runs in great rivulets to the sea. One is absorbed into the earth and water of this place, diminished and overwhelmed by it, and this is good. I was right to come. I stood on Fergus's doorstep and he said, *Eva Byrne, or is it an apparition before me?* And he took me in without questions, gave me tea with a generous drop of whisky, made up the bed with clean, rough cotton sheets. He thinks, I suppose, that I am overworked, or maybe that I've suffered some heartbreak of the ordinary, lovelorn variety. But the truth is I'm tired, I'm just so tired, and he treats me, as he has always treated me, with utter deference and kindness, offering tinned soup and soft-boiled eggs, and in the evenings, poetry and whisky and Bach, expounding quietly on the virtues of particular, sublime passages, pulling out a score occasionally to marvel at the perfection of symmetry in those quintessential fugues, the utter lucidity of the old master's workings. The finger pointing to God, he does not say, sensing I'm not up for an argument. Proportion is as evident in nature as chaos, I might once have thrown back at him, but I suppose I'm as likely as anyone to hunt for something in that vacancy, even if only to shift the blame.

Images well up in my mind with savage floridity. You, Mama, in your moonlit garden at Aurora, in your home-spun vegetable dyed clothes and Birkenstocks, throwing your magic potions over the rows and rows of vegetables. Or in your falling down stone house with its tutti-frutti walls and the saris draped over the salt damp, baking and knitting and praying, actually applying yourself to these tasks as if they were legitimate tools for twenty-first century living. Sometimes I wonder if the darkness that seeps out of me is partly yours, all the stuff you would never own. But there is no absolution in that thought either, no absolution at all.



Fergus was in the kitchen this morning, fresh from his bath, his hair hanging in damp metallic coils. I don't know whether his routines are generally this clockwork or whether he's doing it for me, but he always seems to be making the tea as I pull his borrowed wellies off at the door and retrieve his pages from where I've tucked them inside my coat, to protect them against any sudden weather, that blackness roiling across the hills like sudden anger looking for a place to vent.

I walked in the door this morning, and the breakfast stuff was already on the table, along with the oranges he bought in Stromness yesterday because I'd reproached him for his appalling diet. I played my part in the whole ritual, I held his pages up and said 'Fergus, I think your fugue's disintegrating.'

He said, 'I wouldn't call it a fugue, Eva, unless you're being very loose with your Italian.'

'Which of my Italians are you referring to, Fergus?'

'"Fuga", Eva,' he said, 'meaning "flight", do they not teach you anything in these musical institutions.'

'You could call it *Flight*,' I said.

'I could call it *Anarchy*,' he said. He was at the fridge getting the milk out.

'Not a very public-grabbing title,' I said.

'I don't write for my public,' he said.

'No, that's right,' I said, 'it's all for the glory of God, isn't it?'

He slammed the fridge, which is old and no longer seals properly. Several digits clattered over on the digital clock that sits on top of it. 'Eva, Eva, Eva,' he said, 'you assume my motivations are far loftier than they actually are – God has nothing to do with it, believe me, I write music entirely for my own amusement.'

Or some such thing. Silly banter. I said, 'You're full of bullshit, old man,' and went to take his pages through to his desk in the living room. When I turned around again he was hovering in the doorway still holding the milk.

'Your father rang,' he said, 'he's back in London.'

'Oh, good,' I said, as if I might have actually been expecting his call.

'He's been trying your mobile,' Fergus said.

'I forgot my charger,' I said. I pulled the file marked E.B. – my initials – across Fergus's desk and flicked through it as if it held some interest for me. Letters, scribbled notes, printouts of my blogs, programs, reviews, silly birthday cards, all there, along with fucking Gordon Fenton that I pulled out the other day. 'Why do you keep all this stuff, Fergus?' I asked him, but of course I was really just avoiding the point. Fergus didn't reply in any case, just stayed where he was in the doorway with the milk until I turned and leaned on the desk and said, as casually as I could, 'So, what did my father have to say for himself?'

'Very little,' Fergus said.

'He's hopeless on the phone,' I said, realising that for once this might work to my advantage.

'He said he'd meant to get to Edinburgh but something happened in Toronto, incompetent sound engineers, a recalcitrant pianist...'

'I hope he wasn't rude to you,' I said, 'he can be really rude on the phone.'

Fergus did a great imitation of my father's gentrified English, said, '*What on earth is the attraction in Orkney?*' Which made us both laugh, and then he said, 'I think he just wanted to know how the Berg went.'

'And what did you tell him?' I said.

'I told him it was magnificent,' Fergus said.

'As if he won't read the reviews, Fergus.'

‘Come and have breakfast,’ Fergus said, ‘Come.’

The first time I saw Fergus he was contorting himself in front a children’s chorus in St Magnus Cathedral, wringing a sound as pure as bells from them. This was a few years ago at a St Magnus Festival, my first trip to Orkney. I’d come to perform the Bach Double with my father, fresh off the plane from Vienna. Fergus showed me a review the other day he had stashed away in that file of his: *Timothy and Eva Byrne Double Bach’s Beauty*, with a photo of us, both grinning, identically stooped over our violins. We’ve just swooped in on that vigorously synchronous passage in the third movement, easy to tell from the way my hair’s flying out like a shampoo commercial. The inevitable salt and pepper strand falls across my father’s eye. He is famous for it, that black frizzle, that obscured eye. It decorates CD covers, the glossy pages of highbrow music magazines. Women who ought to know better swoon, he looks so foppish and lovable.

In truth, he’s a selfish prick, but that St Magnus Festival he was uncharacteristically playful. Fergus brought out the best in him, as Fergus is apt to do. These were days of sun and music. We ate and drank and cavorted among ancient ruins. On the last day Fergus and I got pissed on a day excursion to one of the outer islands and spent the night wandering the streets and back alleys of Stromness, in amongst the grey stone houses along the pier, singing arias and exploring the fascinating polarities in our life views, while my father went off to have sex with the flautist from a visiting Netherlands ensemble. Even back then it was no news to me that my father will fuck anything at the slightest provocation.

And of course, the conversation continued over breakfast.

Fergus said, pouring the tea, ‘He’s worried about the Guarneri...’

‘That’s all he was really ringing about...’



‘I gather he might have appreciated a phone call to let him know you were taking it...’

‘And I might have appreciated a call from him in the last six weeks...’

‘He’s not very happy about you bringing it up here...’

‘Would he prefer me to have left it in a locker at Waverley Station?’

‘I think he’d prefer you came home...’

‘Oh really?’ I laughed at that. Waited for more revelations. None forthcoming, so I said, ‘Anything else?’ I’d been buttering my toast but I put my knife down because I was nervous suddenly. Fergus was focussing on buttering his toast too but his mind was on other things, I could tell, his knee was jiggling under the table so that it banged now and again against the underside of the laminate top. And then he shook his head suddenly, and let out some sort of muffled laugh and I knew what was troubling him then.

‘My father thinks we’re sleeping together,’ I said.

‘He gave me that impression, yes,’ Fergus said, eyes still on his toast.

I picked my knife up and cut my toast. ‘Don’t worry about it, Fergus,’ I said, ‘that’s just the way my father’s mind works. Man plus woman is a simple, genital equation for him.’ I bit into my toast. Chewed for a moment before I added, ‘Celibacy’s not a concept he’s capable of apprehending.’

‘It’s not a matter of celibacy surely,’ Fergus said, ‘so much as propriety. Which is why I’ve never invited you here before. Why we’ve always worked at Jeannie’s or in London...’

‘So you’re uncomfortable with me being here...’

‘I’m not uncomfortable at all, other than for the man’s misguided assumptions...’

‘Then forget about him...I thought you didn’t care about your public...’

‘This isn’t the public, Eva, this is your father...’

‘Oh, my father,’ I said, ‘let me tell you about my father, Fergus. He’s a brilliant violinist. End of story. Very limited interest in other human beings, even those he claims as his near and dear. The idea of me shacking up with a famous composer, a knight of the order, may momentarily pique his interest but it won’t concern him on any personal level. Believe me. He’s clinically non-empathic. Diagnosable...’

A moment’s pause after this diatribe and then Fergus said, ‘What happened, Eva? You used to adore him.’

‘Oh, I did,’ I said and then I ran out of words. Found myself suddenly in tears. As if I’ve been hurtling along at a sprint and suddenly smacked into a tree. All this froth and clever, biting cynicism, Eva. What would it be like to stop being this person who creates and destroys herself with these words, words, words? I sat snivelling, wiping at my nose with the sleeve of my jumper.

And Fergus, obviously feeling the pressure, finally said, ‘I wonder whether you mightn’t be better off at Jeannie’s.’

‘Jeannie’s?’ I laughed, shocked by this sudden turn in the conversation. I said, ‘Folk music and Ruby’s noisy bairns, Fergus.’

And he shook his head. Said, ‘Love and attention...’

He saw Jeannie in Stromness yesterday. He brought back socks from her knitting shop, purple for me, army green for himself. I picked him up from the ferry and he cracked open a packet of oatcakes and regaled me with stories about Ruby’s babies as I drove him home. So maybe Jeannie had made the suggestion, I don’t know, maybe he wants me gone but I couldn’t even begin to contemplate that. I picked up my toast and finished it in two determined mouthfuls. Gulped some tea. Then because I couldn’t bring myself to look at him I took another piece and began to spread it. More tears spilled and I swiped at them again with my sleeve and went back to buttering and then I

thought, Fuck it, go for the full frontal deflection. So I said, 'I think the fact that you haven't had sex for several decades probably qualifies you as celibate, Fergus.'

And Fergus stared at me with studied incomprehension. He always falls for this stuff. I wagged my knife at him and said, 'you told me that yourself...'

'Did I indeed,' he said, 'and was I drunk at the time?'

'Probably,' I said, slicing my toast. 'You told me you were an ugly, sickly youth and you'd never really hit your sexual stride...'

'Well,' he said.

But then we both seemed to lose our enthusiasm for the subject. Fergus picked up his own toast and took a bite.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'What for?' he said.

'General running off at the mouth,' I said. 'I ought to learn to shut up.'

He put his toast down. 'Darling girl,' he said, 'I don't think you could have said less to me in the last few days than you have.'

And then I was crying in earnest. And Fergus was looking at me with wide-eyed sort of panic, because I'm not usually a crying sort of girl. And so I got up from the table and said, 'I'm going to lie down, I'm tired, I slept badly last night. Give me a couple of hours,' I said, 'and I'll be fine.'

When he stuck his head round the bedroom door sometime later I pretended to be asleep. I heard him go out of the back door then and knowing that he was off to the ferry for his mail I got up. Went to the living room and rang my father, who predictably started the conversation with, 'You've got the Gaurneri up there.'

'No, I left it in a locker at Waverley Station.'

'Don't be childish...'

‘It’s safe and sound,’ I said, ‘I haven’t strung it up outside...’

‘You might have let me know. I came home to find it not in the safe...’

‘You gave it to me, Tim, I thought it was mine...’

‘You never use it, Eva, you’re so attached to that old damn thing of Maggie’s.

You didn’t even use it for the recording...’

‘And you told me I was a mad fool.’

‘And when did you ever listen to my advice?’

‘This time, apparently...’

‘And I was right, wasn’t I? Fergus Cunningham tells me your performance was magnificent...’

‘Oh, it was,’ I said, ‘it was magnificent.’

‘Well what’s this other business I’m reading about in the reviews then?’

‘I really don’t want to talk about this right now. I want to know how you found out I was here.’

‘I talked to Stephen Elliot, it’s no secret, Eva...’

‘Fine,’ I said, ‘Fine. But I need to know what you said to Fergus.’

‘About what?’

‘About Mama.’

I gathered from the following pause that it had never occurred to him to talk to Fergus about my mother. And then I wished I hadn’t rung him at all.

‘You need to sort this out, Eva,’ he said.

‘Sort it out?’ I laughed.

‘Stop hiding away up there. Get back here and take control of things. Don’t think I haven’t checked your website. You’re cancelling things left, right and centre...’

‘I need a break.’

‘Not the right time,’ he said. ‘You’re just starting to capitalise on all your hard work. You know I thought the Berg recording was a mad idea but it’s been so well reviewed it just might pay off for you. So don’t lose your focus. Don’t let this business...’

‘This business...’

‘You know what I’m talking about.’

Oh yes, I do.

A pause before he said, ‘Mrs Kentish told me the police were down at your flat.’

Old busy-body, I think. Perched up there on the third floor.

‘You know I pay her to keep an eye on things when I’m gone.’

‘I’m not a thing.’

‘What did the police want?’

‘Nothing much. Just your run-of-the-mill drug bust.’

‘Eva.’

‘They didn’t find the bodies I’d buried under the floorboards, though, so you can rest easy, there shouldn’t be too much public scandal. No front page story, at least.’

Silence for a moment before he said, ‘Are you going to tell me what really happened?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it’s none of your business.’

‘It’s my house.’

‘My flat. I’m an adult, Father, you don’t need to know my business.’

‘I do if it affects me.’

‘It doesn’t.’

He sighed, a loud, annoyed kind of sigh. ‘Well then,’ he said, ‘I suppose that’s the end of the conversation, at least for now. But I’m serious, Eva, you need to get back here and get on with it. Go and see a counsellor or a psychiatrist or whatever if you

need to, I'll pay for it. But in my experience nothing is more helpful than passion for one's vocation. And I think you know that as well as I do.'

'Because I'm so much like you, you mean?'

'That's right,' he said.

'Lucky me,' I said.

He waited a moment before he said, 'You chose, remember that.'

And I waited an even longer moment before I said, 'You fucking asshole, do you think I need to be reminded?' And then I slammed down the phone. Which at least guarantees that he won't ring again, not for a while. He's terrified of anger.

I head off down the road to the ferry after that. I don't think I'm actually going to the ferry, perhaps just trying to trigger the memory of it, to aid the general salvaging of this thing, my *self*, which I suppose is the point of this writing, this rehashing of events. I write in the immediate, you see, as if it were actually happening, as if this was the exhaustive and true account of the thing which has actually gone, flaked into the ether, before I can begin to grasp it. Like you, Mama, yes, like you.

So it goes without saying that as I'm walking the road to the ferry, because I'm agitated – because of my father's phone call, and Fergus's earlier pronouncement that I might be better off somewhere else, several bars of the Berg Concerto – a frenzied, hacking arrhythmia – are playing and replaying on a loop in my mind, *molto ritmico*. After all these gut-slogging years the Berg is not so much a memory of mind as a sinuous, internal choreography marked in breaths and silences and beating blood. I want to be emptied. Vacuumed. Dissolved down into this drowning place. Black hills rise on either side of the narrow road. Streams of water run down their worn ridges. The hills appear because of the mist to be breathing; the animal breathing of the place is suddenly piercingly audible to me and for an instant the Berg is obliterated. I stop. Out of

nowhere black cloud gathers and inks out much of the light, spitting stones of hail as small and hard as teeth. Crows in great numbers seem suddenly to be birthed from this blackness, soaring, banking, plummeting through the veils, a murder of screeching on the wind. I pull the hood up on my raincoat and push on, my hands shoved deep into dampening pockets, rain streaming down over the lip of the hood, so that I can lick the runnels that run down from my forehead.

I neither hear nor see Fergus's old Peugeot pattering along in the opposite direction until it is just in front of me. He pulls over on the verge across the narrow road. I stand and watch him gesturing at me through his window. He winds it down. Says, 'Eva, Eva.' He opens the door and gets out and runs across to me. 'Come,' he says, 'Eva, come,' and we go back to the car and he opens the passenger door and closes it once I'm in. Then he runs around to get in his own side. The engine is still running. The windscreen wipers grind uselessly. 'You're freezing,' he says, manoeuvring himself out of his coat and reaching to put it around my shoulders, 'what were you thinking, bringing yourself out in this with not so much as a coat?'

But I wasn't thinking. I put it down on the page here, tripping along in the immediate, and it develops an intention, a life of its own. But the fact is, I don't remember getting to the road this morning. The larger fact is, I don't remember getting to this island in the first place. My wallet is stuffed with credit card receipts for trains and ferries and backpackers', marking the trail and an apparent intention, but the actual events are only now returning to me in vague, fragmented images. Waverley Station, the London sleeper pulling away. Standing outside Sandy Bell's pub (what did I think that would achieve, I wonder?). Thurso, grim and thick with rain. A taxi at some point, the driver with most of his teeth missing. Some fields that seemed lit, as if the sun was pushing up from underneath them. A grimy waiting room. A toilet full of shit and paper.

I can't tell Fergus. I don't want him to think he's dealing with an insane person. And I don't think I am insane. The same thing happened in Adelaide and I came out of it intact and I've spent months since without it happening again. Mind you, when it happened in Adelaide I could blame the valium Fizz was doling out like tic-tacs. This time I've only got myself to blame. And the Berg. The Berg, the Berg, the Berg. That was the real insanity. I should never have gone through with that performance. But as the culmination of years of my life's work, as the one remaining fixed point in that obliterated life, it never occurred to me not to.



So, start with the Berg, Eva, why not? This is not going to go onto the page in smooth chronologies, long causal chains pointing to preventable inevitabilities. The mind doesn't operate like that, the mind and the body are slaves to the random whimsies of memory.

Vienna then, start there. The room in my memory, which smells of cigarettes and dark wood. Of hard-spined, cloth-backed books and toppling stacks of music manuscripts. Of dust, accumulated like a product of knowledge, the very detritus of masticating brains. The light is tree filtered – all my memories of Vienna contain trees – the light falls across the room, the books, the toppling stacks of manuscripts, the emerald jade ashtray on the desk where Behrendt sits with his eternal cigarette, in the heaviness of his clothing, and says, 'Why the Berg, Eva?'

I try to tell him that I've come to Vienna to find the capacity within myself to play it. Of course I sound trivial. I am trivial. I'm twenty-one, fresh from undergraduate studies at the Royal Academy in London, that Babel tower of multilingualism and musical cacophony with its pompous statues and peeling wallpaper and brilliance



spilling out from the lines of closed doors. I've come to Vienna on scholarship to study with Behrendt, intensely preoccupied with what I have to prove, obsessed with the notion of developing an original and savvy musical persona, so I do a bit of a rave about my growing predilection for early twentieth century music, how I'm drawn to its dissension and inventiveness, but I struggle to articulate the Berg fixation, floundering between intellectual wankery and rhapsodic fervour, petering into silence. Behrendt bares his yellow canines ambiguously, out of sympathy or contempt, and plunges his cigarette into the ashtray.

I have a black and white postcard of a young Wilde-styled Berg on the window ledge in my tiny Viennese bedsit where I must practise with the mute on, standing ramrod straight between the bed and the monstrous mahogany armoire. My music, for lack of room, sits on the window ledge beside the postcard; Berg stares out at me with his heavy-lidded gaze and his pretty mouth and his peaked ears, behind which he has tucked his youthful flop of black hair.

I found this postcard in a stall of kitsch at Covent Garden some months before, on a glorious summer day that seemed to open the world up on its hinges. That same day I happened upon a troupe performing a bizarre rendition of *Ride of the Valkyries* in the courtyard downstairs, and that was to change my life too, but Berg is the point of this story. Serendipitous the finding of that postcard because hadn't we just been talking about Berg in our twentieth century music classes and hadn't I felt a frisson even then? After that day at Covent Garden I went to the library at the RAM and sat on the musty carpet between the narrow metal shelves and read every text on Alban Berg, man and music. I was a secret forager of synchronicities and hidden meanings back then, I fell into Berg's esoteric world like a witless Alice into Wonderland. And then I fell into his music.

Of course I'd heard the Violin Concerto – couldn't get this far in my studies without – but I'd had no context for it. At home I scoured the thousands of CDs that line my father's living room walls like tiny streets in a rigour of metropolis. My father with his freakish memory can put his hand to any CD without hesitation but it took me hours to work out his idiosyncratic system. Finally I found Berg, up there with his mates Schoenberg and Webern, under 'E' – for Expressionism, possibly, or Early Twentieth Century, I don't know – it was very high up, I was teetering on the top rung of the hardware ladder my father keeps in the living room for this purpose, I didn't hang around to figure out the logic.

There were several recordings up there, including a remaster of the original by Louis Krasner, who had commissioned the work in the early 1930s. I lay on the carpet between my father's superlative speakers and let the thing enter me, bar by bar, the whole unfolding tragedy.

Months later, in Vienna, Behrendt surveys me across his desk, those ambiguous canines bared. 'It is ominous, is it not,' he says, 'to write a requiem and then die. As if by inhabiting the territory of death one invites it in.'

I tramp Vienna in search of Berg, through cafes and concert halls and galleries where I buy more postcards to line my window ledge: Klimt's *Kiss*, Munch's *Scream*, an Oskar Kokoshka sketch of his lover, Alma Mahler, widow of the more famous Gustav. I catch the tram to Heitzing to walk past the Bergs' apartment at Trauttmansdorffgasse 47, to imagine the stylish Alban and Helene donning their furs and hats to walk down here along the streets lined with plane trees.

I know plane trees – they line the main street of the Adelaide Hills town where I grew up, gasping through the long droughts of summer like the bereft nineteenth century German immigrants who had planted them. Here in Vienna, however, they are splendidly at home. I am the immigrant now. My German is infantile; my English, so

defiantly Australian, bounces like badly aimed ping-pong balls off the surfaces of those people I meet. I huddle in bars some nights with other English-speaking students, releasing language like desperately held piss, but mostly I am alone, and if I'm not practising, I walk the streets, feet tromping a rhythm, *I'm so lonely, I'm so lonely...*

Five years earlier I'd been cast adrift in London in a grey pleat public school tunic and a straw boater, shocked by the short, grim days and the dead-starers on the morning hearse of the Tube, the scars on my body so new that they re-opened from time to time, oozing crimson pointillism across the pale blue cotton of my school shirt.

Now I do in Vienna what I'd done in those early days in London. I work, calluses forming over calluses on the tips of my fingers, shoulders at the end of some days rigid and frozen with pain. I am learning the Guarneri too, my father has just given it to me for my twenty-first birthday. As his first, prized instrument, loaned and then eventually willed to him by a generous Australian patron, he has great expectations for what I will achieve with it. But I am in mourning for the Maggie, my Nanna Maggie's heirloom violin. Maggie entrusted it to me when I came to London, as if entrusting me with part of herself, and now I feel its absence like a loss of my own self. But how can I cast aspersions on an instrument as magnificent as the Guarneri? It must be my fault, I tell myself, and I work harder.

When I talk to you, Mama, I tell you Vienna is great and I'm besotted with a dead man by the name of Alban Berg. 'Dead men are safe,' I say, and you laugh, and I miss you suddenly, wanting to cling to this unprecedented, fleeting camaraderie. But other times I feel the more familiar irritation and rage and I blame you, oh yes I do, and there are weeks of clamped silence. But then you ring. You want me home for Christmas. I have to remind you that Christmas vacation in Europe is barely a pause, I've got too much to do, the Fisher Prize, George Behrendt breathing down my neck... 'Wait till July,' I say, but you're adamant, you even offer to pay. I feel like

saying, ‘if you’ve got the money, come here, get over yourself and fly, Mama, go on – free me from this legacy of fear and infantilism, why don’t you?’ But I don’t say this of course, for fear of severing the tentative threads we’ve spun so cautiously between our worlds these past five years. ‘We’ll see, Mama,’ I say and leave it at that.

One weekend I catch a train to Berlin to see a performance of Berg’s *Lulu*. I hate her. On the cover of the program she’s dressed as Pierrot, coquettish, dangling from the moon. Over the course of the opera she is fucked, fucked over, fucked up, she just lies there with her legs open and her eyes shut while all these men pump their longing and clamouring into her. She is brutal in her passivity and impervious to the brutalisation of others. Nothing touches her. Nothing moves her. When Jack the Ripper finally plunges his knife into her depths it comes as a relief.

I keep the program on my window ledge to remind me when I practise: open a vein, bleed, die. I am not afraid to inhabit death, much as Behrendt taunts me. I suck it from beautiful Viennese cemeteries, roaming among their marble and stone, their angels and gargoyles, their magnificent horrors.

‘Why the Berg?’ Behrendt asks me, persisting. He thinks I’m too young at twenty- one, that I operate in the realms of surfaces and frippery. I would like to tear my shirt open and show him that already I have played Jack the Ripper to my own Lulu, I have cut her down, sliced her, mutilated and bled her.

Instead I lift my violin and begin to play.



Late in the afternoon Fergus pokes his head in the bedroom door and I’m lying on the bed reading Sir Walter Scott.

‘This is rubbish,’ I say.

‘I could find you something else,’ he says.

‘Homer, you mean? Or Dante? Don’t you have anything slightly less daunting?’

He rubs the back of his neck and smiles. ‘You could go to Jeannie’s and borrow something,’ he says.

So then I have to broach the subject, obviously. I say, all casual-like, ‘Fergus, Fergus, out with it now, would you prefer me to go to Jeannie’s?’

He comes and sits on the edge of the bed. I stare at his hands, which are really beautiful – I’ve often thought so. He has them resting in his lap, clasped, so that it is the thumbs that I see, shapely, almost feminine thumbs, with nails that are surprisingly neat considering his general shabbiness. But then, I suppose his hands are his tools. He wears a wristwatch with a fine old brown leather band, I see it poking out from under the unravelling sleeve of his jumper. In an entirely unconscious way, he is really quite cool. And I’m thinking all of this while I stare at him with a totally laid-back kind of smile, as if he can move me on anytime he wants to, like one of your hippie friends, Mama, moving their swag on from our back deck to someplace else, totally open to whatever might come next.

But I’m not totally open, my heart is thumping, my brain seems to have loosed its moorings to bang about inside my head, and still I smile at him, picking at a stray bit of cotton on the hem of my pyjama bottoms, pulling Jeannie’s purple socks up over the top of them, as if I’m worrying about the draft running up my legs when all I’m really thinking about is whether any moment soon I’m going to be packing my bag and leaving. Not that there’s anything to pack. I’m mostly wearing Fergus’s clothes, having come here with an overnight bag, pyjamas and one change of knickers, the spare pair currently hanging drying at the bottom end of the bed.

‘You’ve always stayed with Jeannie,’ he says, ‘you like it there.’

I'm still smiling. I've got my chin resting on my knee like I'm a dippy teenager just waiting for the moment to paint my toenails. 'So you do want me to go,' I say.

Fergus looks at me with his blue eyes, which seem even more emphatically blue because of the wrinkles webbing out from their corners and the tufty silver eyebrows overhanging them. He says, 'Eva, I don't want you to go. I want you to be happy.'

'Happy?' I say. 'What does that mean, Fergus? Are you happy?'

He smiles at that. And I shuffle my chin on my pyjama-clad knee and say, 'Of course I'm happy,' and I smile at him again just to prove it. 'But if I'm an imposition,' I say, looking away from him to pick at something invisible sprouting from Jeannie's sock, 'I'll be on the next ferry.'

He shakes his head. 'You're not an imposition,' he says, his hand going to the back of his neck again, rubbing away, rubbing some more. 'In fact,' he says, 'your timing was quite astonishing.'

'What did I rescue you from,' I say.

He glances up at me and then away. 'Myself,' he says. 'But in any case if any one's being imposed upon it's you, slaving over my manuscript for no pay.'

'Hardly slaving,' I say, 'I love it.' And then I say, because I have to push through on these questions, 'What about the propriety thing? Is Jeannie giving you a hard time, is that why you brought it up?'

'No, of course not.'

'So you're not worried about what Jeannie thinks.'

'No.'

'And does it bother you what other people around here might think?'

He shakes his head, 'No.'

‘So what’s the problem, then?’ And because he seems to be grappling to articulate an answer, I say, ‘We could just have sex, you know, and then they can all say whatever the hell they like...’

‘Eva,’ Fergus says, staring at the floor.

‘Just being silly,’ I say. I lean back on my pillow now, reassured. I poke my purple-socked toe at his arm. ‘I’m as asexual as you are, Fergus, remember? It’s one of the reasons we get on so well.’

‘Is that right,’ says Fergus.

‘Though normally, as you know, my preference is for dead composers.’

‘And I’m close enough to that ideal, am I.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Eva,’ he says again. He’s staring at the floor at his feet.

‘I can stay then,’ I say, ‘just for a few days. I’m not a bother to you?’

He shakes his head, keeps his eyes on the floor. ‘You’re not,’ he says.

I lean forward again to say, ‘You haven’t got a secret stash of grubby crime fiction somewhere, have you?’



My grandmother Maggie was Irish, my grandfather was a Yorkshire lad and they met at university in Durham and came out to live in Australia when my father was small. My grandfather was the professor of music history at the Conservatorium in Adelaide. He still rides his bike in there most days; they’ve had to make him a research fellow to accommodate him. My grandmother was the talented one but she ended up having lots of babies and becoming that sort of chaotic, perpetually running type of person, her red hair always flying out of her bun, her eyes always scanning for the errant members of

her totally undisciplined thoroughly loved brood. Or so I imagine, because that's the way she was when she was my adored Nanny Maggie, right until the day she stopped suddenly in her tracks and died on the footpath on the way to taking soup across the street to some new neighbours.

In the house next door lived a mother that nobody ever saw and a little girl the same age as my Aunt Fizz, who had hair so white that it glowed, and who used to spend the majority of her time hidden in the hibiscus bush watching my father's younger siblings at play in their back yard. And one day my Aunt Fizz got sick of it, so she scaled the wire mesh fence between their yards and stood glowering down at the little white-haired girl whom in any case she knew because they were in the same class at school. And she said, 'Why do you spend your whole time in that bush watching us? It's creepy. You're creepy. Everybody at school thinks so. We think so too. So stop watching us. Understand?'

She stood looking at the little girl until the little girl realised she had to say something, and so she said, 'Jesus loves you, Fiona Byrne,' because that is what the Lord would have wanted her to say.

Fizz Byrne shook her head and said, 'You are really, really weird, Grace Albright,' and hopped back over the fence and that might have been the end of it, had the little girl not been found one afternoon soon after spinning and spinning like a fairy on crack in the Byrnes' backyard.

Maggie picked her up and hopped back over the fence with her and went into the horrible dark house-next-door and found the mother in a pool of pill-strewn vomit, and so she rushed little Grace back over the fence and took her inside and plonked her onto the big green couch beside the three younger Byrne children, Fizz, Andy and Dave, who were all watching *The Brady Bunch*. She said to the older two, who were at the table doing their homework, 'Look after her,' and ran off back next door.



‘Oh, as if Tim is ever going to look after anyone,’ Frances said, and then noticing that little Grace was balling her eyes out there on the couch, she got up from her homework and squeezed Andy off the couch and sat patting at her, saying, ‘Aren’t you just the prettiest little thing, you’ve got hair just like Cindy Brady’s, isn’t she just like Cindy Brady, Fizz?’

To which Fizz said, ‘I hate her, everybody at school hates her.’

Then Tim got up from the table and, switching the television off on the way past, went down the passage and came back out playing his violin. Of course, the television was back on again by the time he re-emerged, so he stood in front of it, playing really loudly while all of his siblings yelled at him and Fizz got up and started pushing him away, saying, ‘You stupid cow, I hate your stupid violin,’ and Andy got up and turned the television up, and Tim kept on playing, louder and louder and everybody yelled at him except for little Grace and the baby Byrne, Dave, built like a wombat. He got up and made his way across the room to a large trunk, which he rummaged through, emerging with a more-or-less intact game of Chinese Chequers, which he balanced very carefully on both of his chubby hands as he made his way back across the room to the couch.

‘Would you like to play Chinese Chequers,’ he said to little Grace, but at that moment Fizz stepped backwards and the game went flying, little lollies of colour spraying out across the floor. At which point the front door opened and a bicycle was shoved through into the passage. Hugh Byrne with his trousers rolled up around his hairy calves stepped in and said, ‘What’s all this? Where’s Maggie?’ Then the sound of an ambulance siren, growing louder.

Little Grace’s father was off in America learning the art of evangelism. Little Grace stayed with the Byrnes until he could get back. He stood in their lounge room wearing a paisley shirt and a necklace with the word Jesus spelled out in gold letters.

He'd brought a polaroid camera, all the way from America! There's a photo to prove it, although the image of that white-haired fairy has long since faded to little more than a smudge of light and that father not too long after went off back to America and was never seen again. The only trace of himself he left behind was the shadow of his fingers across the top of that Polaroid photo, circa 1969. And that's about all I know. Put the pen down now, Eva.



Late. I wandered out to the living room. Fergus was at his desk. The only light on in the room was his lamp, reflecting on his glasses like he was wearing two miniature slightly waning moons. 'Hello,' he said, 'are you not asleep yet?'

'Not tired,' I said, which wasn't true but was close enough to true. I leant on the desk to see what he was doing. A whole string of notes fell out from his under his pen as I watched, tiny charcoal pearls and he flicked a stem at each of them and crossed them all at the bottom with two deft slashes.

'Just how many notes do you think you can fit under the fingers of one mortal string quartet,' I asked him, watching him start another semiquaver run and then another, straight down the line from the first violin to the cello, each voice mirroring the one before.

'Like a Mexican wave,' I said. He didn't say anything, he stayed focused. He was working from a diagram, bar numbers sketched out on a grid; he might have been drafting the plans for an aircraft hangar for all I could make out.

'You didn't do this for *Limina*,' I said.

'*Limina* was different,' he said.

'Different how?' I said.

*'Limina* fell from the sky,' he said, without looking up.

'Oh,' I said, 'divine intervention, you mean?' He kept on with the semiquavers.

'I don't believe you,' I said. 'You always try to pretend that it's easier than it actually is.' I leaned in then and whispered, 'Am I disturbing you?'

He shook his head, but he put a finger to his lips to suggest ever so gently that I be quiet now. So I moved away from the desk and drifted towards the photos on the stone ledge above the fireplace. I like looking at these photos. He hasn't changed them in a very long time. There's a black and white one of a crane lowering the Steinway through the roof of his croft in pouring rain. Another of Jeannie and Roger and their kids lined up along the wall outside, Ruby the babe in arms, and now she has babes of her own. She's only twenty-odd, there's no boyfriend, I'd have had an abortion, I know I would. Not that I have to worry about things like that, no I don't, lucky girl, me, oh yes. And then there's the photo of Stella, Fergus's mother, young and pretty, holding her full skirt out for the camera. She died in a gutter outside an Edinburgh pub when Fergus was seventeen. Of all that Fergus must have told me over the years, this is the line of biography I reduce her to.

I took the photo of Stella and went back to sit on his desk and waited until he finally put his pencil down. Then I handed him the photo. I said, 'She's beautiful, Fergus,' and he nodded, his chin set in a way that allowed me to imagine the small boy's fierce devotion to her. He reached down from his chair and pulled a shoebox of photos from the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet. Shuffled through and handed me more images – Stella clutching a swaddled baby Fergus, Stella doing a cartwheel in unseemly jodhpurs. Fergus knows nothing about his father other than that he was conceived while his mother was on a possibly bipolar rampage across western Scotland, similar to the one she was on when she died.

He grew up with Jeannie's family in Stromness. Like me, he rarely talks about his mother but last night he told me about Stella, the adored, the absent, the fighter, the bewitcher. Stella who, when she was around, made demands for pianos and decent music teachers and mailed Fergus's early compositions off to competitions and publishers and even gave up the occasional drinking binge to buy him records and sheet music. And when she died, he hit the gutter himself. Hard. Jeannie's parents eventually booted him out. He did a stint in an asylum.

'And then you started writing music in earnest,' I said.

'Oh yes,' he said, 'it was that simple.'

I made us hot chocolate then. We didn't listen to any music. We talked. He told me about the years he spent in Glasgow, post-asylum, the only time he's ever lived away from Orkney, a period of bleakness and melancholy that did nothing but stultify the creative urge in him. On the strength of a dream he packed his bags before the end of his degree and returned to Orkney. This was the dream: he was in a garden. Next to him lay a pile of babies, naked and newborn, squalling and kicking, very much alive. One by one, he picked them up and buried them under mounds of dirt in a purpose built plot. He was not up to the task, he sweated and cried and however he tried to cover the bodies, small limbs poked and flailed from under the dirt. Once he raised his shovel to hammer at a tiny clenched fist, to still it once and for all, but he couldn't do it. He fell to the ground and found himself face to face with the next baby he was to bury. The baby spoke to him. 'You are only destroying yourself,' it said.

Late in the night we took a torch and walked up the hill behind the croft, and the wind was still for once, and the moon beamed out so far that it was possible to imagine it bathing an entire hemisphere, while the sun simultaneously beat out over Australia, over the baking tin roof of Aurora, under which the possums have no doubt wreaked their havoc, dribbling their excrement down the tutti-frutti walls. I felt the terrible,

thrilling, ecstatic pumping of my own lifeblood, gorging itself on moon-shiny air, and I turned to Fergus and said, 'I'm happy right now.'

But when I finally slept I dreamt of babies slick as fish, of islands awash with water through which the babies floated, their eyes vacant, their mouths opening and closing like primitive gills. I slid under the water and swam with the babies and they led me to a cave and you were there, Mama, squatting on your haunches, giving birth, flinging these fish babies to me where I stood with my arms outstretched, trying to grasp them, but they slipped through my fingers, one after another, over and over. Oh, I know Mama, it does not need to be said, I am only destroying myself.

### *Tuesday*

More glimmers of memory, not retrieved in order, but I'll order them here: the John O'Groats ferry stinking of chip oil, the bleak huddle of buildings at St Margaret's Hope, a beer in a pub, a noisy bus ride to Kirkwall. St Magnus Cathedral looming pinkly behind the bus depot. Another bus ride across mainland Orkney to Stromness, giant windscreen wipers sluicing the rain. It is all there in my mind but dimly, one dark room opening out onto another. This morning I woke to the image of myself standing like a Dickensian pauper on the cobbled street in Stromness and staring at the view through Jeannie and Roger's kitchen window. So much nostalgic weight concentrated into the form of a yellow teapot ready on the table, a discarded fiddle, a long string of nappies above the gas range.

I tried to tell Fergus the truth this morning. I should have told him when I arrived but I was dealing with other things, like total disorientation and complete failure to comprehend how I'd actually got myself to his door. And then the longer I've left it, the more I've wondered what either of us would gain from his knowing. Frankly, his

state of not knowing has created an intoxicating suspension of reality that I have had no wish to tamper with.

But this morning I tried to do the right thing, out of respect, or because a good person would. I came up for breakfast and he was at the sink and I leaned there next to him while the kettle boiled. I said, ‘About what happened the other night...’ But then I got no further. I had this odd sensation, as if a tap had just been turned on in my head and the conversation was happening over a distance of thundering water. I found myself staring hard at the lino on his kitchen floor, which is the colour of pale, streaked snot. I found myself wondering if Fergus actually picked this lino out himself in some flooring shop but the thought is laughable. Obviously there were previous owners, who chose the floor coverings and the green checked curtains, and there I was trying to imagine with what degree of hope they poured their energies into feathering this obscure domestic nest, and I might have asked Fergus what he knew of them, except that he interrupted my line of thought with a gentle prompting, ‘Are we talking about the Berg, Eva?’

And all these images flooded into my head, the wrong images, really: Greyfriar’s Kirk, the grey stone floor, hard under my feet. The feel of my body – all that clawing and hacking. Breathing, like some sort of fugitive. Stephen Elliot’s baton pricking the air in sudden stabs of panic and my fascination, my absorption. His eyes telling me something – what? I slept with him once. Disgusting. I must have been drunk. I was drunk. That top lip, a puckering, wet sphincter, and there he was the other night, jabbing at the air with his baton...

Well, I couldn’t talk to Fergus after that. Tears sprang up again so I pushed away from the bench and made a beeline for the fridge and stuck my head in. Gulped cold, slightly sour-milk-tainted air and stared at leftover baked beans congealing in an uncovered tin for a moment before pulling out milk and eggs and saying, ‘Why don’t I

make pancakes this morning? Would there be a lemon about the place, Fergus, or some honey?’

‘There’s maple syrup,’ he said, but of course there wasn’t any flour. So after our usual breakfast of toast and tea (neither of us has touched the oranges) we headed across the island to the general store. Our first outing. I tried to be jolly but the rain set in. I found myself in a different reality, thinking about Adelaide and Dave and the horrible bath conversation. How I’d turned up amongst his arthritic pomegranates, doped up on valium and with not a clue how I got there, and wandered inside to find him slumped against a wall with his head in his hands. How long he’d been there was anybody’s guess. Maybe days.

Fergus’s car smells like Dave’s ute, I suppose that’s what got me thinking about him, the smell of rust and sea, although Dave’s ute has an overlaid coconut whiff of surf wax that is so familiar I can conjure it here and now, on the other side of the planet, just as I can conjure an image of Dave with his dreads and tats, paddling out at Trigs while a younger version of myself watches from the front seat, too chicken to ever join him in those waves. When I think of Dave it’s in smells and muscles; not far under the surface of the bear hugs we give each other nowadays is the feeling of riding shotgun on his shoulders, my small hands clutching those pale dreads. I think I spent half my childhood up on Dave’s shoulders. So it goes. My father donated sperm, his little brother donated time. I’d like to talk to Dave right now but he’s out of phone range on Kangaroo Island helping your Buddhists build a stupa, Mama. He’s opting for silence and stacking mud bricks and I can hardly criticise him for that, can I?

But I’m sidetracking here. I’m supposed to be talking about this morning and driving in the car with Fergus. The view to Mainland Orkney fell away behind us. Stromness might have been visible on a clearer day. We passed maybe one or two other small islands, I don’t know, it was hard to tell anything with all the rain. I do know that

Hoy is the only island with the hills – they must dominate from every vantage point. They're purple in the summer. I've stood on the Stromness Pier and looked out over all that glorious festooning, that blooming heather. Fergus told me this morning that some years the snow molds to their treeless forms like marzipan over a Christmas cake. And then I got him talking about Christmas at Jeannie's, all the flock returned and their old rooms spilling over with their burgeoning offspring and the parties up and down the street and in the pub, and the music, of course. One or two of Jeannie and Roger's kids are folk musos roaming the countryside in vans loaded up with instruments and convivial folksy banter, spilling out at tent-strewn festival grounds from Cornwall to Colonsay. Not a bad sort of life I imagine, if you can stand the music. Ruby's the only Freeman offspring I've ever met but I pine for them all with an abstract nostalgia. It's the family thing, I know. My father's family used to be like that when I was small. I remember Christmases with everybody gathered at McGinty Avenue, but it doesn't happen anymore. I think that's why I found myself at Dave's amongst the pomegranates; it was too horrible at McGinty Avenue with all of the rest of them suddenly flung together like an old-time Christmas, ho-ho-ho.

Back to this morning. Several hundred people live on Hoy, apparently, although we saw only a couple of cars this morning, a few nondescript farmhouses, one more imposing place inside high grey walls, only its multiple blackened chimneys visible, caught up in sudden sun. Fergus said it was built in the late nineteenth century, some mainlander's misguided attempt at utopian living. It is owned these days by a bossy old lady called Nellie Potter, who Fergus obviously thinks highly of. He wants me to meet her. I don't want to meet anyone so I only offered the vaguest response to his comment this morning and watched the land flatten out and the sun emerge and tried to make out anything of interest at Lyness, where the car ferry docks. Fergus was pointing things out but to be frank I wasn't listening to him by then.



Across a causeway is the portside clutch of houses at Longhope, where I followed Fergus into the store, held the basket while he pulled bread and tinned peaches and pasta from the shelves. When someone called him over to the door for a chat I kept filling the basket, wishing I hadn't agreed to come, I'm not up to idle chit-chat. I was wearing a pair of Fergus's shabby cords and one of his jumpers and wished I'd bothered to change into my Edinburgh gear, not that I care what I look like to these people, but wearing his clothes seemed like an intimate thing to be doing suddenly, bound to give them all the wrong idea. Guilty by intimation, I found myself watching Fergus, who was standing at the door with his head inclined, listening to the man who had called him over. Both of them suddenly threw their heads back in great peals of laughter. Fergus put his hand to the man's shoulder and they walked out of the door, but he looked back to find me first and my heart turned over for the pure kindness of that gesture. I waved at him, as if to say, go talk to your friend, all's fine here, and then I got on with the shopping. Now that I had control of the basket it occurred to me to think about what I might actually want to eat. Then I realised that I didn't care. But since I was an uninvited guest, I thought it might be a good idea to make a bit of an effort. Bake a cake or make the promised pancakes or something to show Fergus my appreciation.

So I added flour and eggs to the basket and took it all to the counter, thinking I'd pay for it also as a gesture of appreciation. I helped the girl who served me load it all into a box, pulled my credit card from my wallet to pay for it. She didn't seem remotely interested in who I was, nor in having any sort of conversation, which was fine by me. Even when she handed me the slip informing me that the transaction had been declined, she maintained her vague disinterest. I was scrabbling in my nearly empty wallet when Fergus poked his head in the door and called out to her to put it on his account. He moved to the back of the shop and came back with a couple of bottles of whisky, which he added to the box. 'That's all you'll need?' he said to me, and then turning to the girl

he said, 'if she's back in the shop at all these next few days, Sarah, you'll put it on my account, now, alright?'

Can't think about my credit card right now, either. Driving back, Fergus went into tour-guide mode again and since it had stopped raining, pulled the car over to show me a solitary grave with a white picket fence sitting literally in the middle of nowhere. I guess he thought it was just my cup of tea, me being a grave-lover from way back. So I got out of the car and followed him along the rain-slippery plank path set over the sodden furze and stood with the wind whipping up under my jumper and listened to Fergus's story about Betty Corrigan, who got pregnant out of wedlock in the late eighteenth century, hung herself in despair and was buried away off in the peat for the mortal sin of taking her own life. Enlightened times. Someone digging peat in the 1930s dug her up, opened the coffin in hope of treasure and found Betty Corrigan, perfectly preserved, her skin only slightly stained by the infiltration of the peat, her dark hair falling long at her sides. They buried her again. Then during the Second World War, when Orkney was overrun by troops, soldiers digging the peat dug her up again. Of course, because it was such a fascinating peep show, people kept opening the coffin and she quickly deteriorated. They left her alone then. Someone erected a cross. Much later someone added the gravestone and fence.

Fergus quoted a folk song, 'The Unquiet Grave', something about sitting on a lover's grave for a year and a day and the grave beginning to speak. Good stuff, really, I found the whole scene quite perversely enthralling in fact, so I suppose my sudden request to see Fergus's mother's grave came as no surprise to him. We drove back in the direction of Longhope. Fergus started a conversation about cows, how they keep them all indoors when it's cold, but I think even he was getting sick of the tour-guiding by then so the conversation petered out and then the road petered out too at a small, grey-shored beach.

The adjacent graveyard is neatly fenced. The lawn is clipped. Some of the graves have plastic flowers. We stood in front of a whole row of Cunninghams, and there she was with her own pot of red plastic roses: Stella Eliza Cunningham, 1933-69. Fergus's mother tucked in with her family all around her, her head to the sea.

I said to Fergus, 'You'll be buried here,' but he shook his head.

'Scattered on the sea,' he said. 'Spindrift. Here for a brief exuberant moment, then taken back into the whole. I'm a great believer in renewal, as you know,' he said.

'And I'm a great believer in nothing, as you know,' I said.

He was silent for a moment before he said, 'That is a petulant toss-off of an answer.'

'Maybe,' I said, 'but it's also a profound truth.'

'Are you alright, Eva?' he said.

'Of course,' I said. I was trying not to think about his mother's hair.

'You seem...'

I interrupted him. I said, 'How can you adore her so when she fucked your life over the way she did?' It's not a question to ask, I know, but I couldn't stop myself.

He didn't answer for a minute. Just stood there with his hands in his pockets and his huge jaw working. This is what he does when he's deeply thinking, and usually I find it quite endearing but at that moment I wanted to smack his jaw with a tightly closed fist, so I turned and walked back to the car and Fergus followed and we sat there for a minute or two looking out over the dirty beach before he said, 'I wore my best shirt and a tie. Helped to lower the coffin. Sprinkled a handful of dirt. Laid a bunch of her favourite daisies on her fresh stone. Went home that night and made a bonfire of all her belongings. Clothes, books, everything I could lay a hand to. Thankfully my aunt wouldn't let me near the photo albums.'

'What about all those stories you told me last night,' I said.

'I could tell you others that are not so glowing,' he said.

'You've not forgiven her, then,' I said.

'Forgiveness is not a singular act,' he said.

'Even for a Catholic?' I said.

'Especially for a Catholic,' he said.

Another moment's silence, which I interrupted by saying, 'What about the dead forgiving us?' But I didn't expect an answer to that and he didn't insult me by offering me one. We sat looking out at the shabby little beach, reduced to a grey smudge in another fall of rain.



There are two stories about Grace Albright's hair and both of them involve Dave. The first happened when he was about five years old: watching Fizz and little Grace paint one afternoon, he had been overtaken by a compulsion to dip one of Grace's plaits into the jar of blue-painty water they'd been using to clean their brushes. No doubt he was punished but what he remembers is the fascination he felt watching that blue water infuse the milky whiteness of Grace's plait.

She'd become quite a regular visitor to the Byrnes' after her mother's sleeping pill fiasco. God hadn't smite her after all for hanging out with these particular heathens, her father was gone, and her mother seemed never to be out of bed long enough to parent her. But soon after the episode of the blue plait the Byrnes saw a removal truck pull into the next-door driveway. Byrne siblings gathered on the pavement to watch the furniture being loaded up. Then a big, black Humber pulled up behind it. An old man in a hat and tie got out, made his way to the house without so much as a nod at the ratty string of Byrne children paraded out the front, and re-emerged sometime later carrying

suitcases, the mother and little Grace trailing behind him. The last the Byrnes saw of little Grace was her hands pressed like butterfly wings at the back window of that big, black Humber.

The Byrnes didn't know it at the time, but little Grace had been taken to live with her mother's people in Mount Gambier. These people were so zealously sectarian they wouldn't share their neighbour's drainpipes. Years later, a teenaged Dave opened the door to a young woman with the shimmer of white hair falling to her knees. He didn't even recognise her, but everyone else did. Little Grace Albright had turned into a beauty. Dave, gobsmacked dork in school shorts, hovered at a distance for the rest of that day while Grace slept and wept and told her stories to Maggie in hushed tones at the kitchen table. Late that night, long after everyone had gone to bed, he saw Grace tiptoeing down the passage to the kitchen and, hastily swapping pyjamas for jeans and the cleanest cool t-shirt he could find, he followed her. He'd assumed she was getting up for a drink and was going to pretend to do likewise but when he entered the kitchen she'd already made the first slice with the jointing scissors. The hair to one side of her face fell in a single sheet to the floor as they both watched. Grace looked at Dave with her clear blue eyes as she raised the scissors to the other side, bunched the hair and sliced that too. Then she gathered the hair and shoved it into the bin under the kitchen sink. He followed her back down the passage and they both went wordlessly to their beds. But later still he snuck out again and retrieved a length of the hair from the bin and stuck it in a cough lolly tin.

When I was a teenager he showed me that hair in its little tin grave. McGinty Avenue is full of that sort of detritus. It looked so bright and shiny and alive, that hair, and it shocked me, Mama, because all my life you'd kept it cropped short as a shag pile Berber carpet. And then it shocked me again this last time, you see, because you'd grown it, Mama, and you'd never told me. Suddenly I was confronted with all this hair,

and all this diaphanous lavender, and doped out as I was on valium, and weirded out by the whole Byrne clan gathering at McGinty Avenue, was it any wonder I turned up among the arthritic pomegranates at Dave's, with no idea how I'd got there?

I might not remember getting to Dave's that morning but I remember every detail once I got there. It was raining; the place had got really decrepit in the years I'd been away, huddled out of sight of its posh North Adelaide neighbours, its pale pink plaster flaking off in sheets. A wonder the landlord hadn't made good on his promise and bulldozed it. I wandered in through the open front door. The rain battered down on the tin roof. I moved through the labyrinth of subordinate rooms with their caving-in ceilings and bloated, mould-infested walls, to the ballroom.

I stood at the door, looking at the walls. How many times Dave's painted and repainted these walls over the years probably even he couldn't say. This day there was war sharp up against benign domestic scenes, corpses falling from blitzed wastelands across a perfect red-checked linoleum floor, obscured bits of detonated body – a mutilated hand among the cup cakes on a dainty table set for high tea, a severed foot among neatly stacked shoes at a farmhouse door – coats on hangers and the implication of a roaring fire in some nearby room. And somewhere on every wall a small, blonde-haired boy, eyes blue and wide, hands out-turned.

Dave was slumped against the far wall, staring at me with the same wide blue eyes. His dreads were bunched into a ponytail. He'd grown a fat red beard in the years since I'd seen him. 'You ought to do the ceiling,' I said to him.

He looked up at it, then back at me. 'Any suggestions?' he said.

'An angel, maybe.' Of course I wouldn't have a fucking clue. I'm not artistic. I was thinking about the Berg concerto. *To the memory of an angel.*

But memory is unreliable, so I said to Dave that morning while he made me vegemite toast and tea and fetched me a jumper, a scratchy grey thing with a yin-yang

symbol. I wanted him to tell me things that I knew I had wrong in my memory, that's how the horrible bath conversation happened. You see, Mama, I have it fixed in my mind that you dragged that claw-footed rusted thing inch by inch up from Aurora's creek bed but you can't have dragged it on your own. It seems most likely to me that Dave helped you, since he was Aurora's sometimes resident plumber, painter and general fixer, but he isn't there in my memory of the bathtub day. I'm standing up on the deck, useless five year old, and it's hot, and I'm frightened of this dump of a house where the possums hiss and scabble about in the roof all night and the rats squeeze themselves up through the floorboards and make themselves at home in our food boxes. I want to go back to McGinty Avenue and sleep in the bedroom that used to belong to you and Aunt Fizz, under the blankets with their bright knitted squares. I want Maggie to read me bedtime stories and Poppa to play me things on the piano. I want Dave on tap like he always had been. But instead we're here, and you are determinedly dragging that bathtub.

For months you worked away at it with sandpaper. When you weren't working on it, it was a plaything, a boat, a submarine, a dirigible that floated us through the stars at night. And when you had finally sanded away every trace of rust, you painted it deep crimson and moved it into the bathroom. Dave installed it, I do remember that. We christened it like a ship. My childhood baths were like floating in a bowl of raspberry cream. I can picture you at the other end, Mama, flicking bubbles at me, sculpting the tufts of your hair into bizarre confections for my childish delight. I can remember exactly the feel of your tufty hair under my fingers and the way you smelled like trees and the absolute fact of you smack in the centre of my reality. You're still there, of course. You always have been, you always will be, but the shape of that reality is altering as I write. You've altered it. That is what I don't want to face. That is what I don't want Fergus's kindness and concern walking over.



I've been writing down in the bothy. When I come back up, I find the place empty. I go to Fergus's desk and peer out the window to see if I can see him walking on the beach, but I can't. Maybe he's gone for his mail. I sit down. Is that an invasion of privacy? His desk is a mess. The clutter of his current work fills the immediate space, but all around it are disorderly piles of manuscript, half-written bits and pieces, piles of stuff back from the publisher waiting to be proof-read, mail, newspapers, bills, some of it shoved into more disorder by my habit of leaning or sitting on it when I'm trying to distract Fergus from his work. His beloved books of poetry are stacked along the window ledge with a collection of stones and a single tattered dried flower, the yellow colour of it bleached away.

The box of photos is still out from last night and since he was happy enough for me to sift through it then I feel no compunction about doing so again. None of the photos are recent from the looks of them. Many are old enough to be black and white. Most are of Orkney, family, people I don't recognise other than Jeannie and Roger and Fergus himself. And Stella, but I avoid Stella today, I've had enough of Stella. There are a couple of sorority style shots I presume are Glasgow, Fergus looking pale and boyish. An ugly, sickly youth as he called himself. Age suits him better. There's one of him leaning against the stone wall outside with his arms folded, smiling down at a young boy whom I presume is one of Jeannie and Roger's tribe. I recognise the jumper he's wearing in this shot as the one I've been living in since I got here, although in a much less shabby state. All of his jumpers are Jeannie's creations, of course, complex and knobby like the place itself. The colours in this photo are all stone and earth and Fergus too seems to blend right on in. He belongs to this place. I'm momentarily



tempted to steal the photo for myself but then I think, what will that achieve – am I planning to make Fergus my next obsession? So I return it to the box.

I pull the file marked E.B. across the desk. It's not an invasion to read about oneself, surely? Here I am worrying about stealing one photo of him, when before me lies this whole pile of memorabilia he's collected on me – not just concert programs and reviews and blogs, but tickets for concerts at the RAM, Southbank, Wigmore, a program from a cello recital on which I've scrawled, *do you want to leave at intermission? I'm starving*. Tube tickets, the tickets from a matinee session of Harry Potter we'd gone to, purely to get out of the rain, a coaster from the Covent Garden cafe where he'd come one weekend to watch me perform, a postcard from the V&A on which I've scrawled:

*Fantastic working with you again, FC. See you at your London gig. EB x*

*PS By the way, do you realise our initials are parallel fifths? Wouldn't find that piss-weak progression in any work by Sir Fergus Cunningham, would we now?*

And so on. He has, by the looks of it, collected every scrap of communication we've ever had. I teased him about this one night sitting here flicking through it all. I asked him whether he keeps files like this on all his friends, and if so, I said, he'd have plenty of dirt on the famous ones. He didn't seem remotely embarrassed, and I'm not either, strangely. Mutual adoration has always been one of the central tenets of our relationship, right from that first St Magnus Festival. It's all purely musical, it goes without saying, there's a natural symbiosis born from the fact that he is my ideal composer and I am, or was, his ideal performer. We have elevated each other thus. Drunk in the Stromness pub that St Magnus Festival, when we were still virtually strangers to each other, I confessed my Berg obsession, and he confessed his desire to

write something for me, and so the idea of the recording was hatched years before it could come to fruition. And he stuck to his word. I could not have asked for a more perfect work than *Limina*. I love it beyond anything that I have ever played, for the sheer luminosity of it. How did he know to do what he did? Notes on a page are just that, after all. What is the magic that turns them into something so vastly beyond the sum of their parts? Because especially with *Limina* it isn't just the notes, but the arrangement of the spaces between them. So that the notes seem somehow suspended in a gossamer of silence, a resonant, illuminating sheen.

Well, the adoration is evident, isn't it? There's nothing I don't admire about him, except perhaps the religious thing, but even then, Fergus has an unusual grab on things spiritual that I can respect him for. What was the line he threw at me the other night? Philip Larkin, *if I were called upon to construct a religion, I should make use of water...* something like that. Belief can be fluid, in other words, but as I said to him, the average person likes their dogma cut and dried. We don't like things to shift and shape-change around us. We like to know where we're at, to coin a phrase. Except you, I said to him, you open your arms to the mystery with a child-like wonderment, but I know you think so much of the dogma is rubbish. So why do you persist in calling yourself religious? He said he is merely in thrall to the question of what it is to be human. I didn't goad him, I could wish for such an imaginative faculty myself, for options such as prayer or faith.

On another note entirely, I have an unnerving feeling that something might have happened the night of the *Limina* performance. Afterwards, I mean, when I was drunk. There is some memory straining to resurface. I can't help wondering if that has something to do with why Fergus hasn't been in touch all these months, but he hasn't said anything and I don't want to think about it, I really don't.

I wonder where he is. He's taking a while if he's only gone for his mail. I close the file and push it away. I'm over myself, quite frankly. I pick up Fergus's dog-eared volume of Rumi and start to flick through that, but the quiet begins to take form around me. Sitting here like this, I seem to hear everything that is *not* silence, as if to avoid the absence that is silence itself. It's as if I'm clutching at aural straws. The hum of the radiator under Fergus's desk. The wind, and when it subsides, the clatter of plastic digits flipping over slow, uninhabited minutes on the clock in Fergus's kitchen. The fridge, whose old engine jerks into noisy activity every so often, like a somnambulant octogenarian clambering up to the surface of wakefulness, snorting and muttering before falling back into sleep.

I go back to reading Rumi. I find the poem Fergus has been quoting from, *Inside this new love, die! Your way begins on the other side...* The sound of the phone ringing sends me rocketing from the chair. I answer it without thinking. Instantly recognise the congested breathing, even before the voice says, 'Don't hang up, Eva.'

But I do. I find myself standing over by the couch hugging one of Fergus's pillows, waiting to see if he'll be bolshie enough to ring again, and he is. I sit and bury my face in the pillow until the phone rings out. Then I sit a while longer, hoping that he won't try again. Then I think that I ought not to be sitting with my face buried in Fergus's pillow when he comes in so I get up and go into the kitchen and decide to follow up on my earlier inspiration and make a cake. Why not?

But I don't really remember how to do it. Flour, milk, sugar, eggs, but I've no idea of quantities, and then also, that's going to make a really plain cake. But there's oranges on the table, see, and I remember you used to make a cake, Mama, with a boiled orange mashed into the mix and so I grab an orange and set it in a saucepan and cover it with water and fiddle about with Fergus's cantankerous stove top. Then I have a stab at the proportions of everything else, throwing it all into a big saucepan because

Fergus has nothing like a mixing bowl. Then I hum and hah about whether the butter needs to be melted or rubbed through the fingers, opt for melting, get that on the stove too, by which time the orange is boiling away, and even if nothing else works the warm, oily orange aroma is homey.

The phone rings twice during these operations and I ignore it. While I'm waiting for the orange to cook, I clean out the fridge, getting rid of all of Fergus's half empty cans, a dried-out wedge of cheese, the bottle of maple syrup he mentioned, which is ten years past its use-by date. I can't imagine Fergus buying himself maple syrup, and yet he knew it was there, he was conscious all these years that it was sitting there in his fridge. I can't help imagining some woman in love with him ten years ago, trying to impress him with Canadian-style pancakes. A morning-after type situation, the woman standing at the stove wearing his old bathrobe and Fergus being amorous, fondling her from behind or something.

That's a mildly repulsive thought – why is this sort of image springing into my mind suddenly? I've never been interested in Fergus's sex life, have I? Well, maybe I've asked him the occasional embarrassing question, but I've certainly never gone so far as to imagine him being amorous. Is it surfacing now because we've let it out of the bag somewhat, my father making his asinine assumptions, combined with the simple concrete fact of my being here in Fergus's private sanctuary, sleeping in his bed, wearing his clothes, learning something of his personal habits? Or are we letting it out of the bag because it's time for it to surface? No, no, no, Eva, don't get carried away now. You did not come here to have sex with Fergus Cunningham. Fergus does not have sex. You are a basket case when it comes to sex. Let it go, now. Bake your cake.

Except that when it comes to putting the orange and the cake mix together I realise I've made some sort of mistake. Maybe I haven't cooked it long enough. The orange is a pulpy globe that refuses to blend. I wonder how you did it, Mama, I was

young and not paying attention, only interested in licking the bowl. I used to stand on a chair next to you, wearing one of your aprons. I liked the one with the huge, globular strawberry and you liked the rainbow one, goes without saying. Sunday morning you'd put Enya on because it was the only thing you liked listening to and we'd bake enough for the week and then take something up the road to Tallis and sit in her sunroom looking out over Aurora's perfect vegetable beds, drinking tea from Tallis's mish-mash Royal Doulton. I loved those cups. I can remember every detail of them. The pale blue one with the gold trim and the crimson roses, the yellow one with the lace of orange and purple flowers, the white one with the delicate all over pattern of blue flowers. We'd eat our cake and drink our tea and then you and Tallis would work in her garden for a bit. Funny that she was my kindergarten teacher but I never even thought about that on Sundays. Sundays I was allowed to hate millet porridge and take all my clothes off if I felt like it and roll about in mud and draw incredibly scribbly drawings with marker pens, the likes of which you'd never find in a Steiner kindergarten, oh no. And Tallis didn't talk to me in that Steiner sing-song on Sundays, either. I might have been a brat at school, refusing to eat that horrible porridge, turning violent at any opportunity, but Sundays at her place I was an angel.

And here I am, Mama, thinking about you again. Tallis came looking for childhood photos of you, she had the idea the Byrnes adopted you as a baby, is that what you put out there for people to believe? Logically, this would make the fact of my father impregnating you incestuous and disgusting, which actually, it was, if you think about it. You'd been part of the Byrne family for five or more years by then, ever since the day you'd taken the shears to your beautiful hair. But to give my father some credit, he had been in London for most of that time. He hadn't got the gist of having you as a sibling. You were just some weird, religious girl who'd taken up residence in Fizz's bedroom. The Byrnes had done their best to secularise you but you never could quite

extricate God from your thinking. He was like an invasive tumour, so wrapped around your way of being that his removal essentially collapsed the entire workings. So you found the freaky esoteric world of Rudolf Steiner, and you braved an airplane for the first and last time to go and study biodynamics and Goethean horticulture or whatever at the Steiner college in Suffolk or Surrey or wherever it is. My father, living in student digs near the RAM, under orders from his parents to keep an eye on you, fucked you instead and put you on the boat back to Adelaide. At some point on that long journey home you figured out that the vomiting was not just about seasickness. How did you feel about that, Mama, I have to wonder? Would things have been better for you if you'd done the logical thing and aborted me?

Can't really think about that, can I? I have to be grateful that you didn't, whatever the cost to you. We never talked about how you felt about it. I only know the boat story, which along with the birth story forms the first brick in a personal narrative that must now in some fundamental sense be rewritten. But does the birth story have to change? Does it have to lose its optimism? I was born on the living room floor at McGinty Ave with Fizz, trainee nurse at the time, in hysterical attendance, and a rainbow appeared across the sky outside and you saw it as a sign, Mama. Symbol of hope and all that. My father screamed blue murder from the other side of the world but you'd made up your mind, and there's no changing your mind once it's made up, is there, Mama? Oh no, you just do whatever the hell you please, with not a thought for how it might impact on anyone else.

And there we have it, the story's altered already.

I mean, theoretically, when someone takes the trouble to grow their hair, to do something different with themselves, to think a little about their appearance, doesn't that generally mean that they're feeling okay about themselves? Isn't it a sign of

positivity and wellbeing? What good was all that belief, Mama, when all is said and done?

So Fergus walks in with the mail in his hands. I'm trying to mash the orange into the cake mix with a potato masher. The phone rings again. 'Don't answer it,' I say, because naturally enough he's moving through to the living room to do exactly that. He looks at me standing paralysed there with the potato masher and I ought to offer him some sort of explanation but I can't think of one. Even so, he doesn't answer the phone. He lets it ring on and moves instead to relieve me of the masher and the saucepan. At about this point I realise I'm crying and possibly have been for some time. How does that happen? How can you be so unaware of your own body? Fergus sets the saucepan and the masher on the sink and then he comes back and puts his arms around me and we stand that way until finally the phone stops ringing. We've never hugged before. I can feel his heart beating like a rodent trapped in a paper bag.

Finally he says, 'Alright now?' and I nod and he takes his arms away. I pick up the saucepan and scrape the contents into the bin.

'What were you trying to make?' Fergus asks.

'A cake,' I say. 'Complete failure, sorry. I've never learnt how to cook.'

'Well, it was a nice thought,' Fergus says.

I run water into the sink and start the dishes. He stays leaning next to me at the sink. 'I presume it's your father you're wishing not to speak to,' he finally says, and I make no response to that because I'm not up to either lying to him or telling him the truth. I move about gathering dishes while the sink fills. Fergus stays where he is, contemplating his own kitchen floor. With his usual diplomacy he asks no more questions. I switch the tap off and start the dishes. He picks up a teatowel and dries them.

I'm scraping the glug off the potato masher when the phone rings again. 'Jesus,' I say, letting the masher drop back into the water. I stare at it for a minute floating about in the gloopy water. I can't keep asking Fergus not to answer his own phone, can I? I will have to deal with this once and for all. So I move through to answer it, trying to work out how best to phrase 'leave me the fuck alone,' so as not to sound too aggressive or hysterical within Fergus's earshot.

But as it turns out it's bossy old Nellie Potter on the phone. 'I presume I'm talking to Eva Byrne,' she says, and when I concede that she is, she merely says, 'I intend to have a conversation with you very soon, my dear, but for now would you put me onto Fergus please?' I walk back into the kitchen and hand the phone over, listen without hearing to Fergus muttering and murmuring as I wipe the table and the sink down. I'm sweeping the floor when he comes back in. He leans on the sink again.

'There's a school concert tonight at the theatre in Lyness,' he says. 'I'd forgotten but I'm expected. Nellie asked if you might be persuaded to play something...'

I look at him, deadpan, and he raises his hands. 'I told her I didn't think you would.'

'Thankyou.' I go back to sweeping. Stop a moment later to say, 'I suppose everyone on the island knows I'm here.'

'Aye, you can count on it,' he says.

'One trip to the general store...' I look at him. 'But it doesn't bother you, right?'

'People here know me well enough not to jump to ludicrous conclusions, Eva. This isn't London, after all. Why don't you come tonight?'

'Nope.'

'We could eat at the pub first. Have a decent feed for once.'



I shake my head. He watches me finish sweeping, empty the dirt into the rubbish bin under the sink. I set the broom in its place by the back door and return to lean next to him on the sink. It seems to be our place today.

‘Do you remember the pianist, Pamela Veale?’ he says after a moment.

I shake my head. ‘Never heard of her.’

‘She died recently,’ he says.

‘Oh.’ I’m not sure where this conversation is heading.

‘I saw her perform, well, on many occasions in fact, but on one particular occasion at the Barbican, sometime in the 80s. I was sitting quite close to the front, as you know I like to. She was playing Mozart, I think, and it all started off quite as you’d expect but somewhere deep in the first movement, orchestra busily working away behind her, Pamela’s hands suddenly flew up from the keys, and stayed poised motionless in the air about her face. Such a rapt expression, as if she was in sudden communication with the angels. The orchestra kept playing, it was really just a split second, I don’t think that many of them would have even been aware of what she’d done, although I’m sure the conductor was. But then, as suddenly as it had happened, she put her hands back to the keys and carried on brilliantly for the remainder of the work. Judging by the applause at the end, the audience had very quickly forgiven, or even forgotten her momentary lapse.’

‘Did she apologise?’

‘No, she didn’t apologise.’

It occurs to me that Fergus would be shocked to learn how wholly irrelevant the Berg performance feels to me right now. He nods in the direction of the kitchen table, where he’d earlier put the mail. ‘Claudia Ballantyne was there the other night, you may not have noticed. Her review’s there.’

‘Goody,’ I say.

‘It’s a wonderful review, Eva.’

‘Well, I don’t read my reviews at the best of times, as you know.’

‘Come tonight,’ he says. He wants me to feel better. He wants to make me happy. Return me to my normal self and my normal life, I understand that.

And because I adore him I say, ‘what sort of an evening will we be in for exactly?’

‘Oh well,’ he says, ‘the usual sort of school concert, endless simplified Beethoven and top of the pops. I’m sure you had those at your Steiner School, didn’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ I say, ‘we most certainly did.’

‘And you were the star attraction,’ Fergus says.

‘Nope,’ I tell him, ‘I used to hide at the back of the second violins.’

‘Whatever for?’ he says.

‘That’s a whole other conversation,’ I say, pushing away from the bench. ‘If we’re going out tonight, I’m for a bath. I might even wash my hair, how about that?’

I wear my Edinburgh gear, black shirt, black skirt, which I have to iron because I’ve shoved it in a ball at the back of Fergus’s wardrobe along with the violin. I think he’s pleased to see me getting into more normal form. He even threatens to dress himself up a little, watching me get the iron out. He goes for a bath too. I hear him singing something folkish from behind the closed door and resolve to be cheery this evening. No more tears and carry on. Behave like it’s any other night out together, why not?

I pour us both a whisky to get us in the right frame of mind. I put on the most kitsch CD I can find on Fergus’s shelf – *Hits from Broadway Musicals* and sing along loudly and badly to ‘I Feel Pretty’, and when he comes out tucking a rumpled white shirt into clean corduroys I make him take it off and I iron it for him, how domestic and

unfeminist its that? He stands shivering in front of the radiator in his white undershirt and I can't help but smile at him. Fergus has the body of a choirboy. 'I Could Have Danced All Night' is on by now. I offer him his ironed shirt and he pulls it on while I collapse the ironing board and when I come back from putting it away in the bathroom he takes both my hands and attempts some sort of a non-body-contact waltz, the sort of moves you might see a pre-adolescent boy perform at a primary school formal. So I take him by the waist and whirl him about the room a bit but the Steinway keeps interfering with my sweeping moves so we collapse onto the couch instead and finish our whiskies. *Life is a Cabaret, old chum.*

He tells me a little about Nellie Potter as we drive. She was his music teacher in high school, fresh out of teacher's college at the time, but utterly passionate and determined to push him. Along with that information he paints the portrait of a superwoman – defender of human rights, highly vocal campaigner against everything from uranium mining on mainland Orkney to the preservation of endangered marine life. 'She's terrifying enough on the phone,' I tell him. 'Can't we just avoid her?'

'Not possible,' he says. 'She's a great admirer of yours.'

Fabulous. Put it out of your mind, Eva. You're being your high-spirited ordinary self tonight, remember? Nellie Potter's not going to faze you, not once you get enough drink into yourself.

We order a bottle of red at the pub. Fergus goads the young waitress, whom he knows of course, he wants her to fill him in on all the island gossip so he's not stepping on landmines all night. She tells him we're the only gossip she's heard about, which he at least affects to be delighted about. Oh, he loves to be the cat among the pigeons, he tells her. Patently not true, but I suppose he's famous enough to have had to have fashioned some facsimile of social buoyancy for his public self. He introduces us then, 'Taylor, meet Eva.' And then he says to her, 'But do you know, Taylor, the sad thing is

for all my wooing, this young lady won't have me. So maybe you could make it known about the place that she's actually on the lookout for an island lad, what do you say? Any possible suitors come to mind?' And so on. Taylor and I roll our eyes in comradely disdain. He asks for news of Taylor's family and how she's getting on at school and what her plans are after that. Eventually she gets to do her job and take our orders and the wine arrives and we raise our glasses.

'You'll have the lads flocking,' he says with a wink. He gulps his wine. 'I should have brought you out more,' he says.

'Yes,' I say, 'I really came here expecting wall-to-wall parties. You've been a very lax host, Fergus.'

'You've never really told me what you did come for,' Fergus says, and I see a momentary flash of vulnerability.

'I came for the quiet,' I say, 'and for your good self, of course.' I realise too late that sounds predatory. 'I mean, I came for exactly what we've been doing. Bach and whisky and walks on the cliffs. To be honest, Fergus, I can't begin to tell you how absolutely right these past few days have been for me. I just hope I haven't been too much of an imposition.'

'Are we going to have this conversation again?' Fergus says. 'I've already told you, your arrival was a godsend.'

'And you haven't told me why.'

'Because I'm an arse to myself at times,' he says. 'A veritable black hole intent on devouring myself. I spend too much time in my own company,' he says. He sets his glass down. Taylor arrives with our food and we focus on that for a minute.

We both ordered pasta, firstly because it's the only vegetarian thing on the menu and secondly to make up for the spaghetti that I cooked last night, which had managed to bodge together like a wad of telecommunications circuitry. This stuff is swimming in

oil, but I don't really care. I finish a mouthful and then I watch Fergus loading more onto his fork. 'I've got two questions for you,' I say. 'Which do you want first?'

'I presume these are typically direct questions?'

'Of course.'

'I don't care what you ask me,' he says. 'But I don't promise I'll answer either of them.'

'Okay. Easy question first.' I lean in. 'Who bought you the maple syrup?' He's shovelling pasta into his mouth but he looks at me, surprised. 'It was ten-years old, Fergus,' I say. 'I had to chuck it out.'

'Ten years?' he says, shaking his head. He finishes his mouthful. Wipes at his face with his napkin. 'Martha Bracken, her name was,' he says.

I surprise myself by feeling a stab of jealousy at the mention of an actual name.

'You see, I never did believe the celibacy stuff,' I say.

'I never said I slept with her,' he says.

'But did you?'

He loads his fork up again. 'When we were students,' he says.

'In Glasgow.'

'Aye.'

'And then decades later she comes knocking at your door with a bottle of maple syrup.'

'Aye, that's right.' He takes another mouthful of pasta. Nods at my plate. Says, 'Eat, now.'

But I'm not all that hungry. 'Are you going to tell me anything else?' I say.

'Why are you so secretive?'

‘And you’re not?’ he says. ‘You tell me everything, mm? The only lover of yours I have any knowledge of is the dead variety. And I presume you don’t sleep with those.’

I let that pass. ‘So you’re not going to tell me about Martha Bracken, then?’ I say.

He’s loading his fork again. I load my own to give him a moment. Finally he says, ‘She was sitting in a lecture on harmonisation one morning, a young woman with black hair as short as a sergeant major’s, swinging a foot in a steel-capped cowboy boot. Something about that gesture – its arrogance, its jauntiness – provoked a rumbling of feelings more intense than I had ever imagined myself capable of...’

‘And she loved you back.’

‘Briefly, savagely. And then she walked away from me just as savagely.’

‘And then she turned up decades later on your doorstep with the maple syrup.’

‘I ran into her in London. She’d been living in Canada for years but she was in London and noticed my name on a concert flyer. Came down to the green room afterwards.’

‘Was it love at first sight again?’

Fergus shakes his head. ‘I was more wary by then.’

‘But she pursued you all the way here.’

‘Aye.’

‘With a gift from her own country.’

‘I think she expected a different environment from what she found here.’

‘A grand house you mean, a fortune to go with the fame. Well, she wasn’t to know you have a habit of giving all your money away, was she? So,’ I say, ‘did you sleep with her?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘And by the way, that is a great many more than two questions.’

‘Those were all sub-questions,’ I say, ‘I haven’t got to the second one yet.’

‘Is it as convoluted?’ he says.

‘No,’ I say, ‘it’s very straightforward.’

‘Go ahead, then,’ he says, ‘and then it’s my turn.’

Had I not been slugging red wine I might have thought better of asking the next question. But I’m curious and rapidly getting drunk. At my most lethally stupid, in other words. ‘Why,’ I ask him, ‘when I usually hear from you every few weeks, have I not heard from you in months?’

Fergus busies himself with his food. ‘I knew you were busy,’ he says.

‘Poor excuse,’ I say.

‘I haven’t heard from you, either,’ he says, and then he waves his fork at me.

‘You’re an up-and-coming young performer, Eva. I presumed when we’d finished with *Limina* you’d finished with me.’

‘And then I turned up at your door. With no gift whatsoever. I should have brought Vegemite.’

‘You’ve given me Vegemite before,’ he says, ‘and I detested it.’

‘So you kept Martha Bracken’s maple syrup and turfed my Vegemite, is that what you’re telling me?’

‘Read it as you will,’ Fergus says.

‘Okay, okay, but the point is, Fergus...I’m afraid I said something or did something during the drunken revelry after *Limina*. We were all so off our faces – well, maybe you weren’t, but the rest of us...’ I hesitate before I lean forward again and say, ‘I seem to remember some serious interchange with you...’

‘Eva, I’d hardly have taken you seriously that night, given the state you were in.’

‘So there was no reason other than busyness on both our parts why I haven’t seen nor heard from you since?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘I’ve had an awful few months. From your unwillingness to discuss it, I gather you have too. It’s patently obvious neither of us want to talk about it, so let’s move on.’ He sets his fork down and pushes his bowl away. ‘Now it’s my turn. Why did you hide yourself at the back of the school orchestra?’

‘That’s not a very racy question, Fergus.’

‘I don’t happen to be all that interested in your sex life,’ Fergus says. ‘I’d prefer to hear about the wee girl, Eva Byrne, hiding out in the back desks.’

‘Have I never told you this story?’

‘Eva, you so rarely talk about your childhood at all apart from the occasional dig about your peculiar education.’ He pauses before he adds, ‘After talking about my mother the other night, I was ashamed to realise that I can’t even remember your own mother’s name.’

‘Grace.’

‘Grace, that’s right. And she’s a gardener at the Steiner School.’

‘Yes.’

‘And she’s not a musician?’

‘No.’

‘So your father was responsible for your musical education?’

I’ve pushed my own food away at this point, but not my wine. I can talk about my father, no problem, especially after this much wine. ‘Let me tell you a little about my early relationship with my father, Fergus,’ I say. ‘I used to think he lived in the television, because the only time I ever saw him was when my Nanna Maggie put on a video she had of him performing his Beethoven debut with the LSO. Not that I was allowed to watch television, but Mama and I were still living with my grandparents



back then, and Maggie used to sneak that video on anytime Mama wasn't around. I would stand spreadeagled in front of it, absolutely spellbound.

'But then this firecracker of a father would drop from the sky from time to time and scare the bejesus out of me. He was a pogo stick, springing from the balls of his feet when he walked, words and gestures leaping from him in unpredictable spurts, laughter sudden and loud shooting up out of his praying-mantis body. He would forget me for hours and then suddenly lunge to claim me, to swing me around in too-small spaces, to drag me up on his frightening tree-top shoulders and smack me into misjudged doorframes.

'But one day when I was about four he lay on the floor in his childhood bedroom and pulled the tiny black case from behind the boxes and suitcases and bags under his bed. He snapped open the catches. He took the little violin up from its green velvet bed and plucked its strings and turned its pegs and screws and then he handed it to me. But then my Mama came in and ripped the thing from my hands.'

'Because of her Steiner philosophies.'

'No formal music training until your ninth year. Mama wanted to following everything to the letter.'

'And your father agreed with that?'

'My father took her to court, so I've learnt recently. My grandmother took me to lessons with my father's old teacher, Hilary Rowe. But Mama still insisted that I fit in with the music program at the Steiner School. So when I was nine, four years of lessons with Hilary already under my belt, I started group lessons with flubbery Hermione at school, four or five of us scraping away at *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, lucky to get from one end of it to the other without somebody giggling, dropping a bow, farting, bumping the person next to them. I learnt very quickly that it was better to fit in than appear to be showing off. Better still to be silly and disruptive.

‘But I’d go to London with my grandmother every year in June. My great Aunt Elizabeth was living up on the third floor then, and we stayed in her spare room with the crab-apple curtains and the antique furniture smelling of lemon and wax. Elizabeth and Maggie took me to the Yorkshire town where they grew up and told me stories about musical soirees and brisk outings on the downs and showed me the graves of my great grandparents and the little grey house where my father and Aunt Frances had been born before the emigration to Australia.

‘And then we’d trail my father around Europe and I’d watch him play. I adored this life. I longed to be as brilliant as him. But then we’d come back to Adelaide and the kids at school would tease me about my toffee clothes and my toffee accent. I’d brave a concert and play something, get high praise from the teachers and hell from the kids. I felt like an alien. The school orchestra was so bad I couldn’t be bothered with it. I got booted out of it when I was eleven for being such a pill. So I joined the Adelaide Youth Orchestra and lived this schizoid life between music and school, between Mama and my father, between Adelaide and London.’

‘And eventually you came to live in London.’

‘That was years later.’ I pick up my wine. Wave it in Fergus’s general direction. ‘It’s complicated, Fergus,’ I say. ‘I can’t believe I’m telling you all of this.’

‘I can’t believe you’ve never told me before.’

‘The thing is, Mama just didn’t understand. She didn’t have a musical bone in her body. She’d been raised in this weird religious sect and had had no exposure to music whatsoever except for a few lousy hymns. But above all of that, she just didn’t want to lose me, I can see that now. The music was a threat.’ I slug back the remainder of my wine. ‘I didn’t know that at the time, of course. I just thought she was a bitch.’ I pick up the wine bottle and pour us both another glass. ‘No, that’s not true, I didn’t think she was a bitch all the time. I vacillated. I adored them both, you see, my Mama

and my father, and in a funny way I was scared of them both. Parents are powerful, Fergus.'

'I know,' Fergus says.

Another sip of wine before I say, 'I didn't know what I wanted, or at least I was confused by the vehemence of that want, and its apparent potential for causing pain.' Another sip before I say, 'Mama was only doing what she thought was the right thing. She had this analogy, something about being a young tree, and making sure all the branches grew equally strong, so that when the fruit began to ripen, the branches would be strong enough to bear the weight. Something like that.' I lean forward then and say, 'I'll tell you another secret, Fergus, Eva isn't my real name. You'll never guess what my real name is. Go on, try.'

'I'll take a stab and say Brunnhilde,' Fergus says.

'Very funny,' I say, 'but wrong. My mother christened me Rainbow Eva Albright Byrne. You can imagine what my father thought of that.'

I sit back. The pub's full now. And noisy. Fergus is quiet. 'I'm talking too much,' I say.

'No,' he says. 'I want you to talk.'

A group of carousers across the room start cheering at the soccer game on the tellie above the bar. 'I need to take a piss,' I say, standing up. 'And then I suppose we should be getting out of here.'

I weave my way past the carousers at the bar and into the toilets. Hitch my skirt out of the way, yank down my tights, sit with my head between my legs as the piss and the tears leak out of me in sympathetic streams. I let myself sit like this for a good couple of minutes. Then I peel off reams of toilet paper and wipe at my face and blow my nose. Stand and sort out my stockings and skirt. Flush the toilet. Stare at myself in the mirror while I wash my hands. It's been a while since I've looked at myself

properly. It's not a sight I'm relishing right now. *I Feel Pretty* comes perversely back into my mind. Fuck, and now to go and deal with Nellie Potter and the rest of them. I splash cold water at my face. Pull my hair out of the elastic I'd stuck it in because it was still wet. I look like a Kewpie doll some kid's left out in the rain. I dry off the remaining dampness under the hand dryer, but that's about as pretty and witty and gay as it's going to get tonight.

Fergus is quiet on the short drive to the theatre. The carpark is already filling but he finds a space. 'Here we go, then,' I say, but he stares straight ahead and says, 'Eva, I've not been honest with you.' At the same time there's a tap on his window and a grinning face leers in at us. Fergus winds his window down far enough to say, 'Hello there, Arthur, a fine turn-out by the looks,' and Arthur leans his elbows on the edge of the window and says, 'I phoned the councillor this morning, Fergus, as you suggested. Had a most informative chat, and just as you predicted, he was really far more accommodating than I'd expected. Now, I'm going to Kirkwall tomorrow and see him in person, and get the documentation sorted before our next meeting...'

'Wonderful,' Fergus says, 'well done. I knew you were the person for it. We'll put it top of the agenda for Thursday, so, Arthur. See what we can do.' Arthur has Fergus's door open by now, Fergus unsnaps his seatbelt and so do I. Honesty will have to wait.

People are crowding around in the foyer but Nellie Potter is immediately identifiable, even though I've never met her, waiting just inside the door. A short, solid woman with a no-nonsense silver bob, wearing a tweed and twin-set combo and fur-lined boots, she gives Fergus a nod before pressing one hand to my forearm and the other to my elbow and steering me in the direction of the theatre. We sit in the second to front of the tiered rows. Nellie puts her bag on the seat next to mine to reserve it for Fergus, who was being serially accosted out in the foyer last time I saw him. Kids are

running amok on the stage. A harried looking teacher appears and shoos them all off but they dribble back on to play air guitar and make farting noises at their parents. A little boy runs out onto centre stage clutching at the seat of his pants, and hollers ‘Mum, I need to do a poo,’ at which a big woman in crushed velvet skirt and dazzling white trainers with glow-in-the-dark safety strips immediately gets up and hurdles several rows of seats to heave him up under her arm and sprint him off like a gridiron player hurtling toward goal. She gets a smattering of applause for her efforts.

Nellie Potter’s talking at me. She’s giving me a rundown on island resources and so forth. Schooling arrangements. Music teachers. ‘I’ve already let Sally know you’re here,’ she’s saying as I bring my attention back from the gridiron woman. ‘We’d love you to take a masterclass with the more advanced students, Eva – I’m sure you teach in London.’

I don’t teach in London. I’ve never taught anyone because I think I’d be crap at it. What’s that horrible line? There are those who do and those who teach. But this is not about snobbery, more about incompetency. I’m great with kids as long as I’m only there to entertain them, instructing them is an entirely different matter.

‘I’m only here for a few days,’ I explain to Nellie.

‘Well then, not this visit perhaps, but next time. I’ll introduce you to Sally after and we can settle a time for the new school year. She’ll be overjoyed. It’s not an easy task, as you can imagine, keeping all of these children inspired. You’d be a marvellous influence, I recognised that the moment I first saw you perform. Because you are so very alive, my dear,’ she pats again at my arm, ‘you truly live your passion. Your *Limina* performance was one of the most memorable I’ve ever seen, and I don’t say that lightly. I’m only sorry that I didn’t get to see you do the Berg Concerto. Fergus did offer to escort me, bless him, but Edinburgh is beyond me these days, I’m afraid. He tells me your performance was superb. What a tribute to all your effort, my dear. I have

the CD, at least, Fergus brought it back for me. And I have no doubt that you will now find yourself inundated with offers, which is why I am determined to pin you to a date for our schools before you are swept away with it all.'

The big lady in the sneakers is clambering back over the seats now, which are beginning to fill. I scan the incoming crowd for Fergus and when finally I see him I wave and point out the seat we've saved for him, not that I want to look desperate about it. I watch him find his way down, offering a smile, a joke, a friendly hand on the shoulder of everyone he passes. It occurs to me that he's the best human I've ever encountered. That's what I'm thinking as I watch his interrupted progress towards us.

By the time he reaches us, and shuffles past a few sets of legs to seat himself, the lights have gone down and a string of small children are filing onto the stage. They stand in fidgeting lines to sing a couple of folk tunes, little flurries of extracurricular activity stirring up from time to time among them. 'Lovely, children, lovely, pure magic,' Fergus calls out as they finish. A recorder ensemble follows. The end of one girl's recorder drops off mid-song and the whole ensemble begin to spurt whinnying giggles out of their instruments. The harried teacher, whom I presume is Sally, her hair springing out of its combs and clamps and a flush of panic ripe across her cheeks, rushes forward from her conducting position to fix the recorder and get things going again but even the audience is laughing now. And who cares? They're precious, these children, everybody here knows it. The small boy who'd needed the toilet comes out with his fiddle and saws away at something from Level One Suzuki. An older boy lumbers out with a cello and annihilates Saint Saens's *Swan*, harried Sally swaying away at the piano, parodying the grace that her actual playing lacks completely. And how picky does that sound. Could you not lose the London pretension, Eva, just for tonight, and enjoy yourself like everybody else?

Intermission brings back and forth conversation about roof repairs and swapping shifts on the ferries, whose kiddies are back from the mainland for a brief respite, who is poorly or nursing a wee baby or heading off to Bali. There's a collection for a raffle, which an ancient, bent-backed MC conducts after the break. Fergus wins a floral toiletries bag which he throws back at the MC in a show of contempt.

'Give it to yer sweetheart,' the MC yells, throwing it back.

Fergus leans as if to give it to me, and then, much to the delight of the crowd, leans across me to give it to Nellie Potter. Other prizes are won: a screwdriver set, a milkshake maker, an electric beater. When Fergus wins the first prize too – a half dozen bottles of red wine – he is shouted down for the presumption of such luck but donates the bottles anyway to all the unlucky bastards surrounding him, handing the bottles one by one back over his head to the people in the seats behind us.

Finally, after an orchestral rendition of Hollywood movie themes, and several more solo items involving much squeaking and sawing and flushed triumph, a teenage girl walks on with her violin and lifts it to play. Her bow hand shakes so uncontrollably when she starts that she slides over the strings as if they are greased. Still, I recognise the first chord – the Adagio from Bach's G minor Sonata – Jesus, what sort of teacher would think that was an appropriate thing for a kid to play? She stops. Someone yells out from the audience, 'You can do it, Susannah, love.'

I am shocked to feel Fergus picking up my hand. He places it between his own and I'm so aware of what this feels like that I barely notice Susannah and her desecrated Bach until the applause begins and she saunters off with her rude finger raised high.

On the way home, following the hour or so it takes us to disentangle ourselves from the entire community in the foyer, Fergus says, 'I'm a thoughtless bastard for subjecting you to that.'

'Why?' I say, genuinely surprised. 'I loved it. I love these people.'

'I meant the Bach,' he says.

'Oh that,' I say. 'Because I'm having a crisis of confidence, you mean. I'm not that sensitive, Fergus. Young Susannah could have played the Berg Concerto and I wouldn't have flinched, except at the damage she was doing to it.'

'That's utter nonsense,' Fergus says. 'You say a lot that you don't mean, Eva, purely for the effect of it.'

'Do I?' I laugh, slightly stung. 'How very annoying that must be.'

'And then what means the most to you,' Fergus says, 'you don't talk about at all. Why is it,' he says, 'that I know so little about you?'

'Because our whole relationship's been about music,' I say. 'That's the sort of people we are, apparently.'

'Is that what you think?'

'No, it's not what I think, Fergus. I'm playing that annoying game again of not saying what I mean.' I stare out of the side window. Can't make out anything past the patch of road the headlights are illuminating. 'You know more about me than most people,' I say. He doesn't offer any response to that so I go on. 'I don't find it easy to be open, it's true,' I say. 'I don't want to bare my soul to all and sundry. I don't see the point. I'd prefer to deal with my problems myself.'

Fergus flicks the headlights down from high beam and pulls into a bypass to let another car pass the other way. The indicator ticks as we sit idling. It's one of those annoying ones that dings an interval of a downwards major third. 'You're the same,' I say, 'don't try and tell me otherwise. You pour all of your deepness and darkness into your music, where it's safe. That's why you can be so wonderfully innocuous in the world at large. That and the fact that you keep yourself hidden up here, out of harm's way.'



The passing car has well and truly passed, but we sit, idling on, ding dong, ding dong. Fergus has his eyes set intently on the windscreen.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, ‘that sounded more harsh than I meant it to.’

‘Harsh but true,’ he says.

‘No it’s not,’ I say. ‘It’s just more of my bullshit.’ I fill the following pause in conversation by saying, ‘To be really honest with you Fergus, I was watching you in the crowd at the theatre tonight thinking how much I adore you. You are actually a really beautiful human being. So, there you go, one minute I’m idolising you, the next I’m ripping you to shreds.’

He doesn’t say anything to that. The indicator clangs on until he finally switches it off. Into the ensuing silence I say, ‘You want to tell me what you haven’t been honest about, here’s your opportunity. Nasty or nice, you may as well be out with it.’

He shakes his head. ‘Not now,’ he says. Well, I can sympathise with his loss of impulse. After all, the same thing happened to me this morning, didn’t it? And maybe it’s better if he does keep his secrets, since I’m so determined to keep mine.

He indicates again and pulls out from the bypass.

‘You going to work tonight?’ I ask him, steering us into safer conversational territory.

‘Aye, I’ll have to,’ he says.

‘The Tavener Quartet are breathing down your neck, are they?’

‘We’ve rehearsals in London next week.’

I’m devastated by this news, but all I say is, ‘I don’t know how you make do with so little sleep.’

‘You’re not a great sleeper yourself, so I’ve discovered since you’ve been here.’

‘Yes, but I couldn’t stay up working half the night like you do.’

‘Normally I make up for it during the day.’

‘Not while I’ve been here.’

‘To be honest, the older I get, the less sleep I seem to need.’

‘You’re not that old,’ I say.

‘I’ve got thirty years on you,’ he says.

‘So you keep reminding me,’ I say.

We turn towards Rackwick then, in between the shadows of the hills. A sudden glimmer of memory emerges of my arrival here, of staring at that road sign, but it’s gone as soon as I try to grasp it. I’m beginning to think it doesn’t really matter.

However unconscious the decision was to come here, I seemed to have been acting in my own best interest, as I was when I turned up on Dave’s doorstep in Adelaide. Maybe I look after myself better when I’m out of my mind. But then, maybe I’m not really out of my mind, maybe it’s a way of protecting myself, or of allowing my most sane self to take over and make good decisions for once.

Then again, maybe that’s all rationalising bullshit and I ought to take my father’s advice and head for the nearest psychiatrist’s office. But look at me, I’m alright here, I’m dealing with it here. I’ve been out tonight having fun. A few more days and maybe it will all be straight in my head, and then I can sit Fergus down and tell him everything. Maybe we can go back to London together. But no, I’m not ready for that thought. I don’t want to think about London. I don’t want to think about any future at all.

Fergus parks the car and we walk back up the hill through freezing night air. When we get inside he goes straight to his desk with the curtest of goodnights. I go to bed. I’ve got in the habit of leaving the door open a crack because I like to go to sleep listening to the sounds of him working out there. Also sometimes when he needs a break he’ll poke his head in to see if I’m still awake, invite me out again for whisky or hot chocolate. And I do stay awake tonight. I listen for him, although he’s not his usual

restless self. Once I hear him get up and tap a phrase out on the Steinway. Other than that, I have to content myself with the occasional sniff, the creak of his chair. I wonder where his mind has gone. I wonder if he is being focussed and productive while I lay here feeling full of him. If so, there will be pages for me to copy in the morning, the familiar endearing sight of his body slumped over them at his desk. I will have to start staying out of his way during the day so that he doesn't kill himself through sleep deprivation.

But in fact, he doesn't work for long. I hear him make his way up the passage to use the bathroom. I hear him take a piss, flush the toilet, clean his teeth. I hear him come out again and hesitate at my door.

'I'm awake,' I say.

He pushes the door slightly more ajar and says, 'Shall I make us a hot chocolate?'

'No, not unless you want one,' I say, 'come in and talk to me.'

He's in pyjamas, his frayed plaid dressing gown and his army green socks. We're like kids at a pyjama party, except the tone's a bit sombre. I offer him a pillow so that he can lean on the wall at the end of the bed but he chooses to perch instead. I shift the pillows behind me and sit with my knees up. 'Funny conversation before,' I say.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' he says.

'I wasn't asking for an apology.'

His knee jiggles, code for difficult, unspoken words. I say, 'I get the impression you're not quite saying something that you really need to say.'

He hesitates before he finally speaks, weighing his words. 'You asked me what happened after the *Limina* performance,' he says.

I put my head between my knees. 'Oh God,' I say. 'Do I want to hear this?'

'Eva,' he says, 'believe me, I took nothing of what you said to heart...'

‘Wise man, you.’ A hugely pregnant pause before I say, ‘Tell me I didn’t try to bed you, Fergus, I can be such a slut when I’m drunk.’

‘That’s not been my experience,’ Fergus says. ‘And I’ve been drunk with you any number of occasions.’

‘Yes, but I wasn’t in love with you all those other times. Only after I played *Limina*.’

Fergus looks at his feet. He shakes his head. ‘You say these things...’

‘I know. I’m sorry. The thing is, half the time I don’t see the truth until it’s fallen out of my mouth. And it is true, I did fall in love with you, how could I not have? That music, Fergus, shimmering up into the high reaches of St Magnus Cathedral, and you there in the audience, willing something out of me that nobody had ever seen before. But then...’

‘Life swept you up again and you forgot about me.’

I can’t argue with that, not if we’re aiming for honesty. ‘It wasn’t like you think,’ I say.

‘I didn’t forget about you,’ he says.

‘You didn’t contact me.’

‘For the opposite reason to what you might assume.’ A long pause. Fergus sits staring at his hands. Finally he speaks. ‘I wanted something from you after that night that it had never occurred to me to want before. But I had no desire to inflict that want on you. I waited for the safe distance of your Berg performance, the exquisite agony of watching you perform. And you were magnificent – you were – and you were devastated, and you were gone, there was no chance to talk to you. I came home thinking, just as well, forget about it now. And then you turned up at my door. You came to me. Not that I’ve read anything into that. I don’t take any of your declarations seriously.’

‘Even when I tell you I love you, I adore you?’

‘Don’t toy with me, Eva, for pity’s sake...’

‘I’m not toying with you, Fergus, I’m stone cold sober and I’m telling you what I feel.’

‘You’re twenty-five years old.’

‘Why does that have to matter?’

‘You don’t know yourself.’

I laugh. ‘And you do?’ I say. ‘Seriously?’

He’s right in one way, I can’t figure out how in a matter of a few short days we’ve arrived at this, and I don’t know if it’s what I want, but then, who ever knows such a thing unequivocally? My resounding thought is that I’d be safe with him, I’d be utterly safe. Isn’t that why I came? And anyway, there’s no more time for equivocating, because at that moment he says, ‘I adore every molecule of you, Eva, Byrne.’ There’s no alternative, given our history, given *Limina*, given my arrival here, given everything I’ve been saying, but to move and pull him in. The first kiss is hesitant, his lips are thin and dry and I don’t quite know what to make of them. But it isn’t too long before he’s wrenching the pyjama bottoms from me, one leg and then the other, pinning my legs open with his knees as he fumbles with his own pyjamas and enters me with an ecstasy he does not try to keep to himself. The phone starts to ring sometime during the whole proceedings but I don’t think Fergus even hears it.

### ***Wednesday***

Go back to that propitious day in Covent Garden, why don’t you Eva, and begin again. I’ve got the black-and-white postcard of Berg tucked into my rucksack. It’s a glorious June day, four years ago. A Saturday afternoon and Covent Garden is abuzz. It feels momentous, the day, the finding of Berg, and now I become aware of music, *Ride of the*

*Valkyries*, bizarrely rendered, can't quite tell what instruments. I move away from the stalls to join the crowd around the railings, cast my eyes down to the floor below to see a woman with Pippi Longstocking plaits riding a unicycle, plucking the Wagner on a ukulele. I lean over the railings to watch. There are three of them playing – accordion, cello, and the ukulele-strumming unicyclist, who pedals on the spot as she builds to her climax, her feet in perfect sync with the beat – forward, back, forward, back – while her hands pummel out a frenetic repetition. The black-haired accordionist kneels at her feet squeezing wailing chords like transubstantiated Wagnerian gods and the audience cheers and applauds as she jumps from her cycle, whips it into her free hand and holds it aloft as she bows.

What makes me do it? The weather. Silly, gushy bravado. When they finish playing I approach the unicyclist, maybe because she's the only woman, maybe because it was her flair that impressed me most, or maybe because of her thigh-high lolly-striped socks and her general flippy manner. Or maybe I simply know, since it's that kind of day. I walk up to her. Hold out my hand. We're an instant match, short, bleached, big-eyed girls, staring eye to eye, grinning mouth to mouth.

And years later we will still tell the story of when we met; we will tell it in pubs and over drunken dinners, we will tell it with our bodies twining, maximising our synergistic potential. Katie and Eva. Twins parted at birth, we say, or from another life. Although what I say to them all that day in Covent Garden is straight to the point. 'Let me buy you all a beer,' I say, 'and tell you why you need me.'

The sun melts benignly over the surfaces of tables and talk as I explain to them that, courtesy of a hippie school education back in Adelaide, I can juggle and fire-breathe, twirl batons, throw cartwheels at a whim. And, I add, I can also play the violin.

'Demonstrate,' Katie intones, raising her glass, eyeing the violin that rests between my feet. I get up and play Sarasate, flipping up and down the strings like an

acrobat. People throw coins. Coins rain down from the floor above and I scoop them up and juggle them for further applause and remuneration, before bowing extravagantly and returning to the table, offering my gathered loot. The afternoon unfolds over more beer and suddenly we're at Marianna's and it's the wee small hours and the restaurant's long closed. We're eating leftover gnocchi and pesto while the kitchen hands slug back and forth to the dishwashers and Marianna wanders by now and again to box her black-haired brother round the ears and say, 'Ambrose, you are a good for nothing, get your women and your accordion out of my kitchen, some of us have work to do. Some of us have a living to earn. Some of us would love nothing more than to stumble home to our beds.'

I stumble up the stairs with Katie and Ambrose to their flat, fall onto their couch and into their lives. There are pancakes for breakfast. Ambrose is making them. He's pulled his mass of hair back into a hair elastic. He sings something sleazy and Italian while he cooks. I lie on the couch pretending to sleep, waiting for Katie to emerge in all her hung-over glory. She's wearing a t-shirt. Her plaits are a manic fuzz. She leans her face on the bench next to Ambrose and groans. Ambrose puts a hand under the t-shirt, onto buttock, fingers creeping to play in the crack. She turns, slapping at his hand.

'We have a guest,' she says, although I've long since lowered my face into the quilt. She comes over and pulls it away. She leans and kisses my hair. 'What shall we do today?' she says, crawling in beside me, wrapping both of us in the quilt, slipping her fingers inside my knickers as easily as she might reach to stroke a small puppy's head.

Maybe we go to the park and row boats, Ambrose slopping his home-made sangria into glasses as Katie and I make some attempt to co ordinate the oars. Or maybe we go to a movie, a concert, a pub, a play, a gallery. Maybe we do what becomes our most regular Sunday afternoon pursuit – play long hours of Scrabble, while Ambrose

cooks up something or other dripping in olive oil, lemon, honey, rosemary, thyme, cumin, cinnamon, cardamom, whatever. I'm not used to this highly sensual gourmandising – food is something that I wack in the microwave and shovel down between bouts of practice – but here in Katie and Ambrose's flat I fall in love with flavours and smells, with thick, peppery red wines and things that ooze and drip and pleasure the nose and the tongue and the palate and the belly. Actually, what I fall in love with in this flat is life itself. There are conversations here that I knew existed but feel I've never had, of politics and history, literature and poetry. Ambrose is a Cambridge dropout, so Marianna informs me one day; the brilliant hope of the family who's too lazy to make anything of himself, who prefers to hang out all day writing gimmicky arrangements of the world's great music to titillate brainless, wine-soaked weekend audiences. A ham, Marianna calls him, a ham without the bone.

At some point over the weeks that follow Ambrose asks the obvious question, 'Why don't you have boyfriends, Eva?'

And I say what I always say, 'Because I'm not interested.'

'Everybody's interested in fucking, Eva,' he says, 'believe me, we barely pass a minute in a day without thinking about it. Fucking,' he says, 'is one of life's magnificent pleasures. You are missing out, Eva. Your tiny little world, which consists of you and your violin...'

'And the vast universe which is music,' I say.

'Now that is stunted,' Ambrose says. 'Seriously stunted. Katie,' he says, wagging his finger at me while he addresses his wife, 'we have to find this girl a fuck.'

But there's no need in the end, the cello player and I gravitate towards each other naturally enough. Rafe of the sad, serious eyes, the fine hands and the surprisingly enormous penis. And whatever Katie and I are doing remains entirely unspoken. I don't know why it happens with her when it never has with any other woman. Curiosity



would be the flimsy excuse. Really, I'm enthralled by Katie, these infrequent moments of physical spontaneity come as naturally as breathing and pass with as little comment.

In any case my life is at the RAM. Rafe is at the RCM. Weekdays continue with their relentless focus but weekends, whenever I can, I'm with Katie and Ambrose, playing gigs or lounging about down in Marianna's or playing Scrabble at the messy table in the flat upstairs or organising new arrangements for the troupe – miniaturised *Carmens* and *Turandots*, bastardised Beethovens and Mozarts. My father happens by Covent Garden one Saturday and is appalled. But I'm having fun, amazed by this reckless abandon of my work-a-day relentlessness, overjoyed to have found these mad companions, this collusive mayhem, this side of myself which is a little nuts, a little less inclined to take it all too seriously. And because they are older than I am, admit it, I sit at their feet, absorbing their off-kilter existentialism like a true disciple.

When we have a gig Katie dresses me up in some of her garb and lines my mouth with lipstick and sometimes she brings her own mouth close, or brushes my nipples through my clothes with her fingers, so fleeting it isn't real. She's fascinated by the scars. She'll stand staring at them while I'm in the shower. She calls it Jackson Pollock on skin. 'Thank God you're over all that,' she says, and she lets her fingers stray, and then her tongue.

And then there's Rafe. He's a pretty boy, Rafe, he hails from Switzerland. I take him to my basement. I kick the mess on the floor into a heap. I throw the mess off the bed. I strip him down. He has a blush that spreads across his entire, fine body, does Rafe. And that penis – huge – defying his fragile nature and the serious brown eyes behind their thin black frames. I give it a go, but he knows, however hard I try, that I'm really not all that interested. It quickly becomes a sore point between us.

'Katie says you're damaged,' he tells me.

Fuck you, Katie, but when I confront her she merely says, ‘I am so jealous of his hands.’

‘What about Ambrose’s hands?’ I say. But she won’t be drawn on the subject of Ambrose.

The night before I leave for Vienna we ready ourselves to dine at Marianna’s. Ambrose is already downstairs helping with pre-dinner prep. Rafe has not yet arrived. Katie and I have been to Camden Markets and bought identical flapper dresses – hers is red and mine is turquoise. Of course, it goes without saying that I wear mine over a long-sleeve black leotard – Katie has arm flesh to admire, I have Pollock-style cross-hatching that I’m not yet ready to display as public art. We don fishnet stockings and suspenders and black stilettos pulled from Katie’s Mary Poppins-style, never-ending grab bag of fashion accessories. We draw thick black kohl around each other’s eyes and vermilion on our lips. What she then does with her fingers inside my leotard does not need to be spelt out here. Afterwards, she picks up her brush and starts brushing her hair. She says, ‘Ambrose and I want a baby. When you come back I might be round as a beach ball. We can knit booties together. You can help at the birth. What do you say, Eva?’

We join Ambrose and Rafe down in Marianna’s. We drink a lot of red wine. Katie hangs off Ambrose, offering him long, indulgent kisses. ‘You know,’ she says to Rafe, you and Eva would have perfect, pretty babies. Make her happy, Rafe,’ she says, as if she is offering me to him, ‘make her happy.’

I take Rafe home to my basement. My father is having one of his practising frenzies on the floor above, and I’m so angry with Katie that I fuck Rafe on every available surface just so that I might one day taunt her with the fact. He’s ecstatic, but my mind is already elsewhere. Vienna. ‘I have to leave at five,’ I say, removing his glasses, setting them on the bedside table, helping him out of his shirt and jeans. I put

him under the quilt, switch out the light, put on pyjamas and set the alarm. Climb in next to him, turning him over so that I burrow into his back. 'You smell good,' I say, 'you're beautiful.' Katie's right – in a perfect world I could have this boy's perfect babies.

I dream of a Vienna which is seared with light, its streets flooded with music and empty of people. Even the trams are empty, ghost-driven. But I have to get somewhere, urgently, so I board. I watch the stop numbers without the faintest idea which stop I want. At Stop 23 Alban Berg boards in a black fur coat, carrying his hat and umbrella. He smiles at me, sits beside me, kisses both my cheeks and I say, 'You're beautiful, we will have perfect, pretty babies,' and he throws his head back and laughs. I wake. The clock says 23:23. I am surely still dreaming.

I tramp Vienna in search of Berg, my mind disassembling contemporary buildings to see the streets as Berg saw them, searching for vestiges of Loos curvature and Gropius cubes, light refracting through the four dimensions of height, depth, width and time. Vienna in the early twentieth century – God was dead, artists raged, meaning broke into pieces and rained from the sky. Tonality was the irrelevant advocate of a non-existent higher order; Schoenberg invented serialism to rein in the anarchy after its demise, marshalling the twelve tones of the chromatic scale into democratic compliance to this new formalism, which, true to the nature of revolution, he implemented with brutal, dispassionate rigour. He despised the backward glance. He formed the Second Viennese School with his students, Berg and Webern among them. The public hated them. Dissonance reigned onstage and in the audience. Recitals turned into riots.

I've got every one of Berg's works on my ipod and those of Schoenberg and Webern I can tolerate. *Forgive me, I want to say, I am no intellectual – Berg is the one, in my humble opinion, who turned revolution into bread for the masses.*

Behrendt begins a campaign. ‘No,’ he says, and ‘start again please’; *no* and *start again* until I want to whip at his head and gouge at his eyes with my bow. It’s the Guarneri, I’ve tried, but I cannot make myself feel at home on it. I want the Maggie, I know it so intimately, whereas the Guarneri holds me at bay, like a stolid old uncle. I seem to be able to do little more than make polite conversation with it.

‘Do you know the *Altenberglieder*?’ Behrendt says.

Yes. Of course I do, I know all of Berg’s works. I pore over miniature scores in my bedsit, night after night, cradling a hot water bottle with my feet resting on the central heating module, desperate for warmth.

‘Tell me about the first vocal entry,’ Behrendt says.

‘There is no word, the sound is produced with the mouth partly closed. Then the second note is sung with the mouth open but still no word...’

‘And what is the first word sung?’

‘I can’t remember.’ Damn it.

‘It is *seele* – do you know what this means?’ I shake my head. Infantile German. ‘*Soul*,’ he says. ‘But Berg places the word at such a pitch that it is breathy, unconvicted, as if questioning its own veracity. As if questioning its right to exist. Do you understand?’ I nod. ‘This concerto begins with uncertainty. These open strings, so plain – already the audience is unsettled – is it merely tuning, or has the music begun? Or if you must, he waves his hand, dismissing the notion even as he says it, it is the soul of a girl entering the world, uncertain, perhaps knowing even before she is cast into physical infancy, something of the torment ahead. He stubs his cigarette in the ashtray. If you prefer, then think in allegory. But ultimately the music must speak for itself. Start again please.’

Rafe visits a couple of times, until I tell him not to. Katie and Ambrose come for impromptu visits, once in a hired Kombi van with white daisies painted along the side,

another time en convoluted route to Lourdes. Katie had lost a baby. They were donning Ambrose's childhood Catholicism like a party costume, entreating the Madonna for healthy bambinos. It seemed to make them feel better. Katie was pale and serious as a penitent. I gave them a postcard of St Beatrice cradling her pregnant belly and waved as they pattered off in their mini hire car, Ambrose's big belly stuffed behind the steering wheel while Katie huddled in a corner, subservient now to the whims of God and biology.



I came home from Vienna for Christmas. You were at the airport, Mama, in baggy green hemp trousers and an oversize print shirt. You seemed hunched to me, like you'd grown a lump at the back of your neck. Your wrists looked swollen, your fingers puffy. I'd seen you only the previous July but you'd altered so radically in this time. You hugged me, which was a surprise. Affection had been difficult between us for years. It was a strange hug, though, it made me sad. I couldn't really find you in it, although I could tell that you were trying. It didn't feel like the body that I remembered somewhere deep within my own body. The body that had suckled me till I was five years old, and that I'd slept against for most of my childhood. I knew that body slippery in the bath, sweaty from the garden, salty from the ocean. I knew it sobbing and I knew it laughing. I'd watched it piss and crap, bleed, vomit, and scream. Anything I knew about being human I knew from that body. I knew it angry enough to hurl its fists at me, I knew it hugging me so tight that I lost any sense of where my own skin began. But when you hugged me that day at the airport all I felt was the rush of air as you pulled away.

You took my rucksack. ‘Light enough for a quick getaway,’ you said, and I tagged behind you down the long light-flooded walkways of Adelaide’s new airport, clutching the Guarneri, smacking into forty plus degree heat as the glass doors parted.

But I don’t want to think about that. Let’s tell another story. What about circus, Mama? We juggled and cartwheeled and somersaulted our way through every Thursday night of my childhood, making our own costumes, harlequin pants of vivid silk, jongleur’s hats dripping with bells. We practised our routines on the deck, under the stars. I was always top of the human pyramid because I was small, and you were always on the bottom, Mama, holding everybody else together, because most everybody else except the teachers – scary Welsh couple, minimal social skills – was a kid. We did a show about the fire-breathing dragon and caught the school hall’s muslin curtains on fire, children in the audience screaming, remember? Or the show about a tripped-out gang of adolescent kangaroos – lots of acrobatic potential in that. You dyed all the costumes using leaves from Aurora’s own trees. You smelt like trees, Mama, have I said that already? And not because your hands were always in the earth, it was the sap and the spirit of the trees that I could smell on you, I’m certain. I had an easier time getting a grip on the tree spirit thing than I did on some of your other more esoteric notions, I have to say. The spirit of Buddha residing on Mars, for example, Christ hovering about the moon, or maybe the sun, I’m hazy on the details. I hope for your sake that there’s a payoff for a lifetime of ardent, ridiculous belief.



‘Don’t go down below to the bothy,’ Fergus said to me when we woke this morning. We were still in bed, but he needed to work, lack of sleep and bodily revelation were not going to stop him, not after this many years of routine. No amount of persuasion on

my part would get him to linger. So I sighed and complained and got up with him. I put the kettle on while he used the bathroom. Set a cup of tea on his desk and studied the few lines he'd managed to jot down in his brief effort the night before. But everything was different now. Would this new arrangement of ours change the way he viewed what he was working on? Would it alter his ideas? He came out from the bathroom and pulled me into his arms. I pushed him into his chair and straddled him. 'Work, now,' I said. His hands went up under my t-shirt. In no time I was on the desk and he was inside me and shortly after that his pages from the night before were dishevelled and splodged with his cum. I sat back in his lap. He lifted the t-shirt again to look at me in the light and said, 'Eva, what are these scars?'

I pulled his face towards me, started kissing at his ear. 'You don't have to know everything,' I said.

'I want to know everything,' he said.

I put the damaged nipple to his mouth and said, 'Make me better,' and he suckled so voraciously that I came again, right there on his lap.

Then I went to clean myself up and get dressed. When I came back out he was sitting exactly as I'd left him, although he'd done his fly up.

'I can't work,' he said.

I stood behind his chair and wrapped my arms around him and said, 'You have to work, else you'll be taking the Tavener Quartet all those pages we just splattered with your seed.'

He turned his face and I kissed him. He said, 'You are a brazen-mouthed wee lass.'

'It's one of the things you love about me,' I said.

'I love everything about you,' he said.

He's not noticed that I've pulled the telephone out at the socket. I think we deserve a couple of uninterrupted days, is all.

*Dear Eva,*

*I'm reduced to writing to you, since you cannot be civil on the phone. I've enclosed Claudia Ballantyne's review. I happened to see her at a Decca lunch the other day, lucky for you, because she said she'd been trying to contact you and you hadn't returned her messages. She'd like to do an interview with you for Strad, sooner rather than later, while the buzz is still happening about your recording. I've enclosed her business card. A word of advice: do not let this opportunity pass you by. Stop frittering your time away up there and come home. Your friend Ambrose was here the other day, by the way, banging on your door. I gave him Fergus's number. You'll be pleased to know he was loyal to you and would give me no information at all about the police or any other detail of what you've been up to in the months you've been largely absent from here. I may be frequently absent myself, Eva, but I do keep abreast of what is going on. And as I said to you the other day on the phone, I think it is time you got your life in order. Some things are beyond our control, but we can always choose how we respond to them.*

*As for your attitude to me, I remain truly mystified. Are you still upset about Melanie? If so, I can only repeat what I've already told you, that I acted in what I believed to be both of your best interests. She's not upset, by the way. I really do think it's matter of how you choose to respond, and your tendency, I'm afraid to say, is to overdramatise.*

*I'm in Germany from Friday, then onto Basel and Zurich and Prague. I'll be back in a couple of weeks. I assume you will be well and truly back yourself by then.*



*I've also enclosed some documents Fizz would like your signature on sooner rather than later. Send them direct to her, not to Pop. She's ended up having to do most of the legal legwork, driving up and down from the Mount, because Pop's had pneumonia. She's also had to look after him. I gathered from our phone conversation that she shares my view that it's time you started approaching all of this with a little more maturity and cooperation.*

*Your father*

I throw the rest of the post and Fergus's keys on the kitchen table. He's still at his desk, bless him. I wonder how many times a fifty-five year old man can orgasm in one day. Would his capacity be greater because he's been saving it up all these years? I don't know why but orgasm is suddenly all I can think about. I contemplate going back to bed and making myself come again but it's nearly lunchtime and so I decide to make soup instead. I should have gone to the store while I was out. I might go later. I loved being in Fergus's car, driving off to get his mail. I loved the look of curiosity on Sylvia's face, couldn't help wondering if I was bearing the traces of someone so recently and thoroughly fucked. And so openly adored. I don't care who knows. I think I'm falling in love with this place.

Now he stands in the doorway looking so weary that I take him by the hand and lead him back to the bedroom, and both of us sleep, sardined together on the narrow bed. I wake sometime later to find him leaning up on his elbow gazing at me. I can tell from the darkness of the room that the day's almost gone. Neither of us has eaten since last night.

'I haven't slept like that in months,' I say. I put my hand up to stroke at his face, feeling an incredible tenderness towards all its lines and creases. 'But did you sleep?' I say.

‘The sleep of the dead,’ he says. ‘And then I woke to you.’ His hand is under my t-shirt, stroking at my breasts, my belly, moving down between my legs, watching my face as he makes me come again.

‘You were completely wasted as a celibate,’ I say.

His hands have moved up under my t-shirt again. His fingers trace the contours of the scars. He says, ‘Did you do this to yourself?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘Years ago.’

‘As a teenager.’

‘Yes.’

‘What would make you do such a thing?’

‘Pent-up adolescent emotion. General self-loathing. I don’t know, Fergus, if you’re thrilling to the idea of slicing at yourself with razor blades, chances are you’re not in a stable enough frame of mind to articulate why. It felt good at the time, that’s about all I can tell you.’

‘But did something happen, to make you...’

I throw the blankets back and get out of bed. Stick the knickers on that I’d discarded on the floor at some point. ‘Just because you’re having sex with me, old man, doesn’t mean I’m going to suddenly turn into one of those people that spills my guts about everything,’ I say. ‘I don’t want to think about that time of my life right now.’ I move to Fergus’s drawers and start rummaging. ‘Can I borrow one of these undershirt things?’ I say.

‘Of course,’ he says. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed now, the bottom half of his legs protruding from the blankets, white and veined. His toenails are thick and yellow and need cutting. His big toes sit at an acute angle, squeezing the other toes

together. I find myself thinking of beautiful Rafe. Then I find myself pulling the blankets away to look at Fergus's penis. It lies there, grotesque and purple against the livid white of his inner thigh. And I am so moved by it that I kneel and take it into my mouth. But then I'm sobbing, and Fergus is pulling me up from the floor and into his lap, where he cradles me, rocking me back and forth, shushing at my hair.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

Finally I say, 'You have to give me time.'

'Of course I'll give you time,' he says. He reaches around to kiss me, and I can't help it, the comparisons arise again. Not Rafe this time, I have another benchmark for mouths. But Fergus is so sweet and gentle. When he finally pulls away, I put my hands to his face and draw him back in, kiss him one more time before I say, 'I'm fucking starving, what say we cobble some dinner together.'

It's later, over bowls of mashed potatoes, Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier playing in the background, that he says, 'Let's try another tack, let's be chronological.'

'Chronology's boring,' I say.

'No, I disagree,' Fergus says, 'chronology can be very clarifying. It can also slow the pace of things, if that's what you want. One step at a time.'

Fergus is at one end of the couch and I'm at the other, like we've always done it, except my feet are on his lap, and the hand that he's not using to shovel mashed potatoes into his mouth rests warmly over my ankles. 'Alright, then,' I say. 'Tell me everything chronologically after you came back to Orkney from Glasgow.'

'That's a lot of years.'

'One step at a time,' I say.

'I went back to living with Jeannie's family,' Fergus says. 'I worked at the Post Office, sorting mail. I spent a good portion of the remaining years of my twenties

drinking away the money I made at the Post Office. When the drink wasn't enough to chase the demons away I wrote music.'

'Pithy,' I say. 'Don't you hate how words can reduce a life to a puff of froth? I mean, what really happened, Fergus?'

'I developed bronchial problems. I nearly died more than once of pneumonia. I contracted scarlet fever and nearly died of that. I spent a good deal of time in bed studying scores and developing my own compositional language. If I hadn't been ill I might well have killed myself with drink like my mother. The illness gave me reverence for life and taught me to value my own. That's how I came to write *Four Human Songs* and if they hadn't each been variously picked up for awards and films and so on over the years I might still be working at the Post Office.'

'Okay,' I say, 'that's another take. But I could read all that in a biography. In fact, I think I have. What was happening for you personally?'

'Apart from the drinking, you mean?' He pauses to think about it. 'I discovered the Catholic Church when I was twenty-nine. My family are Protestant, you know, and not very enthusiastically, but I walked into St Magnus Cathedral one Sunday morning, and I was taken with it all, as I've told you. I started to read things I'd borrowed from the library, and then to talk to the priest who was here at the time. He was a great comfort to me. I even briefly contemplated the priesthood.'

'Is that when you gave up sex?'

'I didn't give up sex. You're obsessed with this celibacy notion, Eva, when I've never thought of my life in those terms. I didn't set out with any intention of avoiding sex, or love, it just never came my way.'

'Would you like to have married, had kids, all that?'

'I don't honestly think it crossed my mind all that often. It simply wasn't something I ever thought of as an option.'

‘Did you ever think that I’d be an option?’ I say, and he looks at me, startled. I save him from answering by saying, ‘Have you been lonely?’

‘Lonely?’ he laughs. ‘I feel like you’re interviewing me for that aforementioned biography.’

‘Maybe I am. It’s time for a new one, isn’t it?’

There’s a pause before he says, ‘I’ve lived like this for so long, Eva, that I don’t think of it in terms of loneliness.’

I nudge him with my foot, then. ‘You told me you were an arse to yourself,’ I say. ‘You called yourself a black hole. What could be more lonely than a black hole?’

‘Alright,’ he says, ‘point taken. Now you,’ he says, tapping at my ankle. ‘what about your own chronology. We were hovering around your early teens, I believe.’

‘Can we skip a decade?’

‘Give me a brief synopsis.’

‘It’s going to be sanitised, it’s important you know that. I’m not going to launch into a detailed account of why I took a liking to razor blades, for example, any more than you’re going to tell me why you spent your twenties intent on drinking yourself to death. These things leak out slowly, Fergus. The darkness has to be approached side on, are we agreed on that?’

‘Absolutely,’ Fergus says.

‘Alright then. I stayed in Australia until I was sixteen. Then I came to London.’

‘That is very brief, Eva. I learnt more than that reading Gordon Fenton...’

‘Well, so, you already know.’

‘Tell me how the Proms came about.’

I sigh. ‘I’d come and spend my holidays with my father, like I said. He’d started this tradition of pulling me up on the stage for his encores once I was good enough not to embarrass him. We’d do a movement of the Bach or something. If it was a

particularly receptive audience, or a more casual venue, say a summer festival or something, he'd give the second encore to me. The Thais *Meditation* was one of my showpieces. One of the Proms organisers saw me perform with my father, and since my father was already booked to perform, he thought it would add a nice touch to the program. My father's manager – you know Helen – helped me choose a dress. I got my hair done, all that. And then Gordon Fenton gave me my first taste of public humiliation, as you've read. End of story.'

'End of story?'

'I lost my way a bit after that.'

'Because of Gordon Fenton.'

'Actually, more because of my father, who concurred with Gordon Fenton. You have to remember two things: firstly, I completely idolised my father, and secondly, I was fifteen, utterly naïve, possessed of a highly fragile ego. Of course I was going to believe anything that Gordon Fenton said. More to the point, I was going to believe anything my father said.'

'And what did he say?'

'He denies it, but he basically told me that I might as well face the fact that while I was clearly talented, my shoddy start, which he totally blamed my mother for, had probably cost me a career. So I went back to Australia.'

'Not for long.'

'No, as it turned out.'

'You proved him wrong, Eva.'

'Is that what I've been trying to do?' A pause before I say, 'I've been having this fantasy about teaching kids at the school in Stromness.'

'Eva.'

'I'm good with kids.'

‘You’re one of the most passionate performers I’ve ever seen.’

‘But I’m tired,’ I say, ‘And I don’t want to be in London. I want to be here, with you.’ I pull the pillow from behind me, rest it on Fergus’s lap and move to lie on it. Fergus’s hand begins to stroke at my hair. I feel the most exquisite descent of sleep. ‘I think we’re going to need a bigger bed,’ I say.

### *Thursday*

The trouble with chronology is that it irons everything out into inevitabilities. But I suppose it is a necessary evil, a way of setting the story straight, of marching stepwise towards some conclusion, however inadequate. Humans like conclusions. We like to tell our stories and have them turn out the same way every time, but there’s a cost to this, which is the depth of their truth. Re-angle the light and any story changes the length of its shadows.

We went to bed last night and I lay awake feeling sick with guilt that I’m failing to make the most obvious disclosures to Fergus, and in a way, even to myself. But then, I rationalised, I’m doing exactly what we talked about last night, taking it slowly, approaching it obliquely, saving myself the bother of going mad again, saving Fergus the bother of mopping up after that madness. I wish I had succeeded in seducing him after *Limina*, it might have all been cleaner that way. I might have had him with me these past few months, protecting me from myself. Then again, I might have destroyed him.

That trip home from Vienna, Mama, you’d wanted to go to Kangaroo Island and I’d laughed at you. I couldn’t believe that’s what you’d dragged me home for. We didn’t go; I had too much work to do, and I could hardly have taken the Guarneri over there, could I? I went to Maggie’s and Pop’s on Christmas Day because they were old and

who knew when I'd see them again. You didn't come, needless to say, because you'd never quite forgiven them for the ludicrous transgression of thinking differently to you.

That sounds harsher than I mean it to, but when Maggie died a matter of weeks later, I felt vindicated, at least until I came home and found you in the clinic, cold and intractable, barely able to focus your eyes on me. I thought you were punishing me, it's only now that I see how ill you really were. How humiliated. Nobody wants to find themselves down a dark well without a ladder, especially when someone is looking down at them from the bright sunshine at the surface, prepared to simply turn and walk away.

I can flick through Fergus's dossier of my life and see the shape of the future already impinging, as if it was all bound to happen. But that's very Bergian and fatalistic, isn't it? Everything in this file is post-Vienna, post meeting Fergus, post finding Mama in that horrible state. Here's the newspaper clipping headed, *Timothy and Eva Byrne Double Bach's Beauty...*

*An exquisite opening to this year's St Magnus Festival, father and daughter played with such perfect simpatico, as only a father and daughter might, from time to time beaming at each other over their instruments, as if relishing the pure magic of what they were creating together...*

And here's the photo, father and daughter grinning over their violins. I was giddy that trip to Orkney, I felt like a survivor. This was my life. It felt adult. It felt real. I met Fergus Cunningham. Deep in the bowels of some pub in Kirkwall, he raised his glass. 'To your luminous Bach,' he said, 'to your luminous self.'



Next, if we're being chronological about it:

*Dear FC, incredible surprise to see you at the RAM today, wish I'd known about your masterclass prior to Teddy Clark's casual mention of it during my lesson. Wish I'd seen more than your deferential bow to the final applause, but there you have it, I'm an idiot, I don't read the noticeboards. So thanks for the drink afterwards. My shout next time. I'm amazed that you remember my rave about the Berg Concerto on our last drunken night together in that pub in Kirkwall. I'm even more amazed that it inspired you to write something, and in case I didn't sound enthusiastic enough today, let me say it again: I would love more than anything to workshop it with you whenever you're ready. Call and I'll come running. Seriously. You have my number, you know where I am. Great to see you again, EB.*

Ah, the glory days of the RAM. Teddy Clark and his chic strip glasses and his endless nasal sarcasm, the rush of hours, the bottomless coffees, scores memorised on trains or walking Marylebone Road with the jackhammers and the pumping car radios in agitating counterpoint, TV soapies in the common room on those days that started so early that by mid-afternoon they felt mesmeric and endless.

But they did end. I stood on the steps in my mortarboard and gown with the Roth prize for outstanding recital in my hands, smiling for people's cameras. I had not the slightest idea what I was going to do next. So I went and got pissed with all my fellow students and Katie and Ambrose and Fergus, who'd come to London especially for the occasion, and who presented me with the first incarnation of *Limina* as a graduation gift. We went to Marianna's. Fergus entertained us with anecdotes about famous people with short tempers and very low IQs. Katie made him her pet for the

night, fawned all over him in that way I knew annoyed Ambrose as much as it annoyed me, but then, she was doing the IVF thing, so we let her be. What am I talking about? We always let her be.

Eventually Katie and Ambrose went upstairs to bed and Fergus and I hit the streets. We're late night sidewalk-pounders, the both of us, afraid of sleep. Hours we walked that night, we ended up in a fluoro-lit café somewhere round Notting Hill, and I said to him, 'Fergus, what am I going to do with my life?' And he said, 'I think that's perfectly obvious.'

Conversation with my father, a few nights later, he just off a plane from somewhere, so this is a belated celebration. We're eating take-away Indian, sitting on the floor in his living room, and of course the question of what I'm going to do is paramount in his mind, too. He's chuffed that I won the Roth prize. He didn't, he tells me, because he'd just found out Mama was pregnant with me, which rather put him off his game.

'So...' he says. He waves his fork at me, scattering rice. 'You've got something up your sleeve, I can tell. You've been auditioning and not told me. Come on, then, out with it. Which orchestra? Or did you actually audition for the Klee Ensemble, as I suggested.'

'Neither,' I say, 'I'm going to record the Berg concerto.'

He laughs. 'You haven't got a recording contract.'

'I'm going to raise the money.'

'For a full – in fact, an augmented orchestra? A recording studio? Do you know how much money you are actually talking about? Don't expect me to...'

'I don't want any help from you. I'm going to find sponsors. Raise the money myself...'

'How utterly ridiculous. Win more prizes, Eva...'

'I'm sick of the whole scene...'

'You can't afford to be sick of it if...'

'Recording is the way to get recognition...'

'Well, yes, a decent recording, not some sort of bootleg cowboy CD...'

'I'm not talking about bootleg. I've already discussed it with Teddy and David Henderson – the RAM want to give it their support...'

'But why?'

'Because this is what they groomed me for, not an orchestra.'

'There's nothing wrong with orchestral work.'

'I never said there was. It just isn't what I want to do.'

'But you're a musician.'

'That doesn't mean I'm cut out for an orchestra. I'm a freak, Tim. Like you. I don't get on all that well in groups.'

'Well then...that attitude does severely limit your options.'

'Hence the recording.'

'It's ridiculous. A gamble. You could waste years. And then what? You'll end up teaching,' he says, with pure disdain. And then he sighs. 'This is your mother, you know. That silly school you went to. Inverse pride in being non-conformist.'

This lottery of conception – parents flung together like mismatched clothing. Melanie Theroux from Pittsburgh, you beat me in one of those competitions. You with my father's green eyes and that black swanked-up hair. I didn't know a thing about you but you were bound to exist, were you not? All those billions of sperm being shot out willy-nilly as if in some urge on my father's part for international ambassadorship. And despite the fact that you had even less of my father than I did growing up (your mother being sensible enough to have excluded him from your childhood) you were

nevertheless properly educated, aimed in a perfect trajectory towards Juilliard, taught how to dress and make your hair do that filmy, silky ribbon thing.

We should have been interested in each other, but I think you were as shocked by my existence as I was by yours. Still, I was impressed by the way you floored my father that night in the green room, descending on him in your jewel-studded stilettos, saying, *Well hello, Daddy, it's nice to finally meet you.* So like him, Melanie Theroux from Pittsburgh, so like him. I've seen the photos of you since, the school snaps sent annually by your mother in exchange for the generous wallop of child support. I questioned my father studiously – heatedly – at the time. He seemed to be under the impression that you were irrelevant to me and vice versa. And he's probably right. Your existence makes very little difference to me. And it has nothing whatsoever to do with why I'm angry with him. How typical of him to be so clueless.



This morning I woke to the strains of a Latin mass. *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi...* I thought Fergus must have put a CD on out in the living room, except that Fergus was asleep beside me. Then I remembered him telling me that there's a monastery on one of these islands, so I briefly imagined that I was hearing the voices of a prayer vigil floating across the waves from twenty-odd monks on a tiny, solitary outcrop. But it is a long way and there are many islands in between. These were wind voices, no more real than prayer, but all the more beautiful for that. I took Fergus's arm and wrapped myself in it. He snores, so I've discovered. In fact he was honking like a goose in the wee hours.

Fergus is at his meeting with Arthur and all the other community-minded islanders. That's why I'm sitting here at his desk going through the file. I've already

copied all of his pages from yesterday. I've played around with some nibs and ink I found in one of the ceramic pots on his desk, writing his name over and over in very clumsy calligraphy, enjoying the susurrations of the nibs across the page. I've flicked some more through his books of poetry. I even copied out the Rumi poem, because in fact it seems to encapsulate everything that I feel right now, in this new reality we are creating.

*Inside this new love, die.  
Your way begins on the other side.  
Become the sky.  
Take an axe to the prison wall.  
Escape.  
Walk out like someone suddenly born into colour.  
Do it now  
You're covered with thick cloud.  
Slide out the side. Die,  
and be quiet. Quietness is the surest sign  
that you've died.  
Your old life was a frantic running  
from silence*

*The speechless full moon  
comes out now.*

But carry on, now Eva. Force yourself with this chronology. *My way begins on the other side... Do it now.*

My father had put me through the RAM but I was not going to ask him for anything more so after I graduated, I took whatever music work came my way, from theatre

orchestras and the opera, through fill-ins for this or that ensemble, weddings, restaurants, I even busked in the Tube from time to time. And I worked at Marianna's. Stayed upstairs at Katie and Ambrose's on those nights. Katie was teaching full time. Ambrose was doing what Ambrose always did, waiting for Katie to have a baby so he'd have a decent excuse to stay home. It was an obsession for both of them by now. I was suddenly a font of information on biodynamic eating and you sent me information about fertility-enhancing herbs and potions, Mama. That was the start of something, wasn't it? You were needy on the phone, you begged me to come home again.

I was wary, but I did get as far as booking a ticket. Then I got a fill-in gig with the Scottish Philharmonia and ended up in Edinburgh for six months instead. Which felt like a good thing at the time. I liked Edinburgh, it was grimy and freezing and not afraid of its past. I even surprised myself by enjoying the orchestra. I was flat-sitting for the person whose position in the orchestra I was also minding, living far beyond my own standards in rooms full of Persian rugs and long red velvet curtains. I even had a four-poster bed, a step up from my basement or the couch at Katie and Ambrose's. Fergus visited a couple of times. He knew Stephen Elliot. The Berg recording was discussed over dinner one night, the deal sealed. I had some money by then, the RAM came good with their sponsorship, I won an Arts grant, and the rest came through an anonymous donation that Fergus has always refused to discuss.

The principal cellist in the Scottish Phil, a German powerhouse called Britta Lageroth, suggested I start a blog to trace the journey of the recording. Self promotion was a necessity, as she pointed out, the price I would have to pay for keeping my autonomy. Her partner, Rosie, was a web designer. We spent a day in Greyfriar's Cemetery, Rosie snapping broody shots in low cloud of me and the Maggie. Add to that a short, promotional video filmed against the red velvet curtains in the flat, in which I

had to pretend to be talking to a BBC-style interviewer, and you have my website, there for stray trawlers to chance upon.

I sat down with a glass of red one night in Edinburgh and wrote the first blog, all about Alban Berg. Here it is, I must have printed it out for Fergus, who refuses to own a computer. Under the image from my Covent Garden postcard of the young Berg I've written:

*Why record the Berg Violin Concerto? It isn't particularly popular – it's never going to top the charts in any Top 100 Concerto contest. It's a difficult, depressing work and recording it is highly unlikely to bring me any commercial success. But 'follow your bliss', as the bumper sticker says, I'm young, I'm unemployed, what have I got to lose, other than money and reputation?*

*The thing is, I love this work, it excites me like no other. So allow me to begin by seducing you a little with its story. Berg received a commission from the American violinist Louis Krasner to write the work in 1935. He was busy working on his opera Lulu at the time. But when Manon Gropius, eighteen-year-old daughter of Berg's good friend Alma Mahler and her second husband, the Bauhaus architect, Walter Gropius, died of polio, Berg turned to his concerto to express his grief.*

*Dedicated to the memory of an angel, Berg uses the solo violin to convey the sense of Manon's life, her death, and (characteristic of early twentieth century thinking) her transfiguration. This concerto was the first to employ Schoenberg's principles of twelve-tone music, in which the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are arranged in a fixed order from which all melody and harmony are generated. But Berg was criticised by his peers because his particular arrangement of the twelve notes gave him plenty of scope for dipping*

*into traditional harmonic progressions. He was also criticised for harking back to the past, quoting both a Viennese waltz, and a Carinthian folk tune.*

*A lover of things synchronous, always seeking the hidden grace of an organised fate, Berg must have been thrilled to find a fragment in a Bach Chorale which exactly matched the last four notes of his tone row, particularly since the text for the chorale could not have been more profoundly apt for a requiem to a young girl dying in agony:*

*It is enough!  
Lord, if it pleases You  
Unshackle me at last.  
My Jesus comes;  
I bid the world goodnight.  
I travel to the heavenly home.  
I surely travel there in peace,  
My troubles left below.  
It is enough! It is enough!*

*In a tragic twist, Berg himself died soon after the Concerto's completion, of blood poisoning resulting from poorly treated boils. He was fifty, and in his musical prime. His beloved Vienna fell to Hitler soon after. By the time of its premiere, Berg's Concerto was a requiem in a far greater sense than its composer might have wished to envisage.*

*But since the death of Berg's widow, Helene, in 1976, it has also become evident that through his music Berg immortalised secrets he had kept hidden behind the veneer of his respectable, public life. He often used explicit codes – Schoenberg's and Webern's initials are integral to the Chamber Concerto, for example – but it was not until Berg's specially annotated score of the Lyric Suite*



*was discovered after Helene Berg's death that the frequent references to Berg's secret mistress, Hanna Fuchs, were revealed. Her initials (H is B flat in German notation) and Berg's are frequently entwined: HFAB. Her fate number (10) and his (23), are multiplied, or stand sentinel at symbolic junctures.*

*Multiple usages of the ABHF are also evident in the Violin Concerto, as are repeated uses of the fate numbers 10 and 23. Interestingly, since Berg can have had no premonition of his own death, key moments in the unfolding tragedy of death in the second movement are punctuated by his initials, and on bars that are related to the number 23. The entire second movement is, in fact, 230 bars long, Berg's and Hanna Fuchs's fate numbers multiplied.*

*There are also references to other aspects of Berg's past in this concerto – the Carinthian folk tune depicts the young Manon's happiness and frivolity, but surely also makes reference to the Carinthian peasant girl, servant in the Bergs' summer house, who gave birth to Berg's only child when he was eighteen. Berg never saw his daughter, Albane, but a photo of her was found among his possessions when he died. A woman of thirty-two by then, Albane visited Berg's widow after his funeral, but the door was closed in her face – a gesture which foretold Helene Berg's fierce devotion to protecting the public facade of her husband's life, which she maintained over the forty years of her widowhood.*

*But did Berg in any case want his secrets known? Gustav Klimt painted the minutiae of women's genitalia and then entirely obscured them under the elaborately painted textures of their clothing. Alban Berg buried his truths within his music, thereby preserving them as ever present, ever renewing.*

*Berg had first used Hanna Fuchs's initials as a motif in his opera Wozzeck, which he had completed several months before meeting Fuchs. He*

*read this coincidence as an instance of the secret grace bestowed by the underlying workings of fate. It is this that he emulates with his meticulous attention to form in his music.*

*Still, as a teacher once said to me, 'you must let the music speak for itself.' Listen to it. It is all there for the hearing.*

I'd moved back to London soon after writing that. More or less, anyway. Actually, I was all over the place. Newcastle, Glasgow, Paris to lead a Young String Player's workshop, then back to Edinburgh for the CD recording, then to Europe with my father. I was having a high time.

And here's another. I've scrawled, *This one's for you, old man xxx* across the top of it:

*I'm dedicating this blog to Sir Fergus Cunningham. I've been in Orkney this week working with him on Limina, which he has so generously written for me to record alongside the Berg Concerto. Such a natural pairing, extending as it does the theme of transfiguration evident in the final moments of Berg's harrowing, death-themed concerto.*

*But enough about death. Today's topic is the man himself, Sir Fergus Cunningham. In all the media shots you'll see him spruced up in a tux, rubbing shoulders with the gentry, but the Orcadian FC is a different breed altogether. I'd arranged to meet him as I usually do outside of the Stromness Hotel, but it was pissing down when the ferry docked, so I ventured through the old-world revolving door and into the downstairs bar, where one lone old tramp sat hunched over a lunchtime whisky. Except that it was no tramp: it was Sir Fergus*

*Cunningham, lifting those intelligent eyes suddenly, rising from his perch to greet me.*

*Don't get the wrong impression about the drinking – I imagine FC is a stickler for abstinence except when the day is a pissar or the occasion calls for it. I imagine, although I've never been there, that when he is working in his own cottage over on Hoy he barely remembers to eat, let alone have a pint. Hence the emaciated look of him, and the lack of attention to details of his person. I felt duty-bound to point out to him, for example, that he was wearing odd shoes – one brown, one black – and he smiled, shaking his head, 'I'm want to do that,' he said, 'when I've other things on my mind.' Other things meaning the myriad new compositions I know are buzzing around in his head at any given time, current major focus being an opera based on the life of Orkney's own Saint Magnus. My humble recording must be the least of the great man's concerns, but here he is, offering his hand, offering his time. 'May I buy you a quick whisky,' he says, 'before we begin?'*

*We work at his cousin Jeannie's house here on the main flagstone street of Stromness. The buildings seem to erupt out of the sea in this town, harbouring pirates and plague from the look of them. Jeannie runs a fabulous knitting shop on one side of the house, but that doesn't stop her running in from time to time to feed us soup and family gossip. She and her husband, Roger, have raised a brood of kids here but they are all gone from the island now except for the youngest daughter who's begun the next generation with a two-for-one offer – twin baby girls. Poppy and Iris are deposited in our laps from time to time, just to remind us not to take ourselves too seriously; music is one thing, but here is life in all its dribbling, babbling glory.*

*This is the house where FC grew up, among grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. Times being tough during World War Two, his mother's family moved over to the main island from Hoy for a short stint with the better-placed rellies and, as happens, never left. FC is the first Cunningham to return to Hoy, although those that have died are all buried there.*

*But enough family history – onto work: Limina, meaning thresholds, so the dictionary informs me, somewhat ambiguously – I don't get the impression FC is writing music about doorways or vestibules here, rather more those ephemeral spaces, between dreams and waking, between this life and the next, between the physical world and the other, whatever it might be. FC is more poetic on the subject than I am: he tells me the term is derived from the Latin, limin, and the threshold he is referring to is that between existential planes. And he quotes Rumi as his inspiration.*

*I suppose what appeals to me about this music – about any music – is its capacity to give voice to something language itself would at best render banal, or sentimental, and at worst would destroy entirely. So I don't ask FC for a blow-by-blow interpretation. What I want is to inhabit his inner knowing of the piece. Forgive the necessity to use exactly the sort of banal verbiage I've just been bagging, but music does have an intrinsic truth, and it is this, not flashy pyrotechnical style or even beautiful tunes, that silences an audience, that sparks that shiver of recognition up a collective, listening spine. If I am to play a piece of music, it is this spark of essentialness (sorry, another of those words) that I am endeavouring to find; hence my hours poring over the score with the very generous Sir Fergus Cunningham.*

*I'd have been grateful for a couple of hours of his precious time but we were there until cousin Jeannie put a halt to it by demanding our presence at the*

*dinner table. I'd booked a backpackers but she wouldn't hear of it. I spent the night in one of the no-longer-resident son's bedrooms, among Metallica posters and football paraphernalia. And in the morning, there was FC in his odd shoes, grinning across the breakfast table, brimming with what he still had to tell me.*

*Till next time, then,*

*EB*

*(And by the way, we're premiering Limina at the St Magnus Festival only a couple of weeks from now – July 14<sup>th</sup>, St Magnus Cathedral. Come! The St Magnus Festival is brilliant, Orkney's well worth a look, and Limina is a work that deserves to be heard live!)*



Fergus arrives back with Arthur and Nellie Potter in tow. 'We're having a quick cuppa,' he says, 'to commiserate about this morning's doings in Kirkwall. Not the success we'd hoped it would be, was it Arthur.'

'But like you say, Fergus,' Arthur says, 'we've made a start. We need to a more assertive strategic plan now, that's all.'

Fergus is putting the kettle on. Nellie, clearly comfortable in Fergus's kitchen, is searching the cupboards for biscuits. 'You've a house guest, Fergus,' she says peering down into one, 'and what have you been feeding her? She's skinny enough, poor wee thing, without you starving her into the bargain.'

She gives up on the cupboards and turns her attention to me. I'm relieved I'd actually bothered to have a bath and get dressed this morning, unlike the last couple of days, although I'm aware that I look enough of a sight in Fergus's clothes. I make a

move to start clearing my things off the table, where Arthur is already seated, setting out a sheaf of official-looking papers. My own official documents, courtesy of Fizz, I tuck away inside my scruffy journal. There's a large brown paper parcel on the table with my name on it. Fergus turns from putting the kettle on and sees me looking at it.

'From Jeannie,' he says, 'She met us at the ferry on the way back.' I stare at him, blank. 'It's the jumper you wanted for your mother,' he says. 'Jeannie said you saw her working on it the other day when you popped in and you fell in love with it. She put a spurt on to get it done before you left. She said if you want her to add any more bibs and bobs to it you must stop by and see her on your way back to London. I think she's looking for an excuse to keep you there a night or two. She wasn't sure if you were going back to Australia for Christmas but you'll have plenty of time still to send it if needs be. Alright?' he says. I nod. 'And not to worry about the money,' he says, 'get the rest to her when you can, she's not fussed about it.'

'And when are you leaving, Eva?' Nellie asks. 'You gave me the impression the other night this was to be a fleeting visit.' She's setting cups out now. Fergus is making the tea. When I don't reply she turns to look at me.

'Sometime in the next couple of days,' I say.

Fergus doesn't turn from the sink.

Nellie says, 'And what are you going back to, exactly? What are your upcoming engagements?'

Fergus does glance at me this time. He picks up the teapot. 'Nellie,' he says, 'this young woman's diary is as crammed as the pages of a Russian novel.' He brings the teapot over and sets it on the table.

'Yes, well I do think she's capable of telling me that herself,' Nellie says. She comes over to the table and sits down. I stand holding my things. 'Are you having a cup of tea with us?' she says.

‘It looks to me like you’re busy,’ I say. She picks up the parcel and hands it to me.

‘We’ll still see you in the new year, as we discussed?’ she says.

‘Sure,’ I say.

I take Fergus’s pages through to his desk and the rest of my things to the bedroom, where I tear at the brown paper wrapping and stare at a eucalypt green jumper with several rows of feathers and beads stitched across its yoke.

When Fergus comes in sometime later I’m lying with it held to my chest. ‘I’m sorry to have interrupted your quiet morning,’ he says.

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘It’s your house.’

‘It would have felt more awkward to have refused them, if you can understand, because I never normally would.’ He sits on the bed, close to my legs.

‘Are you going to lie down with me?’ I ask him.

He shakes his head. ‘Work calls,’ he says. ‘I’ve a great deal still to do before next week, as you know.’

‘I finished yesterday’s pages,’ I say. ‘They’re on your desk.’

‘Thank you,’ he says, ‘what would I have done without you?’

‘Probably worked a lot more efficiently,’ I say.

‘And with a great deal less inspiration,’ he says.

I’m still lying on my side. He puts his fingers up to brush at my cheek.

‘Everything alright?’ he says.

‘Of course,’ I say.

‘That’s the jumper for your mother?’ he says.

I nod.

He whistles. ‘Is that the sort of thing your mother likes?’ he says.

I nod again. ‘Is something wrong, Eva?’ he says.

Why will the words not come? Tears leak from the corners of my eyes. But all I manage to say is, 'I don't want things to change.'

Fergus lies down then, and in an already familiar gesture pulls me into him. 'Were you serious about leaving in the next couple of days, then?' he says.

'No,' I say. 'You know I'm not in any hurry to leave.'

A moment's pause before he says, 'And what about that very full diary of yours?'

'It's emptying as we speak,' I say.

'Eva...' he says.

'Let's not talk about it now,' I say.

We stay still like this for a few moments and then he pulls his head away a little and says, 'Eva, I know it's a little late to be asking this, but...'

'What?' I say.

'Should we be thinking about birth control?' he says.

I laugh at that. 'How many times have you had to ask that question in your life?' I ask him. He doesn't answer. 'You don't need to worry about it,' I say.

I get up to go to the toilet then, and Fergus gets up to work. Staring at the slate floor while I pee, it's Katie I'm thinking about. She thought she could keep that last baby in by sheer willpower, but I saw it slip out onto the sheets, and then she reached down between her legs and scooped it up in her hands. She said 'look at it, Eva,' her face a mess of tears and blood. But I couldn't look at it. I went and sat on the toilet, like I am now, and I cried hard and silent. Then I called the doctor for her, who insisted she go to hospital. Ambrose was away visiting his mother, but he got back as quickly as he could. I held him for a moment while he cried. Big, softie Ambrose, he said, 'Poor Katie, poor Katie,' over and over and then he went to her. He looked so black and big



lying against her doll-like whiteness. I walked out into the night, thinking *stay away now, Eva*. But I didn't listen to my own good advice, did I?



My father was playing Shostakovich, pacing the floor of his living room. I was downstairs in my flat trying to practise Mendelssohn for a fill-in gig at St Martin in the Fields. I was used to having to deal with his noise, of course, but this particular night I was too hungover to begin to compete with him. My mind was full of images from the last couple of days, *Limina* in the rosy pink Cathedral, Fergus's face beaming up at me, the drunken scene in Jeannie and Roger's kitchen afterwards, which from memory had involved the systematic destruction of some of the world's great music on Jeannie and Roger's selection of folk instruments. Fergus had taken on the Maggie; Jeannie and I were on whistles, Katie had a mandolin, Ambrose's beefy hands were compelling a tiny button accordion, Roger had held the whole thing together on the guitar, with Ruby wandering in now and again to sing something.

Standing in my flat a couple of nights later, nothing was very clear other than that we had all found the experience hysterical. I was glad Katie and Ambrose had invited themselves along. It had been like old times. Things had been strained between us for a couple of years, Katie obsessing about getting pregnant, me obsessing about the Berg project. She'd wanted to keep reeling me into her world and I'd had to struggle to keep some distance. I didn't want to be in thrall to her anymore. She had Ambrose, after all, it wasn't like she could offer me anything. And would I have wanted it anyway, minus Ambrose? I didn't think so. I'd been telling myself for months now that I wanted something real. Something normal. But maybe I wasn't capable of it. Stephen Elliot, as a case in point – what had I been thinking?

Then at Jeannie and Roger's after the *Limina* performance, did something happen with Fergus? Had I done something drunken and stupid? All I remember is the feel of his hands pulling away from mine. And he'd seemed a bit fragile as he waved us off at the ferry the next morning. Katie had said, 'He's in love with you, that man,' and I'd said, 'What utter bullshit, he's old.' And then I'd forgotten all about him until now, standing here in my flat, not playing Mendelssohn. Ambrose had bought us all bloody Marys on the ferry but I think it was the fried eggs and hash browns that had started me vomiting. Katie had vomited too. The plus side of that being that we'd both sobered up, whereas Ambrose was still so drunk that he'd fallen off the train as it moved out of Waverley Station heading to London, and even though he wasn't hurt – he'd sprung up singing *Nessun Dorma* – we'd been booted off like silly teenagers and told to sober up before we got back on.

A strange day in Edinburgh as a result. We'd ended up in Sandy Bell's pub drinking Guinness and listening to folk music. I'd stood at the front bar explaining to an old Irish couple exactly why I hated folk music, but Katie and Ambrose had got into the swing of things in no time, borrowed some instruments again and joined in. Katie had dyed her hair a very unflattering tomato shade, I think in a determined effort to look cheerful, and she'd bunched it in two knotted baubles like antennae on top of her head and her eye-makeup had run over the couple of days of drinking so she was sporting a very definite raccoon look there in the pub. But with all of that, she could still play. So could Ambrose. They were having fun while I sat alone at the bar, the Irish couple having deserted me. Finally I'd got the Maggie out and joined in. I knew none of the tunes but the repetition helped. Anyway, it was all so loud, it wouldn't have mattered what I'd played.

One guitarist was drawing attention to himself, a big, shambolic Scot constructing chord progressions like minor epiphanies; fingers flying, body straining as

if intent on liquefying and pouring down the frets and into the sound. I'd stopped trying to play like everyone else and taken my lead from his renegade chords and he'd looked up, flicked an unruly fringe from his eyes and grinned at me.

Standing in my flat the next day, my father ripping though Shostakovich overhead, I could recall virtually no other detail from our afternoon at Sandy Bell's except for the scene outside of the pub, which had involved the shambolic Scot and a kiss spectacular enough that it had been playing and replaying itself over in my mind ever since. To my knowledge I'd not learnt the shambolic Scot's name. I could remember little else about him other than that his teeth were crooked, his accent thick and his grin hugely infectious. Katie had dragged me away, probably in the nick of time. We'd found a shabby backpacker's and set about sobering up before the morning train to London.

That was yesterday. Now I was supposed to be practising Mendelssohn. The octet. I was to play second fiddle for Leila Fortinger who was in hospital. I heard my father's phone, and for once he actually stopped playing to answer it. Thank Christ for the reprieve. But the insect scissoring of his Shostakovich rang on in my head. I stood idly plucking my violin, thinking about a kiss, Fergus's beaming face, the age-old smell of incense in St Magnus Cathedral. It occurred to me I had a thing for churches. We'd ended up in Sandy Bell's the day before because I'd wanted to show Katie and Ambrose Greyfriar's Kirk, my chosen venue for the Berg launch. I'd not been able to resist taking the Maggie out and playing a few phrases, just to show them how good the acoustics were. A few people had gathered to listen then, so for the sake of the unannointed I'd switched to Bach. Beautiful sound – clean and pure as picked-over bones.

But, back to Mendelssohn now, no more daydreaming. I flicked the music open on the stand and was happily tripping through the first movement when I heard the

knock on my door. I opened it to see my father flapping his arms, making guttural noises as if he had chunks of stale crust lodged in his throat. I thought he was choking, I was trying to remember the Heinrich manoeuvre. I turned and put my violin down on the bed but by the time I turned back to him, he was silent and fixating on an apparently fascinating spot on the ceiling, his hands pressing together as if to squeeze something out from his palms. Words, as it turned out. 'Your mother's dead,' he finally said. He flapped his arms again like a big, ungainly bird. Not a hope of flying away.

'Eva?' It's getting dark. I've not been lying here like this all afternoon, but Fergus must think I have been. 'You've not had lunch, darling, Nellie's right, I'm not looking after you.' He sets whatever he's brought in for me down on the floor but I don't even look at it. I pull him in and kiss him and shove my hips at him until he takes the hint and peels the trousers from me. Once he's inside me I'm safe to cry and I do, and he pulls away, thinking he's hurting me. I grab the thin flesh of his back through his jumper and push him onto the bed and ram myself down on him so hard that we both cry out. And then I crawl off him and curl up and sob.

Hurling through blackness back to Adelaide, babies screaming in front, behind, my father fidgeting beside me. Still hung over from post-*Limina* partying, I vomited beef teriyaki, clutching the steel rim of the British Airways toilet, the knees of my jeans soaking up the inadvertent drops and sprays of strangers' urine from the cubicle floor.

McGinty Avenue full of Byrnes, Poppa making up beds in rooms barely changed in twenty years of vacancy, Fizz dolling out valium like tic-tacs. Frances banging about in the kitchen feeding everyone. Someone else vacuuming – why was anyone vacuuming? Fizz's boys in adrenaline-fuelled oblivion around Pop's computer, the phone ringing, ringing, ringing again. And my father cross-legged on the floor in his

childhood bedroom playing Beethoven Seven over and over until Fizz marched into his room and ripped it from the turntable.

Tallis looking for childhood photos. Matthew Brink the priest eating Fizz's banana muffins and explaining why the body was laid out at his weird, esoteric church, requiring our company. Apparently the soul was still hovering in the vicinity wanting to say goodbye. So we all piled into Andy's van, filthy from his trip across the Hay Plain, and headed for the hills, through thick fog at Crafers, piling out again into rain, stumbling up the driveway of the utilitarian, low-roofed Church of Religious Renewal. Inside was dark and muted with candles. A few other people were seated, their heads bowed. The coffin was set before the candlelit altar, an amorphous, fluid Christ gazing down from where he hung in ambiguity in the deep purple folds of the curtains behind it.

Last time I was here I was one of those barefoot children, crawling in and out under the chairs while their parents sat and prayed. Fizz had my arm, the valium was playing tricks, I needed a snorkel, my knees were bending the wrong way. Australians don't view the body, do they? But there you were, Mama, emanating a blue, auric glow through the wafting incense, dressed in all that diaphanous lavender and with all that pretty hair, Mama. Isn't she pretty, Fizz, isn't she just the prettiest, tiniest, palest porcelain Mama? And was the blue glow from the drowning or from the pills, I wanted to know. And what was that annoying animal noise, where was that coming from? But Fizz had me outside by then, couldn't be carrying on like that in there and annoying the other punters at their prayers.

So I didn't hear you say your goodbyes, Mama, because I was making too much noise, but you came to see me in the night. I woke to find you hovering above me, your shoulders pulled up like wing stumps, straining to force the air into your lungs. You leaned over me where I lay on the green couch saying, *I'm so lonely, I'm so lonely,*

feeding your bright new hair into my mouth until it choked me. I woke up screaming and Fizz came running with the valium.

And the next morning I found myself at Dave's, in among the arthritic pomegranates. Nobody had seen Dave, he hadn't showed his face at McGinty Avenue all this time. He was squatting in the ballroom, surrounded by his paintings, his dreads bunched into a ponytail, his beard fat and red. 'You ought to do the ceiling,' I said.

'Any suggestions?' he said.

An angel maybe. I wouldn't have a fucking clue. He made me tea and toast but I sat there in his kitchen banging on about the bath. And then the final straw. I said, 'When did she grow her hair?' and he lay his head on the table and his jagged sobs knifed at my eardrums. I ended up curled under the table like a discarded foetus. Neither of us was fit for a funeral, clearly. I was still wearing my pyjamas. Fizz came down and picked us up. She went into nurse mode, put me in the shower, aimed the nozzle at my underarms and my crotch, dressed me in something black of hers, although as I said to her, Mama's hippie freaksters and Buddhists and Anthroposophists weren't likely to be following the tradition. I felt like I was going off to play a gig, but it was my father who got up and played. Such a pro, my father, standing over the coffin there, serenading you, Mama. Pity he didn't know that the Bach G minor would have bored the shit out of you. Enya would have been a better choice, *I dreamt we dwelt in marble halls, and you loved me, you loved me still the same...*

### ***Friday***

It's light when I wake again and I'm confused for a moment about where I am, until I turn to find Fergus solid at my back, sound asleep. At the same time I become aware that what has woken me is the sound of someone calling out from the kitchen. 'Hello,

hello?’ I give Fergus’s arm a gentle shake and he stirs, lifts his head at the sound of Jeannie’s voice.

‘I’ll go,’ he says. I have to get out of the bed to let him out. He pulls his trousers on and calls, ‘On my way, Jeannie.’

‘I’ve been trying to phone you,’ Jeannie calls back, but Fergus is down the passage by then. I hear her say, ‘why is it disconnected, see?’

I go to the bathroom. I don’t want to see Jeannie. She’s going to talk about the jumper, Christmas, my mother, whatever it is I must have said to her in the shop, and I don’t even remember going to the shop. It’s all going to come out now under Jeannie’s scrutiny, which doesn’t strike me as being ideal, really, but then who have I got to blame but myself for clinging just a little too long to life in the fantasy bubble here with Fergus. I would have told him this morning. I will tell him this morning.

I sit on the toilet for a very long time. The bath has a ring of grime around it. It occurs to me to get cracking here and now and clean it. Instead I flush the toilet, splash water at my face. Go back to the bedroom for clean knickers and the clothes I’ve been wearing for days now without even thinking about what I look, let alone smell like.

It’s not until I’m heading down the passage that I hear the other voice, and I don’t register who it is until I’m at the kitchen door. I see him rising from his chair, moving towards me. He pulls me into his arms. ‘I’ve been worried sick about you,’ he says. ‘I gather you’ve told Fergus nothing.’

Maybe what I’m writing here is as much for Fergus as it is for you, Mama, given that the words might make a difference in his case. The sight of him that morning, sitting at his kitchen table with yellow gunge caked at the corners of his mouth and sex matted into his hair, watching Ambrose cling to my elbows and plead, ‘I didn’t know what she’d done, Eva...’

I yanked my arms away from him. Ambrose had obviously been providing his own pithy summations while I sat on the loo because Fergus wouldn't look at me.

'You weren't meant to find out this way,' I said to him.

He let his eyes pass over me. 'Which bit in particular?' he said, fixing his gaze elsewhere.

'Eva, your mother...' Jeannie said.

'You can have the jumper back,' I said.

'I'm not worried about the jumper, darling...'

'Can I talk to you, Fergus,' I said, 'in private?'

We went down to the bothy since there was no private place to talk in Fergus's tiny croft. It felt like a homecoming, all the more because I knew I'd be leaving with Jeannie and Ambrose. No more mornings in the bothy for me. So I had a lot to say to Fergus but I couldn't seem to get started. We sat side by side on the cold bench seat like strangers waiting for a bus.

Eventually he said, 'Eva, I'm so sorry about your mother,' and I felt vindicated for not having told him. Suicide is such a conversation stopper. More silence before he said, 'What a fool I've been.'

I said, 'Can I at least try to explain?' But it wasn't the right time. Fergus might be the wisest person I know, but I'd humiliated him.

He looked peeled. He said, 'Why did you not say anything?'

All I could offer him was some rationalising bullshit about how easy it had been, given his ignorance, to create a little time pod away from people's scrutiny and sympathy, not so much to pretend that nothing had happened, as to try and figure out how to deal with it.

'Did you not feel like that after your mother died?' I asked him.

'I did feel like that,' he said.



But of course the real betrayal was that I'd slept with him. I'd allowed him, as he pointed out, to believe that I'd made a clear and conscious decision to come to him. Ambrose, as he was also quick to point out, had at least known why I was suddenly seducing him, whereas he – Fergus – had been led to believe that I was responding to him from a reciprocal place of love, not from the base neediness of madness and grief.

These were all valid comments, I could deny none of them, although I did argue the point that none of them excluded the fact that I actually did love Fergus, and that while my turning up on his door might not have been intentional, I had recently come to the conclusion that I made some of my best decisions while I was out of my mind.

I think that if I'd had the opportunity to say any of this to him prior to him learning about the messy business of Katie and Ambrose, I might have had a hope of redeeming at least something of our time together. But the idea of my having fled Ambrose's bed for his was too much for him. There seemed no way to explain to him that the picture he was conjuring was wrong. Fucking is fucking, when all is said and done.

He said, 'It's called a fugue state, Eva, you'll enjoy the synchrony in that.' Ambrose had been doing some online research, apparently. The afflicted person simply wanders out of their memory for some period of time and carries on another life entirely, so Fergus informed me.

'I suppose the warning signs were there in your performance the other night,' he said, but I told him he was wrong about that. I've never been more fully conscious than I was in that moment on stage. It was not a loss of memory but a sudden illumination of every accreted fact of self. A sort of non-religious version of an epiphany – not a spiritual awakening, in other words, but a sudden and intense revelation of materiality. What was this music, anyway? What did I think I was trying to do, standing up there, carving sound from wood and metal and horsehair?

Pulling the Guarneri from the back of Fergus's wardrobe a little later, I began to weep.



The final straw was waking in my flat one morning to the sound of my father practising overhead. After your funeral, Mama, I could no longer live under his feet. Katie and Ambrose took me in. I was their surrogate bambino. Katie was working full-time, so Ambrose fed me, washed and ironed my clothes, kept track of all my bookings. Every morning he put the Maggie in my hands, in the corner he'd set up for me in the little bay window of their bedroom, and I played like an automaton. But sometimes I'd be on the Tube and forget where I was supposed to be heading. All dressed in black, holding the Maggie on my lap, tears and snot streaming. Once I didn't turn up somewhere, so Ambrose started coming with me after that.

Alright, so I didn't really notice what was going on with Katie. I had other things on my mind. It was the IVF stuff, I was aware of it, I tried to be helpful. But once she admonished me for my self-centredness, she said, 'You weren't even close to her, Eva.' And once in the bathroom, she took my fingers and shoved them into her wetness. 'I'm going to leave Ambrose,' she said. She went back to her parents' and to be frank I think Ambrose was as relieved as I was.

I played countless gigs during which I hovered in the vicinity of the ceiling watching myself perform with an intense fascination. What surprised me more than anything was that nobody seemed to notice, not even my father. He came to a recital in Bristol. He said, 'Are you intending to come home at some point?' but I thought he was talking about Aurora, the question of your urn, Mama, waiting there for me to figure out what to do with it, let alone what to do with Aurora itself. In any case he wasn't really

looking for a response, he was more intent on telling me that he liked the new rawness in my playing and that he'd heard quite a bit of buzz about me around the traps. It was a 'keep up the good work' sort of talk, a real pat on the back from my father.

And meantime I lay on the couch at Katie and Ambrose's drinking red wine and watching American sitcoms on the tellie. Ambrose went off for a brief period to retrieve Katie from her parents' but he came back empty-handed. He whipped me at Scrabble. He tried to teach me how to play Mahjong, all those pretty, clicking tiles. We stole leftovers from Marianna's and watched TV end to end on the couch. Sometimes he would massage my feet and I would leak silent tears, but we didn't talk about you, Mama, and we didn't talk about Katie. Then one night during *CSI* Ambrose came back from the bathroom and instead of lying at the other end of the couch, he squeezed himself in behind me and put the quilt over both of us. He massaged my shoulders. Onscreen, people were dying in pools of blood, some construction of violence I couldn't quite get a grip on. He put his hand under my t-shirt and felt my breasts. Then he pulled the back of my pyjama bottoms down and inserted himself. A degree of pre-planning in that he'd thought to have a condom on hand.

This is all it ever was, night after night, a few moments of tenderness before sleep. Under the quilt with the lights off and the TV on. When Katie walked in one night, she pulled the quilt away and surveyed the details. 'Do be careful with her, Ambrose,' she said. 'I just came to tell you I'm pregnant.'

And not to give the impression that no work had been going on in the meantime. In fact the CD had been released. Gordon Fenton had given it a plug, so had a couple of others. Four days before the Berg performance I found myself back at my own flat, having fled Katie and Ambrose's with nothing but the old tracksuit bottoms and t-shirt I'd been wearing when Katie made her appearance. I'd not even grabbed the Maggie.

I was sitting on the floor, leaning on my kitchen bench when Katie rang the next morning. ‘I know you have to be in Edinburgh in a couple of days, so you’d better come and get your violin,’ she said. ‘Ambrose is going to his mother’s, and I’d prefer you to wait until he’s gone, for obvious reasons. So shall we say 11?’

I could see her hanging out of the little bay window of their bedroom as I walked down the High Street, but the sun was bright, so I couldn’t really make out what she was doing. I thought she was waving and then I felt a momentary panic that she was going to throw herself out, but in fact it was the Maggie that dropped to the ground, even as I realised what she’d done and sprinted the last few steps to save it. Not a hope. The sound flew from it. People stopped and looked up, but the window was closed now. I knelt to gather the splintered pieces. I suppose you would do the same for a broken body, as if you might still mend it. The only thing intact was the soundpost, the most fragile piece and the only part of a violin that needs to be periodically replaced. They call it the soul because it sits inside the violin, connecting the front and back pieces, making sound possible. But there was no point at all to it now.

**November 18<sup>th</sup>, Greyfriar's Kirk**

**Berg Violin Concerto, Soloist Eva Byrne with the Scottish Philharmonia**

**Review by Claudia Ballantyne**

The first thing that strikes me about Eva Byrne, particularly since there is no stage here at Greyfriar's Kirk to elevate her, is that she is tiny; almost childlike – not the physical presence I assumed she would be from listening to her recording. The cover of her CD provides virtually no clue regarding her appearance, so one assumes some public reticence – in keeping she is dressed tonight in understated black, blending in with the members of the orchestra, her hair down, her enormous eyes framed by a short, rather severe fringe. She bows, but there is something immediately unnerving about her. Watching her tuning, she seems both intensely focussed and entirely absent. No eye contact. No smile. A brief nod at Stephen Elliot when she is ready, eyes cast momentarily upward, and then she bows her head, as if to pray. We wait. Stillness descends. She lifts her violin and begins...

Of course, nobody is going to claim that this is a work you put on of an evening, while you prepare dinner or take a bath. It isn't an easy work, and yet from the moment Byrne begins on those ambiguous open string arpeggios, I'm drawn in. Let me tell you a story, she seems to be saying, and I follow her, barely pausing for breath. With seemingly effortless technique she draws us into her marvellous palette of colours and tones – lilting, flirtatious, scatty, voracious, we trip through the first movement, stumble and sigh through its moments of sadness, smile at its occasional cheekiness, the drunken Viennese waltz, for example, which Byrne plays to full effect. She is both dancer and choreographer in this movement – Stephen Elliot's presence seems barely necessary, and his eyes, I have to say, are glued on the all-directive Byrne.

With the shrieking beginnings of the second movement I find the ground suddenly shifting beneath me. We are entering the territory of death and Byrne is pulling no punches in her interpretation. Ripping double stops from the strings like teeth from their sockets, hairs flying

loose from her bow, she begins to pace the stage, battering out an artillery of wavering, perseverating sextuplets before melting with fluid ease into the *molto ritmico*, building again to triple stops which form like architectural edifices under her tiny, remarkable fingers. Again, I find myself barely focussed on Byrne's technique – this is theatre she is producing – I am witnessing directly the spiralling and unravelling, the agony and the incomprehension. When she crawls up finally, over impossible, leaping sextuplets to the moment of extreme climax, the orchestra shrieking at her back, the rawness is almost enough to undo even me.

Finally, the calm. It is enough, Lord, it is enough. Byrne draws a rich vibrato from her magnificent instrument. But then it is at this moment too that I get the first hint of faltering, something in the way she breaks off her final note before the wind section plays its profoundly beautiful, organ-like rendition of the Bach chorale, *Es ist genug*. Byrne lowers her violin and holds it limply at her side. Again I have the impression that she is not with us, not remotely aware of us. Still, she raises her violin and continues over the next two phrases, staggers over them it seems, then stands, her violin still raised, although her bow arm falls away to her side and her gaze moves heavenward. Now Stephen Elliot has something to do. I see him making rather frantic head gestures in Byrne's general direction, not that she is paying him the remotest bit of attention. If you were unfamiliar with the work you would not perhaps recognise that Byrne should not be resting as she is at this moment, dreaming off into some distance. She should be playing. Elliot can do nothing other than keep the orchestra moving and keep his eyes trained relentlessly in Byrne's direction. Then, quite suddenly, she comes out of her trance. 'I'm sorry,' she says, softly but audibly, before placing her bow back on the strings and joining in seamlessly with the orchestra. So ephemeral, the moment, I find myself not quite believing that it happened. I wonder how many other members of the audience experienced it similarly.

I don't want to make too much of this faltering. Eva Byrne gave herself so entirely to this performance that I was almost frightened for her. Frightened and awed. I'm often admiring of performers, but rarely gripped as I was by Byrne. It haunts me still.

## *Australia, December*

I haven't been to Brigadoon since I was a little kid, when I'd come down with Poppa and Maggie. Mama would never come here, too close to old haunts for her. The old limestone cottage is still here but Fizz and Mick have built their own place now, with wide verandas all around and lawns sweeping out to the surrounding thousand acres. Fizz sent me money from the estate to get me back to Australia. She drove the five hours up to get me from the airport and then the five hours straight back to here. She's probably right, I'm not ready for Aurora. Maybe I never will be. She overrode my vacillation and put tenants in for a few months but they're gone now and she's reluctant to put anyone else in because she thinks it ought to be cleaned up and sold. Tallis is keeping an eye on it in the meantime.

Second day here, Fizz drove me into The Mount to see her doctor. I've been prescribed pills but I have no intention of taking them. I trailed Fizz around the supermarket after that. She'd forgotten the vegetarian thing, tried serving me one of their organic prime steaks the night before. Hence the supermarket. I tried to tell her I really don't care what I eat, but then I realised she'd take this wrongly, she already thinks I'm depressed, don't want her thinking I'm anorexic as well. They're on the lookout for genetic instability now. I might have tried to explain to her that while I'd demonstrated an early propensity for self-mutilation, I'd never been remotely interested in dying, that in fact even the self-mutilation was a way of making me feel more alive. Couldn't work out any way of saying that that didn't sound insane, and so I followed her around the supermarket and pretended to get excited about the ready availability of tofu and TVP.

Fizz is the strangest sort of health freak. Really into the organic thing, insisted on choosing things with a low glycaemic index, for instance, and yet she's so addicted

to cigarettes she couldn't go the distance of the supermarket without a ciggie break. Interesting foible for a palliative care nurse. She looks fit, though, all muscle, still wears the tight black jeans and bare midriff tops she was probably wearing in her youth. It's her voice that's the giveaway, deeply smoke-damaged, about three octaves lower than your average woman's, and so ocker it twangs like loose guitar strings.

So there we were sitting outside a tacky little café near Woolworths when three old women with silver hair reaching down to their backsides and strange little kerchief style headscarves walked past. Fizz didn't say anything but I saw her watching them. 'You have to have thought about it,' I said to her.

'More often since Grace died,' she said. No beating around the bush with Fizz, she'll drag me out of the denial phase if she has to. She'll crack the champagne the first time I say those words myself. *Since Grace died...* She eyed me as she sucked on her cigarette, blew the smoke out away from me before she said, 'I imagine you've thought the same thing as I have. Frances and I did talk about trying to find the mother before the funeral. In the end we decided she didn't deserve to be there.'

'They ought to be told how much damage they did,' I said.

Fizz stubbed her ciggie out. 'We'd never find the father, of course, he disappeared off to America, but the mother might still be around.'

'You've never been curious enough to find out?'

'Well, have you?' Fizz said.

'No, but I don't live on their doorstep.'

'Like I said, Eva, until Grace died I hardly ever thought about it. Occasionally I'd see one of them and spot a resemblance to Grace and wonder, but even if I was face to face with the woman, I'd have had nothing to say to her. Nothing polite, at least.'

'I don't even remember her name.'



'Her first name was Joyce. She married a widower with many sons whose surname was Joyce. So she was Mrs Joyce Joyce.'

'I don't think I've ever heard that.'

'I remember having one conversation with Grace when we were still really young, before you were born. We were probably pissed on Spumante. We laughed till we cried over the Mrs Joyce Joyce thing. The widower Grace referred to as Mr Piggy, and the sons she collectively referred to as The Pigs. It seemed hilarious at the time. With the wisdom of hindsight it seems sinister.'

'Did she ever talk about why she left?'

'Not to me. I always thought she'd told Maggie, you know, when she arrived on our door as a young woman, but I talked to Maggie about it once and it seems Grace didn't reveal much at all. Maggie tried to get her to a counsellor, but that wasn't Grace's style. She was a closed book, your mum. But I don't need to tell you that.'

'So how would we go about finding her?' I said later, as we were driving back to Brigadoon.

Fizz shrugged. 'I can tell you, they don't have phones, their church is like a fortress, not so much as a window to look into. And while they have a monopoly on the local businesses I imagine you'd get pretty short shrift if you came asking questions...'

'What about electoral roles?'

'They don't vote.'

'There must be legal channels, she was her mother, for Christ's sake...'

'Well, if you're that determined, let's look into it. She might be dead, you know, she wasn't young, even when Grace was little. Then again, maybe she just looked old to us because she was so shrivelled and miserable.'

'She didn't look like Mama?'

‘To be honest, sweetheart, she looked more like you.’



I find myself wondering how I would describe this place to Fergus. The trees particularly, which struck me with renewed awe after the treeless vista of Hoy. I’ve written Fergus countless letters in my mind but nothing in reality. In the days I spent at Jeannie’s in Stromness, plucking up the courage to face London, I clung on to the naïve hope he’d ring.

The second or third day, I took the ferry back across to him, fired up to tell him all that he’d misunderstood, to beg his forgiveness and to promise him something. Love to the best of my ability. I put my feet to Hoy’s earth again and felt myself draw strength from it and I began the five-mile walk to him with all the intention I could muster.

Whatever Fergus thinks, the place he inhabits is never silent. What it lacks in human voices it makes up for tenfold in the ravings of the elements. The elements ranted and I ranted back, I would not be argued out of this but I was. Halfway down the road to Rackwick I turned and began the walk back to the ferry. I couldn’t trust myself not to hurt him again.

I sat on the freezing shore for hours until the ferry pattered back across water as glassy at day’s end as the glaze across a dead creature’s eye. I paid them with my last few coins, huddled into a space away from the engine and watched the pattern of darkness further diffusing the light, melding the earth with the sky. And when the engine started up I listened underneath it to where the water itself becomes sound. *If I were called upon to construct a religion I should make use of water...* A huge plume of striated cloud frilled out across the clear gold of the sky as we began to make our way,

the water so still that the cloud reformed itself in it, and the boat moved through it, rippling it into the black edges of the oncoming night. And in no time I could make out the black shapes of buildings, the lighted Stromness Hotel, the huge bulk of the mainland ferry, glittering and golden like a surreally transplanted Las Vegas casino.

Jeannie was waiting at the pier. I guess she'd put two and two together. 'If you go off like that again without telling me,' she said, 'I'll put you on the next flight to London.' Fergus was in London anyway, so she told me, meeting with the Taveners. I helped Ruby out with the babies for the next few days, minded the shop, walked the narrow main street in the grey rain and fog. One day I walked into the tiny bookshop and found Fergus's biography proudly placed. I sat on a carpeted step and pored over it but I had no means for buying it. Another day I walked up the hill above the Stromness Hotel and found the primary school, bright paper flowers decorating its windows.

'I didn't know what she'd done, Eva,' Ambrose had reiterated, sitting in a café on the pier in Stromness the day I'd left Hoy with him and Jeannie. The story he told me went like this: he'd been at his mother's for only a few hours when Katie had called him and begged him to come home. The police had paid a visit and given her a nasty scare. Sitting in the café on the pier, he thanked me for not pressing charges. And then he pulled his chequebook out.

I said, 'I don't want your money, Ambrose, I told you that. It was insured in any case. You can't replace an instrument like that, you know you can't.'

'All the same,' he said, sitting with his pen poised. Then he barked out a laugh and said, 'Thank Christ it wasn't the Guarneri.'

It seemed only fair to tell him I'd had as much sex with Katie as I'd had with him. I'd thought he might know, but the revelation silenced him. The vaguely sexual

overtones of his gestures and his conversation ceased. He caught the afternoon flight back to London. I suppose that is the last I'll see of them.



Another memory from those days at Jeannie's. One morning I was in the kitchen, walking baby Iris about to settle her down while Ruby had a lie-in. Iris was my extra limb those few days. I loved the fact of her on my hip, solid as pudding, her big black eyes gulping everything in. I was riffling through the CDs on the kitchen bench while I jiggled her a bit on my hip, holding them up one by one to her and reading the titles in a sing song, making a silly game of it. I pulled out one with a photo of a young man against a grey Edinburgh backdrop, pose enigmatic although unmistakably shambolic, the name Jacob Freeman sketched across the bottom. I took it up to Ruby. She was feeding Poppy in bed, exposing the legitimate scars across her breasts and the ample flesh of her belly.

I held the CD up and said, 'This is your brother, the folkie.'

And she said, 'Aye, my brother the big galoot.'

'The Metallica loving brother?'

'I doubt he's still into them,' Ruby said, 'we just keep the posters up to taunt him...'

'But I've met him,' I said, 'at least I think I have.'

'Where?'

'Sandy Bell's.'

'That'd be right. It's his home from home. Although he's on the road a lot more now, he won a Horizon award, you know, which is a big deal if you're a folkie. What were you doing at Sandy Bell's? I thought you hated folk music.'

'I was drunk.'

'Fair enough, then. Did you hear him play?'

'We shared a few tunes...'

'Did you hear him sing?'

'I don't think so. I remember his playing though, he was bloody brilliant...'

Ruby had pulled her mobile from the dresser by then, she was putting the hand not cradling a baby to dexterous use. She smiled at me when she finished.

'What did you just do?'

'Asked him if he remembers you.'

'We never exchanged names.'

Her phone beeped. She read the message and said, 'Well he knows who you are in any case. He wants to know if you mentioned the snog. Jesus, Eva,' she laughed, 'you get about don't you? I could wish for the half of your fun, although I'll be honest with you, I think your taste in men is rubbish.'



I'm not sure I'll ever be able to tell the story of your death, Mama, not in a way that will help me to deal with it. The one thing I can say unequivocally is that if someone dies an awful death, their whole biography ends up shredded, there's no place left untouched by that death. A life gets packed up into a few biographical footnotes that are totally eclipsed by that horrible, pointless ending, and at times I am still so angry that I find myself screaming abuse into the thin air which I imagine you inhabit now, Mama, ever present where once you were so very absent. But to be frank, the anger is a sometimes sweet relief from the endless basso lamento of, *if I'd not put off coming home time and again...if I'd found it in myself to make some sort of relationship with you...* Would you

still have felt the need, Mama? Am I to blame? On and on it winds, that particular, treacherous, counterpoint; I've been to the ends of the earth and back and I know, it never, ever fucking lets up, and I will never, ever know.



'You know, Maggie sent Mrs Joyce Joyce a letter when Grace first arrived,' Fizz tells me one morning as we're making breakfast, 'just to let her know that Grace was safe and well, also of course because Maggie would not have believed that a mother would turn her back on her own child. And the woman sent a letter back saying as far as they were concerned Grace no longer existed...'

'So you had an address...'

'Thirty years ago, Eva, although knowing Maggie's housekeeping it might still be floating around McGinty Avenue somewhere. Mind you, I think it might be easier to search thirty years of council records than search McGinty Avenue.'

'Where would you start if you were me?'

Fizz shrugs. 'Births, deaths and marriages. Ring the council and ask them,' she says, 'what have you got to lose?'

Another veranda conversation, sunset lighting the trees, Mick's tractor heading home across the fields. Fizz says, 'As for the father...'

'What was his name?'

'In those days he called himself Bobby, which stuck in my mind because it was silly and American and also the name of the youngest son in *The Brady Bunch*, who I thought was pretty cute at the time.'

'Bobby Albright.'

‘Hopefully he matured eventually into a Bob. I don’t remember much, Eva. Well, no, that’s not quite true. I have two very strong memories. The first is of him coming to our house to collect Grace; he’d come back from America because Joyce had taken an overdose, remember...’ A slight pause while we get over that hurdle. Fizz sucks on her ciggie. ‘Actually, according to Maggie the woman swears she simply forgot how many she’d already taken. I suppose attempting suicide is not kosher in the world of fundamentalist religion.’

Fizz’s boys are on some car racing computer game inside, engines revving, crowds cheering. Fizz turns towards the bedroom window and yells, ‘Can you turn that down? We’re trying to have a conversation out here.’ Then she waits with her head tilted, listening for the change in volume. ‘Alex!’ she finally yells, and the volume goes down. ‘Jesus,’ she says, ‘Remind me why we have children. Anyway,’ she waves off the smoke that is drifting in my direction, even though I’ve told her I don’t really care. ‘What was I saying? Bobby Albright, that’s right. He came back from America and stood there in our living room, sporting all this Jesus paraphernalia and preaching the Word to us in exuberant Americanisms. Maggie and Pop were horrified by him, as you can imagine, but little Grace wrapped herself around him like a pretzel, wouldn’t let him out of her sight. Then the next time we saw him he’d come home from another stint in America to find his family, his furniture – everything – gone. That time I remember because he sat in our loungeroom and bawled like a baby. I’d never seen a man do that. I’d never seen an adult that broken.’

‘But he went back to America and forgot about them.’

‘I doubt if it was that simple, Eva.’

Another conversation, a couple of days later while I’m demonstrating to Fizz the culinary versatility of a slab of tofu. In other words, I’m stir-frying it, which is the only

thing I know how to do. Fizz is dealing with the vegetables. She says, suspending her knife above the chopping board, 'I've been thinking about what you said about Grace's father going back to America and forgetting about her. You know I said I didn't think it would have been that simple? You think about it, Eva – if your daughter was in a closed sect that allowed no contact with anyone outside of its own, and you'd grown up in it in it yourself, then you'd know what sort of damage you might cause by interfering, tearing the kid between mother and father, between one version of God and another... I mean, what was the poor sod going to do? Kidnap her? If they refused to acknowledge that he even existed any more, they were hardly going to grant him weekend access to his daughter, were they? And even if he'd fought for custody, he'd have been on pretty shaky ground, all the time he'd spent away. Besides which, in those days custody always went to the mother. And also besides which, we don't know that he didn't try. We don't actually know anything...'

'What are you saying?'

'I just think Bobby the evangelist may not have been as negligent as we think he was. We just don't know. If there were court battles, nobody would have told Grace, would they? Even if he tried to write to her, her mother would most likely have kept the letters from her. And in any case, he might have stayed away for her own sake. So that her life would be stable.'

I snort. 'She never said much, but I never got the impression it was stable.'

'She liked her grandmother. That was where the gardening passion came from.'

And then I'm suddenly hit by a memory. I say, 'I think I might have met that grandmother – I can't believe it – I'd actually forgotten all about it. Mama and I sat with her on a park bench somewhere in Adelaide – we'd caught the bus down. She had the long silver hair, all the way down her back, and she was wearing a red patterned scarf



around it. I was only about six, but I distinctly remember her because I thought she looked weird.'

'Are we talking about your grandmother or your great grandmother?'

'No idea, but she'd brought Mama a massive bunch of flower bulbs. I thought they were potatoes. I couldn't work out why this stranger was meeting us in the park to give us potatoes...'

'Your great grandmother then, the passionate gardener. Joyce's mother, I suppose. Or maybe she was Bobby's mother, that would make sense – she would have been really going out on a limb to make contact like that, maybe she was determined not to lose a granddaughter as well as a son...'

Fizz has been working long hours. One of her clients is expected to die sometime in the next couple of days. She's a pro at this dying business. Thankfully she isn't instructive about it, she's not throwing helpful books or names of support groups at me. But she treats death, if respectfully, also very matter-of-factly.

'Grace struggled,' she'd said to me one night out on the veranda 'She had always struggled, long before you were born, so don't blame yourself, Eva. If she'd ever managed to come to terms with taking medication things might have been better for her. But that wasn't her way, was it? It was always on again, off again, which probably did more harm than good. She'd find a homeopathic guru and sit at their feet for a while and then she'd crash again and end up back in the clinic. Get out and start the whole cycle again.' She looked at me suddenly. 'How much of this were you aware of?'

'None of it,' I said. 'I saw her in the clinic that one time after Maggie died. If she was ever in again, she kept it from me.'

Fizz took that information in. She shook her head. ‘She didn’t keep in touch with me, of course, I’d been too much a part of the conspiracy to turn you into your father. But Dave filled me in from time to time. I’m really just making up a story around that, Eva, I don’t know how accurate it is. Maybe I should have thought more about what you were hearing or not hearing over there. But what could you have done?’

‘I might have come home more.’

I’d started to cry. Fizz didn’t rush in with affection and platitudes. Crying was a natural enough response, after all. I said, ‘The one time I saw her in the clinic I felt myself harden towards her. It felt like a survival instinct. I loathed myself for what I was doing but I could also sense that it was empowering me. As if I was finally taking control of my own life after years of feeling such terrible guilt. That time in the clinic was the last time I saw her. She was so sedated she couldn’t even focus her eyes on me.’

‘How much contact did you have with her after that?’

‘Occasional emails. The odd phone call. Sometimes there’d be a resurgence of contact, I guess during her good times. The last of those was about a year before... She was really keen for me to come home, and I did book a ticket, but then I got an offer too good to refuse in Edinburgh, and then the Berg recording took off after that. So the idea of coming home sort of went off the boil. After the Berg, I kept telling myself, after the Berg... At some level I think I always resented the fact that she wouldn’t come to me.’

‘The flying phobia.’

‘I wanted a different role model.’

‘I’m sure my boys would say likewise about me,’ Fizz said. ‘The cigarettes disgust them, I’ll tell you that much. So moral, this younger generation, I don’t know how we’ve spawned such a collective of prigs.’

A long pause listening to the crickets then before she said, ‘In my opinion – and I’ve been through a bit of this – I don’t think she necessarily meant to die that night. I

know she took sleeping pills, but she didn't take that many. If it wasn't for the bath...' she stops herself. 'What I'm trying to say is if she'd been planning it in any great detail she'd have left a note for you. Probably for Dave, too.'

'Dave?'

'You never did cotton on, did you, Eva? I think Dave feels more to blame than anyone.'



I've been on Fizz's computer these nights she's been working. I went through my trash, Mama, which I've not deleted in years. Fourteen emails you sent me in the last four years, all bright and slightly boring, same old stuff about school, news about friends, and friends' kids, the ongoing saga with the council about removing the willows along the Angas. Nothing at all about how you might have been feeling. But then, my replies aren't any better, perky and pointless, on the whole.

On a whim last night I googled Bobby Albright. Scrolled through all the facebook, a couple of youtube clips from some would-be pop star, profiles for civil engineers and high flying financiers. Who'd have thought the world would be so full of Bobby Albrights? But I found him, finally. I trailed through archives from some backwater church in Illinois until about three a.m.. Took breakfast out to Fizz on the veranda when we both finally surfaced late this morning. Said, 'Bobby Albright worked for an evangelical group called White Dove Ministries and all his fanatical dogma from the 70s and 80s is online for the finding.'

'Really?' Fizz said. She had her jeans rolled up and her very tanned legs up on the railing. 'Why?'

‘He was popular. He had quite a following.’ I was peeling an orange, chucking the peel to a couple of magpies on the lawn. I offered half to Fizz and she took it.

‘So what did you learn about him, then? Apart from his fanatical dogma...’

‘He married again, had three more children...’

‘No surprises there...’

‘He killed them all in a car accident, wife and kids.’

‘What?’

‘There was an obituary, in a newsletter, you know, *pray for our dear Pastor Bobby Albright, after this terrible tragedy...* Apparently he wouldn’t travel without his family – wouldn’t be parted from them – this is the father who left Grace for months at a time to be in America, let’s pause to remember...’

‘He may have been determined not to let it happen again.’

‘Anyway, he was driving their camper van back from a preaching gig in Florida or somewhere and the weather was treacherous and so on.’

‘And then what?’

‘Nothing. No more fanatical blurbs from Pastor Bobby. Guess he shed another skin and moved on.’

‘Maybe...’

‘You don’t think so.’

‘I saw the man cry, Eva. He didn’t strike me as a man who moved on too easily. I mean, Jesus, what a fuck-up of a life. You have to feel sorry for him...’

*Dear Eva*

*Got your email details from Ruby – the coincidence of you fronting up in the family home in Orkney seemed too strange to let slip by unnoticed, but let me say that for me this was not the only strange encounter I have had with you since first we met (or*

*didn't) in the dim reaches of Sandy Bell's those months ago. At the bakery near my home one morning, whose face beams out at me from a slapped up poster but that of a stranger (give or take a strange moment) whose name I finally belatedly discovered to be Eva Byrne. And no slouch on the fiddle, as she might have feigned to be that afternoon in Sandy Bell's but a bona fide professional, performing several nights hence a stone's throw from the iconic chambers of Sandy Bell's, in the more hallowed Greyfriar's Kirk.*

*This might sound like a confession, but I can think of no reason to deny it – I was at your performance, although late from a gig of my own, and stuck in the standing room only section behind the back pews. I've been told the performance upset you, and that all manner of things have been happening in your life since last we met. Let me say that whatever happened from your professional point of view that night, I – uninitiated tosser of a folk musician as I might be – came away in awe. I now own your CD, although it would not be the same listening experience if I had not seen you first perform live. Standing where I was it was obvious that I was not the only audience member utterly spellbound. Don't let one bad moment get to you.*

*I gather you're in Australia. I hope these are more peaceable times for you.*

*Jacob.*

*Dear Fergus,*

*I wish you had email. I imagine the weeks that this is going to take to reach you, touching down and alighting in how many countries before it finally finds its way into your hands. Not that I have anything particularly profound to say, other than that I have found it so hard not to have the option of talking to you.*

*I'm at my Aunt Fizz's, thirty kilometres outside of a large rural town called Mount Gambier, five hours south-east of Adelaide. It is a good place to be. Fizz and*

*Mick have a thousand acres (how many Rackwicks could you fit into that, I wonder?) – entirely flat but with trees. Many, many trees. In the mornings I walk in the pine forest, which is more silent than any place I've ever known, including your own good island. A muted hush in the forest, particularly if you move off the trail and in between these towering trees, which, according to the forestry sign, were planted in 1965, and which might I suppose be felled at any time. I'm often startled by an emu or a kangaroo.*

*But do you know, it's the gums I'd really love you to see. If you were here on the veranda as I am, feet up on the rails and watching the sunrise, I'd say, set your eye on that ghost gum, old man, and keep it there for the next half hour. Because the light alters it so utterly, washing it pink, and orange, and yellow, and then it will harden to its daytime ghostly greys and fill with the noise of the birds, the shrieking white-breasted armies of cockatoos, the maggies, the kookaburras, you might see a couple of kangaroos nearby, not yet scared away by the daylight. Oh, this is picture perfect, cliché Oz, Fergus, you'd love the place. Or maybe you'd hate it, I don't know what you'd make of the heat. The earth is already cracking open in places, like the crust on an artisan loaf. It's rock and dustbowl from hereon till March. The smells, though. The enormity of the sky; it's funny, that's the first thing I always notice stepping off the plane, I can almost feel my spine straighten and my lungs filling. My Mama would have talked about the elements, she would have said this is a place of fire and air and yours, Fergus, is a place of earth and water. A yin and yang thing, maybe. I miss you, old man, did I say that already?*



I have to wonder whether you ever googled him, Mama. You weren't the googling type, you claim to only have ever got a computer to keep in touch with me, but

still...Sometimes I find myself wondering whether you always knew more than you told me, other times, I remind myself that you didn't want to know, burying anything you didn't want to deal with was always your main line of defence.

Another memory of Fizz's: Grace and her mother lived with Mr Piggy and the Piggy sons in a horrible grey house with no garden, just weeds growing out of the cracks in the cement. Probably one of those limestone houses you see down here, she says. I've probably driven past it, hundreds of times...

And another – my memory this time: Once Mama was looking for something in her mother's underwear drawer and she found a photo of her father slipped under the drawer liner. So she took it and hid it behind a loose skirting board down next to her bed, but when she went to look at it again some days later, it was gone. All her mother ever said was, *I've given your room a nice spring clean*. When did you tell me this, Mama? I can't remember. I was young, it might have been the same conversation when you showed me the photo of your father's fingers. Maybe I was asking questions about my own father at the time. Maybe we found some solidarity in the idea of absent fathers, I don't know. If you told me anything else, I don't remember it.

'I wonder if Mama ever tried to find him,' I say to Fizz, 'she might not have talked much about him but she said enough for it to be obvious that she never got over him. She kept that photo, you know, the one of his fingers...'

And Fizz says, 'Eva, why not go and talk to her friends...she's more likely to have talked to them than to any of us these last years...Talk to Tallis...'

'Tallis knew nothing, remember? She came to McGinty Avenue before the funeral looking for childhood photos. And if Tallis didn't know, I guarantee nobody

else did. If Mama was close to anyone it was Tallis. In any case, I don't want to talk to them.'

'Because of the school thing? Get over it, Eva, I'm sure they have...'

'It's not about the school.'

'What then?'

'Dunno. Anger. I blame them, maybe, for their influence. Their stupid alternative health ideas. Or maybe I'm just afraid of what they'll know.'

No response to that, so I say, 'I'd like to talk to Dave...'

'So would we all, love,' Fizz says, 'so would we all.'

*Dear Jacob,*

*I wasn't responsible for those slapped up posters, I don't know about you (BBC award winner and all) but I hate being assailed by inflated images of myself as I wander down the road for my morning coffee. I've been known to rip them down.*

*I'm glad you got in touch – it was very, very weird seeing your photo on the CD in your folks' kitchen. Obviously I've paid limited attention to the family shots lining the walls, because in my memory they bear no resemblance to the person I met at Sandy Bell's.*

*So, now I must make several of my own confessions:*

*Firstly: I know a lot about you that I didn't know that I knew that day we didn't (quite) meet in Sandy Bell's. I know that when you were four years old you peed on your kindergarten teacher from an upper storey window of your house, while she was out on the front step complaining to your mother about your bad behaviour. I know you once lifted several crates of beer from a truck pulled up at the back of the Stromness Hotel while Ruby waylaid the poor truck driver in the front lobby with a brilliant rendition of an epileptic fit. Details about your juvenile relationships, the loss of your virginity and*



*the compelling variety of your grossly bad habits have also been revealed. For the transference of this knowledge you can, of course, blame Ruby.*

*Secondly: I have slept in your bedroom on a number of occasions. I can't believe you're a Metallica fan.*

*Thirdly: I also have your CD. I was stunned to find your version of Unquiet Grave, the words of which Fergus had once recited to me beside a grave. They seem to echo my own grief over the sudden death of my mother, the horrible fact of which I was to discover on returning to London the day after that day at Sandy Bell's. I don't think that I am the same person as that merry drunk in Sandy Bell's. I am incredibly grateful to you for recording this particular track, which brings me more than occasional solace. I listen to it constantly.*

*And lastly: Much as I hate folk music, your CD, and your playing that day in Sandy Bell's have alerted me to certain potentialities I might otherwise have never been aware of. Would be interested to hear of any other like musicians I might also draw inspiration from – I'm broadening my tastes, you might say, exploring new territories.*



Alright, Fizz says, slamming the local phone book and the phone down on the veranda table. 'The fundamentalists themselves won't be in there, but we might nab a few exes with information. I'll make coffee,' she says. 'You get started.'

We take it in turns. After ten or so duds, I go in to make toast and get waylaid by one of my cousins, who is sitting at the kitchen table having conniptions over trigonometry. Not that I can offer much help, but I do point out that all the answers are in the back of the book.

Fizz raises triumphant fists when I go back out.

‘I got a cousin,’ she says, ‘who gave me the number of Peter Joyce, youngest son of Mr Piggy, who left the brethren years ago and moved to Robe. So I rang Peter Joyce, told him I’d known Grace...’

‘And...’

‘Stunned silence from Peter Joyce, and then, he said, “I’m sorry, you are walking over graves”, or something like that. He was close to Grace when they were young; they were about the same age. He was very upset to hear that she’d died.’

‘Small world,’ I say.

‘Very small down here,’ Fizz says. ‘If Grace had ever wanted to know it wouldn’t have been hard for her to find out.’ A pause before she says, ‘Your grandmother passed away several years ago.’

‘So that’s the end of that.’

‘Not necessarily. Peter Joyce would like to meet us. What do you say? I’ve got a day off on Friday – fancy a jaunt up to Robe? Might be nice to see the beach, in any case.’

Robe is a pretty place. I’ve never been here. The main street is lined with old stone shops and cottages done up as B&Bs. The sun was out, but it wasn’t hot by South Oz summer standards. The sea, when we pulled in to look at it, was vivid green against creamy limestone cliffs. We had a couple of hours to kill before we met Peter Joyce, so we wandered in and out of clothing shops and gift shops placed to catch the moneyed tourist trade from Adelaide and Melbourne. Fizz is no more into shopping than I am. We ended up at an arty little bookstore called The Whistling Fish. Fizz had a coffee in the garden and I browsed. Pulled from the shelf of second hand books a slim, carefully plastic-covered Penguin edition of *The Orkneyinga Saga*. These are the original tales of the Viking invasions of Orkney from around the eleventh century. Herein lies the tale of

St Magnus himself, among others. I've read bits of it at Fergus's, and he's told me tales, but what were the chances of finding a copy here? I bought it, of course. I have money now, I don't need to remind myself.

I don't know what to say about the meeting with Peter Joyce. He seemed an ordinary, lovely man with a lovely, hearty wife. The lounge room was littered with photos of three grownup children and several grandchildren. We sat on brown velvet couches sipping tea and eating homemade lemon slice, while he told us with remarkable equanimity about his former life. So many of the stories were good I had to ask him why he'd left. But he said his reasons for leaving were of no interest to us, what we'd come to hear about was Grace. He looked at me.

'Grace was your mother,' he said. I nodded. He got up then, moved to get something from the dining table across the room. He handed me two photos, one of a young girl with missing front teeth and white plaits. You, Mama. Little Grace Albright. The other was a smaller photo. Fizz was looking over my shoulder by now. 'That's Grace's father,' she said. 'I remember him.'

Both photos were found in Joyce Joyce's Bible when she died. Peter Joyce had taken them because nobody else had wanted them. He was beginning the arduous journey of leaving the sect at the time, and had taken some comfort in the idea that he might one day try and find Grace. But that was as far as he'd got.

He said the expected things, that he'd been saddened to hear of her death, that she was a lovely girl once upon a time, that she'd been like a sister to him. Then he started on a convoluted and mostly incomprehensible ramble about the specific beliefs of these people, including Biblical citations for removing oneself from the world, and why the women cover their hair and so on. I don't think he wanted to paint the whole thing in too bad a light, and he kept emphasising that what he and his family missed

beyond anything was the strong sense of belonging, the absolute cohesion of the community.

‘But,’ he said, ‘there is a shadow side, inevitably.’ Absolute cohesion demanded absolute unity of thought, and therefore absolute compliance to the dictated system of beliefs. Independent thinking was a sin, and if one persisted with it, one could find oneself withdrawn from. Excluded. All contact with the members of the sect, including family members, could be entirely severed at the whim of the church elders for any variety of sins from bestiality to trimming one’s hair. And since employment was also entirely in-house, all sect members being employed in one way or another within sect-run businesses, exclusion also meant the sudden evaporation of income.

Paul Berry, who was a friend of Peter Joyce’s, was an intelligent young man who asked questions as much for clarification as to express doubt. But of course his questions did lead to doubt, since a lot of the sect’s fundamental ideas were tottering on pretty dodgy foundations. The elders didn’t appreciate a young upstart like Paul Berry drawing attention to this, however. So he was warned, and warned again, and finally withdrawn from. Grace Joyce was his girl. Always had been. They were to have married when she turned eighteen. Disillusioned herself, she packed a bag and left with him. But she was hauled back from the bus station by Peter Joyce’s father and held in confinement in her bedroom for some weeks after, her only contact with others during this time being with the church elders who were rostered for every hour of every day to pray and read the gospel with her. Whether this might have made her more compliant was never ascertained. Paul Berry was found hanging from the rafters of the church the first Sunday she was allowed out of confinement. Nobody tried to stop her when she left that same day.

*Dear Eva,*

*To answer some of your anally listed points:*

*1) I never peed on my kindergarten teacher. That was my peedie brother, Mattie, I'd swear on it.*

*2) The beer lifting was Mattie too, in fact all the appalling stories belong to the wee man, Mattie Freeman.*

*3) Ruby has a number of her own gross habits which I'm happy to enlighten you about, please advise on your tolerance level for gory, unhygienic detail before we proceed.*

*4) I love Metallica, although I admit it may have been a mistake (committed in my drug-daft youth) to have the word tattooed above my left nipple.*

*If you're back in the UK anytime let me know – we could have a jam, perhaps – I've got my own boundary pushing agendas, you might have gathered.*

*Jacob*



I'm on the bus from The Mount to Adelaide. Going to spend a few days with Pop at McGinty Avenue and help him get ready for Christmas Day. The Byrne clan entire will be there, apart from maybe Dave, nobody knows what Dave's up to. It is unprecedented these days to have so many Byrnes together at one time. Even my father is coming. I'm not exactly relishing the prospect of seeing him. He'd driven me to Heathrow to catch my flight back to Adelaide, and I'd got the impression that he genuinely wanted to know what he'd done to make me hate him so. I tried to explain to him about the principle of accretion, layers of resentment building like silt over the years, and the final grains that caused the landslide. We sat in the car on the top storey of the car park at

Heathrow and he leant in and he really listened, he had his ear tuned right in, which is as good as it gets with him.

I have to learn to accommodate the fact that things must be explained to my father in very concrete terms. He needs to be told, for instance, that honesty must be appraised in consideration of its likely impact. That casually writing off the discovery of a half-sister, for example, is not on. That listening obsessively to one's childhood record collection when one's ex-partner has just died and one's daughter is a puddle of grief in the next room is really, really not on. That leaving that daughter alone in London for weeks after the death of her mother, without so much as a phone call is hurtful, and selfish, even if it is highly likely that the daughter will scream abuse at you when you do phone.

So I tried to explain to him in the carpark at Heathrow. I don't think it will change anything but I liked the fact that he listened. The other thing I learnt about my father in the Heathrow carpark is that he is perfectly willing to cop it if he has the faintest idea of what you are accusing him of. He doesn't want to be a prick. He wants what most of us want – to be loved, to be lovable. I wonder if he and Mama might have sorted things out more amicably if they could ever have figured this out between them, but then, I've lived with him, she never did. And he is at his worst on the phone, I know.

I'm thinking about Mama making this exact bus trip when she was seventeen. I'm thinking about how terrified she must have been. I wonder what she would have done if she had turned up to McGinty Avenue and found the Byrne family gone. I'm wondering why it has taken me this long, and the worst of circumstances, to begin to acknowledge how heroically she lived. I'm wondering yet again how to live with the regret.

I sleep in the bedroom Fizz once shared with Mama, which was my own bedroom briefly, as a very small child. The bright knitted bedcovers are still on the beds but I have to throw mine off to sleep. Summer's hit Adelaide with a vengeance. Forty plus degrees for three straight days. Pop keeps iced tea in a huge jug in the fridge and spends his days in his Jason recliner with the airconditioner on, reading his way through the daily papers, while I lie on the old green couch switching between the Orkneyinga Saga and my ipod. I've downloaded some of Jacob Freeman's music suggestions, which I think are a hoot, but I don't think Pop would appreciate them, somehow. He doesn't listen to music, not even in the evenings, which surprises me since he's spent his life surrounded by it. I ask him why one night and he says, 'I thought you might be trying to avoid it.'

'I'm not,' I say.

'Well, choose something you'd like to listen to,' he says.

Unlike the rest of the house, Pop's shelves are neat and alphabetical, like my father's. My eyes flash over Adams, Ades, Albinez, Albinoni to Bach, Beethoven and Berg. My CD is there, of course I'd sent it to him, and he'd sent me a lovely formal letter on onionskin telling me how much he admired it. I plough on through Berlioz, Bernstein, Brahms, Bruckner, but I do feel a slight loss of nerve. Maybe it is too reminiscent of Fergus's.

'I think maybe you're right,' I say, sitting back down on the couch.

'We could watch a bit of tellie,' he says.

I end up reading him the story of St Magnus instead, pure soul, hopeless in battle, so reluctant to fight his cousin for the reign of Orkney that he surrendered his head without a struggle to his cousin's cook's kitchen cleaver. This was on the tiny island of Egilsay – the ruins of the church, where people were said to have been miraculously healed after Magnus's death, are still there.

‘And have you seen them?’ Pop wants to know.

‘Not yet,’ I say.

‘You’re planning another visit, are you?’

‘I don’t know, Pop.’

‘And what about London?’

‘I don’t know about that, either.’

He adjusts himself in his chair, pulling the lever to lower the footrest, so that he can sit forward. He rests his hands on his knees and looks across to me. ‘Eva,’ he says, ‘I’m going to be frank with you. You have been through a great deal, my dear, and I can see that you’re trying to find your way to the other side of it, but it perplexes and worries me to see you spend this much time away from your violin.’ I’m shocked by the mention of the violin. I’d avoided the topic entirely at Fizz’s because she hasn’t got the faintest interest in it. ‘Would your father not have agreed to your bringing the Guarneri?’ Pop says. ‘I know you dislike it, but...’

‘I didn’t want to bring it,’ I say.

‘But all that work, all that talent...’

‘You know what, Pop, sometimes lately I’ve thought I just don’t want to be the person that devoting myself to the violin made me.’

‘And who was that person?’

‘Ambitious, self-absorbed, callous, inconsiderate, preoccupied...’

‘But you must miss the music – your violin – terribly.’

I’m suddenly crying fast, furious tears. He’s caught me off guard with this conversation. ‘Of course I miss it,’ I say.

‘Are you punishing yourself, is that it?’ Pop says, ‘depriving yourself to amend things in some way...’



I don't answer that. I'm trying to regain some equilibrium. I don't think I've cried in front of Pop since I was a toddler, apart from maybe in the days before your funeral, Mama, but I don't know that I did cry very much then – what I remember is lying on this couch for those days in a sort of dull state of paralysis.

'Whether you play the violin or not,' Pop says, 'you will have to deal with the challenge of creating yourself as the human being you desire to be. And I grant you, that is the most important thing you can do with your life. But why rob yourself and everyone else of your remarkable talent?' A silence follows that neither of us attempt to fill. Finally he says, 'Alright, enough now, I've said my piece. What about a game of something? How are you at chess?'

'Hopeless,' I say. 'What about Scrabble?'

'Scrabble it is,' he says. He gets up and moves toward the old trunk next to the tellie.

'Is the Chinese Chequers still there?' I ask, watching him rummage.

He replies by holding up the old wooden board with its hole-punctured star for me to see.

'Amazing,' I say.

'You'd be lucky to find any of the pieces for it,' Pop says.

When Pop goes to bed after our game of Scrabble, I make my way to Dave and Andy's old room. Open the large drawer under Dave's bed and rummage through old school projects, hundreds of loose football cards, stamp collections, Phantom comics, art sketch books filled with Dave's early attempts at portraiture and landscape, football and cricket trophies, loose coins and even a couple of ancient rolls of musk and spearmint lifesavers. Finally I retrieve from deep down under it all the cough lolly tin. I don't want to open it, I don't want to see Mama's hair. I just want to know that the tin is there. In

my father's room, I flick up the bedspread and pull out the tiny violin and open the case to see the green velvet lining, just as I remember it. In Fizz's room I rummage through the desk drawers and the shelves in the wardrobe looking for anything from the time when she and Mama shared it. I find some old high school assignments of Mama's, one on the Eureka Stockade, for which she scored 14 out of 20, and one on Dicken's *Great Expectations*, on the top of which her teacher has scrawled, *Incomplete, Please See Me*.

Mama didn't finish high school. She'd left school while she was still in The Mount to help her mother out at home. Maggie and Pop had encouraged her to go back and finish when she moved in with them, but I guess there were too many other things happening. Maggie got her a job in a local nursery instead, she found Rudolf Steiner through someone that worked there, and the rest is history.

I'm not tired after my rampage. I go back out to the loungeroom. Something else I'd noticed while I was flicking through Pop's CDs was a stack of old videos, down behind a row of more recent DVDs. I pull them out and read the printed labels, which are mostly in Pop's careful handwriting, and are mostly just dates or events. *Tim, Beethoven, 1982*, reads one. There's also *Christmas, 1986; Fizz's Graduation, 1987, Dave and Andy, HS Graduations, 1986 & 7, Christmas 1987; Christmas, 1988; Fizz and Mick's wedding, 1988; Rainbow's birthday, 1987&8*. And then it runs out. I guess the camera broke, or one of the siblings took it off on an overseas jaunt and lost it, who knows.

Quite a night's viewing in any case. I keep the volume low, but Pop appears again sometime later and sits himself back in his chair, and I turn it up then, because I want to hear Mama's voice, it's like I've almost forgotten it, that melodious, gentle voice. I'm watching Mama lying on a rug in the back garden, with baby me lying on top of her, fast asleep. She leans her face to smell at my scalp. She pulls her head up to kiss at the newly growing hair on my head. She strokes at the pale skin of my arm with her

thumb, she chats to Fizz, who's behind the camera, she leans her head back, smiling, to watch something. Dave's legs come into view, I know they're Dave's legs just from looking at them. He sprinkles her face with lawn clippings and she laughs, and brushes them off and bends backward to grab at his ankle before he runs off. The baby Rainbow wakes with a startled cry and she sits up and cradles and rocks and laughs and soothes.

On and on these moments flicker and roll. Mama nursing me at Christmas lunch, everybody's attention suddenly turned to the camera, Mama smiling, holding my hand up to wave, Mama with her shirt open, feeding me; Mama holding my hands while I take clumsy steps on the back lawn.

Pop goes back to bed at some point but I watch until I'm suddenly aware that the room is growing light again. The last thing I watch is my father's Beethoven. Something in my body remembers that video. Everything in me suddenly aches for a violin.

I grab Pop's carkeys and leave him a note. Stick my feet into runners on the way out the back door. I hope the noise of the car starting doesn't wake him. It's still dark, essentially, as I head towards Cross Road and the Freeway. There's very little traffic. It's already hot, I don't suppose it ever really cooled down last night. I wind the window down rather than opt for the airconditioning. Relish the miles along the Freeway with the last of the stars fading and the sun tinging the clear sky deep shades of blue, mauve, pink, yellow and the smell of the trees and the earth wafting in from the open window.

By the time I turn off at Mt Barker the early workers are banking up to get onto the Freeway towards the city. By the time I reach Macclesfield the light is brightening across the top of Mt Dennis. The pinkish stone of the Town Hall looks positively rosy in this light, and I think of St Magnus Cathedral. The lights are already on in the general store and the post office. I turn up the hill and pull the car into the drive at Aurora.

Move up onto the deck to watch the last of the dawn colour spill out over the rocky outcrops across the creek. The noise of the birds is deafening, thrilling. What possessed you, Mama, to want to leave this?

Tallis, her orange dreads looped up onto her head, pokes her head in the door while I'm standing in the middle of the living space. I move to greet her, and she pulls me into her voluptuous patchouli-smelling body.

'I saw the car from up the hill,' she said. 'Thought I'd better come and see who was down here.'

Both of us survey the brown stained walls. 'Bloody possums,' Tallis says. 'We trapped them and set them free in the National Park before the tenants moved in, but they just came right on back.' Her words echo around the empty space. 'You're going to have a lot of sorting to do when you finally get it all out of storage,' she says, gazing around as I have been, as if reassembling all of Mama's things in their rightful places. 'Fizz and I did our best,' she says, 'but we really thought it best to keep everything and let you make decisions about what you didn't and didn't want.'

'I have a lot to thank you both for,' I say. 'It's not something I could have got my head around back then. Not even now.'

'Well, sometime,' Tallis says.

She invites me up for breakfast. 'Not if it's millet porridge,' I tease her.

Toast and tea in the sunroom. Same Royal Doulton cups. Same view out over Aurora's gardens.

'The structure's still there,' she says, nodding toward the geography of the garden beds. 'It won't take much to right it when someone moves in again. The roses are magnificent, by the way, if you want to take some.'

More polite conversation about school and Tallis's daughter, Freya. I suppose it is the thought of Freya that leads Tallis to say, 'Your mother wasn't a writer, I know. But I can't understand her not leaving any sort of explanation, any last words, any professions of love or remorse...'

I vacillate, but I do finally offer her Fizz's theory, that maybe Mama's intention really wasn't all that clear, but that the blackness in that moment suddenly overwhelmed all else. I want to know how Mama was in the days before she died, but Tallis's eyes fill when I ask her.

'I wasn't here,' she says. 'I was away for a few days with Freya. I'd thought about calling her, just to check in, but I didn't.' She hesitates before she says, 'It was draining sometimes, Eva, I have to be honest with you. Most of the time your Mama was fine, lovely, my favourite person in the world to be with. But when she wasn't, she could suck the hours and the light right out of your day.' Another pause before she says, 'But I will carry that 'if only I had called her' mantra for the rest of my life.'

'If you're claiming culpability,' I say, 'you'd better be prepared to stand in line.'

'Eva,' she finally says, as I'm getting up to leave, 'I have the ashes here. We couldn't put them into storage, obviously, and it seemed silly for them to be taken away from here, since I presume Aurora's where you'll want to scatter them.'

I do find something to listen to at Pop's. It's called *Lament*. Music for the grieving soul, so I quip to Pop. It traces the history of a four-note descending line, starting with John Dowland's *Lachrymae*, and weaving around through cultures and folk idioms, from Bach's desolate Chaconne, through to Brahms and on into the blues and Bob Dylan. Two full CDs and we listen to it all, Pop and I. Some of it has a light touch and some of it is a spiralling wail into hell. Dido's most fucking lamentable moment being a case in point. I barely knew the words before, but I know them now, oh yes, I do.

*When I am laid in earth  
may my wrongs create  
no trouble in thy breast,  
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate...*

And it is Dido, and the visit to Aurora, and the videos, and Pop's talk about the violin, and Peter Joyce's revelations, and all of Fizz's memories – everything that has happened this past couple of weeks – which prompts me to drink a great deal of whisky for the first time since I've been home (a very good single malt, which I will have to replace) and to endure another sleepless night in which I spend a good many hours constructing yet another letter for Fergus, a veritable rave which begins with a statement of my drunkenness and a description of the *Lament* CD, and winds on into an interesting aside regarding the whole *Unquiet Grave* theme that is starting to develop in my mind, but ends up being a full-force rant about the Berg performance, in which I state, among other things, that art is not life, that I could not have stood on that stage in Edinburgh and played my Mama's death. It would have been a travesty, a mockery, so my imaginary letter stated. And in any case, Mama would have hated the Berg, she would have been up there in those liminal spaces Fergus is so fond of, plugging her ears, saying, *yadayadayada, stop that terrible racket...*

Then I imagine confessing that I played the thing for Fergus, out there in that audience smiling up at me, the Berg being the perfect vehicle for peeling back the public façade and folding those raw internal places out into the light. As if I was trying to tell him everything. And then the moment itself, not blankness, or void, but searing clarity. Everything stripped away, everything contained in that split second of utterly still, silent now.

But would he want to hear any of this? Finally I slept.



The day before Christmas, I offer to clean the place. Pop gets energetic too, despite the heat, and starts stacking all his newspapers, which are currently tumbling out of the pantry and making it impossible to close the door. We pull everything out of the kitchen drawers and wipe down shelves and throw all the handle-less saucepans and unmatched lids and containers out. I mop and vacuum and scrub the bathroom. Neither of us had put a moment's thought into decorating, not even a tree, but Pop rummages around in the shed and finds the old silver tree they'd used when the siblings were children. He also finds the old decorations. I don't think any of it's been used for years, but it has a whimsical, antique look when we've finished it.

Christmas day. Thirty eight degrees predicted. Pop and I are peeling spuds when I hear the first car pull up in the drive. Footsteps along the back porch and Fizz comes banging through the back door. 'So frickin' hot,' she says, pulling her sandals off, swiping her long bottle-black hair from her face, moving across to the kitchen bench, where she swipes a kiss at her father's cheek and then turns to me as she says, 'Don't tell me you're only getting this stuff ready now. Have you even got the oven on?'

'Not yet,' I say.

'Christ,' she says, moving to turn it on, 'it'll be teatime before we get to eat. I told Mick we ought to have left earlier but of course there was a crisis, as always, cows and electric fences, I won't bore you with the details...'

Two of my boy cousins come through the door dragging an esky between them. 'Leave it out on the porch,' Fizz says, waving them back out of the door, 'there's no room in here. That was the point of stopping for ice, remember? And help your father get the barbie off the truck and up onto the deck, would you? Is Charlie unloading the

meat? Because that fridge only works when the car's working...I know, I know, I'm an old nag, so get on with it then and spare me the necessity for once...'

She waves them off again. Says, 'Jesus, you've no idea what it's like living twenty-four-seven with all this surging testosterone.' She fishes through the utensil drawer and pulls out a small knife, peels an entire potato while I'm still navigating the first round. Quarters it deftly and throws it into the pan, and in an almost simultaneous action begins on the next one, glancing around the room, peering through the cut-out space above the sink into the living area as she does it. Her eyes fall to rest on the vase of Mama's roses I've set on the ledge above the sink. 'You two have cleaned the place up a bit,' she says.

'Been through drawers and everything,' Pop says, 'She's quite the organiser,' he nods at me.

'You wouldn't say that if you saw my flat in London,' I say.

'Speaking of which,' Fizz says, throwing another peeled and quartered spud in the pan, 'I've talked to a couple of the local real estate agents. They think it might be best to hold off selling Aurora until March, given the lack of water...'

'I'm not going to sell it.'

She stops peeling mid spud. Smiles as she studies me with those angular, determined eyes. 'You mean, not yet?' she says.

'I mean I'm not going to sell it.'

'Oh well,' she says, setting her focus back on her spud, 'you've been very busy making decisions these past few days. Has she been talking to you, Dad, or coming to this all on her own?'

'I'm sure she doesn't need my advice,' Pop says.



Fizz throws her spud in the pan and then stops, leaning a hand on the bench as she watches me. 'Are you thinking you might stay in Adelaide?' she says. 'Is that what's behind this?'

'I don't know what I'm doing, but it doesn't feel right to put it on the market. Not yet.'

'Eva.' She sets her knife down. Grips the bench with both hands, leans in my direction, her cleavage wrinkling a little under the weight of her leaning shoulders. 'It's worth quite a bit of money these days, love. Not the house itself, of course, but the land. You could make some sensible investments and still have money to get you set up wherever you decide to go. Why would you want to keep it?'

'Because...'

'But if you decide not to stay, who's going to look after it? I can't keep traipsing up here...'

'I wouldn't expect you too.'

'Pop's too old...'

'Easy on,' Pop says, 'no need to write me off before my own eyes.'

'Even if you rent it, it all has to be maintained...'

The door bangs back and Mick appears, red faced. He takes his cap off, wiping the sweat from his face into hair already coiffed with the stuff and says, 'gas cylinder just ran out...'

Fizz turns to look at him. 'You're kidding,' she says.

'No, I'm not,' Mick says. He comes across to the bench then. Swipes a kiss at my hair and pats a couple of times at my shoulder. 'Anywhere round here I might get it filled?' he says to Pop.

'On Christmas Day?' Fizz says, 'you've got to be joking...'

‘Foodland on Fiveash Drive’s open till eleven, you’ll still catch them if you’re lucky,’ he says.

‘Ta,’ Mick says. ‘The road down the bottom here, you mean?’

‘No,’ I say, ‘the one that winds around up the top, you know, if you turn right out of the driveway...’

And meanwhile Andy appears at the door, and Pop lifts his arms and says, ‘Well, finally, my intrepid son, how was the drive?’ and the screen door bangs open, Mick and I going out as Andy comes in.

Fizz calls out, ‘Tell the boys to come in, would you, they can help...Oh, bugger it,’ I hear her say, ‘I’ll come and get them myself, they won’t listen to you in any case.’ And she marches out ahead of me, kissing Andy’s cheek as she passes.

Two of my boy cousins are kicking an old footie down the bottom of the garden. ‘In here, you two,’ Fizz calls out to them, ‘we’ve got to get this stuff in the oven and the meat ready for the barbie.’

‘Alex is getting chairs out of the shed,’ Mick says.

‘Well, send him in when he’s done will you?’ Fizz says, ‘or we’ll never eat,’ and she heads back inside, banging the door behind her.

‘All going like clockwork in the kitchen, I see,’ Andy says to me. ‘Shall I grab us a beer?’

I wander out the front with Mick to point him towards the shops. A sleek black BMW convertible pulls up on the street behind Andy’s dust-covered van; Frances – scary osteopath auntie – and her new man, Petros or Patrice (none of us have quite caught the name on the phone) step out looking somewhere between ruffled and completely above it all.

I’m still out the front making awkward conversation with them when a cab pulls into the space in the drive that Mick has just vacated. Andy wanders out holding two

beers and hands me one. Pop emerges through the front door, arms raised again to more arriving offspring. My father springs out of the back of the cab and with not so much as a glance at any of us heads for the boot. For the usual Changi bounty, no doubt. Yes, there it is. And the violin, of course, couldn't leave it in the hotel safe like any other normal person. We're all standing there on the front lawn, watching my father progress towards us with his peculiar gait. He doesn't greet any of us. He sets down his bag of gifts and holds the violin out to me.

'Your own case and bow' he says, 'Ambrose returned them.' His knee jiggles. 'Take it,' he says, still holding it out to me. 'It's for you,' he says. I take it. 'Open it now,' he says. He can't keep the grin from his face, he claps his hands together while he watches me undo the clasps and survey the violin. 'Same year, same make,' he says. 'It took a bit of detective work but then I heard about this one in Prague. I went over there myself, to be certain. I think it's as close as you'll get, but we won't know for sure until you play it yourself...play,' he says, nodding, clapping his hands again.

'Not out here,' I laugh.

'Yes,' he says.

'Go on,' Pop says, 'I've been waiting all week for this moment.'

So I lift it from the blue velvet lining, with the photo of Berg still tucked into its pocket.

'I tuned it in the cab,' my father says. 'Driver thought I was mad,' he lets out a boyish hoot of laughter.

I lift it to my shoulder. My father hands me the bow. My old bow. 'Don't play the Berg,' he laughs, 'anything but the Berg.'

## **Strad, February Edition**

**Violinist Eva Byrne tells CLAUDIA BALLANTYNE about a year that has cemented her philosophies on performance, marketing and the direction of her own musical career.**

When young British-Australian violinist Eva Byrne performed Alban Berg's violin concerto in Edinburgh with the Scottish Philharmonia last November, it was evident to everyone in the audience that she inhabited the darkness of the work to an almost frightening degree. What most didn't know was that Byrne had lost her mother very suddenly some months previously – rendering the performance of a work so patently focussed on death particularly challenging. I was at that performance in Edinburgh. Byrne has impressed me on the few occasions I have seen her perform, not only with her skill but with her vulnerability and passion.

She left some weeks later for Australia, but was happy to talk with me recently by phone. When asked about this particular performance, Byrne was candid. 'I don't normally talk about my personal life at all in the media; I have always adopted the position that it has nothing to do with the music I play and the way I perform. But clearly what was happening for me personally at the time had an enormous impact on that particular performance. It has also forced me to re-evaluate what it means to me to be a musician. It was shattering for me to lose myself onstage as I did that night, but it was also highly revealing. In that moment everything was stripped away; all the play-acting, all the pretending and mimicry and trickery a musician might use to get them through a tough moment simply vanished. I had nothing left in my bag of tricks except myself. The Berg was a pure and direct act of translation of what I was experiencing emotionally into what I was expressing musically. That was bound to cost me something. Maybe it cost me too much.'

Realising the level of distress she was experiencing, Byrne has cancelled performances for the next several months. She is in Australia to sort out her mother's affairs and to spend some time making decisions about her own future direction.

Byrne's background is interesting. Her father is violinist, Timothy Byrne. Her mother, Grace Albright, with whom Eva lived in Australia during her childhood, had no musical background. 'Less than none,' as Byrne put it. 'My mother grew up in an environment in which her access to any music was totally restricted. Obviously this changed somewhat when she grew up, but she never really developed an affinity or a deep knowledge of music.'

I asked her if this was a hindrance to her musical education, given that her father was living in London. 'I've changed my opinion entirely on that,' Byrne said. 'My mother was involved in Steiner education; her ideology was always about holistic development. She totally rejected the notion of hot-housing particular skills, even if a child was gifted. This caused some friction in the family, I won't deny it, but I think her ideas were not entirely without grounding. She fought to keep my musical development within the context of other aspects of development. She saw this as essential for producing a well-rounded, balanced, happy human being. And I think she was right, at least to a degree. Yehudi Menuhin talks about being so identified with the gift that any faltering or failure in it leads to the total crumbling of the personality, which has never been strongly developed. Personal growth is stunted in comparison to the artist's creative evolution, and perhaps this ultimately even affects the artist's capacity to use the gift in any case. There's a Jung quote I like, which says, "great gifts are the fairest, and often the most dangerous fruits on the tree. They hang on the weakest branches, which easily break." I think this was the basis of my mother's determined effort to keep me grounded.'

I asked Byrne about the influence of her father, given that she did not live with him for any length of time until she came to live in London at the age of sixteen. 'Of course, I have always been inspired by him,' Byrne said, 'and he was not without opinions and stipulations regarding my musical education when I was growing up. I saw him regularly. We communicated regularly. I certainly would not be where I am now musically if it hadn't been for him. And he is a sublime musician, it is all so effortless for him,' she laughed, 'not a trait I inherited, unfortunately. The musical stuff,' she went on, 'is clearly from him. But my mother gave me a very solid

foundation. She was very alternative. Very ideological. Sometimes I resented this, but one of the greatest gifts she gave me was permission to be non-conformist. I don't find it particularly difficult to go against the grain or to follow my instincts about what I need to do. My early experiences with the media made me very wary, but they also made me reflect on what I was doing it all for. I made a commitment to music, not to self promotion. I don't want to be an entertainer so much as an advocate. I don't want the covers of my CDs to be identifiable by the label or the grandeur of my evening dress. A musical career only makes sense to me, given the world's general state, if I believe that music makes a contribution, inspires, expresses the human condition in all its highly fallible, redemption-seeking glory.' Then with typical self-effacement she guffawed. 'Not that I don't also want to give people a good night out, I just like to think that a good performance can change the way we view the world and our place in it.'

Of other influences, Eva cites her teachers, Hilary Rowe during her years in Adelaide, Theodore Clark at the RAM and George Behrendt during a year in Vienna. 'I've been lucky with teachers,' Byrne said. 'Hilary gave me excellent foundational skills, George Behrendt gave me Alban Berg on a platter and also absolute rigour in my approach to any piece of music. And Teddy Clark...what can I say about Teddy? Loads of technical grounding but he was also, serendipitously, the right teacher for me because he recognised early on that I was never going to quite fit. He used to quote a French poet, "develop your legitimate strangeness..." Develop your own eccentric, out-of-the-box interpretation of your gifts and passions. Because none of us do fit the box, do we?' She laughed again. 'There is no box, right? In the purest, existential sense, that is.'

She considers herself lucky, marvellously lucky. Family, teachers, people she has met along the way, opportunities that have dropped into her lap – again, a rather self effacing term for what has in fact been an unflinchingly self-directed course thus far. Byrne has won prizes, certainly, although she made a decision to retire from the competition circuit when she completed her studies at the Royal Academy of Music. In the spirit of self directedness she turned her

energies to an independent recording, for which she has won wide critical acclaim, of the Berg concerto, along with a work by Scottish composer Sir Fergus Cunningham, whom she also cites as a major life influence. 'Fergus Cunningham is an amazing person,' she said. 'I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude for the generosity he has always shown me.'

Of her next moves, she seems excited. She intends during her time in Australia to 'cut loose. Listen to everything.' Ideas are brewing, she says for another CD, which she will dedicate to her mother. 'There's a folk song, called Unquiet Grave, which has been done in many guises. My favourite is by a young Orkney/Edinburgh folkie called Jacob Freeman. He has an ancient, ravaged sort of voice, perfect for the words, which are about mourning the loss of a loved one, about not being able to let them rest, and not being able to get on with your own life either, for the time spent keeping watch over the grave. It seems in my limited experience,' she laughed, 'that there are a lot of folk songs about corpse kissing. In any case, the gist of it is that the dead loved one begs the one still alive to get on with their living, to make the most of their time, to be aware of their own mortality. It's a good theme, I think. I'd like to find my way to a few variations on it. And I'm enjoying exploring folk music. Having very limited background in the genre, I find myself drawn not only to its strong traditions but to the innovations these strong roots enable.'

I asked her if this would be a folk CD, and she laughed again. 'Hardly,' she said. But collaboration seems to be foremost in her ideas; 'pulling together loosely connected or quite disparate ideas to form some sort of unique congruity' is the way she described it. And then she laughed at herself again. 'Sounds like a lot of bollocks, doesn't it? No wonder I prefer speaking in music.'



I slam the door of Mama's old van, amazed I've been able to find my way here, along rutted, convoluted roads and narrow dirt tracks embedded between islands of impenetrable scrub I hope never catches fire. There are no other cars in the carpark when I finally clatter down to it apart from an old Holden station wagon, luminous green with four flat tyres. I pull my rucksack and sleeping bag from the back and walk up the few steps to the door. It won't be locked at least, I know. There's a small kangaroo feeding from the garden near the sliding door, which has a sign on it, *I'm broken, please use the side door*, with an arrow pointing right. The kangaroo munches on, eyeing me for only a brief second as I make my way past it to the working, wooden door, which must be shoved at with the shoulder, I seem to recall. The red carpet on the floor inside is the same as it was. Same smell of chai tea and damp towels, or possibly it is the carpet that is damp, it feels rubbery under my boots. I suspect it has been laid straight over dirt, not concrete slab.

No one in the kitchen. The same arrangement of island benches, shelves of pots and pans and precarious crockery stacks, an entire wall lined with gas ranges, utensils hanging on strung coat wire above them. A door bangs on the far side of the room; a small Asian woman turns down the enormous kettle of boiling chai but does not see me over on the far side of the room. I have to call out, 'hello,' which startles her, her hands go to her face, although she smiles as we walk towards each other, meeting halfway.

'Hello, hello,' she says, 'welcome. You are here for the ceremony.' I tell her I'm here to see Dave, I'm not aware of any ceremony. 'Dave,' she says, shaking her head, as if confused. And then her face lights up, 'Ah, Dave,' she says. 'He's at the stupa. Everyone's at the stupa. This weekend the Lama is coming to bless the stupa.' She



points at the kettle on the stove. 'I am making the morning tea,' she says. 'You have a car. We can take it.'

She is Princess, and I am Eva. This established, amongst much smiling and hand holding, I set down my things and help her out to the car with a box of mugs, teaspoons, milk, biscuits. We drive up the track, Princess giving directions. It is as I remember it. Summer though it is, it has been raining, at least in this tiny corner of the island. The dirt track is slippery under the wheels and the clay soggy as we step onto it. We can't see the stupa from where I park along the track behind several other cars. I take the box again and Princess takes the giant kettle and we tread carefully across the clay, up the path, minding our feet until Princess says, 'there' and stops. I stop too and look up.

I remember the bones of the place – the gardens and paths, the dam with its strangely pale, spearmint water, the thick vegetation spreading out for hundreds of acres, the sea somewhere beyond it, although not visible from where we stand. Rising up before the dam now stands the stupa.

'It's not finished,' Princess says. 'It is only the shell.'

It is a shabby edifice of mud bricks, shrouded in scaffolding, high enough that people on the upper level of the scaffolding are tiny, almost indiscernible. I can't make out Dave amongst those bodies. On the lower level of scaffolding something large and ornate is being lowered via ropes amidst a lot of yelling. I can make out maybe ten people waiting with raised arms to grasp it. There are shouts of 'Now!' and 'I've got it!' and 'Lower on this side, bring it lower!' and then the thing is finally in place with bodies pressing it against the wall of the stupa.

'It is the gorkim,' Princess explains. 'It has come from Tibet. Very heavy. Made of...I've forgotten the word...'

'Metal?' I take a stab.

'Copper,' Princess says, relieved to give it its proper title.

We are still standing, holding our morning tea offerings. 'Come,' Princess says and we move down the path beside the stupa, listening to the frantic goings on from the scaffolding above us, directions to push and hang on and push harder. We enter the stupa down below, where prayer flags are being strung along the metal pillars inside the temple, and the dirty concrete floors are being swept. Someone is chanting in a mellow mezzo soprano. Swallows flit in and out of the wide entrance, swooping up to the high ceiling and ducking back out of the glassless windows.

I set the box down on a table already cluttered with mugs and tins of more biscuits. Several women are stooped next to the table, over boxes and bags of what I can see are dried flowers, letting petals run through their fingers, discarding anything mouldy or insect-riddled. I have no clue as to what these multitudes of flowers might be for. There are boxes everywhere, I notice, looking around, and numerous people working over them in a focussed sort of way, pulling things out, discarding those things deemed unacceptable for whatever purpose they have been set aside.

I'm aware of not belonging in this hive of incomprehensible activity. I recognise no one, but that doesn't surprise me; I had never made any effort to know anyone in the times Mama brought me here. Dragged me here, I would have said. I communicated begrudgingly, miserable puddle of adolescent that I was, spending long hours in my mother's car or in some hidden corner of bush reading, coming out only when Mama demanded it, spitting with fury in a most un-Buddhist-like manner at my general recalcitrance.

'Let me introduce you,' Princess says, taking my arm, leading me to the women at work on the dried flowers, whose names I instantly forget, not because I am any longer recalcitrant, only a little overwhelmed. I want Dave to appear. I want him to take me off somewhere quiet and talk me through things. I didn't mean to embroil myself in any ceremony, nor did I anticipate having to deal with this many people. Still I nod and

smile, answer a few questions about what I am doing here. Ask a few too, about what it is they're doing with the flowers and these other boxes I can now see are filled with hundreds of tiny, gold-painted plaster Buddha statues. All to be packed, apparently, inside the vase of the stupa, which is what we had seen surrounded in scaffolding on our way in. I shake my head, mystified. Then a large man in a hard hat appears in the doorway.

'Is that morning tea?' he says in a Cockney accent, disorienting me further. He moves away from the entrance and yells up into the scaffolding. 'Break! Frank, Gavin,' he waves his arms, his head tilted back. 'Break,' he calls again.

Men and women troop in from above. I'm handed a mug of chai and a ginger nut. There is still no sign of Dave. Everybody knows him, no one knows where he is. Off in Kingscote getting wood, one person thinks, or maybe he'd gone to the airport for the Lama, someone else suggests. Getting gold spray paint, someone else says, there's still hundreds of those statues need painting and packing. Still work to do up top too, rain or shine they'll be up there till daybreak if they have to be, it has to be done or the Lama will be coming for no good reason. There's also shopping and cooking to do for the Lama's special dietary requirements. All of the Lama's designated students will be disappearing shortly to prepare for his arrival, which doesn't leave too many people to do what needs to be done here, at the stupa, so the Cockney man, who appears to be some sort of foreman, says.

'You've arrived at a good time,' he says, grinning at me.

I'm put in charge of spray painting the Buddha statues. In fact, it is immediately obvious from the mass exodus after morning tea that I'm the only one available for the task. I am given very specific instructions by Princess about the fastidiousness with which I must perform it. No imperfection will be accepted. I must check every detail of every statue. If there is so much as a tip of a Buddha's thumb missing, the statue must

be blessed and thrown into the dam. I am to make a pile of these discards, to be taken out later in the boat. Maybe it's an excess of plaster of paris, I think, which gives the dam its odd colour. I set to work, examining every statue, best I can in the dark, dusty innards of the temple. Someone is at work still on the dried flowers. Other than that the place has been deserted, prayer flags half-strung, floor half-swept. I try to keep my attention focussed on what I have been asked to do, rather than on the actual bizarreness of the request. I find it mildly consuming; at least it will keep me occupied till Dave returns.

One by one I lay the plaster cast Buddhas in a line along a board, tossing aside those with obvious deformities. Wind and rain sweep into the temple from time to time and I wonder what this will do to my spray-painting efforts. I'm not dexterous or crafty; can't remember when I last held a tin of spray paint. I set the last of the tiny buddhas out on my careful rows on the large hardiplank board and give the spray can a long and vigorous shake before I begin at one corner to spray, stooped over the board, stepping along it slowly to reach every one of the statues, careful to get every nook and crevice. It takes me an hour or more to spray one side of the first batch of statues and there are hundreds, possibly thousands, more awaiting me in boxes, all to be done by dawn tomorrow, when the ceremony begins. I still have no real clue what they are to be used for. Princess instructed me to wait until they were dried and then pack them away in the boxes again, filling every corner of air with sawdust, layering dried flowers over the top. They are to be packed in the vase of the stupa, someone with more fluent English tried to explain to me but I don't know what this means. I don't know why I must pay such fastidious attention to detail when the things will be buried in layers of sawdust and dried flowers.

Still, I stick to my task. I am resolutely careful. I'm thinking of you, Mama, making up for all those trips when I sulked in the car. I'm thinking of you and at the

same time delaying giving any real attention to what I know I have come here to confront. I am paving the way with alms. I wish to be blessed, if blessing is possible. I wish to be better. So I spray the lines of Buddhas gold. I endure the fumes, the sticky coating that builds on my fingers from the back-dribble of the nozzle. When I have finished the first coat, I step outside while I wait for them to dry. I move away from the stupa to look up to its shaky pinnacle, watch them all at work, listen to the occasional shout or jibe. They're happy Buddhists; deadlines don't seem to be getting under their skin.

The Cockney's on the first level of scaffolding, about ten metres up, where they are still struggling to attach the copper thing I will eternally think of, since the Tibetan word won't stick in my mind, as the gherkin. He leans over the rail during a pause in activity. 'You want to come up?' he says, and directs me round the corner to a bridge, then holds the fully extended ladder at the top end while I clamber up, the frame visibly shaking with every step. The view, this much higher up, extends out over miles of bush; the swallows are everywhere, but especially over the dam; from this height they seem to fibrillate rather than fly. There is a wooden boat at the far side of the dam; I suppose that is what I will row out in to drown my defective Buddhas.

I'm not idle for long. My diminished height is noted and put to advantage. I'm tucked in under the main bulk of bodies to pin a low corner of the gherkin to the wall of the stupa, where it is to be bolted. Someone's had a dyslexic moment and marked the template back-to-front, apparently, hence all the jiggling and manoeuvring to fit the thing into place. Again, nobody seems to be laying blame about it; no one's having strips torn off of them. The Tibetan gherkin is pure copper, apparently, and weighs a ton. It is ornately painted, I can now see, with devils and big-breasted mermaids; my hands cup a vivid green mermaid fin as I squat inside the hollow entrance, amidst mostly burly male legs, and because I am looking outwards, I see the ladder rattle as

another body makes its way up. I recognise the hands, then the pale dreads. Dave is clapped on the shoulder and put to work. He shoves his own great weight against the thing and finally first one bolt and then the other are slid into place amidst cheers. I choose my moment. My hands now free, I run one up under Dave's jeaned leg, watch him jump, startled, and look downwards; watch the grin spread across his face as one equal in dimension spreads across my own.

'Fancy finding you up a holy shrine,' he says.



So comes the moment. Rattle the skeletons to life. Be fifteen again. How much do I need to say? Will words make any difference? But words are powerful, Gordon Fenton's words were, and my father's. *You may as well accept the fact, Eva, that your mother's crazy ideas have probably cost you any chance of a career.* Go home now, Eva, to your crazy Mama. Go back to the hippie school and learn how to belong because this is all you've got now. No more fooling yourself, no more trying to prove you're like him, the father, and not her, the mother. Go do what all your friends at school are doing, smoke dope and have sex. Loosen up a little. Take a break. I'm taking a break, Hilary, it's all cool, I'm just over the whole practice thing, the whole discipline thing, I'm going to be a normal teenager for a little while, watch television, fudge my homework, fall in love with Ezra Crane, whose father grows dope so potent that the first time I try it, it fundamentally alters my concept of time. Maybe of other things, too. Ryan Crane builds bespoke furniture from the dropped limbs of the neighbourhood's redgums, which he steals from the side of the road, justifying his theft by turning them into things of beauty rather than woodchip.

While Ezra's band is practising up in the mud brick turret I go out to the shed because I like the smell of redgum and Ryan is cool to talk to. The walls of the shed are plastered with shots of him surfing in remote places all over the world. He's into the extreme thing, getting dropped in the middle of the ocean by a boat, finding himself suddenly lifted to the crest of a forty-foot wall of water. He's taken Ezra to Bali, other spots around Indonesia and New Guinea. His dream is to surf the Faroe Islands, way up north near Greenland. He looks like a surfer, although he's older, obviously, he's still got the long bleached hair. He's got a scar the length of one of his shins from the nose of a board bulletted at him through the pounded spume of one of those forty foot beauties. He wears several rings in one ear, as does Ezra, and they both have tats. Ryan has more, one for every country, a big blank space on his right bicep for when he finally does the Faroes.

There's no Mrs Crane and Ezra and Ryan don't talk about her. I've heard Mama and Tallis say she's a heroin addict and hasn't seen Ezra since he was a baby. Ezra's a really beautiful, gentle person. Ryan's a great Dad. Their house is like a drop-in centre for everyone from school, Ezra's band pretty much lives there. Ryan's put a caravan out the back and he's aware that kids from school go there to have sex, but as he says, kids are going to have sex, may as well do it somewhere where they're safe.

Ezra has the top floor of the turret, Ryan has the floor below. Only problem with that he says is he should have sound-proofed his ceiling. I think he's talking about Ezra's band practices but he laughs and says, I'm talking about when you two are up there fucking at three in the morning. But he's cool, he's glad his son's having a good time. He hopes I'm having a good time too, he says, the problem with boys Ezra's age is that they can be a little too focussed on their own pleasure.

We're in the shed when this conversation takes place. I'm sitting on a stool, Ryan's sanding a large slab of redgum for a benchtop for Mama's kitchen. This

particular branch fell off a tree down the bottom of Aurora a few years ago, so it's only fitting it should be returned to her.

Things fall silent after Ryan's comment. I'm not sure whether he expects me to say something. So I say, 'Ezra's cool.'

Ryan stops sanding. 'Yes, I'm sure he is,' he says, brushing his hand over the slab a couple of times before he says, 'but does he make you come?' He glances at me then, raises an eyebrow, goes back to his sanding. The radio's on, Radiohead suddenly floods out and fills the silence. Eventually Ryan says, 'You want to go in and make us a coffee?'

I do. When I come back I hand him his mug and he sets it down. He takes my own mug and sets that down too. Then he rubs my hands between his own, says, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you. You don't need to be embarrassed. You're a gorgeous young woman. I want to think you're taking full pleasure in that body of yours. That's all I'm saying. No harm intended. Okay?' He lets go of my hands. Picks up his coffee. Takes a sip. Sets it down. Goes back to work. I go back in to Ezra.

Now when we're fucking at three in the morning I'm doing it for Ryan's pleasure. You'd think I'd have the opposite reaction and try and tone things down but clearly I'm some sort of pervert. I want Ryan to hear his son make me come. But even if Ryan does, he no longer says anything. He keeps the conversation totally above board. I'm the one that starts dressing for him, letting my shorts ride up as I straddle the stool in his shed, masturbating at home to the thought of him slipping his fingers inside them.

One night there's a party – we're all stoned, people fill the rooms and spill out into the garden, where Ezra's band is playing. Ryan's in the shed, staying out of harm's way, he calls it. I slip in, pull the lock. I'm wearing a singlet and a long Indian skirt, nothing underneath. Ryan's still sanding Mama's bench, he wants it smooth as marble, he says, from the sheer effort of his own hands. I lean next to him, watching. When he



wants to move to where I'm standing I won't get out of his way. He puts his hands on my arms and moves me sideways but I squeeze myself back in between him and the bench. I take the block and sandpaper from his hand and move his hand inside my singlet. I can feel his heart beat in his solid chest. He turns me around then, and I pull myself up on the bench and open my legs for him. He works his dusty fingers into me while Ezra's band plays on in the garden, the bass thumping like a heartbeat as I come.

Ezra and I and a couple of others were expelled from school because we were caught smoking dope in the costume loft before a dress rehearsal of *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*. I was supposed to have played Puck. I'd already started cutting myself. I don't know why Mama had razors in the bathroom cabinet since she never shaved anything and I used disposables, but then there were many mysterious things in Mama's bathroom cabinet. Discarded pills she ought to have thrown out that I swallowed now and again for the heck of it. Ancient bottles of calamine and rescue remedy, congealed tubes of homeopathic remedies.

A quick slice with the razor while I waited for the shower to warm up. I liked the hot pain of the water hitting where I'd sliced. I liked watching the blood go down the drain. Ryan took Ezra away for an extended surfing trip – the 'for sale' sign went up at their house in their absence, about the time that Ezra's postcards stopped. Mama walked into the bathroom one day and saw me with the razor and began to scream. She took me to a shaman, an Australian woman with hair hennaed lurid orange and a coating of pink cream over her eczema-scabbed facial skin, who lay me down in a tepee and wafted feathers at me and beat various drums as she made dialogue with the variety of animal guides and malevolent spirits lurking over my shoulder.

This made no difference. I couldn't stop cutting myself. I had nothing else to do. Mama got rid of the razor blades but I found other things. A compass. A needle. A very

sharp lead pencil. I was tired all the time. I went to Mt Barker High School for a couple of days but I never had any serious intention of continuing. Mama would often come home from school in the afternoon and find me still in bed. The homeopath recommended a wheat-free diet and some sort of potion that made me nauseous, but Mama insisted I keep taking it.

In the end, Mama took the rest of the term off school. We were going to Shangrila, ha-ha. She packed the Hiace van and ordered me in, I'd left myself no choices. We caught the ferry over, I never got out of the van. Halfway across the island she suddenly lurched the van to the side of the road, put her head to the steering wheel and sobbed. Then she recovered herself, pulled the van out again and drove on in silence.

It was midweek and Shangrila was deserted, all the Buddhists off earning a living. Probably not quite what Mama had in mind but she trundled off to the stupa that first afternoon while I lay on the threadbare tweed couch staring out at the bush. I was sick. I'd got my period and it was painful. I hadn't had one for a while, which wasn't that unusual for me, I'd always been an erratic bleeder but I'd also been a light bleeder and this period was not light. I'd gone through several tampons by the time Mama came back and started banging pots around in the kitchen. I'd had to scrub a large patch of blood that I'd flooded the couch with while I'd napped. Tampons were clearly not up to the task so I switched to some sanitary pads I found in the bathroom, but even these couldn't contain the blood. My insides were being dragged from me. Mama made me chamomile tea. She told me sometimes a homeopathic treatment could have this effect. She rubbed at my back and my feet with lavender oil. She put her mattress and sleeping bag on the floor next to the couch and told me to wake her if I needed her.

I woke up sometime during the night sobbing with pain. Thankfully Mama was a heavy sleeper. I knew I had to get to the toilet, although what for I didn't clearly

articulate. My body was thinking, my mind was gaga. I stumbled out through the kitchen, fumbled about for the light switch in the bathroom, sat on the toilet while wave after wave of pain flowed through my lower body. What I finally passed was a black clotted wad about the dimensions of a bloated tampon. It plopped into the toilet from a vulva twitching and spitting of its own accord. Momentarily the pain subsided. I sat on the toilet crying, dirty with blood. Finally I reached a finger down into the toilet and touched that gelatinous spat bloody gob. It had form, places of hardness, sinew, bone, tissue. The possibility of a pea-sized skull and miniscule hands clutched in a gesture of prayer. My mind refused absolute recognition, but even so, I couldn't bring myself to flush the toilet. I pulled off a long stretch of toilet paper, lifted the thing from the bowl. Then I flushed. I took it out to the garden. Trod gingerly in my bare feet into the middle of a large patch of bushes. Cried as I squatted and scrabbled at the dirt with my fingers, making a hole deep enough to place the parcel inside. Then I covered it and went back inside.

Mama was up when I woke the next morning. I could hear her in the kitchen. The pain was back. I knew I was still bleeding. There was no denying what was happening and yet I kept denying it. Mama would have understood, if it had been a little more straightforward. Mama had taken me to family planning but I was as hopeless about pills as she was. So she'd have been upset, but she'd have understood. If it had been straightforward, that is. Ezra used condoms. Always. Ezra was a sensible boy, about birth control at least. Even if he was stoned, the condom went on. So I'd never had to worry, not really. The complication was Ezra's daddy, because he'd never meant it to happen, and had therefore not used a condom. But denial does not negate the fact, as I was by now fully appreciating. He'd wept almightily with self-disgust but that didn't undo the damage either. Anyway, I hadn't seen it as damage at the time, and as I'd pointed out to him, it had been me doing the seducing.

But it was not possible to communicate any of this to Mama. I stumbled out to the kitchen again intent on getting to the bathroom before I bled everywhere. Mama was at the stove boiling milk for some chai tea. She looked at me with such concern. She said, 'How are you feeling, poor duck?' I could barely restrain myself from doubling over in pain, but I don't offer that as an excuse. I told her to fuck off. She raised her hand and slapped hard at my face. 'Why do you treat me like this?' she screamed. 'What have I done to you?'

But then she noticed the blood soaking the legs of my pyjamas. 'Oh, Rain,' she said. 'Oh, darling,' and she took me in her arms while I doubled over with pain, bringing both of us to the floor.

It wasn't a straightforward miscarriage. They discovered cysts on my ovaries. They had to take one. The other is so scarred that it's virtually useless. It was a miracle I'd got pregnant in the first place, they told me. What they really raked Mama over the coals about, however, was the damage I'd done to the rest of my body. There was quite a bit of infection, especially to the more recent wounds, which were not as clean as those inflicted with the razor blades. I don't know why they blamed Mama, she'd had absolutely nothing to do with it. I could not offer any of them an explanation for why I'd done it but it certainly wasn't, as Mama insinuated, to get back at her. You always did take things too personally, Mama.

'What have I done to you?' you said, sitting next to my hospital bed.

'It's not your fault, Mama,' I said, but of course I wanted to blame you. If I pinned it all on you, then I could walk away and begin again.



I'm used a lot over the next twenty-four hours; diminished height is of sudden advantage if you are trying to stuff a stupa. I spend most of my time down inside the hollow concrete bowl that forms the stupa's dome, resting on top of the square walls of the temple. It is, at least until we start filling it, about three times my height. I clamber up and down the ladder, taking down boxes of statues and dried flowers, which I must arrange to fit as compactly as possible, and around which I then stuff loose dried flowers and sawdust. The boxes are lowered down to me by others sitting on the lip of the concrete bowl, their bums sticking out thirty metres above the ground. The sawdust is tipped down out of garbage bags. Because I'm soon choking on the stuff the Cockney bloke goes off in search of a mask. It's the sort with complex nozzles and devices, veteran airforce style. On top of that, someone throws me a scarf to wrap around my hair. It's dark down here and it's not all that easy to breathe. But I like the repetitiveness of the task. I'm offered breaks but I don't take them. I know there's a deadline – the Lama has a plane to catch in the morning – and I know how grateful all these supersized humans are that I'm willing to put myself through this. But really, I'm not doing it for them. I'm not doing it for the Buddha either, although I try to pay respectful heed to the exacting requirements of making this thing a viable place of worship. Prayer scrolls and mantras, for example, which form their own separate layers at intervals between those of the flowers and statues, must be placed with their script exactly facing the east, complicated by the fact that they are rectangular and the bowl is circular, complicated further by the sheer mass of stuff, ferried up in a constant stream by a tag team of people, placed at intervals from the ground up to each level of scaffolding.

At some point delirium sets in, I think I've been hoping for it, suddenly all the stuff is music under my fingers, chords and melodies stacked and arranged, layer upon

layer, line upon line, a fragile form laid over the chaos. One way to pack a life into a meaningful, cogent, forgivable shape.



Dave's moved to KI more permanently to get the stupa built, since the thing's been stalling for a decade. That's the cover story, at least. The reality's different. We were outside under the stars for hours last night after everyone else had gone to bed spray painting the Buddhas, and Dave told me a bit about the on again-off again, mostly fraught relationship he'd been having with Mama since my childhood. Of course it's obvious in hindsight – Dave is all over my childhood – but they never slept together, not when I was around. Mama thought things were complicated enough, apparently. 'Even recently?' I said and he shrugged, 'You know what she could be like,' he said. I didn't ask him if it was on-again or off-again when Mama died. Either way he's another one carrying a load of guilt and regret. He was at his old place in North Adelaide the night it happened. 'You know,' he said to me, 'she couldn't get out of that bath alone at the best of times.'

So here's the Buddhist idea – I did a bit of reading last night after Dave went to bed – you hold things lightly, you let them go. You don't try and run from them, but you don't seize them by the throat, either. And I'm up here in this stupa, and that's what I'm doing. I'm letting you go, Mama. You never will go, I know that – this is a lifelong ritual I'm starting here. In my rucksack is a small silk pouch containing the remainder of your ashes. New Year's day I had risen at dawn, taken the urn and scattered some over your gardens at Aurora, a small crowd of kangaroos gathered on the ridge amongst your beautiful trees to bear witness. Some of the ashes I kept back for a New Year

ceremony Tallis arranged at the Steiner School. And I played my violin for you there, Mama, among your beautiful gardens, just a simple melody, *Unquiet Grave*.

My plan is to scatter the rest of your ashes here on Kangaroo Island with Dave, around the stupa gardens that you were so much a part of creating too. But here I am, up in this stupa, and I would love to leave even the smallest portion here, among the sawdust and flowers and holy relics, invisible inside this inner sanctum, which emanates its own form of hope. A little bit of secret grace, I think. In the end, I don't, though. If every tiny part of this act is held to be sacred, who am I to decide what will and won't desecrate it? I take your ashes and hold them out to the wind instead, way up in this high place, with the bush spreading forever to the sea. Fly, Mama, fly.

Dave's been living all these months in a tent by the Chapman River, across the other side of the island. I know the Chapman River because Mama and I used to camp there when I was young, before she discovered the Buddhists. She was fond of the place. I think the story went that she'd camped there once with her own parents, although how this fits into the nightmare of her childhood I'm not sure. I suppose a rare time of happiness would be cherished. On the other hand, I might have made the story up, it certainly doesn't equate with my image of Pastor Bobby or the shrivelled up misery of Mrs Joyce Joyce. Dave wanted to take me over there this trip, but there's been no time, what with the rush to prepare the stupa. It's an isolated place, that much I remember about it. I imagine it's been perfect for Dave these past few months – he's not one for communal living at the best of times, and clearly this has not been his best time.

The stupa's been swept and reswept. The wind is such that the detritus is immediately blown back in. Carpets have been rolled out on the floors and cushions laid out. People are seated while the Lama chants. Some like me are standing in the door, not quite participating. He's been chanting for a long time. It's the final ceremony. I'm

going home today. The ceremony is not that important to me – I found my meaning up the stupa – but Dave and I are going to scatter the little that remains of Mama’s ashes in the gardens when he gets back, if he gets back; I’ll have to go soon if I’m going to get the ferry. I don’t want to find myself stranded in Penneshaw.

He’s off fetching the old hermit who lives in a tin shack on the land above where he’s been camping. The old bloke’s been there for thirty years, so Dave says, thirty years of very limited company, staring out over that breach of ocean to the mainland. Dave saw him one afternoon a while ago down at the river mouth, shovelling sand. He was at it for hours. Dave finally realised he was digging a channel to get the river flowing into the sea, something that probably hadn’t happened in years, given the drought. So Dave took a spade down and gave him a hand, as only Dave would. They dug most of the night. Very little talking, I imagine. They slept on the beach when they were finally spent. Dave woke the next morning to find the old man crouched a way off, watching the first trickle make its way into the sea. Then, Dave tells me, he was invited up to the shack for a cuppa and they’ve become mates, as much as two largely silent men can be mates.

The old bloke does some trade with the Buddhists – takes their newspapers for recycling and so on in exchange for basic supplies – that’s his connection to the place. As for me, I’m over the ceremonial stuff. I’m tired. My hair’s full of sawdust. I’m going to go home and paint the walls at Aurora white. Then I’m going to offer it to Dave. His house in Adelaide was finally bulldozed, apparently. And someone who likes to cover every surface inch of his dwelling in paintings cannot live forever in a tent. I don’t know, maybe he’ll refuse me, maybe it would all feel a little close, but I look at what he’s doing here, and think it’s all about Mama’s memory, Aurora might just be an extension of that.



I see them coming down the path, Dave and the old bloke, who looks frail, although if he can dig through the night he is clearly nothing of the kind. I slip away from the stupa and walk up to meet them.

‘Just made it,’ I say to Dave, ‘we’ve got about three minutes to do this or I’m going to miss my ferry.’

Dave says, ‘Eva, meet Rob’, and the old man holds his hand out to me. His eyes have an amazing clarity. I think of Fergus; think, it must be a hermit thing, this clarity, and I’m thrown as I still often am by the thought of Fergus. I shake the old man’s hand and say something polite to him but really, my mind’s on other things, and I’m already pulling the silk pouch from my pocket and turning to Dave and saying, ‘Shall we? Sorry, I’ve got to get to the ferry...’

And it’s not till days later that I make the connection. Bobby. But let’s not even start that story. Leave it with the ferry, standing on the upper deck in whipping, hot wind. Sky so big I want to fold myself into it, or so I’m thinking when I vomit, abrupt and without warning, all over the railings of the upper deck. Not that I’m reading anything into it, but I think of you, Mama, on a long-ago boat trip, and my hands drift to my belly as the words float up, *I would give you everything*.

**The Musicalisation of ...*fuga*:  
how music influenced and shaped the writing of a  
novel**

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## Introduction

The musicalization of fiction. Not in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound [...]: But on a large scale, in the construction. Meditate on Beethoven. The changes of moods, the abrupt transitions. [...] More interesting still, the modulations, not merely from one key to another, but from mood to mood. A theme is stated, then developed, pushed out of shape, imperceptibly deformed, until, though still recognizably the same, it has become quite different. In sets of variations the process is carried a step further. Those incredible Diabelli variations, for example. The whole range of thought and feeling, yet all in organic relation to a ridiculous waltz tune. Get this into a novel. How? The abrupt transitions are easy enough. All you need is sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots. [...] More interesting, the modulations and variations are also more difficult. A novelist modulates by repudiating situation and characters. He shows several people falling in love, or dying, or praying in different ways – dissimilars solving the same problem. [...] In this way you can modulate through all the aspects of your theme, you can write variations in any number of different moods. (Huxley 293)

If for the purposes of this exegesis I define ‘musicalisation’ as the appropriation of musical strategies and ideas within a narrative, and limit the scope of the discussion to the art of the novel, two questions immediately arise: Why ‘musicalise’ a novel? And how? It would appear from Huxley’s description that musical ideas are easy enough, in theory at least, to appropriate for narrative purposes, and there are many examples of works of literature that have done so, *Point Counterpoint* among them. But it also hardly needs to be stated that music cannot exist in any real sense in the realm of words;

any idea of music, or any such appropriation of its processes and characteristics for narrative purposes, is purely metaphorical. Music and words are both temporal, aural, dynamic forms, and it is these shared qualities that enable analogies to be drawn between them. But as will become evident over the course of this exegesis, the impetus for musicalisation stems as much from the differences between these two mediums as from any likeness, and chief among these differences, for the purposes of the current discussion at least, is the way they function with regards to meaning. Words by their very nature signify something outside of themselves, whereas music, while clearly evocative of meaning, doesn't. Music, even of the programmatic variety, requires words to elucidate its meaning, and nevertheless remains subjective. Where words might suffer from a semantic rigidity, music might conversely suffer from its semantic ambiguity. Perhaps then, as the following exegesis will examine, what the novel might seek from music, and what music might seek from the novel, is some means of escaping the constraints imposed by the nature of their own mediums, particularly in relation to degrees and qualities of meaning.

..*fuga* began as a novel about music, but the limitations of writing 'about' something, particularly something as abstract and inherently incompatible with the medium of words as music, were quickly evident. Writing 'about' something implies a descriptive, objective account – reportage at a distance. But this sort of writing seemed to say little about the music I was trying to describe and even less about the novel I was trying to write – I might have easily substituted equivalent passages about water polo for all that it offered the novel's deeper ideas. I began to examine, often through the writing itself, why it mattered that the novel was about music, and not water polo. I began also to examine through the writing why I was writing a novel at all, for in fact the realisation about the inadequacy of writing words about music was merely a specific instance of a larger awakening to the limitations of words in general, which did not

behave on the page the way I might have expected them to. No doubt this is a common enough experience for the first-time novelist, and no doubt words about water polo would have generated some interesting metaphoric potential of their own, but because of the musical orientation of my own novel and my own affinity with music, I found myself grappling with the novel's specific issues through music. Words about music might have appeared inadequate for representing the music itself, but the challenge of doing so provided ample opportunity to explore the potentialities (positive and negative) of analogising these shared territories. Music became my way of thinking about the novel, of conceiving the novel, and of reflecting upon the novelistic process, somewhat along the lines of Huxley's musings, although my own musings and their practical application are specific to ... *fuga*'s music and ideas, as well as to my own evolution as a writer. It felt at times as if, to paraphrase Walter Pater's famous dictum, I was writing something that was not so much *about* music, as aspiring to *be* music. In another sense, it was always clear that the aspiration towards music was as much a means of grappling with the slippery territory of words, and of moving the words beyond their own limitations, as it was about perceiving any superior capacity in music. I responded to the shortfall I perceived in words by turning to the qualities of music that might address this shortfall. Music became a means for stretching words out beyond their constraints, just as it became evident that the words themselves could offer reciprocal emancipation to the music they sought to elucidate. Music also offered a means for examining novelistic form and the role it plays in the construction of meaning.

The following exegesis explores the music of ... *fuga* and its influence on the shaping of the final work. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework for ideas about musicalisation. Each subsequent chapter addresses a specific work of music or strategy of musicalisation as it applied to the writing of ... *fuga*, within the context of a

broader literary and theoretical framework. This exegesis is an attempt to reflect and reason upon an overarching consideration that was largely sensed or intuited during the creation of the novel itself: namely, the aspiration of one art form to move towards the conditions of another, and the questions this raises about the nature of both music and literature.

## Chapter One

### Words and Music – a theoretical framework for musicalisation

The human mind is conceptual. We construct our reality through words, which do not denote ‘things’ as they exist in the world, but the concepts we have developed in our minds of these ‘things’. Saussure, who laid the foundations for structuralism, saw an inherent unity between the word and its concept – something like that of the convex and concave sides of a lens (Crotty 205) – but post-structuralism and anti-structuralism called this unity into question, identifying language’s inability to ‘close off meaning into concept’ (St. Pierre 968). In postmodern, post-structuralist or anti-structuralist terms reality might be conceptualised via language, but every act of conceptualisation generates some degree of slippage. Michael Crotty paraphrases Adorno: ‘We substitute concepts for what they represent but no concept can ever capture the richness of reality’ (132). Adorno himself says: ‘objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder’ (qtd. in Crotty 132); there is ‘a “more” which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being’ (135). Barthes refers to this remainder or surplus as the ‘excess of the signifier’ (*Rustle* 198) – that which is not entirely accounted for in the interaction between the signified and the signifier (the word and the concept), and which must be read ‘in the margins of representation’ (198). Derrida sees the union between the word and the concept as incomplete, or deferred; he talks not of a remainder, or an excess, but of an absence – an ‘other’ – which eludes the word’s grasp. The word is inadequate, and Derrida therefore puts it under erasure, but leaves it still on the page to indicate that despite its inadequacy it is necessary (Crotty 205-6).

Words are all we have. It is through words that we comprehend reality, but the contemporary mind also recognises that words are as unreliable as the reality they seek to represent. ‘Uncertainty...is the ground of man’s very existence’, as Milan Kundera

tells us (*Testaments* 23). In the world as we now view it, ‘fragmentation takes the place of totality and completeness. Ambiguity reigns where once there was clarity. The old certainties vanish, leaving us with the tentative, the provisional, the temporary, the contingent’ (Crotty 194). We no longer have the faith in language we might once have had, just as we can no longer have faith in the world it represents; we can no longer assume that language is infallible, and capable of conclusively expressing what we mean or what we know. As Patricia Waugh describes it:

The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and “objective” world is no longer tenable. Language is a self-contained system which generates its own “meanings”. Its relationship to the phenomenal world is highly complex, problematic and regulated by convention. (3)

And yet language is the means by which we must express this uncertain, fragmented, tentative existence. It is the means by which we try to communicate with each other, navigating the distortions of meaning, since we all interpret words differently, through our own unique cognitive and experiential lenses. Words ‘cannot simply transport meaning from one person to another’ (St. Pierre 968), and we cannot therefore assume that we are interpreting the world in a way that will be meaningful or ‘true’ to others; we must inevitably resign ourselves to the inadequacy of our communicative attempts. Perhaps it has become fundamental to the human condition to recognise and to live with the constant shadow of that which is remaindered, to acknowledge all that we can never quite say – all that does not quite fit within the concrete forms of words. Perhaps it could be argued that one function of the novel (and any other form of literary narrative) is to attempt to address that remaindered, unspeakable void. Music, by virtue of its non-signification, likewise functions in that realm.



But what music also offers us, which language by its very nature denies us, is immediacy. We absorb any immediate experience and filter it through language, which makes it comprehensible to us, but which also always leaves us at a remove from our immediate reality. But since the aural components from which music is formed, unlike the words from which language is formed, do not signify anything outside of themselves, they do not operate from a remove, as language necessarily does. Music simply is, as the physical world simply is; we recognise music's quality of immediacy just as we occasionally breathe in a whiff of uninterpreted reality from the immediate physical world outside our own skins. But we have no way of apprehending or comprehending this experience without words. Our bodies might know it, but our minds can only operate from the remove of interpretation, capturing some aspect of the musical experience while inevitably some part of it slips away. To quote Kierkegaard:

Music always expresses the immediate in its immediacy; it is for this reason, too, that music shows itself first and last in its relation to language [...].

Language involves reflection, and cannot, therefore, express the immediate.

Reflection destroys the immediate, and hence it is impossible to express the musical in language. (qtd. in Scher, 'Melopoetics' 10)

We cannot express music in words, and yet if we want to have any relationship to it, we have no choice: it must reveal itself 'in relation to language'. Listening to music is a necessarily hermeneutical process. We recognise that music happens in immediacy, but we can only know it by translating it into language. Lawrence Kramer, in discussion about music's relationship with language says: 'It is not enough to say, in contradiction to hard epistemological claims, that music *may* be interpreted in relation to non-musical phenomena. Rather music *must* be so interpreted or it cannot even be heard' (24).

But, as we have already established, music is not the only experience that it is difficult to translate; language fails to convey the experience of music in much the same way that it fails to convey any other experience, including the experience of language itself (Kramer 18). An interpretation of music helps to make the music accessible to our minds, but also inevitably leaves an unspoken remainder. Language ‘alienates what it makes accessible’ (18), polarising what it conveys from what it fails to convey. Add to this the enormous personal variation with which we conceive of music because of the enormous variation in personal experience we bring to our listening. Kramer says, ‘We hear music only as situated subjects and hear *as* music only that acoustic imagery which somehow “expresses” part of our situatedness, our ensemble of ways to be’ (24). We can make certain objective claims about music’s physical, acoustic qualities – instrumentation, dynamic range, intonation, form and so on – but the way we interpret what this information means is highly subjective and highly personal.

Nonetheless we recognise that music does mean: that it possesses meaning within itself. Adorno (cited in Kramer) says: ‘Time and again [music] points to the fact that it signifies something, something definite. Only the intention is veiled’ (2). Music is both symbol and meaning, unlike language, in which the relationship between symbol and meaning is arbitrary. Words are inadequate to describe what music signifies because language immediately introduces the arbitrary, placing the symbol outside of the music. But given that we must use language to know music, what form of language can peer beyond that veil to what music signifies in and of itself?

Peter Dayan, over the course of many essays and in his book *Music Writing Literature*, details a history, incorporating the writings of poets, novelists, composers and theorists from Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Proust through to Barthes and Derrida, which supports the idea that while music requires language – can only be determined by ‘a contingent context’ (95) – literature, in comparison to any other form of writing, has

the capacity to free music from the reductive, specific and too-readily fixed meanings with which other forms of language are most likely to engender it. Literature seeks to slip the noose of fixed, reductive meanings. It resists the urge to name, protesting against the fundamentalist regime of conceptualisation in a revolution aimed at emancipating words from the utilitarian poverty of everyday discourse. It embraces ambiguity in order to refrain from declaring any allegiances with singular truths, offering what Milan Kundera describes as ‘a welter of contradictory truths’, whose only certainty is ‘the wisdom of uncertainty’ (*Art* 6).

If music seeks literature it is to submit to a necessary translation, but one in which its untranslatable remainder is manifest. Literature has the capacity to offer music an interpretation that can be ‘endlessly emptied of its specific meanings’ (Dayan, *Music* 95).

And what of literature seeking music? If literature seeks music, perhaps it is to signal its desire to mean in a qualitatively different way. Literature can use music ‘to prove the possibility of a discourse that signifies without naming’ (Dayan 99), to move beyond its own constraints – most notably (for the present purposes at least), the inadequacy of words – to dabble about in those liminal absences and erasures and surpluses, in those marginal spaces beyond the reaches of representation. To the extent that it seeks this role literature transcends itself: ‘writing about music becomes the creation of a meaning in perpetual expansion towards the horizon of what language can contain’ (Dayan 27).

Of course I am not referring to language that is merely descriptive of music, and therefore represents music in much the same way as it represents anything else. And I am not referring to the loose, generalistic metaphors that are our most frequent reminders of the shared territories of these two mediums – the pace or rhythm or lyricism of a narrative, for example, or the descriptive or story-like elements in a work

of music. What I wish to explore, because it became a phenomenon in my own writing, are the ways in which music becomes a feature of the writing as a means for saying something about the writing itself, or about the writing's non-musical contents: the musicalisation of the text, through the appropriation of ideas or strategies more commonly associated with music itself.

Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, writing about the self-reflexive capacities of interart discourses, describes musicalisation as:

a mode of reading that situates music as the text's "other", carrying the function of reflecting in, problematising and foregrounding the text's own linguistic and textual premises...the self-reflexive function of music integrated as a dynamizing agent in the text. (205)

She asks the question: 'Does the appropriation of another art, in our case music, strengthen the self-reflexive purpose of the text, making it doubly powerful, and evoking new depths of meaning?' (208). Musicalisation becomes a form of metafiction, a postmodern, self-conscious, contextually-conscious inclination to 'create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction' (Waugh 6), reflecting our increased awareness of language's potential to both construct and deconstruct reality as we have come to know it. In Lagerroth's terms, 'interart self-reflexivity' (206) is:

the process by which literary texts foreground their own production: the act of writing, their authorship, their literary form, their intertextual linkages, their reception. It calls attention to the text as textual construction, its status as artifact, and it invites the reader to examine its texture. It might pose questions

about the relationship between fiction and reality, also exploring the possible fictionality of the world outside the fictional text. (207)

Interart analogies, such as those offered through the musicalisation of fiction, are a means of questioning the way we view language, and the way we construct reality through fiction. Music takes on a role within the narrative beyond simple description, asking these questions of the novel itself, strengthening and illuminating its meanings.

But what can a musical analogy offer the novel in literal terms? Eric Prieto, writing about ‘the problem of metaphoricity’ (49), says that all interart metaphors are ‘subject to the inherent instability of analogical thought’ (56), that the test of their value is not in their degree of literalness, but rather the same criteria that can be applied to consideration of any metaphor: that of ‘the quantity and quality of information imparted, the extent to which the metaphor affords new ways of seeing’ (54). He cites Aristotle, who saw the value of the metaphor in its ‘ability to instruct, to teach us something new about the relation between two objects’ (49).

And yet we are wary of that ‘instability of analogical thought’. Metaphors are excluded from objective or empirical considerations. Steven Paul Scher, a prolific writer in the field of Word and Music Studies, offers the following slightly sceptical justification for Huxley’s musicalised text in *Point Counterpoint*:

as a writer of fiction Huxley is entitled to laxer usage of terms like theme, modulation, or variation; as a precondition for creative reflection, he must be allowed to contemplate the other medium from a distance and interpret its ground rules with flexibility. (‘Music and Literature’ 183)

The writer of narrative fiction is given permission to operate outside of the jurisdiction of objectivity, to puddle about in loose metaphors in service to creativity. But I think this viewpoint is limited for two reasons: firstly, because it undervalues the role interart analogies can play within narrative fiction (and within the theory and criticism that legitimises that fiction), and secondly because it underestimates the role that metaphor plays more broadly in that pervasive language game we know as conceptualisation. Metaphoric thinking is, after all, hardly limited to literature. Lakoff and Johnson, in their well-known work on metaphors, make the claim that metaphors play a significant role in the way we make sense of the world in general, stating that ‘most of our conceptual system is metaphorically structured; that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts’ (56). Kramer considers the value of the metaphor in the conjunction of the disparate:

The conjoining of disparate terms forms a metaphor if it can be interpreted as an elliptical comparison. As a communicative act, metaphor opens the possibility of two-way transfers of meaning between its constituent terms, each of which appropriates elements from the other’s characteristic spheres of discourse. (70)

Given that a direct conceptual comparison could only denote two things that are exactly alike, metaphors necessarily function in the territory of partial similarities; that which gets remaindered through the mind’s focus on perceived similarity also equates to that which is sacrificed for the sake of enabling a partial conceptual understanding based on that equivalence. There is both generative and reductive potential. Metaphors might afford ‘new ways of seeing’ (Prieto 54), but as the feminist writer Anne Oakley points out, ‘a way of seeing is a way of not seeing’ (Crotty 55).

Lakoff and Johnson cite Nietzsche, who viewed metaphor as the means by which we construct our reality in our minds. Reality – that concrete, material world external to our own skins – does not, in Nietzsche’s terms, exist outside of the framework we provide for it through metaphor. There is nothing real about it until we make it real through metaphor. As a result, what makes the world comprehensible also limits it. Nietzsche’s ideas regarding experimental thought (which Milan Kundera also draws from in *Testaments Betrayed*) are aimed at unfixing rigid conceptual ideas, or metaphors that are so familiar that we rarely even notice their metaphoric nature (time is money; an argument is something to be fought and won), and exposing that which is remaindered by them, in order to view reality differently. This is, somewhat paradoxically, the role that a metaphor can play.

Prieto describes metaphors of limited value: those that have ‘achieved quasi-conceptual status and pass almost unnoticed, or have degenerated into clichés’ (55), or those that are so loosely impressionistic that they offer nothing new in the way of insight (52). As Adorno says, ‘to perceive resemblances everywhere, making everything alike, is a sign of weak eyesight’ (qtd. in Crotty 133). On the other hand, metaphors can serve as ‘a mode of cognition’ (Benson, ‘For Want’ 293). These ‘living metaphors...require a cognitive leap in order to be understood,’ and bring about ‘a degree of surprise or cognitive dissonance’ (Prieto 55). Derrida observes that metaphor necessarily ‘risks disrupting the semantic plenitude to which it should belong. Marking the moment of the turn...from the truth that attunes it to its referent, metaphor also opens the wandering of the semantic’ (qtd. in Kramer 70).

The inherent instability of metaphoric thinking affords it the capacity to semantically wander away from the obvious, or the assumed, and to pull together loosely connected or quite disparate ideas to form some sort of unique congruity. If literature is ‘the ‘language of metaphor’ (93), as James Wood says, ‘a language of

forceful hesitation' (93), then it has the potential to produce metaphors which are both generative and hermeneutic. In line with Nietzsche's experimental thought, literature can break down the established elliptical comparisons that have come to represent truth, and offer new ones, which perpetually reinvent that truth. Kundera, with reference to Nietzsche's experimental thought, talks about 'authentically novelistic thought' as being 'always unsystematic; undisciplined...experimental; it forces rifts in all the idea systems that surround us' (*Testaments* 174). Metaphors have the potential to enable new insight through forcing us to view things in new alignments; they provide, 'a means of comprehension rather than decoration or escape; perhaps the only means we have' (Kundera, *Art* 75).

Music and words are similar enough to be often pulled together in loose, generalistic, and therefore not particularly valuable elliptical comparisons, as already stated. But the potential also exists in the interplay between these art forms for metaphors that are rich with new insight. Prieto, acknowledging the frequency with which writers and composers employ interart metaphors, states that this 'attests to the importance of the cultural role they play' (52), stressing that the value of such metaphors lies in 'the underlying concerns that motivate their use' (52). He cites the work of post war avant-garde writers such as Beckett, Joyce and Huxley, who frequently used the other arts to provide a metaphorical commentary: 'to formulate and explain their objectives... to explain and defend their work,' and perhaps most importantly to 'question the accepted literary conventions of their era and propose new ones' (64-65).

Alex Aronson describes the origins of Proust's inspiration for *Remembrance of Things Past* in the hearing of a piece of music, an event which in turn begins his novel. The novel itself is about Proust's developing ideas about writing a novel. It is steeped in musicalisations – from its descriptions of music and the way music is perceived and



remembered, to its employment of music to underscore those experiences which appear to be beyond the capacity for linguistic expression, through to the use of musical ideas (e.g. the leitmotif) to push beyond the boundaries of conventional novelistic form.

Aronson describes *Remembrance of Things Past* as:

a deliberate attempt on the part of the novelist to prove to himself and to his prospective readers that music can aspire to the “condition of language”, and this is not necessarily by contrapuntal modulations of themes or a set of variations, but rather by transposing the novelist’s...experience of reality – within the limitations imposed by time, place, social context and the writer’s own temperamental predilections – into music. (26-27)

Barthes defines music as ‘a *quality of language*...beyond the reach of the sciences of language’; this quality of language offered by music enables us to foreground ‘what is not said, what is not articulated’ (qtd. in Dayan, *Music* 98). He makes a strong claim for the value of metaphor: ‘Perhaps a thing is valid only by its metaphoric power; perhaps that is the value of music, then: to be a good metaphor’ (98).

Literature, like music is a ‘quality of language’ that strives to reach beyond the ‘sciences of language’. Literature and music meet in this liminal, metaphorical territory in which words seek to foreground those language elements that Barthes ascribes to music: valuing the remainder, the unarticulated, the not said, the impossible to say, signifying these as contingently meaningful, and informing the actual textual reference. As Dayan says, ‘The existence of literature, as distinct from any other kind of writing, can only be maintained through analogy with a non-verbal art form that is believed to be at once full of meaning and irredeemably corrosive of reference’ (*Music* 10). Music and language are similar enough to invite analogy, and different enough for the

metaphors to produce a friction of incongruity, capable of generating the energy of new meaning. This is the territory I wish to explore through the specific musical examples in the following chapters.

## Chapter Two

### The Berg Violin Concerto – using real music for narrative purposes

Alban Berg (1885-1935) was an Austrian composer and a student of Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg's influence is evident in Berg's work most notably in his appropriation of Schoenberg's principles of twelve-tone music, in which the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are arranged in a fixed order (generally for the duration of an entire work) from which all melody and harmony are generated. Schoenberg used twelve-tone principles to develop a compositional technique known as serialism, in which the fixed arrangement foundational to a work of music might potentially incorporate not only pitch but any other musical or compositional element, including intervals, durations, rhythm, dynamics and other features of form. Serial music is 'atonal', in that its twelve notes are all equally significant, not subject to the harmonic rules of tonal music which, centred around particular keys or modes, give functional significance to certain pitches (for example, the tonic, the dominant, the sub-dominant), according them a tonal status of consonance and dissonance, where serialism makes no such distinction (*Oxford Dictionary of Music* 1140-1141).

Eva's teacher asks her, 'Why the Berg, Eva?' (15). This is a question that might equally be applied to ... *fuga*. The Berg Violin Concerto is relatively obscure. From the listener's perspective, since it is an atonal composition, it is also a difficult work to grasp and appreciate. While it was the first serial composition to achieve status as a 'modern classic' (Pople 204), it does not have the wide audience appeal of the Beethoven Concerto, for example, or the Brahms. Even if I could claim that my motivation was to choose a more contemporary work, the Berg Concerto stands alongside a proliferation of violin concertos from the 1930s, including those by Britten, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Walton, Barber, Bartok, Milhaud, Hindemith, and Schoenberg

himself, and the 1930s can in any case hardly be classified as contemporary – why not Glass? Why not an Australian composer such as Ross Edwards?

It is significant to the exploration of the role music played within ...*fuga* to confess at this point that I chose the Berg Concerto not because of any personal relationship to its music or by virtue of its musical qualities but because of its overt narrative program. Written in 1935, Berg wrote this work in an uncharacteristic frenzy following the polio-related death of eighteen-year-old Manon Gropius, daughter of his good friend Alma Mahler and her second husband, Walter Gropius. He dedicated it *to the memory of an angel*. Berg was fifty years old at the time and in his musical prime, but he died suddenly before the concerto's premiere, of blood poisoning from a poorly treated abscess. An analysis of the work's more secret programmatic elements gives the sense that while Berg could not have anticipated his own death, he had written something that served beautifully as his own requiem. With the Nazi invasion of his beloved Vienna soon after, the Violin Concerto became a requiem in an even more broad-reaching sense, reflecting the era's pervasive sense of loss and mourning.

Written in two movements of four linked sections, the Berg Concerto is openly programmatic (Berg loved to be programmatic, but his programs were generally more enigmatic, not spelled out for public consumption, as this Concerto was). Meant to portray Manon Gropius's life, illness and death, it is in turns dreamy, skittish, playful, flirtatious, vital, harrowing, tormented, agonising and then finally acquiescent (see below for Barthes's scathing attack on interpretations of music that are reduced to the adjective). According to *The Oxford Companion to Music*, the work 'portrays Manon's fragility and grace – the fragility and grace, perhaps, of all human life' (127). In the manner of Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*, it seems to offer in its final, floating moments, what one writer describes as 'an aesthetic glow of consolation over pain...a metaphysical acceptance of death' (Geuss 48).

Berg was strongly criticized for this by his contemporaries; God was dead, why cushion the blow with this sort of esoteric flight of fancy? His former pupil, Theodor Adorno, was said to have found the work ‘deeply embarrassing’ (Geuss 48). He objected to its affirming tone and to its nostalgic bent, particularly its references to a Bach chorale, a Carinthian folk tune and a Viennese waltz. Perhaps most notably, however, he objected to its tonality. Berg’s Concerto was based on a tone row, and therefore ostensibly atonal, but because of Berg’s particular arrangement of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale it still managed to retain some vestiges of tonality and traditional harmony, affording Berg plenty of scope for dipping into traditional harmonic progressions. As Eva herself says in ... *fuga*, ‘Forgive me... I am no intellectual – Berg is the one, in my humble opinion, who turned revolution into bread for the masses (61).’ And Berg’s era was certainly one of revolution. ‘The end of the world began, by common consent, in Vienna’, Peter Conrad states (41). The new century demanded a new music to mirror its brutally original aesthetic. Karl Kraus, Viennese writer and critic, and friend of Alban Berg, described the Vienna of this era as ‘a laboratory for the scientific study of apocalypse’ (qtd. in Conrad 41). ... *fuga* sets the scene for this apocalyptic Vienna, to which Eva is in thrall:

Vienna in the early twentieth century – God was dead, artists raged, meaning broke into pieces and rained from the sky. Tonality was the irrelevant advocate of a non-existent higher order; Schoenberg invented serialism to rein in the anarchy after its demise, marshalling the twelve tones of the chromatic scale into democratic compliance to this new formalism, which, true to the nature of revolution, he implemented with brutal, dispassionate rigour. He despised the backward glance. He formed the Second Viennese School with his students,

Berg and Webern among them. The public hated them. Dissonance reigned onstage and in the audience. Recitals turned into riots. (61)

Long before her mother's death – before the reality of death has any real purchase for her – Eva is drawn to Berg's world, tramping its streets, her 'mind dissembling contemporary buildings to see the streets as Berg saw them, searching for vestiges of Loos curvature and Gropius cubes, light refracting through the four dimensions of height, depth, width and time' (61).

While the Berg Concerto's narrative program was the original impetus for its use in ...*fuga*, Berg's world and Berg's music also came to play a key role in forming both the narrative tone of the novel and the character of Eva Byrne. Certain preformed ideas about Eva flourished under the influence of Berg. Eva was always going to have a past and it was always going to involve her mother, but it is evident to me now that both the degree of her rage and the contradictory remorse that drives much of her self-hatred have come to be shaped by, or at the very least to find their strongest metaphors through, Berg's expressionist music and the early twentieth century world it sought to reflect.

Eva is a poster-girl for the expressionist cause. She exemplifies within her own character expressionism's 'emotional turbulence', its demand for 'deep psychological penetration' and 'intense self examination' (*Oxford Companion to Music* 437). She condones its practice of 'the ruthless expression of disturbing or distasteful emotions, often with a stylistic violence that may involve pushing ideas to their extremes...the portrayal of characters in extreme or psychotic states' (437). She laps up a performance of *Wozzeck*, as if its violence and fatalism were truth itself. She goes to Berlin for a performance of *Lulu*, and this is what she reports:

I hate her. On the cover of the program she's dressed as Pierrot, coquettish, dangling from the moon. Over the course of the opera she is fucked, fucked over, fucked up, she just lies there with her legs open and her eyes shut while all these men pump their longing and clamouring into her. She is brutal in her passivity and impervious to the brutalisation of others. Nothing touches her. Nothing moves her. When Jack the Ripper finally plunges his knife into her depths it comes as a relief. (18)

Nevertheless, in line with her unflinching expressionist stance, she keeps the program for *Lulu* as a reminder to be fearless in what she draws from her music:

I keep the program on my window ledge to remind me when I practise: open a vein, bleed, die. I am not afraid to inhabit death, much as Behrendt taunts me. I suck it from beautiful Viennese cemeteries, roaming among their marble and stone, their angels and gargoyles, their magnificent horrors.

'Why the Berg?' Behrendt asks me, persisting. He thinks I'm too young at twenty-one, that I operate in the realms of surfaces and frippery. I would like to tear my shirt open and show him that already I have played Jack the Ripper to my own Lulu, I have cut her down, sliced her, mutilated and bled her.

Instead I lift my violin and begin to play. (18)

But there is another side to Eva, as there is another to Berg. Recognising the damaging influence of religion in her mother's life, Eva has renounced any religious affiliation. She declares herself 'a great believer in nothing' (29), but equally 'a secret forager of hidden meanings and synchronicities' (16), and this is again something that affirms her strong identification with Alban Berg. For much as the turn of the century was the era

of God's death, it was also an era in which solace for this loss was sought in any number of esoteric substitutes. This fascination for symbolism, for the presence of hidden arcane meanings and fateful correspondences, was reflected in the art of the time. In Conrad's words:

The links between heaven and earth had been snapped, or at least hopelessly confused. New omens and auguries, reaching across the gap which divided nature from supernature, had to be identified...Symbolism still yearned for the beyond, but could only guess at its whereabouts. (44)

In 1919 Paul Kammerer published a book entitled *The Law of Seriality* in which he argues that coincidence 'is prevalent to the extent that the concept of coincidence itself is negated' (qtd. in Jarman 178). Coincidence is, according to this thinking, 'ubiquitous and continuous in life, nature and cosmos. The law of seriality is the umbilical cord that connects thought, feeling, science and art with the womb of the universe which gave birth to them' (Jarman 178-9). Berg was a man of his times in this regard, constantly seeking connection to that universal womb. As is made evident by his painstaking attention to numerological details in his works, he was, 'eager to accept any theory or to read significance into any coincidence that seemed to confirm his sense that everything was pre-destined' (Jarman 178). Eva herself describes him as 'always seeking the hidden grace of an organised fate' (... *fuga* 83).

'Lines, circles, mysterious figures – if only one could read them,' Wozzeck sings in Act 1, Scene 4. Berg's sought the affirmation of finding his self-identified fate number (twenty-three) on tram tickets and the postmarks of letters; he also made frequent reference to both his own fate number and that of his secret lover, Hanna Fuchs, in a number of his works. He read as a portent his use of Hanna Fuchs's initials



(B-flat, F) as a motif in *Wozzeck* only months before meeting her for the first time.

Similarly, he must have felt affirmed when, having already constructed the tone row for his Violin Concerto, and in search of a suitably funereal reference in Bach chorales, he found one whose text was not only entirely fitting, but which also began with the first four notes of his own tone row.

*It is enough!*  
*Lord, if it pleases You*  
*Unshackle me at last.*  
*My Jesus comes;*  
*I bid the world goodnight.*  
*I travel to the heavenly home.*  
*I surely travel there in peace,*  
*My troubles left below.*  
*It is enough! It is enough!*

(Cantata No. 82, BWV 82)

Eva is dismissive of notions of fate. ‘Proportion is as evident in nature as chaos’ (6), she declares. Still, she notices, and acts upon, the coincidences that punctuate her own life. On the strength of a glorious day in Covent Garden and the consequent largesse of her state of mind, she falls into Berg’s world ‘like an Alice into Wonderland’ (16), soaking up the significances of the day, which lead her, among other things, to postgraduate studies in Vienna. ‘It is ominous, is it not,’ her Viennese teacher says to her, ‘to write a requiem and then die? As if by inhabiting the territory of death one invites it in’ (17).

And so to the morbid coincidence of Eva’s mother’s death, which of course within the context of the novel is nothing more than authorial manipulation. I made these events happen, I have to remind myself, but to what extent was this decision shaped by Berg’s fate-dazzled world, Berg’s music, and the morbid coincidence of

Berg's own death? Coincidence ultimately plays a significant enough role within ... *fuga* that, at least until I was dissuaded from the title because of its religious connotations, I called it *Secret Grace*, making reference to Eva's mother, but also alluding to 'the secret grace bestowed by the underlying workings of fate' (... *fuga* 78) that Eva identifies in Berg himself, and that she seeks in her own life as vehemently as she dismisses it. Coincidence was certainly not a theme I had sought consciously to explore within this novel, and neither was it something I was particularly comfortable writing. Coincidences too easily appear as plot devices, revealing the heavy hand of the author. If coincidence was going to play a part in the novel, I needed to ensure that its presence was understated, seamless within the natural flow of events, and in evidence because Eva herself sought its evidence, as her idol Alban Berg had.

Michael Wood views Milan Kundera's use of coincidence in the novel *Immortality* as metaphoric, 'a *Grund* not for character but for the way we experience the order and disorder of our lives' (80). Coincidences as evidenced within an intricate novelistic plot, according to Wood, are 'chains of causality' (79), reminding us of the interconnectedness of our lives, but also 'that this fact is dangerous, a new and unmanageable feature of our crowded, modernized planet' (80). The incident in Kundera's *Immortality* that Wood discusses involves a young girl, absorbed in her own misery, sitting down in the middle of a busy street and thereby setting off a chain of causality linking three separate groups of people through death. As Wood says, 'We seem to meet a crazed and disreputable form of fate, a last, ironic, impossible master narrative' (80).

The use of coincidence in ... *fuga* needed to echo metaphorically the original impetus for its inclusion: that of characters seeking meaning where no meaning might exist. But in line with Wood's reading of the function of coincidence in *Immortality*, I wanted the coincidental element in ... *fuga* to reveal, as Berg's own tragic tale did, the

less gracious – the dangerous and unmanageable – potentials of that sought-after hand of fate. Read this way, Eva's identification with Berg's world of symbols and signs and synchronies had brought upon her the perverse affirmation of her mother's death. Still, she does not entirely surrender to the nihilism that she professes, despite its potential to free her from the torment of this affirmation. She is comforted by Fergus Cunningham's faith, even as she goads him about it. 'I suppose I'm as likely as anyone to hunt for something in that vacancy,' she says, 'even if only to shift the blame' (7).

In retrospect, it is obvious to me that if Eva is an atheist with God-shaped leanings, riddled with contradictions and wildly fluctuating states of mind and temperament, it is because I came to hear her this way through the music with which she is so passionately identified. I listened to the Berg Concerto obsessively without the slightest idea of how that listening might influence what I wrote, but in essence what I heard, and began to imagine in a very visceral sense, was Eva, violin in hand, pacing the stage, drawing this music out from deep within herself. And it also became evident that to perform the work in the way I could so clearly imagine her doing, she had to be a certain temperament: highly-strung, emotional, passionate, driven, obsessive – all of the characteristics that compel her to behave as she does, and to obsess about that behaviour the way that she does on the page.

It is also obvious on reflection that the nature of Eva's relationship with this Concerto determined the use of the close first person voice in which the majority of the novel is written. While I shunned any idea of emulating the musical elements of the work in words, it does seem apparent to me now that something of its ethos imbues the writing. The character of Eva Byrne is in a sense a metaphorical rendering of Berg's Concerto; her state of being is a translation of elements of Berg's characteristic musical style, which only a close first person narrative seemed able to capture. Just as a tone row derives all of its materials from within itself, reproducing itself both horizontally

and vertically, there is a narcissistic quality to Eva's internal, self-focussed narrative that seems to endlessly generate material from within itself.

Whittall, talking of Berg's characteristic style says: 'not only does Berg's music start out from the smallest component elements and then immediately subject these to a kind of "splitting of the atom", but the whole character of his music is that of a permanent self-retraction or self-cancelling' (252). It could be said that Eva splits the atom of herself on the page, poring over the minutiae, displaying, retracting, contradicting herself in obsessive repetition and re-imaging. She frames and reframes her own unravelling, at times obliquely, at other times with candid factuality. She works and reworks the substance of her mother's death, for example, in the first instance through an ambiguous symbolism, referencing the bath, her mother's long hair and the arthritic pomegranates outside of her Uncle Dave's house. She approaches her distress in tangential mannerisms before finally exposing the grim reality to matter-of-fact description: her mother committed suicide in her bath. Eva's distress at seeing her mother's body laid out in the church is exacerbated by the sight of her mother's hair, which had grown over the years of Eva's absence, symbolic of the distance, physical and psychological, between them. It is this that brings on Eva's first amnesic episode, after which she finds herself among the arthritic pomegranates at her Uncle Dave's house with no idea of how she had got there. These images become motivic, iterated and then reiterated, taking on new meanings dependent on their contexts.

Eva's multiple, conflicted voices – the sordid, the crass, the cynical, the lost, the vulnerable, the grieving, the remorseful, the still faintly optimistic – echo a Berg-like plurality of mood, exaggerated in the first half of the novel by her refusal to state the fact of her mother's death, and the ultimate suspension of her mood within this untenable unreality. Berg was a pioneer of pluralism; fusions of disparate styles and techniques and moods were a trademark of his work. Take for example the

simultaneous markings of *religioso* and *amoroso* at the end of the Violin Concerto (bar ii/222), which create a ‘very specifically Bergian tension’ (Whittall 251):

Displacement, disorientation – these are disturbing experiences, and in Berg the ambivalence is not simply a matter of conflict between disorientation and a “humanly restorative” experience, but of tension between apprehensions of order and of chaos which affect structure and expression alike. (Whittall 251)

The novel’s erratic time sequences mirror Eva’s own disorientation. While she eventually endeavours to approach the fact of her mother’s death through a more concerted effort toward chronology, a sense of tension is maintained by the displacement of resolution between the time sequences as they appear on the page. Equally, the strange illogic of her own behavior – her attachment to Fergus’s orderly routines, her sudden decision to enter into a sexual relationship with him, her willingness to create an entirely improbable new vision for her life – serve as means for her to suppress her own impending state of collapse, even as she diligently records the chaos of her unravelling reality. The novel’s form, its displaced time sequences, and its use of multiple points of view through diverse writing formats such as reviews, blogs, letters, emails, and journalistic writings, attempts to convey this fragmented pluralism.

It is highly unlikely that this ‘Bergian’ influence would be evident to the reader, and it was never my intention that it should be. The Berg Violin Concerto presented an emotional landscape in the way that place often sets the novelistic tone, but as stated earlier it was never my intention to directly emulate the work by imposing its structural ideas (more about this in the next chapter), or by attempting to imitate the musical qualities from which that emotional landscape was derived. Any attempt at literal translation from music to words, as discussed in the previous chapter, is fraught, and

strikes me anyway as not really the point. As Milan Kundera says, 'I do not mean to draw a facile parallel between the novel and music, the structural issues of the two arts not being comparable' (*Testaments* 75).

But of course it was necessary for me to convey something of the music itself, given its role within Eva's life, and in this regard I was confronted with the issues explored in the previous chapter. How could I translate anything of the Berg Concerto's actual music, or of Eva's experience of it, into the barely compatible medium of words? Aronson says, 'Language is a singularly inept vehicle of expression when it is called upon to say something adequate about the content of a musical work' (21). But language is all that we have. As is hopefully evident by now, the Berg Concerto offered the novel much in the way of inspiration, but the task of rendering the work's musical qualities in words perplexed me. What could I offer this music that did not diminish it? In his essay, 'The Grain of the Voice', Barthes talks about the conundrum of writing about music:

How, then, does language manage when it has to interpret music? Alas, it seems, very badly. If one looks at the normal practice of music criticism (or, which is often the same thing, of conversations "on" music), it can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective... Are we condemned to the adjective? Are we reduced to the dilemma of either the predicable or the ineffable? (179-180)

Writing on Woolf's *The Waves* Elicia Clements states: 'In 1940 Woolf acknowledges explicitly... that she conceives of all her writing as music before she pens it. In a letter to the composer Ethyl Smith, Woolf says "I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot."' (163). In writing *The String Quartet*, Woolf uses what Clements describes as a

technique of ‘enact(ing) the music’ which is ‘performative rather than figural. Woolf’s text, according to Clements, ‘enacts a version of musical signification, rather than just a description of it’ (167).

Does Eva enact the Berg Concerto? Is this novel performative? Everything about Eva needed to be defined through the music itself. How? What language? How to avoid the adjectival trap? How to convey the music’s physicality? I don’t know that I did. What became apparent as I struggled to convey anything of the Berg Concerto in words was the necessity of grounding the music in something beyond itself – of giving it a metaphorical context, even as it also provided metaphorical context itself. And perhaps because I had already drawn a comparison between the emotional landscape derived from the music and the role of place within the novel, Eva’s evocations of the music are frequently attached to the landscape, in passages such as the following:

Several bars of the Berg concerto – a frenzied, hacking arrhythmia – are playing and replaying on a loop in my mind, *molto ritmico*. After all these gut-slogging years the Berg is not so much a memory of mind as a sinuous, internal choreography marked in breaths and silences and beating blood. I want to be emptied. Vacuumed. Dissolved down into this drowning place. Black hills rise on either side of the narrow road. Streams of water run down their worn ridges. They appear because of the mist to be breathing; the animal breathing of the place is suddenly piercingly audible to me and for an instant the Berg is obliterated. I stop. Out of nowhere black cloud gathers and inks out much of the light, spitting stones of hail as small and hard as teeth. Crows in great numbers seem suddenly to be birthed from this blackness, soaring, banking, plummeting through the veils, a murder of screeching on the wind. (14)

Because Eva's performance of the music, and not just the music itself, is central to the novel, it also seemed important to provide a more objective perspective of Eva onstage, outside of the constraints of her sometimes claustrophobic interior monologue. Objectifying Eva enabled an objectification of the music itself – a chance for the reader to understand something of the music's actual, aural qualities from a perspective other than Eva's:

With the shrieking beginnings of the second movement I find the ground suddenly shifting beneath me. We are entering the territory of death and Byrne is pulling no punches in her interpretation. Ripping double stops from the strings like teeth from their sockets, hairs flying loose from her bow, she begins to pace the stage, battering out an artillery of wavering, perseverating sextuplets before melting with fluid ease into the *molto ritmico*, building again to triple stops which form like architectural edifices under her tiny, remarkable fingers. Again, I find myself barely focussed on Byrne's technique – this is theatre she is producing – I am witnessing directly the spiralling and unravelling, the agony and the incomprehension. When she crawls up finally, over impossible, leaping sextuplets to the moment of extreme climax, the orchestra shrieking at her back, the rawness is almost enough to undo even me. (93)

Of course, as stated earlier in this chapter, the Berg Concerto's explicit program greatly relieved the burden of description, although the proscriptive nature of it might equally have been perceived as a limitation, if one were seeking to use as narrative leverage, music's 'open semiosis' its 'autonomy and independence from external sense', that which enables music to 'lend itself so readily and thrillingly to a wide range of interpretations' (Bernhart 28). Tolstoy's reading of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata is an



example of such a thrilling interpretation. The narrative for his novella, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, is entirely based on his own interpretation of the music (although the Kreutzer Sonata has long been associated with jealousy because of the stormy feud that erupted between Beethoven and the Kreutzer Sonata's original dedicatee, George Bridgetower). Tolstoy's narrator tells the story of a man he met on a train, who had murdered both his wife and the man with whom he suspected her of having an affair, their passion supposedly inflamed over a performance of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata. The murderer defends himself to the narrator:

They played Beethoven's "Kreutzer Sonata". Do you know its first movement, the Presto? You know it?' He burst out. 'Ah! It's a fearful thing, that sonata. Especially that movement. And music in general's a fearful thing. What is it? I don't know. And why does it do to us what it does?...Music carries me instantly and directly into the state of consciousness experienced by its composer. My soul merges with his, and together with him I'm transported from one state of consciousness into another. (96)

Beethoven inspired Tolstoy; Tolstoy in turn inspired Leos Janacek, who wrote a quartet dedicated to the fictional, murdered wife. The Australian Chamber Orchestra performed both of these works in one of their 2010 programs, also commissioning a play that wove together elements of both Tolstoy's novella, and Janacek's inscribed program. Thus a narrative is born. Thus the meaning of a work of music is expressed, and re-expressed, as much through this weaving of plot than through any description of its actual musical qualities.

The Berg Concerto's explicit program precluded further narrative interpretation, offering instead a language-oriented perspective, which foregrounded the novel's own

concerns with death and loss. Likewise the story of Alban Berg and his world were evocative of the novel's key themes. These narrative elements, in conjunction with the verbal description of the music itself, provided a foundational metaphoric material for evoking the emotional turmoil and intensity of the character of Eva Byrne.

I would like to say that I set out to find a concerto that spoke to the novel's preformed ideas but I am not at all sure that this is true. From memory, the Berg Violin Concerto was something that I stumbled upon, and in stumbling upon it I also stumbled upon the novel. In retrospect, it seems to me that to a large extent the novel created itself around the music; the music gave voice somehow to the inchoate glimmers I naively grasped and gathered as portents of a potential, complete work. Once discovered, and learned, and loved, the Berg Concerto – or at least, what the Berg Concerto came to represent – merged with the writing, setting the tone for Eva's character and for the emerging plot to the degree that I can no longer think of the novel as a thing separate from it. Eva would not have been Eva, as she became in the writing of this novel, if she had played Beethoven or Shostakovich or Glass.

Why the Berg? Because it became fused in my mind with all that the novel was struggling to be. It became 'an objective correlative' (Aronson 22), a way of conveying ideas beyond what language itself seemed able to convey. Eva carries her obsession in the form of a black and white photo of the young Alban Berg. I carried his Violin Concerto, tucked into the corners of my mind as the character of Eva Byrne emerged and set the tone and the course of events for the novel's unfolding. Eva's Berg is only one of innumerable possible interpretations, but I make claim to her experience: 'After all these gut-slogging years the Berg is not so much a memory of mind as a sinuous, internal choreography marked in breaths and silences and beating blood' (... *fuga* 14).

## Chapter Three

### The Art(ifice) of Narrative Fugue

The literal meaning of fugue is ‘flight’ or ‘escape’ (Italian: *fuga*), and ‘chase’ (Italian: *fugare*). In musical terms, a fugue is a style of polyphonic composition in which independent voices (generally three or more) enunciate and develop one or more themes in imitative succession, producing a contrapuntal harmony from their parallel flight and chase across the page (*Oxford Companion to Music* (493-96); *Macquarie Dictionary*). A populous literary precedent exists for appropriating elements of fugal form as narrative device: wrestling with multiple time lines and voices in the early drafts of ...*fuga*, I found myself in thrall to this idea, but inept at its application. Metaphorically appealing as it was to imagine narrative voices interweaving and cohering in contrapuntal harmony, I could make no sense of the notion of making words perform vertically.

We associate the art of fugue most readily with the Baroque era, and most particularly with the music of Bach, music ‘clean and pure as picked-over bones’, as Eva describes it in ...*fuga* (86). She marvels with Fergus Cunningham over ‘the perfection of symmetry in those quintessential fugues, the utter lucidity of the old master’s workings’ (6). Very early in the novel Eva tells the reader that Fergus Cunningham is writing a fugue, ‘ancient form buried under the contemporary fragmentation, voices shifting in mirrors, in truncated flights and sudden fusions’ (6). The fugue was not an arbitrary compositional choice, as is evident in this early conversation between Eva and Fergus:

I held his pages up and said, ‘Fergus, I think your fugue’s disintegrating.’

He said, ‘I wouldn’t call it a fugue, Eva, unless you’re being very loose with your Italian.’

‘Which of my Italians are you referring to, Fergus?’

‘“Fuga”, Eva,’ he said, ‘meaning “flight”, do they not teach you anything in these musical institutions.’

‘You could call it *Flight*,’ I said.

‘I could call it *Anarchy*,’ he said. He was at the fridge getting the milk out.

‘Not a very public-grabbing title,’ I said.

‘I don’t write for my public,’ he said.

‘No, that’s right,’ I said, ‘it’s all for the glory of God, isn’t it?’ (7)

This passage, from which the novel’s title was eventually derived, makes self-reflexive reference to the fugue as form, and a self-conscious dig at the novel’s potential instability of form. But it also makes reference to the instability of its main character, Eva Byrne, who is in a sense in flight from herself and her memories. The relationship between identity and memory had become a pivotal exploration quite early in the novel’s development, inspired by two separate items that form a strange counterpoint in my own memory. The first involves an incident witnessed many years ago during which a very famous pianist ably performing a Mozart Concerto suddenly lifted her hands from the keys mid-phrase, stared into space for dazed seconds while the orchestra carried on without her, then apologised, set her hands back on the keys and resumed playing as if nothing untoward had happened. The second item bears no obvious relationship to the famous pianist’s momentary leap from consciousness, but is for some reason inextricably linked with it in my mind. It is the opening lines to a poem by Rilke:

Sometimes a man stands up during supper

and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking

(49)

Chasing the first glimmers of the novel's central focus, I searched medical and psychiatric texts for an amnesic condition that might suitably shear Eva off from identity and memory, propelling her from onstage trauma to a walk in the void on the remote Orkney island of Hoy. I had never heard of a 'fugue state', but I found it readily enough through my research. Brian Castro quotes *The Oxford English Dictionary* in his own 'fugal' novel, *The Bath Fugues*:

a flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired location...a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress...during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person's outward behavior may appear rational. (Castro 71)

I can conjecture that the preoccupation with coincidence evident in ...*fuga* might have been prompted by the coincidences that proliferated throughout its creation. When Brian Castro first took the position of Professor of Creative Writing at University of Adelaide, and announced the title of his soon-to-be-published novel, *The Bath Fugues*, I was tentatively using the title *The Beauty Fugue* for my own novel, excited by this serendipitous discovery of the fugue's musical and psychological correlatives. I didn't read Castro's novel at the time (I have read it since: it is a feat of intellectual, poetic and geospatial brilliance, and a lucid example of 'fugue' applied as structural device and as psychological trope within a novel), but it did prompt me to shift my focus: Eva remained in flight from herself, but her preoccupation turned from Bach to Berg, a radical enough departure I might have thought, although I was quickly to discover otherwise.

Castro is one of many writers who have mined the potentials of the literary appropriation of fugal or polyphonic musical qualities with greater or lesser degrees of specificity over the past century. What is the pervasive appeal of the fugue?

Perhaps a little music history is necessary to set the scene. As stated, a fugue is a polyphonic composition. Earliest European musical forms (as far back as we can garner any evidence) were monophonic, consisting of long strings of single musical lines, such as those of plainchant and Gregorian chant. Polyphony arose when monophonic musical lines were sung at different pitches to accommodate the natural vocal ranges of those who sang them (boys and men, since women were excluded from the ecclesiastical music from which the form emerged). The harmony that resulted from the juxtaposition of these polyphonic voices in motion is known as *counterpoint* – ‘the coherent combination of distinct melodic lines in music, and the quality that best fulfils the aesthetic principle of unity in diversity’ (*Oxford Companion to Music* 315).

Music (unlike narrative) always had vertical potential, although early polyphony highlighted the linear, horizontal organisation of its form, and was only beginning to be aware of the possibilities inherent within its vertical constructs. It was music of the Baroque period – Bach as the most significant exemplar – that began to maximise the qualities and potentials of this verticality. By the Classical and Romantic periods, verticality was predominant, but with this verticality came a loss of the independence of voices: multiple voices became largely subordinated to the role of harmonising one key voice; hence, a return to a fundamentally, if enhanced, monophonic form. (Kundera *Testaments* 71-74; *Oxford Companion to Music* 978-979)

The music of the early twentieth century brought a new wave of polyphonic forms, most notably Schoenberg’s method of twelve-tone, or serial, composition. Twelve-tone composition was a reaction to the outmoded and exhausted harmonic system of tonality, which Schoenberg and others felt had reached its zenith in Romantic

music. Schoenberg links his twelve-tone technique with Bach's contrapuntal art, describing both as 'the art of inventing musical figures that can accompany themselves' (173). Schoenberg states that what he learned from Bach was 'the art of producing everything from one thing and of relating figures by transformation' (173). Kundera also describes the link between Bach and Schoenberg, describing serialism as a re-emergence of an organicism of form: 'both a Bach fugue and a twelve-tone composition, from beginning to end, develop from a single kernel, which is both melody and accompaniment' (*Testaments* 58). Herein lies the unanticipated correlative between Bach and Berg: the Berg Concerto, being a twelve-tone composition, exemplifies the conditions of polyphony (as described in the previous chapter) that I had initially found appealing about a Bach fugue.

But why the return of polyphony at the turn of the twentieth century? The mood was one of apocalypse, as also described in the previous chapter. Schoenberg and his cohorts were intent not just upon developing a new musical language but also on violently denouncing the past, and yet it was an ancient past that they drew from, as stated by Schoenberg himself (116-120). Pierre Boulez comments that Schoenberg 'rather forgot his enslavement to the past during the really explosive period of his career' (327), and only claimed these comparisons with Bach to bolster the credibility of his own triumphantly proclaimed 'new "eternal" law' (327). Boulez reiterates Schoenberg's own position, that 'Innovation is possible only after the completest possible digestion of the past' (326). Of course, as a listening experience, even the most educated listener would struggle to link the new polyphony with the old, and what the new polyphony signified in the broader cultural and historical context, if this can in any way be theorised, might be viewed as diametrically opposed to that of its predecessor. If the polyphony of Bach's era was dedicated to God, to ideas of Oneness and unity (Aronson 67), early twentieth century polyphony sounded more like the voices of a

collective, babbling, disenchanted humanity released from suppression after the silencing of the singular, overriding voice of God, which had for so long restrained them in harmonious submission.

The return to polyphony corresponds to the phenomenal expansion in human knowledge occurring at this time, which had propelled the world – the massively expanding universe – into the new century. Conrad says, ‘Schoenberg’s serial method of composition engineered a model of this new universe, where everything is divisible, combinable, infinitely permutable’ (735). He cites Pierre Boulez, who defined serialism as ‘a polyvalent mode of thought’ (735), capable of reflecting our emerging recognition of the complex multiplicity of the universe, and of our own human consciousness.

How was this idea of ‘polyvalent thought’ to be reflected in literature? As Conrad says: ‘The modern mind was not a quiet, tidy cubicle for cogitation. It thronged with as many random happenings as a city street’ (15). Literature had to mirror this new understanding of our ontological experience, the idea that while we live linearly, chronologically, things moving inexorably forward along a continuum, our minds do not experience the world in this way. Virginia Woolf captures this idea in her essay, *Modern Fiction*:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. (71)

Of the novelist’s task she implores: ‘Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness’ (qtd. in Lodge 52).



Conrad describes Proust's apprehension of the four-dimensional world extrapolated from the new physics and represented most tellingly in the art of the Cubists. He quotes Proust from 1913: 'There is a plane geometry and a geometry of space. And for me the novel is not only plane psychology but psychology in space and time' (66). Conrad describes Proust's oeuvre as multi-dimensional, as opposed to planar, claiming that the singular point of view used by nineteenth century novelists (like the singular melodic voice of the music of this era) not only made a false claim to 'absolute knowledge' (66), but did not enable novelists to walk around their characters, to imbue them with the full quota of their complex, existential states of being and mind. 'There had to be a way of narrating in space, as well as in cramping, consecutive style', as Conrad claims (66). He uses Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as an example of a literary work that 'disparaged the habits of literary narrative, which reduce the hubbub of sensations and happenings to a disciplined sequence' (66). Kundera similarly makes a claim for the 'structural revolution' evident in *The Man Without Qualities*, in which 'everything becomes theme ... the background disappears and, as in a cubist painting, there is nothing but foreground' (*Testaments* 165).

Likewise, in a fugue everything is theme, and every voice operates in the foreground to elucidate it: it is a form that mirrors a consciousness in which past, present and future all impinge in the split seconds that shape the course of our lives, existing vertically in the memory of our minds and bodies, colliding in random, unanticipated juxtapositions. But whereas music has the tools to maximise this consciousness of verticality, literature does not. David Lodge, in *Consciousness and the Novel*, addresses the issue of narrative linearity:

The primary limitation is this: that verbal language is essentially linear. One word or word-group comes after another, and we apprehend their syntactically

cumulative meaning lineally, in time. When we speak and listen, when we write and read, we are bound to the linear order. But we know intuitively, and cognitive science has confirmed, that consciousness itself is not linear. In computer terms the brain is a *parallel* processor running many programs simultaneously. In neurobiological terms it is a complex system of billions of neurons between which countless connections are being made simultaneously as long as we are conscious. (62)

In a letter to a painter friend, Jacques Raverat, Woolf claims her desire to move beyond the constraints of ‘the formal railway line of the sentence...people never did think or feel in that way, but all over the place, in your way’ (qtd. in Lodge 63). Lodge argues that Woolf achieved her aim:

By breaking up the formal railway line of the sentence, by the use of ellipses and parentheses, by blurring the boundaries between what is thought and what is spoken, and by switching point of view and narrative voice with bewildering frequency – by these and similar devices she tried to imitate in her fiction the elusiveness of the phenomenon of consciousness. (63)

Changing ideas of consciousness demanded changes to literary form. Writers of the early twentieth century were drawn to the idea of appropriating musical form as one means of subverting narrative conventions. Prieto states that while both music and narrative exemplify content and form (and for the sake of brevity, I will put aside the debate about the distinction between the two), music, because of its abstractness, is more generally analysed with regards to form, whereas narrative, because it is meaning-based, is more traditionally analysed according to its content (63). When a work of

narrative fiction seeks to emulate something of musical form, it is seeking to realign itself, to change the weighting of its own propensity to mean, or to elucidate that meaning through its structural features, rather than through its content alone. Narrative fiction always has form, just as music always has content, but the relationship shifts.

Of particular relevance to the subject of this chapter, Prieto cites the ‘Sirens’ passage from *Ulysses*, which Joyce explicitly referred to as fugal on more than one occasion, despite the literal impossibility of making words perform as a fugue. Prieto, discussing the significance of this passage’s fugality, points out that while the long-standing argument among theorists and critics is about its musical rigour, what really ought to be considered is what Joyce was trying to say through such a deliberate and self-conscious appropriation of a musical term (58). As Prieto says:

If Joyce appealed to the principle of the fugue to explain the significance of the “Sirens” passage, it is not because he truly thought to have written a fugue, but because he was interested in the principle of simultaneity, a more general principle that is specific to neither music nor literature. What Joyce is trying to emphasize in the “Sirens” passage is the ability of the mind to process multiple streams of information simultaneously. The fugue is not the ultimate target of this passage, but a handy metaphor for emphasizing the centrality of the psychological principle of cognitive multitasking. (58-9)

Joyce appropriates fugal form to emulate the simultaneity that is eminently possible in the medium of music, and utterly unattainable through the medium of words. Words can only allude to this simultaneity – this ‘cognitive multitasking’ – which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged as ontological truth.

Prieto also uses the example of Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, a work that is often referred to as polyphonic, its structure deliberately employed 'to convey, metaphorically, a sense of contrapuntal simultaneity' (63). While Huxley's novel cannot in any true sense be polyphonic, by drawing attention to its multi-voiced form, it expresses the idea of polyphony (63).

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his work on dialogia, used the term 'polyphony' to make a distinction between monologic literary forms and the revolutionary introduction of multiple, independent voices within a literary narrative such as he identified in the novels of Dostoevsky. He saw the significance of this new dimension in narrative form as extending into a far broader cultural and aesthetic context (Pearce 224-5), but he was careful to point out that the use of the term 'polyphony' was 'meant as a graphic analogy, nothing more' (22), comparing the challenges that literature faced in moving from monophony to polyphony to those which had also occurred in the trajectory of music history, while also declaring that 'the material of music and of the novel are too dissimilar for there to be anything more between them than a graphic analogy, a simple metaphor' (22).

Musical terms are appropriated, in other words, because there are no literary terms to describe an essentially musical aspiration, which nonetheless resonates well enough because it draws on the comparable features of the two mediums. Of course, all novels are polyphonic in the sense that they depict a number of characters, or the range of voices within one character's head, or those that ring out across epochs, galloping across borders of time and space. But the polyphonic writing that began to emerge in the early twentieth century involved a self-conscious reappraisal of novelistic form, reflecting a more general reappraisal of what language is and what language does, and how it might be used to convey something of contemporary consciousness. As Barthes says, 'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological"

meaning (the “message” of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’ (*Image* 146).

It is in the ‘blending and clashing’ that postmodern literary ‘polyphony’ distinguishes itself. Bakhtin, according to Waugh, viewed a novel as dialogic not simply on the basis of its multiple, polyphonic voices, but because of the way these voices relativised each other, introducing a ‘semantic direction into the word which is diametrically opposed to its original direction...the word becomes the arena of conflict between two voices’ (5). As Waugh goes on to point out, the language of fiction bears such a strong relation to everyday discourse that it is ‘*always* to some extent dialogic’ (5-6), but in conventional, or realist fiction, the conflict of the various forms of language operating within the narrative is suppressed, or resolved ‘through their subordination to the dominant voice of the omniscient, God-like author’ (6). Dialogic novels, by Bakhtin’s definition, ‘resist such resolution’ (6), releasing their multiple voices into the arena of relativisation and conflict. Bakhtin describes this polyphony as ‘an eternal harmony of unmerged voices’ in ‘unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel’ (30). Bakhtin’s polyphony ‘offers a concept of a singularity *constituted* from a plurality of possible liminal meetings’ (Benson ‘For Want’ 299), the liminal boundary in Benson’s description referring to Bakhtin’s own assertion of ‘that which takes place on the boundary between one’s own and someone else’s consciousness, on the threshold’ (287), or in the case of a novel written from a single point of view, as illustrated by Dostoevsky’s *The Adolescent*, a ‘contrapuntal combination of vari-directional voices within the bounds of a single consciousness’ (Bakhtin 223).

Milan Kundera also explores the idea of novelistic polyphony over the course of his many books and essays regarding the art of the novel, although his focus is more on the idea of simultaneity. The interviewer, Christian Salmon, asks, ‘Doesn’t this metaphoric application of the term “polyphony” to literature set up demands a novel

could never meet?’ (*Art 73*) Kundera claims that as a novelist, he does not have to validate his position as a politician or a philosopher might, or to empirically validate his ideas; his concern is with what these metaphorical insights might offer in terms of fresh ways to approach the art of the novel. His discussion is ‘playful, ironic, provocative, experimental’ (80), and almost entirely without reference to broader literary theory, including the work of Bakhtin.

Kundera describes polyphony in musical terms as ‘the *simultaneous* presentation of two or more voices (melodic lines) that are perfectly bound together but still keep their relative independence’ (73-4), correlating this with a novelistic aspiration to an ‘equality of voices: no one voice should dominate, none should serve as mere accompaniment’ (75). The novel by virtue of its medium must set its words and therefore its ideas down in a linear fashion, but it ‘has always tried to escape the unilinear, to open rifts in the continuous narration of a story’ (74). He uses *Don Quixote* as an example of non-polyphony, ‘because there’s no simultaneity to it’ (74). As examples of novelistic polyphony he cites Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, and Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers*. Dostoyevskian polyphony is described as the tying together of three storylines into ‘an indivisible entity’ (74). Broch takes the idea further, attempting (and in Kundera’s opinion not entirely managing) to fuse five different genres into the unified whole of the novelistic form. The polyphony, with its resultant sense of simultaneity, is produced by incorporating within each of the novel’s five genres a unifying theme, which Kundera defines more specifically in *Testaments* as ‘the development of the same existential questions, reflected in the five lines as five mirrors’ (21).

Kundera describes the ‘existential inquiry’ (*Art 84*) he submits to in his own novels as involving the close examination of key ‘theme-words’, which are ‘analyzed, studied, defined, redefined, and thus transformed into categories of existence’ (84). The

content of the novel is focused around these words and generated from them, just as Schoenberg's serial compositions are generated from the kernel of the original tone row.

The underlying impetus for all of this is 'to rid the novel of the automatism of novelistic technique, of novelistic verbalism; to make it dense' (73). Novelistic conventions 'do the author's work for him: present a character, describe a milieu, bring the action into a historical situation, fill time in the characters' lives with superfluous episodes' (73), just as musical composition can involve a great deal of technical, mechanical activity, and a great many notes that do little more than move the theme through exposition and development toward predictable resolution, so that 'orchestral scores collapse under the weight of superfluous notes' (72). Kundera makes the point that a computer could churn out a decent sonata based on these principles of composition. 'Destroy the computer!' (72), he cries. As a model for the contemporary novel, he cites the work of Leos Janacek (as I have similarly cited the work of Berg) who rid his composition of formulaic elements, and whose compositions therefore 'always head straight for the heart of things: only the note that says something essential has the right to exist' (72-3).

The form of a novel, like the form of a work of music, expresses something in and of itself. If a novel seeks to be fugal it seeks to mean in a different way; it seeks to express ideas beyond the meaning of its text, and, through its form, to make its own statement about contemporary apprehensions of reality and consciousness. As an example, Dumitri Tsepeneag's novel, *The Vain Art of Fugue* (2007), consists entirely of the repetition and variation of a single scene, in which the protagonist boards a bus, carrying some flowers, late for a train. It is an experimental, highly self-conscious attempt to subvert conventions of plot and temporality, but of greater interest to my own work is the portrayal of the protagonist: unnamed, written in first, second and third

person, so that the sense of his identity is never stable. As one on-line reviewer says: 'As a compositional strategy for the novel, the fugue reifies the post modern notion that identity isn't an essence, but a series of relationships' (Novy). The fugue expresses plurality in consciousness but is equally expressive of the plurality of identity: the self is a no more stable or cohesive concept than the mind that constructs it:

The individual is both the site and subject of...discursive struggles for identity and for remaking memory. Because the individual is subject to multiple and competing discourses in many realms, one's subjectivity is shifting and contradictory – not stable, fixed and rigid. (Richardson 962)

And so to return to the discursive struggle of Eva Byrne, who in the wake of her mother's suicide must reinvent her identity through the reappraisal of her memories, the rehashing and reconstruction of the history upon which that identity is formed. I made no attempt to write fugally, but perhaps the writing of a character in flight will naturally mirror that flight: hence the ultimate decision to title the novel with the Italian '*fuga*' which expresses the idea of flight as it might apply to the novel's psychological and formal aspects, without making a claim to any strict imitation of the musical fugue's properties. Eva is polyphonic by virtue of her instability, her many voices exemplifying Bakhtin's 'unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel' (30). She is incapable of starting at one end of her story and finishing at the other, following the stepping stones towards resolution. A singular voice reads like a singular truth, and we no longer believe in those, just as we no longer believe in singular histories.

But many voices and many chronologies can equate to a disjunctive, linear mess. What of Kundera's uniting, common theme? Siri Hustvedt describes the writing of her novel, *The Sorrows of an American*:



I was writing a kind of fugue...themes that keep recurring are chasing each other through the book...three secrets that unfold over the course of the novel and at the same time all these secrets and stories are reverberating with and against each other. (ABC Radio, 2008)

‘Never reveal a theme or an ambition’, Bach cautions his young protégé, Gottlieb Goldberg, in Castro’s *Bath Fugues* (138), and I read this as self-reflexive. I could not write to ...*fuga*’s larger themes – death, loss, the nature of memory, the instability of identity and consciousness – without watching the narrative shrivel to fit the reductive stature of my own limited comprehension. Images compelled me instead: a grief-stricken young woman hacking away at a harrowing violin concerto, staring into the void as the orchestra plays on without her, walking the desolate miles on a remote island stripped of the protection of her own identity; a violin falling from the sky; the beaming, enraptured face of an ageing composer. Images chased and reverberated through my writing, crystallising into smaller, seemingly inconsequential tropes – baths, hair, graves, oranges – which began to string together like baubles on a repeating chain: a tone row of symbolisms cohering the text, generating new material with each recurrence, conveying something of the complex organicism of Eva’s thought, and the larger, inchoate ideas of memory, identity, loss and death. They seemed to dig into the novel’s material rather than propelling it along a linear surface, giving a sense of verticality, one narrative strand feeding into the next, not seamlessly – in fact, at times, quite incongruously – but *rightly, musically*: dare I say, *fugally*?

But there is an inexorable march forward. Just as the fugue grows from within itself in a lush verticality, so it must also acquiesce to its time-bound form. However we

might explicate its multidimensional meanings, a story must begin and end. As Eva describes it:

The trouble with chronology is that it irons everything out into inevitabilities. But I suppose it is a necessary evil, a way of setting the story straight, of marching stepwise towards some conclusion, however inadequate. Humans like conclusions. We like to tell our stories and have them turn out the same way every time, but there's a cost to this, which is the depth of their truth. Re-angle the light and any story changes the length of its shadows. (70)

Perhaps the most that we can do is cast the light of many angled voices and stories upon an ending that will never be final. Finding a form for ... *fuga* that enabled the cohesion of its many voices and chronologies was always my greatest challenge and may still be the novel's greatest weakness. Siri Hustvedt describes the 'jabbering voices every fiction writer hears in his or her head' (*A Plea for Eros* 42), the conflicted interior polyphony that can both guide and obfuscate the course of the novel's own jabbering voices.

But are all of the novel's 'jabbering voices' necessary? I have to wonder whether at the turn of another century we might be moving beyond the need to foreground the idea of a polyphony of self and consciousness; perhaps we are ready for new forms, or to hark back again, as Schoenberg did, to revolutionise other ancient forms. To conclude this essay a long way from where it began, let me cite the example of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), a work of such searing monophony that reading it made me ache to strip everything in my own work back to some minimal essentiality. The world as we know it may have ended, but the contemporary mind hardly requires a detailed explanation into the possible causes of its demise.

A man and a boy walk down a road, one step after another, and their immediate past and the past of an entire decimated humanity exists in the space around them, more vivid than words.

## Chapter Four

### *Limina* – fictional music as a voice for the fiction

*Limina* is a fictional work of music composed for Eva Byrne by the fictional composer, Fergus Cunningham. Fergus is my fictional luminary; he is Catholic for the beauty; he considers mystery a ‘fundamental human need’ (... *fuga* 5); he ‘doesn’t talk about God and doesn’t pretend to have answers but straddles the space between earth and the numinous, insisting on the possibility of an underlying, unfathomable order’ (5). This is Fergus, foil to my Eva, my zealous non-believer, and *Limina* is his signature tune, his dance upon the existential threshold between the earth he seems to prefer not to inhabit and some other esoteric realm that he is wise enough not to try and express in any form other than music.

Fergus is a fictional character, but he is based on an amalgamation of two important figures in recent Orcadian cultural life and history. Sir Peter Maxwell Davies is an eminent English composer, who has lived in Orkney since 1971, firstly on Hoy, and then on Sanday. Fergus’s croft in ... *fuga* is in fact the croft that Peter Maxwell Davies originally resided in when he moved to Hoy in 1971. This place has particular resonance for me because of a story that my partner tells, of sleeping on a lonely beach on Hoy one night as a young man, thinking the place entirely uninhabited, only to be woken in the wee hours by the noise of music drifting down from the tiny croft high up on the hill above him, which he discovered the next morning was occupied by the famous composer.

George Mackay Brown was an Orcadian poet and novelist, who lived for most of his life in the portside town of Stromness, his sense of the place and people of Orkney fundamental to his writing. He was great friends with Peter Maxwell Davies, and instrumental with Davies in launching the annual St Magnus Festival. Whilst

Maxwell Davies is the model for Fergus as composer in remote seclusion, Fergus is in character more like Mackay Brown. It is Mackay Brown's spirituality that Fergus embodies, as evidenced in Mackay Brown's words:

I have a deep-rooted belief that what once existed can never die: not even the frailest things, spindrift or clover-scent or glitter of star on wet stone. All is gathered into the web of creation, that is apparently established and yet perhaps only a dream in the eternal mind; and yet, too, we work at the making of it with every word and thought and action of our lives. (qtd. in Fergusson 289)

'I'm a great believer in renewal, as you know,' Fergus says to Eva. 'And I'm a great believer in nothing, as you know' (29), Eva says to Fergus. Eva is entirely grounded in the material world, or so she would have the world believe; she is aware of the 'fascinating polarities' (9) between her own views and those of Fergus, happy to goad him (at least before her mother's death) but clearly seeking something from him. I'm reminded of Salman Rushdie's tenet that since the death of God, we all have this 'emptied God chamber' to fill (377). Rushdie writes in order to fill it (377), but music performs this role for Eva, or did before her mother's death. Dayan is 'tempted' to call music 'the unbeliever's divinity' (*Music* 119), and this could describe Eva's relationship to music, although she maintains a derisory tone in trying to express the 'meaning' of *Limina* in mere words:

*Limina*, meaning thresholds, so the dictionary informs me, somewhat ambiguously – I don't get the impression FC is writing music about doorways or vestibules here – rather more those ephemeral spaces, between dreams and waking, between this life and the next, between the physical world and the other,

whatever it might be. FC is more poetic on the subject than I am: he tells me the term is derived from the Latin, *limin*, meaning, *the threshold between two different existential planes*. And he quotes Rumi as his inspiration. (80)

Through music Eva gains entry to spiritual territory she claims no affinity to, and this is particularly evident in her relationship to *Limina*; she recalls ‘the notes shimmering up into the high reaches of Saint Magnus Cathedral’ (55). Her *Limina* performance shimmers in her memory, beacon for her lost innocence; all that heady beauty in the cathedral and the frivolous drunken decadence that followed is lost to her now, as music is lost to her. Still, she pores over the pages of Fergus’s latest composition, studiously copying it note for note, as if she might reclaim her lost sense of the spiritual from its ‘mice-turd trails’ (5).

*Limina*: what is it, actually? A work for solo violin. Very little is said about the music itself, other than those allusions to its shimmering quality, and that it ‘extends the theme of transfiguration evident in the final moments of Berg’s harrowing, death-themed concerto’ (79). *Limina* voices Fergus’s aspirations, but it is also, in a self-reflexive sense, the voice of the novel’s own aspirations. It is my opportunity to touch, however lightly, upon the ineffable territory my words might strain towards. Eva says:

I could not have asked for a more perfect work than *Limina*. I love it beyond anything that I have ever played, for the sheer luminosity of it. How did he know to do what he did? Notes on a page are just that, after all, what is the magic that turns them into something so vastly beyond the sum of their parts? Because especially with *Limina* it isn’t just the notes, but the arrangement of the spaces between them. So that the notes seem somehow suspended in a gossamer of silence, a resonant, illuminating sheen. (35)

While the Berg Violin Concerto ably performs the function of elucidating a narrative of death, *Limina* goes beyond the scope of what a real work of music might offer in a literary sense, performing a very different, more self-reflexive role within ...*fuga*. Over the course of many drafts *Limina* came to represent what I wished the novel to be, and it is clear to me now that it fulfills this role more ably through its fictitiousness. Fictional music can perform a metaphoric function without the possibility of ever disappointing in actuality, whereas real music, if set up to meet certain criteria, always invites the possibility of not fitting the image the writer has so painstakingly created. Some degree of reader mismatch is in fact inevitable given the subjectivity of music, which suffers a necessary distortion or reduction when subjected to the semantic objectivity of words. Music can never be perceived exactly, and no two people will ever perceive it identically. While we might agree on general attributes (we might think a piece of music is sad if it is in a minor key, or ‘catchy’ if it is upbeat and hummable) and while we might be able to offer some purely empirical observations about its physical characteristics (its dynamic range, its pitch, its tempo, for example), our individual perceptions of music are resultant of innumerable experiential, educational, psychological, emotional and cultural factors that affect how we listen and how we respond to any given piece, those factors further influenced by our immediate circumstances at the time of listening. As a result, the writer’s verbal interpretation of a piece of music will never quite fit the reader’s bill; hence the need to frame the idea of the Berg Violin Concerto through historical and programmatic contextualisation, and to make descriptions of its musical qualities specific to the narrative’s intentions.

Fictional music can fulfil a different role. Proust’s original inspiration for Vinteuil’s septet was a scene from Wagner’s *Parsifal*. How might readers’ perceptions of the work (let alone the nature of the work itself) have been altered if Proust had stuck

to this original inspiration? As Dayan speculates, 'would it not have been more evocative to the reader if we had been able to hear the music which had given rise to the narrator's meditation?' (*Music* 86-87). But in imagining the consequences of being able to hear Vinteuil's septet and to interpret it for ourselves, another question arises: might it not just as easily have detracted, or distracted, from what Proust meant to convey through this musical motif? Dayan quotes Jean-Jacques Nattiez, 'the Narrator had to arrive at his revelation thanks to an imaginary work of art...a real work always disappoints: the capture of the absolute can only be suggested by a work which is disincarnated, unreal and ideal. [...] The work which redeems cannot be of this world' (87).

Mann's *Dr Faustus* is another example of a novel that uses fictional music as a metaphor for ideas about music and the broader aesthetic, historical, psychological and sociological contexts in which that music is placed. Again, it is interesting to speculate on how this work would have been altered if Mann had used Schoenberg's actual music instead of a fictionalised version of it.

Once the music is known, the pursuit becomes musicological: if the music's function within the novel is to point towards the larger ideas that it represents, then there is a point to choosing music which cannot become the focus in its own right. Unheard music, because it can never be known beyond the image the writer provides, can maintain its illusion as the conveyor of the ineffable, or the ideal, or the idea; it can remain in the condition of being unanalysed. Readers will necessarily imagine it according to their own experiential conceptualisations, but what they will conjure will still be the half-veiled form of that idea or that ideal, since the only form in which they will ever know this music is through the image the writer's words directed them toward. Dayan describes it as 'a melody which comes back to us without having been heard before' (86). By virtue of the words that have constructed its image it can retain its



immediacy; it can exist beyond the scaffolding provided by these words, perpetually generating its ideal and unknowable state.

It can also offer something to the words themselves – a glimpse beyond the threshold of their own constraints. Ideal, fictional music describes a territory that words will inevitably fail to reach, but at least the words alert us to the possibility of this yonder, ideal place. Like the Buddhist sutra, words become the finger pointing to the moon – they can never be the moon, but they can at least alert us to its presence. To return to Dayan's reading of Proust:

it is the musicality of Vinteuil which allows Proust's work...to point towards what it cannot be, in a way that language without music cannot do...language seems made to be understood. It only becomes art when we read it as performing something that goes beyond understanding, therefore beyond its own primary function. (87)

*Limina*, as a fictional work of music, symbolises that threshold beyond words, that ineffable something that art persists in trying to grasp. Eva understands this. Music fails her in the long run, but at this stage, the *Limina* stage, music is all, music is superior, music has capacities far beyond the limitations of words:

I suppose what appeals to me about this music – about any music – is its capacity to give voice to something language itself would at best render banal, or sentimental, and at worst would destroy entirely. So I don't ask FC for a blow-by-blow interpretation: what I want is to inhabit his inner knowing of the piece; forgive the necessity to use exactly the sort of banal verbiage I've just been bagging, but music does have an intrinsic truth, and it is this, not technical

pyrotechnics or beautiful tunes that silences an audience, that sparks that shiver of recognition up a collective, listening spine. If I am to play a piece of music, it is this spark of essentialness (sorry, another of those words) that I am endeavouring to find; hence my hours poring over the score with the very generous Sir Fergus Cunningham. (... *fuga* 80)

To what extent are Eva's words also reflecting the writer's own struggle? How much of Eva's moaning about the inadequacy of words and the supremacy of music is actually a self-reflexive function of the novel, carping at itself for the inadequacies of its form? Aspiring to be music so that it can free itself from the claustrophobic constraints of so much inadequate verbiage? Or is it the voice of the writer herself, tormented by her utter incapacity to render on the page some semblance of the thing that impels her to pick up the pen in the first place? The constant sense of the inadequacy of one's tools, of finding the thing you are striving to express reduced to the merest hint of itself on the page, once rendered in that concrete, meaning-laden black and white is no longer complete, not the wholeness towards which you had strived. Its 'truth' constantly slips through the fingers. The finger points to some void, barely illuminated by a moonbeam, let alone registering the source of the glow. 'All these words,' Eva says, 'all this froth and clever, biting cynicism. I ought to learn to shut up. What would it be like to stop being this person who creates and destroys herself with these words, words, words?' (... *fuga* 10).

Words have been the object of disdain since the late nineteenth century, as already described. While in its earlier history music was not considered an art form so much as something that merely touched the heart, or incited emotions, by the late nineteenth century it had taken a position of supremacy because, unlike any other art form, it generated meaning and significance entirely in and of itself, outside of the

jurisdiction of words, and despite its complete incapacity to represent anything of the world in any concrete sense. This was its strength, judged by the aesthetic principles of the era, hence Walter Pater's proclamation that 'All the arts aspire to the condition of music' (qtd. in Breatnach, 'Writing About Music' 60). Music in the nineteenth century became the voice for that liminal territory beyond words.

Proust wrote his idealised account of music, suffering what Conrad terms as 'linguistic agnosticism' (126):

I wondered if Music was not the sole example of what – had language not been invented, words formed, ideas not analysed – might have been the communication of souls. Music resembles a possibility which has not been realised; humanity followed other paths, the path of written and spoken language. But the return to the unanalysable had been so intoxicating that, on leaving this paradise, contact with more or less intelligent beings seemed to me extraordinarily insignificant.' (qtd. in Dayan, 'On the Meaning' 152)

There's a certain irony in Proust's adulation of music, in consideration of the large quantity of words he felt himself compelled to write. As Conrad says: 'He expended many more than a million words on the quest for lost time, only to conclude that language can never adequately account for the sensations compressed into a single moment' (126).

Mary Breatnach, writing about Baudelaire's glorification of Wagner's *Tannhauser*, concludes that the nineteenth century fervour for music rested on its non-representational status, which afforded it 'a unique capacity to express human passion in the fullest possible way' ('Writing About Music' 60). Music offered 'unmediated

access to an intuitive understanding of the nature of human existence and the relationship of mankind [sic] to the material world' (60).

Mallarme saw it differently; in fact, he was intent upon wresting back from music the supremacy he believed belonged to literature. In a letter written after the death of Villiers, he praises Villiers's work as 'of equal magnificence' to music, with the added bonus of 'that clarity which is our conscious knowledge' (qtd. in Lloyd 225). Equally, he disparages music as 'latent and incomprehensible' despite its popularity among the masses (225).

Mallarme used the metaphor of a broken building or cloister to suggest the idea that literature, though incomplete, had the advantage over music because it was 'rooted in the ground, in the dust which all things remain' (qtd. Dayan, 'Do Mallarme's Divinations' 70), while music's evocations begin and end outside of that earthly foundation. Literature has supremacy over music, in other words, because it is grounded in our 'conscious knowledge', and yet capable of pointing towards – of illuminating – the essentialness, or otherness, or completeness, or truth, which it is the function of art to express, and which music seems to express in and of itself, but in a way that is not comprehensible to us until we bring it to ground through words (Dayan 65-81).

Dayan says, 'Literature seems permanently to be trying to escape from the bounds of nature' and as a consequence, 'must indeed eternally reach towards the unnatural lightness of music' (72). Music, because of this 'unnatural lightness' might have been seen as the condition to aspire to, but Mallarme claimed that this lightness was also its 'aesthetic weakness' (72) since music is ultimately meaningless without words to translate it:

The supremacy of words is precisely that they do not begin beyond nature; they reach towards the state beyond nature. They begin in the non-ideal, the non-

absolute, the human side of the veil, and strive to tear it; therefore they force us to be aware of the veil's existence. In so doing, they invite a lucid appreciation of the paradoxical nature of the artistic enterprise. Music does not do this. (72)

Language is rooted in the ground, but literature points us skyward, straining towards an inexpressible 'wholeness' (70). The writer's task is to maintain an 'insane belief' (70) in the possibility of this wholeness, constantly striving to write what lies beyond the limits of language (70).

And so we arrive back at where we started: the liminal territory beyond words, which perhaps for current purposes is better imagined as the liminal territory between words and music. Mallarme himself believed that within this territory lay 'a force which was nothing less than the key to understanding of the nature of the universe' (Breatnach, 'Pli Selon Pli' 266): a silent force, no longer words or music. I think of Rumi, who inhabits that liminal space for me. I entitled a poem years ago 'Rumi wreaking havoc in the shorebreak', presaging this interest in things liminal. Fergus quotes Rumi to Eva, 'your old life was a frantic running from silence' (22), but he leaves the context of that quote for Eva to discover for herself: 'Inside this new love, die', the poem begins, 'Your way begins on the other side' (22). The writer strains towards this other side, as does the composer, the performer, and the lover.

Giving myself permission to puddle around a little longer in things metaphorical, I am struck by the idea of Eva as representative of the words, rooted in Mallarme's dust-bound earth, and Fergus as representative of the music, other-worldly, beyond the bounds of nature. Each aspires to what they lack and the other possesses. *Limina* is music about transcendence, Fergus reaching towards the numinous unattainable, but written as it is for Eva, perhaps there is an implicit element of sublimated desire for another unattainable: namely Eva herself. I did not consider this at

the time of writing, but perhaps it is inevitable that Eva brings Fergus to ground, not only by giving bodily expression to his music, but in the possibility, hinted at in the novel's last paragraph, that she will give birth to what might be considered his most worthy creation.

But for now let's leave Fergus up there in his liminal spaces. Let's leave Rumi with the last word:

Inside this new love, die.  
Your way begins on the other side.  
Become the sky.  
Take an axe to the prison wall.  
Escape.  
Walk out like someone suddenly born into colour.  
Do it now  
You're covered with thick cloud.  
Slide out the side. Die,  
and be quiet. Quietness is the surest sign  
that you've died.  
Your old life was a frantic running  
from silence

The speechless full moon  
comes out now. (22)

## Chapter Five

### *Sing me a song to make death tolerable...*

Theorists warn us that music is a non-referential art, that its affective properties depend on extra-musical associations. Indeed, with a change of variables, a rowdy chaconne can turn into a deathly lament. Nothing in the medium is fixed. ‘I consider music by its very nature powerless to *express* anything,’ Stravinsky once said, warding off sentimental interpretations. Then again, when Stravinsky composed the opening lament of his ballet *Orpheus*, he reached for the same four-note descending figure that has represented sorrow for at least a thousand years. (Ross 25)

*Lament*. When we cry, or moan, or wail, our voice follows a line down, and if we continue to cry, or moan, or wail, we might start the next time at a higher pitch and slide down again; the mechanics of lament are as universally human as those for laughter. That descending trope is mirrored in the musical lament, not just in classical music but in blues, pop, rock, folk and raga. From East to West, across time and culture, humans have musicalised their despair.

‘No doubt pleasant are the tears which Musicke weepes’ (qtd. in Ross 32), John Dowland penned across his *Lachrymae*. Music’s weeping is balm to lamenting souls; we know what it means without the aid of words, without the need for the sort of sentimental interpretations Stravinsky objected to. As Ross says, ‘It has long been understood that music has the ability to stir feelings for which we do not have a name’ (32). He describes a trend towards something that might be defined as musical signification, which started to emerge in the Renaissance, and hit a zenith in the

Romantic era. ‘The dream of a private kingdom beyond the grasp of ordinary language,’ he calls it (32): that liminal territory, in other words, towards which all the arts aspire.

Alex Ross gave a pre-concert talk on ‘lament’ at an Australian Chamber Orchestra Concert in March, 2011. The musical program for the concert was designed around the various laments that he discussed, including works by Bach, Dowland and Purcell, all of which are referenced within ... *fuga*, the lament seeming a natural vehicle through which Eva might explore her grief. In earlier drafts it was Fergus Cunningham who offered the lament to Eva – it had never seemed appropriate to make a character as reclusive and musically oriented as Fergus suddenly perform a wordy, therapeutic function, and I did not in any case put Eva on a remote island to have her verbally accosted by an expert in Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief. Music presented itself as the obvious solution, although in the final version Fergus is relieved entirely of responsibility for Eva’s grief, since Eva chooses not to tell him about her mother’s death.

Laments make death tolerable. Like Aristotelean tragedy, they ‘help to guide us out of the labyrinth of despair’, Ross writes, allowing ‘a purgation of pity and fear: through the repetitive ritual of mourning, we tame the edges of emotion, give shape to inner chaos’ (26). Eva finds the CD, entitled *Lament*, at her grandfather’s house. She is cynical, true to nature. ‘Music for the grieving soul,’ she quips to her grandfather, but she listens to it:

It traces the history of a four-note descending line, starting with John Dowland’s *Lachrymae*, and weaving around through cultures and folk idioms, from Bach’s desolate Chaconne, through to Brahms and on into the blues and Bob Dylan.

Two full CDs and we listen to it all, Pop and I. Some of it has a light touch and some of it is a spiralling wail into hell. Dido’s most fucking lamentable moment



being a case in point. I barely knew the words before, but I know them now, oh yes, I do.

*When I am laid in earth  
may my wrongs create  
no trouble in thy breast,  
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate*  
(118)

Dido's *Lament*, like the Berg Violin Concerto, has an obvious narrative and a clearly corresponding text. I am conscious on reflection of the degree to which I chose music for ... *fuga* that required minimal narrative interpretation, and perhaps this reflects an ambivalence on my part about exploiting music's 'open semiosis' (Bernhart 28) for my own narrative purposes. Bach's desolate Chaconne is another work I might well have used as Eva's signature tune, had I been more willing to offer the reader my own subjective musical interpretation. Watching Richard Tognetti perform this work with the Australian Chamber Orchestra evoked for me the same sense of claustrophobic despair I had experienced watching Gil Shaham play the Berg Violin Concerto; it could have served well as a metaphor for Eva's grief. 'It would appear that Bach has gone beyond the rituals of mourning to a solitary, existential agony' (44), Ross says, quoting musicologist Susan McClary: 'the chaconne has become a formal prison for the struggling self' (44).

But Eva has her Berg Concerto, with its already established narrative; Eva performs the Berg in her own state of solitary, existential agony, although it fails her in the end. Faced with the reality of death, as opposed to merely metaphorically sucking the marrow of it at the graves of Viennese strangers, the Berg becomes a mockery rather than a purgation. What good is it to her when what it represents is conceptual, symbolic,

universal, and not in any way representative of the singular horror, the utter uniqueness of a death that belongs to her mother, and her mother alone? It is a betrayal of her mother to place her in this generality. Likewise, she has no desire to generalise her own singular grief out into some common territory of grief, fodder for a devouring homogeneity of audience. 'Art is not life,' Eva says, 'I could not have stood on that stage in Edinburgh and played my Mama's death, it would have been a travesty, a mockery, and in any case, Mama would have hated the Berg, she would have been up there in Fergus's liminal spaces plugging her ears, saying, *stop that terrible racket*' (119).

*Sing me a song to make death tolerable...*

Eva Byrne claims several times over the course of ...*fuga* to dislike folk music, and yet it is a folk song in the end from which she derives greatest comfort. In the following quote, she is discussing this folk song in an interview for a well-known classical music magazine called *Strad*:

There's a folk song called 'The Unquiet Grave', which has been done in many guises. My favourite is by a young Orkney/Edinburgh folkie called Jacob Freeman. He has an ancient, ravaged sort of voice, perfect for the words, which are about mourning the loss of a loved one, about not being able to let them rest, and not being able to get on with your own life either, for the time spent keeping watch over the grave. It seems in my limited experience,' she laughed, 'that there are a lot of folk songs about corpse kissing. In any case, the gist of it is that the dead loved one begs the one still alive to get on with their living, to make the most of their time, to be aware of their own mortality. It's a good theme, I think I'd like to find my way to a few variations of it. And I'm enjoying exploring

folk music. Having very limited background in the genre, I find myself drawn not only its strong traditions but to the innovations these strong roots enable.

(127)

The inspiration for the inclusion of this folk song and the narrative it goes on to inspire in ... *fuga* stems from a personal experience – a coincidence worthy of the novel itself: starting the long drive up the freeway to home one night, I scabbled around in the car's glovebox for music to take my mind off the lengthy rehearsal of *Turandot* I'd just attended. What came to hand was called *Lightweights and Gentlemen*, by an outfit called Lau, an obscure English or Scottish folk band, I presumed – the sort of thing my partner loves to buy online and then never listen to. Like Eva, I'm not particularly fond of folk music, but I knew it would take my mind off Puccini and so on it went.

I can only describe my initial impression of this music with a string of inadequate adjectives: athletic, acrobatic, and masterfully, euphorically anarchic. It made me laugh out loud at times. And then 'Unquiet Grave' came on. The relevance of the lyrics may have caught my attention in the first instance but it was the voice of the unknown singer that made me press replay time and time again, compelling me in a way I have to admit an operatic voice never has. Complex and multi-layered in its own right, gorgeous, weighty, full of gravel and drink and cigarettes and foul weather (resorting to adjectives again to try and fail to describe it), this voice struck me as absolutely cognisant with that of a boy who might sit on his lover's grave for a year weeping.

Thus the character of Jacob Freeman – Orkney born and bred, music in the genes, shambolic, thrash-loving, grunge-loving, prank-loving, fun-loving, guitar-slung, chain-smoking, contortionist of the frets and the vocal cords – emerged fully formed over those repeated hearings of 'Unquiet Grave' on that long journey home up the freeway, purely inspired by the voice of an unknown folk singer, whom I naturally

searched for on the internet the moment I got home. And what did I discover? Kris Drever, award-winning vocalist and guitarist (and one time lover of Metallica), but what delighted me (and would have thrilled both Alban Berg and Eva with its synchronicity, had they not been in turn dead and fictitious) was that Drever is the son of Orcadian folk star Ivan Drever, and is himself Orkney born and bred.

‘Unquiet Grave’ is a lament in its own right: Drever (who also wrote the music) has the wailing mourner sing in solemn descent, which the voice from the grave dismisses with a steady, ascending line. ‘Go and get on with your life,’ the ghost sings, which seemed an appropriate message for Eva to latch onto, providing her with some sense of release, of permission to move on. The coincidental late reemergence of Jacob Freeman as a member of Fergus Cunningham’s extended clan also delights Eva, although any relationship between them is tentative and merely alluded to, the happy coincidence itself perhaps being the real point.

While the Berg Concerto represents Eva’s grief, ‘Unquiet Grave’ is her personal, transformative lament, and while the lyrics are relevant enough, and the music is poignantly contextualising, it is the ravaged voice of Jacob Freeman that transports her. What is it we experience in a voice? Barthes, in *The Grain of the Voice*, describes it as ‘the body in the voice as it sings’ (181); it is that part of the voice that signifies. He cites the example of an operatic voice, given over to technical perfection and dramatic expressivity, as ‘a voice with a grain which little signifies’ (181). On the other hand he cites the example of a Russian bass:

something is there, manifest and stubborn (one hears only *that*) beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form...their melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is the cantor’s body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the

membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the [...] language, as though a single skin lined the flesh of the performer and the music he sings. (181-2)

It is as if the grain of the voice occupies that liminal territory between the interior remove inside the singer's skin and the external world of immediate reality. The voice of Kris Drever, fictionalised as the voice of Jacob Freeman, sits in that space, calls to Eva in its unique materiality, summons her to that 'private kingdom beyond ordinary language' (Ross 32). It is interesting to contemplate whether, having steeped myself in things Orcadian (the 'Unquiet Grave' experience occurred not long after a research trip to Orkney) the voice of Kris Drever signified something of its place of origin; something beyond accent, for although the Orcadian brogue is a thing of melodious delight to me, I don't know it well enough to have picked it in those first hearings of 'Unquiet Grave'. Is it possible to hear traces of a place – its history, its weather, its people – in a voice, as Barthes specifies the Russian origins of his bass voice?

It is also interesting to wonder whether the 'Unquiet Grave' experience, and particularly the intense identification with the voice of Kris Drever, belongs to me or to Eva. On my way to Heathrow to return home from that research trip to Orkney I had been seized by a sudden panic, realising that I had left my violin somewhere. It had taken some moments to reassure myself that I don't actually play, let alone own a violin.

If I identify the response as Eva's, then it occurs to me that I have made her the ideal listener. She can make no objections to this strong identification since she does not actually exist. If unheard music can convey through words a sense of the ineffable beyond those words, perhaps a character can also convey that sense of an ideal listening experience – a response to a work of music that captures music's potential to transport

and to transform. In turn, 'Unquiet Grave' offers Eva, as the idealised listener, the consolation she seeks.

*Sing me a song to make death tolerable...*

Derrida quotes this line from Williams Carlos Williams in an essay in honour of his friend, literary critic and theorist, Joseph Ridell, following his death in 1991 (132). It is a line likely to resonate with anyone in mourning. Sing me a song, an idealised, unheard song, to name what is beyond naming: death itself, and those that death consumes. For what is required of those who bear witness to the dead? Only to fill the void the dead once inhabited, to hold the full and complete sense of that life before it flakes into the ether. To not betray the dead by reducing the meaning of their life to words, whose remainder the dead will never be able to redress.

'Words cannot do justice to the dead' (Dayan, *Music* 120). In a broader sense, words cannot do justice to anything, but perhaps it is in the act of communicating with, or about, the dead that the inadequacy of words is most profoundly illuminated. With words, we commit what Proust, towards the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, termed 'a posthumous infidelity' (qtd. in Derrida 3). We speak for the dead – we interpret them and we represent them when it is no longer possible for them to amend our words, to contradict us with their own words or deeds, or the sheer complex weight and density and plurality afforded them by the fact of being alive. And for this, we must ask for forgiveness. 'Is it not derisory, naïve, and properly puerile to present oneself before a dead person to ask for forgiveness? Is there any sense in that? Unless it is the origin of sense itself?' (Derrida qtd in Dayan, *Music* 114).

Derrida, in his essay 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes', puts it like this: 'Living, Roland Barthes cannot be reduced to that which each or all of us can think, believe, know, and already recall of him. But once dead, might he not be so reduced?' (47). Or,

in another passage: ‘To go on speaking of this all alone, after the death of the other, to sketch out the least conjecture or risk the least interpretation, feels to me like an endless insult or wound – and yet also a duty, a duty toward him’ (55).

It is a duty because it is, of course, entirely necessary to speak of the dead. It is fundamentally important to honour them, to salvage the value of the life from its inevitable conclusion in the absolute totality of silence which is death. We have no choice but to try, even if there will inevitably be the sense of needing to apologise for the clumsy inadequacy of our words: *I’m sorry for reducing you to this*, we feel compelled to say, particularly if the death is of the kind that eclipses the life. Suicide, or untimely, gruesome death, wipes the slate clean and inserts itself in bold letters at the top. Anything reinserted under it are mere appendices to the fact. Eva, in thinking about Fergus’s mother, who died her own ugly death, puts it this way: ‘Of all that Fergus must have told me over the years, this is the line of biography I reduce her to’ (23). She knows this will be her mother’s fate also; she struggles with the question of how to preserve the essence of her mother’s life, with which she had barely grappled while her mother was alive. She attempts through her own writing to avert the reductive inevitability of memory, and to save her mother from the one-line biography that is the only obvious future for her: *she overdosed and drowned herself in her own bath*.

Music fails her. Words fail her; words fail us all. Facing the death of a loved one, words failed even one of their greatest champions: Mallarme. Mallarme’s son, Anatole, died at eight years of age after years of illness. While Mallarme wrote a great deal in the form of correspondence leading up to the event of his son’s death, what remains of Mallarme’s writings about his son following the death amounts to 202 fragments towards a poem in which, one assumes, Mallarme sought to capture the fullness of his son’s life. Paul Auster describes these notes, which were published as a collection in 1961, as:

a kind of ur-text, the raw data of the poetic process...closer to what we today consider poetry than at the time of their composition...a language of immediate contact, a syntax of abrupt, lightning shifts that still manage to maintain a sense, and in their brevity, the sparse presence of their words, we are given a rare and early example of isolate words able to span the enormous mental spaces that lie between them – as if intelligible links could be created by the brute force of each word or phrase, so densely charged that these tiny particles of language could somehow leap out of themselves and catch hold of the succeeding cliff-edge of thought. (434)

Mallarme wrote much in the way of remembrances of the dead, for Gautier, Poe, Villiers, Verlaine, among them. Perhaps loss is ‘beyond telling in that the object of loss cannot be fully represented; but grief for that loss is its sign. Emptiness becomes *significant*’ (Stamelman, qtd in Lloyd 217). Lloyd is citing Stamelman’s study of grief, entitled *Lost Beyond Telling*, and she makes the point that Mallarme is a surprising absence from Stamelman’s work, ‘since so much of the poet’s work, public and private, bears eloquent witness to the desire to make loss and emptiness significant; [to]...respond to the anguish of loss and to the knowledge of mortality’ (217).

Mallarme, through poetry, sought to capture the totality of his son’s life, to ‘transmute Anatole into words and thereby prolong his life. He would *literally*, resurrect him, since the work of building a tomb – a tomb of poetry – would obliterate the presence of death’ (Auster 435). But despite his reputation for eloquence on the subject, words finally failed him in the face of his son’s death; poems remained fragments, unable to give voice to the whole. Auster views this failure of words as:



one of the most moving accounts of a man trying to come to grips with modern death – that is to say, death without God, death without the hope of salvation – and it reveals the secret meaning of Mallarme’s entire aesthetic: the elevation of art to the stature of religion. Here, however, the work could not be written. In this time of crisis even art failed Mallarme...The work died along with Anatole. It is all the more moving to us, all the more important, for having been left unfinished. (435)

It could also be said that what Mallarme might have perceived as a failure to capture, by contemporary poetic standards, through the very fact of its fragmented form, captures more completely.

*Sing me a song to make death tolerable...*

Upholding music’s supremacy over words is not restricted to the French Symbolists, it would seem. Derrida, confronted with the task of writing about his friends who have died, turns repeatedly to the idea of music. In his memorial to Paul de Man, he says, ‘Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness’ (72); ‘only music seems to me today bearable, consonant, able to give some measure of what unites us in the same thought’ (75). And in *The Deaths of Roland Barthes*: ‘How to reconcile this plural? How to concede, grant, or accord it? And to whom? How to make it agree or bring it into accord? And with whom? And such questions must also be heard with an ear to music’ (34).

Why music? Because it offers a language with which to consider the dead without the possibility of representing them, or interpreting them: ‘In words, death is intolerable, because words make sense, and at the very origin of sense is treachery, injustice, sacrifice’ (Dayan, *Music* 125). Words aspire to music in this case since ‘Music might make death tolerable, because in the language of music, it might be possible not

to betray the other; but for our words we need always to be forgiven' (117). In talking of the dead, words must aspire to the condition of music in respect to somehow acknowledging the inevitable, ineffable remainder in what is said. Literature, in an effort to elucidate this remainder, must seek ways to point a finger at it, to highlight it with signs and arrows, retractions and erasures. The words must themselves contain the act of eluding themselves, slipping the noose of totality, creating their own long string of non-ownership. Echoing the discussion in Chapter One, Derrida calls it 'the irreducible surplus' that part of the writing which 'cannot be added into any hermeneutical sum' (qtd. in Dayan *Music* 115), that most essential remainder which inspires the hermeneutical pursuit, even as it inevitably eludes the hermeneutical grasp. It is 'a provocation,' Derrida says, 'which sings or which calls forth a song in every poem' (Dayan 115).

Of course, Derrida is not referring to any literal song. He is talking about an idealised music, as discussed in relation to *Limina* in the previous chapter, capable of grasping feelings that cannot be named. 'The music which makes death tolerable is never present', says Dayan (118); it is the lack of potential for interpretation that we seek from this idealised music of mourning. It is the place beyond words we are trying to reach. The remainder, the bit that defies and frustrates us, is precisely the element of language towards which literature strives, because it is this remainder that defies interpretation and fixed meaning. It is this remainder that reminds us that words are not reality, words are not the thing itself; words are not the dead. Let the words draw attention to this remainder, then, rather than lodging themselves in the territory of certainty. Let the words fragment, layer, fall apart, reassemble. Let them mark themselves, return to themselves, destroy themselves, and resignify themselves. Let us suspend the words in that 'gossamer of silence, a resonant, illuminating sheen' that Eva describes (... *fuga* 33): that space between the words which is 'able to span the

enormous mental spaces that lie between them' (Auster 434), which holds the sense of music – the uninterpreted, the non-represented within it. Derrida leaves his thoughts for his dead friend Roland Barthes fragmentary and incomplete, but he says:

I value them for the incompleteness even more than for their fragmentation, more for their pronounced incompleteness, for their punctuated yet open interruption, without even the authoritative edge of an aphorism. These little stones, thoughtfully placed, only one each time, on the edge of a name as the promise of return. (34-35)

I take this lesson from Mallarme, from Rumi, from Barthes, from Derrida, and from my own writing: leave the spaces open, let the unheard music float between them. Leave the words, as Derrida does, 'endlessly hollowing out the depths of our memories, beneath their great beaches and beneath each grain of sand, beneath the phenomenal or public scope of our destiny and behind the fleeting, inapparent moments' (95). Consider the words equally for what they do not say; honour the silences like we honour the dead. And finally, let the words run out.

# THE SPEECHLESS FULL MOON COMES OUT NOW

TO FC FROM E8  
IN HONOUR OF PARALLELS

TRANQUILLO ♩ = 62

EVA SYENE

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time, marked 'TRANQUILLO' with a tempo of ♩ = 62. It consists of seven systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The score begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first system (measures 1-5) features a simple harmonic accompaniment. The second system (measures 6-9) continues the accompaniment. The third system (measures 10-13) introduces a more active right-hand part with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The fourth system (measures 14-17) features a crescendo (*CRESC.*) from piano (*p*) to mezzo-forte (*mf*). The fifth system (measures 18-22) features a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo (*CRESC.*) to forte (*f*), and then a decrescendo (*DIM.*). The sixth system (measures 23-25) features a piano (*p*) dynamic. The seventh system (measures 26-29) features a piano (*p*) dynamic, ending with a fortissimo (*ppp*) dynamic.

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