PART TWO:

TWITCH GOTHIC
SHORT STORIES
1. The Fantastic:

Experiments in Hesitation and the Supernatural

1. Urban
2. Blood
3. Loss
It’s our last call for the night. *Jack and Jill went out to drink two bottles of vodka. Jack fell down and broke his crown. Now Jill is crying in the gutter.* Not quite what came through from dispatch, but close enough.

“Hi Jill. My name’s Theresa. This is Mike. We’re ambulance officers. You called us? We’re here to help. Can you tell us where your boyfriend is?”

The young woman is sitting on the curb staring blankly at us as we approach from the wide lights of the van.

“Over there.” Jill looks up bleary eyed and points to a still lump, two metres away. The body is back from the road, further up the small hill and closer to the railings. Below us, past the railings, an angry ocean cuts rock. Mike shines his torch over. There is blood spilling out near the young man’s head. “It was an accident. Okay?” Jill looks up at me and pleads as Mike walks over towards the body lying face down on the grass.

“Okay Jill. Mike is going to take a look at him. Can you tell me anything we need to know? Are you hurt? What happened?”

Jill begins to cry. I see her hands are stained red. She starts telling me about the night. She wore the outfit especially. Her friends and she tried on so many different outfits. It was going to be a big one. She wanted to tell Jack how she felt. That she loved him. I cut her off before she continued with the excruciating details. I try to detour her back to the Main Event. No one tells you that your life as a paramedic is 33 per cent action, 47 per cent trying to coax out relevant information, 20 per cent paperwork. Mike always says we could make more
money if we’d trained as therapists. He’s right, but as a selective listener, it wouldn’t have worked out well for Mike.

Jill tells me that they were walking back from the lookout. That the others had already gone but they’d stayed up top to talk. As they were walking back, Jack tripped ... “and and and ...” she starts yelling, “I’ve already said all this. I’ve already said it on the phone. Fuck, lady. Do something. Just help him. It was an accident, all right!”

I edge closer to her and try and see if she is injured at all. I’m asking questions calmly, slowly. I use my deep voice, which took me the last four years to develop. Jill suddenly stands up and comes at me. She pushes me and I get a brief glimpse of her dilated pupils. She starts swearing at me. I back up immediately and she sits back down. Right there on the road. “Okay Jill, okay.”

She stands up as I say her (real) name. Jill grabs a stick. She starts waving it in my face. “I’m outta here. I’m going, you can’t make me stay. It was an accident. Get out of my way, bitch!” The stick is inches from my face. I step back, palms up. Jill spins around and looks like she’s going to run towards Mike and her boyfriend but throws the stick instead, into the space between them. “What a cunt!” she yells out.

Mike yells out at me “Clear. Okay?”

“Okay,” I yell back. I know I need to keep Jill clear of them, get her attention back, get her talking. Away from her boyfriend’s bloody body.

“Breathing,” yells Mike. He’s talking to dispatch. Mike by now has checked the vitals. He’s stopped some of the blood pouring out of Jack’s head. I notice the glass shards winking all over this section of the hill.
The police arrive and pull up beside our van. Jill begins to get more agitated. She stands up and starts swearing again. She’s kicking out towards me and I move slowly and try and position myself on the hill in between her and Mike. The cops get out of the car and are approaching cautiously.

“We’re going to move Jack now, okay? We’re going to get him on a stretcher and take him to hospital, okay? Get him some help.”

Jill rushes me as I’m about to turn towards the van. She grabs hold of my shirt and spits in my face. “He doesn’t need help. That asshole. That fucker.” She keeps repeating this as the cops try to disentangle her from me. Jill pushes me back and I land on the grass. I feel a sting in my thumb. A thin jagged piece of glass sticks out. Jill falls down again limply and Mike is yelling at me to get the stretcher ready. ‘Stable’ but a head wound. With this much blood, Jack’s going for a ride to hospital. Wonder if Jack’s got insurance. Theresa! I check myself. I wipe the spit from my cheek as the cops ask if I’m okay. I get the glass out of my hand and a Band-Aid on quickly. One of the cops helps get the stretcher ready. Mike and I get Jack on and into the van.

I’m driving and Mike’s in back. The lights and sirens go on. It’s only the second time tonight. Before this we’ve had a suspected heart attack (not so, thankfully), a sprained ankle in a brawl (more swearing) and a kid with breathing difficulties (anxious but caring parents). Mike is right. We’re paid shit all to get sworn at and spat on. There’s going to be extra paperwork tonight.

The codes are logged. The hospital has advance warning. Not that that means anything. Any trip to ER means extra time out of the field. Hospital emergency departments are almost as understaffed as the ambos.
Not bad stats. What a time to be thinking that! But it is late, end of the shift. Trying to keep it together. Whatever keeps your mind clean and firing, right? Response time: 9.5 minutes. Travel to nearest hospital on the beaches: 6.5 minutes. Time getting Jack off the stretcher and into ER triage: too long. Time spent checking and sanitising my minor injuries: minimal.

"Off their tits," says Mike when we've gotten back in the 'Benz'. "That wasn't just vodka."

He's right. Jack didn't trip either. Hard to fall forward and have a bloody gash in the back of your head. Jill is in for a night of explaining why Jack's a fucker and what she did to that fucker. Mike calls the shift officially (almost) OVER. We’re on our way back to the station. He’s anxious to finish for the night. It’s been a 10-hour stint. His daughter’s first birthday is tomorrow. He has invited me to the party. But not Rick. He hates Rick. 'Waster', Mike calls him. I like that Rick tastes and smells like salt. Rick is strangely impressed by what I do and he keeps similar hours. He gets gold stars for his patience with my shitty moods and shift work. Rick is a surfer and part-time bar tender and part-time poet (self-described). And he kisses me like an apocalypse has just been averted. Mike’s never going to like anyone I date. Mike’s the big burly overprotective brother type. I couldn’t work with a better bastard. I’m sure he’ll be grudgingly hospitable to us both tomorrow.

We arrive back at the station. I start the inventory of the equipment. Mike’s logging everything. We pull out the reams of paperwork to finish out back. Fiona and Jasper pull up and the next teams are ready to get back out there. Brief ribbings and info are passed around. The industrial action stickers are flicked and grimaced at. One on the next shift suggests changing them to "F it and F u!" and "kisses my hand better". As we sit down out back, Fiona is complaining that Jasper should never have told her the story about the snake. Jasper shakes his
beautiful head full of curls at the grey-haired woman, “You have taken me on my first no-show 55 call, a veritable ghosthunt tonight, also taken down an icer out of control and saved a stroke victim and you’re afraid of a story about a snake?”

“Yes, you bloody hippy,” Fiona snaps back, “That’s truly terrifying. Tell them ...” she gestures towards Mike and I sitting at the debris-covered table.

“You got a no-show?” I ask them. If you dial 000 and can’t speak into the phone you get told to hit a number and they’ll dispatch an ambulance or police car or whatever is nearest to the address. It is sometimes a stroke victim or someone having a heart attack, unable to speak. Or someone too scared to speak into the phone. But usually a person, or people, in whatever condition, is at least at the end of the line.

“Yep. An abandoned warehouse. Nothing inside but a table, set up under a skylight. Dark still ... obviously. With only the phone on the table! CREEEEEepy! On All Souls night, too!” Jasper is clearly jumped up and wired by this last call. He has just completed his graduate internship this year. Tonight marks the anniversary of him being “road-ready” – on the job proper. I envy his energy and lack of cynicism. I want to warn him if he’s not passionate, to get out now.

“As I said, less terrifying than the snake story I just got on the way in.” Fiona is less wired. She’s seen it all and then some. Fiona has taken Jasper under her wing. She may only have six hairs on her head and used to joke with me that I was sitting on my best asset, but she is genuinely a brilliant paramedic. She turned down management to stay out in the field. Mike says she must be doing time for something she did in a past life. I think she’s a freaking saint.

Mike turns the kettle on. I put biscuits in the middle of the table and some Twisties (stale) to pass around and we sit down. I look through the forms and
sign each page and pass them over to Mike. He swaps me for his half. Jasper and Fiona are going through the same motions. Mike’s bottom three shirt buttons have popped open and some curl-covered stomach protrudes. I motion to him but he doesn’t pick up my hint. Or doesn’t care. Instead he urges Jasper to tell the story.

“Well, okay. Sure. It's a true story, okay? I haven’t made it up ...” Jasper begins in a low voice.

“EEEKKKKK!” Fiona gets up to make the tea.

Jasper begins telling his story. “Okay, so this chick, she’s I dunno, like your age, Tez. She lives on her own. Let’s call her Mary. She has a pet snake.”

“I bet she does ...” Mike fake-laughs into his hand and Fi and I both look at him sharply.

“Calm down old man ...” Jasper continues, “Anyway, it's a python. Mary loves her python and lets it roam around the house and feeds it mice and lets it sleep on her bed or in the rafters or wherever it likes. She calls it Lester. Her pet snake Lester,” Jasper says.

“Lester – it’s such a peddo name.” Mike nods his head to himself, looks around for agreement but Fi has her back to us and I’m pointedly trying to listen to Jasper’s story.

Jasper carries on, “She begins to notice that Lester doesn’t eat as much. Doesn’t move as much. He stops eating and Mary worries that he is starving and will die. She visits a vet. He asks Mary about Lester’s behaviour as he examines her pet python. She tells the vet that he has stopped eating and doesn’t move much any
more. The vet nods. He asks her if there is any other strange behaviour. Mary tells him that come to think of it, yes, she has noticed something. Lester used to sleep above her in the rafters, or all curled up at the end of the bed. The last few nights, he has slept stretched out lengthways, rigid, next to her on the bed. 'Ah ha. I see.' The vet said, 'Well that's all quite normal.' Mary was perplexed. 'What do you mean?' she asked the vet. 'Well,' he explained, 'he's not eaten anything for a while. Lester is stretching out beside you at night. For the last few nights.' Mary still looks …" Jasper is about to get to the punchline but Mike cuts in.

"Urgh! Jasper that's so … just urgh! But I reckon I've heard that one before. Urban myth bullshit!" Mike slaps the desk and stands up to go. The story makes Fiona react anew and I physically get the shivers.

"Like I said, it's true, I swear! But a bunch of hardened fieldies and yet … a snake story be scaring you!" Jasper laughs and tosses a handful of Twisties into his mouth. The paperwork is all sorted and I am sufficiently tired to start making my moves to head home. I'm reminded, tactfully by Jasper, that it's Fiona's 50th next week. I hand over some money for what will no doubt be a Jasper-inspired bizarre present and a frozen chocolate cake. Mike grudgingly forks over some cash and grumbles again about choosing the wrong bloody profession. He will see me tomorrow. Bright and sparky at 2 pm. I wave goodbye.

"Which way you heading?" Jasper asks me as we walk out together.

"I think I'll take the Parkway …" I grin at Jasper.

"Watch out for the ghost!" he quips.

I could take the usual route but I want to get home soon. The Parkway is less used. It's a little scary and dark at night, and there are old company myths about an ambulance driver stopping to pick up a woman who turned out to be a ghost. It's a story they tell new initiates like Jasper when they start covering that patch.
But the Parkway is much quicker; 80 all the way and no traffic lights or stop signs. At this hour, I’m probably going to be the only car on the road.

I sit quietly in my Toyota Land Cruiser. It’s an old ‘company car’ that the service let me buy quite cheaply. It still has the ambulance insignia on its sides. No sirens and lights though. My phone trills and I imagine it’s Rick off work. The message reads: “It’s been a year that we’ve danced this song, come home quick, before too long! Happy Anniversary Babe!” There’s a reason he’s a part-time (self-described) poet. I smile at the message and luxuriate in the Friday/Saturday weekend we’ve both carved out together. All I’ve got between here and that is a drive home.

The Cruiser grumbles into life and I open the windows because although it’s only just spring, it’s warm. The radio crackles to life and the late-night presenters are getting excited, like a relay runner, ready to pass the baton to breakfast. The half-baked chat is followed up with some deep house music that gets me tapping the steering wheel.

The night is shaking off me. Jack and Jill and John and Jane and little Joe. The music is getting into my cells. Waking me up. Reminding me that I’m alive and about to have fabulous anniversary sex with a man who loves me, who I love, who also has a nice ass. I imagine him getting the ‘mojo’ flowing. He’ll light one candle and have a cold beer and maybe do something silly like be sitting on our front step naked but for a bow tie. A year of our lives all wrapped up in doona discussions and midday breakfasts and the little things you learn about someone new that turn them into a 3D person.

I like the next song even more. Some trip-hop bleeds out of the speakers and my thighs tighten with the beat. I turn onto the Parkway as the bass gets louder. I
press my foot down harder. The Cruiser likes this pace better than the stop-start inner-city traffic.

There is no light but the beam of my two sentinels reaching out into the shadow to echo back more uninterrupted tarmac. Alongside the Parkway’s edges is scrub and field. Low, dense, marshy, blank. As far as the eye can see, even in daylight. Now, though, it’s just a brown shallow flash as my car races forward. I fold into the warm rush of air pouring through my window. I see a blur of something brown and long. The Cruiser jolts as I bump over it. A stick, perhaps? Or Mary’s now released and still bloodthirsty, homicidal python ... I shiver again as I imagine lying down next to something that is sizing me up.

I close my eyes only for the briefest moment. When I open them there is someone standing there. Up ahead. Waving at me. I screech on my brakes hard. The car skids a little to the side. I’m swearing and also in a panic that my final words in this situation if I were to roll the car and die or kill someone else are as lame as “Fuck!” Why even worry about that if you are going to die? I then think to myself. The car pulls up two metres from the figure, in the middle of the road. The loud deep bass from the radio still pumps inside the car but I can’t feel my heart beat for a second. Then it fills me. Fills my body louder than the music. I look out of the passenger side window at the figure that ran out in front of me.

She is young looking. The woman wears a filthy white dress. It is ripped and torn and bloody. Her hands are muddy and she is holding one out to me and shielding her eyes from the glare of my headlights with the other. I reach to grab my phone and start dialling emergency. Before I have pressed call, she starts yelling at me.

“Please give me a lift. Please. Please help me!”
I wind down the passenger window and ask her name and tell her that I’m an off-duty ambulance officer. She comes to the window and I see her bulging split lip and swollen eyes. I drop the phone and have to scrabble to find it under the seat. “Please. Please. Don’t tell anyone. Just take me home. It’s not far. I just need help to get home. I need to get to my mum. Can you take me home? Please?”

I would normally follow a protocol. Ring emergency. Take her to the police. A hospital. But she is pleading with me and I realise it will take a while for a team to get here and perhaps I can help her or talk to her on the way, but getting her to safety is paramount. I nod and she tells me her address. It’s a corner house near the new 24-hour servo, she says. It’s really close to where Rick and I live and not that far from the Parkway. I open the door for her to get in.

“My name’s Theresa,” I say. “I really am an ambo. I can take a look at your injuries if you like? I might be able to help?”

She is shaking and hunched down in her seat. I don’t bother insisting that she put a seatbelt on. There’s small ribbons of dried blood on her thighs, seeping through her white dress. I tell her she needs a hospital. She grabs at my hand and I feel her pulse racing in her wrist that is uncomfortably pushed up against my fingers. She lets go and I am in shock. So much for ghosts on the Parkway.

I start to follow the GPS and feel as if I’m on autopilot but breaking the law or something. She reaches over and touches my arm again, as if making sure that I’m real. She whispers “Thank you” and then folds back into herself. I’m so worried. I keep looking at her and trying all my best questions and conversation-starter tactics. I’m trying to get anything from her. Even just her name. Finally she says, “My name’s Sarah. Sarah Adams. Theresa, I need to go home.”
“Okay. Okay, Sarah,” I try and keep my voice calm and neutral. I’m rattled. That name, that name. Isn’t that the woman on the news recently? Wasn’t she the one? I can hear my breath hard and full in my chest.

“Will your mum be home?” I try to ask gently. Sarah tells me her mum is called Pauline and “She will be home, she’s always home.” She is grabbing at the bits of her dress and covering herself and won’t let me see much of her face in the graceless early morning sunlight. She keeps her long hair flopped forward and her face to her window. I catch reflected blurs as we pass along quiet suburban streets and beachfront McMansions. The flashes I see are horrifying. She turns to me at one point and puts her hand over mine. It feels so cold and light. There are scratches and cuts all over it. There is something off though, something is wrong.

I feel the snake circling and stopping and stretching out long next to me.

The car rattles urgently and I see the petrol light is flicked on, which I hadn’t noticed in my small panic. I feel like it’s a warning light to me personally. I tell her I have to stop to fill up. I don’t tell her I need just a second, a second to breathe. She smiles at me and nods her head. At the petrol station I fill up fast and rush inside. There, there it is, a face splashed across the newspaper.

The murderer accused of killing three other women.

I freeze in the fluorescent lights. The man with the close-shaved head at the counter is getting impatient, he is used to late-night antics from stupid young people. “Are you right there?” he asks me. I look down again at the paper and the caption underneath the murderer’s face shows a different name, a ... Sophie Allen. I breathe out. I’m letting Jasper’s story affect me. I remind myself that my lapses in judgement tonight will all be worth it if I can get this woman to safety.
We get in the car and in a few minutes we arrive at her place. "Can you go in and get her to come and get me? I love her so much," Sarah says. Her dark eyes stare up at me from bruised flesh, behind her tangled hair. I start to protest. I remember I've a card in my wallet. I give her my card. "It has my name and my station's direct number on it. If you need to talk or get in touch or whatever you need," I tell her. I get out of the car, leaving it running and look up the short path.

The garden is immaculate. The curtains are drawn, as you’d expect this early in the morning. For a second I think I see a curtain upstairs flash open, but my mind must be playing tricks on me. I sprint up to the door and knock, as there’s no bell. I knock again and there’s no answer. I look back at the small folded up figure in the car and knock louder and longer this time. I hear a weary voice call out: "Alright, alright."

A wrinkled woman opens the door. Her hair is pulled back sharply and she is already dressed. She wears a small gold cross around her neck. "Yes. Yes. Yes," she says as she looks at me.

"I'm sorry to bother you but it's very important. Are you Pauline Adams?"

The woman nods her head impatiently. "Yes. Yes. Yes," she says again. I try to tell her that I've her daughter, who needs help, in the car. I'm confused. This woman looks old enough to be Sarah's grandmother. I haven't really said anything. Perhaps she's been awake, worrying all night. "Yes. Yes. Yes," she keeps repeating as I'm talking. I start trying to get her to walk with me back to the car but the woman just closes the door slowly and firmly in my face. I look back at the girl in the car and am determined. I knock again and again. My knuckles are sore.
Pauline opens the door. "She doesn’t need my help, she’s been a naughty girl," she says. I feel a sharp burning hatred towards this immoveable soul. I repeat to her that if she doesn’t help Sarah I will take her myself to the hospital. Pauline clutches the door, about to close it again. She shakes her head as I’m speaking and wishes me well. She warns me not to continue to bother her. I move to push the door to keep it open and beg her to come and help her daughter.

“I told you not to push. Oh, oh god! Leave. Me. Alone!” Pauline yells at my shocked face and I see tears in her eyes. I back away from the door.

I turn around determined to take Sarah to the hospital. I can’t see her tiny frame. I’m seeing things, I think. *Seeing things ... so silly when you’re seeing something that is real that’s not there, to describe that as ‘seeing things’. Then I think, What a silly thought to be having right at this moment.*

Sarah is there.

I was just talking to her.

I repeat this as I walk, step by slow step, back to the car.

On the passenger seat there is a card, my business card. I reach over and turn it around. On the back there is the lightest trace of a small bloody fingerprint. The breakfast radio show is now on. Bright, energetic voices flood my empty car.
Mia Redgrave surveyed her small wardrobe. It was another Dad Visit Saturday. Her little sister had sport. Mia’s team hadn’t made finals season. Her netball skirt was all scrunched up at the back of the cupboard. She hoped that next year she wouldn’t have to wear it at all. Instead she pulled out her shorts onesie and a black T-shirt. The shorts and straps had shrunk. Or she had grown. The shorts ended snugly, right under her small bottom. Her long legs thrust though. She looked like Bambi. A black and white patterned faun. The straps fitted badly around her newly developing breasts, making them bulge out on each side. She was about to take it off and put on some jeans when her mum hurried into the room. It was too late. Kath was in a flap. Kath was always in a flap. Mia didn’t get her mum’s single high-pitched nagging register.

Mia made all the right “Yeah, okay, okay” noises to her mum’s harried directions. She collected her phone, key and lip-gloss and went out to the front steps to wait for her Dad.

Her mum and Vick pulled off, with her sister looking all tense and keyed up for her big match. Mia hadn’t even bothered to wish her good luck. What was the point? Vick would probably shoot the winning points in overtime and be named player of the season or whatever at the awards ceremony. She would have yet another trophy to add to her swimming, ballet, jazz, little athletics, Tournament of the Minds and whatever-else collection. Kath would put it proudly on display and recount her own feats so that the girls were never unsure that their successes were in fact the blessings of mum-inherited genetics. Reflections of her former glory and not an outcome of their own hard work or talent.

Her Dad’s silver car pulled into his former driveway. Thankfully, Sonya (aka the F’ing foetus) was not in the car. A one-on-one Dad Visit. This meant food and a
movie, so they wouldn't have to talk much. Her dad waved inside the car and Mia stretched her long legs into a lope. “Hi,” she said. No hugs or kisses. “Hi,” her dad replied.

Mia lengthened the seatbelt across her and wondered how long she would be subjected to her days being organised by someone else. Her friends had been texting all morning that they were going shopping and then on to Tash’s for pizza. No doubt Tash’s mum and dad wouldn’t care and they could have some real fun. Mia checked her phone a few times, while her dad listened to soft-cock FM or whatever station he was perpetually tuned to. He glanced at his daughter only once at some lights and made a weird throat-clearing gargled sound. Mia thought that was gross.

When she wasn’t looking at her phone or Chatexting her friends, she stared out the window. All the houses tried to look different. A slightly darker shade of trimming around the windows set in the boxy red brick. Or a landscaped front yard instead of patchy lawn. The types of cars or size of the garages rarely changed. The unending blandness of it all made Mia want to vomit. As soon as she was old enough, she would move to the city and live in cramped lively congestion with the rest of the world.

The houses spread out and the traffic got busier. A car full of teenage boys pulled up next to Mia at the lights. The driver was leaning half out of his seat and began making faces at Mia. She puckered up her lips and blew a kiss back before flicking up her middle finger as the lights changed. Her dad said “Mia!” sharply and then made that weird throat noise again. She slumped back in her seat. Today was going to be brutal. Brutally Bo-Ring. Mia texted Tash about the guys at the lights and her dad flipping out. Her phone trilled immediately. A text responded in their code, translated as: “So fucked, poor you, kisses, meet us when you’re done?”
All of their parents had access to their messages (echoed on their parental mobile surveillance units – PMS U) so the girls developed their own code. More complicated than primary school pig-Latin but easier than a foreign language. Mia texted back "shiz", which stood for "will do" or "for sure". In other contexts, it stood for stuff as in "shiz be real def" – stuff is fucked. Mia often laughed to herself thinking of the apoplectic fits of their parents, trying to work out what they were saying. Maybe, that's why Kath kept insisting on the importance of spelling and grammar at the parent–teacher functions and at parent meet-ups.

They reached the 21st century version of a tribal meeting ground. The large supacentre mall monolith had its own postcode. Mia hoped she would not meet anyone she knew in the complex. Pretty safe bet her dad would suggest The Pancake Place. No one she knew would ever go there. He was a big man, her dad, but he didn't look heart attack ready, like Zadie's kind but overprotective father. Zad's dad snorted when he talked. Mia's hardly spoke.

At The Pancake Place a young acne-ridden boy squealed, “Let me show you to a table”. Mia laughed. He dropped the menu into her lap when she stared at him with her biggest, roundest eyes and asked what today's specials were. The boy hurried through the list and burst away from their table as if it was on fire. Mia's dad shifted in his seat.

“That wasn't very nice,” he said.

Mia rolled her eyes. She hadn't done anything. She couldn't help it if the boy was a nervous nifty. Kath probably would have just raised an eyebrow. But Russ had made a comment. This was new. Unusual. Disturbing. Mia turned to her dad and asked him in her sweetest voice about his partner, Sonya. Her dad made a quiet one-word reply and continued surveying the menu. Mia was so over it.
Perhaps she could sneak into the bathroom and call Tash. She got up to go and her dad rasped, "Where are you going?"


Russ looked uncomfortably around at the other tables. He noticed Mia’s walk through the room turned heads. Some innocently tracking anything moving in their peripheral vision, others with a different look in their eyes. He wrung his hands and went to stand near the bathrooms. Movies, then home. Fucking Disney one, too. He would be having a helluva word with Kath about this. Was she trying to get back at him by clothing his daughter as a young tart? Her bottom flopping out of her shorts in a twisted midway dance between kid and woman. Was that going to be the MO for his wife's 'woman scorned' act? If he remembered correctly, they had both been having an affair at the time they split. It was just his girls only knew one side of the story. The intermittent affair his wife had been having was, no doubt, continuing. A bottle of vodka was easier to justify on a Visa statement than a weekend stay at a motel.

Mia had been unnerved by her Dad the whole day. Maybe he was sick with a life-threatening disease and didn’t know how to tell her. Perhaps he and Sonya were splitarckies. As much as Kath raged about Sonya, she wasn’t that bad, just a bit arrogant, sort of inflated and jargon-oriented, a public servant type.

Mia and her dad had walked out of the restaurant without even eating and then watched a freaking kids’ movie. Her dad bought her a heap of popcorn and chocolate and stuff, though. He usually scrooged on all that after pancakes. When he dropped her off, he told her this super-odd story about how you can’t always see what people are thinking and tried to use dumb euphemisms for puberty. This left Mia gripping the car door handle for her very life. He even got out to see her to the door and chat with her mum. He gave her a little pat on the
back as she went inside. Mia wondered how many weeks he might have left to live. It all seemed pretty serious. She tried to listen through the closed front door. She could only make out a couple of low muffled words as Kath walked Russ back to his car.

Vick came bouncing up and Mia couldn’t stop her sister opening the door and rushing outside. Vick held up her medal and certificate and ‘Best and Fairest’ trophy and ran towards their dad. Mia watched as he scooped her sister up and spun her around. Clinging on for a hug, as he almost wept his congratulations. How fucking lame. Mia was going to Tash’s tonight no matter what her mum said. She went in to pack a bag and thought about nicking a bottle of wine from the shelves in the kitchen.

As she was in her room texting the others, Kath walked in. She sighed and sat down on Mia’s bed. Vick tried to come in too but their mum fobbed her off with some meaningless request. The human medal magnet left the room.

“Mia, sweet, we’ve got to talk …” Kath started up.

Mia just shrugged. “I’m going to Tash’s tonight, okay? Can you drive me or should I get a lift from Zad’s mum?”

“Zad’s mum, if you can darling. You’re going to have to change though.” Kath pointed at Mia’s outfit.

Mia was confused. Of course she was going to change anyway, but her mum had bought her this outfit last year and thought it was super cute back then.

“Your dad’s upset that you’re flashing it all around. Doesn’t want to take you out looking all tarted up. His words, not mine. I think you look cute. Perhaps it is a
bit short though? Bit tight in the wrong spots? Apparently men were looking at you and it made your dad feel uncomfortable. Perhaps we can go shopping and get some new clothes ... that fit better? Not so tight. That you don't spill out of?"

All Mia heard was TARTED UP. Her mum with her wine-smudged mouth. Her dad with his high moral standards! And she was the one who needed to change? How was this even her fault? If her dad felt uncomfortable, that was his problem. Why hadn't he just said so to her? Instead Kath was in there, all martyred up for her big moment as mother to her tween. Oh the difficulty she represented! And now she was a tart. A slut. An object to be covered up. This was bullshit. Mia looked down the length of her legs and suddenly felt ashamed of herself. For the first time in her life, she felt utterly exposed. She swallowed the tears that were creeping up her throat and the back of her eyes. She told her mum she needed to get ready now and asked if she could be alone. Kath nodded emphatically. She thanked Mia for listening and sharing in their girl-time. Mia hated them both so much. Her text to Tash read GMTFOH.

That night all four of them were staying at Tash’s. She had the most absent parents, even when they were home. They didn’t pry, always sprung for pizza and left the girls to their own devices. Tash’s room was an adult colour, deep purple with grey ceiling and painting rails. Tash had covered her cupboard doors with quotes and magazine articles and photos. There was a big window that they climbed out to sit on the terrace roof and look out over the suburb. It was one of Mia’s favourite places in the world. Zadie, Tash and Lora had downloaded a whole bunch of new music that afternoon. They played it loud on repeat and sang out their favourite lines into the night sky.

Talk turned back to Lora’s news. Mia was pretty sure Tash had gotten her period already but wasn’t saying. Mia had some spotting last month and told the others she’d ‘got it’. Tash had just smiled and said nothing. Zadie was absolutely afraid,
with no visits yet. Lora announced her triumphant news to Mia when she arrived that night. Tash whispered to Mia that earlier they’d had to go on a tampon mission and Lora didn’t even know how to insert one! Mia giggled. She didn’t want to let on her own ignorance. No matter how many talks Kath wanted to have, Mia blocked out as many as possible. There’d been a hopeless attempt by her year six P.E. teacher. More diagrams and hand gestures than anything informative. Tash had older sisters and always seemed one step ahead. She was kind of uncool in primary school but was getting to be Mia’s match, if not even more of a leader, in their gang.

They had come in from the night air, devoured pizza and watched a movie. Zadie was getting sleepy and whiny. Lora suggested ghost stories. Tash trumped her, “What about we go on the Splicerma website?” she asked the others. Mia wasn’t sure who or what that was. Lora, queen of the thrills, was in: “Oooo yeah!”

Mia knew Lora would be all up for a horror film and then spend the next month having nightmares and unable to sleep. “You sure, Loz?” Mia asked, to cover her own apprehension.

Zadie, who herself had an older brother, perked up groggily from her mattress on the floor. “I hear everyone’s sending like real blood and flowers and photos of fucked shit in to the instafan gallery.”

Tash was fortified by that. ‘Everyone’ was a compelling argument. She flicked on her computer and typed in Splicerman. Tash clicked the top hit. It was a ‘story site’. The screen went bright red and then a flash of silver cut through with a loud tearing sound. Lora jumped back. Mia felt her heart quicken. Tash clicked through to the main menu. She began to read aloud ‘The Story of Splicerman’: 
Her body bloomed. His precious orphan girl. Once left to the wilds and forests by eyes that refused to see her need. Yet she found an unlikely guardian. As she grew up, Splicerman warned her against impurity. Even as he celebrated her transition, he deplored it. She was changing, before his very eyes, it angered him. Why could she not half bloom? Like a stunted changeling. But his Rose grew and ventured out into the world. Splicerman took it upon himself to come between any who sought to spoil her. He was her protector.

His constant diet on the impure blood of transgressors often made him ill. Rose would prick her thumb or neck and let Splicerman recover on the good pure wine of her innocent blood. Thus the seasons changed. But no matter how much Splicer tried to protect his ward, a much worse disease began to creep over the pair. Splicerman was no longer able to be revived on Rose’s offerings. Her blood became brittle with that other curse, age. Splicerman, mythical beast that he was, had no counter to this final and exacting circumstance. As Rose stooped and folded and faded, so too did the Splicerman’s fortunes. The once strong and mighty creature was bowed and broken with grief. His Rose’s un tarnished petals settled into the earth and Splicerman vowed to sleep for eternity in tribute to her memory.

Many hundreds of years later, a girl happened down a path into the wood where Splicerman slumbered in numbness. Poppy was her name. She was bright and fragile and unaware. She echoed back the birdsong. She collected fallen leaves and acorns into her basket to make her arts and crafts. Her tiny feet whistled up a happy tune. Splicerman rolled in his tree’s hollow. He heard a new siren’s song. His lust overwhelmed him. As Poppy skipped closer to his tree home, red blurred his very vision. Splicerman’s throat ached. His hands trembled. His silver teeth chattered. He was awake. Risen. A craving so powerful and ancient swelled in his taut veins and throbbing teeth. Poppy paused at the tree hollow. Awed by nature’s design, she paused a second too long. Splicerman could not control the force in him that had
lain dormant. He crawled from his slumber’s grave and feasted on the young visitor. The acorns and leaves from her basket scattered to the floor.

At the end of his red rage, he surveyed what had dragged him from his shelter and sadness. Splicerman had ripped the little Poppy in two. He was pulsing, full but enraged by his very act. Since that day Splicerman has devoted himself to all young and innocent maidens.

He is your warrior. He will accept prayers, blood tributes and requests from any maiden pure of heart and mind that requires his protection. There is a place where tall oak trees grow amidst fields of poppies and roses. It is here that you can find him, should you need his help.

Splicerman’s gallery tribute is available to all his fans who write in their stories or send their pictures.

Your offers are accepted here, my flower girls.

They clicked the link to an instafan site and up flashed pictures. Thousands of pictures of young girls and teenagers and even some older chicks. They were all posing with flowers or ‘offerings’ and making requests. The comment thread was obscene. Mia got pretty tired of what she imagined were bored teenage boys making up crap. Lora was already a little wired. Tash looked excited. Zadie had fallen asleep. Lora was chattering to Tash about all the different scenes they swiped through. Mia needed to reclaim her edge, “We need to make a tribute. Ourselves. Tonight. Before we get … too impure!”

Tash jumped on this. Her eyes went all sparkly as she grabbed Mia’s hand tightly. Lora nodded slowly, wondering what was next. Mia looked from one expectant face to the other. She had just the thing to get them started. She pulled a bottle of red wine from her bag. Lora gave a nervous squeal. Tash
looked unimpressed. “Really?” was all she offered. Mia shook her head slowly. Lora was looking between the two of them waiting. Mia knew this was it, one of those moments.

“Ritual. Sacrifice. Tribute. Blood.” The words fell out of some part of Mia’s brain that she didn’t recognise. Her brain had pre-connected them. Maybe she was born with that specific verbal assembly. All that was required was the right moment for the words to be given breath. Maybe all speech was like that. Pre-recorded jams lodged in your brain, only shaken free or re-jumbled or stored up by your everyday circumstance. The spontaneous encounters with other people’s assembly lines. You got all you’d ever get on day dot. Then you have to fit the world to your words. Or the words tumble out, seemingly random and ruinous. Spill out like: Ritual. Sacrifice. Tribute. Blood. Mia’s words bathed the room with possibilities and powers that had never existed before they were spoken out loud.

Lora looked frightened. Tash smiled, "Perfect. What did you have in mind?”

Mia thought her friend was testing her, to see how far she would go, if she could keep it up; be the leader or not. Mia asked her to pass their glasses over. Previously they had been filled with Pepsi Max and water. She opened the wine bottle. She poured them each a glass.

“First we will say a prayer to Splicerman. Drink from our wine. Then make the tribute. Something that we can record and post to the instafan site.” Mia was surprised by how confident she sounded. She didn’t even know who Splicerman was half an hour ago. “Each of us will say a line. We go around the circle.”

“Should we wake Zadie up?” Lora asked.
Tash shook her head, and looked eager to get on with it. Mia handed them each a glass. They were kneeling and facing each other in a tight circle. Mia held her glass up over her head and bowed slightly.

“Splicerman, we are your flower girls. We are pure of thought and pure of deed. It is only for you that we will ever bleed.” Mia started them off and was secretly quite chuffed with her effort. She thought she’d sounded appropriately freaky and serious. Lora looked grossed out, but Tash nudged her to go next. Lora mumbled his name three times, once for each of them. Lora then promised, in return for his protection, her undying affection. This almost trumped Mia but Loz hadn’t been as into it as when Mia had spoken. Next came Tash. She held up her glass and stood up. She dropped it over her head, letting it fall to the floor. The red wine splashed over her hair and face. It covered the front of her white singlet and dripped on to the carpet. She licked her lips and said, “I’m yours, Splicerman.”

Mia stood and sipped her glass. “Splicerman, we have offered you our love. Now we offer you our … blood.”

Lora and Tash both froze when Mia said this. Lora was shaking her head and asking what Mia meant. Tash was more intrigued with the logistics. She thought a pinprick blood brother type thing was lame. Tash looked over at the still soundly sleeping Zadie, who had not woken to their fevered whispers and incantations. Tash smiled and nodded at Mia. “You’re right, we need to make an offering. But it should be pure. Zadie hasn’t even kissed a boy or got her period yet. She’s the purest of all!”

Mia winced. The idea of pure and impure was dumb. If Kath was to be believed, the rusty spots of Mia’s first period was cause for embarrassing tears and celebration. Hardly something to be ashamed about. She thought Tash might be
thinking of splashing Zad with some wine. They could take a hilarious pic to upload of Zad’s surprised face, “I’ll get my phone ready!” she said. Tash rushed from the room. Mia thought she must be checking her parents were in their bedroom downstairs, so they wouldn’t hear anything. Lora was sipping her wine and went to pour them all a second glass.

Tash stole back into the room behind them. She turned the main light off. For a minute all was black, quiet. Tash crept to the corner of the room. She lit the far corner lamp. It emitted a limp, pale glow. Mia was thinking that she’d have to activate the flash on her camera phone because this light was really shit. Tash checked on Zadie. Then she got them to stand back in the circle. They whispered Splicerman’s name four times. An extra time, on behalf of their ‘sacrifice’. Tash began to remove her wine-stained top. She told the others to take off theirs. Two years ago, Mia wouldn’t have cared, but this was making her feel weird. She got down to her crop top. Lora, who was flat chested anyway, didn’t seem to mind. They gulped the wine. Then they poured the rest over their heads and torsos.

“You’ll have to take the photo if you’re too chicken to do it properly.” Tash whispered at Mia. Lora smirked. Mia didn’t care as much anymore. The wine had made her light headed. She thought the whole Splicerman thing was a bit … whatever.

“Don’t get your blah face on! Get ready. Over there. On my count of three, okay?” Tash whispered to Mia.

Lora and Tash went over to stand behind Zadie stretched out on the mattress on the floor. The two girls standing over her wore pyjama shorts. The red sticky wine smudges covered their upper bodies. Mia was surprised at how big Tash’s boobs had become. Her nipples looked like flat discs in the bad light. Mia turned
the flash on and selected the shutter-speed. One touch would get a frame-by-frame series of Zad waking up. She tried to frame the shot properly. She told the others they’d have to kneel behind Zad’s head to fit in the frame. Lora and Tash complied.

The lamp cast deep shadows across the room. It messed up Mia’s focus. Tash looked like she was holding her hands behind her back. Her breasts thrust forward. Lora seemed to be looking directly at Mia and the camera. Her hands were on the pillow near Zadie’s sleeping head. A grimace on Lora’s face befitted the serious task of paying tribute to Splicer. Mia directed them in a bit closer to each other. She was thinking about just turning the light on to make it easier. She looked towards the switch and noticed the empty bottle and the glasses in the circle space. As if sensing Mia wasn’t properly focused, Tash whispered urgently, “Ready, Mie?”

Mia snapped back to her task. Tash hadn’t used her nickname in ages. She smiled at her friend and nodded. Her finger hovered over the button. Tash began to count “One.” *She must have the wine behind her back.* “Two.” Mia thought she saw Tash raise her hands above her head. Mia’s mind suddenly fixated on the glasses and bottle behind her. “Three.” Mia’s finger reacted automatically. The bright flash kicked around the room, multiplying and illuminating the sequence. Arm, flashes, faces and flesh. Ritual. Sacrifice. Tribute. Blood. Mia didn’t hear the sounds at the time; she hasn’t heard anything else, ever since.
Loss

The waiting room was much more decrepit than Lisa Rankin thought it should be for all the money she was paying. She sat alone, shrinking into a worn leather couch. The room teemed with people. Kids with their strained parents giving each other defensive or defeated half-smiles.

Piercing the daggy room was a cramped reception desk. Behind it sat two women of indeterminate age, both with dark hair, bright smiles, broad accents. They had offered her a tea or coffee, twice. New Age quotes were embroidered across the cushions and an array of self-help books lined the shelves. It made Lisa incredibly uncomfortable. She was all for a positive affirmation or two if it boosted sales, but did people actually buy this shit?

She would never have made the first appointment if one of Kathy’s daughters hadn’t also been coming here. Kathy had a daughter the same age as Lisa’s and an older girl, in therapy, for school bullying and adjustment issues.

Kathy had confided that her eldest, Mia, 13, was coming home from school distraught. Some of her previous circle of friends had started ‘cutting’, others had already graduated to giving blowjob rounds at parties. Mia, not being in for “that sort of behaviour”, was beginning to be ostracised as a nerd or freak.

Lisa didn’t want to burst Kathy’s bubble. She’d heard a while back from other parents that, far from being on the outer, Mia was in fact a ring leader. Her demure appearance at home must be just a cover, so said the nasty gossips. Kathy had tried to approach some of the other mothers about the behaviour that Mia was reporting went on at slumber parties. They completely ignored her. It struck Lisa that perhaps Mia wasn’t the only one experiencing bullying and adjustment issues.
Lisa had listened to her friend. After all, they were co-conspirators. Both had kids who had started out as being bright popular young girls. Now Mia was a parental pariah and Lisa’s daughter Polly, 10, was having her own issues. Polly hadn’t been invited over to play or to any parties by any other kids all year. If there was one thing Princess Polly had liked, it was play-dates and parties. Lisa wasn’t sure what Polly liked anymore. Her precious little girl, these days, was more often than not completely lost in her own world.

“I mean … I don’t mean to pry Lise, but if things are … you know, these guys can really help out! Half the school is sending their kids. Cutters, bullying, dope!, divorce adjustment, or just kids that don’t fit. And us parents, too. It’s a family place. Not saying anything, but you know …” Kathy said, handing Lisa a business card. It had a dinky rainbow lollipop logo that did not inspire much confidence.

“Dave would never go for it. Can’t interest him in talking to me about Poll, let alone with a stranger!” Lisa smiled wanly at Kathy. Kathy looked as if she was about to say something but stopped herself. Lisa wondered what new gossip Kathy had heard and was too polite to repeat; maybe Kathy was just helping out. Kathy liked to help. Kathy was a helper. She was the only school mum who had bothered to really talk with Lisa all through this difficult year.

Lisa had tucked the card in her wallet and Kathy asked her if she had heard the news about the Dunmores’ divorce. Sally Dunmore was rumoured to be having it off with the school’s P.E. teacher, a lovely-looking woman. “I don’t blame her; she’s hot, I’d go there, in a heartbeat!” Kathy smiled. The women became engrossed in teasing out this latest gossip and Lisa had forgotten about her friend’s suggestion and the card.
Some time later, Lisa came home from an ordeal of a day. She interpreted the scene that greeted her at home as her husband remonstrating with Polly.

_Really. Enough. This is absolutely outrageous, what will mum say?_ Lisa thought she heard Dave saying to the small girl. Polly kept moving about, slipping from grasp.

“What am I going to say about what? What’s up?” Lisa kept her voice neutral. She had tried talking to Dave about some of Polly’s antics but he had dismissed it as her _vivid imagination, our daughter after all. Time, Lise, time._

Dave looked at Lisa and stood up. He indicated to follow him into Polly’s room and Lisa heard Polly shadow their steps. Their daughter’s room looked serene enough. The white bedspread was roughly pulled up from when they were running late that morning. Her school bag had been dumped unceremoniously in one corner with dirty sports gear spilling out. Lisa noticed a branch sticking out, leaves piling up on the bed and even a cobweb maybe, but so what? Polly’s school shoes looked as if they had been kicked off. They lay at odd angles on the subtle lavender-coloured carpet. An art installation of youth, as if someone had placed them there, like that, on purpose. The curtains were drawn and the lamp was already on when Lisa walked in.

Lisa was confused. Nothing seemed particularly at odds. On top of a low and wide white chest of drawers sat Polly’s fish tank. The water at the top was quietly moving in lazy circles. Lisa didn’t register much at first. The fish tank wasn’t broken or leaking or anything. Her eyes focused on the contents. The fish were gone. All of them except one. Swimming around the tank, instead, were miniature-sized kittens. Some pawed at the glass. Others displayed an acro-aquatic sensibility, tumbling and diving. One was perched on a rock in the back
corner as if sunning itself. Lisa lost her words. She looked incredulously at Polly. Her own voice, when it did come, sounded distant, hieroglyphic, “Tell me, Poll. What’s going on?”

No.

“No. You won’t believe me. You never do. You won’t listen!”

Lisa bent down and took Polly’s hands in her own, “I can try, Poll. I need to know what happened. I need to try and understand. Okay?”

Polly answered slowly.

The fish are dead, except Starr, that one there. The others got eaten. By the cats. Charlie did it.

Lisa turned to look back at the tank. Starr was darting away as quickly as possible from the swimming felines. Starr swam down towards the rock. The sun-baking cat swiped. It collected Polly’s last living goldfish into one of its tiny paws and gobbled it up. The flakes from the tail of the fish formerly known as Starr were swept on the languid current up to the surface of the tank. Lisa gasped and grabbed Polly’s hand tightly.
Rest In Peace, my Starr. Polly said. She wriggled out of her mum’s hand and tried to disappear from the room.

Lisa had been trying to tell Dave for some time about Polly, about how she was different now. He didn’t want to know, he was absent, incapable of listening or intervening. His little girl would always be his little girl, forever. This is just where they had arrived. Lisa poked her head surreptitiously around the door to check Polly was there. She stared at the back of her daughter’s head. Polly used to have beautiful curly chestnut hair. All wild and free.

Lisa didn’t want to keep the weird tank creatures. She didn’t know what to do with them so she just moved the fishless tank into the spare bedroom and locked the door.

Polly sat quietly at the table and munched on her food. She had always started with her least favourite things and used to work up to the most delicious thing on the plate. Lisa’s plate went untouched. She kept sipping the foetid dregs from an off-tasting bottle of red. The glass seemed to fill itself.

Lisa tried another tactic. She had heard Charlie’s name before and was excited, oddly enough, that at least Polly was making new friends. She asked Polly to tell her about Charlie. Was he in another year at school? Or one of the new neighbours that had recently moved in next door? Polly chewed on with no replies. Her cheeks billowing and shrinking with the mouthfuls. Working her way up to the cheese-stuffed potato.

“Ok, well how did the cats shrink and fit in the tank, Poll?”

You really want to know what happened Mum? Polly asked.
Lisa nodded at her sweet, strange daughter.

*I put them in big. One at a time. And when they got in, they just shrunk. I think Charlie was right.*

Lisa smiled and tried to nod encouragingly. Polly was unconvinced. *I knew you wouldn’t believe me. You never do. I can fly, but you won’t let me.* Polly suddenly stood up on her chair and floated above her mum.

Lisa shut her eyes. When she opened them Polly was sitting back down, eating. Lisa’s mind was racing. This was all a bad dream. She would wake up soon. She quietly put a hand in her lap and pinched herself hard on her thigh. She winced at the pain and looked at her daughter, who was not floating, rather sitting at the dinner table. Polly rolled her eyes at her mum’s anxious look. *When was that ever a thing?* Lisa wondered.

What if this Charlie was some pervert living in the park that lured young children with magic toy kittens and then bam, one day Polly’s face would be on a milk carton. Lisa’s heart contracted. Disaster of that magnitude was inconceivable. She shook her head. She wanted to reach out and hold her daughter. *I will not fail you.* More wine. Blot the crazy. She would, however, be speaking with the school tomorrow about Polly’s out-of-bounds lunchtime excursions. What on earth were they paying this second mortgage of school fees for if the teachers couldn’t even keep students on the grounds during school hours! That was for tomorrow. Blame was always for tomorrow and the day after that.

But right now. Logical explanations. Must be. They weren’t going to get anything further from Polly that night. Lisa told Dave about this Charlie character and asked Dave to tuck Polly in. Dave threw up his hands. *Really Lise? How long is*
this going to go on for? That school, near the park with the creek, that was your idea, you remember, don’t you, Lise? I was happy with the local one. Not near a park or creek or strangers. Blame was on today’s agenda too, apparently, and tomorrow’s. Good. At least anger was some kind of reaction. A feeling. Better to have feelings than keep them bottled up. That’s when feelings turn to poison and can see a man choose dead.

Lisa opened the door of the spare room and stared at the little aqua freaks. What are you? You perversions of nature. She couldn’t explain the sight. The natural order of things was bitterly warped at the Rankin home. She walked up to the tank slowly. One of the little creatures swam to the surface and she instinctively grabbed at it. It leapt playfully into her hand, mewling and shaking out its damp fur. She tried to turn it upside down and around to see where the batteries fitted. There were no batteries or hidden pockets. It felt warm and whole in her hand and placidly licked her wrist. Then as she released her grip, it back flipped into the water. She hurried out and closed the door. She didn’t want Polly around those things until they had some more answers. It was her job, after all, to protect Polly, to keep her family safe. To be there for them. Her most important job.

Exhausted, she got ready for bed.

Dave and Lisa sat on the end of their bed. The square rug was folded in between them. It was called a comforter. It was failing to live up to its name. Lisa was failing to live up to her life. She couldn’t understand. Why would she ever have bought a rug that she didn’t use, to fold and refold every morning, with no purpose and a stupid name? She was nitpicking because the big stuff was too hard.
“What if there is no explanation, Dave? What if ... this never ends ... What if ...” Lisa petered out.

Dave was stretching. Next, sit-ups. Nervous Activity. He had always hated to stop. This active-man imposter-husband calmed her between his painful crunches, with the thought that the cats were probably animated placeholders, a visual version, until reality could step in and provide some answers.

Lisa felt the small of her wrist where the kitten had licked her. It felt sticky, like life had touched her and only left a tacky imprint. They both got into bed. Lisa told Dave about Kathy's kid and the card and the place. They’d had this conversation before. He nodded, more times than he needed to, like a robot, the shadows warping his face, yeah okay. You should probably have a chat with someone.

Lisa was woken by Polly early in the morning. THE CATS! Polly was screaming at them. Lisa went running towards the spare room.

She swung the door open and five normal-sized kittens sprang out. The tank was smashed and the shards of glass were scattered all around the room. Polly went running after the cats, trying to chase them around the house as if this was just your usual game of hide-and-seek. Lisa surveyed the empty room and started to cry, her tears mixing with the shimmering carpet.

MUUUM! They're getting out, Polly was remonstrating. Even though Polly was annoyed, Lisa found her daughter saying 'Mum' surprisingly comforting. She didn’t want Polly to stop calling for her. Lisa smiled at her husband. Catastrophe averted this time. Polly sulked all the way to school and refused to speak to either of them.
Lisa dropped Dave off at the bus stop. He had said nothing, as usual these days, for the whole trip and looked tired and glum while he listened to his wife telling Polly to be good at school. After he got out, Lisa continued making inane speeches about freedom of wild things and repeated things she’d heard other people say in a crisis – it was probably for the best, the cats were too good for this world, too wild and free to be trapped inside, they had moved on now, little angels, and so on. Lisa didn’t believe any of it. Polly frowned in the back and refused to answer or even look at her mother. Lisa pulled up at the school determined to speak once again with Polly’s teacher.

At the gate, Kathy rushed over to head her off. “Are you okay? Lise?” her friend asked. Lisa tried to garble out the events from the night before and couldn’t make sense of any of it. Kathy looked sad and was shaking her head. “Call them. Make an appointment. Now.” Lisa told her she wanted to speak to the teachers about this Charlie in the park and the cat-toys or whatever they were and lunch times and the creek, that she’d already made appointments, Dave useless as vapour, she was managing it herself, godamnit!

“You’re not making sense, Lise. Look I’ll call them, okay? Sounds horrific, whole thing, just awful. I’ll call right now.” Kathy went into action mode. Lisa walked back to her car and slumped down as her friend called the place. The other mothers at the school gate were pointing at her and whispering. Lisa looked down and saw her mismatched outfit. She ran a hand through her own tangled mess of hair. *Breathe*, she instructed herself. *Just breathe.*

....

Lisa waited patiently for her emergency appointment. Kids were running in and out and some of the therapists were helping them collect chook eggs or nurse rabbits that were kept in a large hutch outside the psychology suites. It was that
kind of place. Animal therapy. How could she tell them about Polly, the one- 
time aider and abetter of goldfish killers? Lisa felt lonely and raw. Her therapist 
came out of one of the large front rooms. All smiles and superficial waiting room 
chitter-chatter. She offered Lisa another tea or coffee. Lisa replied between 
clenched teeth, “No thank you”. The slim blonde kaftan-wearing woman paused 
a beat, “No problems. You go in. I’ll follow you in there. Okay?”

Lisa surveyed the set up. There were always excess chairs in a therapist’s room. 
Like it was a test to see where you sat. How close you wanted to get. What it 
said about your personality if you chose the window-facing red leather chair or 
the ugly green couch that looked back on the room. There was a white board on 
one wall and someone had drawn flowers and a list of things on it that whoever 
had been there before “likes to do”. Before Lisa could stop herself, she walked 
over and picked up a fat green marker. She leaned in close to the board and 
began to etch out, letter by letter, P-0-L-L-Y, then she drew a line to where 
someone had written “likes to play”. She snapped the marker lid back on and felt 
teary and weak. She hovered near the red chair and told herself just to sit down 
and get on with it.

Ellie walked back into the room with a steaming mug of green tea. Lisa Rankin 
was perched on the edge of the red chair, rubbing at a spot on her thigh. Her 
hair was matted and unbrushed and she wore a suit jacket over what looked like 
a nightie tucked into her jeans and slip-on shoes. It was as if Lisa had tried to 
make an effort and had applied too much mascara and lipstick. Without a mirror. 
Ellie popped the tea down on a coffee table near one of the chairs. ”One more 
minute, Lisa.” Lisa registered this with a brief nod.

Lisa was convinced they would think she was la-la. Maybe the red chair was the 
indicator. Perhaps the therapist had noted the letters on the whiteboard. Why on 
earth was she taking so long to get started? Was she calling someone? Dave? To
let him know the state she was in. Perhaps, Lisa thought, she had made a big mistake and should just pack up and go. Sort this out with the school and with Dave and Polly and take some time off work and spend time, real family time, together again. She began to collect her things and was moving toward the door as her therapist walked back in.

“So sorry about that, just checking on a client, you know. Lisa, sit down, let’s talk”. Ellie sat down in an impressive wing-backed chair that faced both the couch and red leather chair.

Lisa began to tell Ellie all about the fish and the cats and the tank and the noises and the wild answers and sullen silences. The pain of not knowing what had really happened. Why Dave was acting as he was. Lisa saw her therapist look up and notice the writing on the whiteboard.

“Do you want to talk about that? Lisa? That you wrote ... “POLLY” and joined it with “likes to play”? Do you feel like Polly is playing with you?” Ellie enquired.

Lisa gestured wildly at the whiteboard. “Yes. Yes I wrote that. Polly’s favourite thing, Polly playing. Loves animals. She’s not really a goldfish killer.”

“No she wasn’t. Polly did love animals. Polly liked to play,” Ellie measured her voice. Not too hard. Not too soft. The sun had moved on and the room now had a cold blank air, everything was bleeding edges and shadows.

Lisa smiled. “I never bought her a cat. Dave’s allergic. That’s all she has ever wanted. A cat.” Her voice cracked and she howled a guttural sound. Ellie held her hand, “Yes Lisa, Polly wanted a cat. Dave was allergic.” Lisa cried. Reality twitched. Lisa got up to go. She was quiet now. Spent. She collected her things. She felt like you might at a forced retirement party. Present in name only. The
world going on about you as if you were an ornament, dispensable and only vaguely connected. Her 'episodes' felt more alive than this. A haunted life is preferable to an empty one.

"I'll see you on Thursday, Lisa?" Ellie smiled at the collapsed woman.

As Lisa was leaving she heard Ellie take in her next client. A young boy, about the age Polly would have been. Lisa had seen him at the clinic before, with a rabbit in tow. "Who have you got there, Charlie?" Ellie asked him, as she did most weeks. "He's my friend. I like Starr the bestest of all your rabbits," the young boy answered, the same as he did most weeks.

Lisa walked out the door and returned to her car. When she looked in the rear-view mirror, Polly was suddenly there, making faces up at her. Lisa laughed and made a face back at Polly, and then turned to ask Dave what he felt like for dinner.
2. The Abject:
Experiments in repulsion and annihilation

[T]he jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses ... a brutish suffering that "I" puts up with, sublime and devastated ... a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness ... on the edge of existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.
(1982, Julia Kristeva)

1. Now:
Ratatatat

2. Yesterday:
Degustation

3. Soon ...
Justify

4. Next:
Octagon
Now
He plugs in his earphones and twists the volume dial to loud. He shrugs in his jacket as he sees other people on the train steal squeaking looks at him and he says *fukoff fukoff fukoff* under his breath, and the pretty girl sitting next to him, with the dyed blonde hair and glittering blue eyes leans away into the curve of plastic at her elbow. Marty smiles at her and pats out the rhythm of the train on his knees, then slaps it and yells at her over his music, "Ratatatatatatata, eh? Ratatatatat? Rats in a cage, Rats on a stage, Ratatatatatatat." He smiles at the back of her head as she bends closer to her smartphone’s screen and buries herself in connecting elsewhere, anywhere, but here, this, right now.

Marty sees a middle-aged man look at him quickly and shift his briefcase out of the aisle. Marty likes the early morning trains best. They are the sweetest time to watch the whole thronging pile of them. Rats in a cage, rats on a moving stage. He keeps the beat on his knees, feeling the seat underneath him shift over the large slider connections on the tracks. He is two screeching storeys above this contact between pressured metals. He doesn’t know why he is back in this city. It has never done anything for him. But he’s come back, he’s been here all along. Marty never even left.

The notes that are bleeding through his brain are beginning to sync with the small sway of motion riding his body. The singer croons an old blues song and he listens to the hurricane in his headphones and twists around to watch all of the others.

The woman behind him smiles weakly and then looks away as Marty opens his mouth. He is about to tell her ... what was he about to tell her? What could he tell her? She wouldn’t get it, dumbitch. She wouldn’t get it. She looked away, like they all do, they swill their coffee bean breakfasts and they smile in
shadows or frown in conspiracy or nod their heads in fake sympathy and say things to Marty like: *Why Don’t You Learn A Trade?*

And he says to them, later in offices and cubicles and grey rooms with fake flowers, he says to them in their too-loose suit pants and blouses stained under the armpits, he says: I learned a trade, boss lady, I learned how to watch cities crumble and I learned how to ignore the bombs and I learned a trade, I can carry and clean and load and reload a rifle, I can aim it and point it and I can shoot it, and you all looked away when I did it, like a dirty shame that was someone else’s fault, not your problem, and I believed I was doing it all for you lady, I believed it when they said it was the greatest act of diplomacy and that we were freeing people from oppression. I believed in it then. I even believed in it when I was on the planes and the wire springs pulled me to life like a killer robot puppet and we landed hard *crunch* knees pulling up into your belly and you roll over and hope the guys on the wire behind you landed ok and you pull your knees away from your body and you see kites of flare snapping across the sky and you know that you will have to get up and keep moving because they are nowhere and everywhere and they all have eyes and your vision is blurry lagging and the sound in your ears is the ocean thump of blood and fear, but I did it for you lady, because that was what I was doing, because that is what I was told to do, and I didn’t have to ask the questions, *I’m a grunt*, but lady you should have asked the questions but you didn’t and now it’s the same as it always was, always will be, but you like a game of two-up and celebrating your dead granddaddy who never told you the truth because he knew what I know and what we know and what you don’t want to know: that we had to do things, we just had to do those things and you watch the news and tears spring to your eyes, plucked harp strings, because your kids are in their bunk beds and you think ‘how awful’ and ‘what a sin’ and you sign your name on a petition, any petition, all the petitions, and you look at me, now I’m home here, and now, *now,*
you want me to be more ‘useful and productive’ and you say why don’t you learn a trade?

And then she, they, whoever, start to interrupt and say things like: Let’s just get back on track here Marty. I’m finding it hard to follow you.

And Marty will shut his eyes and ball his fists and try not to hit something and his knee will tremble because you need steady legs and his legs keep giving out on him and he needs a job to prove that he can be useful.

He needs to have a purpose or else what’s the point? You need to have something to do even if your leg trembles and your back’s stuffed and you don’t have a girlfriend anymore ’cause you needed to teach her a lesson and you forgot that lessons have consequences for the student and the teacher, and he had always hated school, he left early because it was useless — sine cos, whatever — and everyone always talked about their uni degrees and certificates and even his old army buddies with their cert 4 this and licence that and going back to study psychology, that’s what he should do ...

But the lady at the administration office had laughed at him and asked if he was applying as a joke? And he had reached over and grabbed her name tag and stared at her hard and let the silence be filled with the dancing nuggets of knowledge vibrating to their own tune and Marty said an inch from her stupid young face: That’s my application there, you hear that? You hear it? And Marty began to dance to the music to show her, to show all of them, to make them understand what it sounded like and he started to push the pamphlets off the desk and then ran over as the thudding sounds soared into a crescendo and he began to step from one chair to the next, a ballet, a graceful leap, before his guts got tight and he squatted and rolled his pants down and took a shit on one of the chairs.
The admin officer went to press a button and Marty saw it then, saw it in her eyes, as she had moved slowly to the Big Red Panic Button and he heard it in their shocked eyes, all that judging and naming and blaming, and their music, their spiritless song, was so gritty and thick ... And then it all went Black.

That was the first time.

His mum shakes her head sometimes and gets quite upset. His father fixes up things that he can fix around the house and in the garage. They try kindness. They try distance. They tell him that he needs to grow up and find a nice girl and start looking ahead instead of always looking back

back
back

ratatatat, eh?

The train has stopped and the blonde girl, Marty calls her Eve, is trying to stand up and move past Marty and he grabs her hand and says: "Don’t Go Please Don’t Go." And she starts to try to pry his fingers off her wrist and she is saying things that Marty can’t hear because of all the other noises, the music, the words, the way they try and weasel into your brain, the way the words are written in people’s eyes and they carry like warp rays and fire flares and lasers straight out of people’s eyes and they make noises like rockets launching and the flap of plastic on glass, like in the doorway to a fish’n’chip shop on a stormy day or a wind-rippled sheet covering most of a body, and people don’t know how hard it is to stop the words from hitting and bouncing off your eardrums drums and drum beats
The man with the briefcase doesn’t stop he just grabs his bag and starts to move off towards the stairs going down, to the train’s open, belching door. He ignores the girl who is screaming at Marty. She raises her bag to hit Marty and then she struggles off the train, crying, well behind the man with the briefcase.

The man with his briefcase keeps walking brusquely towards Martin Place. His office is on the floor of a tall building that isn’t a tower. Later today, he will look out, occasionally, from his window onto the busy, industrious city streets below. It is here, the man knows, in the city centres, that countries are truly made and unmade and made anew.

The man reaches his office and sits behind his desk. He doesn’t have to worry about that little knot, that worrying bump in his morning routine, when a man in ripped jeans and a t-shirt and an army-looking jacket and headphones, a nut, held on too tightly to a young girl’s wrist. The girl could have been the man’s daughter’s age. Too much eyeliner. Who knows what was going on? It is just better not to interfere when people are having their little disputes.

He will look at the tax loopholes. The man will work out a way that the company can get the offsets written down. The profit margins back in the red. Not by so much that the shareholders will worry. Enough that they can recommend the productivity cuts at the AGM. He needs to make sure the company remains competitive for the Defence tender.
The man with the briefcase has friends in high places. Real people with real jobs who control media outlets and editorial space and tender panels and court resources. The company has recently been tarnished. However, trial by media works best for those with the deepest pockets. The small red light is blinking on his phone. The man picks it up and his secretary tells him the CFO is waiting on the line. The man picks up the phone. He straightens out his tie. The man gets his day, quite properly, underway.

But the man can’t hear what Marty hears. Marty can hear it even louder when he’s off the platform and in the open square above. He had gotten off the train and tried to run after the girl with the tears running down her face, like shapely riffs at a late-night jazz jam.

Just like the ones in the old Sydney tunnel where the Johnny Blue flows all night into the hours that follow the hours after those ones and as musicians turn up and set up and join in and drop out and drink – they all drop back in to one single unending song that starts at about 10 at night with three of them, the early-nighters, and carries on until five the next morning when about seven of them are tweaking and plucking and cranking and breathing so hard that it feels like they can keep daylight out, but the tunnel is below a part of the city where people could hear them if they are not careful, so they leave at dawn and get up and move out in lots of one or two, spaced apart, and carrying cases made to look fit for another purpose — a book bag or briefcase — to cover up the instruments inside.

Even these guys, they know that you have to hide the beauty, you have to hide the real music — the actual song — because if they get their hands on that then we are all ruined, it is the only one true song, this thread that keeps Marty believing that there is something else.
And Marty heard that sound one night from below him on a random and isolated train platform further out of the city than the busy station he is now at, and when he heard it he thought he was dreaming but he kept going back at night and he found the doorway. They didn’t stop him and he brings the musos bottles of booze and they let the Army Man sit in a corner and they play all night.

Marty always keeps one headphone on, to keep him grounded, he says, but the musicians and their partners don’t talk much to him or to each other, they are all there for the music, beneath that city that is cracking on its surface to be as pristine and clean and sweet and salty as possible. Underground they must go, musical moles searching each other out to play play play.

They know the score so well now. They know that Ben will come with his bass guitar at about midnight and Bridget with her drums at around one a.m. and they will replace Saskia and her trumpet (she has teenagers and doesn’t stay out all night) and then comes Bobby and his double bass and loop pedal, they tease him about it, but all agree there really is something magic about the dance he draws from it, and there’s Charlie with one leg and fast hands and a piano man’s memory. Charlie with a vinyl collection that’d make you cry and stories of playing with the greats, he’ll play off and on all night, and Amy will come with her guitars at three a.m. and Marty watches as all the others join in, so many others off and on,
off and on,
but the song never stops it is embedded and enriched, thinned and stretched, but it carries on, and it is never the same, night to night, and there are always a few new additions to the score, a travelling muso from a Peruvian acid rock band or an American blues giant keen to get out and see where the real music is, in this city so pleased with itself.
And Marty will occasionally worry about whether a new one, or one of the younger ones usually, are sending him loud angry word streams. Sometimes, the music gets too much, it descends sweeping through him and cuts away at too much and on those nights he sits back and he cries or he leaves.

Marty knows the importance of the music to the others. He knows that if he stays he will want to yell at them to change their tune and it is not his tune, it is the one and only true song. On one night when the tune has lashed and sliced him to the quick, he walks outside, shaking. He stands outside the room at the end of the tunnel, unable to go back in, aching inside, and he stands in the shaft of light reaching down towards him and his head is bent forward and the tears rush out of him.

Someone is coming towards him. She holds out her hand to Marty. The moonlight is momentarily brighter, it lights up the void, and a haunting sax solo silvers out into the air. Marty listens with his eyes closed. The notes echo down the long lost tunnel underneath the pretty and sleepy city. Marty looks down and the woman is gone but there is a violin case, now empty, in his hands and he starts to dance, left right left, soft soft soft, and for that minute, the world was quiet, but for the sax and his steps echoing, and the slow pulse of the moon that kept time with Marty, all underground and lit-up and safe, without all the topsoil noisy sentences and footnotes that jostled for importance, and scratched inside his ears, that wouldn’t stop their ringing, but for a few moments like this.

The night has passed, and Marty can only reach for it, like a just-waking child stretching hands out towards a fleeting dream and then Marty, just like on all the other days, is back on a train.

And today he can hear the whole ugly aboveground score, it is beating him hard and fast and the ringing is louder today so he turns up the volume dial and the
music is going faster than he can keep up with, like the girl with the glittering eyes running away from him and faster and away from him and he can’t keep time properly today things keep bumping it and moving it around and he knows that there was once a yesterday and a today and a tomorrow and that was yesterday and now he doesn’t know because he thinks he saw those eyes before, those glittering eyes trying to make him let go, and he can’t remember when it was, only minutes ago or it could have been hours or was it days months ... years?

Alone in the crowd of commuters, Marty hears all the whispers and the loud stares between them screeching. He is an intruder in the midst. He knew what they were saying about him and he cursed them under his breath Fukoff Fukoff Fukoff and he watches the blonde girl be boop be bop beeeeeee boppppa doop run over to a train guard and point him out and he freezes. In this situation, when you are a target, you need to assess the danger.

He flicks his glasses on, protection, and he looks around to see where the exits are and what his pathway will be and he checks in his pockets to make sure they’re all there the parts of it, all broken up, but he can reassemble them, he can put them back together, he can make the machine laugh like a kookaburra, he can send out fireworks with people’s names attached, he can pull gently on the trigger like a lover pulling you back into body, but he needs a place, a place that isn’t so noisy and loud, to be able to put the pieces back together because the ringing is getting so strong, so fierce.

He knows if he stays frozen, he is dead. Marty knows if he rushes, he is dead.

He has to blend in, move like the bodies around him, he has to find the top note and fold down into the same sounds that it makes, he has to overlay himself and hope the clang reverberates long enough that the guard thinks he is seeing double. Marty moves towards the stairs away from where the young girl points
and he follows a man who is his age, but younger, he is clean shaven, a cloud of Aqua-di-Gyno or Armada-Sculpture or Germs4Hommes billows off him in waves and Marty flaps it around him, and smiles at the guy, bro-to-bro, the guy gives a quick nod and picks up his pace, and the lever is pulled.

Everyone responds all at once, as a jostling line of school children racing forward or soldiers squeezed by vicious enemy fire. They start to march quicker to the exit. Left Right Left, Marty is whispering and he is keeping up, folding in, blending in. Left Right Left, the turnstiles are ahead. Marty knows that he has to get his pass out and wave it over the strip in one clean fluid movement, a single stroke of the violin, and he needs to stay next to eau de-every-other-fucker-in-a-suit and he needs to get to his friend Paul’s bar near town, in The Rocks, and he needs to sip on something labelled Knock You The Hell Out and he’ll rock for a bit and everything will get steady.

The hunter was going to get safe back inside and watch and listen, like he did when it was dark and there were bombs and those eyes stared at him, it was all getting confused, they all decided that the deer in the forest was fair game even if it was once Marty’s dear and there are consequences if you behave badly, there are always consequences, and he deserved it and she deserved it and so did they, so did all of them and,

Marty was frozen.

His thoughts raced but his body was stopped. His hand was raised above the pass swipe. There was a line of angry people building up behind him. They tried to swerve around him into other lanes. Someone shoved Marty in the back.

It was like restarting a glitched robot. Marty started to turn around and began taking out the pieces from under his coat, and inside his jeans and with speed
and precision he started to slot and fit and clip and clap it together. The man
who had shoved him in the back said No No No No No No and rushed around him.

When you watch the CCTV footage later, in a closed room with no windows, you
think Marty looks like he is conducting an orchestra. He takes aim at people who
have started running like scared rats to the corners of a people-filled corridor,
trampling each other to get off the stage, as they start racing and screaming.
Marty is smiling in the footage. His back is pressed to the closed barrier gate. He
is facing a crowd of people who are spilling and piling on top of one another.

Until a woman, an older woman, she says to Marty, “Are you lost son? You from
Company 3? That’s what your jacket says. My son was Company 3”. She is crying
softly and she reaches out to Marty. He is not smiling anymore, he is also crying.
The tears are louder and more painful than anything Marty or a distant
courtroom or psych tribunal has ever heard before. The woman brushes the gun
to Marty’s side and says, “I never got to hold him again, my son — I’d like to hold
you”. Marty starts to wail as she hugs him and he beats this woman on the back.
And she wails too.

A security guard picks up the fallen plastic gun from the top of the barricade.
People are standing around and one of the eau-de-whatever-the-fucks looks at
his watch and pushes at the barriers on one side of the pair. Others start to
follow him and the barriers either side start to open and close like a regular
heart valve. The side gate is already pouring people out and people push out
and rush away. The woman just holds Marty and he cries and slaps slower at her
back. In the blurred CCTV footage you then see a group of police and some
paramedics and a blaze of security and officialdom burst onto the scene. They
clear away all the sounds.
The woman cries her tears. They drop wet and warm into Marty's ears. He listens to the beautiful sweet wetness plod and imagines that this woman is his mother. And then everything goes Black.

And that was what happened this time.

Marty wakes up. Everything is dull. He tries to slap at his ear. The ringing doesn’t stop. Her tears haven’t fixed him. It takes him a year for his hand to try and reach the side of his head. And just as long for his thoughts to start to match up. His hand won’t reach. His thoughts are just as stuck. There are loud voices speaking in a foreign language. Clinical assessment. He just nods and in his mind he keeps trying to hold his hands to his ears. The orderly tries to keep Marty’s eyes open and Marty nods and smiles at him slowly. And then Marty sleeps.

Sometimes the guns and flares and metal and heat and camo and sounds and eyes, always the eyes, the movie reel slides, they come back, the eyes, their potent word music.

Because the drugs are so strong. Marty can’t move.

Now, Marty just sleeps. He will sleep until he dies. That is his treatment plan. Because he is dangerous. And because no one can hear the words anymore. Rats in a cage, jostling rats swept off the stage, ratatatat, no one has Marty’s back. His trade is no longer needed. His service has been rendered. He is now useless surplus. A residual of the war fraction.

But sometimes, just occasionally, the hacking bell stops its tin shudder and he dreams, he descends down, down, down and away to a moonlit night and a dark tunnel. The tunnel bends and expands and soothes. Marty listens to the sound of
a winding sax solo, and moves in rhythm in a slow shuffling dance. All this happens ever so rarely, behind his eyes and underneath the floating, unknowing machinery of his sleeping city.
Yesterday
Degustation

What happens if you eat the forbidden fruit?

Eve could feel him watching. Eve had just experienced a moment. Fuck Proust and his madeleines, Eve had just tasted eternity. She smiled up at him and his face grew puce.

Wes looked at the thickening brown mixture gumming up his long thin fingers and getting under his too-long fingernails. He watched the fleeting peace that flashed across Eve’s face. He wanted to ruin it.

He stood up and before his wife had opened her eyes, he ground the thick gluey pie into her face. She tried to scream and Wes started slopping in the remaining food off the table into her open mouth. Perhaps he could be her “enabler”. Wasn’t that what they called the people who helped someone with an addiction — food, alcohol, sex, drugs whatever — to really enjoy their own misery a bit more?

Eve grunted as Wes held her jawbone, level with his crotch, and squeezed as hard as he could to keep it open. She struck at him but her hands only registered tapping blows against his legs.

When did Wes decide to kill her?

Wes walked towards the roller door and a man approached him. Wes instantly started to look for a retreat. This guy was short and squat and looked like he drank protein shakes in his dreams and tore the limbs from wild animals during daylight.
“Hey Man, hey, you Wes, right?” The human cube asked him.

Wes’s voice felt tight and he knew if he tried to speak it would come out as a high-pitched quaver, not very menacing. Wes had done two weeks of tai chi once and was rapidly trying to remember a move that might scare someone off. The short ball of muscle continued to move towards him slowly.

“Hey Man, hey, don’t, like, not afraid Man. We cool.” He held up his hands. In one he held a phone and the other hand was open, palm facing out. Wes was more concerned about the missing verbs. Maybe this mortar and pestle was saving the action words for later.

Wes fumbled with his key chain and it fell on the ground. The man rushed over and bent to pick it up. Wes imagined himself karate-chopping the man’s thick neck and even made his hands into a chopping gesture. The guy looked up at Wes and laughed, handing him the keys.

“I’m not after you Man. Here to make something right. Been plaguing me Man. I think I just gotta, you know, just …”

Wes had decided that just smiling benignly and nodding and moving towards his bike might be the safest move.

“I, oh Man.” Muscles wrapped a thick hand across his eyes and shook his head. Wes was worried. He’d heard about the drugs these gym junkies took and how it caused havoc with their moods and penises and rage tendencies. Perhaps this was a gym junkie on the low.

“Ah fuck Man, it was a gee-up, Man, my mates put me up to it, and fuck yeah, sorry Man, she fuck, it was only once, and it was shite man, you know, if there
ever was a problem, fuck not sure it was you, shit sorry, fuck, anyway the photos are down and I wanted to give you back the $50 I made on the bet. Fuck, Man. Dog move. Shouldn’t ever touch another man’s missus. I get that now. And I’m trying to right karma, you know? I’m in the program man. One of the steps, you know? Just trying to say sorry. Sorry.” The man squared up and looked like he would have accepted a punch to the chin or gut, should Wes have felt remotely obliged.

Wes just looked away and started to laugh. “Um? You Right?” The man asked.

The other guy held a phone up to Wes’s face and covered his eyes again in an act of modesty. “I just, Man, I just, I thought you should know, you know bro code?” Wes scrolled through.

“When was this?” Wes asked.

“A couple of years ago.” The man answered, “Can’t remember exact dates.”

A little death:

Her hair and make-up and outfit were chosen by Wes, he dressed her in head-to-toe black, as if she was the one who was alive and in mourning. His funeral outfit was a masterpiece. He wore a headscarf tied back over his dark but lightly greying hair. Wes sported an ironic t-shirt, The Ungrateful Dead; some thought it in bad taste. It was covered in a few paint splatters even though he hadn’t really ever been an artist. The outfit was completed with some Indian yoga pants in a bright colour to add the illusion of a tortured soul on the quest for a spiritual nirvana. The t-shirt sleeve rolled up to reveal an arm tattoo of a Bukowski poem. Even though Wes didn’t do yoga, had not travelled to India and thought
mindfulness, like poetry, was a pile of shit. He knew Eve would have rolled her eyes. In fact she did.

There was a passed-around Facebook shot of Wes curled over her coffin. Wes curated all the details. Image was important. It had garnered plenty of likes. Eve had listened to her eulogy from the front row. Her husband, Wes, had done a wonderful job at fabricating feeling. He even squeezed out some tears as he said to the gathered friends and family, "But I tried, I tried everything to help her. I’m devastated. She’s gone.” Then he had peered between his fingers at her and she had winked, “Good job fuckhead!”

The attempts at murder:

She still had the scar where the bullet had grazed her cheek. She had fainted before he completed his mission, a "mishap" at his friend’s farm. Wes had easily explained it away to police. There wasn’t enough considered planning and attention to detail that time. The police slapped him on the back and told them both to take care. Eve froze. That was the first time. Too haphazard. A little bit desperate. On the next occasion, the arrow did pierce the apple he had placed on her head as a joke. It was lucky that she ducked, kept her head down.

How Eve felt just before she died:

Eve stared at Wes. She tried to dredge up any feeling of sentiment towards him or a vague bubble of something that could mimic love. Some small thing that she could latch on to. Instead the oily layer of bitterness that sloshed deep in her gut raised as chunks of sick to the back of her throat. Her mouth yawned into a Picasso smile. She got up to vomit.
Eve retracted her starchy stuck tongue and tried to lick some moisture on to her lips. She tasted rainforest floor and bushfire. Like an unholy hangover where the night before reappears in flashbacks as you raise your head from the bowl. The flavours of rot and buried memory and ash attacked her brain. It seemed unfair. Then her brain connected, like long-distance dial-up. She wasn’t dead. She was still a thing, halfway out. A woman in a body with a slowly un-fogging brain. She was still here. Eve swallowed a hard lump. He was trying to kill her. Again.

She had been sick for so long, she didn’t care anymore. He had almost beaten the resistance out of her. But she persisted in small ways. She persisted in that halfway-there space that he couldn’t turf her from, no matter how hard he tried. She clung on to this sort of life like a barnacle on a shipwreck. That was where she buried all her burning shame, several layers under the ocean’s surface.

The morning that she once died:

Her mouth lay gaping into her pillow. A once steady stream of drool had dried to make concentric salt-crusted circles around a diminishing pool. This new overnight shift in topology had stained the light pink pillowcase at the site of the drop a richer colour of rose. A deep blush. The colour of a bedsore’s centre.

This time her husband had tried sedatives. A lot of sedatives. They were chalky but tasteless as she had downed one after the other. A death disguised as glasses of wine. Wes was ingenious.

The empty bottle of sedatives sat accusingly on the nightstand. Its wide round eye seemed to roll back and forward ever so slightly. She could see the base, inside, of the plastic bottle, a creamier colour that contrasted with the nothing white of the few small tablets that remained inside it. She wondered what kind
of person cooked their wife a cake, opened a bottle of wine, and then tried to kill her?

*The few necessary frames from a life’s “montage”:* 

Eve had escaped. Travelled away. Met a guy. Started a bakery. Well, she thought she had escaped. Escaped to ‘Love and Work’. That’s what Freud had said. That was Wes’s philosophy after his year of Liberal Arts. Eve had her doubts. They baked together. They ran a market stall. Now, some years later, she knew Freud was just flogging the same old system as everyone else always had. Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Google, the Pope – all the same shit. There are masters and there are servants. Eve was, as much as anyone, a cog in a wheel tied to a ball and chain, a rotten one.

Still, there was always beauty.

If truth is beauty. Then hell is fucking beautiful.

*An examination of Eve’s beliefs:*

Eve didn’t believe in heaven or hell. Her early religious education had failed miserably at making her a convert. She rejected it flatly. She couldn’t stomach the hypocrisy of the hipsters who pretended not to buy into the religious paradigm that they had been born into but then still went along with the ingrained expectations of that lifestyle. Money. Two-point-two pumped out and a picket fence. That was what hypocrisy tasted like. Burnt plastic perfume for the slave masses, indoctrinated to consume and buy and buy out their lives. Norman Mailer was right, about some things. What he got wrong: women are not useless but used. What he got right: the world is going to eat itself, with a plastic fork.
Why did Eve marry Wes?

Eve was happy that he was tall and bearded and occasionally funny. There were, however, a few indicators that Eve might have caught along the way. Some insights, that perhaps there might be some deep-seated "issues" there. When he said: “At least I got you young enough before the real-world meat market. You won’t cheat on me, baby? That is what is most important. You can do anything you like. But not that, 'kay?” Eve had always assumed that market forces would present her with a better option eventually, but none came in time. Life rolled on. The market was rigged and there was an oversupply of wolves in wannabe outfits. Eve also remembered Wes saying that he didn’t like it when an undeserving woman got to enjoy something that didn’t belong to her, like success. But that was just a passing comment and he made a mean hollandaise sauce.

Why did Wes marry Eve?

Wes had told his friends that Eve was an age-appropriate appendage, life-stage tick-off, needy enough so that he felt useful with good-enough looks and who he could have a few kids with one day. She got told that after the wedding, when a concerned mutual friend tried to intervene.

Was it always this bad?

She was convinced that there was no more beautiful vista. The Gold Coast beaches stretched like a thick-link gold chain that left a tinny taste in your mouth. If you have to live like a garra rufa fish then you may as well go where the feeding is good. Sunrises here were hailed as majestic happenings; unexpected and transformative events. Girls in bright leggings performed on the beach at dawn to salute and sashay. The fruit was fresh. Enough. The seafood
was fresh. Enough. Every year they had stayed away for a few weeks while the schoolies rioted with their youthfully spoilt flesh and fancy.

They had made their first home among the white concrete and palm trees. They ran their stalls where they triumphed over buying in and selling out. They occasionally sold out of their baked goods and made a profit. Both had rich-enough parents who could support their children’s ardent rebellion against the repressive status quo.

*When did it start to go um ... downhill?*

Their sex life seized up. Wes joked once that having sex with his ex was like throwing a sausage down a hallway. He began to make similar jokes about Eve. She tried to block out the jabs and the uppercuts.

On the rare occasions when he and Eve were stoned enough to grope for each other in the dark, it felt like they were each fucking an empty coffin. He was her greatest mistake. She became his body in a hallway joke. Later he upgraded. Wes started to call Eve his little second-hand car that could; in need of constant tune-ups and definitely some better bodywork. They both knew he was sleeping with Caroline, who lived around the corner.

*What does OK not look like?*

Wes looked up at her and grabbed her hand, "Gi’a kiss to your ol’ man.” Eve said no and tried to move away but she felt anchored to the spot by thick ropes wrapped around her ankles and wrists. Wes’s fingernails pierced her skin. Her blood was his consent.
Wes leaned forward and puckered up his lips and used them like a speculum to manoeuvre her mouth open. Eve tasted cat’s piss and rust and she tried to move her face back or at least push his tongue out with hers. He moaned with pleasure and leant in further. She suddenly felt her arms unfreeze and re-pin themselves back to her body, like the tail on a paper donkey. Her arms swivelled, bending like a Barbie, up to his small hollow chest and she pushed him away from her. He swam in scissor kicks, over to the other side of the bed to get up and move to her. Eve turned to exit the bedroom. He came up behind her and nuzzled her neck as he pinned her arms behind her and forced her face down onto the bed.

(Eve doesn’t always have the emotional strength to continue here).

*An art-house horror show interlude:*

The thin guy and the shorter girl chase each other around the bed, slowly around and around. The Marx Brothers soundtrack is warped; it sounds out long whale sounds, while the audience guzzles frozen Coke. With each slow swing around of the camera, she becomes paler. Her hair looser and greyer. Her body more brittle, but it becomes padded up to keep the long nails and the piercing things out and away from herself, from her body. And as the camera moves faster, she disappears altogether. He forces her face first down and she becomes feathers, dust, darkness.

*Preparing for the last supper:*

Wes opened and closed the kitchen cupboards in a slow procession.

He boiled and burned and shook and flipped.
The smells wafted like an orchestra of accusations filling the kitchen. Eve lowered her face into her body and screamed and screeched at him, at herself, at the world. And no one answered.

This is the part where the woman is muted.

No one wants to see the agony, hear the pain. She is supposed to dress stoic or silently retreat. Not be messy and broken. Eve is here breaking all these rules, like a bad smell she hangs around the scene of the crime, others see her there and still no one can hear her. And Wes knows this, that he has the upper hand. For him the soundtrack is some jaunty ska music. He would say, it’s just the kind of records he’s into and that white boys like him can ska if they want to. That’s the kinds of jokes he likes to tell. And if worse comes to worse, Wes will do her in. Keep her silent.

*The last supper:*

Eve looked at Wes, too tired to move and too angry to speak. Wes looked back at her as he picked up his steaming cup and brought it right up to his nose. He inhaled the fragrance of Ethiopian ethically sourced fairly traded crushed Arabica bean. That’s what the label said. Labels were important. Wes was an ardent recycler and into organic only. He inhaled the elixir, and poured some for Eve. The heat of the cup ached into her raw left palm. He watched as she sipped.

Wes jiggled a crepe from a stack under a tonne of fresh fruit and dusted it in lemon and sugar. Wes piled on the berries and the diced fruit rainbow and fresh cream. Eve felt her body involuntarily lurch forward.

Wes skewered the soft flat delicacy and the compliant rush of fruit onto his fork. He made a gesture like an adult flying a plane into a child’s mouth but stopped
just short of her open mouth. He leant back to sit in his chair and placed the fork of food against his own closed lips. Wes placed the food on his tongue and closed his lips, pulling the fork out slowly. Eve heard a cackle get louder and louder until it was all she could hear. It was her own.

_What might eternity taste like? Or, Why Wes really killed Eve:_

They were at a dinner party, before they were married. Wes watched as Eve extended a hand forward and plucked a still perfect and raw red strawberry off a plate. She held the little green stork in her hands and twisted its top off. Wes saw the others watching her. He knew that she knew they were watching.

The lengthened arm hovered and she appraised her minute share of the spoils. She dangled the red strawberry above her mouth and reached up her neck to bite into it. In a different kind of story, in a different kind of mouth, this scene would signal something else. But here, her teeth simply sunk into pitted flesh. Yet, her moan was real. The sweetness hit the tip of her tongue and worked back in rolling layers as the small clump of natural wonder undulated back.

She smiled in a way that made people around the table nervous. Wes had always hated her for it.

_What about when there aren’t any consequences? Or, What might an eternity taste like?_

He let the textures reach his brain first. The slight wetness and crunch of the cooked batter. His brain waited. Wes rolled his tongue from one side to the other. A light ocean toss to better arrange for the fireworks of flavour. They never come.
Wes’s cheeks billow out and he keeps stuffing in more and more and more. He feels the sharp crack of a bone against the inside of his cheek. Still he keeps stuffing his mouth with more. He is laughing now. Eve swings back and forth in her chair, her short legs are like a happy young schoolgirl’s and her arms are waving high above her head like she is perpetually riding a rollercoaster.

Food is falling out of Wes’ mouth in mixed wet chunks. He forges ahead. Roasted carrot combined with the toffee from the top of a croque-en-bouche dessert. Pumpkin and feta and spinach and pine nuts plopping out of his mouth in a torrid fountain, along with ragout and mascarpone. Wes starts grabbing chunks off the plates with his hands, disposing with the delicacy of the fork.

It is no use. Whatever Wes eats, whatever he places into his mouth, all he can taste, all he has tasted, is his own death. His lies, at least, have caught up with him. Even if nobody else will ever know. He looks over at Eve, she is clapping and laughing at him, her mouth is the colour of rust on strawberries.
Soon ...
“Ladies and gentleman put your hands together.”

The courtroom shook. The porthole opened and the criminal emerged on a rising platform. Her face had been marked in thick columns of red paint. The red was just visible at her crown. Her chin was pulled tightly into her chest. Her face was a lonely oval pointing at the floor. The criminal’s body was covered by a rough-hewn black cassock dress.

The interlocking laser beams held her body in its uncomfortably contorted position. A knee bent and the other leg crossing over it, lengthened out. Her hands were twisted in a begging position. This was the body formation that the Court Rules decreed was best suited to conveying to the Judges and Jury the extremely serious nature of the crimes Eve had committed. Soundtrack boos and hisses were amplified for the benefit of the punters watching at home. It helped to get people in the mood.

“Raise your face, woman,” an electronic voice giggled.

The mobile light rig raced around in time to light up her slowly raising head. Jagged lines of black ink radiated horizontally across her face, marking the red columns with an imperfect array of veins and blots. A spider web diagram that mapped the accused’s transgressions. This was, in fact, her Guilt Map. The program’s interface stream lit up. The message beetles floated in, buzzing around the stuck figure.

She’s guilty as sin. Just look at her. #TTW

Maximum! Maximum! Maximum!
What a cunt.

The criminal’s visual map is a computer-generated tattoo. Inked during her time in custody to match the prosecution’s description of her wrongdoing. The coordinates were pressed into a keyboard by her initial inquisitors. She had sat strapped into the inquiry chair. As soon as the information was keyed in, the robot inkbug found the designated place to rest upon her face and burrow in. Burrow down. The inkbug would inject, painfully, a toxic resin that leached out into the criminal’s skin and rose to the surface to create the Guilt Map.

This was an essential part of the criminal’s pre-trial preparation. Other criminals might have a thick singular line, running across the face. This woman’s face was a constellation of small crimes. Dirty acts. Hideous private embarrassments. A personal hell writ large.

The hissing indictment of the millions of viewers quietened for the preliminaries given by the Court’s electronic assistant.

“You are Eve.”
“It says so on your name tag.”

A curlicue border flashed on the screen across the criminal’s chest and the letters E V E were carved out. The frame was only a hollow visual aid. The letters were actually carved into Eve’s chest by a laser. The criminal’s screams were edited out. A peppy blood red colour enhanced the audience’s view. The Producer cued the canned sound of applause. The audience sent their message beetles in droves. The beetle avatars flapped in formation to add a deep whirring base note to the program’s streaming soundtrack.
“Eve is guilty of crimes against us all.
The Judges will help you to unravel this particularly horrific story.”

The audience were tuned in from their homes and work capsules and cyber-clubs. They had been following the pre-trial media coverage intently. This had included the long-format 15-minute current affairs special *The Victims of Eve* and the 'leaked' stories about the potential for an increase in the maximum penalty due to the particularly shocking nature of her crimes.

Pre-trial process compelled the instantaneous upload of any available interface information on the criminal, by the public at large. There had been less than usual, which was criminal in itself. The evidence included some drunken photos from Eve’s troubled adolescence and some smiling selfies with friends at Last Century outdoors events, when people still went outdoors. There were also shots of her during her compulsory national service years, now famously looking frumpy in her minds-without-borders uniform. The opinion-informed audience wet their lips and leaned further in. She wasn’t pretty enough or powerful enough to require mercy.

A montage of her life to date played on the screens of the courtroom. There was a particular focus on the aberrant behaviour that was the subject of the trial. Her birth, followed in the sequence by an unfortunate teenage hair-removal incident, a prolonged period of bad coffee breath, a dog that she had not walked often enough when she was little, her indulging in the offensive pre-CenturyNow practice of smoking cigarettes and binge drinking (that in itself was enough for a healthier happier harder prescription).

Sadly, there was also a penchant for astrology reading and tarot deck consultation. In the homogenous spiritual universe of The Way, this was
heretical. If not, at least, easily disparaged. It irritated the most sanctimonious and the beetle bots swarmed louder.

Then followed further damning footage of her switching off her personal interface (without permission) and her refusal to use emojilex in professional communications, as required by the law. She had been photographed throughout the prolonged investigation, writing and reading (unusual if not criminal), without immediately posting and sharing this information with others online. The beetles buzzed and hummed a louder chorus of disapproval. She was not one of the hive. The hive buzzed thick with the indignity of it all.

These transgressions were not in accordance with Continuous Online Profile Status Update Guidelines (COPSUG) and breached Public Interface User Regulations (PIUR). The hissing interface seethed and boiled as their emissary beetle bots whizzed thicker and faster around the criminal who remained frozen on the raised platform.

The montage continued showing the woman’s more recent decision about what to name her unborn child. She had refused to use an online baby name selector, breaking Popular Names and Birth Guidelines, which were in fact non-negotiable rules. She had, most egregiously, conceived the child out of her allocation.

This decision had consequences.

There followed the footage from the hospital’s interface CCTV live stream showing the ensuing redirection of the foetus. The woman in the footage appeared to be staring directly at a pinpoint camera that she couldn’t have known was there. It looked like she was being defiant, even as she was suffering. Such displays of selfish individualism for no apparent material gain
were not only shocking to the global *Justify* audience, but deeply disturbing. Her actions ran contrary to The Way.

*She is clearly unfit to be a mother. Thank The Way! #TTW.*

*That’s what happens when you try and go it your own way.*

*I hope she bleeds as much now as she did then! Die bitch. #TTW*

The count read 1,850,899 interface messages. The Producer looked over the stats with satisfaction. The show was only a few minutes in. The promo had clearly worked. Millions of thought profiles, world over, were tuned in. The ratings had slumped ever so slightly in the last three-hour entertainment cycle. Her job was on the line. If she failed, The Producer could be out there facing an impending execution at the hands of the Judges and the public jury next week.

The Producer jotted down the figures as the feeding frenzy continued. She signalled the Judges to ramp up their inputs. This side-dish information was transmitted to the tuned-in viewers’ thought profiles in appealing, low-thought RAM opinion clouds for easy simultaneous consumption.

An ad break was probably necessary.

Eve’s corporate sponsors, who had funded the criminal’s pre-trial detention and preparations, had paid a great deal of money for this privilege. The Producer released the colourful opiate thought bubbles onto the interface stream. The subliminal messages were chemically wrapped to enhance the corporate sponsor’s various entertainment products. Everyone who was tuned in to the stream got a nice little bump.
The faces of the judges flashed momentarily on the various screens while advertisements filled the thought-stream interface. Eve used her eyes, the only uncontrolled part of her body, to try to connect with the judiciary.

One Judge was a preppy young man flossing his large white teeth, using his instantaneous screen playback as a mirror. Another woman wore the dull expression of her flaking wallpaper personality. This woman, Flaky-face, stared unremittingly at the guilty subject before her. Eve looked up entreating her for compassion. Flaky-face adjusted her ugly patterned pashmina and continued to stare. She said nothing.

A chorus of colour-plastic-wrapped cheerleaders emerged onto the floor below the now raised platform. They raised their legs and arms in gyrating rhythms to the deep pulsing bass music, played live simulcast by a famous DJ located in another country. Eventually the music died down and the spinning cameras refocused in on Eve's face. Her mouth was pulled back in a grin where the nerve endings had been fixed in her pre-trial make-up and wardrobe session.

“A defence is called for!” Flossy Preppy the toothy Judge called out as the camera zoomed in for his close up.

The Producer knew that he would try for as much camera time as possible, yelling out when he felt the cameras had neglected his neatly styled hairdo for too long. He was painful. He repeated himself often, and was incapable of an original thought. He was also young, pretty and the masses liked him most of the time, which was rare in the bitter fame game. Even for a globally State-sanctioned reality program as long running and popular as Justify. She cued the defence lawyer in.
“Walkley-Hannah the Third, at your disposal.” The lawyer stroked his beard quickly as he smiled nervily at the camera. His eyes never rested for very long on any one spot. He bowed to each of the judges, one screen at a time. His shoulders then resumed their natural hunch.

“Time!” Justice Flaky-face called out curtly.

5.04

A large clock materialised and began flashing a neon countdown. Walkley-Hannah began to talk hurriedly, saying that while he deferred to the great Judges he was sure that if they looked at all of the footage they would see acts of altruism, kindness and banality even, committed by the accused.

“Enough! We have already reviewed the footage,” The glycerine-coated whinny of another Judge rang out. He clicked his cowboy boots twice upon the table top that they rested on.

“It is most amusing. Amusing in a bad way. I wouldn’t want to mislead the public.” Flossy Preppy grinned into the camera. Somewhere, a yearning person’s thought-profile exploded in red and pink emojilex.

“Is it true that the accused is incapable of and refuses to properly iron a shirt? And that she also engages in un-prescribed private sexual acts? No ratings or sexslashes are publicly accorded the act(s)?” The Cowboy swung his legs down from the table. He clicked his fingers. One of his many assistants quickly connected to his private interface with the next question to ask.

“And further, that she did not upload a rating, a contemporaneous webisode enactment or even some titillating images from these encounters to provide
amusement and entertainment or cathartic humiliation redistribution material for others as is required, under law, Thank The Way, for all allocated and unallocated bodily, emotional or sexual interactions? Especially for women under grazing age.” He winked slimily out at viewers. The Cowboy hee-hawed, slapped his diminutive thighs and pursed his wet lips. His interface injected a spike of testosterone into the program’s stream.

A fair while ago, Eve, or at least a woman who looked a lot like her, maybe from another sector, who cares, anyway this woman had rebuffed the Cowboy. The Cowboy was finding Eve’s degradation more enjoyable than most of the Justify episodes he bothered to turn up for.

Flossy Preppy had been away from the lens for too long. He interjected. “There was also footage of…” the Judge paused for effect, lowering his voice to convey the gravity of the situation, “uncoordinated midnight dancing? Not by an avatar, or cyber shadow but ... live and with no footage being redistributed as memes or video uploads for comedic purposes. This activity was conducted without known spectatorship, dance partner or encouragement. These can only be characterised as spontaneous and anti-Way actions. The criminal is not an allocated dancer.”

The beetles vomited scorn.

*She’s a ‘tard wishing for a leotard!*

*What a fucking freakshow! #TTW*

*#Sad.*

*#DTD (deserves to die)*
Flaky-face was required, under her contract, to have some kind of a speaking role. Her thought profile was why most viewers tuned in. There was not a lot going on upstairs but when the grey noise paused, the imagery was so black and hateful that she had developed her own hard-core fan base.

“Time!” she called.

3.01

Flaky-face stated for the record, "It is also true that E V E uses mental organic barricades to evade the great Interface of The Way."

“Disgusting. What are you hiding, or trying to hide, you filthy depraved degenerate?” Flaky-face’s voice did not rise. Her facial profile emitted only the slow clawing movement of her mouth forming shapes over her saw-pointed teeth.

The Judge’s thought-profile flipped over from grey static. It began to stream her mind pulse of stripping the criminal naked and cutting into Eve. Flaky-face personally, meticulously and meaningfully attended to this important task. She sliced with one small sharp razor blade until it was blunt. Then the next. And the next. And then the next. And then the...

Her thought-profile appeared to be on loop.

The defence lawyer shook his head and frowned. Sadly, the footage showed it was all fact. He had briefly looked over the actions taken by the criminal. She had not followed the Online and Thought Exposure Protocols that were mandated for all global citizens. The evidence was beyond reproof. Indefensible. As were all the Justify contestants.
Walkley-Hannah the Third reviewed the scrawled notes written on the billiard balls that floated on the pool table at his side. He chalked the end of his cue stick. Whichever ball he potted would be the defence he would go with. He hugged his cardigan around his bent frame and leant over the table breathing out his gentle snot-infused syllables, "As the Court pleases."

A number 14 clicked into the back left pocket. The 'one more chance' routine. This, like all the other lottery of defences, never played out very well for the accused. It was a well-known fact that the criminal contestants were always guilty by the time their crimes reached the public forum. Whether they were or were not really guilty was a philosophical matter, for another time.

*Walkeley's pulling for a fucking-wanker! Haha :)*

*She deserves more than a simple online death. She has no online profile. Full shame and physical mortal pain penalty of The Way must be imposed! #TTW*

*What a dirty red-faced dancing slut.*

“Closing statements!” Flaky-face called out.

Walkley-Hannah ran a finger down the cereal-encrusted edge of his too-big cardigan and cleared his mucus-lined throat.

“Ahhhh ha hem. The accused has lived a wretched life. Unable to connect to the Interface in an appropriate manner. She designated herself as different from the drawing of her first breath. It is true that she has neglected her online presence and has not performed her public profile as required under the laws of The Way, may it be praised.” He walked around the pool table chalking his stick, unaware of the large chunks of blue dust now covering the front of his cardigan.
Eve has, it is true, offended, deeply, The Way and all good global citizens. She is guilty of much. You have all read it on her face. Reviewed the evidence. She wanted an un-prescribed future. Evil. She has at times been lonely or silly or dumb or intoxicated or stubborn. She has, it is true, also belched and farted. These are despicable attributes.” He paused to pat down his messed front.

“These are not excuses or defences for her ... *replete* horror.” Flossy Preppy interjected, trialling a new word.

The defence lawyer bowed. “She is the most anti-The Way criminal we have probably ever encountered. An appalling disgrace. She stinks. In person and in deed. She deserves a very real punishment. But!” Here he held a finger up in close profile to the in-zooming floating camera. “But!” he repeated, “She has tried to make amends. She has not tried to flee her punishment. She stands before the Court, before the public, asking for *just one more chance*.”

The home Judge, selected from a random selection of viewers, flashed up on a screen. She pushed a cat off from her lap and leered forward.

*That cow doesn’t deserve another chance. Maximum! Maximum! #Citizen404SE*

Her sallow face-crunch of disapproval filled the screen as she gave the endearing smile of a long-time *Justify* screen savant. Even The Producer leaned back wondering how they found such extraordinary real-life characters.

Eve's eyes had closed. The Producer cued the Court Official to use a spray of the burning eye-buttress foam to pry and keep the criminal’s eyes open. This act of defiance by the criminal, closing her eyes, was also a weakness. It enraged the viewers and the Judges.
“Well, now that’s not very nice. Don’t you think I’m rather impressive? Why would you be so rude as to try and shut your eyes on me?” Flossy Preppy was offended that anyone could ignore him, criminal or not.

Eve was beginning to shake in her shrunken pain. It was unusual and showed an incredible mind insolence to the brain opiate she had been shot with prior to the show.

“Who failed to do a risk check on this sorry piece of ass? There will be an inquiry. She’s bloody mind-opiate resistant. What a fucking crackho,” the Cowboy snickered. What do you reckon, Flak., I mean, my learned colleague?”

Flaky-face yelled: “Time!”

2.20

Flaky-face’s thought-profile registered the mind-pulse to piss in the Cowboy’s boots.

The message beetles had hit close to the billion mark, people were sending their usual one or two beetle bots to participate but then were buying more and more backup beetle bot avatars to send into the fray. There were so many flying around in the studio space that it was getting too busy. An emergency vent was opened to give the criminal a modicum of breathing space.

The Producer received a private memo from her Director. The Justice Department was rewarding several members of a resistance group in the northern sector, with a quick death. They had already been quarantined from the
Interface but their mindlamps were still visible and energetically resonant to connected stream users.

The Department decreed that *Justify* must carry on.

There would be an energetic disturbance when the reward was delivered. People world over, connected to the Interface, would likely feel the absence.

*Justify* would play as a distraction until this act was over. The Producer chose that moment to play the most damaging footage of the contestant. It was captivating stuff.

The Producer cued in Flossy Preppy to do the introduction before his enormous teeth broke through the thought profile barrier and mindbit the streamers.

“It is with sincere regret that I share the following images with you. I did not want to have to do this. I did not want to have to show this footage. I feel, however, that it is important to respect my colleagues and my fellow citizens by showing you all this stream of Eve’s most egregious breach of the Greater Publicity Protocols of The Way. Let there be silence,” Flossy Preppy’s hands flourished out like a mad conductor.

The whirring wings slowed. The enraged streaming beetle bot owners concentrated. Their interface comments went quiet. The screens in the Court Room, and then all of the lights in the film studio, went dark. The Producer spliced in an old-school countdown effect in black and white. The absence of colour in the visual thought-stream threw many off balance. It helped to pull in their attention and distract them from the absence of mindlamps elsewhere. It would only take one beetle, one thought user on the Interface, to sync up and change tack. The Producer’s internal organs cramped in fear.
The sound started before the vision.

Eve was singing softly. An un-prescribed tune. Everyone knows just how important the soundtrack is. She was wearing strange attire, a men’s shirt and some tight pants. Her hair was messy and a concentrated look had taken over her face. She absentmindedly chewed the nails on her left hand.

“Filthy.” Flaky-face imagined embedding the fingernail offcuts into Eve’s repellently padded frame.

In her right hand, Eve was holding a paintbrush and staring down at her creation. A painting of merging sky colours and Last Century-type animals with wings and fur. Water and clouds and a golden orb hung pendulous in the sky. It was crude.

“Infantile. Prurient toddler. She is disgusting.” The Cowboy rocked back on his chair to avert his eyes from the criminal’s streaming anti-Way activities.

The footage rolled on. The omnipresent Stream of The Way was playing in a distant corner of Eve’s mind. Eve had tuned it out, even as she continued to paint.

The film studio was now full of fierce, sharp wings. The beetles were whirring at ever-higher gears.

_Cunt!_  
_(unintelligible)_  
_Whore!_
The Producer slowed down the footage to capitalise on the building anger. The Producer encouraged Flossy Preppy and the other Judges to help build the mood.

"Outrageous! Insolent! Ignorant and hostile. She is a thought terrorist. She swallows up Interface resources and gives nothing. She is a Leaner. An Outcast. Selfish woman!" At Flossy Preppy's last two words the beetles went into an attack mode. The Producer had never before seen anything like it. The footage had not even reached its culmination yet.

There had only ever been one fatality on the show before. Usually the criminals at least survived the Justify trial. Thus ensuring The Executioner or The Sentence programs could run the following night.

Eve was somehow holding on. She was shaking wildly as the beetle bots, now suicidal with rage, crashed against her body. The Producer zoomed in when a beetle with the corresponding interface message:  

Pain is too good for you, die!

collided with one of Eve's terror-dilated eyeballs, prized open and unable to shut against the metal. The bot, on connection with an actual human presence, was turned into inexpensive collateral damage. Eve's eye began to bleed. The bot's owner quickly paid for, loaded and mentally redirected a replacement.

Flaky-face called "Time!"

0.34

Flaky-face began clapping with the abandon of a Last Century child. As if she was orchestrating the collisions and incisions of the demented beetle bots that hit and cut Eve, and then fell like iron flies to the floor. Flossy Preppy was bored
by the spectacle. It wasn’t nearly as stream-friendly as he was. The Cowboy leaned in to watch the savage whirl and mind savour Eve’s destruction for his own personal review stream.

The Department sent a congratulatory email to The Producer. The reward for the insurgents was completed. No one was the wiser. They advised her to play out the episode. The Producer fired back a quick reply on the secure Interface connection; surely they should amp down? It could be a repeat of Episode 1010001, she warned, the only other time they’d lost a body live on the stream. The Department advised her to continue without muting the audience response. The episode was just so darn entertaining. The Department heads were all hooked in to watch the ending.

The Producer allowed the rest of the footage to play at normal speed. In it, Eve had moved one of her paintings to the side and had taken another blank sheet to start on. As she mused away, The Way Stream Interface alerted that there was a message to be delivered by The Way’s most popular political entertainer. A globally approved man named George. George began to make a statement on the Interface.

In the previously captured reel, Eve looks up from her painting. At this point, when billions of others would have stopped to listen to George’s every word, to resonate with his every thought-shiver and mind-bubble, she did the most criminal thing of all. Eve rolled her eyes and continued with her picture.

The millions of angry beetles in the studio flapped in high distress. Eve’s impertinence was beyond comprehension. Her refusal to submit in this instance was even more insidious because it defied personal, political and public protocols. Eve was beyond redemption. Her rebellion proved what an ungovernable anti-The Way elite this dangerous thought-terrorist had become.
The stream was fading out. The show’s credits began to roll. Eve had at least lasted until the credits. The Producer was relieved. It was great reality TV. The ratings beggared belief.

0.01

The *Justify* stream continued to capture the final beetle bot frenzy. There was a noise that The Producer had never had to sequence. The silver and grey and black metal wings on the bots were manic. The last seconds of *Justify* revealed the eyeless and limp body of the criminal. The lights on set went out. The laser beams were switched off. The criminal sagged in a messy puddle on the still raised platform. There was no need to prepare for a State-sanctioned episode of *The Execution*. It had already happened. Everyone was satisfied.
Next
Subject will, pursuant to s. 8 of the Octagon Colonisers Act 2035, undergo full assessment and extraction procedures. (4820) Reported by Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888]

Subject #19819888, congratulations on your choices. Welcome to the Octagon.

You have agreed to submit yourself to this procedure. Your thumbprint is registered as the print of Subject #19819888 at the bottom of this page. It is through your own choices and activities that you have found yourself here at the Octagon on this date.

There is no need to affirm by nod or verbal instruction your acquiescence. Your presence is all that is required, provided you are, at this time, in an appropriate state of mental, spiritual and physical health to attend this guided tour. A continuation of these proceedings is admission on your behalf that this is in fact a true statement as to your state of wellbeing.

I haven’t as yet formally introduced myself. I apologise for this lapse. I am your tour guide, Tolophi #19799888. I have followed your case with close scrutiny, as you can imagine. It is of the utmost importance that you allow yourself full surrender to these proceedings. Of course there is no choice. At least, not your own. As advised earlier, it is through the choices that you have already made and activities that you have engaged in that you have found yourself in this building on this date. None of which you were previously aware of. You are the substance of all of these prior choices that had little to do with any action you may have chosen, had the advent of this guided tour been an outcome that you would have considered. But such is the reason you find yourself in these
circumstances at all. You didn’t consider this as the potential outcome for your life choices to date, even though it was inevitable.

You are obviously unaware of all of your transgressions but these will become less obvious to you as we proceed. Calm yourself. We can continue. We are not an entity. I should run through the health and safety provisions of our tour. You are of course already aware of these having attended here before, without your due recollection. At any stage where you feel like leaving the discussion, you may do so.

[Subject attempted to leave briefing chamber. Subject resumed briefing at the hour that the Subject resumed the briefing.]

Due to the lack of any other option, you have agreed to resume the proceedings. Your continued presence is enough confirmation. The fact that you cannot leave is not an available defence. The fact that you may not remember, have been here before or are not the subject in question are also not available defences to you. We shall continue. This of course is up to you. In the same way that your hair colour or the room that you were born in was your choice. You are a composite of many events and activities that you were fully unaware of but are the subject of and therefore possess no defence in relation to. So we shall continue.

[Subject requested the cessation of the guide. Subject further requested that we defer proceedings.]

The deferral that you have sought was considered and rejected by you due to your past choices and the activities that you have previously engaged in. You are guilty in fact of being you and this is not an order that I, as your tour guide, or indeed any tribunal or court, never to be appointed, can set aside. This was
confirmed when you turned up on the day that was appointed to you in the brief history of things that were and have been. One might say it was your choice, had you been able to decide it, which in fact you have done without any material choice of your own doing.

[Subject became alarmed. Proceedings continued on this date at this time.]

We must continue because the proceedings have been delayed by the sheer fact that you exist in your current form at all. One might say a miracle, or an equation, of the simple desire to be you has brought you to this place at this time. But that is not an available defence.

Of course we have met and discussed this before so I will not rehash all of our previous meetings. Simply that a tour of the Octagon under the Act was predetermined by you as an outcome due to the activities you knowingly unknowingly engaged in as we have previously discussed. Perhaps you did not read the fine print on your Contract. I can see you grow tired. And faint. It isn’t unusual. Your bodily functions at this point have not been adequately outsourced, to your knowledge, which is why you do in fact find yourself in your current predicament.

[Subject was offered nourishment by way of the standardised menu log. Subject chose a beef vermicelli salad at this time. It was noted by the tour guide to not be the Subject’s standard choice, but one of the Subject’s top five nonetheless.]

We will move from the briefing chamber because through your choice you have selected the first room where our tour must in fact commence. As we continue, it is necessary for you to understand as much as you can, inclusive of your own limitations that you have previously created for yourself. At this stage, it is clear
that without a form of sustenance outsource and extraction, you will be unable to continue. You have selected your food of choice.

[Subject has been moved to viewing room 1, by the Subject's own choice.]

As you will note in the first room of the guided tour, you are sitting. You are nervous about the tour so your sweat and your vague echo of a headache, as you have previously directed, unknown to you at this time, has been outsourced to the Octagon.

[Subject is seated at a long wooden table. Subject sits opposite a subject. Behind in the room is a bed with a person sleeping. Exercise equipment is being used intermittently by a subject in correlation with the Octagon principles of interval training health. The subject opposite the Subject looks straight ahead.]

There you see an Eve or Adam or Ave or Ede or child of approximately your age and appearance. It is hungry. You can clearly see that this is in fact the case. The Adam/Eve or Ave or Ede or child is now holding their stomach. They are in fact sweating. This is because of your choices. You will note the bowl of steaming nutrition that has just been placed down. It is salivating. Your choice has appealed to you. The man/woman or child gets up to move closer to the bowl of food. Just as you will now do. The man/woman or child takes a seat directly behind the steaming bowl of beef vermicelli salad. You take the seat opposite the man/woman or child.

[Subject is directed to sit opposite the subject.]

Its senses, unlike yours, have been activated. The steam is refreshing. There are implements either side of the bowl. I am glad to see that you are feeling a little less anxious. It is eating. First one mouthful. It is chewing. Then the next. We
must wait and watch while this subject finishes your meal that you have chosen. I am glad to see that the colour has returned to your cheeks and that you are feeling sated. As evidenced by the subject opposite you. You are feeling rested. Your hunger and fatigue have been averted. As you can see, Subject #19819888, the Octagon provides. As you can see, you have made the right choice. For yourself. At this time. Which of course you are already aware of, having previously made this exact same choice. You must however wait for the final phases of viewing room 1 to be completed.

We can get closer if you prefer but I can see by the sweat on the brow of the person who has now moved to a seat next to where they sat eating the salad that you selected, that there may have been too much chilli. There are repercussions. You must sit and watch your choices played out in front of you. When the results of these choices are not as you expected or according to desire, this does not mean you can unmake them. Please do not protest.

[Subject objects to watching the subject attempting to evacuate the food.]

The aftermath of your choices is, after all, your own concern and not due to any pressure or manipulation on the part of me, your tour guide, or the Octagon.

[Subject is detained in waiting room 1 as appropriate bodily function processing procedure occurs. One hour of tour-time is processed. Subject appears disconcerted. The tour guide notes on this simultaneous tour report (4820) that: This will need immediate resolution in viewing room 2 of the Octagon if the Subject is to continue to successfully outsource all processes, as prescribed under the Act, on this tour.]

The olfactory senses of your bodily functions have offended you and yet it is your choice what you eat and how you process these nourishments provided to
you, today free of charge as part of your guided tour, tomorrow indexed at the appropriate work-per-calorie rate of the reborn. The subject that is processing these functions for you looks uncomfortable. But such procedures are often uncomfortable. You in fact look more uncomfortable than they do. You are not needed to wipe the subject in view’s ass. They perform this function and only this function, multiple times a day on yours and others’ behalf. As they selected due to the choices they made and activities that they previously engaged in. You see, Subject #19819888, a useful function was found for the former politicians of the early 21st century. Let us move on to viewing room 2.

[Subject, nourished and more engaged but still troubled by its own choice and repercussions, is moved through to viewing room 2 with little delay. There are several subjects in various states of emotional decomposition. Subject is at first alarmed by one subject banging their head against the glass wall that separates us. The tour guide instructed the Subject as appropriate.]

Viewing room 2, as you can see, does not possess any furniture. All of the men/women or children in this room are engaged in a continuous procedure of extraction. You are clearly unfamiliar with this procedure, even though it is your choices that cause these people to enact the various poses and take the actions they are involved in, that you bear witness to today on this date and every day where your re-education is necessary. Because of your actions and reactions, the allocation of these people with these functions is necessary. The Octagon is proud of how few out-of-work actors there are in our society. Look now:

[Subject is directed to look into the viewing room and not away]

That subject there is perplexed, that one there disgusted, as you would potentially be now if it wasn’t for the fact that you have agreed to this process by being reborn as you were, when you decided to be.
There, enacted by that subject banging their head against the wall, is the reaction you now did not have when your spouse died last year. Outsource emotional resonance 2.4. These subjects enact all of your emotions, saving you from having to do this yourself. The Octagon cares, Subject #19819888. The Octagon spares no resources in ensuring you are free from worries, indeed that all of the Octagon’s subjects are free from worries. These subjects that you view here have had other subjects processing their thoughts, feelings and physical discomforts and needs for them, too. They are now engaged in the work that they have been selected for, as you will one day be too. For the betterment of yourself, Subject #19819888, and the Octagon as a whole.

Outsource emotional resonance 8.0 – The reason there was no elation when you discovered the outcome of your proposal to the government for existence continuation by hereditary default by convergence – under subsection 38 of the Octagon Colonisers Act 2035. In plain terms, Subject #19819888, this is when the Octagon recognised your firstborn. Your happiness was outsourced under subsection 25 of the Act.
[Although the Subject is yet to have any offspring, Tour Guide Tolophi felt that this emotional resonance outsource from a future event, as decided by the powers of the Octagon, may provide incentive for the Subject to continue the tour.]

Outsource emotional resonance 1.0 – The reason you have not felt anything since the day you chose to exist. The resistance you felt before this, that you now cannot feel. This resonance was deemed under the Act as a revolutionary emotion and quarantined as necessary. That is why that subject is chained in a cage for the duration of the amplitude of the emotional processing.

Outsource emotional resonance 0.0 – The date that you signed your Contract on the date that you signed it, which is of course this date.

[Subject is grappling to understand. Subject intervenes with a question regarding the functioning of the Octagon processing and extraction plant processes. Why emotional extraction contains remnants of previously felt but not undesired or necessary emotions or the emotional resonance related to future events. Tour guide explained resonance theory of emotional amplitude and applied an active stance, with forward propulsion of the guided tour as directed by the Manual, as prescribed under the Act. Tour guide promised that the continuation of the tour was the best way of answering the Subject’s persistent questions. Tour Guide Tolophi notes to the Octagon that some problematic emotional resonance may not have been completely eliminated and understands that the emotional outsourcing will continue until no such feelings or traces are left in the Subject.]

The fact that you still have any questions about the scientific alignment of your own energetic life synergies and the organisation of life principles as designed by the Octagon with your full, if unacknowledged, approval suggests the need to
move quickly to further viewing rooms, where you will engage in these processes further.

[The subject became transfixed by the stimulation of the glass against their body. Tour guide proceeded to here named viewing room 3 to extract any residual primal impulses.]

This room again, like all the others, is subject to you. Enacted by your will. On your behalf. For your betterment and the progress of the greater Octagon society as a whole.

[Subject is seated on a red velvet couch and offered wine and indulgences (physically processed by viewing room 1 subjects, and emotionally by viewing room 2 subjects) as prescribed under the Act for this section of the tour. The tour guide agrees and undersigns that he/she participated/facilitated only in so much as is necessary for the fulfilment of the tour. Signed: Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888. The tour time consumed in this room is admitted as six tour days and seven tour nights. A particularly frisky subject. Below is not an approximate of all the adventures of impulse entered into but only of the transgressions or immediate explanations that applied in this viewing room, in accordance with the Act.]

It is important to understand that the sex that you watch which you are a party to, the blood that you spill in this room — yours and others — and the degradations that you effect, Subject #19819888, are made and done in accordance with your desires.

Your reaction to the ____ fucking the ____ , while for you only cerebral at this stage, was noted.
Your inclusion of a hostage scenario was noted. By you. As was your unknowing attempt to escape while you watched subjects perform the acts that you unknowingly and knowingly requested. The scene involving your mother, for example. Or your high school enemy. You witnessed these in fulfilment of your wishes and impulses. The scene you enacted on a clogged roadway was duly actioned as to your direction.

[Subject spent the maximum allowable amount of tour-guide time in viewing room 3. The Subject offered no primal, bodily or emotional responses, however some reactions persisted. The majority of time was spent reviewing one scene from the Subject’s viewpoint repeatedly. Many different angles were requested. Extraction of thought impulses occurred per the requirements of the Act. The processing of the impulses was undeniably still occurring on an alternate extraction strata (view rooms 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8), as has been evidenced before under the Octagon Tour Guide Directives. The tour guide acted with appropriate self-control at all necessary times. The Subject was transported to viewing room 4 at the appropriate and final tour-guide time limit.]

Your puerile sexual and primal needs sated, here lies the repositories of your dreams and fantasies that do not contain an overarching element of sexual gratification or murderous violence or deeply acted upon anger, pride or envy.

[Subject spent 85 seconds in the dreams and fantasies viewing room – a small percentage below average of the tour-guide time limit prescribed for this section of the tour. Subject was engaged in altruistic acts for a limited time and a small fantasy involving a boat on a green sea for most of the rest of the allowable time limit. There was also a kitten prop and a flying sequence. Fifteen seconds of allotted time was spent playing other people’s video games. A fantasy of meeting the Subject’s other self was neatly packaged in the final dream and fantasy sequence.]
[Subject continues to engage in nagging and unreasonably perceptive questioning of the Tour Guide Tolophi. Tour Guide Tolophi requests an injunctive relief, available under s. 8, subsection 888 of the Act, to bypass to view room 7 immediately to stem the tide of energetic material emanated by the Subject's brain and the heart's electromagnetic residue.]

{The Octagon denies the request. ☺}

[Tour Guide Tolophi acknowledges and thanks the Octagon for their generous decision. Tour Guide Tolophi venerates his misunderstandings of the Act in a series of Salute to the Octagon exercises while the Subject is frozen in transition. Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888 requests a continuation of his active service to the Octagon and delivers an apology in effusive terms as set out by the Obsequies written under s. 101 of the Act.]

{Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888 is granted an immediate resurrection of his tour of duty service for subject #19819888. No further penance required. At this stage. ;) ]

[Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888 resumes his tour. The Subject is taken (physical restraints are used on subjects in view room 1 to aid in processing physical compliance) into viewing room 5. Subject is strong-willed although physical, emotional, primal and fantasy processes have been evacuated. Subject requires psychological shepherding as prescribed under the 'Subjects Unwilling or Anti-Acquiescent to the Total Extraction of the Subject' Rules as prescribed under the 'Difficulty with Difficult Subjects' section of the Protocols, as recognised by the Act. Subject is moved into the viewing chamber after a tour-guide frozen debit time limit has been accrued of five hours. Tour Guide Tolophi # 19799888 admonishes himself and has taken the lost time from his own useful time limit.}
He apologises again to the Octagon, and in reverence has performed as many Salutes to the Octagon as possible in the dead time.]

{The Octagon notes Tour Guide Tolophi # 19799888’s efforts in guiding an ungrateful subject through that subject’s extraction and outsource procedures. The Octagon acknowledges the offer made by Tour Guide Tolophi # 19799888. The Octagon does not acknowledge or recognise failure. ☺.}

[The Subject is woken and then suspended in the timeless chamber of viewing room 5. In the Subject’s amniotic bubble, the Subject is able to pull on any of the threads that connect the Subject with any version of the Subject from the past, present or future. These threads and webs extend across the entirety of the timeless chamber. The Subject begins at first to amplify certain moments and memories. To investigate the Subject’s other lifetimes. The Subject begins to be overwhelmed. Subject’s neural networks are unable to comprehend the matter of the Subject’s own existence. The many overlapping and continuous projections exhaust the Subject’s infinite potential once and for all. The availability of potential, past and all probability have the desired effect.

Subject disengages from a belief in alternate or any realities. On the available data, view room 2 subjects enacted a scream sequence unknown to the Subject. View room 1 subjects worked with the elevated heart rate and anxiety attack. The collapse of the Subject’s timeframe ensured that view rooms 3 and 4 have become almost permanently evacuated. A final fantasy of escape was enacted in view room 4. Subject’s choice to disengage by ejecting from the chamber consolidates Subject’s confinement in this place at this time on this date. It collapses the available choices, as prescribed under the Act, to a defined finite linear stream.
This choice ensures a greater commitment by the Subject to the goals and functions of the Octagon, even if the Subject is unaware of this stronger commitment. Subject’s choice to eliminate Subject’s past, future and other potential manifestations ensures that the Subject will continue more compliantly with the tour and the final extraction, as prescribed under the Act.

[Subject is moved after a brief physical resuscitation of the Subject’s physical self in view room 1. Now alert, Subject is moved into the next viewing room. It is usually viewing room 6 that provides an inherent danger for the Subject to get lost and not return to the tour. Tour Guide Tolophi will take all necessary precautions as prescribed under the Viewing Room 6 Protocols.]

You have done very well, Subject #19819888. Your commitment to the project of your self-development and final extraction has been noted. You will be reborn. You will become a contributing and devoted member of the Octagon. You will be welcomed not as you are but as you will be.

You are here advised to let your spirit roam freely. To rediscover and then discard any beliefs that may have intentionally or unintentionally corrupted your core soul data. If any spiritual beliefs are imprinted and left unchecked, your loyalty to the Octagon may come into question. Your ability to choose for yourself the things that you have already chosen will be conflicted by notions of higher wills and purposes, or the unravelling of the central place in your life of the life-giving Octagon. That is The Octagon that you have elected to feel, think, bleed and breathe for you, on your behalf. The Octagon will also believe for you, on your behalf, as you agreed to in your Contract with the Octagon. Signed as it was by you when you had no choice but to make the choices that you made – which have of course led you to be here at this place, at this time, on this date.
Your spirit is energy. Energy imprinted with your core soul data, particular to you. You are, like all subjects, comprised of atoms and molecules buzzing and searching for your truest form.

In viewing room 6 you will have the chance to free your form. Viewing room 6 is set up to stimulate all the atoms and molecules that make you Subject #19819888. They are encouraged to seek out the truest form of you; of course this is the you that is recognised by the Octagon. This process is similar in metaphysics to a little bang. Your core data gift will be donated to the Octagon and we thank you for your service.

You will, in this free form, Subject #19819888, also be able to select and eliminate any beliefs that have thus far hindered your full evolution into a citizen reborn to the Octagon. This room will also align you to the tasks and functions that you will be conducting on behalf of the Octagon once you have completed all the extraction processes that you assigned to the Octagon. Here you will decide your soul's purpose. Choose wisely. Of course, the choice is not your own. Your core soul data, once harvested and interpreted by the Octagon, will reveal your designation for active service within the Octagon per s. 12 of the Act.

[Tour Guide Tolophi notes that viewing room 6 would be dangerous to anyone but a single subject. For this reason, Tour Guide Tolophi left the bridge room and returned to the viewing desk. Subject proceeded on their own into viewing room 6. There was an explosion of infinite colour. The data that the tour guide was able to collect at this time noted several competing belief imprints on the core data; institutional and metaphysical. This differed from the Subject's public stance and affirms the position of the Octagon that core data can be imprinted by various and nefarious sources. Having ensured that the Subject's physical, primal, emotional and other sensory or memory processes were removed, there
remains a lingering amount of energetic disloyalty to the Octagon. It was assumed that once the Octagon has captured the core soul data for its energy, light and resources, that the Subject, depleted, will then be more inclined to appreciate that their choices have led them to a belief, strong and whole, in the work that the Octagon does on behalf of this and every subject.]

{The Octagon does not ask for Tour Guide Tolophi’s assumptions. ☺}

[The core data suggests that a corner of the soul was strongly attached to curiosity, a Designated Undesired Quality (DUQ) as defined in the Act. Tour Guide Tolophi suggests an appropriate assignation for Subject #19819888 may well be a memory-sorter or, if the subject proves unable to curtail this continued DUQ, then as a primal feelings actor in view room 3. The Subject, then a subject, would be able to relieve another Subject’s curiosity and help in making the Octagon a safer and more unified society.]

{The Octagon does not ask for Tour Guide Tolophi’s suggestions on Subject #19819888. The Subject will be delivered into the Subject’s appropriate assignation after full completion of the extraction tour. Please continue to outsource Subject’s final cognitive processing capabilities. ☺}

[Tour guide resumes at the hour that it resumes on the day that it resumes. Subject is taken into viewing room 7.]

You have alighted into viewing room 7. You are able to touch the hologram of your own brain. You may ask as many questions as you want and watch the hologram of your brain light up. The processing of all your cognisant, subconscious and primal functions, your nervous system and imagination retain their last holds here. I can see on the available data that the subjects in your
viewing rooms 1 and 2 are in a state of panic. You may no longer fully understand, as your mental extraction procedure has already begun.

[Subject asked innumerable questions and watched and unrecorded the processes, growing less cognisant as the questioning continued and the fluorescence of the hologram grew stronger. Tour Guide Tolophi asked the Subject the coded 10 questions prescribed under the Regulations. The questioning started with complicated nuanced conundrums and ended with the final question: What does two plus two equal? Subject performed admirably and in accordance with the known outcomes for mental processing extraction procedures. Subjects’ final answer was inaudible but the Subject gestured 42 carrots. This was interpreted by Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888, according to The Manual of Decoding Fragmentary Human Communications of Meaning Via Body Language in the Absence of Language or Other Mental Processes, as prescribed under the Act. Subject was still able to fall on the Subject’s knees and clasp their hands together at the foot of the tour guide after the last question. This occurred without direction and is a surprising and resilient reaction by the Subject after all processes, except the last, have been outsourced successfully. An immediate Room 8 extraction was required under the Poses Drawn from Humans in Extreme Crisis Protocols, as directed by the Act. Subject is moved to viewing room 8 for extraction and redesignation.]

I am singing to you now, Subject #19819888, because you can’t decipher these words but for their resonance. The tune is harmonising with the last place within you that might be considered human.

I will sing to you the story of your life and the Other subject, that is you, in the chamber that you can see behind the glass will then sign your name on the Contract and you will accept your new roles and duties as a fully outsourced and reborn subject of the Octagon. You will resign yourself in your current form. You
will be reborn as the Other subject that is you, made up of your extracted and reprocessed atoms, into your new form.

The Octagon is waiting. The Octagon will give you a name and a home and a purpose.

The Octagon welcomes you, Subject #19819888, not as you are but as you will be shortly.

[The Subject is watching the Other subject. Tour Guide Tolophi continues in accordance with the Act to sing the story of the life of the Subject to the Subject, using uncomplicated melodies to not confuse the Subject. At this time, it is Tour Guide Tolophi’s view that all extraction and outsource functions and processes to date have been successful. The shell of Subject #19819888 is ripe for its last procedure.]

[The Subject continues to stare at the Other subject. The Other subject behind the glass in viewing room 8 begins to lower a hand to sign the Subject’s Contract. Parts of the Subject begin to shimmer and fade. An elbow, then a shoulder. The tour guide continues to sing. A successful extraction is almost complete.]

[Tour Guide Tolophi watches the Subject watch itself and it is disconcerting to see the Other subject behind the glass now drawing flowers on the Contract. The Subject has ceased to fade.]

The Other subject behind the glass begins to slowly disappear. The flowers begin to disappear. The Contract begins to disappear.
Tour Guide Tolophi takes immediate action to resolve the situation and sings louder at the Subject. The Subject has raised an indefinable resistance. The Subject’s Octagon self, the Other subject, in view room 8, disappears completely. Tour Guide Tolophi is aware that the Octagon does not accept failure. Subject #19819888 has once again failed to outsource hope.

{The Octagon received the report and findings provided by Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888 on Subject #19819888. The Octagon does not acknowledge failure. A re-extraction procedure is ordered. Immediately.}

[Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888 paralyses the Subject #19819888 with the Octagon memory slumber formula, in accordance with the Act. Tour Guide Tolophi awakens the Subject in order to recommence the extraction tour. Tour Guide Tolophi thanks the Octagon for its kindness and many chances and acknowledges the Octagon’s extreme benevolence. Tour Guide Tolophi will succeed.]

{The Octagon does not acknowledge chance, as the Tour Guide knows, having been here before. Please continue with the Subject #19819888’s 8-room tour. Tour Guide Tolophi # 19799888’s service is marked incomplete. The clock is reset to this time on this date.}

[Subject will, pursuant to s. 8 of the Octagon Colonisers Act 2035, undergo full assessment and extraction procedures. (4821) Reported by Tour Guide Tolophi #19799888]

Subject #19819888, congratulations on your choices. Welcome to the Octagon.
3. The Sublime:

Experiments in Terror and Awakening

1. Story – dedicated to Dennis.
2. Place
3. Artforms – dedicated to my Dad who edited this story.
4. Place
5. Story
6. Place
7. Story
8. Place
Story

This is not a cautionary tale. But hopefully, like all stories, it will resonate. Somewhere. She has many names. You probably know her as ____. This is a story that you know well in the blood that fills your veins, in the soul muscle twitch of your core. A story set eons ago, which still applies today. It is how Theia came to be the woman that she is, that she always has been and forever will be. Story and time being what they are, this is a part of a bigger relay race. Can you blame me for wanting to tell such stories, to make sense of the cycle? A seemingly limitless, relentless cycle?

In the beginning of this version there was sky and land and a tree and a river and a plant and its fruit and space. The spirit then created animals and, eventually, a man. The man, not being able to see above or beyond the tree and the plant and its fruit and space and animals, imagined that he was the first ever conscious being to inhabit the place. The spirit watched on.

It was amused, initially, by the man’s resulting attempts at corralling order where there already was a system, imagining new philosophy where his limits, and loneliness, precluded his innate understanding. Eventually it grew tired of his stomping and his desultory attempts at shaping a world for himself. He could not feel the thunder rolling toward him or the rain it guided to nourish the land. He could not work with the tools already at his disposal. He needed a guide and an inspiration and a reason for his existence; the spirit looked in upon itself. It drew a feather from its ephemeral wings; the spirit plucked an atom from its heart and a leaf from the pulsing hum of its mind. It sang a tune that cannot be translated here, music being of the angels and transcending the written word. The spirit tore the blue of the sky and the green of the plants and cradled from the vibrant warmth at the heart of the animals that it had previously born.
The man was woken by a cool finger at his cheek. A woman stared down at him. He was frightened but drawn to the creature before him. She beckoned him to rise and follow her. She showed him the sunrise and how to gather the vegetables and berries and fruit, and how to capture the water that had rained down while he slept. She awoke in him a strange longing. The spirit watched on, transfixed by the alchemy that it had enlivened. This woman, in tune as she was with the passing of what we now call time, could seek out what was growing, what needed nurturing and what needed to be cut for the place to keep flourishing.

The man watched and grew and learned. He saw the way the woman merged with the twilight and the way her body took on the shape of the moon, expanding and contracting as months passed. He was happy, for a time. Then he began to grow restless. He wanted more. He wanted not only to mimic her – but desired her fullness and wanted to be in possession of, or at the very least in control of, her magic. The spirit maintained a curious distance.

The man wanted. He craved the sanctuary and respect that the woman gave to tree and plant and sky and animal and stone. He grew a small hard knot in his chest because it was she and not he who could whistle tunes of life and solace to the very earth, of which he had thought himself in charge, ignorant as he was of the spirit. He became jealous of the time the woman spent with the river and the moon and the sun and the creek and the roots of the trees that were now beginning to spread out across the space. His original systems were no match for the energy that she vibrated, that she conjured.

One night, after she had bid farewell to the setting sun and had made way for the moon to pour its half-ladle of milky ink across the sky, he hatched a plan. He waited for her and she came to him as she did some nights, laden with provisions and her abundance. He took her throat in his hands. It was smooth
and long as the slippery weeds in the nearby creek. He squeezed while he stared into her eyes. He watched as his strength folded her power in half. He felt full in a way that he never had before.

Her body crumpled and collapsed under an emotion that she could not understand; the limits of her intuition expended, he forced her back into the earth. Her blood spilt a warm, slack, slow throb against his skin. The earth drank her in and the man, jarred and spent, tried to reclaim her even as she disappeared, folding into the dirt and leaves and roots and berries that she had once coaxed into brave appearance. He grabbed and yelled and screamed. A most painful awakening. The last remnants of the first woman hardened into hard red gems. Immediately a tree burgeoned from the red, glass-littered ground, its fruit round, the colour of blood.

A scarlet-coloured feather now adorned the spirit’s wings. It cried so many tears that several oceans were created overnight. It imagined a reckoning for the man but was too distraught to concentrate. The spirit lifted the great weight of guilt and placed it, severe as a tonne of ore, deeply into the earth’s crust. It spent several days communing about the violence with the other spirits of greater beyond. The spirit received no answers, only compassion for the life and the destruction that it had created. The man continued to wander across this world and in a desperate futility, feeling the core of his own loneliness, he clawed at his flesh and proffered up to his unknown creator one of his own ribs. Never again, he thought, will I act again as I have done. A rib was placed into the earth and the spirit cried out. A river of lightning split the skies.
21 January

Omniscient culture, she thinks as the plane pulls over the endless stretch of desert. An ancient culture that didn’t have sky wings had encapsulated the forever horizon in artwork, born from the visions and dreams of ground-connected astral travellers, over thousands of years. Long before technology and geographic surveys.

The dots and shapes of an Aboriginal artwork mirrored the terrain below her window as the wing dipped and the big rock smashed up out of the earth. The flight attendants continued their unceasing diatribe about a previous night out and there were some expelled breaths as the plane lurched around to land. Cameras, and expectations, were shuffled by the passengers. She was glued to the porthole framing her arrival at the heart of a country that she could never quite feel was her own, and yet she didn’t know where else to call home. Home is where the heart is. Here was the stretched-out blood-pumping stone muscle of her national identity. For so long it had just been a distant, beautiful picture, photoshopped online and in catalogues.

Overseas, other travellers would explain their profound epiphanies and connection stories to a land that was her passport nationality and her birthplace. Connected as she was to a history of invasion, the prickles of her doubt ran deep. And here she was to witness; to experience and reflect. “It’s truly Gothic. The place just didn’t want us there,” she remembered a haunting, long-limbed man once telling her. She wasn’t sure whether the rock would embrace or reject her. Whether she was sufficiently equipped to truly appreciate it.

She looked out the plane window.
She witnessed shapes amassed below as if the gods and goddesses had upended and rained down a pantry of large utensils and moving shapes embedded into the earth. Out of the red and yellow and green she made out the swampy spines of a forest of crocodiles climbing out of the sand and through the desert. Saucepan craters and armies of skinny green brush knives were clustered and dispersed over infinity. She felt small.

01 January
The end of a relationship packed in not yet dusty storage. The job and study efforts to get her on the plane had been rushed; she had been drowning, not waving. This chapter could be the start of finding her feet but her legs were still jelly and her heart was shifting in aimless drift. “Watch out for the desert. It opens your third eye. It can feel raw,” a friend had cautioned her before she left.

22 January
“It’s a great town. How long’re-ya here for?” The clerk behind the desk asked. She explained it was only brief, a mere few months. “Ah yes.” He smiled at her kindly. “That’s what I said, too ... Twenty years ago.” His smile lingered on his face and took on a small menace. “Once you’re here, you either love it or hate it.” It felt like a challenge. The new urban acolyte was here and to be tested.

23 January
Would she last the distance? Would she be desert people? Would she cope without her bullshit and soy chai three-quarter lattes and arty-farty coastline city mates? The answer was a smug ‘No’ in people’s eyes as they looked her up and down, taking in her hyped-up speech and patronising ill-fitting idea of what desert clothes look like. She itched in patterned cotton. She wore clothes that she never would have imagined in her city life and laughed along with the smug-eyed at her “desert preconceptions”. She arrived with illness closing over in her throat, like a hand clenching. Her mouth not able to form the words she
wanted to. She sweated and gasped to catch up with the uniform short hand. Whitefella ways and blackfella ways and all the “cultural training” that could have been a part of her earlier national education. It felt rushed and inadequate. She used her urban hippy speak to ingratiate herself; “I’m just grounding,” she dripped. The retort was sharp: “There’s no time for ‘grounding’ here. You hit the ground running.” A board member told her on the first day.

24 January – 24 July
Thereafter, conversations were peppered in meeting minutes and acronyms and the speech of bureaucrats buoyed by their importance as “service providers” to “consumers” and “clients”. Every specialisation has its lingo. The town itself began to feel like a riddle. If you drove out one end, you returned through the gap porthole to its entrance. Everyone knew everyone’s business.

Her shared office became a hub, like every other office, to discuss colleagues and gossip, and she wondered what was being said about her between neighbouring dusty doorjambs. It was not going to be pretty based on the snippets she overheard. “Been here for five minutes. Noooo idea.” “F’ing useless, and there’s funding cuts.” “Remember Anita? Did you hear she’s now try-in to be a big fancy Sydney barrister.” “What a F’ing numpty.” There was an unrestrained nastiness at work, visible like globs of gummy milk skin clawing at the surface. Joy at another’s fall can bolster you against your own weaknesses. A guilty or contemptuous look would sometimes pass over a turned shoulder in her general direction. She would smile dumbly back like Bambi in freeze-frame. Office politics was a professional art here.
Artforms

I am ushered in by a research associate. She pitches forward, head and eyes looking to the floor, as she introduces me. His Honour’s chambers are not opulent but rather busy and over-accessorised with trappings of office. I’ve been invited around for a collegiate drink. My opponent, Nicholson QC, looks like his collegiate drink started a few hours ago. His cheeks are rosy and full.

“What’s your poison?” enquires Judge Worther.

“Whisky, on the rocks,” I reply.

The Judge gifts me with a barely perceptible tilt of the head by way of reply. He moves to a corner of the wood-panelled room and with a few deft movements of his hands, an oasis of glass and liquor is revealed. I try not to register any kind of reaction. I am well trained at this. Nicholson QC occupies one of the plump green chairs resting in front of the Judge’s mahogany desk. He looks into the middle distance. He is well trained in condescension: “Anitaaar, how are you?” He turns his neck towards me, without any effort to shake hands or face me. I look past him.

“Very well, thanks Peter. You?”

“Ah. It’s Thursday and I’ve had a gutful. A gutful. Been in court … in Canberra. For the last three weeks. Cordon. You know what she’s like … don’t you?”

I do not take offence at this light taunt. I have appeared before Justice Cordon, many times. I respect her as one might a magnificent lion that enjoyed a diet of magic mushrooms in its youth, now completely unpredictable. Her Honour had always been one step ahead of the pride. The pride didn’t always accept or
forgive her success. She manages her Court by generating an unrelenting sense of unease. Woe betide the unprepared. She eats flaccid advocates, on toast, for breakfast.

"Keeps you on your toes though Peter, doesn’t it?" I counter.

Worther J snorts into the drinks he is preparing. Nicholson QC rolls his already red eyes and smooths his mauve tie across the undulating waves of his torso.

“It’s no connoisseur’s brew, Anita,” the Judge informs me: “Only blue label, I’m afraid. But on the rocks just the same.”

“Good enough for me, Judge,” I say.

Judge Worther is a tall wiry white-haired man with eyebrows alive with directional angst. He hands me the crystal tumbler and ushers me toward the second plump chair next to Nicholson. I know this is a cat and mouse game. The refugee case we have been invited here to discuss presents some potential judicial challenges. I understand that. I still remember the ashen face of my government instructor as she rehearsed the events that had led to this case. Political hot potato at its worst.

Nicholson QC is squat, meaty, silver-haired and impeccably dressed. He only takes on cases that pay extremely well or deliver a profile profit. This time around it is the latter; a golden opportunity to correct his tough, uncompassionate image. He knows the mileage dividend, if he plays it right. It could be enormous. It is rumoured he took the case on the basis that while his legal arguments would likely lose him the case, the moral outcry would draw him that desired profile hit. I am, not for the first time in my life, on the wrong
side. Outpourings of heartfelt public opinion favour Nicholson’s client. And my personal value system sides with that opinion.

Directly behind Judge Worther’s leather chair is a large and original Frederick McCubbin artwork. In it, a man hacks at the bush surrounding him as if he is trapped and unlikely ever to find his way out. A woman in a corner of the work, in the distant background, looks directly out at the viewer as if the horizon has long ago swallowed her hope. She waves something toward the distance. She is not expecting her man to come home. Ever. She is alone but I think I can make out other faint shapes of figures in the bush. I am cursing myself for not wearing my glasses.

I have not been invited to Chambers by Worther J before. I have only heard of his penchant for Australian art through knowledgeable colleagues, and from a few articles written by him as a celebrity art critic. I am tempted to turn around to look at the wall behind Nicholson and me. I resist. There, so the silky whispers intimate, hang a ‘Ned Kelly’ Nolan, all black mask and determined eyes; an ‘Alice’ Blackman, surreal and haunting; Hester’s stretched ‘Lovers’ and an austere, unsentimental Drysdale presenting human figures in slight scale against the background of the harbour in years gone by.

Beside the Chambers entrance is a famously tortured Albert Tucker work that no one seems able to name. The eyes some remember. For others, it is the mouth. The disfigured face and contorted figure in the painting confront the departing visitor to the Judge’s Chambers. This was a one-off opportunity to attend this unusual judicial gallery.

“Sweltering, isn’t it?” Judge Worther opines as he looks languidly out through the window. His skin is thinly scraped over his skeletal frame. Perhaps he would melt if directly exposed to sunlight.
"Outrageous," I volunteer.

"Well hardly that bad, is it Anita? Hardly outrageous. Perhaps a tad uncomfortable, outside, but not exactly desert conditions, eh? We should leave the hyperbole for the courtroom, no?" Nicholson finishes outlining my limits, and flicks a tiny smile at the Judge. Nicholson lightly taps his top-crossed leg as if he were listening to a jazz radio station.

My mind drifts back to my childhood. My brother had a rancid temper. He would occasionally burst out that he just wanted to "smash" something. He'd occasionally settle for my computer or moneybox. I never had that feeling. In my professional life as an adult, I noticed a small change. But, I reminded myself, feelings and thoughts are not actions. I smile icily at Nicholson and sip the blue label letting the flavour roll over the tongue I am biting.

A dull silence stretches out. Judge Worther leans back in his chair and swivels slightly, left and right, left and right. He waits as a seasoned campaigner before picking up his tools. Nicholson's leg-tapping continues like a drunken woodpecker. I place my drink on the edge of the desk. Nicholson leaps to life and pushes a coaster forward at me. This is a surprisingly rapid gesture for such a stolid man. A colleague of mine claims to have seen him play squash so perhaps Nicholson has more moves up his sleeve than I give him credit for.

I accept the coaster, replacing my drink on it carefully. I adjust my attire before slowly raising my glass. I nod once into the silence. Worther continues swivelling left and right, left and right. Nicholson resumes his shell, leaning back into the crumpled silhouette indented into his chair. I imagine him stroking an invisible beard. The air-conditioning hums. I hear the associate's polite high-
pitched phone voice, muffled behind the thick door. A clock ticks. Tumbleweed may have rolled across the desk.

Worther’s continuous chair-swivelling has made the veins in his arms visibly rise and tighten, grasping at blood. Nicholson decides to up the ante.

“Well, now, Anita, as I’ve said, in court all week. Perhaps it’s best we get straight down to business. To brass tacks. Bare bones. It’s obvious I can’t win.”

I hear Worther’s chair crack, not in protest at the cliché-ridden comment, but at the directness of the point. He unspools forward onto his desk: “I’m not sure this is appropriate talk for Chambers, Peter …” The admonition is well rehearsed.

I look from one to the other. And wait. They know my position. It is the same as it has been for any number of refugee cases in which I have represented the Minister. Plaintiff X145 failed the test. He simply did not have, or could not establish, a well-founded fear of persecution for a Convention reason. He is not a refugee in the eye of Australian applied law. He is going back.

I had read Plaintiff X145’s wretched testimony. The country information he had provided was patchy but accurate enough. But he could not explain his political position sufficiently. The atrocities he alleged looked exaggerated. He had been unable to identify the difference between different communist doctrines.

Nicholson QC had stood on the court steps addressing the media, ‘identifying but not identifying’ his poor client who would be tortured or killed if deported to his country of origin. The media coverage and political mileage put Nicholson at centre stage. The advocate for a good cause. It was the first and only time he had acted in this role. Plaintiff X145 was the brother of a former freedom fighter in his country. The brother had been summarily executed. His wife raped. His
four-year-old daughter murdered. The Minister would be responsible for sending him to his death. Nicholson was adept at the one-line grab; a sound-bite specialist. The Minister’s office retaliated via its media affiliates. One country’s freedom fighter is another country’s terrorist. Australia should not have to work out which is which.

Before Nicholson could continue, on cue, Worther’s associate knocks three times on the door.

The top of her head pokes into the room: “I’m terribly sorry to interrupt you Judge but I need your attention on an urgent matter.” Worther raises his frame from the chair and now – clicked into upright – he excuses himself and leaves the room.

Nicholson waits until the heavy oak door has floated into place as the collegiate fog evaporates.

“Anitaaraar, Anitaaraar, this needs its day in court, obviously, but what we don’t need, neither you nor me, are surprises. Worther will do what he does best. He will apply the law, black-letter style. My client has a problem. I know that. You know that.”

Nicholson turns to face me, smoothing and recrossing his legs.

“Then why are we here, Peter?” I ask. “Why did you accept a case that you know you can’t win?” I know the answer already.

Nicholson drones on: “You know as well as I do that there will be no shortage of attention on this matter. The activists need a poster boy and 145 is their pick for the moment. Even in this political environment. I have to hand it to my friends
in government, they've stopped the arrivals, but your old mob, well they left a legacy, didn't they? Unusual situation for us both to be in, this.”

The reason I have been briefed to represent the Minister in recent times is no secret. I spent many years working as a lawyer in various community organisations before becoming a barrister. I defended and aided many refugees seeking asylum in Australia. I won – and lost – some high-profile cases. I changed teams. The professional cab rank rule requires me to take the next paying client. The Minister’s team get to me first. I have reached into the deep pocket of federal funds. My hands are stained.

The faint shapes in the McCubbin painting begin to firm up. One of them raises a hand that points accusingly at me.

I tear my eyes away and turn to face Nicholson. “It’s a matter of looking at each case, Peter. In this one, you are drumming on the bandwagon; as far as I can see there will be no surprises. Your client’s appeal will, as you say, fail. X145, or Jhon – your client’s name, Peter – was not interviewed with an interpreter present in his original interview. But that’s the way it is. He has no refugee status under the law.” I hear the words come out of my mouth. They taste like fire. I sense piercing eyes behind Ned’s mask. Alice grows ever smaller.

I remember the small rooms in the detention centre where I interviewed my former clients. The stale air. Their haunted expressions. The last refugee that I represented anglicised his name to Sam. He told me his story. It was heartbreaking but I lost his case. He did not outline a clear enough trajectory in his history of events. I argued that the trauma of these events had affected his ability to recall the detail. He was a man of truth. But to no avail.
Sam, or Plaintiff B182, was a teenager. He had worked afternoons for his father on a subsistence farm. He followed his family's political and religious traditions. The group in power burned the family home down. His family continued for some months living in a shed. One day his mother and father were cut into pieces. They had been garishly reassembled as broken and blood-soaked scarecrows in the family's front yard. The children found them when they returned home from school. Sam's older sister took her own life that night. Sam gathered what little he could the very next day and fled to a border town before taking a rickety boat to Australia. He waited in a detention centre for three years before his case was assessed. By that stage his depression had left him highly stressed, incoherent and despondent. He was sent home. I began training to be a barrister after that. I thought I could do more. I lied to myself. That was eight years ago. The Tucker man whispers: “There is blood on thy face; how can the earth hide thee?”

“This case is not totally unusual, Anita,” Nicholson starts up as if about to make a speech. I cut him short: “What is it you want, Peter?”

Nicholson counters: “I understand that it is a losing battle but I feel that my client’s story should be told in the public arena of the court. I’m surprised at you. Really. I am.” Nicholson stares accusingly at me. Some of his chins flop and flap in my direction, blending into one another like a molten cascade. “What the situation calls for is that you allow his testimony to run in court, without objection. To be recorded. An impact statement, if you will. Surely you wouldn’t deny this small concession to my client, Anitarr?”

Anitarr. That is exactly how Sam used to pronounce my name. His hands were often crossed in his lap, just as Nicholson’s are placed now. But in there he was called B182.
The woman in the McCubbin is holding something. I can’t quite make out what it is. It could be a white hanky or a cloth or a blindfold that she has just taken from her eyes. Is that a spot on the cloth? I look away from the painting. The books lined along the shelf next to the painting are marked with letters and numbers. All the knowledge of a transplanted legal tradition – that usurped others’ country and culture – now used, jealously and defensively, against people fleeing persecution.

Worther J is sitting back behind his desk. I must have missed his stealthy re-entry. His hands are steepled and three protruding wrinkles across his forehead mirror this empty prayer gesture. Nicholson’s tie is falling flatter over his chest as he reclines deeper into his chair. I catch a surreptitious wink between them.

“It’s a matter of process, gentlemen,” I hear a voice say. I think the timbre is one I recognise as mine. “You will have your day in Court, as will Jhon. His appeal will fail. He will be returned. You, Peter, have made him a celebrity and the media in his home have no doubt followed the case. His safe return is impossible. He might die. Yet, he doesn’t know the ins and outs of a political science theory. Just like many who devote their lives to ideologies or ideas; what are the practical realities and politics that underlie people’s passions? No? I shall leave the hyperbole for the courtroom. A broken system is sending him back but, Peter, your hand is firmly on the pen that will sign his death warrant.”

Judge Worther looks as if he has choked on clotted cream. His decision is not a moral one. He is exempt from making that choice. His bulbous Adam’s apple marks its movement up and down his throat like a swimmer sending ripples through a clear stream. But I am not exempt. I have a choice. I decide it’s time to leave. The rules of engagement are clear. I have my own little private war to play out, to rediscover my lost path. Nicholson QC can sense the temperate room belies my emotional barometer. He looks agitated. His legs cross and recross. He
slides his hands down the sides of his expensive suit. I can hear the strategy internally reorienting.

The woman in the McCubbin behind Worther’s desk holds a page of a book out to me. On it are letters and numbers next to people’s names. It is a tally. A man hacks at the bush from which he will never escape. One of the shapes in the painting points the way out of this chamber. The other shapes form into faces and bodies; some that I know and recognise, others I have only heard stories about. Those I have helped. Those I have not. Sent home to countries more inhospitable than this place. Many buried in a waiting game, reach out.

“Thank you for the brew, Judge.” I nod brusquely at the pair of old accomplices seated before me.

As I turn, the Albert Tucker looms large on the wall beside the door. Thick rays of deep black and blue and red and orange paint pour off the canvas. The mutilated shape of the Tucker man condemns: “The blood, the blood! Ne'er will you hide within the chambers of thy heart!”

The figure looks exactly like a bleeding scarecrow.
Place

09 February
The reason for her position became clear. There were unused monies. There had been ... funding issues. Potential media stories about previous corruption were about to pop up in the papers. Welcome to the family. There was no shortage of “colourful Australian outback characters”. Nietzsche flashed briefly like a warning shot in her subconscious: beware interesting people. The more interesting they appear to be the more truly horrible they are. She imagined that some found her as interesting as she found them.

“It’s the end of the road for you here. We’ll break you in yet.” A busted carcass of a man grinned despair at the new recruit. These small, seemingly innocuous psychic violences his raison d’être. She floated up near the top of the fishbowl and began to count time differently. She became determined to never end up like this office golem. A symbol of the rotted-on underbelly requiring excision for the good of a better story.

20 February
The desert stretches shapes unsparingly over vast distances. She learned quickly that little cruelties can run rivers of blood and small kindnesses can open up mountainous wounds of immaculate tenderness.

06 May
She and her colleague arrive at the Government demountable. Another Government worker comes out from next door. "You two are brave ..." he starts laughing. Her colleague asks some questions and the two men walk away and talk in low voices. He turns back to her and motions at the other man, “He better tell you what’s been happening here at night; your choice if we stay.” The demountable building is, she is told, from a refugee centre. A girl died there. Her
sister, too. The girls turn the lights on and off at night and you can see the pair running through the rooms and opening doors. They don’t let you sleep well. They want you to help them leave. But they are trapped. Our new friend tells us he has been sleeping next door with friends, but suggests that perhaps with more of us staying, we will be alright.

07 May
We all leave in a hurry.

03 March
Inertia spread as the world spun faster around a place where time spooled its magic thread. Physics bend daily even as imagination is considered frivolous in the imposed bureaucratic atmosphere. New equations for tallying and being are tried out, tested, replicated and the town’s pulse expands and contracts around paydays and weekends. There is something to be said for stars and stripes based on usefulness. Or bonding over copious Friday night drinks. During her time, she and others had doubted her own ability to contribute meaningfully.

04 March
Her shallow imagining could not pierce the years of weight. The last massacre occurred here when? The right to vote? To live on your land? To control the interest in your land? Her knowledge is usurped, reversed, unfounded. She needs to listen to learn. She needs, like anyone, to use language to survive. Her throat is filled with layers of unused words; sometimes her colleagues helpfully stuff them back down for her. These unsaid queries, these almost said things, they build up and she cannot breathe.

17 May
It is after several grant documents, reports, presentations, meetings, conferences, consultations and ‘dialogues’ that the change begins to happen.
The desert boulders that balance on curious angles begin to fold and fade behind her eyelids at night. The desert is working on her subconscious. Her dreams start to firm into red and green dizzying swirls.

18 May

“Bleeding heart leftie latte-sipping overqualified wankers.” She is told about all the other arrogant wannabe “change-the-world types” that have cycled through here before her arrival. She disintegrates this other self that others think she is, that she probably is, and holds up the fragments to the spearing light. The sun breaks the hilarious caricatures into smaller pieces. She disintegrates and tries to find new forms.

10 April

A young girl is killed. The streets are quiet. For this day even the locusts do not jump but stay strewn across the street in a twitching river of legs and wings.

21 July

Some people felt compelled to stay for years. Others were righteous about their role – but not from land or culture could anyone else ever really understand a place that had existed before the controlling influence of a language of domination? Before linear time was sectioned up? Before a perverted version of history was birthed and tended to? There are no easy answers. Perpetual questions. And no magic government strategy that worked uniformly. Effort applied endlessly but haphazardly. And resilience like a beautiful secret. Fires that would burn centuries after disastrous attempts at control, born of knowledge and will that she was shown was inimitable and persevering. She touched out, tentative as a curious kitten, at the raw nerve ends of a powerful culture. Embedded as it was in layers of rhetoric, uncovered and united it could blow up the paradigm. *The leaders in community are real leaders*, she is told by a community elder, *we live family, land, connection, even if others cannot understand*
it. She tries to see, to listen, to hear, even as the land gives way under her feet.
She is a stranger here.
Story

What is this now? I hear you ask, and what does this have to do with the above meanderings? Well, as you know, in a world where replication and duplication is part of science and time is a burnt firework, you must be aware that we are a concentration and also a dilution of all that has come before us. And all that will enfold after us. Descended as we are from an initial wonder and horror combined, how can we reconcile these paradoxical elements?

In a kitchen. Once upon a time.

Theia is straining with a handheld grinder. She mixes onions and tomatoes and just the right amount of chilli. Food is rich alchemy, a necessity, which the modern world celebrates without attack. But this woman, whose hearth had calmed the wildest souls, was working as she often did, to create enough blachan for her plane ticket.

Theia was often asked to make her condiment recipes, and especially her special blachan, for union and birth and death ceremonies. Her desires for the fulfilment of all potentials had enhanced her food. Today she wasn’t sure how her creations would end up.

A young woman knocked timidly at Theia’s front door. The girl was tall and beautiful. But today, this quiet daughter was sporting a frown, a bruised cheek and a closed and swollen eye behind tinted sunglasses.

“Hey Theia …” Josie’s voice was timid.
Theia fought the urge to tear the sunglasses off and hold this young woman to her chest and embrace her precious energy with her protective own. It was not the way in these modern times. Theia waited without words.

Sometimes people came for help. Sometimes they came to talk. Sometimes they came to forget and sometimes they came because they knew that Theia wouldn’t beat out of them the words that they couldn’t afford to speak. She continued to grind the tomatoes and onions and chilli into the finest fragments before she would cook, adding shrimp paste and her secret ingredients.

“You going somewhere?” The young girl pointed at a suitcase Theia had got down from a high cupboard in preparation for packing. Theia nodded at Josie. She kept grinding.

“You going soon?” Josie asked.

Theia looked up and motioned her head at a calendar that adorned the fridge. It was one of those glossy generic prints with photos of children smiling innocuously at the camera, holding up fruits and plants that were not even growing in the local area. The council logo was stamped on the front. In blue ink on a little numbered square was written Theia’s meeting. A few days away.

“That’s good. Not today then. I mean, yeah . . .” Josie stalled.

Theia kept grinding. She wanted to mince the bones of the man who had hurt her Josie in the small handheld grinder. She gritted her teeth and wound the handle. She knew this blachan would have a different impact.

Her last lot was created after an event of great joy – a happy birth in the community, all the family joyous and relieved after the woman’s troubled
pregnancy. People had approached Theia after the last batch: how amazing the effects were, they all said. Community barbeques and family lunches for months afterwards were harmonious affairs.

The making of blachan, Theia believed, was the same as the making of a story or a life. It contains all the elements of what is in the maker and the receiver and also, elements of those who are affected by its eventual birth. The chemistry of creation, Theia used to say, is magical and organic, all at once.

“Can I have something to eat, please?” Josie looked at Theia’s stove with barely concealed desire.

Theia stopped twisting the small handle. She went over to a pot that she had been preparing for the children’s lunch. She tasted a dab, put her wooden spoon through one more time and turned to smile at Josie, who had taken a seat at the kitchen table in front of the grinder. Josie picked up the small handle and began to turn it listlessly. She kept her covered eyes low.

“I missed work today,” Josie whispered.

“I told them I was sick,” Josie said.

Theia kept stirring the simmering stew and listened.

“I said I probably wouldn’t be in this week. Mr Owens said I had better get a certificate if I was going to slack off. I mean, I haven’t ever taken a day off. Like, not in over two years. I can’t get a certificate till next week.” Josie buried her face further into the uncompromising surface of the table. “May reckons he’ll fire me if I don’t turn up all week.”
“He won’t fire you,” Theia answered, her back still turned.

Josie didn’t reply. She turned the grinder a bit quicker and sneaked a finger under the sunglasses to wipe her battered cheek. A small tear escaped and fell into the blachan bowl.

It was in this room that Josie had started drawing and painting. Josie made sketches in crayon and pencil, she also used ink and sometimes created fragile, beautiful watercolours. She lashed at canvasses in confident swirls of thick paint in bold colours, the shapes precise and abstract, layered or discrete. Josie combined new and old and explored different mediums. Her landscapes and visions, secrets and savage portraits built their own energy. Her work moved through people.

Her Power, Theia had once called it. Theia had given Josie a red feather when she was a teenager, a precious and unusual feather. Josie tied it around her neck and sometimes used this feather as a fine-pointed paintbrush. But she did less and less painting each year. Josie still dreamed of one day selling her artworks, having her own shows at funny little hole-in-the-wall galleries. She dreamed of travelling the world and exploring it through her art. Josie dreamed of flight. Of getting on a plane and not looking back. And she felt selfish for it.

“Aunt May said I can’t stay there if I’m not working. She said I’d be a distraction. Jem’s got a lot on. I don’t want to stay there anyway. I should probably just go in to the bank.”

Theia turned the stove off. She scooped today’s deliciousness into a bowl and got a spoon from the drawer. She turned to face Josie and set the meal in front of her, gently tapping Josie’s wrist away from the grinder.
“You can always stay here, of course,” Theia said.

Josie looked up from eating and smiled a quick, short smile. A few minutes passed. Theia looked away and out the window in the comfortable silence. Josie lunged at the last few mouthfuls in her bowl. She munched quickly and wiped her hand over her mouth and got up to take the bowl to the sink, still chewing and swallowing.

“I should be off. Thanks and everything. I just. I dunno …” Josie trailed off, shivering at the sink as she ran cold water over the dirty bowl. She didn't want to look at Theia. She felt embarrassed for even coming.

Theia sensed the change in mood and tried to get up to reach Josie. She wanted to hug her and tell her that there were options. That it would be okay. That Jem would get what was coming. She reached out a fraction too late. Josie settled the bowl with a clatter in the sink and moved to the door.

“Thanks, that was really great. Really yum. Please … don’t do anything. Please.” Josie hurried out the door before Theia could get around the table. The front door shut with a clatter.

This was not a watershed moment that preceded some unique change. An actual change would only occur if action and will collided. This was as old a story as the recipe for blachan or any creation. There are survivors and protagonists. There are, of course, ingredients that only know how to make their mark with force. There are moments when all the anger drops away and there is space to bring about change. Theia's mind was growling her reaction as she paced the kitchen; she was not in the space of will or action or reasoned collision.
As if in tune with Theia’s inner whirring, the grinder handle started to spin itself. Should she run down to May’s now? She had spoken with her once before, about her son Jem, to little avail.

The handle twisted faster and faster as Theia paced. Josie wasn’t Jem’s first girlfriend to turn up with a black eye. But no one else ever said anything. Jem had once buried a box of his tears in Theia’s front yard, in penance for an ugly act. He had promised never to hurt anyone again. In its place sprung a tree with small glassy berries. Inedible. Poisonous. Later, he had started dating Josie.

Theia had been worried. May had told her Jem was now a good boy and to settle her overprotective feathers. The toxic berries in Theia’s front yard had then begun to ripen, strangely, growing redder even as they shrivelled. Theia had tried not to meddle.

A dry metallic screech jolted Theia back. The grinder handle had spun so quickly that the last remaining remnants of the coarse mix were ground to dust. The kitchen was stretching and contracting with the blood pumping, thick and fast, in the veins of Theia’s wrinkled neck. The colours darkened into shadows around her.

The dust was starting up outside. It began to stroke the walls and ceilings. A storm was coming. A few voices bubbled out of the beyond and Theia’s door began to open and close with the regularity of excited hands clapping.

Theia’s heart was saved from a brittle explosion by arms wrapping around her waist and the faces at her table. Several of the children smiled up at her. There was a peculiar energy in the room. The children were subdued and chattered innocently in low voices as lunch was served. Theia hugged and scolded and laughed at their questions and chatter. A few hours later the bowls were
dripping dry and the pot was empty. Her lunch guests had long gone and the
dust outside was kicking harder at the small hollow of the kitchen. Theia felt her
heart skip a beat. She held a hand to her chest and tried to breathe deeply.

Theia finished her small batch of blachan. It had ground fine but there was less
than usual. She cooked it up with the shrimp paste and stirred the now fouled
mix. The ingredients were sticking together in tighter, fatter clumps. She
scooped the pungent condiment into small jars, a small battalion that lined up
across her kitchen table. She peered through the thin walls of glass at the
distorted rainbows that distilled in the oily top layers of the blachan.

The dust storm clawed and scratched and was now arcing up into full throttle. A
rush of garden shrapnel hit the heavy wood of the front door. Theia’s heart
stopped for a beat. She went and swept the curtains back in her front room to
check what had caused the battering. The garden was resisting the storm. Theia
saw, off in the distance, large pieces of roof tin cutting through the amorphous
rust cloud that engulfed the street. The hard berries flew off the shrub in Theia’s
front yard. They exploded against her house, pitting the walls and cracking the
windows. Theia found that some of the berries had pushed through cracks under
the door and in the wood. They dropped like small accusations on her front hall.
Bloody stains marked their impact. On impulse, Theia picked up a small handful
and went back to the kitchen.

Theia cloaked herself in a protective layer and grabbed the basket of jars. She
opened the front door and a howl of energy and dirt, and the detritus of a land
refusing to bear any more violence, erupted around her. Her fragile but
determined first steps seemed to carve out a short path before her. On the other
side of the road from Theia’s house a murder of crows pushed into the air. Their
screeching caws winged through her.
The community had tightened and was shuttered away. Theia shouldered the basket at her side against the fading light and inched forward. Theia's shadow flickered long in front of her. Curtains twitched as she passed slowly. The town watched her shuffling pilgrimage to her Josie.

A torrent of sharp grey rain peeled from the thick mess overhead. The houses drooped either side of Theia's path and melted into one another as she passed, like a series of messed watercolours. The few trees, bent down in battle, gleamed a hyper-bright brown and a fluorescent green against the deadening sky. Water stripped and naked, they resisted as much as they could. The earth began to settle and compact under foot as Theia trudged on.

When the storm had broke open, May had tried to unbend, move. She wrapped a blanket around Josie. She found a strength she did not know she possessed. Leaving Jem behind her, she opened the door. She picked up the cold body. May carried her out into the wild outside. She moved forward with Josie across her arms. May's walk was stilted and painful.

The rain fell heavily. Doors across the street and further down began to open. People came out. Men and women and children. They supported the weight. They carried and lifted. The huddle moved towards the opposing lone figure of Theia. The stretch of road was punctuated by their heaving breaths and the hands that clutched and slipped under each other. The rain drew in each one closer. Their feet were etching deep into the mud.

Theia and May and Josie and her bearers reached each other. The sky burst into deluge. Theia fell upon her daughter. She dropped her basket. She wiped and rubbed and wept and screamed and yelled and shook. Theia turned defeated. She resumed her lonely procession, this time back to her house.
As May watched them go, she picked up the basket. She held one of the jars up to the sky and noticed the dark red pits of glass floating on the surface. Her hands trembled and tears covered her face. She took first one jar and then the next. May smashed the jars down, one at a time, on the uneven wet road until the basket was empty.

The rain stopped. After the town’s people returned home, the doors and curtains remained closed. Night had fallen and not even the moon braved an appearance.

This ending is how it was.
Place

28 March
Before long, she is adopting the carousing language of positivity and change and challenge. If she doesn’t, she will roll up into herself; she is aware that she is a gravel stone in an endless plain of other small pebbles.

01 April
The cynicism starts to creep in to a fissure in the smooth surfaces of the tiny gravel stone. After all, she is just another blow-in on a contract, a tourist like any other.

22 February
As the white 4WD flings out onto the open road, the early-morning sun reflects back snippets of the violent neon of bird wings that scrape an inch from the windscreen. You can get lost in a city. You are gorgeously lost out here. The legs of bloated cows puncture the still loudness. Colourful vans and burnt-out cars sprout along the highway. She wakes with sounds of crickets and lizards and frogs that last night creaked and buzzed around the demountable building still clinging to her ears. Back on the road her colleague advises her, “You gotta beep at them to get them moving.” She grips the wheel tighter. “What are they?” She asks about the mass of hulking shapes on the road ahead. “Hawks”, he replies, “but we call them Bobs.” Their wings arc out in a fury as she hurtles the car straight at them.

29 January
“That’s where Falconio’s girlfriend was taken after she got picked up.” Some hours later, “People go missing around here all the time.” She looks outside at the flashes of crawling earth that creep stealthily to the edges of the highway, taunting visitors to step into the surprisingly green, dense abyss. “You got a
shovel in the back and a plan?” she jokes. He laughs back at her easily and turns up Led Zeppelin on the car’s CD player. He talks to her calmly as she passes her first few road trains and they laugh later, over a large roadhouse steak, at her white knuckles and swearing. He tells her his stories. She shares her own. They are both quiet while they watch the news.

25 February
“How come whitefellas can pull up on footy nights and buy their cartons and drink and we can’t? No coppers out front stopping them. Your laws are racist,” she is told. She muses that she didn’t write them. And is suddenly their paltry personification. But words written down and the ones said out loud and the actions of people are often different to the intentions behind an idea. And sometimes laws really are just racist.

04 May
“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah,” a woman says as she discusses domestic violence. “You’re not on the frontline. You don’t see.” She offers back a strained silence. She has seen that violence can happen to anyone, anywhere. Women and men and children, all around the world, are hurt. That can’t be acceptable to anyone. She opens up the word ‘acceptable’ and sees another box fitted tightly inside. The shock is seeing her own severed head inside, talking talking talking gibberish. The ears were cut off once. She tries to sew them back on.

07 February
She is told that there is an overlap on the Venn diagram. The circles crossing at that point into a shapely oval. It’s here that exists the overlap between white and black culture in Australia, she is informed. It’s in this space that you must work. She watches herself trying to reach it. Her hand looks hesitant. Looks wrong.
15 April
She tries to sleep. The red and green and yellow and black and white and brown
and orange and pink shapes jostle in her dreams. The overlapping wings are
hectic, wavering. A kaleidoscope of beauty and brutality. Flowing in all
directions. Bleeding into each other. She will lie down now on the earth. She
will feel it yield and then harden against her. Her arms are making false wings in
the desert earth. Her mouth tastes rust and ash. She is not home. She is not
unwelcome. She is a surface spectator to a much bigger match. The earth is
crowned by a star-studded stadium. A circle of time whistles in her ear. This is
not about you. Or about any one person. It’s a struggle much older and more
important than that.

09 May
“Here look,” he shows her. “My dreaming,” he explains. The exquisite history of a
time is opened up on a canvas the size of a postcard. The dots and circles rush
off the page and steal into her blood. She feels a trembling in her ankles and up
her spine. He is smiling at her, watching as she struggles to stay in it. Perhaps
this time has been lived before this very moment. Others, more deeply
connected, wiser, already have the knowledge of what will come next. Just keep
listening, she thinks in the half-way-there space between dissolving and
growing. She is still naive.

31 July
Her contract is finishing and people are starting to ask whether she will stay or
leave. She still needs to pay her respects at Uluru.
Theia is standing in her kitchen. There is a young girl knocking at the door. She wants to show her Aunt her latest artwork. Theia is proud and encourages her to not give up.

This girl grows into a woman. Beautiful lights echo in her eyes. There is always a patch of paint on her chin or cheek or eyebrow.

Josie has continued to paint and sketch. She has become a famous painter and drawer. Her works adorn rooms in places far and wide, here and there. Her work moves through people.

Josie now lives here and overseas. She is said to paint with a blood-red feather, a gift from her Aunt Theia.

At her latest show, a large canvas painting spills down the walls of the gallery. In it, four ghostly trees are depicted. They are the ones that mark the highway when you reach the centre of a dusty, far-away town. The trees are tall. Imposing. They cast no shadow. When anyone tries to cut one down it just grows right back in the same spot.

These trees have always been there. Their berries look too high up to pick, they are bright red but shrunken, like jealous faces. It is as if they haven’t dropped to the ground in decades, held in place by a reverse gravity. They are waiting for any lapse, but their continued rejection peels their ugly intent, layer by layer. They look, in the blinding sun, just like hard red glass.
Place

One Day Near Her End
She travels out alone to a gorge one day. It is deserted. She slips in and the water covers her. Completely as it would a small gravel stone like the ones that have always clawed at the banks of the whispering edges to this ancient chasm. She opens her eyes under water and cannot see. She feels gently pierced by an energy pouring through her and almost, at least a little bit more, awake. She pivots around and breathes as a plane passes distantly overhead. The sky above her opens into a vault, drawing her through the clear blue umbrella beyond.
4. The Uncanny:

Experiments with Doubles and Un-Homely Horrors

1. Lotion
2. Olivia & Harry
3. The Interview
4. A Game
5. Mumma Nursey
Lotion

Gwendolyn Jameson was humming a jaunty tune as she sipped her jasmine tea. She ran a single hand over the front of her suit skirt, smoothing out the creases that linen inevitably encouraged. She looked up at her mantle piece and stared hard at the photos of herself and her husband Gregory. A lifetime’s worth of memories, in a few confined frames, out of sequence. You did not have to be beautiful as a man to succeed, she noted grimly to herself.

Gwen stared down into her leafless teacup and realised that she was still wearing her large wraparound sunglasses. A ‘seniors moment’ perhaps, or just a sign that she was very tired, or maybe she didn’t want to see things in full colour at present. She placed her teacup on the antique sideboard and slipped the glasses off her nose, folding them up slowly to set them beside her. Also sitting beside her was a bottle of iridescent blue lotion. She was startled by its electric colour whenever she looked down at it. Gwen had been sneaking a look at it every now and then for the last 10 minutes.

She wondered what the cream would do. She could only hope. She stared back up at the wedding portrait; her dark hair and bright eyes and clear skin were faultless in the black and white photograph. Above the mantle was a painting of her by one of the artists that the couple had met overseas on one of her husband’s many postings. Gregory was now living in that same country, with his new family. The younger wife (whose hair was a blonde tangled mess), the two children (that contradicted his anti-children stance that he had held for most of his life), the farmhouse conversion and fresh produce-lined tables where he entertained his and Gwen’s mutual friends. Gwen still had the portrait and the memories of their shared time together. They echoed loudly in her gracious, empty house.
She pinched the loose skin on her wrinkled hands. It had a great amount of yield. Indeed as she had walked in that day she had glanced in the mirror in the entrance hall. Her stooped frame, her greying hair, her flesh disengaged from its thin frame like meat that has been boiled for too long. Her voice, once as beautiful as her face, now caught in her throat. Gwen did not sing out loud very often anymore.

She had tried, after Gregory left her, to stay upbeat. To visit friends and family. To avoid their pitying (or occasionally gloating) gazes. She had thrown herself even more heavily into her charity work. She joined a choir to give her a tune-up. There was only two things worse than being ugly, her mother used to tell her, and that was being useless or being bored.

She knew her once-admired looks had long faded but she felt that she had much to offer to the world. But there was a place inside of her that remained hollow. She filled it with more work. More social events. More Grey Goose vodka. More attempts to revitalise herself.

She had enough money to try chemical peels and expensive lotions, fancy facial treatments and had even consulted a cosmetic surgeon. Sitting in his waiting room she had seen once beautiful and yet still young women who had lost touch with reality. Their faces masked and impassive to a world full of pain and pleasure. Unnerved by this carnival of clown faces in the waiting room, she had gathered her handbag and left quickly. There must be some other solution more rewarding than aqua aerobics and less garish than a tonne of Botox pinpricks.

It was a dear friend who gave her hope. This friend had of late begun to look better, fitter, firmer and more elegant than ever before. Never acknowledged as a major beauty, she appeared to be reversing the landslide of age that all the other women and men were facing. Gwendolyn began to suspect that there was
something else at play other than a new type of mineral make-up. She watched her friend blossom and steal the admiring glances of the few still virile, age-appropriate single men who they encountered. With her friend’s glowing new looks came a glowing new confidence. Gwendolyn felt ashamed in her presence, and worse still, jealous of the attention her friend was receiving.

Gwen started to follow her.

After a few weeks, she had her friend’s habits down pat. The morning teas, workdays, shopping trips, visits to family, day looking after the grandkids were all kept to a regular schedule. This Tuesday, however, Gwen’s friend emerged from her house wearing an inexpensive raincoat and her walking shoes. They were quite unattractive padded brown lace-ups.

Gwen hunkered down behind the steering wheel of a rented car with its tinted windows, and her large sunglasses. She whistled to herself and drove slowly down the street behind the woman, now walking at a brusque pace. The woman arrived at a tram stop just in time. Gwen noted the tram number and was surprised by its destination.

Gwen stayed behind the tram, lurching forward with it, overtaken by every car. A few passengers got off and she thought they gave her odd looks. Each time she feared that the jig was up. She would watch each passenger alight and shrink back when one looked like it could be her friend.

She thought it looked completely empty now, and became anxious that she had missed her friend getting off the tram. The journey had snaked through suburbs thick with prosperity and then further out to suburbs where the houses were nestled closer together, knitting the street sides. The trees and lush foliage and
high fences had given way to service stations, graffittied walls and the exposed lives of people without thick curtains.

Children played in front yards on monkey bars and trampolines. Further out the houses spread out again, punctuated by power lines and washing limp on clotheslines. A few people sat on porches and stoops, perhaps not talking to each other but still watching the world go by.

The tram had dissected the suburb of its destination. Gwen could see the final station up ahead and was resolved to turn around and follow the tram tracks backwards. As it lurched to a final stop, Gwen looked at the bleak industrial entrails that spotted the horizon.

In the distance, iconic golden arches beckoned cars off the road and into a plastic hiatus from the outside world. Next to the tram stop a corner store with a few flimsy chairs and tables out the front also had posters of the front pages of popular women’s magazines. The immaculate faces of youthful movie stars were posed next to a 50-year-old Elle Macpherson — The Body — all of them peering out through latticed metalwork. Gwen looked away, oh to have those genes, that tenacity and the discipline to live such an apparently healthy life.

Just as Gwen was about to turn the car around she noticed the slight figure of her friend getting off the tram and hurrying along the side street behind the corner store. Gwen pulled out after her.

The street was home to some tall blocks of flats, all bricks and small windows. An Australian flag poked out here and there, a lava lamp visible in one window pulsating with vivid orange lumps. Next to the towers was a football oval, empty but for two teenage boys smoking in the far corner.
Gwen watched as her friend neared a small weatherboard house in a row of similar dwellings. This one had Tibetan peace flags fluttering in the wind and some crystal-looking things hanging from a large tree that took up the whole front yard. Gwen’s spirits sank. Surely her friend’s secret could not be a washed-up tarot reader or an insipid yoga teacher doling out nothing but positive affirmations.

She parked a few blocks from where her friend had, without knocking, opened the door and entered. Gwen settled back to wait for an hour or however long the appointment took. Before she had even taken off her glasses, her friend was hurrying out the door and back towards the tram stop. Gwen was utterly confused as to what to do. She tried to become as small as she could as her friend marched passed the car and was putting something in her bag and looking nervously behind her. Gwen was now sure that there was some mystery in the small house and was determined to wait a few minutes before trying her luck.

As her friend rounded the corner in the rear-vision mirror, Gwen looked at herself. She took several deep breaths and located her small capsicum spray vial in her handbag, just in case. She adjusted her sunglasses and buttoned up her jacket.

As she approached the house the crystal objects became clearer, all made in the shape of human body parts, translucent, swaying lightly to an invisible rhythm. She noted what looked like a hip, another that looked like parts of a ribcage dangling from a branch at eye level. Unnerved, Gwen hugged her scarf tighter around her throat and fingered the spray in her bag. The door before her swung open and Gwen looked up to see an extraordinary-looking woman standing before her. The tall creature leaned against the doorframe.
“Come in, I’ve been waiting for you.” She motioned towards Gwen.

Gwen had lost her words and felt herself walking past the woman as if she was on automatic pilot. The house was immaculate, grand. Floorboards of gleaming redwood drew the eye down an infinitely long corridor, from which hung various rooms. Each one that Gwen passed was more opulent than the next, decorated in expensive antiques, exquisite rugs and artworks. It was, however, devoid of any feeling that a home normally has; completely still. Gwen found herself looking for any sign that the woman lived there. A sagging chair, comfortable as the chosen seat always is. A used teacup or a photo. The smell of perfume or words left lingering in the air after a sharp discussion, or of anything human. The woman stopped next to a closed door.

“That’s it, it’s there, on the table, inside that room. What you’re after. What you’re looking for. But you will have to pay first. That necklace will do.” The gorgeous being pivoted effortlessly and was standing just behind her. Gwen felt her hot dry breath reaching its tentacles along her spine.

Gwen turned to face her and wondered how she could feel this crawling search over skin. How under her jacket and scarf this woman could see the necklace she was wearing. It was the most expensive present her husband had ever given her, her ‘push’ present. Not for having a child, but for his guilt as he pushed her away.

She unwrapped her scarf slowly and undid the collar of her stylish black high-necked trench coat. She fumbled at the back of her neck but couldn’t locate the latch. The woman, impatient, grabbed it straight off her chest. Gwen was about to yell out because she was sure the woman must have broken the chain but she watched as the other clasped it around her own neck and then gently touched the doorknob. She motioned for Gwen to enter.
The room was empty but for a black lacquered table with a red silk sash covering its top. On it sat a bottle of blue liquid. The most expensive lotion Gwen had ever laid her eyes on. She moved slowly, sluggishly towards the table. As soon as the bottle was in Gwen’s hands she felt bolder, stronger.

“It’s not the same as your friend’s. After all, you wanted different things. But it’s what you wanted. I will drop off the next bottle, as you need it. It will cost double what you paid for this one today. You should only need three bottles.” The blue-eyed goddess turned around and left Gwen to find her way back out onto the street.

As Gwen passed the rooms down the hallway she noticed all the details, the weave of the rugs and the gorgeous handcrafted ornaments, the shimmer of candlelight in one room, the reflection of glass and gold in the next. She was overwhelmed by the appearance of so much luxury, so much beauty. She clutched the bottle to her chest and could not tell whether the thump was the potent force of the liquid or her own rattling chest.

She had driven home in something of a daze.

Gwen decided she would put the lotion on instead of her rejuvenating moisturiser, right before bed. She undressed and took a long lavender-scented bath and towelled her hair. She selected her dark-blue silk pyjamas and then stood before her bathroom mirror.

The sight of her unmade-up face, with her hair pulled back under the towel, was bleak. Her hand trembled as she reached for the lotion. She poured a small amount onto her left palm and went to work dabbing it in little circles around her face just as her mother had taught her to do, many years ago.
The instant the lotion touched her skin she was aware of a tightening and effervescence. She finished dabbing and rubbing it in and stood waiting for something to happen.

The smell of the lotion was overpowering. Wildflowers, innocence and abandon, youth was trapped in that magical little bottle. She closed her eyes and breathed it in.

When she opened her eyes she saw a flash of herself at 16. Her blushing beauty, freed for a minute. A snapshot of her before she had stopped performing, before she had met Gregory. Just as she began to smile at her old face, her skin reverted back to its usual form. A purplish bruise where the blush of her youth had momentarily rested, began to swell and rise.

The blue lotion was drying quickly and she frowned at the tight feeling. She left the bathroom amazed at the transformation she had experienced after applying just one layer of the precious blue liquid. She could barely sleep that night for her excitement. She kept touching her skin in the cool dark of her bedroom and then rushing to the bathroom mirror to check if any change had occurred. There were no more changes and she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Gwen woke herself up with a loud yell. Her face was on fire. The agony unlike anything she had ever experienced. She tried to put a hand to her cheeks and forehead but the pressure of the lightest touch caused a pain so severe that she was instantly crippled by it. She crawled out of bed and towards the bathroom. She held on to the basin cabinet and looked into the mirror.

The image that greeted her was grotesque.
Her face was rubbed raw, as if the top 20 layers had been filed off in a facial carwash fitted with razor blades. Strips of skin were hanging off from her cheeks and nose and forehead. She tried to press them gently back on but the pain again caused her to cry out. She reached for the blue liquid and poured some of it onto her hands, not knowing what to do she slapped it on her skin in large angry dobs. Immediate calm. Her skin firmed and healed instantly.

Gwen breathed a heavy sigh and was about to turn away but she felt something pushing up, pushing out from underneath her skin. She turned in horror to see the pointed chin and high cheekbones of her 20s clawing their way back to the surface.

The bags under her eyes disappeared and her eyes seemed to reset in her face. Her wrinkles disappeared completely. She waited for the excavation and restructuring to stop and settle. There was some bruising here and there, but nothing that a tinted cream couldn’t cover up. She was transfixed by her youthful appearance staring back at her.

She decided to wait the full course before letting anyone see her. The nightmare of this morning had rattled her. Gwen looked down at the bottle and was surprised to see that in her haste to calm her skin she had used up all of what was left. She needed more.

At this instant, a loud knock sounded. Startled, Gwen grabbed her dressing gown and went to the front door. She opened the door and the lithe beauty from the day before was leaning into her doorframe this time. Gwen panicked, wondering if they had made a plan that she had forgotten. She was about to apologise. The woman uncurled a finger and brought it to Gwen’s trembling lips. “Hush now,” the being brushed past her and walked through her house. Gwen watched as the silent creature picked up her antique vase that her father had left her, and went
on to inspect each painting before her eyes came to rest, steady and focused, on the portrait of Gwen above the fireplace.

“That one; that will cover it.” The woman began to walk across the room and reached up to take the large artwork off the wall.

“That’s not nearly as valuable as some of the others. Perhaps this one here, the Drysdale, or the Hester?” Gwen stammered, unsure of why she was bargaining with this strange creature that filled up her living room with such a force that Gwen felt as useless as a crushed egg.

“No. That one is perfect. It fits. No beauty without sacrifice.”

The woman placed a small bottle on the mantlepiece and then removed the artwork that Gwen had spent close to 30 years cherishing.

Gwen tried rearranging her artworks for the rest of the day. Nothing seemed to fit where her portrait had once hung. Still, whenever she felt sad, she rushed to the mirror and looked at the stunning face that looked back at her and felt that it was not such a bad deal after all. She slept soundly that night and awoke the next day without a glimmer of pain in her cheeks. Groggy and relieved, she pressed her hands to her face and then drew them away sharply. It felt like she was touching a hessian bag, so hard and scratchy was the surface of her skin.

She flew from her bedroom down the hall and into the bathroom. Her face was covered in scales. The remote youth of yesterday was covered up behind a thick screen of face plaque. The effect left her speechless. She began to pick at the scales one after the other. Where she pulled one flake off another grew in its place. In her panic, Gwen thought about going into the kitchen to get some steel wool. Then she remembered the new bottle in her lounge room.
She hurried to get it and, not wanting to make the same mistake as yesterday, began to dab the cream a little more circumspectly around her face. This lotion was thicker, richer. It smelled of peaches and almonds and mascarpone with figs. The scales began to fall off slowly at first, then faster and faster until her sink was full of hard blue coils of skin. She stared down at the flakes of her former face and wondered how much more her skin could take. Gwen looked up into the mirror. Her face was gone.

A gaping hole sat perched above her neck. Floating layers of dark, grey-tinted hair bounced around where her face would have been. Gwen panicked. She tried to touch where her eyes should have been. The air passed through her fingertips instead. She could still see, so where were her eyes? She could smell the thick delicious cream but could not find her nose. She could taste the panic in her throat but had no tongue. Gwen screamed long and loud. But there was no sound.

Gwen reached out instinctively for the bottle although a small part of her hated herself for doing it. She tried to dab the cream where she felt her face would be but missed with the first few attempts. She was running out of the lotion and was violently smacking the bottle against her palm to get the remaining dregs out. She began in a blind fury to hit at where she felt her face must be.

An outline began to appear. A face emerged. Her hair darkened and lengthened as she looked on waiting and hoping for her face to fully arrive. Her skin bubbled up out of the invisible blankness. Her cheekbones pierced the surface and her lips became more full and shapely as they gelled into view.

Gwen stood in front of her mirror for what felt like hours, watching. Watching, as if she were in a rapid-fire dress rehearsal for a face. Features appeared and
disappeared. Parts of her face pointed out and were covered over. Eventually a face stared back at her, lovely, sensual, young. It was not her own. Instead, looking back at her was the face of the enchantress who had given her the lotion. Gwen needed to go there right away. She needed to put a stop to all of this. Get her necklace and painting back and say “thank you, but no thanks”. She hurriedly got dressed and grabbed her bag and opened the front door.

The exquisite being, her twin, smiled up at her.

“You wanted to be beautiful. Am I not the most beautiful woman you have ever seen?”

Gwen was angry. She yanked the lady into her house and pushed her with a fierce strength into the living room saying, “You very well may be, but I want you to stop it. Stop all these games!”

The woman laughed a little as she held this twin, and gently twisted Gwen’s head from side to side. “You started this. Not me. I’ll need something in return. A part of you, so that the mixture really works ...” She let go of Gwen’s face; it was contorting now with a look that had never graced the doppelganger’s own.


“No.” The woman smiled. “No. Something else. I will need your voice.” She tapped out a lazy circle as she danced into the centre of her host’s lounge room.

Gwen was furious. Adamant that the woman must be totally mad. Then Gwen remembered the house where she had first visited this creature. She sat back down limply on her couch. Gwen’s hands twisted and writhed in her lap, uncontrollable as eels trapped in a toilet bowl.
“Just your singing voice. All else will stay the same.” The woman swayed gently as she began to move towards Gwen. Gwen nodded slowly. The woman came up close. She lent down and kissed those at once strange and familiar lips. Gwen pulled back. As she did, the long line of her throat lay exposed, the woman reached in and sunk her fingers in deep. She pushed past masses of sinew, bone, nerves and veins and pulled out a valve, still pulsating open and closed. A fleshy butterfly.

The woman poured a drop of Gwen’s blood into the final small bottle of lime green liquid and held it out to Gwen, who snatched at it. As the woman walked away, she cradled and caressed the small piece of Gwen’s body in her hands. It began to crystallise. Gwen pawed at her throat, swallowing thickly. She opened the bottle and poured it over her face and throat making gasping sounds as it washed, oily and wet, all over her.

Gwen leavened herself off the couch and walked slowly to the bathroom. She switched on the light and let out a blood-curdling scream. Her face was withered and old, her body bent and twisted. Her skin sallow and thin, as if aged origami birds had nested upon her face.

“You lied to me. Give it back. Give it all back!” Gwen attempted to lunge and grab the glass trinket that was once a part of her, from where it was now tucked into the woman’s belt. The strange creature pushed her forcefully back.

“I haven’t lied to you. What you look like to me and to everyone else might be different than what you yourself see here in the mirror.” The woman turned and left Gwen all alone. The shadows lengthened as Gwen stood there. She continued looking at herself. She crooned silently into the mirror as her face
slowly became softer, a little sweeter, yet still desperately sad, with every inaudible note.
Olivia and Harry

Olivia’s body blocked the door. “Do it!” she insisted. Harry bent down and began trying to move the heavy bookshelf from one side of the room to the other. “Not like that! Useless!” Olivia moved in from the doorway and rammed into Harry, pushing him out of the way as he sneezed feebly. “Like this!” she motioned, and he tried to catch the edge of the shelf that she turned back towards him.

Harry, unfortunately, didn’t have a sufficient hold on it. The bookcase began to topple back and forward before Olivia steadied the great heirloom. Harry bent forward with the shelves resting on his back as she’d directed. He restored his grip on the edges and began to slowly shuffle with the weight of it. “Hurry up, Harry! We haven’t got all day. I want this room perfect for when Bridie comes over. You know what she’s like! She’ll be hoping to catch us out unprepared and tell everyone all about it.” Harry was nodding into his collar and breathing heavily as he set the bookshelf against the far wall. He began to fill the shelves back up with all the books and toys and knick-knacks that they had received when they had told their friends and family that they were expecting.

Despite all these expensive presents from Olivia’s family and her important friends, Harry had taken on extra shifts at work because Olivia wanted nothing but the best. She wanted the most expensive pram, cot, change table, car seat, clothing and hand-carved toys. Harry was happy to add to the pot. He could hardly complain; he had been the one who wanted a child. When Harry and Olivia got married and he talked about having children, she told him that she had a career and that came first.

He rubbed his back where the shelves had made small indents in his skin, remembering the dinner that had changed Olivia’s mind. He had picked up their dry cleaning and some beef fillets and arrived home to cook and set up before
Olivia’s closest friends, Bridie and Angus Symmonds, and Nigel and Diana Hurtford, came over. Harry did not feel like cooking or entertaining at all. That dinner though had ended up being more a blessing than a curse. Nigel and Diana had some news. Diana was blushing and she overtly refused wine, before dinner and at the table, as Olivia attempted to fill up her glass. Eventually, realising that Olivia was not going to ask the obvious question, Diana couldn’t hold back. Her hand over Nigel’s, she announced to the group triumphantly, “We just started trying and well ... such a surprise ... We’re expecting!” Nigel stretched out his long legs and smiled.

Diana was Olivia’s oldest friend and they had been in competition since high school over grades (Diana had the edge at school, Olivia at university), scholarships (they both won several), boys (neither fared particularly well), the first to get married (Olivia won the race, but Diana’s Nigel was wealthier and better looking), their jobs (both were high-profile senior bureaucrats, although Diana had recently just been promoted and had almost caught up to Olivia’s pay bracket), their travels (Diana had loved London, Olivia hadn’t enjoyed it at all), their houses (same postcode, Harry and Olivia were just slightly closer to the inner city, with ever so slightly better views, oh and a terrace garden).

Olivia’s face was a complicated purple mess after the announcement. She wanted to be happy for her friend but she didn’t even know they had been trying. Olivia had thought of them in solidarity, as two 30-something married career women (marriage was non-negotiable – Olivia believed that it was essential to achieving maturity and showing the world you were an adult, otherwise career women were often accused of being lesbians or sleeping their way to the top). Olivia felt there was more time for the designer dinners and impromptu trips to New York to see that latest hit show before ‘settling down’. It appeared not. Diana had been very cunning. Olivia felt somewhat betrayed by
the announcement and the ease with which the whole thing had apparently occurred.

Harry saw the disconcerted look on her face and tried his best to make up for it by heartily congratulating the pair. Olivia rallied herself and raised a toast: “To Diana and Nigel, may this blessing in your life bring you the greatest joy! I can only hope that Harry and I are similarly blessed soon!”

“Ooooh! Squeal! Livvy darling are you trying? I never pictured you as the mothering type?” Diana smiled politely at her friend.

“Well of course, sweet. It’s just the next step, isn’t it? I mean I can’t really get further in my career until a change of government or a fatality occurs and Harry and I, well we’re just so happy and settled.” Olivia mirrored her friend by placing a hand over Harry’s, smiling over at him.

Harry, who barely registered this physical intimacy, nodded dumbly and grinned effusively. He was excited by the idea of a son or a daughter that he could read to and play soccer with. Diana and Olivia had begun a busy and detailed analysis of Diana’s birthing plans, stage of development, baby room set-up and décor, and parenting style. Harry knew that Olivia wouldn’t rest until she was sure that her birthing plan, bassinet and baby name were better than Diana’s.

Nigel had leaned forward to Harry, “Maybe this will mean they’ll lay off a bit?” Harry smiled tightly. He had learnt long ago not to challenge Nigel’s casual sexism. Nigel worked as a non-descript executive in his own father’s company. This left Nigel with a warped view of the world and a lot of spare time to spend on a golf course.
Harry, unlike many of their friends, wasn’t in finance or sales or politics or law or in a senior bureaucratic position. He worked as a freelance engineer and also did spotlights as a project manager. He wanted more than anything to be a scuba diver instructor.

Harry did the shopping (at the farmers’ markets on the weekends), cooking (he enjoyed it) and the washing (Tuesdays and Thursdays), paid the bills and did all the cleaning (Friday night when Olivia was at work drinks) as well as his jobs. He ran interference for Olivia with her meddling family and played host at any number of events and dinner parties that Olivia had him cater and organise. Harry told himself he was just a modern man with a very clever and busy wife. Other wives used to tell him he was an absolute saint. He found Nigel’s attitude pointed to an underlying fear of his successful wife. After all, Harry was only doing what many other women had done for a very long time before him. Olivia was very influential in her sphere and he enjoyed the benefits of her connections and their lifestyle luxuries too. They were more than a marriage – they were a partnership, a classic team, and that was something her friends just didn’t get.

It hadn’t been as easy for Harry and Olivia to fall pregnant as it was for the Hurtfords. After a few failed attempts at conceiving Olivia was getting frustrated. She came home irate after the issue of IVF was raised by a well-pregnant Diana: “You know Bridie Symmonds is doing it?”

“I had no idea! The minx. She told me she was going for that job she was headhunted for! And she’s doing rounds of IVF!” Olivia filed this little piece of gossip away for when it would come in handy. She didn’t engage Diana further on the subject because she knew the inference was that she was somehow defective, unable, unworthy of motherhood. Recently her dreams had stretched out night after night in a grotesque pantomime. The godmother to thousands of
crying babies. None of them her own. Her ovaries plucked out and she forced to wear them as earrings to show people that she was unable to conceive. A dream of Harry masturbating until a small trickle of black slime poured out, he offered it to her, smeared across his hands, while wearing an eager smile.

Olivia redoubled her efforts. More and more of their friends in the circle were getting pregnant and she was now determined to join them. The conversations were now all about the cutest online clothing brands and breathing techniques, prenatal pilates and baby whisperers and karatani nurses to help you in the first few weeks. Diana was showing quite a lot early on and Olivia was transfixed by the process of her skinny best friend’s body changing. No more marathons for Diana for a while. Olivia had always been the big one of the pair; she was strangely excited by how fat Diana was looking. Diana’s face bulged out and her skin became rashy and horrible. Still, Olivia was jealous that Diana was pregnant and she wasn’t. Diana would smile benignly at her and suggest the latest in fertility treatments: acupuncture? Kinesiology? Massage and fertility diet? Yoga? Superfoods? Sex during the day? “Or night,” Olivia thought she heard Diana say under her breath.

A month later, Olivia surprised Harry by arriving home early from work. She had sent Diana an email before arriving home. Harry had received the news from a laconic Nigel by text message: “Another one bites the dust. Welcome to the club, dad to be.”

Olivia burst through the door. Despite the way he had found out, Harry was desperate to hear Olivia say the words – his shining eyes urged her on. She walked around the kitchen, “Harry, please, get me a chair, I need a foot rub! I’m pregnant!” She announced this victoriously. He went to kiss her and she cut him off before he was halfway around the table, “No, really. Get me a chair. My feet
are killing me.” Harry decided he would treat his wife like even more of a queen. The queen bee. He was just so excited.

Harry’s friends were used to seeing him at functions and every now and then on the golf course, but after the announcement, he disappeared altogether. He was painting, building, buying, fetching, rubbing, attending and soothing. Olivia had cravings, unusually from the first few weeks right throughout the pregnancy. They ranged from roasted baby carrots at midnight to rounded quartz crystals to spread around the bed in a protective circle at 4am.

Nigel told Angus and Bridie that Diana had seen Harry pushing a trolley behind Olivia at a funky baby warehouse store. He’d apparently put on a bit of weight and was looking tired, pale, not himself. Diana had been concerned and so she had told all their other friends. Nigel was to give him a call, take him out for a beer or something. Nigel left a message but Harry was just too busy to reply. Something about Nigel had always made Harry feel slightly on edge. He put it down to his own jealousy. Life came easily to Nigel.

Diana was close to giving birth and Olivia (and Harry) threw the baby shower. Diana had become so rotund that she could barely manage the stairs to the terrace on her friend’s roof. Nigel dropped his wife off and rolled his eyes behind her back at Harry and Olivia as she heaved up the stairs. “Coming to golf, Harry?” he asked. “No. He is serving today,” Olivia replied for Harry and dismissed him back to the kitchen before ushering Nigel to the door. “Now Nige, it’s a girls-only type of thing, off you go!”

In comparison with Diana, Olivia was losing weight from her arms and legs and face. Her new diet free of alcohol and full of healthy eating was working well. Harry insisted on a walk together every now and then, to which she reluctantly acquiesced. Olivia’s skin glowed and Diana’s was sallow and grey. Olivia
produced a perfect little baby bump in time for her friend’s shower. She made sure that Harry had created butterfly scones and blue and pink polka-dot cake pops and that he iced a chocolate cake in marzipan with a pair of baby shoes on top for decoration. Diana was too tired to appreciate much of it and didn’t seem to even care that Olivia had imported the latest craze of sugar-sushi for the pregnant mums.

As Olivia’s due date loomed closer she became increasingly less focused on work. The perfect birth and the perfect baby became her new obsession. She would wake Harry up in a panic at night: “OH MY GOD! HARRY!” she yelled.

Harry would flail awake in a state of anxiety and confusion, “What petal, darling, sweet, are you okay?”

“What if our child inherits my sister’s nose? What are we going to do? You’ll need to find someone who specialises in cosmetic surgery. For babies. Maybe we can get one in to have a look at our next ultrasound? Make sure it doesn’t have her hook nose and that it doesn’t look like it’s going to be a fatty.”

“Yes, Olivia.”

“I mean it, Harry. Do It! Now! Chop-chop. Go and look it up. This is my kid’s future on the line. If it’s likely to be a fatty or ugly we’ll have to nip that in the bud early on, and by the looks of your recent paunch I’m not liking the example that you’re setting.”

Olivia’s head hit the pillow and her snores began to shuffle out and fill the room. Harry found her inhales strangely soothing.
The day before Olivia was due she felt that she needed to run through the birth plan with Harry one more time. After her baby shower (thrown by her hook-nosed bumptious sister) had been such a disaster, Olivia needed to be sure that Harry could be counted on to follow the simple birth plan. There was the music and massage routine, aromatherapy, her doola was to be present as well as her obstetrician. There were special coloured clothes for Harry to wear and costume changes as required. She did not want any family there until the baby was Facebook/photo ready. She had certain words that Harry was to use and others he wasn’t. The bag was packed. The announcement of a boy or a girl had been pre-typed and laminated for Harry. The baby’s room was (mostly) ready. Olivia was quietly confident. She had been doing yoga and Pilates long enough to have full faith in her pelvic floor. Unlike poor, post-birth Diana who, now weak-bladdered, remained enormous, a deflated and flabby sack of her former self, much to Olivia’s quiet delight.

Harry was a ball of nervous energy these days. He jumped to attention before Olivia uttered a full syllable. They hadn’t found out the sex of the baby but Olivia had shortlisted the names for a boy and for a girl. Neither were Harry’s pick but that didn’t matter. Olivia decided that he would be the stay-at-home dad when she went back to work. She had done a cost–benefit analysis of their combined earnings and what it would cost to hire a nanny. All the variable risks to her child’s upbringing or safety were factored in to the assessment. Harry at home was the best option. With hook-nose on call for sporadic babysitting (in short bursts this was unlikely to damage the child too much).

Diana had originally decided that she was going back to work within a month but she hadn’t yet. Diana was loving motherhood. Olivia found her friend increasingly one-tracked and perversely happy. She was determined not to end up like that. Bridie, after three months, had started her new job part-time and said it was a great balance. Olivia was certain that only three weeks maternity
leave was necessary. More than that and it would affect one of her long-term projects. It was also enough time for Harry to get proficient with a bottle, she announced to their friends and family. Harry was delighted. He reminded her that many women changed their mind about returning to work early and that he would support her in either case.

The birth had been a relatively drama-free event for Olivia. Two hours in she got an epidural, two hours later little Adeline Freeman-Schmidt was born. Olivia nursed her and fell into a deep sleep. Harry took care of Adeline's first pooey nappies and bottle feeds. Adeline showed no signs of an inherited hook-nose. “Listen to that cry! Her mother’s daughter, that’s for sure!” all their friends commented.

Whilst Adeline’s cry was loud and shrill, she was rather well behaved for a newborn. Excellent eye contact so early on (potentially a genius), perfectly proportioned. Not a fat baby, but a slim and lithe gorgeous girl. Olivia blogged details about how her baby preparation had really helped her “breathe and bliss” through the experience. She had started returning work emails the very next day and, true to form, was back at full-time work within weeks. Her blog entitled “Manic Mummy” caught a publisher’s eye and it looked like she was going to be an overnight champion for working mothers everywhere.

Harry was proud of his wife’s success. He also wanted to be as involved as possible, a contemporary father, not the old heard-and-not-seen type. He washed, changed, nursed and bottle-fed little Adeline. Olivia began to want to show little Adeline off at her fortnightly mothers group. Olivia selected Adeline’s outfits with care each day and organised which sounds and songs Adeline listened to at sleep times. Olivia set aside time every day to ensure Adeline was being interacted with in the correct manner for her brain’s development.
Olivia asked Harry to prepare a dinner party for her friends, the Hurtfords with their ugly red-headed child (‘fat Simon’, Olivia called him in private) and Bridie and Angus Symmonds with their (IVF number) Patricia (very close eyes, piggy nose – unfortunate looking, both Olivia and Diana agreed). Lovely Adeline, however, was perfect. In behaviour and appearance. People stopped Harry on the street and remarked on her beauty and serenity. Olivia and Harry were proud.

After having moved Adeline’s bookshelf around, Harry had taken little Addy for a walk (Olivia hated the nickname but Harry used it whenever they were alone). Harry was sneezing only lightly at first but by afternoon was sure he had a cold. Back at home he was trying to tend to Adeline who was acting up for the first time in her young six-week life. He worried that he had given her his cold. The Hurtfords and the Symmonds were expected to arrive at 7pm. Earlier that day Olivia, once she was satisfied with the room reshuffle, had gone out with friend’s for lunch and had to work that afternoon. It was likely that she would arrive home (with the dessert trifle from Diestazzi’s – better than smack Olivia would call it) just before the guests did.

Harry decided that he and Adeline might just have a short rest. He lay his head down on the pillow. Harry’s sleep was restless. He woke up and heard rain starting to patter on the windows. He made a mental note to set up inside instead of outdoors tonight, forgetting everything already set up on the rooftop. A crash of thunder woke him at another point and he was worried that he had rolled over and suffocated little Addy. She rested next to him and he checked the arrangement of the pillows and fell back into an even deeper sleep. Adeline didn’t move next to him. He woke up again worried that he had not heard from her and checked her breathing. His angel continued to sleep.
There was another loud bang. Harry opened his eyes groggily and in horror watched as her little head grew bigger and bigger and bigger until her enormous mouth opened and instead of a shrill cry, Olivia's voice rang out. Olivia was standing, furious, over him. Handing a groggy Adeline to Bridie, Olivia said, "What a mess, Harry! What a mess!"

Harry heard Bridie return to the lounge room, stifling giggles and telling the others about "sleeping beauty". Olivia's temper was legendary. Olivia leaned over Harry, the wall of her breasts hemming him in as she yelled, "You better fix things, Harry! I'm this close!" Olivia leaned in and he could smell her coffee breath as she spread her thumb and forefinger an inch away from each other, in front of his face, "This close to really losing it."

Olivia pulled herself up and stormed out, slamming the door. Harry didn't snap. He didn't raise his voice. He wondered where Adeline was. He roused himself back into action and went out to greet their guests. Harry made a joke about being a tired new dad. Fat Simon was asleep in his carrier, gently rocked by Fat Diana. Angus and Bridie had dosed their daughter up before their visit, so Ugly Pattie was sound asleep in her huggiebuggieluggie pramcot.

Harry noticed that it was Nigel, however, who was awkwardly holding a very awake and teary Adeline. Olivia started uncorking a bottle of wine in the kitchen and taking out glasses. She began noisily searching through their cupboards and fridge for some cheese and crackers with all the finesse of a fracking expedition.

Every now and then Nigel stared down at the child on his lap. Fat Diana had stopped rocking Fat Simon and was staring at them. Bridie was looking smugly with arched eyebrows from where little Adeline rested and back over to her husband. It was hard for everyone not to notice that Adeline shared Nigel's rather pronounced cleft chin. Olivia bustled back into the room and placed the
platter and glasses down. She quickly understood the strained silence. She picked up Adeline in one swinging move and went over to Harry and said, "I just love the smell of her, just delicious." She gestured over at Fat Simon and Ugly Pattie, "You must all feel the same." Harry put his hands out towards Adeline and said, "But ... Oopsy-daisy, I think someone’s had an accident." Harry winked at Olivia and she returned a conspiratorial half smile at him. They were turning in a good performance tonight. Harry and Olivia’s hands touched briefly as Olivia passed him Adeline and they both felt each other’s familiar skin against their own. Olivia smiled into the room as Harry nursed Adeline. Perhaps we are misunderstood, she thought, but certainly, we really are a team. The smug looks on the faces of their guests wilted in confusion.
The Interview

The woman looked resentfully at her phone and listened to its modulated tinkering. It was supposed to gently coax you into your day. She had been awake for hours, waiting for it to go off. She left its siren to carry on for a full minute. Sue had also been up for hours. The woman heard her clattering loudly past her door, up and down the draughty hallway to the kitchen, where she would likely clang some pots and huff meaningfully about the last remaining tea bag. The woman stared at the clothes neatly arranged on the coat hanger. She had researched the company, memorised their values (determination, happiness, enthusiasm, integrity and fun!). The woman had set her alarm extra early as she was always late, even when she tried not to be. She had been hopeful the extra-early start would solve the problem.

The woman unfolded herself from the warm bed to shower and dress. She would try to avoid a confrontation with Sue if she could. The woman was not a morning person. Today, the inside of her mouth had the consistency, taste and stench of dog turds. Lack of sleep and too much red wine and too many cigarettes. She swirled her tongue around the gluey mess and imagined that without the morning coffee she wouldn’t function. Yet, with the coffee, the acrid whiffs would not be the best opening line for a health-clinic interview. Had she stuck to her original profession in advertising and PR or developed an interest in law, finance or banking this impressive scent would be less unusual. Something to do with telling lies or embellishing beauty and ugliness perhaps, or just substance abuse, she mused. She wondered if the clinic director would notice – if he would stop the interview and order an emergency oral enema – fun!

Emerging from the shower she dressed carefully so as not to mistakenly put her skirt on inside out, as had happened on one unfortunate occasion. She brushed her hair and put on concealer and mascara and went to eat breakfast. Sue was
not in the kitchen at present and the woman decided to eat her cereal at the
table so she could read the bits of the weekend paper still strewn across its top.
The face of a once alive and now dead person stared up at her. Another woman
who had eaten breakfasts and laughed and worked and loved and had good days
and bad days and drank sometimes and dreamed some nights and had goals and
plans. The woman became acutely aware of the vivacious eyes staring up from
the photograph. It was not the first female face to grace the cover of a
newspaper announcing a senseless crime; it wouldn't be the last. The article
impatiently divulged secrets about the violent act that had occurred in streets
close by.

The woman had driven past two separate vigils in as many months. She felt an
anger surge up past her stomach and throat, breaking free of her grave mouth.
She felt a dislocated grief and a lingering, faint fear. Her breakfast sat
untouched and congealing before her and she held the coffee mug into her body
tightly.

Just as the woman was about to get up, Sue appeared, her voice taking over the
kitchen. “Oh good, I’m glad you’re awake. Ooh, what are you reading ... the
murder? Shocking. Tragic. Cut down in her prime. Really, I mean you know that
my brother’s wife knows someone who went to high school with her? And it only
happened around the corner. Around the corner!”

The woman listened to the avalanche of information and wished she had
already finished her breakfast.

“I mean I think of you when you come home late from gigs and I just ... you
know I feel sick about it. Just sick. Anyway, what I was saying was we can talk
about the qualities that we want in our next flatmate. I know you aren’t that
interested, but I’m really hoping we can find someone, you know, grounded. A
bit chatty, but not too much, you know? Who isn’t here all the time, who’s as busy as we are, you know?” As Sue continued to talk, the woman phased out. She couldn’t help but notice a cereal glob stuck in the corner of Sue’s mouth that bobbed and jiggled as Sue talked, but that would stay firmly glued on.

Sue began to talk more about the qualities of a good collective household and how she felt that she hadn’t necessarily been ignored by the woman but that she felt like this was now a good opportunity to make it clear, really clear, what she needed in a house and how much she hoped they would find someone who was also into alternative therapies and needlework and gardening and expressive stillness. The woman wondered what the dead woman’s hobbies had been. She cleared her throat and said abruptly, “Sounds good, Sue. I’ve got that interview to get to.”

Sue’s face folded up into a sympathetic crease. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. I know how nervous you get. You held down that other job you thought was boring for a little while, didn’t you? This will be a new start. Fresh. And think of all the opportunities to discuss your painting with new people. And in a health setting! With healthy people. Really good for you. Really. And you have your skirt on just fine.”

The woman was already walking towards the bathroom to clean her teeth as Sue followed her in. “I think what you have to remember is that you’ve just got to be your most attuned self in an interview. Really switch in to that intuition you Pisces have in great depth. You know, it’s like I always say: you can only present to the world your best self and let the Universe do the rest. But perhaps try not to talk about your painting gigs or the exhibition scandal or, you know, the potential that you might only be there for six weeks. You know, be your best self but … Well maybe be like someone else? Just tune in. There’s nothing worse than talking too much in an interview and not letting them direct the discussion,
you know? Take their cues and just relax, be positive, positive thoughts, you’ll be fine ... after all, you’ve done it successfully so many times. It’s not the interviews for you, but holding down the job ... ha ha ha.” Sue’s laugh bounced around her bathroom and the woman inadvertently slapped her leg like she’d been told a great big funny.

The woman wiped her mouth and applied some lip-gloss and tried to silently insinuate that it was always those who shouldn’t give advice that doled out the most.

She smiled and left the house quickly. The woman was in the car and on the road before peak-hour traffic kicked in. She really needed this job. It wasn’t going to be a career highlight, but it would pay the rent and she was getting desperate. She passed by the early-morning joggers, scantily clad and perky, and business people waiting at bus stops, darkly dressed and heavy. She saw the few eager school kids who ambled by on the way to an early morning class or, more likely, to meet up with their friends. Their limbs were still not in total agreement with their brains and all the hairstyles deliberate and wet. The woman passed along the street where the woman from the newspaper had tried to walk home and she shivered.

She was still angry. She also felt like a lucky survivor, which made her even angrier. She tried to locate her best, most positive self. Her mouth was still bitter tasting, the gum she chewed adding an extra coating of anxiety for good measure.

She parked the car a few doors from the health and wellbeing supercentre. The brightly coloured balloons announced its entrance. The website had advertised for people to *come in and have a health party!* She felt neither healthy nor like a party but she was there, and a half-hour early.
The woman saw, in her peripheral vision, a man approaching her car. Instinctively the woman panicked. The woman looked at him as he was striding closer and jumped and leaned over to the passenger side door to activate the central locking. She looked back up at him and watched as the confusion and then the understanding of what she had just done dawned on him. He shook his hands as if to say ‘no, no’ and then held them out flat, in a gesture of peace, and stopped two or three paces from her door. The woman then followed his hand pointing, at the ‘No Stopping’ sign behind her. Embarrassed, she quickly put the car into drive and sped off.

It had reached peak hour by now and buses hurtled up and down the marked lanes of the inner-city suburb while cars were crawling as bikes flew past and weaved in and around them. There was no parking. The woman at last located a small space in a dead-end laneway about six blocks from the centre and noticed with incredulity that it was now five minutes until her interview.

The woman tried not to get flustered and walked steadily towards the clinic. Just before she went in, she tried to smear on a bit of lip-gloss and hoped that the interviewer wouldn’t notice the sweat beads beginning to form on her brow. The woman put on her jacket to hide the patches showing under the arms of her silk blouse. She straightened her hair and walked purposefully towards the door. Just as she was entering, a thick gust of wind blew the strewn leaves up from the doorway and a great mass of them followed her inside.

"I’m so sorry," the woman said to the receptionist hurriedly. An apology is not a great start to any interview, unless perhaps it was for grief counselling. *Pull yourself together*, she intoned soundlessly. The receptionist who beamed up at her was blonde, tanned and young – *healthy!*
“Are you here for an appointment?”

“I’m here for the interview?” The woman’s voice quavered in reply as if she was unsure why she was there.

“No problems. I’ll just let Fergus know you’re here. Won’t be long.”

The woman sat down and took in the overpowering smell of the candles attempting to mask the rising damp. The few other patrons, spaced out on uncomfortable but expensive-looking chairs, were flicking through magazines and watching pre-treatment videos of twisted spines or reading the fun! quotes that were tacked up around the walls. Fergus walked out and over to the woman. He was short and square and wax-like, as if a squashed Ken doll had been stretched into human form. His dark hair was severely cut and he was wearing yoga pants and a muscle t-shirt. Fergus grasped her hands in both of his. He made very intense eye-to-eye contact with the woman and breathed her name out slowly.

She nodded and wondered how long he would hold her in this grasp and eye lock. It was at least 30 seconds more. She was sure he was going to say ... “Big mistake. Terribly sorry. Wrong job for you.” Instead, he jerked his hand back and smiled, pointing towards a doorway. “Welcome. Welcome. Welcome to what could be your new home, your new family!” He beamed around the waiting room and his acolytes smiled back at him. The receptionist was busy helping a customer fill his water glass. “No problem,” the young assistant replied to the client’s "thanks" and wandering eyes.

The woman entered a room with a large fancy treatment table in its centre and no chairs. There was a small altar with a fake plant and a gurgling cement water feature. Some elevator music was playing from the discretely placed speakers.
that Fergus turned down via remote control. He sat perched on the treatment table and the woman had no idea where to sit or stand so she edged her way nervously, like a crab, into the centre of the room.

“Sit. Sit.” Fergus patted the treatment table next to him. As the woman sat down, he turned quickly and faced her square on. She tried to adapt her body language to be open and receptive. To beam confidence and interest.

“We’re here to help people. I think you’ve got a good look. You’re five minutes late, though. That can’t happen if you start here. We pride ourselves on service. Service is key. We charge people lots of money. To help them. You see? If you become a Happyworld Health Party Team Administrator, you will have to work at 150 per cent. Anything less is unacceptable. You will have to be positive at all times. You will need to smile at all times. We are packaging happiness here and it will be your job to help us help them.” Fergus gestured dismissively towards the waiting room. On his wrist a handsome and very expensive-looking watch gleamed.

Fergus began to talk about synergy and flow and energy and profit. His movements were either clipped and abrupt or intense and drawn out, there was no mid-gauge. He talked for 10 minutes. The woman listened. She nodded. She smiled. At one point she tried to concur and relate it to something on her CV. He just nodded his head and brushed invisible lint from his arm.

“Exactly, Miranda. Exactly.”

The woman was about to tell him that wasn’t her name when he jumped from the table and crouched down. All of a sudden Fergus buried his head in one hand and pointed up at her with his other arm. It was a strangely twisted version of a Usain Bolt victory move.
“Tell me five words that start with an H?”

Startled and suppressing laughter, the woman began with a tentative "H? Okay ... Home, Heart, Helium, Hurt and umm ... I guess Health?”

Fergus looked up from where he was now stretching from side to side. “Not bad, not bad. You should have mentioned happiness or help but health is good. Heart is good.” He stood up and turned his back to her and stretched his legs out into a triangle position. Suddenly he threw his trunk forward and stared at her, upside down, from between his legs, “WHO do YOU want to be in five years?”

The woman fought the urge to say “Anyone but someone who works here”; she reminded herself about the Visa bill and next month’s impending rent. “I want to be the healthiest, happiest version of me possible!” She even side-pumped the air to add what she hoped was believable gusto.

“Time’s up!” Fergus stood upright and moved in really close to the woman. She tried to hold her breath. “Yep. Yep. I like your eyes. Good eyes. I think it’s a fit. I’m going to meditate on it at lunch and I’ll call you this afternoon. But it’s a good fit. I like your essence. Strong. Creative. Being.” He squeezed her hand with every last word and then shepherded her through the doorway. “The last thing is, of course, we prefer the girls here to wear a uniform. Something flattering. You know to emphasise their ... aura.”

Before the woman could even respond to this, a man emerged from the opposite doorway. “Calvin,” Fergus called out to him as if he were miles away. “Good morning, my fellow practitioner! Come and meet our potential new health and happiness administrator.”
The woman looked up in time to see that Calvin was staring intently at her. She recognised him as the man who had warned her about the No Stopping sign. Calvin held his hands up in the same flat-palmed gesture as before and chuckled. The woman waved a fast farewell and headed towards the door. She emphatically pulled instead of pushing, and then lost her balance. She dropped her bag and looked up to see Calvin and Fergus in discussion as they watched her collect its myriad contents. “This one needs some serious ... body work ...” Calvin said under his breath to Fergus and shook his head at the woman. They watched her quietly.

Out the front of a café, across the road, a group of women were performing. They wore wild crazy costumes and carried drums and brass instruments. The woman watched them for a second and began to cross the road. Fergus and Calvin continued to stare out the window at her. The woman joined in dancing and singing with this parade. Their voices grew stronger in unison. She laughed to herself, shaking and jumping on the spot. For that one moment, there was only wild joy.
A Game

Please select the relevant response to the following statements:

I like my name:

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Her name is something wild and exotic. As unlike my real name, Claire, as possible. She – let’s call her Zelafria. No. That sounds like a prescription drug. A pill to make you feel dead calm. Flat. Nothing. Okay. Let’s call her Alexis. It’s strong, warrior like.

Alexis will be tall and blonde because I am short and brunette. I will make sure that she isn’t weak and skinny but buxom – Lara Croft stop-drop-and-roll-esque. All boobs and thighs that would squeeze the life from a neglectful lover. I don’t have thighs like that, even though I’ve been trying power yoga recently. Mine drip like layers of clotted cream, with an ass that moves like a cat flap. Even in downward dog. Alexis has an ass like two pert balloons.

She’s assertive, with a deep voice. No one ever expects blondes to have deep voices but when they do, people listen. Alexis will be left-handed (I’m right-handed), which will give her a battle advantage, a surprise factor. She will have trained as a dancer. Alexis seems to me to be someone who has twisted, stretched, pirouetted and vaulted effortlessly, all her short life.

I am aware of my weaknesses and strengths:

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I have two left feet. It’s a running family joke that I have dyspraxia. I find negotiating the frame of a doorway a spatial feat requiring great skill. With gaming, though, I’m quick, I am nimble – my thumbs move dexterously over the controls, my fingers tap dance across a keyboard, all gentle and reactive. I can click, create and destroy whole worlds in seconds.

I like where I live:

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My face is a semi-permanent blue and purple and green, from the monitor’s reflection. The dark lounge room always smells faintly like cats’ piss because the windows are high and small and the walls are damp. The best that lifelong renters can afford. My flatmate Byron and I are moving further out of the city the older we get.

I have more friends than enemies:

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My attention is diverted back to the screen as Alexis effortlessly leaps onto it. At my command, she will find and fight and defend until all the missions are complete, until the storyworld’s mythical sprawl swallows her back up. Or until I download my next game.

Alexis feels different from any other character I’ve played. More personal. I have made all the choices that make her who she is. The IQ and personality profiles that created her character were informed by my answers. So I have no one else to blame.
The game opens with a 360-degree bird's-eye view out over the storyworld. It is vast, beautiful, frightening. There are castles and bubbling dank moats and lush shadowy forests. The vision begins to pan across the storyworld until we reach the edge of one of the border forests. The vision stops moving as it closes in on a small hut with a connecting shed. A door opens and the vision flicks to inside a small, dark room in the hut, the door shuts and the room goes dark. My controls come alive. I start moving Alexis around the room, trying to find a light switch or the door. We look up.

I am a curious person:

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As we move outside, Alexis encourages me to go looking into the shed. Here we uncover our first mission. We have to find a map. This map will help us to find the treasure. The shed grows and expands around us. We have to fight off attacks from ghostly creatures that we have stirred awake by breaking into the dilapidated space. We locate the map finally.

I am a bad tourist but a good traveller:

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Alexis moves out stealthily into the world. We cover a lot of ground. We begin to follow the treasure map. It is as though it has been drawn specifically to thwart us at every turn. Rocks that we climb down slip and crack open under our steps. We are left traversing desert for endless miles, our endurance tested at every turn. There are now people on the horizon behind us, following. A huge gorge opens out before our eyes. As we are climbing deeper into the gorge, hoping to
reach the water that we can hear ahead of us, we smell burning. We smell fire. We are trapped.

Alexis finds a maze of tunnels that grow darker and slimier. The walls shine red and black and grey. The mission rolls on.

The treasure turns out to be the missing pages of a diary. We locate them after enduring the fog of doubt, where every decision you make is questioned and alternatives that could be better are given to you. The ordeal is strength sapping.

Alexis needs to discover the whereabouts of the person who wrote the diary in order to navigate to the rightful rulers of the world. I discover that the diary pages that Alexis and I find are fake. We have rescued the wrong person.

I have been betrayed before:

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The person Alexis releases is not who we thought he was. I’ve inadvertently released a bloodthirsty villain into the mix. His sole purpose is to track and to hunt and, well ... deconstruct you in a ghoulish way. He cuts up and feasts on the body of the avatar. This happens quite a few times. It’s a difficult game.

I can’t seem to find any online cheat sheets. There are no forums or tips. I start searching gamer chat rooms to see if anyone else out there is playing this game. I get confused emoticon-riddled replies to my enquiries. I reconstruct and resuscitate Alexis over and over again. Each time that I bring her back, I’m more drawn in to her.
I would do anything to win big:

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It’s Friday. I have a whole weekend to look out for Alexis. She has been helping me out more and more too. She’s started to leave clues for me, lying around, as well as little messages in the storyworld for me to discover. Even as I move her forward – as I continue to key in directions, she will stop and stare at me with her big eyes and pouty bottom lip, pointing at where she wants me to move her. She will stay frozen like that until I discover the cave system that opens out onto a field of endless violets, my name spelt in blood-red poppies in the distance.

My flatmate flicks the light switch and shakes his head in disgust.

“You need to move. Get out of the house.”

I listen to alternative music:

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I nod at him dumbly and point to the screen – Alexis has organised for my latest favourite song to play. I’ve only heard it on the radio a few times on the way to and from work earlier in the week. She has roused an orchestra of fat furred creatures, hanging bats, snakes, barking owls and a bunyip creature that beats on a large drum. The instruments look familiar but, like the creatures themselves, slightly different to what you expect. Not your standard game
sprites, their limbs and body parts disappear and reappear in time with the music.

I’m confused how Alexis even knows this song. Even if the game can search your hard drive or whatever, I don’t have the song on any downloaded lists. I haven’t been on any other online platform, except to ask about this game, in over a week. How did she know? How much do they know? Maybe the game just plays the latest new hits. My flatmate would know. Byron is always in the know about the latest and greatest and yet-to-be-discovered acts.

I point at the screen and turn to face him feverishly, “Who’s this one by? I only heard it for the first time this week. On the radio. On community radio, maybe? I think. I actually don’t remember listening to it, but I have, I have heard it before. I’m pretty sure.” I ask.

He shrugs, “Yeah it’s a cool song, I guess. I’ve never heard it before. The lyrics are weird. You need to eat.”

“What lyrics?” I ask him and turn back to the screen.

Byron sings, “Little girls shouldn’t play in places they aren’t welcome, beware the friendly souls who say that they are there to help them.”

He walks out quickly before I can reply. I’d forgotten about how creepy his singing voice sounds.

_I have done embarrassing things for money:_

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I know Byron has gone to the kitchen to put together a midnight snack for me. He’s good like that. Alexis doesn’t have these mundane worries. She is more concerned with the trees that change shape and alter the course of her path through yet another forbidding forest. I guess climate change impacts everybody.

After a few bleary hours of early-morning sleep I wake with something nagging at me about the diary pages. They seemed really quite juvenile. I know that some people might think that playing a game is in and of itself juvenile, but the average gamer is now aged in their 30s. The stories and action can be very sophisticated, really!

I read a lot:

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The diary pages don’t seem to fit. Some of the creatures also seem completely illogical, even for this game. Perhaps it was just a design flaw, as if they’ve tried to mash up too many genres.

I have betrayed others:

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I felt suddenly compelled to go out to the garage where the boxes full of dead memories are buried. High school yearbooks and photos of ex-boyfriends. There is an even danker smell in this crowded mausoleum. I shifted past some of
Byron's old bikes; he always has several that are in various states of repair. I moved the gardening tools that we were occasionally inspired to use and kicked the blow-up pool and other summer toys out of the way. We are 20 degrees from dragging them out.

The rake falls off the wall it was leaning against, swinging inches from my face. I swear and flap at some cobwebs that have formed a thick bridge from one side of the garage to the other. An arachnid Autobahn. Several pit stops of dead moth were available along the way. I do not want to wake any sleeping nasties or get caught in their thick web.

I reach a collection of mildewy boxes and begin rifling through them. I've found my old uni and school diaries at the bottom of one and flick through them. The very first few pages of my year nine diary send me screaming out of the messy garage.

How did the game know?

Has my flatmate suddenly developed a new skill and started programming? The words were identical.

I return to stare up at the computer screen and then back down at the ripped page. I enlarge the words on the screen. I peer down at my lap. Identical. My long-forgotten youthful first fantasies, a sexy if still naive Snow White riff, and Cinderella's lurking step-sisters – their bloodied, red-shoes in hand – have morphed into this current nightmare.

Except Alexis is the fantasy princess locked in a magical world on my screen.
I started reading through the directions page on the game. I searched online for any information. I looked up the site where I had found the game to see if I could download a second copy but there was nothing there anymore. I emailed the administrators of the site and asked them about the game. Before I could start looking at the actual code, the screen flashed twice and my computer died.

I am calm in a crisis:

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I feel like the prevalence of bad language in homes and workplaces directly matches the increase in the role of technology in our lives. I’m a fan, big fan, clearly, of all that technology has to offer. But for fuck’s sake. When it doesn’t work or stops working, its allure is temporarily dampened. Life and/or productivity (depending on your politics) grind to a halt. Your functionality is offline. I do not have an on-call home IT department. I do what anyone does. Swear. Push buttons. Flick switches. Swear.

It appears these plaintive cries worked and sleeping beauty woke up. At first a non-committal few flickers on the screen and then the whole machine sprang to life. My screensaver image (a beach somewhere) was gone. There were no files on the screen. No icons or start or shut-down or settings buttons available.

Alexis is staring out and shaking her head and waving a tut-tutting finger at me. She takes up the whole screen. My phone beeps and Byron has messaged he’s off on his camping trip and to “stop playing that infernal game”. Alexis whistles and my attention is diverted back again. She’s talking directly to me now. I’m nodding back and realise that I haven’t touched the controls once. She starts to lead me through the storyworld.
“Isn’t it just how you remember it?” She asks in her deep voice.

She laughs smugly as she points out the part of the story that I once enacted with Barbie dolls at age eight. The portion of the storyworld that has been strained from my dreams as a teenager. The various impacts of *The Exorcist* and *It* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The hunter who looks a lot like someone I used to know lurking in the background of the forest that morphs into a park near a creek.

“It’s what you wanted. Isn’t it? It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

She’s taking me back down the tree-canopied lane and across the violet fields and towards the castle buried deep in the forest. She holds her hand out to me and waits patiently for me to take it. I look around at the lounge room. It’s dark and shabby and the world on my screen is fecund and rippling. I reached out my hand to Alexis.

I *don’t* spend much time *thinking* about the past:

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The last thing I remember seeing in the room was the computer cord plugged in to a switched-off power point. Alexis has me in a tight hug. She strokes my hair and tells me we need to hurry, the hunter is no longer watching from the periphery of my trapped memories but is making his way closer and closer to us. He wants me this time.

She takes me closer to the castle. We battle through the shape-changing trees and avoid the sword-feathered birds. The sky is getting darker and the melted
kewpie-doll statues spring to life. We have to climb a rock face that softens and hardens with every heartbeat – one minute you cling to solid earth, the next you slip on wet hot slime.

I am afraid of heights:

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Finally, we reach the mouth of a cave that will give us direct passage to the castle tower. Standing, balanced on a precarious ledge, we have to heave the enormous mirror covering the entrance aside and shift it back into place behind us, all with our eyes closed. If we had looked upon our reflections, well mine (Alexis doesn’t have one), I would have been burned to ash. With every turn and pause and step, we are faced with falling, burning, ending. We survive.

We reach the inner sanctuary and Alexis hands me a drink. She tells me it will make us sleepy but that it will keep us safe from the hunter. I drink it. She lies down next to me, her hot breathe runs along my neck, she plays with my hair. She moves closer. She drinks me in.

Byron is standing in the doorway yelling at me.

“NO, Claire-Bear! You’re in the same clothes as two days ago! Wake up. Move!”

“Don’t call me that,” I sleepily reply.

He forces me toward the shower and goes off to make breakfast. I look at myself in the mirror. Maybe yoga can explain the lift. I shower and it’s delicious. Everything feels and smells great. It’s the little things. The soap running over my
skin. The minty flavour of the toothpaste. The warm towel and fresh clothes. I finish up and walk in to the kitchen. Byron points at the kitchen table. I sit down obediently and smile at him. He brings the plates of food over and I ask him how he is.

“Pretty good. Trip was good. I wrote a new one. It’s kind of soppy but … wanna hear it?” He looks up at me sheepishly.

“Another what?” I ask him.

“A poem. A-huhmmm, a love poem this time … I guess it’s for y—”

_Deep down, I know who I really am:_

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Laura Hamer stepped down from the chair in front of the peephole. They had roughly 12 more hours until she’d have to take up watch again. She lit her cigarette. The eighth of the morning. She tried to ration a pack of rollie tobacco a week, but it didn’t always work out that way. The butts from the night before littered the front entrance hall. She turned to face the figure sitting on the couch, bathed in lights from the flickering screen. Freddy’s dry tongue slacked on his lower lip like a dead snail half out of its shell. The dark, airless lounge room hosted a TV that was perpetually on. Laura believed it was what kept the others away some nights. They thought, maybe, that she had finally succumbed. Or perhaps they didn’t want her in their club. Just wanted her body parts and her blood and her spare change.

*Brilliant shine. Wipe on, wipe off. Moira this is just one great gosh-darn appliance. Is there nothing it can’t do?*

*Well Steve, it can’t be your dinner date. And, who’d want to be that? But it will clean up after! Hahaha!*

*Hahaha ... And back to you, Teags, for the wonderful weather!*

“Wonderful weather. Freddy, you like that?” Laura shook her head at the glazed breakfast show hosts. “It’s raining, same as it was yesterday and the day before that. But they’ll tell us a big lie, once again.” She jiggled a cup suggestively towards Freddy and went to turn on the jug.
Laura’s apartment was a small box-shaped affair. The front door opened to a small hall, off which hung the door to the bedroom to the right and the bathroom to the left. Directly in front was the passageway to the lounge room; alongside one wall of this room ran the kitchenette. That was it.

The bedroom window looked out onto the second floor of the red-brick apartments next door. The bathroom had no window, just an air ventilator. Occasionally you could see flashes of the concrete stairwell as the blades flicked around. At the back of the lounge room were three large windows. Laura had bought the place 10 years ago for the sunlight. She had wanted to downsize ever since her daughter had packed up and moved overseas. Laura bought the place outright. No mortgage. Out of the leftovers, she gave some money to her daughter and used the rest as her dwindling retirement fund. Nursing super was not enough to get by on. Freddy was as useless as he’d always been when it came to money.

These days the windows were never opened. The blinds were always down. She knew that they couldn’t see through them. If she lifted the blinds, any night of the week, she would see them. They would be congregating on the street in big groups, scratching and twitching and looking up at her building, trying to work out a way to get in. She was pretty sure she was the last one in the building who hadn’t joined. She wasn’t sure about the rest of the street. People still seemed to get up and go out during the day or drive off to work or school or other places, away from this stretch.

It couldn’t have spread too far. The post-woman still delivered the mail. The grocery man still collected it for Laura on his way up to drop off her home shopping (which included her tobacco, gin and tonic water). Laura wasn’t totally technologically inept, so she paid her bills and ordered her food online. She felt guilty about putting the couriers in the line of fire, but she knew that they were
at least aware of the risks, and they always came in daylight. They probably took precautions. Occasionally she “surfed” to see how far it had spread. There were outbreaks all over.

Sometimes she also Googled her daughter’s name. She liked that it came up, the first on the list was her daughter’s entry for a big consulting firm in New York. She had really done well, her Mella, really well. That’s why she couldn’t tell her about it. She didn’t want to worry her daughter. It would upset her. Mella might send someone around they both knew or get lawyers and police involved and Laura just couldn’t have that. It was far better, on their weekly phone chats, to just tell her about all the amazing things she wasn’t doing. Last week she had invented a new social circle, a ‘bitch and stitch’ event, where she was a total hoot, “class clown,” she told Mella, “They just love me. Even the young ones.”

“Ah, who wouldn’t, mum! I miss you. Big love, yeah? Gotta go, Jason looks as though he’s raided the fridge! We’re going to visit soon. Promise.”

“Give the little fella a kiss from his nan. Love you, sweet. Got to get going too, Pilates is about to start.” Laura had smiled at this. Maybe too far? She thought she got it in under the radar. She’d have to look it up on the Net and at least pretend to be a bit knowledgeable if Mella ever asked her about the Teflon arachnid pose. Laura Hamer wasn’t going to a Pilates class that night or ever. In fact, she hadn’t left the apartment in years. Not since the first ones moved in upstairs.

She made the tea and sat down to flick through the channels. Now TV had gone digital there wasn’t any more choice, just endless duplication. Channel after channel of home-shopping networks and American soap opera reruns. What she wouldn’t do for a box-set collection of The Bill. She dozed off next to Freddy and when she awoke the midday news was on. She elbowed Freddy to get his
attention; he just kept staring at the TV. He was not going to budge. He was getting even sloppier, if that was possible. Laura noticed all the bits that needed tending to. She couldn’t interest him in anything much these days. A big part of a lifetime’s worth of memories you share and eventually you’ve nursed each other into the grave. Whoever had worked out this deal should be slugged, thought Laura.

She leavened herself off the couch, rolled and lit another cigarette and did the few dishes in the sink, setting them on the rack to dry. A strand of brittle hair fell forward and she brushed it aside, making a mental note to try out her new hair conditioner. Laura swept the butts from the front door into the dustpan and wondered about what she would make for the next meal. Uninspired by the remains in her fridge, she fantasised about thick fruit jam on fresh bread and real coffee. Laura made herself raisin toast and instant, and sat back down on the couch to watch her soapies and smoke herself into a quiet stupor. The smoke folded around the dank air, enveloping them both.

Laura awoke to the sound of a metal pipe along the stairwell railing. Back and forth he’d go. He was calling them. He always stayed right outside Laura’s apartment. It would start slowly, one railing clang after another, and then get faster and louder as he bashed the pipe against the stairs and giggled uncontrollably. The others in the building would respond. Some would come out and just sit, hooded and folded on the steps, watching him for hours at a time. Others would start playing their own music. Electronic signals that bounced around the vacant heart of the apartment block; their own private code.

She had overslept. Laura was disappointed with herself. She rose from the couch and crept over towards the peephole. Gingerly and quietly she rose up on to the high stool and placed one hand to the right of the small one-way window to outside her apartment, the world beyond. She had rested her hand in that spot.
so many nights that there was a print when she took the hand away. Laura rolled a cigarette without looking down, using only her left hand. She’d only been an occasional smoker before the last few years. It was just that it calmed her, gave her something to do, while she watched others watch her.

“People will feel safe. Second-floor apartment. Inner city. Lots of people around. Still a few of the, ummm, un-gentrified in this neighbourhood but they wouldn’t bother anyone here.” That was what the enormous-toothed rental agent had told her. The short flatulent woman had flapped her through a tour and told her she couldn’t lose. Place was the trendiest hot-spot location on the map. The small one-bedder was a steal, the agent said. There were 19 other one-and-two-bedroom apartments in the L-shaped block. It was close enough to parks and the water not to need its own aesthetic beauty to command its chilling price. “You’ll easily be able to rent it out. I imagine that’s what you’re looking for? An investment property?” The agent’s thin brow perked up at the word investment and remained tucked up in its apex shape, as she looked at Laura quizzically.

“No, we’ll be living here. I think.” Laura answered.

The agent looked slightly put out, she explained to Laura that it was a building with lots of renters. Perhaps a younger community than Laura was used to. Maybe she should look a few suburbs over, perhaps a bit pricier but nice gardens and a more ‘sedate’ pace for people her age. Or further out, bigger houses and the real estate agent continued, “There are other people from where you’re from that live there, could be a real little community for someone like you.” Laura fought the urge to say, “People like me? Other Australians then?”

Before she could respond to this woman’s casual slur, Laura saw a pretty young 20-something woman below, unloading groceries from her boot in eco-friendly shopping bags. Laura smiled and waved at her as she swung around and
launched past them and up the stairs. The woman grinned back and nodded; she looked about Mella's age and professional. Laura thought she would feel quite at home in the building and made an offer on the spot. At this, the agent seemed to forget her various prejudices and shook hands.

Laura always tried to look out for that woman. The pretty young woman from 7a upstairs. She'd been one of the last to fall. Laura still remembered hearing it. The man had knocked slowly on 7a's door and asked for some cable or adapter or something. The lovely but lonely young woman hadn't been aware what was going on. She invited him in. Laura should have warned her, should have been neighbourly. Instead she had been dealing with her own life, with Freddy, who was sick himself.

Laura saw a few of them murmuring over their small fires. Each night it was a different routine. One of them would cook up for the others. They'd take turns. Then the music would get louder and the antics stranger. Earlier that month on the full moon, Laura had looked out and found them all standing in the car park below. They were turned and pointing their fingers at her apartment door. The whole grey-faced mob of them, illuminated by the milky-blue carpark lights. They looked like a shoal of slimy fish. They had stayed that way until dawn, shuffling off to their respective apartments to repair before the next sundown.

She had called the police the first few times about the noise. The cop from the station around the corner came and chatted to a few of them. He stopped by at Laura's on one occasion: "No problem with a party unless you're not invited, eh?" he joked. Laura didn't ask him in. She tried to explain that they weren't having a shindig. They were off, something was wrong with them. They taunted her, she told him. He patted her on the arm and told her to get some rest, that it wasn't them that were off. Maybe she needed to lay off the booze. Maybe use some air-freshener, or get out of the house a bit more, talk to her friends and family more.
After that they took turns. Sitting outside her window. Some of them would sing hateful low moaning songs. Or just spit or make hawking or sniffing sounds. Some would bring their saucepan lids and just bang them together over and over again. Laura would yell at Freddy to do something to stop it, but he was useless. She began to not go outside at night. She was too afraid even to have her after-dinner cigarette on the concrete stoop next to the stairwell. She began to smoke at the front windows and craned her head out so the smoke wouldn’t get trapped inside and make the place stink.

A few months ago, as they sat scraping their fingernails down her front door she lifted the blinds and went to edge a window open. When she looked out, there was a group of them on the street. Faces she recognised from the collective who lived in the building, all bloated and scaly and rancid. People she thought could have been the dog-walking neighbours. One of this pair held a leash with nothing at its end. He swung the leash around in wide arcs as if he was building up to shot-put it through her window. Laura had not opened her blinds since.

Tonight, Laura realised that she hadn’t showered in a week. She sat there puffing on her next cigarette and could smell the pit under her lifted arm. It was wheatty and acrid. She also had only surface-dozed and was tired and not alert enough to get through the night. She wondered if she wouldn’t be just as safe having a quick shower to wake herself up. It would refresh her. Laura slipped quietly off her stool. They hadn’t yet taken up a post outside her door.

The one Laura called the Master was only really just starting the games for the night. The residents were still queuing up, waiting for him. Laura opened her drawers carefully and selected some new clothes. She slipped out of her rumpled old ones in the bathroom and didn’t open or close any doors or turn on
any lights. She worried that the water taps might shudder while she showered. Laura hoped the electronic wail of their music would cover it up.

The water spilled out in fat thick gushes and she felt alive. The soap and shampoo were in a metal rack that she had to twist around to reach. She never knew why it had been put there. Very poor design, she thought. Of course Freddy wouldn’t move it, and she was always busy, so there it sat, fixed in its awkward spot. Laura ran the soap over her body and lathered up.

Laura was hurrying as she twisted to reach for the shampoo when she looked over to the air vent. Around and around went the blades. She lathered her hair. She had almost finished up. She stretched back once more to place the bottle back in its place. Looking over nervously she yelled out in fear. The blades in the air vent had stopped moving around. Instead there was one of his large red and yellow eyes leering in at her. And a knife poked through, keeping the fan still. He made a low whistle and she could see others crowding around to laugh and get a peek. He grumbled in his low voice and several of them started to run up and shoulder-charge her front door. Her wrinkled flesh angered them. They wanted her out.

She could have joined them. He’d told her that the first time he had knocked at her apartment. Laura had registered his surprise that an ‘ol’ mummy’ lived in the building. Laura had kept a low profile once he and his mates moved in. Watching him stop by a new apartment each night until eventually it was her turn. He told her that she too would have to take the medicine.

He’d gotten excited when she refused him entry, yelling: "Mumma Nursey, Mumma Nursey, she’ll get us clean singes and look avva us all! Sides, what’s rottin in there, bitch?"
His sidekick with the evil small eyes had clapped and in a terrifying whinny, he repeated: “Mummys Nursey, Nurse me Mumma Nursey. Love me like you do so well.” Small-eyes walked up to her in the doorframe and tried to pull at her shirt to uncover her sagging nipples. He gagged when he got close and scurried away. The Master roared with laughter and peered inside Laura’s apartment. Freddy sat in the lounge room, the Master couldn’t see his open mouth and slouching body. Laura had pushed the cretins out as forcefully as she could and slammed the door, putting all the extra bolts in place. The boys cackled and the Master yelled out that she had a week to join them or leave, or he’d tell on her. He’d make life hell. That was a while ago and Laura Hamer had not given in. She had been tested and tortured before and survived.

As they kept jeering at her she ran from the bathroom and into her bedroom. Dressing quickly. She found her tool belt that she wore for the “endurance” nights, like public holidays and long weekends. That was when the screaming and yelling and stomping was at its loudest. In the tool belt she kept her large kitchen carving knife and her Swiss Army knife engraved by her first husband and a bottle of rank perfume that she could spray in their eyes if she needed to. It had repelled unwanted social advances in the past. Laura kept the heavy, dented fire extinguisher next to the door so that she could put out a fire. If they tried to smoke her out. Or bash someone’s skull in if she had to. Another of its potential uses.

The Master, as if sensing she was ready, pointed at two of the young lads from No. 12. They swung down from the stair railings and ran at the door and bounced back off as if it were canvas. Next he whispered to the once.pretty young woman. She came up slowly, shuffling and twitching until she was directly in front of the peephole. The angle and the lens of the little window created an Alice in Wonderland effect. It made people’s faces grow bigger and smaller depending on where they stood. The woman shuffled closer and closer
to the door until Laura could almost smell the decay that she, like the whole building, emanated.

"Mumma Nursey?" The girl whispered. "Are you in there, Mumma Nursey? I need you to come out now. We're all very worried about you. We heard the banging, Mumma Nursey. We smell its end. And I'm hurting, Mumma Nursey. Look. Look at me with your nursey eye, Mumma Nursey. I'm so hurtie!" The young woman stepped back and her body lengthened in the peephole. The young woman lifted her shirt and Laura was shocked by her bruised and sore-ridden torso. Her navel was black and she had burn marks on the inside of her arms. "Don't you wanna be my friend, Mumma Nursey? I can help you, too, Mumma Nursey, help you leave your nasty old life behind. Comun outta there and we'll go for a walk and get some medsin together."

Laura gripped her knife tightly. There was no use calling the policeman. He wasn't one of them, but he was in on it, she was sure of it. Like the nursing profession, his copper's super wasn't ever going to pay big dividends. People were better off going into professions where you didn't help other people. The cop's last advice for her had been: "Should just sell up, Ms Hamer. They're not going anywhere."

The TV emitted a blast of gunfire, making Laura shriek at her post. The 11 o'clock action movie on Channel 13. Freddy liked those. The others outside started laughing again. One of them began to throw a ball against the door. Thud. Thud. Thud. The others seemed to have fun watching this for a while but they got bored and turned away. Most of them obediently lined up, when the Master started playing the railings again. The worst was over, Laura thought. They got less and less able as the night wore on. Only a few times a week did one really freak out. She knew the Master had banned guns in the block. He'd been wounded by an ungrateful sidekick once. He didn't want that to happen.
again. His record also meant he couldn’t hold a gun himself; if he got caught, he’d go back inside. He’d end up all guilty and curled up like the old woman in putrid No. 3.

At around six a.m. Laura awoke. Pierced by a blinding ray of light through her eyeball and experiencing a dull painful stinging around the skin that had been scrunched up against the peephole all night. She brushed the ash from her pants and wearily fell into bed.

Later that morning Laura was woken by a loud knock at her door. She peered carefully through and was surprised to see the horse-mouthed agent who had originally sold her the property, older and with even less eyebrows. These pencil arrows flew up as Laura opened the door. The agent stepped back from the frame repelled by Laura’s ash breath and the bruised eye socket she was sporting.

As the agent extracted a tissue from her handbag and held it to her nose she began prattling on. “Hi, Laurrah. Long time, no chin-waggy, eh?” She purred. “Just wanted to drop this off … Offer! Eeek! Great, huh?! They’re turning this into a gym health wellbeing medical clinicky natural therapies yoghurt complex or something. None of the other owners live here … all, you know, ummm, investor owners. But they’ve all signed on. You’re the lucky last … means I can probs negotiate the price up for you. But take a look…”

Laura accepted the proffered documents, all bound and glossy. The TV behind her brayed an ad for cheaply priced men’s clothes. The offer was triple what she had paid for the apartment. It did not take Laura long to consider the proposal.

“I’ll sign … on one condition …” Laura smiled.
“Pretty sure this company will agree to anything.” The agent flicked her hair from side to side and smiled with all the warmth of plastic flowers, in an attempt at intimacy with the deranged-looking woman. Laura became aware of her sticky grey hair plastered to her forehead and the chunks of ash that looked ground into her loose shirt and pants. She tried to run her hand, nonchalantly, through her hair. It got stuck.

“I want to leave with you right now.”

The agent smiled wider and flipped out her phone. She hit redial and walked just below the stairway, mumbling brightly, and too audibly, to the corporate buyers, “The (inaudible but casual racist epithet) in Number 3 said yes!” The agent came back, wobbly on her too-high heels, in her too-tight suit. “Deal it is!” The agent remembered the ease with which she’d originally signed this client.

Laura grabbed just what she needed. As Laura was walking out to the car, she glanced at the agent seated in the petrol-guzzler parked downstairs. “That one’s not even worth the effort,” she thought. Laura threw the beaten-up fire extinguisher and the tool belt in the trash. She thought she heard a clang of metal railings overhead, but she didn’t look back.

The agent went back to the building later that week and knocked at the top floor. There was no answer. She turned around to leave when the door creaked ajar behind her. A skinny panel of faces leered up at her through the crack, the one visible eyeball was red, shot through with floating yellow icecaps. She smiled in at him, “Good work on getting rid of her. Can you pick up her husband and drop him off at her hotel? And chuck out all the left-over furniture? They start building next week.”
The Master curved in to the doorframe and smiled, revealing a miserable gash of gum. "Sure, Sure, we'll do a tip-run, drop off old hubbie bludgeon. We drop him all the way down. Mumma no nursey him no more. She no nursey hubbie bludgeon for a long time." He spat onto the concrete next to the agent who walked away quickly, wondering where she could get a cold-pressed juice.