The Novel

The Luna Museum

By

J.A.Morrison
Art is a lie that makes us realise truth.

Pablo Picasso

By disparagement, by starvation, by repressions, forced direction and the stunning hammerblows of conditioning, the free, roving mind is being pursued, roped, blunted, drugged. It is a sad suicidal course our species seems to have taken.

And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world.

John Steinbeck, East of Eden
**Prologue**

This is what we know in 2010:

The day was hot, his diary tells us, but what an Englishman regards as hot in 1799, we do not know. He has borrowed a box of paints from an officer. He is not a painter, though he enjoys drawing objects and landscape. He chooses a position on the foreshore of Sydney Harbour looking across the water to a small promontory of land the other side that is, according to his painting, fringed with stiff, feathery trees arranged in rows; gum trees supposedly. He makes them look ordered, with foliage similar to botanical specimens pressed flat for examination. We know gum trees straggle, that their foliage is green-grey, and with a poetic eye, sometimes in evening light, purplish. We do not believe his representation. Perhaps he paints the flora the way he wishes it to be.

We proceed, sceptical of his intentions now. What else does he invent, ameliorate, fail to render factually?

The harbour, it is silver white. He cannot, he says in his diary, paint water very well. We take him at his word; we do not believe that he is being modest. Looking at the painting we are persuaded that his competence is mediocre, his imagination limited. The harbour therefore may have been, in reality, green or blue, rippling or still, but instead it gapes at the viewer like a cold mirror.

Now, the tall ships are something else. They are out of proportion, too large for the scale of the figures on the shore. They are central to the composition and we can suggest that this is the high point of his emotion. He wishes for the ships to be larger, perhaps for his future to be less tenuous in this fledgling colony. Here he works his rudimentary hand with sentiment. Here the ships, made in England and carrying the cargo of his civilisation ï cutlery, lace doilies, lanterns, picks, axes and ink-wells ï resonate with a cultural and emotional significance far greater than their actual size. The awkward scale of the ships could be a gesture at an epic moment of history that shakes, that does not attain, that falls back forlorn into the brief ambition, perhaps longing of one man. However they are vessels of meaning ï they convey meaning, unload and transplant it onto foreign soil.
And perhaps he finds, to his surprise, that here on the hem of the known world, the meaning of the ships and their cargo is profoundly altered.

We know he is lonely. He writes that he misses his family and has not found satisfactory companionship in the new colony. Then we notice that the sky is the colour of the sea and, despite the wobbly oversized sailing ships, there is a great emptiness at the centre of the canvas that dilates out. We feel, at this point, for his loneliness. Sometimes, in the tremendous light, the unfillable future, and the unexplored land, his heart shrinks. *My heart shrinks sometimes*, he writes in his diary, *to think of this place. It has a silence.*

There are many distances in this painting, both metaphorical and real. But the most important one is his distance from what he paints. We know from the topography of the harbour that he greatly exaggerates his distant point of view. Why does he do this? It could be that he wants to include too much in the painting for the purposes of composition, or that this is how he perceives the scene. Perhaps the multiple distances within which he lives — the months’ journey back to England, the unmapped tracts of new landscape — coalesce into this one distance — his emotional distance from what he sees.

He writes of the first day, the first flag, the first building foundation, the First Fleet. In this remote place he sees and also does not see the rustlings of a new world. Is it as if time has begun again?

Does he think of us, the people who will come after him, two-hundred and eleven years later? We do not know, but we think of *him* through his painting; through its faults and failures we seek him out.

Two more small and touching things: he was not pleased with the final picture. He handed the box of paints back to the officer and writes that he wished he had never seen them. And he died on October 13th 1800. We do not know what from; the records merely state, *natural causes.*

Describe this painting on the screen behind me by way of introducing you to Nick Barlow, who has worked an architectural idea from this same promontory of land. Whereas the painter has rendered an inexpert but sincerely felt picture of Sydney Cove in 1799, Nick Barlow has, at first glance, treated the site entirely differently. However I have set up this little dialogue between the ordinary early settler and the acclaimed contemporary architect to suggest that it is not merely their interest in the land on the
northern foreshore that links them. Perhaps there are other cultural, artistic, even existential issues that inform them both and connect them across time.

It my pleasure to introduce you to the controversial and internationally renowned architect, Nick Barlow, who will explore these and other issues in his delivery of the Arthur Phillip Lecture, 2010.

Professor Jennifer Hume finishes speaking, smiles and steps off the podium to the left. Nick Barlow steps up on the right. There is a spatter of earnest applause across the Sydney Museum Theatrette.

Barlow is tall, grey haired, with a fine boned face and a stark, confrontational gaze. He gathers his papers, and beneath the light of the lectern his hands are glaringly white. Then he glances vehemently over the audience and frowns into the spot light.
Chapter One

Nick

You see this jagged line? This is a ceiling comprised of shards of glass and stone. You look up at it and ask: could this thing we think of as a ceiling actually be a floor? As if the rubble of another great civilisation has fallen and we wait below entombed. Wait for what, he wonders, as he describes the intersecting lines before her and looks briefly through the window. The light has just deepened and the sky is readying for a furious momentary storm. Serrated rows of agaves and bronze flax stiffen beneath the birches. He turns back and finds she has leaned into the desk to examine the rectilinear drawings. Her face is young and lustrous, almost classical. While he studies her closely he has a vision of abundance, a brush with infinity.

It is early evening on a Thursday in 1999. He now believes that he is designing one of the great and enduring monuments of the twenty-first century.

She sits still while he describes the quality of light that will diffuse through the Main Hall. He is renowned for his quality of light, in both northern and southern hemispheres. Modernist light he calls it and later thinks how absurd it is to colonise sunlight, to speak as if light originated in the twentieth century. In any case it is not exactly Modernist, but something more lyrical. He envisions how the light will fall on the slate floor and how people will mingle in the tranquil stealth of its beams.
In his cool white study, among his books and favourite objects he wants to touch her. To feel her resistance and touch her anyway. She is accidentally, erotically out of place. She is a professional masseuse waiting for his wife to come home for her appointment. He thinks of her massaging his wife, touching her in a forceful, even way as no one else touches her. How do they relate to each other, the masseuse and her client? One lies passively and one, bound in her pleasure, circles her with impersonal hands. He looks at her hands clasped in her lap; they are wide at the knuckles, square at the finger tips. They are indelicate and lack feminine vanity, but they know the sprung points of tension and the soothing meridians of release in a stranger’s body.

He makes notes on the plan while she waits in silence. He bends over close to the paper and with a sudden sense of his own treachery, he retreats into the drawings and wants her to be gone. He stands and says something about her leaving and his wife phoning her later. Then he sees her to the door. They walk side by side down the wide passage and through the house. The sound of them quickly absorbs into the leather panelled wall and the volume of air in the living room, except for the tap of her heels on the stone floor, which makes a primitive echo like flint on rock. She brushes a strand of vivid dark hair behind her ear. She seems not to notice her conspicuous foot fall in the quietness of the house. He sees her glance indifferently across the furniture and the impeccable white planes of the living room. The atmosphere in his house has altered, has been seen from another angle. At the door he asks her name, and she replies with excessive dignity, Lilijana.

Returning to the study, he contemplates her fleetingly. Back at his desk he takes up the exaltations of designing the iconic museum to be built on Sydney Harbour and no longer thinks of her.

She is not gone half an hour when the thunderous rain of a summer storm passes. In the early evening sky there are no curlicue clouds or distant scattered showers. There is just a new sky without traces. In Sydney, he thinks, there are few remnants. Most people want to rush from darkness and corners into the seething beauty and celebrate the shameless, reckless pleasure of the instantaneous moment.

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
Helen comes home later that night and stops at the door of his study. He speaks without looking up from his desk.

‘The girl came for your massage appointment. Did you forget?’

‘God. Yes. Did you pay her?’

‘For what?’

‘Nick, she should have been paid for coming.’ She raises her voice. He looks at her then. She stands centred in the doorway, still holding her black kidskin bag, her other hand resting on the architrave. Her lipstick is fresh and glossy and he cannot make out the fine intersecting lines around her mouth that he knows are there. Her grey linen jacket is slightly creased from sitting at a charity dinner and her expression is cautious.

Lately she speaks loudly as if the listener has receded into the distance. After the architectural awards, she, the ex-architect, had complained how *if you are not practising architecture, they treat you as if you have to justify your existence.* He had agreed with her because it was easier. Her opinions are increasingly simple and dogmatic as she becomes less certain of everything. Her constituency is now propriety and convention.

‘I said you’d phone.’ He turns back to the desk and considers the fractal planes of the titanium cladding that wraps the southern profile of the building.

‘Did you read all those letters and articles in the press objecting to the demolition of Luna Park and saying that your museum would be an eyesore?’

‘Briefly.’

‘How could you read all that briefly?’

‘Without reading it properly.’ He smiles at her.

‘You don’t care.’ It is a reproach not a question. She continues, ‘Do you think it will proceed without compromise?’

‘I think it will proceed. I know I won’t compromise.’ There is a pause more serious than the banter would suggest.

‘Did it occur to you that you might be imposing things on people that they simply don’t want?’ She says quietly, almost to herself, then steps into the passage.

‘Sometimes vision fulfils its own prophecy and takes us to new places. If people let themselves be taken.’ He raises his eyebrows above his half-glasses as if they have shared a small joke, but all they have shared is their disparate views of the world. She
turns and continues on to the bedroom. He senses her out there, jittery and indefinite, balanced at the edges of his life.

At four-thirty the next morning he wakes from a dream, blood roaring on its course from heart to ear to temple. Helen lies beside him, a slender undulating S, the vibration of her sleeping breath in the air, her face turned to the wall. He wakes with the image of himself as a young man lying in his bed and a voice from another room saying in a casual conversation, *he is not young, did you know that he is fifty-one?* The number relays an indecipherable emergency. In a half-sleep the voice persists, now gentle as if breaking terrible news, *you are fifty-one.* He lies still, disbelieving and wonders, where is the life of thirty years that was once before me?
Chapter Two

Lili

Images of Lili, like negatives, flash against the window as the train passes through a tunnel to the light. She looks at the reflection of her face looking back at her. It is an x-ray glance. The train lurches and slows at Sydney central station. Along the concrete embankment she sees graffiti. Tag lines cringe, personal hieroglyphics, bent over, angry, red, yellow, full of haste. She thinks they mean nothing. They are not language, they are vacant hours in the night that can never be known. Moments of exhilaration that pull on emptiness. Her bleached-out face flashes against the stained graffiti wall; the images layer over each other and are confused, like a limpid well that you look down and through to an original memory over which life is stacked.

She remembers a photograph of her family gathered beside the cherry tree. Her mother had arranged them, directing them to stand or sit, to move until she had composed the perfect assembly. It was meant to be a moment of pride. The photo resonates with innocence. They are people who think that history is behind them, having lunch in their cousin Murat’s garden in early-autumn, in short sleeves. A plate of cheese, salad from the garden, fish with dill, and to finish, almond cake. The plates had been cleared away but Lili remembers the meal. It seems from the photo that under the cherry tree is a fretted light that gently veils their faces. They sit beneath the pattern of its shade and feel the
warmth. Murat’s birthday, a Sunday in the autumn of 1986 is written on the back of the photo.

During the war in Bosnia, they sometimes loaded prisoners onto trains. Freight trains without windows. Lili did not see it. She did not read it. Like most things in those years she heard it whispered from dry lips with measured breath, words tightening in throats.

She likes to suck coloured lollies. A crumpled paper bag filled with jewel-coloured lollies gapes in her hand. She pops two in her mouth. They slip over and around her tongue, smoothing into small discs of sweetness. The different colours all taste the same. When she was a child she used to eat boiled lollies one at a time and poke her tongue out in the mirror to see the colour. Now she jumbles them up. They run together in a dark red-green. Her tongue looks like slime, and she thinks that she resembles an exotic lizard that struts on the rusted earth of an Australian desert.

She has the facts when people ask: I came here as a refugee.

They are not sure how to react. Some of them are attentive to her face, to her words, when they know this. Others wonder what might be asked of them. She understands from their expressions that they do not want signs of excessive emotion.

I come from Bosnia. We have … er had civil war. I had to leave. I have been here a few years. Yes, I was quite young when I came here. Yes, I like it very much.

They are glad she chose Australia. They do not know what has happened to her so they are wary of asking questions. Her experience is encoded in another more complex history. There might be emotional fault lines that should be addressed only by professionals. But people are mostly nice. They urge her to look to the future. They are relieved that she is safe, that hers is a happy story.

At home I studied medicine. I could not finish the degree because of the war, so I took a massage and natural therapy course in Australia.

Like most things it is a lie. She did not study medicine, she did not even think of it until she needed to distinguish her story from that of the others. It is that extra loss, more than family and country, culture and language, that they take notice of. Here is a girl who could have been a doctor. Loss of opportunity, a democracy’s chance to restore, to exercise its power. The other losses are beyond its mandate.

No, I came alone. My family was killed in the war.
This seems brutal and out of context. She says it with a bland face as though its impact is not fully realised. If the person is very curious, she tells them her family was murdered in the war. Generally that is the end of the conversation about being a refugee. She is always grateful for that. Lili could not possibly tell them the truth.

She has strong wrists and hands that are smoothed by massage oil and tanned in the Sydney sun. They glisten as she kneads the knotted necks, the knuckled backbones. She looks at the backs she massages and thinks they are like shining sand dunes. But underneath are gristled, contracted muscles; tension and stress, hypochondria and sometimes bitterness. At the end they stir slowly, as if they are surfacing from beneath a calm sea and are waiting for their lips to kiss the air. They want to know how they are. Did you find much stress? It was better than last time, wasn’t it? They want to find improvement in everything. Yes, she says, you are much improved. More relaxed. They smile and grab their watches and dress quickly because they are late for an appointment. Or they are at home and must get ready to pick up their children, or meet their husbands at a function. Lili cannot contemplate how she might belong to this world of round tables and families, of appointments and gardeners, florists and cleaners.

* * *

At the beginning of the war, she watched from the window of their apartment while a group of young soldiers beat a youth in the street. Five soldiers, arms out to balance, were kicking a fallen figure. They jumped and kicked, springing from the ground in the rhythm of dance steps; the long shadows of their swift legs moved gracefully on the stone pavement. She was mesmerised by the curled figure at the centre, the victim, afraid for him. There was nothing between him and the dancing boots — no god, no court, no government or mother or father. He was just abandoned. After a few seconds her father came over to her and told her to come away from the window. Her mother had warned him not to go down into the street and interfere, you can’t save him and if you try, it will be you bleeding in the street. Please.

Why did they beat him? she had asked her father later.
He had hesitated and it seemed to her that he did not have the answer. Then he said, ‘What is the man who beats you doing? He is shifting your mind around your body. Into your body. He is keeping your mind in the pain. Like an animal, you cannot think,’ he tapped his forefinger against his temple. ‘They beat him because he thinks and his thoughts are different from theirs and they want him to suffer for it.’

She did not fully understand her father’s answer. All she could see in her mind was the blood on the boy’s hands as he protected his head against the kicking feet. Her father believed in the power of the mind to render both darkness and light, to provoke and defend – that is how he explained it to her. Even as war overtook them he had kept alternative worlds alive in his imagination.

Her cousin’s friend, Lucia, had been raped and had moved away with her family. Her school friends said it was a soldier. Every incident was an incident of war. Every criminal, a soldier. One day Lili was walking down the hall and passed the bathroom door. It was slightly open and she glanced inside as she passed. Her grandmother stood naked in the bath. Her old body was white and lumpy. Her skin was luminous with water. On her legs were fans of blue veins, her shoulders sloped, her back was rounded and her breasts drooped. The old woman’s vulnerable body frightened Lili. There were no defences. A soft woman, old and innocent, bathing. How could the soldiers ever be persuaded to let her be? Lili wished in that moment that her grandmother would die that night, in her sleep. Would pass with dignity into the safety of death, in the way a peacetime death might come. Softly, gently, leaving memories intact, taking in the casket the whole person, the whole life and not some desecrated remnant. Manner of death, she decided, was very important. She was fifteen when she decided this.

Her grandmother turned and saw Lili at the door. She smiled and did not rush to cover herself. Lili immediately felt guilty. Her grandmother waved a scolding finger at her, and in an instant it seemed that life could prevail. That bodies and minds were complex and not just grist for war.

When the siege took hold, the muscular branches of the trees along the boulevards framed widening spaces, their tracery dissolving into sky. Old poplar and chestnut trees. In the night people came to take branches for fuel. Some came in cars, took saws out of boots and hacked at the trees. It started in a modest way, as if they could all share. Or as
if it was just a short pause, this war, and they did not need to rob the trees too much to warm themselves through winter.

Lili watched them from her bedroom. Sometimes it was raining. Sometimes a loose mist washed low over roads and footpaths. In the mist they stayed longer and took more, knowing that they would be hard to recognise. In the beginning they would not come when there was a full moon. The street lights started to fail and were not repaired. Then the electricity was cut off. People preferred the darkened reaches of the street. Observers’ eyes made their act an act of theft.

When the cold bit in and it started to snow and the light faded by four in the afternoon, more people came for wood. They were audacious now, because they had stopped thinking that the winter would be mild or the war would be short or their neighbours kind. And they did not believe anymore that they were stealing. Soon entire trees were gone, hacked off at the base. Jagged trunks stood like broken columns of some ruined colonnade along the streets. They came and took as much as they could carry.

One night under the haze of a green pearly moon, Lili watched a man and woman drive up in a car with a trailer. They got out, took a small ladder, a rope and a saw from the boot. He was a heavy man in a thick coat. He threw the rope over a low branch and stepped up the ladder. Then using the rope, he hoisted himself from the top step. His wife handed him the saw. They did not speak. It started to rain. Lili smiled at how he grappled with the saw, in lumbering movements, sitting uncomfortably over the branch. Who was this man, she wondered. He was not a man used to cutting wood or climbing trees. He was probably an accountant. Then he cut his hand. Lili could tell, not because he cried out, but because he dropped the saw and it clattered on the road. At first he lifted his hand to his mouth, but the cut must have been too wide. So he hugged it in his armpit. He hung his head and nursed his hand. He looked like a child sitting in the fork of a tree, crying.

There were hardly any birds once the trees were gone. Late one morning she found some soft grey feathers stuck to the window. On the balcony lay a small dead bird, claws curled under in a backward prayer. Lili went out and picked up the carcass and wrapped it in paper. She buried it in the backyard. She had wondered if it was the last bird.
The mortar attacks intensified. Sometimes hundreds of explosions in a night. The whistling trajectory and then the iridescent shock of fire in the black sky. Her father put sandbags against the window and they slept in the passage way, or on the worst nights, in the basement. Once a mortar was fired on people queuing for water in daylight and Lili’s friend, Dragana, was injured. I want to visit her in hospital, Lili told her mother. No, it’s too dangerous to go out. Lili pleaded and after a few days her father took her to the hospital at dusk when it was harder for snipers to see in the dimming light. Outside, in the destroyed world, cars riddled with bullet holes were crumpled and discarded on the street. Facades of buildings were destroyed, the rooms exposed and abandoned. Jagged concrete blocks had fallen in the snow. They walked close to buildings where an immense indifference seeped from the stone and brick walls.

The hospital was smattered with bullet holes. Inside, patients lined up on narrow beds in corridors and rooms. As they walked through the crowded hospital looking for Dragana, Lili passed a child wrapped in bandages, lying on a narrow camp bed. A small body about six years old was completely wrapped in white bandages. From the head to the feet like a mummy, with a small hole for one eye and another hole for the mouth. Lili felt a stifling nausea. She leant against a wall and saw large swathes of dried blood beside her face on the grimy door. She felt faint and whispered to her father to take her home.

She cannot forget the doomed child, resting askew on the bed as if it had been thrown away. She still thinks about the child’s heart, the frightened beating of the heart knowing that nothing would save the life or take the pain away. She cannot imagine the terrible chaos in the child’s mind.

On an upper floor of her building, an entire family was taken. There was a lot of blood, she heard a neighbour tell another, so much blood on the walls and floor, smeared, leaking as if blood were cheaper than house paint. They shot them and left them to bleed. And next day they took the bodies away. Lili thought she could smell blood in the corridors. But then she decided she could not and the neighbour must have invented the story to scare them. Her mother said not to tell the neighbours anything.

Her father’s face had drawn back from the bones. His sunken eyes looked like round black river stones sliding from side to side in thick liquid. He had cancer. The treatment was inadequate. He went to the hospital when he could, but over a few months his face...
had paled, his hair thinned and he had become fully bald. Dying was feasting on colour, rubbing him out. The soldiers took him anyway. How did they add him to the death toll? As a half?

A fierce look on her father’s face as he was led away. It was not defiant, he did not fight. It was a private look that reached into her skull. It was a look that persists, that will persist through time, exhorting her to live. To keep life on her side. Keep living his intense eyes say, do not dare do anything else! She wonders if the others saw it. Her mother and grandmother did not say. They just cried for days. Her mother said she would wait for him there in the apartment, even if the entire building evacuated, she would wait.

In the following weeks, her mother refused all comfort. Once, when Lili found her weeping, she had taken her mother’s hand and placed it against her cheek. Her mother had pulled away and glared at her, as if Lili’s gesture of comfort were traitorous, slight, almost insolent in the face of the tragedy of losing her husband.

Lili had become a drifting irrelevant figure amid the dim movements of her family. An alien condition had been delivered to her, one in which her mother could withdraw her hand as if Lili’s touch were wounding. It seemed that only in the presence of her father had she been loved. Her mother now insisted on grief in the place of love. Was that the moment, she has wondered ever since, when she decided to leave Bosnia?

Eventually someone cut down the chestnut tree that shaded Lili’s bedroom window. Narrow blades of light pierced around the edges of the stacked sandbags. Some days she would sit and try to read as the light contracted at midday and lengthened into evening. Birdsong was gone. Silence was sharpened by gunfire. Without the trees it was easier for the snipers. They took up positions around markets and shops. School had ceased. She tried not to think of her dream of studying art at university. Life was thinning out, and Lili wanted to be rid of everything. On some days she wanted to stroll in the street and walk brazenly in the sniper’s path. Sometimes she thought her father did not know what he was doing when he looked at her and commanded her to live, to forbear.

How different would it have been if all the dead had not died in that war? She imagines that there was one, buried now, who would have been her lover. In Australia a man from the local garage had asked her out. They saw each other for a few weeks, and then he said he was heading north and would she like to come. No, she said, I’ll stay here,
and he left in good humour as if he had not lost or gained anything by knowing her. She dreamed instead about the Bosnian lover she had never known.

At times now, late at night when she can’t sleep she imagines her family’s apartment. She thinks through all the contents of the cupboards. She practises finding things, living there. At this moment she forgets the look on her father’s face and does not question where he has gone.

* * *

Lili gets off the train at Kings Cross station, travels up the escalator and out into the bright spring morning. She finds, in this country, the seasons slip easily one to the other. Here there is a new equilibrium.

Along Victoria Street the day is fresh in the rinsing sun. Sales girls vacuum small fashion shops, a few people eat late breakfast on the pavement at Morgan’s. Near dusk the atmosphere changes – strangers crowd bars and cafes, homeless men carouse in the small park, bins overflow, drug addicts scam for coins and lose themselves down side alleys. She does not like to go out in the dark.

She walks past Bar Caluzzi where men sit on low stools and milk crates, drinking short blacks, making energetic and conspiratorial conversation as if they pass on secrets that will make them all rich. Turning up Liverpool Street she looks ahead to the rise in the pavement. Today an old woman sits on a low brick fence half-way up. As Lili approaches her, the woman looks familiar. Is this the neighbour who lives in the ground floor apartment below her?

The woman sits stiffly, perspiration beading on her forehead and pooling under the metal rim of her glasses. Her expression is tense beneath greasy make-up; her black-dyed hair, grey at the roots, is coarse. Around her neck a gold crucifix with a tiny sculpted Jesus glints in the sun.

‘Are you alright?’ Lili asks.

‘Not really. I will be. In a minute.’ She gasps for air and wipes her forehead. She was trying to hurry. Angina. Shouldn’t have hurried. The woman taps her heart with a loose fist, rebuking it for causing her pain. She appears not to recognise Lili.
‘I live above you.’

‘Oh. Yes.’

‘Do you need help to walk?’ Lili offers her arm. The woman takes it tentatively. Standing up, mouth open, she tries to catch her breath.

‘My name is Lilijana.’

The woman’s lip quivers as if she is unsure how she might form the foreign name.

‘Call me Lili.’

‘Well, the woman says, shuffling beside Lili, attentive to the placement of her feet on the pavement, ‘my name is Anne O’Leary.’ Her voice is faint, stammering and wet on the Ls.

Waiting at the traffic lights, Anne O’Leary says abruptly, ‘My sister just died.’ Lili glances at her, the woman’s face is not sad but scrunched up against the sun, void of expression. ‘I’ve just booked my ticket. To the funeral.’

Lili thinks the woman is confused.

Heat radiates from the bonnets of slowing cars. A boy in black t-shirt and shorts scoots over the road on a skate board. Anne O’Leary persists, lifting her chin to project her thin voice above the grinding roar of the skate board wheels, ‘Air ticket. She lives in Brisbane. Lived.’

‘Ready?’ Lili asks, and takes a step onto the road that seems to have broadened beneath Anne O’Leary’s uncertain feet. She tightens her grip on Lili’s arm.

‘Your sister was old,’ Lili says without thinking.

‘Yes,’ The woman replies.

When they arrive at their apartment block, Anne O’Leary lets go of Lili’s arm and makes a clucking sound at a ginger cat that slinks along the brick wall of the building.

‘This is my cat, Moses.’

‘Moses?’ Lili smiles, thinking it is a joke.

‘Yes, Moses,’ Anne O’Leary says curtly.

The cat shimmies at Lili’s shin. She lifts him up and he blinks as if sunlight is liquid in his eyes. She streams her hand along his back and fondles his ears. Anne O’Leary takes him from her and puts him down.
Inside the foyer Anne OLeary’s face relaxes. Now she seems not so vulnerable. She smooths her thin-belted navy blue skirt. Lili observes some pride in the crisp collar of her red blouse, her dependable pumps with a short squat heel, a smudge of pink lipstick that has bled away through pucker lines.

She left my pills inside. Should always take them with me. Anne OLeary lifts the flap of her tan leather handbag, finds her keys and opens a steel security door. She turns around to face Lili. Would you like some tea?

Okay. Lili says and follows the silhouette of Anne OLeary back along a dark hall. She edges past a bow-fronted table where small ornaments rattle and give off a winking, lizardy light. Above the table a large plaster crucifix hangs on satin-striped wallpaper.

The woman’s lounge room is much darker than Lili. A sloping driveway partly obscures the window, old heavy furniture saps up light and air. A smell of nutmeg, tea and starch permeates. Four slat-backed chairs surround a thick legged dining table that abuts a wall. Lili thinks the table would be impossible to access without moving all the furniture in the room. A dark green velvet settee and matching arm chairs crowd around a stolid coffee table dotted with coasters. Cuddled lotto tickets, small gold safety pins and silver coins fill a floral china dish set in the middle of the coffee table. A remote control rests on the arm of an easy chair as if it operates the chair and not the television.

Anne OLeary contracts her neck beneath the low ceiling, rubs her hands together and says in a high fussy voice, Now where was I? Oh, the pills. On her way to the kitchen she gestures at the couch.

Lili sits and sinks unexpectedly into a lumpy cushion. Next to her in a tight bay window, is a writing desk with dainty turned legs and a lockable drawer. The cat settles on the settee beside her and starts licking its crotch voraciously.

Sugar and milk? Oh, don’t worry, I’ll bring them in. Anne OLeary calls out from the kitchen. Then she enters the lounge room with a tray of blue and white teacups, a matching teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl.

How do you take your tea?

Just black, thank you. Lili would have preferred coffee.

The spoon tinkles in the saucer as Anne OLeary passes the cup of tea. She offers a plate with three malt biscuits fanned out from the centre. Lili declines.
You have an accent. Anne says as she pivots in a small gap between the coffee table and an arm chair, and sits down.

Yes.

Where are you from?

Bosnia. Lili is disheartened by the brittle handle of the cup that is like a frail knuckle, by the swill of strong tea that exudes unapproachable heat. She hopes the woman is not expecting friendship.

Oh, my sister’s passing was quite unexpected. Just last week I had a letter from her. I have it here. She rises and takes a step, picks up an envelope from the desk and rests back down. She pulls out a slim letter folded in three.

Judith, my sister, knew correspondence. She did secretarial studies. See how neat the letter is? And no PS. She did not believe in the PS. She holds two almost translucent pages of paper up for Lili to see. I cannot believe she is gone. Anne O’Leary says cheerfully and plops two sugar cubes in her cup.

Listen to this: this is dated last Friday. Dear Anne, the weather here has been lovely with sunny days and cooler nights. Though we are expecting summer to be very hot so we – her husband’s name is Michael – have bought a new air-conditioner. New. Judith always thinks that new things are more impressive. I’m not so sure. Our places are very different. I like traditional things. Of course I only rent, having never married. And I have never had enough money. She takes a deep draught of scolding tea. But I have kept things handed down through the family. That clock for instance was my father’s. She points at a brass faced clock hooded in dark wood ticking ponderously on the mantelshelf.

Lili cannot think what the woman expects her to say to all of this.

A new air conditioner – reverse cycle and very silent. That is an exaggeration I believe they are never silent. I have found some photos of our parents from the 1930s and am having them blown up. Etcetera etcetera. Oh, here she tells me about my brothers: Down on the Gold Coast in that lovely new house of Bill’s on the canal we had a lovely lunch. Bill and Yvonne have done very well. You could say, though they would not say it themselves, that they are well-off. They have an in-built vacuum cleaner system with an outlet in every room and also electric drapes. That is operated electrically, not with
electric current running through them I suppose that is a joke from Judith. She takes a bite of biscuit, holding her hand beneath it to catch the crumbs. She goes on to say that Janet, my other brother Geoff’s wife is not well. She thinks cancer, but not to tell anyone. *Keep it to yourself* she writes. *Bobbie is 12 and bright as a button.* The Jack Russell. Then she asks me how my flat is and my little red car. As if my things were toys. She scoffs at the pages of the letter now resting in her lap.

I do not have a sister, Lili says, urgently seeking out her own distinctions.

Judith was seven years older than I. Gone now. Poor soul. God bless her. I was also a good letter writer. I mean I am a good letter writer. I am, after all, not the one dead, Anne O’Leary says, reassuring herself. She smiles at Lili, she folds the letter and slides it back in the envelope. Then her face flattens, a tension at the gills. They both fall through a hyphenating silence into the ticking clock, the licking cat, the distant heave of a truck along Crown Street.

Anne O’Leary pats her heart, a slow flat-handed pat of self pity. Her thumb and forefinger skim over the crucifix at her neck like a blind person trying to identify a key. Lili is apprehensive. She does not want the woman to confide in her. She glances out the window where a car eases slowly down the driveway, its flushing brake lights as exhilarating as fire.

I must go, Lili says watching the chrome bumper bar of the car disappear.

Anne O’Leary speaks over her. I believe that Judith has gone to a better place. One has to have faith in that. I said that to Michael on the phone. But he was never a good Catholic, she says as if she speaks to a family member familiar with Michael, if only he had more faith. She clasps her hands loosely in her lap. Suddenly the cat twists on its back, then flips over, startled, and glares at Anne O’Leary. Oh, Moses, she says coyly. Come here.

Then to Lili, assume you are a Christian?

Lili nods, not wanting to speak. Why does Anne O’Leary sit in this subterranean gloom insisting on her life, in denial of all other possibilities? But, Lili thinks, she herself has no particular possibilities. What has she got, what does she do, that would guarantee life might not end up like this?
Lili places both hands flat on the edge of the couch, trying to find beneath its slumped upholstery, a hard frame to lever herself up. She stands with a surge of energy, wanting her movement to signify rejection.

đhave to go.đ

đThe funeral is next Tuesday. Itđ years since I have been back to Brisbane. At leastđ mmmđ sixteen years.đ

Anne stands and from the velutinous fibres of the couch, the carpet, the fine-haired cat, bitter, suffocating particles lift. Lili holds her breath. The shadows along Anne Ođ.earlyđ furrowed jowls deepen. Her whole face droops from beneath her moist eyes as if they are the two fixed points of injustice from which everything else suspends.

Lili nods at the brass clock, đhave to prepare for an appointment.đ

đWhat do you do?đ

Lili has not anticipated this question. She hesitates.

đam an interior decorator,đshe says.

đOh,đAnne Ođ.early says, a little snap of sound, and flashes her eyes over her lounge room as if she hopes it has the decency and history to refute any professional opinion of it. đWell you are a career woman, a bit like myself. For years I worked for a legal firm in Rose Bay as a receptionist. Though now I am semi-retired I work part time at the veterinarianđ in Edgecliff, helping out with the books.đLili finds in the womanđ abidance a momentary loss of her own hope.

Anne Ođ.early continues, đhope you donđ like those modern interiors. Those awful modern buildings. So inhumane. Where is your office?đ

đreally have to go.đ

Anne Ođ.early leans over and picks up the teapot, đAre you sure you would not like more tea?đ

đNo thank you.đLili steps toward the doorway of the lounge room.

đOh, well,đAnne Ođ.early says as if Lili has disappointed her and shambles down the hallway on stiff ankles. Lili wants, more than anything, for the future to begin.

Once out in the foyer she says, đThank you,đover her shoulder and runs up the stairs to her apartment, opens the window, and sings. She sings the folksongs of her childhood, as if she is in a brittle musical that will snap from dancing and singing to dying at any
casual moment. These are the songs she used to hear men singing in the street from the first year of the war. She forces the sounds out like the marathon runner who knows as the air goes out, he is becoming fitter for more than just running for a purity of form and toughness. That is how she sings the folksongs to make her fitter for war.

* * *

The next day she wakes abruptly from an afternoon sleep. She thinks she has heard something crash and fall, but there is only the indifference of her lounge room. A shaft of bright sunlight falls through the open window over her and onto the carpet. Dust moves with her breath through its beam like shoals of fish. She blows to make the glittering fish scatter.

She remembers her dream. She was flying over islands and continents on a summer afternoon. The landscape was a jigsaw that merged and re-formed as Lili looked down. The path of her life should have been somewhere, a glistening trail over small terrain, but there was nothing. The land looked like a topographical map made of brown felt, puckered over mountains, tight and flat over deserts. In a moment of elation she saw her family as the plane swooped down. They were marching with other people into a sand castle. She hung out the window, shouting and waving. Her father looked up but did not recognise her. Her mother saw her and called out, you did not have enough love! Then instantly the landscape became unrecognisable.

A film of sweat has formed at her back against the cracked vinyl of the couch. Sounds from the open window float and die in her ear the old woman, Anne OLeary, calling her cat, voices from the street. A radio crackles with the insistence of a sporting commentary. These afternoons between appointments rupture any accumulation of life and order.

Her brow aches as if her dream had been projected onto a screen inside her brain. For a prolonged moment she perceives everything through the dappling movements on that screen. Her eyes itch, her breath catches sour vapours at the back of her throat. She feels hungry.
An hour to fill before her next massage appointment. When she is out working, or with other people, she looks forward to these gaps of solitude. But when she has them she is filled with a sense of obligation to make them matter and afterwards feels she has lost something of uncertain value. Solitude dissipates into a nervous crowding of thoughts. Then she becomes anxious and wills herself to sleep.

She gets up slowly. At the sink she scrubs a coffee rim from her mug and fills the kettle. Dark residue has formed along the corrugations of the old sink. The apartment is stale with the sediment of second hand lives, renters from decades ago. A shallow pool of milk rests in her breakfast bowl from the morning, the bread is dry, a tomato in the fridge is leached of flavour. She doesn’t know what to eat. The kettle clicks off under its shot of steam and she makes herself a cup of black coffee.

It is difficult to reach any conclusions, even about eating. She slumps back on the couch and stares out the window cut out of a bland world — a white sky stretched clean as a sheet, where an occasional bird or plane appear to be the same scale. Her hunger is as pointless as the sky. She thinks of the food her mother used to prepare for the family — rich tomato sauces, meat ragouts, vapours ripening in the kitchen caressed by ladles, the scent of baking onions, caramelising sugar. Lili does not ever want to eat food like that again. Something about that food was not true — a lavishness that portrayed life like a still tableau, like a painting of the Last Supper that shimmers over the hooded hearts and secret manoeuvres of an evil world.

She glances at her unopened mail on the windowsill — the telephone bill and another letter with the familiar handwritten address, which is turned face down. It is from her mother. For a while, holding her heavy pottery mug, her legs drawn up beneath her in the tension of her intransigent position, she can hardly resist her mother’s letter. She feels sorry for the wobbly writing of the address, the capitals mixed in among lower case letters, the sloppy serif on the toppling one. Then she recalls Anne O’Leary reading out loud, revelling in the humiliations of her sister’s letter. What rebukes and judgements, pleas and tears lie within the letter? News perhaps of more suffering, more death? She grasps the envelope anxiously and puts it in a shoebox with the pile of other unopened letters from her mother that she keeps in the hall cupboard.
Back at the sink she rinses the bowl and fills it with cereal, pours milk, makes another cup of coffee. The muesli has gaudy flecks of tropical fruit which she does not like, but swallows whole. Flakes of grain and small gritty seeds stick between her teeth and lay flat at the back of her tongue, so she washes them away with a glass of milk. She is glad to eat food that does not fuel appetite or gratefulness for life.

In the bathroom a shiny arc moves over her dark hair as she combs it. She splashes her face with cold water, changes her blouse, takes her bag. On the way out she passes the hall cupboard and thinks of her mother’s letters festering with the dreadful, grief-stricken news that she refuses to receive. She locks the apartment behind her and speeds past Anne O’Leary’s door, imagining her looking through the peephole. Old ghosts everywhere, she thinks. When she opens the front door of the building, hot air rushes in and mingles briefly with the damp stale smell of the foyer. She feels queasy.

It is half an hour’s walk to Helen Barlow’s house. Lili has been there three times before, each time on a Thursday at six. My husband has a regular meeting on Thursdays so please reserve that time every week. I need a weekly massage, Helen had said. She treats Lili as if she is a physician privy to confidences that can only be known through touch. In an austere room at the back of the house, Lili exhumes mute secrets.

Along Edgecliff Road, fig tree roots bulge and burrow into the earth. Pools of shade stain the bitumen footpath. A woman in leggings walks towards Lili, her expression grim, head phones wedged into ears, arms punching the air for extra heart rate. Cars cruise over speed humps like great heartless sharks. She feels as if she is loping along the floor of a giant aquarium.

When she first visited the Barlow’s house she was unsettled by the dominating spaces. Huge sheaths of glass, furniture marooned in the middle of spacious rooms, finishes you would find in a laboratory, interrupted by oversize abstract artworks. It was a space best appreciated for its emptiness. In among the spaces, Helen Barlow moved quietly, tall and long limbed with the demeanour of a preying mantis. My husband is an architect, she had said to Lili as she led her through the vestibule, her voice stalling on husband as if the word carried too much private meaning. Helen Barlow had moved quickly and seemed wary of a creeping exactness that one day might make her indistinguishable from the design scheme. Her smile was slim and fleeting. On the
massage table her arms and legs were becalmed, her face buried in a towel, and she was lifeless. She always paid Lili before the massage commenced because when it was finished, Helen was disoriented and withdrawn, as if she had had sex with a stranger and did not know how to recover her former distance. Lili had learnt to pack her things up as she went and to show herself out with the least disturbance.

It is five to six when Lili arrives at the cement rendered wall surrounding the Barlow’s house. She presses the intercom. There is no reply but the gate opens and she proceeds to the entry and waits. There is no sound from the house. Then the door opens and a tall man dressed in a white T-shirt and black jeans stands in front of her, looking over small black framed glasses.

‘Hello,’ he says almost as a question obliging her to explain herself. He frowns, holding his concentration in abeyance while he deals with this interruption.

‘I have an appointment with Mrs Barlow.’
‘Oh. Yes? He does not register any recognition.
‘I have an appointment to give Mrs Barlow a massage.’
‘Well she’s not here. I suppose she’ll be back soon. I’m her husband, Nick Barlow. Can you wait a while?’
‘Yes. I’ll wait.’
‘OK. Well, come inside.’

She passes in front of him and stands in the vestibule while he closes the door. He walks through the house in long energetic steps. She follows. It could be that Mr and Mrs Barlow once looked alike, they are of a similar size, but whereas life is thinning out in the wife, it is gathering in the husband.

He bypasses the hallway that leads to the massage room and diverts to a subdued study. A grid of white bookshelves covers two walls. Large document cylinders are stacked in the corner. On a tilted desk, loosely rolled plans curl around each other. The room smells of ink and paper and faintly of school. When he turns he seems surprised to find that she has followed him.

‘I was just working on the plans for the museum,’ he says. She stands near the door in silence. ‘Would you like a drink while you wait?’ The intensity of his attention magnifies her smallest movement. Her wits sharpen.

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
No, thank you.

Mineral water?

Yes. OK. Thank you. You have a nice house, she says, politely.

Yes. He receives the compliment as a fact and leaves the room to get the water. She wonders if she should sit down, but decides to stand and moves to look through a window that fills an entire wall. The garden behind the glass looks like a large-leaf salad sealed in plastic wrap, eternally fresh.

He returns and passes her a glass of water. You’ve heard of the museum?

She remembers a headline in a newspaper, a segment on the television news. The chilled water frosts the glass and is cold in her hand. She drinks a mouthful.

He picks up his glass of wine. What do you think?

He looks at her, sips wine, and continues. It’s controversial you know. He studies her, his gaze serious.

Yes. I don’t know what to think.

So you can be converted. You are without an opinion, a rare state of being in this opinionated world.

I have opinions about other things. She feels the power of her own candour and is buoyed by the idea of her body of opinions.

Are your opinions a secret? He half-smiles. He reminds her of no one. He is not friendly yet he is taking up a position of familiarity. She is inclined to answer him insolently, to want to engage in arguments that are merely an expression of her opposing will and of no real account. She experiences a resurgence of adolescent resistance—a result of too much serious adult attention.

Not particularly, she says in a bored voice. But her pulse races.

Would you like to see the plans?

She nods, but she does not wish to see them. She wants to create a discord, hasten an ending but thinks of the money she will earn from this regular weekly booking. He does not treat her with kindness, he treats her as if she must bear up and put her mind to the task. Or else become of little interest to him.

He goes to the desk and unfurls a large white sheet with annotated drawings, then he takes a fresh wine glass from a sideboard and fills it.
Please have a glass of wine. I’ve had a humourless day.

She cannot imagine him laughing and conjures a sound that might bounce in a structure and not the soft airways of a human.

She takes the glass and says, thank you, without intending to drink the wine.

He motions her to sit beside him at the desk. A low desk lamp on a long arm arches over the desk top. Everything in the house is overreaching.

This is the atrium. He wafts his hand over the drawing, and then the index finger takes control and the others curl back. He points, and in this ceiling there are uneven planes of glass, none of them the same dimensions, as if they are broken shards from some other great building, fallen at random. Here, you see? His finger remains on the plan until she has studied the section detail of a ceiling.

Of course, she says matter-of-factly.

I want to set-up an ambiguous relationship between the outside and the inside. Could this plane that we think of as a ceiling actually be a floor? There is a vista of the harbour behind this wall that we cannot see and must re-construct with our imagination from the pin-pricks of light through tiny apertures. Like a constellation of stars. He traces the pattern of the ceiling. His finger nail is clipped evenly across a milky crescent. Lili imagines the pad of his finger skimming surfaces. She is nervous, but sits still, glancing from his face to the drawings. He blinks slowly and his eyelids are moist and fragile in the lamplight. He reaches across the desk in front of her and does not excuse himself. There is no hesitation in his movements. When the circle of light catches his expression, his face looks too avid for his age.

He lifts another sheet of paper over. This is the most important gallery. In this space the twentieth century art will be hung. He smooths it out, it’s beautiful isn’t it? He looks at her without suspicion, seeming to believe that the meaning of his words can empty into another mind without alteration.

Yes, she says quietly and thinks that it is beautiful.

He is pleased and smiles. rarely get the opportunity for wholesome comment on the museum. He turns back to the plans. It will take seven years more, before it is finished, but it will be one of the most important modern buildings, one of the first icons of the new century. He speaks on without a break, and she feels as if she can leave.
only by means of his consent. This strange clever man is showing her the work of his life. It is just on paper, but it is a template of the future, and he sees it. She imagines the rectangular galleries through the sound of his words, the spaces that do not even exist, that she cannot rise from her chair and go to visit. He is not a man with hope, he is a man with vision. And what use is hope, she wonders. Hope of peace and pleasure, hope of love? Hope is just a small swing bridge that you cross with your eyes fixed on the distance you could fall. It is not the future.

His finger traces the outline of an elevation. And then he lifts his hand from the paper and touches her face with the tip of his finger in a barely noticeable movement. He goes on speaking about the building, not acknowledging the touch. Then his whole hand unfolds, starts at her brow and falls along the bones of her face. He turns his hand over, and the ripple of knuckles lifts to her temple and falls back, down over her hair as though he has skimmed away a sealing film. She sits still, and even if he now does something bad, something insulting or demeaning, it will not matter, he has trusted her to see this vision of his. He talks about the museum as he traces her face, and the words are bells that strike out evenly over vast distances. It is his chant, etched in his voice, keeping his faith.

Then he touches her lightly on the wrist and rests his hands on the desk. She feels that the terms of her survival have shifted and are unknown. That she retains the coiled power to burst and bloom or remain forever still.

She waits as if her body is yet to be drawn by his hand to make it real, waits for him to tell her how she should live. He picks up a pen and in a short silence, draws some correcting lines over the plans and makes some notes. She can hear the rush of the nib over the paper. He writes a few lines and then, still writing, speaks without looking at her.

“Well, I have probably bored you about my building when I had the chance to convert you. Helen is obviously caught up. I will get her to phone.”

He seems embarrassed and jerks his chair back and stands. He walks her through the house in silence. She turns full face at the front door and says goodbye. He frowns at her as she stands on the step, as if she has exited not only the house, but some realm of recognition. He asks her abruptly

“What is your name?”

“Lilijana,” she says with the full import and formality of her foreign accent.
Yes.

Then he withdraws as if he has pulled them both back from a precipitous edge and closes the door.

She thinks later that when he touched her face he opened up the distance between them, laid it out as if it might be understood. She does not think of him as a man, but as a world. In the following days she moves her experience around a delicate orbit in her mind.
Chapter Three

Helen

Will you come to the Levy Foundation ball? Helen asks Nick as she places a plate of fruit on the white marble Saarinen table. The breakfast alcove, where she used to chat with the girls after she collected them from school, is her favourite space in the house. This house, Nick’s house, lauded in architectural journals, is now empty of children, of youth, of her youth. Day to day she hurries through its stark passages as if she is in an abandoned hospital and has retained the habits of duty in the face of evacuation. Nick is designing the first great public building of the new century and is hardly ever home. Katie and Emma are in London – Katie studying art at the Slade School and Emma working for Condé Nast in Hanover Square. Helen out to lunch, Helen waiting for Nick. The beginning of her in the mornings, the tail end of her in the evenings when they intersect. This house still glamorises them as the couple they have ceased to be. Life in these spaces used to carry the weight of the future. Helen feels an exposure, she feels under the surveillance of loneliness. There is no sound from distant rooms. It has an amazing serenity, the editor of Architectural Digest said.

He smiles and shakes his head. You know I loathe attending balls, but if you want me to go I will. When is it again?

Saturday week. The eleventh.
I'll have to check. I think Alessandro might be flying in from the Milan office that week. I can work round it. But Helen don’t accuse me of embarrassing you.

Why would you embarrass me? She hands him a napkin and a knife and fork.

Because your set get offended easily, and offence embarrasses you. You like people to remain unoffended. I’m not complaining. I just don’t have your social skills. He slices a crescent of cantaloupe into bite-size pieces. They talk about people I don’t know, I fail to get impressed at the right moment. When I leave the table to go for a walk or ask them what the hell they’re talking about they get offended. Am I right?

But if you realise that why do you do it?

I don’t know – I’m not trying to move through life with the least trouble to others. I know that. I know what I’m like. I don’t the time for these people. They don’t interest me. I try to go if you want me to. He spurns her social world with such honesty that she barely feels justified defending the cycle of functions, charity balls, cocktail parties, launches and lunches that span her diary.

Why can you just humour me? she persists.

I do. I just think it’s a waste of time humouring them. I’m not married to them.

This wit is still surprising even after twenty-three years. But more than that it is a way of ending arguments without escalation, without anything indelible happening between them. Helen stands and clears the table. She decides to go to the ball alone, as she has done for the last two years. He kisses her lightly on the lips and leaves for the office. It is a courtesy that neither is willing to dispense with.

When they were first living together his odd social behaviour had excited her. He was arrogant, driven, intense – qualities that, in a young man, sweep others along, compel their attention as the life blooms. Out at cocktail parties and dinners she used to observe him expose people for their pretensions. He challenged assumptions, corrected small inaccuracies and was always right. He didn’t do it for affect. He did it because he would not compromise on any level.

Helen and Nick used to share looks across tables that later culminated in fast urgent sex, sometimes in a car in a car park, light washing through the windows; once in a public cloakroom at a function. Sex that could only happen between them; transgressive
intimacy, the fist in the face of others whose futures seemed dim compared with theirs. Their trespass on respectability in life was full of possibilities.

Nick will go to the ball but she wants him to guarantee his behaviour, which he will not. Everyone has a right to their own behaviour, their own personality in a social context, don’t they? And if Helen wants him to change in order to be more palatable to her, what does that say about her? How did she end up suspended between her feelings and his behaviour?

If she could surrender the idea of her marriage, her yearning for it the way she had envisaged, then she could leave him. Or she could just immerse herself in his life completely. But she clings to the woman formed within her before she married Nick. The identity that belongs only to her, the one invested in by parents, the one that believes in a loving successful marriage, motherhood and a career, a fulfilling social life, a self-determined future. This ideal is part of the core woman and cannot be altered by experience. It is resistant to disillusion. Keeping the unrealised ambitions intact, tending them, saving them from dereliction, persevering with the pristine belief that this is what she deserves, paralyses her. The core woman believes in the whole woman, but the world of the whole woman is faltering. She wants to work in Nick’s office on public relations for the museum project, she wants to move to a smaller house, visit her daughters with him in London for an extended holiday, she wants him to take her to the ball and modify his behaviour and accommodate her friends, she wants… But as she thinks these things they seem fanciful.

Helen tinkers with the components of happiness in the hope of mastering its assembly. Tinkers with it in the presence of encroaching ultimatums and a rigid pride. Abandon the marriage? Discard the years lived for a less-formed life, an inconsequential life that she lacks the vigour to re-invent? Or force a discussion with Nick about all the things she wants to change and risk desperation in the face of his indifference? Nick who has treated her for years with consolation, with the respect of never descending into argument or insult. Her feelings cannot be spoken of without losing their shape, without taking on a new uncontrollable proportion. She often dreams now that they are talking, and suddenly he says to her in cold clear words, when you walk away from me there is a...
moment when it does not matter if you return. Helen still loves Nick, less than she did, but loves him and sometimes that’s all she knows.

Today is the luncheon for Stephanie Wilde’s fiftieth birthday. A small event for four close friends — Prue, Jacqui, Stephanie and Helen. Last time they met, Stephanie complained about her husband, Tom. *Numb,* she had said, *Tom makes me feel numb. And angry. I am so tired of negotiating. Every time I start a conversation about how I feel, he negotiates. As if I am screaming mad, standing on a roof top threatening to jump and he is a police negotiator for whom reason is a profession. He sits low in the chair, which he thinks is conciliatory. He talks in a restrained voice. I say I want more out of life, more from our life together. He says that’s reasonable, what do you have in mind? I say, do something for me, speak to me about how you see our life together, I don’t know, surprise me! He considers my ranting in silence and then he says, you’re right Steph I’ll give it some thought. And then one week later he makes a move in bed that is unusual. Some flourish, like dragging me onto the floor. Or he leaps into the shower with me. Why is it that he interprets everything I say as a comment on his love making? His sexual prowess? I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about life! Then Stephanie had slammed down her champagne glass as if it were a judge’s gavel and the stem broke off. Look what he’s done now! They all laughed. They all agreed.

Helen wishes that Nick liked champagne — its cajoling, celebratory rush. He likes white wine and red wine on occasion, Pinot Noir, Grenache, light varietals. He never drinks to excess. Nick’s thoughts keep their proportion in all conditions. When he is in the company of people loosening under the influence of alcohol he seems brutally clear to Helen, drawn with the sharpest contrast against their good humour. At times like these she thinks of him as a geometric shape, perhaps a Necker cube. In the first years of her marriage she could never have reduced him like this, made of him an ironic instrument of his own architecture.

This afternoon Stephanie Wilde is serving lunch on the terrace overlooking the harbour and the city. A soft haze masks the hard edges of city towers that rise like Atlantis submerged in sky, adrift in sea, caught between the two great parallels. She has
just divulged to Helen, Jacqui and Prue, her oldest friends, that she has had a facelift. Her face gleams and her expression is hyper-alert. In her walk now, Helen notices a half-swivel as if she is turning on a catwalk, or regarding a familiar figure in the distance with a backward glance. Dermabrasion has smoothed away most of her wrinkles, her brow has been lifted, her chin sculpted.

Did you ever have that heart to heart with Tom about your marriage? Jacqui asks.

No, of course not. I had the face-lift instead! Stephanie laughs.

You look wonderful Steph. Happy birthday, Helen says and they raise their glasses. Stephanie also has a new hair cut – short with stranded wisps around her face. Nick only likes classical hair styles. Helen has gradually shortened her hair over the years, but it is still a thick straight bob tapering to the side, soft brown with highlights.

Helen thinks that Jacqui has had highlights to mask the grey. Her hair glistens chestnut-red, her face, though lined, is tanned and made-up expertly, with flesh coloured gloss and bronze blusher. Jacqui has always loved tennis, Helen recalls, and it gives her a lovely nutty colour, and springy legs. Prue, though, has rounded out, and always orders pate or pasta when they dine at Moncur’s. But she is a natural blond and that somehow makes a lapse in slimness bearable.

Sometimes at these lunches they ask a hard question of each other. A question only women ask that peels back experience to a level where they all share the emotional life of marriage. Each of them has considered such questions of relationships, of love, and they have answers. Some answers are complex and insightful. Some are flippant. Wit and flippancy in the face of probing questions raises a hard admiring laugh. But the answers are never as revealing as they seem. They are never final.

They are drinking champagne and talking about what they would do if they had their lives over.

Would you get married again? Prue asks Stephanie.

No. Well, maybe in my thirties I â€œ consider it. But only if I found a soul-mate. A very wealthy soul-mate. Stephanie enunciates the last phrase with exaggerated clarity.

Donâ€™t know whether I would or not. I had a promising career, Helen says.

Why did you marry Nick? Stephanie asks Helen.
I don’t know. I didn’t ever think I would marry a tall man. I don’t like tall slim men very much. I always had chunky, strong boyfriends before Nick. Remembering boyfriends simplifies womanhood.

Helen continues, always say to the girls I don’t marry an architect and if you do, marry an unsuccessful one that way you might get to spend some time with him!

The museum project sounds amazing. And so controversial how does he deal with all those objections? I suppose he is used to it. He’s such a focused man. Very creative, very clever. Helen observes how Prue always condones husbands until marriages end in divorce, and only then enthuses over their failings.

Yes. He can be difficult though. He was impressive. I was impressed by his confidence. At twenty-eight he had his own practice. I was seduced by his buildings. That it, his big phallic towers. Helen is relieved to have found the joke.

And now he doing low-rise? Stephanie has the wit of short sentences and a talent for outrage. Prue only jokes about her own family out of respect for others. Having suffered a devastating divorce, Jacqui can only laugh at other people’s jokes. Helen stumbles across humour and is glad for the distraction.

He was always very excited by the future I mean his vision of architecture. Anyway. Anyway he was interesting, you know?

My God Helen, it’s not a eulogy. He’s not dead yet. Stephanie laughs.

No, but he’s not always alive either! She is wry, but she thinks he is too alive.

Nick’s endless motion forward in his own life makes Helen feel as if she has no time to perfect things. He disrupts her plans, talks quickly and then has to be somewhere else before she can be fully understood. He often has to travel on short notice and if she wants to go with him she has to drop everything. You can stay at home, he says, you don’t have to come. On the longer trips he goes alone.

When they travel together it is mostly to New York. She stays with him in a suite at the Royalton. It’s not to his taste, but unmistakably Starke. Nick likes the Algonquin lounge for informal meetings authentic Edwardian New York, Dorothy Parker’s words somehow present in the panelled interior. He likes buildings that retain their original form and do not mimic other periods. In New York his favourite restaurant is the Grill Room at the Four Seasons, designed by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson in the late
fifties—*a timeless space, soaring rosewood walls and rippling curtains of brass beads. It is not decorated, but designed.* Nick's favourite art museums are The Metropolitan Museum of Art for the sheer scale, The Guggenheim on Fifth Avenue for the building and the architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. And the Thyssen in Madrid. *One of the most exquisite collections in the world.*

Whose had an affair lately? Stephanie addresses the table as if she is sorting the order of a queue.

had one about three years ago, when I was still married to Roger. Jacqui says.

Why didn’t you tell us at the time? Stephanie chastises.

Jacqui ignores Stephanie and continues, Anyway I met a fabulous Italian at a cocktail party. Roger was overseas at the time. The Italian, Paolo, talked to me for a few hours, rather closely in a corner. And then he suggested we go for coffee. He was here on business, working with some fashion company. Anyway Roger was away for a week. Plenty of time to get to know a young lover.

Young? Prue and Stephanie ask in unison.

Yes. Twelve years younger than me. Though of course I didn’t tell him my age. I visited him every night for a week. We had room service. And each other. Every night. He had the sweetest breath.

What has that got to do with it? Stephanie asks, laughing.

don’t know. It was fruity with wine. You know how some older men have breath that comes from deep within their lungs. Old air. As if they are on recycle. Well his breath was light and fresh. As we got closer it sort of swirled between us.

Like a romantic mist? You are ridiculous Jacqui. Prue says. They are all laughing about the breath. But I have to say that one of the things that really irritates me now about Frank is his use of Listerine. It sort of medicalises him. When I kiss him sometimes I feel as if I am taking medicine. And sometimes I am. But sometimes not! Coquettish Prue.

Did Roger find out? Stephanie asks Jacqui.

Roger didn’t notice a thing. He was so self-obsessed he wouldn’t have noticed if he had come home and I was swallowing Draino. But I told him. *After* the divorce and the
settlement. He was surprised. Nick doesn’t like Roger Lawrence – Jacqui’s ex-husband and now the Minister for Public Works.

Why did Nick marry Helen? They don’t ask this question. Helen doesn’t know why he married her, but she knows how.

Nick Barlow hand-picks his team so don’t expect to get a job. And if you do, don’t expect to keep it. He has a few loyal devotees and the rest he turns over. He’s so demanding. But he’s one of the best. The best. Her tutor at university had warned her. So she got a job at an established firm doing small shops and houses. But then she watched Nick Barlow win an award at an annual architectural dinner and he didn’t thank anyone. He just spoke about his winning project, without notes, in the most persuasive way. She had never seen someone so alive. Helen wanted his attention, wanted his eyes on her talent so as she could become an architect working on buildings that mattered. Competence was not enough for her, her grades were too good, her parents too proud for competence.

Nick interviewed her for the position of junior architect. She prepared her resume with meticulous attention to detail. He did not open it. He didn’t ask her about her education or past experience, he did not say, what would you like to be doing in five years time? No. His questions were about her architectural convictions. Which were her favourite buildings and why? Which twentieth century architects did she most admire? What would she have done if she had not achieved her degree? She had considered carefully before answering, I would have gone back and studied until I qualified. There is nothing else for me to do.

Exactly. A successful architect is not a failed doctor or lawyer. Architecture cannot survive on default passion. You want to be one or you want to be something else. Can you start next week? And she started the next Monday.

Helen had been employed at Nick’s practice for nearly three months before he asked her out. They were working late on a Thursday night and he leaned over her desk to examine some plans and said, Let’s have a drink after work. I’d like to discuss your proposed solution for the Simons house.
At about seven she waited for him in the street while he locked the office. Winter evening. Acrid city air, heavy and cold. Oxford Street labouring under the insistence of traffic, the street pulling the glitter and clarity of car lights into a distant darkness. They walked a few blocks to a bar off Taylor’s Square. Lurid neon signage patched over old facades of small shops and cafes; bodies close on the footpath, weaving; a couple of derelicts hanging around a news stand. Past the old barber’s shop, the old barber’s chairs empty, worn but solid at the seat, turned in to each other like complaining widows; some gay men, muscular, vigorous, marching; a boy with a dog, slumped against a shop front; some young girls, laughing, smoking with an exaggerated grace; an old woman in a hat and cardigan, pushing her shopping cart and as she passed, the shock of her face, her turned eye and the dirty suntan of the streets, the slot of her mouth. And Nick. Nick striding through them as if they were ragged edges pouring into the past and he was destiny. The rain had started as they entered a dark timbered bar. They sat at a small round table and drank house wine. Misty Blue was playing, light from the candle ribbed across his eyes.

“... How did you arrive at the solution for the roof?” he asked as soon they sat down. 

“I thought that the other schemes for the roofline didn’t work with the scale of the house. It’s a huge house that is somehow floating on the cliff face and I thought it needed to be anchored, substantiated. I had this idea that maybe the building could resemble a billowing tent, pegged down at the corners. So I played with an undulating roofline.”

He clasped her hand then. It was not romantic, it was triumphant. He clasped her hand in triumph and said, “Well done Helen. That’s exactly what the house needed - a sculptural expression of the site.”

Helen noticed then the way he used his hands - he tapped his fingers on the table to emphasise a point, his hands moved with his conversation, but never in an exclamatory way, never with an excess energy that dimmed his words. He kept on talking at the same pace - the atmosphere, the music, her young face excited in the light - all incapable of illuminating anything more in him, he was so illuminated by his unassailable hold on the future. She wanted to slow him down, hold him at that moment, as if she could have stepped back to record the meaning of this night in the context of a lifetime. She wanted him to hear the words of Misty Blue, I can’t get you out of my mind, the music lush with
emotion, with sexual obsession, with soul. But he was expounding his architectural philosophies. He kept talking with all the immensity of belief in himself to render up great things. His was not a floating, free falling dream, but an ambition that imbued everything with the same quality of energy from the philosophical idea of the building to the bevelled edge of a balustrade nothing fell beneath his attention. Helen had thought that she, too, was passionate about architecture, but now she knew Nick Barlow she understood that her talent paled, her adherence wavered, that it was not her life. When she thinks of him that night he has a vital innocence that cannot be transcended by the years.

His memory of their first date does not accord with hers, Do you remember the music playing? Well I remember we went to a bar. I’m not sure if that was a date. I don’t remember the music. Nick likes jazz Chet Baker, Miles Davis. And classical music. Particularly the cello, not the light touch of YoYo Ma, but the grip and melodic rasp of Isserlis.

Prue is slicing the birthday cake. Stephanie opens another bottle of champagne in the kitchen. Just a small slice for me, Stephanie says as she brings the bottle to the table and fills Helen’s glass. They all say, yes, just a small slice. Helen takes a sip. The champagne tastes too acidic now, not like the first glass when she arrived that was yeasty and streaming with fine bubbles.

Why? Stephanie asks.

Because I can undress in front of him now that he has a personal trainer and reads the latest research on all foodstuffs. He watches me cook as I if am working in a lab. He expects my cooking to improve him, he expects the kids to love and respect him all the time when they’re tired, when he’s grumpy. He expects a full-performance family. It’s unreasonable. I go into the bathroom to undress and come out in my robe. His existence is a criticism!

Stephanie fills Prue’s glass, But you have a great figure.

don’t think so, I’ve had two kids. He used to think I was gorgeous.
He probably still does. Have you discussed it with him?

I don't really want to discuss it with him, I'm afraid of what he'll say.

What can he say? He'll probably reassure you once he knows how you feel.

Stephanie suspends the champagne bottle above her own glass waiting for the bubbles to subside.

Or he'll say he wants to leave. I feel like he's just waiting for me to raise something so as he can say what he wants. I just can't take that risk. It's too sad, anyway I'll sort it out.

Prue's eyes lightly glaze.

But I thought that it was you who wanted to leave him? Stephanie says, and in a short silence everyone contemplates her insensitivity.

Christ I don't know. Who knows?

As they walked out of the bar, Nick had put his arm around Helen. Then he kissed her goodnight in a tentative way as if he were deciding whether to speak or to kiss her and the words fell back at the last moment. He hailed her a taxi and then walked back to his car. She watched him walk and waved, but he didn't turn. Why didn't he offered to drive her home?

After the drinks, Nick didn't acknowledge his night out with Helen and didn't invite her out again. But he spoke with her more frequently and called her into meetings with clients. He respected her professionally. This day-to-day exchange of views seemed to satisfy him. She reflected on the one night out that they enjoyed as if it were unbelievable. She longed to sit across from him, her hand in his, his conversation meant for her. Helen felt as if she were hovering over a past moment that would never come again.

Was his attention based on some union of minds and not desire? Had she mistaken the immediacy and immensity of her need to be with him for some coalescing truth about love? A truth through which all threads were twined? Nick had placed Helen at a distance and she had a vantage point from which to consider herself without having to make the split-second decision to sleep with a man who was panting and pleading. Men had usually pursued her in the grip of a sexual spasm, like a cramp that begged to be relaxed,
and denying them had always seemed unfair, and capitulating so simple. This lack of pressure to have sex made her feel mature and ready for love. But Nick Barlow had touched her lightly, incompletely. What lay beneath those light touches, the soft lips that scanned across hers, pre-occupied her.

Helen started to see herself through Nick’s eyes, almost needed his eyes to bring her into focus. That was what he does – he envisions things and then he realises them. He still does that more brilliantly than ever.

Jacqui has found herself a man. She deserves him. I’ve met him and he’s gorgeous. Tell them about him, Stephanie urges.

Oh I don’t know. I don’t want to say too much. These things often don’t work out. We’re taking it slowly.

Slowly! I don’t think that a week in Paris is very slow. What about the jewellery? Stephanie gestures to the group who suspend table top activity. Forks poise on plates, glasses rest in hands, mouths close, waiting.

He is spoiling me, that’s true. Every day since we arrived back he has sent me flowers. You know my divorce from Roger was so difficult, devastating really. I’d lost all faith. I never thought a man like this existed. But now… his name is Bob and he lost his wife a few years ago. He’s in his sixties, but very fit. It wasn’t a ring, she cautions them. Prue takes up her cake fork, Helen takes a sip of champagne, they loosen up around the story. At was a bracelet. She projects her arm into the centre of the table and rotates her wrist with unabashed pleasure.

Stephanie undoes the clasp and tries it on. It’s beautiful. Lucky girl!

One night when Nick and Helen were working late and everyone else had gone home, she called out to him from her office, “I’ve got something I want to discuss with you. Do you have a minute?”

“Of course.”

Then Helen took off her clothes, walked naked into his office, bent over the desk and kissed him. He seemed surprised, then curious. After the first long kiss he had paused and gently pulled back to look at her, and said “you’re beautiful. But after that he had
shown no restraint. On the granite desk top at the edge of a circle of light from a lamp, sprawled on a plan, cold on her back, pens scattering and bouncing. Then on the floor of his office after she kicked the chair out of the way. In his car the next day on the way home to his place. Every part of him imprinted on her. Soft skin at his temple, the crease line of his frown, his dark upturned lashes, the moist skin of his clavicle, the feel of him. After a few months they moved in together. That’s how she married Nick Barlow — she seduced him because she was afraid that he was never going to seduce her. Helen chose him.

She has a question, a private question. And only he knows the answer: Would he ever have seduced her? Would Nick ever have loved Helen if she had not loved him first?

Do you think that Nick has ever had an affair, Helen? Stephanie asks.

Probably. Look, it’s just entertainment. That’s what an affair is — entertainment. It’s not marriage. What sort of women does Nick like? Would they all be young? It would be random. He’s too pre-occupied to go seeking, they would cross his path, they would accommodate his schedule, they would not disturb his architecture. Therefore they should not disturb his marriage. Fidelity is not as important as marriage.

I wish Tom would have an affair. Stephanie says, gloomy. All he can do is talk about how much stress there is in being a lawyer. I could do with someone to share the complaints with, she brightens, and in bed he just rolls around like a sea lion. He’s put on so much weight. He won’t exercise. Except for golf of course, but played at a snail’s pace with many hours in the clubhouse afterwards. He talks to me about the politics of the office every night. Every night! In bed he snorts and snores. She snorts, they all laugh. In the mornings we sit at breakfast and he’s there in his business shirt stretched over his stomach, his jowls falling over his collar and his neat tie and moussed hair, and I think he looks like a fat well-groomed school kid. They are laughing tears. Tom just reads the financial news and clangs his cup in his saucer telling me about the price of gold. Then he asks me where he put his keys and leaves. Christ I would pay someone to have an affair with him! Stephanie skols her champagne. Then pouring another, she turns to Jacqui.
Are you going to Europe with Bob in September, Jacqui? You shouldn’t hesitate, you should just go. Don’t worry about the twins. I’ll drop in on them and anyway they’re nearly seventeen. Life is short. For God’s sake if he wants to take you just pack a suitcase of lingerie and go. I’m sure he’ll buy whatever you need over there. He obviously adores you. Stephanie is mentoring. She understands the dynamics of new relationships.

But Roger said he would be away in September. I can’t leave the children without any parents in Sydney. It’s not possible. Bob says that it has to be September — that’s when the conference is. He can’t change it. I can’t go.

Stephanie is frisky, almost angry and wants to push Jacqui to egotistical excess, wants her to take up her charms shamelessly and use them. Helen thinks Stephanie wants them all to collude with her in the quest for more life.

Stephanie gasps. ‘You must be crazy. He bought you jewellery, right? The man is serious. What is the point of having a lover if you are still trying to accommodate the career of your ex-husband, who is a little politicking weasel who wouldn’t change his pants for you let alone his schedule. Say to him, Roger... Roger.’ Stephanie is drunk, her new face flushes and sparkles, but her advice is unrefurbished. ‘Listen to me Roger, when you were running for election I supported you. You screwed around, you neglected your children, you even went overseas when I was in hospital with bronchitis. So now I need you to do something for me. For one week in September you need to be on board for the kids.’

‘Two weeks,’ Jacqui says flatly.

‘I know that. But if you say two he’ll never agree. Get him to agree to one and two will come.’

Jacqui rolls her eyes.

Stephanie continues, ‘Jacqui, they’re just the tactics he used on you a million times.’

On their fifth anniversary Nick had arranged to take Helen on a mystery trip. Leave Kate with your parents, I’ve organised them to come down and mind her for a few days he said. She’s only three Nick. I can’t leave her. We can leave her Helen. I have a surprise
for you. And he took her to Turtle Island. When she recalls it now she thinks that some excess of happiness washed over her then and she did not understand its fragility.

On the Saturday night they shared a special anniversary dinner. Helen had bought him a small sculpture for his study, accompanied by a card. She had taken care to write a message of tenderness, written to last—a testimony to their marriage. An heirloom of love that defied alteration.

To my love, my husband Nick
On our fifth wedding anniversary I love you more than ever.
I look forward to our future, I cherish our past.
All my love
Helen.

Nick read it without expression, then looked up, smiled at her and put it back in the envelope. He hesitated, then took her hand.

“You are a romantic. A lovely romantic. You just want your parents’ marriage, Helen. Was she too uncomplicated to occupy his world? Was she just a bride up until that point and only then moved into marriage when she entered the dubious, shaded territory of another person’s perception of her? She recalls the eagerness of the message, forcing its own resolution, attempting to deepen love through declaration, and then his subdued reaction to this unexpected travesty of taste, of grace—she recalls feeling insubstantial, adrift in an unstable world and in need of private defences.

When they arrived back in Sydney her parents were sitting on the couch in the early evening. The dinner dishes were in the dishwasher, her father’s arm rested behind her mother. They were watching television in silence, leaning into each other as if they were snuggling in a small nest. Their faces looked alike in the glow of the television—mild, wholesome faces, softening around the jaw line. Kate was in bed. Helen said I have to look in on Kate and went to the bedroom in tears.

The card is kept with all the cards and all the albums and videos in the fine Italian credenza in Helen’s study. Helen has not read the card since and neither has Nick. Nick doesn’t like long messages in cards or opulent gift wrapping. Helen would like to sit
down with him one day and look through the family photo albums. But she will not ask him, it would invite some kind of censure. He would regard it as looking back, growing older. Nick has disdain for reminiscing. For him it is backward hope. *It is a romantic idea Helen, that things can lift from their history with freshness and be known again with increased significance.* Nostalgia re-constituted sentiment enhanced by the years chipping away at the present to diminish it, to exercise their power of quantity. Nick expects that tomorrow he will be more important than today, and today he is more important than the sum total of all his years and the input of her years and by any other measure you wish to apply; he has a vital exuberant currency that will always be greater than any calculation of his life, than any record of his life.

The wedding was the beginning point when all the years lined up ahead of each other into the future, and the bride and groom stood on their one spot before the priest and the one spot on top of the cake and made the same swirl on the dance floor. Was it a myth? Is its desecration an everyday tragedy? The centre of disenchantment with everything else? Helen loved first. He went on because he could not go back. She has followed him ever since that most emboldened moment of her life. In her mind is a chiaroscuro image of white bodies on a black granite desk under a down light a cinematic image that pulses. How can it be, she wonders, that you start out with a passion that sickens you for more, but what you really want is years away? What you want is that someone will always hold your hand the way they first held it. That in those years there will be no pulling back, no offers withdrawn, no love lost. That hands held in innocence and passion can hold for a lifetime.

*We all agree Jacqui, you have to put yourself first for a change. The twins can stay here if Roger doesn’t fulfil his obligations,* Stephanie says.

*You know what Bob said to me the other day?* Jacqui smiles.

*Not the L word?* Prue asks.

*Lips, lust, lunge* Stephanie is laughing.

*Love,* Jacqui says finally. *He said he loves me."

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
Now when Nick takes Helen it is the only time he seems to have aged. He takes her evenly, thoroughly and shudders above her. It is not like the first years of desire when his climax was startling and he disappeared in its moment. Nick never disappears now, he has mastered his desire, it works for him and he doles it out carefully, with a galloping inevitability that makes her want to cry. She wonders how a young woman might feel about this. This orchestrated pattern of hands and legs, how a young woman might feel about the distance that comes into his fixed face as he starts and does not leave until the last shudder, and then the face re-sorts as if nothing has transpired. Or is it different with them? It is never ever different with her now. No false moves. If there were a difference it might reveal something between them. Now sex seems astounding in its impertinence, a shadow-play of action that masks feeling, a tiny inexact moment. A re-enactment of love.

Helen and Nick had grasped for each other on large white sheets of paper, on his plans, on his vision of intersecting lines and rectangles put together in his mind. Her round white buttocks had rolled over those drawings, had lifted and bayed. Her back had risen off the plans to reach for him. She had opened herself out under his desk lamp, over his designs, obliterated his designs from his sight and he had taken her. Sometimes this irony, this embedded symbolism makes her laugh. And sometimes it is the moment from which all the losses can be calibrated.

It was a deception. She had not surrendered to him in that moment, she had surrendered long before. That moment was designed by her for his surrender. Helen had thought that all of his acts, every part of him, lived with the same intensity. The first few years they were together they recalled her seduction of him many times. It made them feel connected, it constituted a secret at the heart of intimacy. Not the secret of the act on the desk, but the secret of Helen. Serious, reserved, competent Helen, capable of such sexuality in his sanctuary.

After a few years they stopped speaking of it. In Helen’s mind now, it shifts from poetic to shameful, to a glimpsed parody, an aberrant moment fraught with meaning at the time, shown by the years to have meant nothing. The brief self-involved goodnight kiss after the first date was more symbolic. The seduction was a mistake.
Well, let me put it this way Jacqui. If he asks you, will you marry him? This is important. Another opportunity for love. Go to Europe and he may ask you to marry him.

Would you accept?

Oh yes. Yes, I would,
Chapter Four

Nick

This morning a man in his sixties, leathery tanned, is standing under the shower on the rock ledge watching the sea, as if it should never be out of sight, not even when you are washing its salt from your pores. It is an obsession, Nick thinks as he watches him, the desire for the sea. You look out and it is your solitary vision that beholds the world ñ there are no eyes looking back.

Nick steps up to the edge of the sea pool and dives into the lapping lane. The water is cool and unresisting. Today it has a beautiful softness like hands gliding along his body. As he swims against the swell of sea, an octopus washes over the wall and across his path. At first, in the suspension of shock, its tentacles float like baroque hair, then it scoots to the bottom of the pool and transforms its skin into the pattern of sand and concrete. When he swims over the inscrutable sea creature, he feels the ordinariness of his own mechanics, his stroking arms and scissoring legs.

He swims for twenty minutes; it is always twenty minutes. His sightline is contained; he is in the water and cannot comprehend its shifting mass, knows only the cool hugging channel in which he swims. When he lifts out, his hands are liverish red from the cold water. He watches the showering man walk away; the soles of his feet are white and
luminous against the brown of his legs. The man picks up a striped towel from the bench, flings it over his shoulder, he shuffles his feet into thongs and whistles as he walks up the steps to the road. He leaves behind him an insouciance that overlays everything: the windows of meek houses and apartment blocks on the hill that reflect dazzling sunlight, the golden sand of the beach with cusped shadows falling from dimples made by bathers' feet, the bride-white gulls squawking.

For a while in this light and ionised air, this simple morning, the museum is more an evocation than a structure, derived not from geometry but from a certain quality of longing. Here, over the sand and sea and sky, Nick's thoughts drift mist-like. Later in the office they must have the potential for materiality, must be capable of assuming words and taking on dimensions, must hold in their presence the venerated tenets of architecture, but here they are ethereal.

Then she recurs, the girl. It is unexpected, this desire to touch her. Today he sees a haughty light in her dark eyes, a dismissal of him that he did not see on the evening she sat with him in his study. He thinks she would be capable of deep concealment, of vault-like impersonality. Ideas of her make him anxious. He wishes suddenly that he loved his wife, Helen, deeply; loving her without reserve would be a kind of grace.

Helen and Nick, young architects just married, with long lean bodies and, he thinks now for the first time, with energy for life that had seemed synchronised. They had travelled to London on their honeymoon. It was her first trip overseas. He carries an image of her in those early days, a poster-woman of the 1970s striding along a pavement, swinging her arms, long hair lifting in the breeze, maxi-coat skimming her brown boots, turning to smile at Nick, the observer. She seemed momentarily inviolate, walking streets late at night, taking the Underground everywhere. In Leicester Square at two in the morning she had insisted on giving money to a beggar. The beggar stood close to her, shivering in the cold while she took out her purse and unfolded a pound note in the orange glow of the street light. Had she believed she could make a beggar wholesome again? Was her good fortune so blinding? Come on Helen, it's cold, Nick, sensing something spoiling inside him as he watched the display of his wife taking in the wonder of herself anew. Is that your name? Helen? It's a pretty name. Her pound in the beggar's cold dry hand. She smiled, Thank you, and looped her arm through Nick's.
Early spring in Green Park one morning, they had sat on a teak garden bench under the bare branches of a giant oak – waves of daffodils through the grass, a dehydrated stillness in the sunshine. A Capability Brown idyll. She was saying they should go to Paris, he was saying he had to get back to work, when a bee landed on her gold earring.

Helen is allergic to bee stings. He told her to stay still, stay still while I wave it off. She sat with complete trust. Is it gone? She asked in a whisper. The bee floated off through the daffodils, glinting like a bead. Nick felt then the possibility of failing her, of the gathering panic beneath her serene seated silhouette while she waited for him to save her. The bee’s gone. She breathed out loudly, her throat reddened and she laughed. Thank god for you! And she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth.

He had wanted to leave her then. To stand and say that her trust was a mistake, that this ideal life soothed by parks and kisses, by sunshine and trees was a kind of stupefying happiness that other people wished for all their lives. And they were living it out in their twenties. They had pulled up abruptly against a wall of happiness. And this was supposed to be sustained for a lifetime? Otherwise decline, regret, grief or worse – pretence, dishonesty, complacency but either way there would be yearning. For her, yearning for this, this blithe moment in the park. And for Nick, yearning for an ever expanding future. For her completeness he must remain incomplete? He would – and did – love her his way, through a pattern of absences, in order to go on creating important architecture. Was that the only reason? He suspects not, he suspects that he has only ever wanted to touch love lightly.

After the incident in the park, he had become withdrawn, and over lunch, to all of her inquiries, is there something wrong? Are you okay? What are you thinking? He had said, I’m just thinking, that’s all. In the early afternoon, she had insisted they go to bed. In a feverish voice, in her panic to break the pall of silence that had fallen over him, she had said, Let’s go back to the room. Please, just for a couple of hours.

He remembers the room as she moved on him – her silk pants and bra deflated on the carpet, the air fungal and damp through the open window, the pink flock wall paper, the pleated lamp shades, the floral valance, the formidable English fussiness of the room – and this bright woman swirling above him, her hands behind her head, her beautiful armpits exposed, pale and firm, opened out, their youthful contours sparkling innocently.
with sweat. Her arms and face and breasts, her body, connected with a frightening suddenness to the whole of her. She was inviting him to possess her, all of her — her dreams and hopes and feelings — her mind and heart. He became a wraith beneath her. She folded down on him. It was a dance, this intimacy, the space between them could not be seen by anyone, least of all by them. He sensed the stimulation of the city outside heighten. He thought of the chance energies that strange women might impart if only he could touch them.

When he woke later the violet light of dusk came through the window, faint in the grainy shapes of the furniture in the room. Sickert's London, full of melancholia, a crime loitering just beyond the frame. She was asleep, the covers pulled up to her chin. He recalled the light from that morning and the day in between seemed hard to grasp within the borders of these half darkneses. She woke and told him that she loved him and he could only reply that she was beautiful.

Did he really feel this cynicism then, or does he feel it now? What privileges this memory over others? There are many memories, memories comprised of images that revolve and re-form, as if they possess secrets not yet fully divulged, needing more lifetime to establish their final significance.

Another memory, another turning point, as he himself turns with the curve of the cliff face and the sun warms his back. A family holiday on the Amalfi coast when Kate was two, he was pushing her in a stroller up the winding stone lanes of Ravello. The immense heat of afternoon settled over the hilltop as they arrived at the gardens of the Villa Cimbrone. The ancient cypress trees and gravel paths, the marble busts of Roman Caesars along the belvedere. They stood, holding hands, thrilled by the pulse of light at the distant horizon, the quiet and splendid gardens around them. Again an idyll, he thinks; behind all idylls is a world churning.

On the way back they stopped to rest in a small austere church, dark and cool. Kate whimpered and reached up to him, so he broke off a piece of biscuit and handed it to her. She put it in her mouth and immediately erupted in a choking spasm, her face flushed bright red, her rasping coughs reverberated around the empty church. Helen instantly freed her from the stroller, thumped her back, put her fingers into her mouth and dislodged the crumbs. The biscuit has nuts in it! She screamed at him. Kate calmed and

_The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008_
Helen stood holding her, both with tears on their cheeks, glaring at him. There was an accusation there, as if he would never understand the pain of a choking child, and this, in an unspoken way, was the most important thing to know about him. He thinks, resignedly, modestly, like a man in need of conclusions, that marriages loosen in small unsurprising ways.

As he runs along the footpath overlooking Tamarama beach, young men run towards him, shirts off, baring smooth Olympian chests. Their steps are brisk and light and there is something meticulous in the way they hold their fists at chest height, something that suggests learned technique. They run to benefit themselves, for the firmness of their limbs and the motor of their hearts. They are modern, they are devoted to their well-being, they have that model self, the conjoined twin, who needs maintenance and nurturing in order to sustain levels of self-esteem. He knows this by looking at them.

What do they know of him? Of his measured stride, his taut, serious face, of his small bookish eyes, green and sharp, probing everything for extra resolution? Reptilian eyes — that is how he thinks of an architect’s eyes — sharp, efficient, looking askance at all things solid to deduce their purer form.

On the descent to Bondi Beach, he slows to enjoy the view of the rolling, glistening sea. Surfers crouch and paddle out to catch the waves, then lift in one unfolding movement and stand like Leonardo da Vinci’s man, winging their arms out to balance. They glide into shore, then paddle back out with the rhythm of the sea and wait for the gasp of a new wave. They will remember their most majestic waves, they will speak of them for years.

* 

Nick meets with the new Minister for Public Works, Roger Lawrence, in the afternoon. They have encountered each other several times over the years, mostly when Lawrence was married to Helen’s friend, Jacqui. They meet now to scope out, as Lawrence said on the phone, the general timing and approach to the museum.

Lawrence, an ex-barrister, greets Nick with a fleshy handshake and assures him of his personal commitment to the project. Lawrence’s office is dim, Victorian era, past

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
deliberations seem ossified in the scent of wax that lifts off the timbered wainscot, in the light from a high window that falls on the obscenely sprawling fronds of a potted palm.

Lawrence does not acknowledge that his ex-wife, Jacqui, is a friend of Nick’s wife, Helen. Nick recalls something Helen said about an acrimonious divorce.

Nick sits in a green leather club chair and Lawrence sits opposite. On the conference coffee table between them is a model of the museum.

‘Your scheme for the museum will deliver an outstanding icon to the people of Sydney. We have completed some initial research on the potential benefits to the economy. We might expect up to twenty percent increase in tourism in the first few years. So we are very keen to support you. You have the government’s full support. Your excellent international reputation for both architecture and for completing projects on budgets and on time, will carry the project through smoothly.’ Lawrence speaks with a residual legalistic rhetoric, hesitations and pauses filled with gravel-throated ahhs. His heavy face smiles and awaits affirmation. His stubby hands sprung out of thick wrists turn the barrel of an engraved gold pen clockwise until the silent nib appears, like a witness.

Lawrence holds his smile for several long seconds. He is opaque. Nick imagines someone has adhered a human-scale facade on a constellation of cells with the classification and this façade denotes a concise set of duties. One of them is smiling when things are going well.

‘I think the key to our successful collaboration will be how we all understand the philosophy of the building. If all parties accept the architectural principles, then we will be able to achieve the best outcome for the people of Sydney.’ Nick says, shifting the rules of engagement.

‘Well it certainly important. It is the most expensive public building to be undertaken in today’s money since the Opera House.’ Nick surveys the room as Lawrence talks about the sublime design of the Opera House. On the opposite wall, along the top of a solid oak credenza, twin daughters smile and shine in a walnut frame. Lawrence himself is elsewhere, he looms from a black lacquer frame, ruddy and joyous on a yacht beneath a billowing spinnaker. A cricket trophy like a brass bell, yachting flags and his law degree from the University of New South Wales, line up behind him.
Nick considers the futility of these marks of ownership amidst the serial bureaucracy of the minister’s office. The institutional air is heavy, almost solid in his lungs as he waits for Lawrence to finish speaking. After a brief pause, Nick embarks on his advocacy of the winning design.

“We arrived at this solution for the museum based on how the building refers to and works with the surrounding built environment. Of equal significance is how the natural beauty of the harbour should be treated. The concept, and it is at this stage only a concept, provides for a building with a sympathetic footprint on the site. It is a quiet elegant building that wraps into the hillside, yet emanates a translucent quality, recalling and refracting notions of water and light.”

Nick traces his finger along the side of the model facing Lawrence. The distressed titanium facade refers to the vernacular of bush architecture, of tin shedding and ruined barns, of tenuous pride worn down by the elements. Huge sheaths of glass invite the picturesque, the harbour view, into the galleries to mingle with the pictures from the mind the art. Lawrence frowns in concentration, the way he would listen to a waiter recite a list of special dishes, trying to recognise the one that suits his taste.

Nick does not want the concentrating Lawrence to understand anything – anything offered into his understanding is necessarily diminished. Nick stands and walks the room, sits back down, all the time offering a dense synopsis of twentieth century architectural theory. He rambles, impassioned and erudite. He does this deliberately to deflect any interference from the government, to impress on Lawrence that the architect is the one who fully possesses the architecture and there will be no compromises. Lawrence is frozen by Nick’s labyrinthine lecture into the discomfort of the small club chair.

Nick tells Lawrence about *the rationalist principles of modernism*, how Mies van der Rohe *eschewed the expressionist style*, how he focused on building with simple industrial materials to *achieve limpid towers of sparkling glass skins over steel skeletons*, how van der Rohe was the man who claimed, *Less is more* and *Architecture is the will of the age conceived in spatial terms*. He does not expect these quotes to strike any chord with Lawrence.

Nick pauses. Then he poses the questions that he cannot answer. What can we say is the *will of our age*? What is the *will of our age* so as we may conceive of it in *spatial*
terms? Or, perhaps, conceive of it at all? I don't entirely know that this scheme, he gestures at the model on the conference table, captures that, not yet. Is the quest for the will of the age too grand for our times? Is it a question that belongs in the first half of the twentieth century? Have we arrived at a point of contented stasis, where progress continues without much social, philosophical or political impact? I wonder, he says in a lower register, sitting back down and leaning towards Lawrence, if the real question, the much greater question is, how do we envision the future? The modernists envisioned a collective, ideological future — again Mies van der Rohe said something like, we are not at the end of an epoch, but at a beginning. But now in 1999, what epoch is ending and what sort of epoch might begin? The question sounds pretentious doesn't it? Too grand, too ideological. He leans back and looks down at the model of the museum as if the answers might lift from its miniature planes in a cartoon balloon of thought. But it seems to me that we must be very diligent, intellectually and aesthetically diligent, in addressing these questions with this building, he adds pensively, cautioning himself against his own excitement.

Lawrence stares at the model of the museum. He looks up when Nick speaks again, his expression neutral. This scheme does not fit a purist style — it is modernist but also expressionist in its interior curves and arcs. It is organic in its lack of holistic symmetry, though the cube is the essential geometry. So you see the creature before you is complex, and if we are to resolve it, we must first appreciate its intent. This approach is absolute and unnegotiable if we are to achieve the icon we say we all aspire to.

As he has been speaking the actual building seems illusory, the description more powerful than what he describes. The museum of Nick's mind is a solitary reflective pool over which inspiration and metaphors float. But the museum of his words is a fortress, a rampart, full of defence.

Yes, yes. Of course. I agree. Your reputation speaks for itself. I particularly admire the library in Dresden you completed in the late eighties. Of course your recital hall in Brooklyn is a striking building. I can see elements of the Brooklyn building in your design for the museum. Lawrence rushes his words, pleased to be speaking again.

Actually I collaborated with George Irvine on the recital hall in Brooklyn. He is a master architect. It is more his building than mine.
Yes, I have heard of him. I believe you will base yourself now, nearly full time in Sydney to manage this project? Lawrence is parched for a fact, a solid logistical detail.

Of course.

I can see how this scheme is ideal for the site. A refined building. You are renowned for meeting deadlines and coming in on budgeté in on budget is very important to the government. And before his point has any chance to deflate he picks it up again.

Transparent financial reporting and responsibility is, in general, very important to the electorateé

Please do not get too fond of the budget. Our costings are barely preliminary. Equally the winning scheme is only a beginning point. It is a concept, not a building. It will evolve and change as we go along. Now he is in control, Nické voice relaxes.

Lawrence, nervous, twists his signet ring with the family coat of arms. Well é we, the government, understand that certain changes might occur as a building is built, perhaps to do with engineering issues. But we do not expect sweeping changes. There must be some definites in this, as you say, concepté

The definite is that we will deliver the best building. The current concept encapsulates many of the architectural principles that I would expect to be in the final building. But I wouldné worry at this beginning point, about the changes that will be wrought in the design process.

The government has not given you carte blanche, though we entrust this project to you of course, but neverthelessé he lifts his hand to his face and smooths his right eyebrow, he sighs and looks towards the door as if an interruption would be welcome. Nick is silent, though he tilts his head forward in a gesture of comprehension. Lawrence sighs again and his expression lightens. é will be interested to know what you think of this. You know there is much protest é and ahé bad feeling from some sections of the community about the demolition of Luna Park?

Nick nods.
We believe this will pass of course, when the museum takes shape. But in honour of the legacy of Luna Park, we thought we would include a but our ideas are not yet finalised but a section within the museum or perhaps in the grounds to communicate the history of Luna Park. We would of course consult with you regarding this initiative. But in honour of Luna Park, we have decided to call the museum, The Luna Museum.

Nick laughs at the man, but also at himself, at the gravitas of his architectural vision assuming the nomenclature of a fun park. Lawrence laughs briefly in sympathy.

This is a serious building. It is not a transformed big dipper or carousel.

No, of course not. But we have to acknowledge that Luna Park has been much loved. It's popular culture. Anyway I was like you a bit taken aback, but now I quite like the name. You will probably get used to it.

During this hour in Lawrence's office, Nick has become uncertain about his scheme for the museum. Is it sufficiently historic or iconic to distinguish him as a great architect — a transformative, visionary architect? Is it the peak of his career or a point on a declining arc? Does it mark the beginning of an epoch, or does it derive from the past?

Outside the government offices the sky is vapid, emptied of heat. The museum is not yet itself, he thinks, not yet fully conceived; its manifold possibilities still live and are unlimited. The revelation gathers force, arrives in his mind solid and fierce, like the imperatives of being born and dying.

The traffic has taken on the souped-up anxiety of peak hour, pushing forward to freeways, pressing towards the edge of the business day. He hails a taxi. At first he directs the driver to his office address then changes his mind. Instead he gets out and walks to the Mitchell Library to examine depictions of early Sydney when the museum site was a pristine wilderness. If he can erase the built environment from his mind, perhaps he can conceive of an authentic spirit, one that is not contextualised by a functioning city.

He finds an engraving on copper by the convict, William Preston. The horizon is low over the first hospital and barracks, and spindly sailing ships float on the harbour. The
engraving is just a record of the early settlement and shows what progress has been made. He is not sure how useful it might be.

A watercolour by Richard Read depicts the harbour and the sky as two white floating expanses. The panoramic view over the wharf fades through sketchy trees to faint hills in the distance. The emptiness at the centre of the picture opens out in him, and seems like an absence of detailed vision on behalf of the artist.

A fine watercolour by Conrad Martens is flooded with Turneresque light, God-infused monumental beams full of hope wash over the water, the ships, the small gabled roofs of early buildings. But the light is the light of anointment brought from England. It is not the Australian sun which beams down over this Sydney harbour. On the pink and silver water, the black ships are large, and their colonising cargo erupts with enterprise onto the wharf.

In all the pictures the landscape recedes into a generic rim of misted hills and curly topped scrub. It is as if the artists did not want to see the landscape. Mostly Nick is stirred by the fragile vessels anchored on the reflective horizontal plane of the harbour. Again though, there is much that is not even implied — the compacted darkness of the small hulls where remnants of one civilisation were transformed into the genesis of another.

He arranges for a copper engraving, two water colours and several etchings to be reproduced to his specifications and delivered to his office. He walks out into Macquarie Street feeling somehow cleansed by the humility of the depictions of early Sydney.

Nick meets with his senior architects in the small conference room with a view over Circular Quay. When he tells them in a rapid insistent voice that the museum scheme will need to be re-designed, perhaps abandoned, they are circumspect. The entire staff has been working late into the night to resolve the current scheme, and they are emotionally invested in the current design, Zoe says, tired and watery-eyed. Ricardo, on secondment from Nick’s Milan office, sighs impatiently, how will the government ever agree to a revision of the winning scheme? Ewan, who has worked with Nick for over fifteen years, is silent and accepting. It is not Nick’s practice to play with the conceptual elements of a project at this stage, so they listen to his argument closely.
He explains that the current concept is derivative and humble and lacks the unity of a single potent idea. It is dominated by the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. Perhaps the current design is the genesis of a grander more monumental concept yet to come, or perhaps it is not. But what choice do they have? This is an internationally significant commission and it must be sublime, radical, visionary, it must open up new thinking, new aesthetic possibilities for the twenty-first century. It must. There is no other choice. And the government? He will deal with the bureaucrats if of course it will not be easy, but many buildings are significantly altered during the building process if many at a government’s behest.

And then, uncharacteristically, he goes home at five, as if he is weary or needs the meditative tranquillity of his own space, as if he is momentarily overwhelmed by his revelation regarding the museum. For any of these reasons he goes home early. But it is none of these. It is because he knows that the girl, Lilijana, will be coming to massage his wife at six and now it has become a matter of faith to pursue her. How will he break through her defences, or her contempt, or her dismissal or worse, the worst of all if her insincere compliance, the co-operation of the body that masks a hardening, perhaps hysterical resistance in the mind? And why her?

As he drives beneath the plane trees that arc over Queen Street and turns the corner into Edgecliff Road, he thinks carefully how he will approach her. He will talk with her casually about the museum and then he will ask for her contact details. Just like that, straight out. From that moment he cannot say what will happen. If she says yes to him, what will he be saying yes to? To escape from emotional dormancy, yes to betrayal it is not the first betrayal yes to a brief erotic interlude or something else entirely. What he hopes for is to lose the confinement he feels in his mind and heart. This he knows, just today, fully today, though he now believes it has been accumulating for years, is part of the limitation of the museum scheme, and perhaps the limitation in his way of seeing architecture. What he hopes for is a profound enlargement of spirit. Of meaning on a new, provisional scale.

*
When he settles in his reading chair and switches on the floor lamp, the intercom sounds. Helen walks up the passage to answer the door and as she nears the study she slows, reaches in to the door handle in the manner of a secretary and pulls the door closed without speaking.

He scans the *Sydney Morning Herald* but cannot concentrate. On the front page is the heading, *Olympics 2000, Ten Months to Go*, and below a photo of men in business suits and hard hats inspecting the construction site of the Olympic swimming venue.

He can hear quiet voices muffled by other rooms and passage ways and then two sets of footsteps – Helen’s first, the squelch of her rubber slides on the stone floor and then the scuff of Lilijana’s footstep which finishes with the tap of her heel. The rhythm of the sounds is uninterrupted by conversation and fades in an aural arc until it disappears into the massage room at the back of the house.

He flips through the general news pages which feature photos of Olympic venues in various stages of construction. Further into the paper, there is a lift-out section on the Olympics, and then the sport section is thick with athletes in action. He thinks Australia is obsessed with sport and puts the paper down to contemplate that. Why are we so obsessed with sport? What does it mean? It is not the tradition of gladiators or ancient Olympians that moves Australians – not man against man. Is it man against land? Is it the fitness to inhabit this landscape that we need to remind ourselves of – a pioneer fitness to know the vacant heart of it, the encroaching desert, and survive it? Is it a display of toughness to inhabit the uninhabitable? Does the small precise scale of sport reassure us – the games corralled in stadiums, races in pools, athletics on tracks and fields, gymnastics in auditoriums – small terrains contrived for competition? The same scale for all nations, for all people. And in these equalised spaces, Australia excels beyond all measures of size and history – we overcome every handicap of our small and short civilisation when we play the biggest and the best. He thinks that sport continually expands to fulfil our ideas of nationhood, while the arts are marginalised. The precariousness of the arts troubles him. His thoughts skip, barely touch each other, are the trifling foreground of some larger unsayable desire.
Sitting here, waiting to speak with the girl, he feels an urgency to complete the new scheme for the museum before the entire world turns away from him and becomes something in which his mind has no place. Some nights he is so overwhelmed by history he knows already that he is not Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe or any other of the explicitly grand and completed men of the twentieth century. History moves and plays in its pattern behind his eyes, and obscures the future that is coalescing, right now, all round him and he cannot see it.

He picks up the newspaper again and turning the large pages, he is agitated by the sound of their flapping in the silent tension of his waiting. He stops at the opinion pages to read some letters to the editor. Helen reads them diligently, but they are of little interest to him. He reads them now because he has time to fill.

There is a letter from an Anne O'Deary, who writes:

*My mother and father took me to Luna Park when I was a child. Since the 1930s Luna Park has been a haven for wholesome family outings in an increasingly difficult and inhumane world. Why should we forsake this for a big building aimed at tourists? Why are the opinions of people who believe in Christian family values so easily overlooked? If Luna Park must go, then we should build a cathedral to replace it. We cannot go on denying God...*

There is more, but he does not read it. It is too ridiculous. He notes only two words that strike him as anachronistic. *Inhumane world.* He ponders them for a moment. She suggests, as religious people do, that true humanity resides entirely in their god. The world is *inhumane* because we deny god. That is her simple rationale. But *inhumane* also impresses him as a dangerous concept, a particularly twentieth century concept, though he does not attach that insight to her; she is probably parroting phrases she grew up with she must be of an older generation. But the concept of *inhumane*, degrees of humanity, standards of humanness, absolutes of humanness that can be judged, owned by a certain group of people and not by another---this is the subtext of her letter. Distinctions between people, eras, histories---they are all the provenance of war---fascism, communism, Nazism, even the Crusades. What is the point of this floundering, truncated analysis?
He closes the paper and puts it down. He does not want to think of these things from the news anymore – the terrible enervating disenchantments of the twentieth century, the theories and cynicism that infect everything. He wants ideals. He wants youth. He wants more life.

He goes to his desk to review the concept drawings. He thinks of Utzon’s brilliant solution for the geometry of the Opera House. After playing with parabolic and ellipsoid schemes, Utzon finally solved the construction challenges of the shells by segmenting a single sphere into sections to form the geometry of the roofs. The core geometry of the current museum is a cube. In the depthless calm of the computer screen he experiments with the unfolding sides of a cube that move with futile elegance in the dark void.

He checks the time – Helen’s massage should be finishing in a few minutes. He leaves the unfolding cube on the screen and takes his water jug to the kitchen to refill it. On the way back he hears Lilijana close the door of the massage room and he waits in the passage. When she sees him her footfall softens.

"Hello.

Hello. How is your museum?" She says in a young hushed voice and tucks some strands of hair behind her ear.

He smiles. "Come in for a minute and I’ll show you." He moves to the computer screen and turns it round to face her. She stands near the door looking at the moving squares. "This is how the geometry works – the cube unfolds and forms the main structure and then repeats in diminishing proportions." Her face is impassive and he wonders if he would recognise her in the street; if he saw her anywhere but here in his study would he know her? He taps the keyboard and brings up the latest exterior elevations in three dimensions. She moves closer to the screen, the cold glow pale on her face, clear in her eyes. Her right arm is tensed, holding her bag, heavy with treatment lotions. She stands still, isolated in the world of proportions, of geometric perfection, keeping, gestureless, her own symmetry in check. She looks as if she occupies the solitary role in an advertisement for an inconceivably transformed future; an elemental human standing at some frontier of technology. Then she re-assumes her female self, flicks her straying hair back from her face, loosens her mouth to speak. Her lips do not
exactly match, the top lip, too large, meets the bottom one with a series of tight puckers along a soft pink seam.

That seems different from the outside. Last time you were telling me about the rooms and I didn’t think it would look like this from the outside. She frowns and turns back to the screen, and he notices the moist and perfect set of her shoulder in her sleeveless top. She smells of eucalypt and lavender oils. Down her arms her skin glistens from the exertion of the massage.

Well that right there is a reversal of expectations, a sort of mystery as to whether you are really occupying the building that you entered. But ultimately the disconnection of the inside from the outside will become like two inseparable but distinct experiences. She does not turn to look at him as he speaks, but keeps her full expression hidden.

Not sure about that.

Neither am I, he laughs. She holds her uncertainty in an intense moment of concentration as if what he proposes can never be light. He thinks she might not have understood what he has said and he wants to say it again in plainer language.

Anyhow it is very interesting. Her voice is now conclusive, polite. Have another appointment. I have to go. Thank you for showing me.

He is not sure now whether he can ask her for her phone number. She assumes a level of polite control that he had not envisaged. But he must keep faith with his intentions. He leans back on the desk and asks her, conversationally, in a relaxed voice, Where do you live?

Darlinghurst.

Where in Darlinghurst?

A flat. Flat 7, 635 Liverpool Street. I have to go. Already she whispers as if they have a secret. He is elated.

She turns, the back of her knees visible below the hem of her loose skirt the vulnerable smoothness of the olive skin deepening in the crease. The narrowing from the calf to the slender ankle, the nub of her heels in the sling back shoes with the ruche strap. Her direct careful walk loose from the knee, steady at the hips with a slow sway her straight back, pride running up and down it, that she may sense but does not see. Like anger in abeyance. A pride and anger waiting at her back.
When he hears her close the front door, he goes to the massage room to tell Helen that he must go back to the office for a few hours. The small room is hot, cloying with fragrances. Helen is sitting on the edge of the massage table, her face is flushed and shiny, her expression vague. He speaks to her quickly and she says, Yes. Okay, as if his explanation is unnecessary and uninvited.

Then he rushes back to his study, puts his reading glasses in his brief case, takes his keys from the desk and jumps into the car. As he backs the car out of the garage and onto the road, the bumper bar scraps the curb.

While he waits at the Ocean Street traffic lights, he sees Lilijana walking on the wide footpath. Her arm strains with the weight of the heavy bag. The sky is buckling, ready to darken and storm, and in her sandals mended with the metal tip she could easily slip and fall on wet bitumen. She crosses the road in front of the thronging cars, and squints into the head-wind which blows hair over her face. There is no sway in her walk. She puts the heavy bag down and picks it up with the other hand and then she disappears into the train station, into the earth. Her vulnerability is so potent and absolute, that there in those few minutes, he is afraid for her.

He drives on, uncertain of what he should or can do. He arrives at the office twenty minutes later. It is now after eight in the evening and Ewan and Zoe are still at their desks. Against the background hum of computers the susurration of their consonants reaches him with librarian calm. He waves to them, but does not speak. He goes to his office and closes the door, switches on the computer, takes out a blank sheet of paper and places it on his desk. Then he leans back in the chair and closes his eyes, stretches his arms above his head and smooths his hair. He wonders if it is too late to try to choose love again, even briefly. He feels an unusual tremor in his hands, as if they belong to another man.
Chapter Five

Nick

Nick can still visualise Eva Wegner vividly. She sits on the blue brocade sofa in his suite at the Sherry-Netherland. It is 1981 and he is in New York, collaborating with Eva’s husband, George Irvine, on his first international project – The Brooklyn Recital Hall.

Her fragrance, Passion, which she pronounces with a hiss on the s, smells of summer flowers, humid with a cool note, an unfamiliar note beneath the heat. Through the panelled door, Nick detects the sound of muffled footsteps in the corridor, the hotel elevator whistling on its cables – there is other life circling this small scene, this woman who places herself artificially on a sofa, legs crossed like embracing swans, her smiling and unpredictable mouth.

"Since you like the fragrance so much, you should buy it for your wife."

He thinks of the citrus fragrance Helen wears and cannot recall its name. How would it smell in this room, in this city, in the presence of Eva asking him about his wife?

"What is she like, your wife?" German accent stiffening her phrases.

He hesitates. Is it his question also? He does not answer directly; instead he repeats the phrases Helen spoke at her thirtieth birthday dinner, when she told her guests, tears in her voice, "We have a good marriage, yes, a happy marriage." That reaffirming yes in the middle strikes him now as sad.

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
Standing in a plush room in New York, wanting to sleep with Eva Wegner, he has a flow of love for Helen. He feels the power of attachment that flares at a small point of abandonment, the back swell of love when love is stepping back. He imagines Helen as she was at the airport, a figure standing on an expanse of white linoleum, people weaving in diagonals around her, her silhouette fixed in that brief farewell. She looks back at him from a place where he used to reside, a place that he now revisits but can never know in the way she wants him to. You just want to leave other people behind, Nick. It’s as if you are in some kind of race. Helen, waiting for the changes in him to peel away and leave her with what she knows, knew; waiting for him to shed his complex tastes and energies and restore to her his lovability.

Eva reaches over and switches the lamp on; she sweeps her hand across the seat of the sofa and gestures for him to sit. The circle of lamplight flatters Eva’s pallid face and throat. He is on the verge of infidelity, wanting the anchor of marriage, wanting its context and morality, feeling the need to own it even as he betrays it. Wanting, in a perverse way, to test his marriage for strength, to see if its vows and sentiments can hold his life within its structure. But he is compelled to risk, to live this moment of complication, of self-invention.

* Helen is a beautiful woman. I love my wife.*

* * *

A month before he meets Eva Wegner he arrives in New York to start work on the Brooklyn Recital Hall.

On the first Saturday, he walks the stern and reputable streets of the Upper East Side wondering about George Irvine, the master architect. What gravitas George has, Nick thinks, professorial in manners, speaking in a low excited voice full of breath. He is intrigued to find an unpretentious and ardent man behind George’s expressive, modernist architecture. He had envisaged he would be different, larger in personal stature and overtly ambitious. Last week he had been welcomed into George’s office with a sweetness and courteousness that Nick does not exactly respect.
As the wind bites at his bones and buffets his cheeks and ears, he imagines the quiet determined prestige behind the Fifth Avenue doorways that he passes, the captive glow of sitting rooms inside. His sweater is too thin, his coat jacket too short, but he is invigorated by the chill; it brings to consciousness the angularity of his limbs, the inner litheness of his body as he moves against it. He walks straight, straighter than ever, up the broad pavement to The Frick and later, the Guggenheim.

He ambles along the sombre hall of the Frick, past the carved staircase and into the Fragonard room, where the lucent faces of Van Dykes and Rembrandts peer out unerringly from scrolled and gilded frames. He pauses in the stone courtyard to contemplate a beam of mellow light that slants across statues, and overhears a bird-like woman in a boucle suit tell her young companion that she will not be going to the latest exhibition at the Met because she loathes Caravaggio. Nick wonders how Caravaggio’s chiaroscuro brilliance could be wrong. Does the woman want a romantic fold of cloth, a classic column or saintly penumbra in which to shelter between light and dark? When she turns he can see that her shoulders are improbably narrow against the gossamer balloon of her brittle thinning hair and her face is powdery white and shrewd. He is impressed by the stunning clarity of the old woman’s opinion. She strikes him as evidence of a different kind of freedom, not the spacious freedom of Australia, not the easy-going irony and contentment, but an active congested freedom dense with argument and shameless individuality.

It is mid-afternoon and he is hungry. Out on Fifth Avenue the wind has died. He hails a cab and directs the driver to Soho where he intends to find a small neighbourhood café. He sits on the tan vinyl seat that has been mended with packing tape and breathes the ingrained perspiration and cigarette smoke. The driver swings the large steering wheel as if it is a roulette wheel and the cab lurches from side to side, suspension creaking. He will, he thinks, discuss with George Irvine a more defined basis for their collaboration; he does not want to be subsumed into the master architect’s long reputation; he must make his clear and unique mark on this first international project. He is only in his early thirties, but by forty he expects to have a celebrated profile. His future career relies on the success of the Brooklyn Recital Hall. There is a humility, he is beginning to realise, in George’s work that does not accord with his own vision of monumental buildings.

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
He closes his eyes and has the sensation of being ferried through an arterial shipping lane into a magnificent port. The cab heaves to the curb and when Nick gets out, he is exhilarated by the multiple purifications and contaminations that are possible, here in New York City.

He observes in the first weeks of knowing George Irvine that he does not work in an ordered way. He sometimes arrives in the office after ten, dressed in crumpled corduroys, a v-neck jumper and banker-blue shirt. Nick cannot reconcile his appearance with the reputation of the gifted aesthete.

George has periods of stillness when he seems barely to be working, when he engages in discussions about architecture with undisguised emotion, emotion that is too raw for Nick. Other times he is frenetic, ebullient, and ideas for the building flow onto blank sheets of paper, into the components of experimental models. At these times George walks the office and his staff expand in his presence. This mercurial style unsettles Nick’s working rhythms.

One evening, sitting in the boardroom of the eighteenth floor office, Nick and George review the progress of the concept drawings that are now two months behind schedule. They examine the building profile and the preliminary models of the slim elliptical recital hall that resembles a cockle shell slightly ajar.

George is speaking about architecture and Nick is irritated by the philosophising. He watches George unfold his hand slowly with an exquisite movement of the wrist as if he holds in his palm a rare and fragile thing. He listens to him say, "Architecture is in an endless process of becoming. From the smallest germinating impulse to the centuries a building may stand, it is always becoming, within its setting, within its culture it evolves and reaches forward…"

Nick interrupts him. "So what does that mean George, for the Brooklyn Recital Hall? Does that mean that we need to see this building now, and simultaneously understand what it will become?"

"Yes" and no. George smiles and combs his fingers through his thick grey hair. "We can only attempt to understand what it will become. We cannot know, we cannot expect to know. For it to become, to resonate, it must possess the conceptual plasticity to meet..."
changing perceptions, it must be ambiguous. In some way. And this scheme, godammit, is not! That’s what’s wrong with this scheme Nick; it is solid geometry. It does not effuse.

Nick considers the plans spread over the boardroom table. He examines the profile of the building, how it rests on a small surface at the base and cantilevers out as a cockle shell does, how the glass seam wraps around the circumference, how its scale relates to the character of the street.

Without looking up he says, let me think about it George, let me work on it.

For days Nick experiments with the façade and the proportion of the building. Then he realises the problem is not the geometry, but the building profile on the site – it is static and formalist. He returns to the cockle shell motif and visualises how a shell rests on sand. He tilts the building, five degrees, twelve degrees, no, it is nine degrees that best expresses an organic asymmetry in placement, but perfect symmetry in form.

When he presents his solution, George is quiet. He examines the gradient of the tilt and its affect in each of the section drawings, and then he says, yes, he thinks Nick has achieved the finesse, the spatial abstraction that lends the building resonance. He smiles. He suggests they go to dinner to celebrate, perhaps the Pool Room at the Four Seasons.

The atmosphere of the restaurant is inky dark; the pool reflects quivering light onto the ceiling, over white table cloths, through crystal glasses, and into George’s astute shining eyes. They order from a heavy bound menu, they drink Sancerre. Nick feels he is in the midst of a hastening ascendency. There is a secret augmenting within him, the secret of his unlimited self, his invigorated talent, the surge of energy within his mind to see beyond this moment, way beyond, to a life of ascendency.

George is speaking about the Seagram building, Philip Johnson’s early masterpiece. The restaurant in which they sit is on the first floor of this famous building. Then he is talking about the Brooklyn Recital Hall and the problem with the seating capacity. For perfect orchestral acoustics, he says, you must have a reverberation time of two seconds. This is a problem. He drinks his wine, and Nick drinks also. The wine is dry and flinty, golden in the light. The problem with the reverberation time is that the Brooklyn
Philharmonic Trust want two thousand five hundred seats in the auditorium—too many seats, about three hundred too many seats for two seconds reverberation. The pheasant terrine and cornichons arrive. Nick eats a delicate finger of toast with the gelatined meat to leaven the gamy flavour. What to do about the acoustics? George has some ideas, though they will have to speak with the acoustic engineers, but they could decrease the distance between the seats. A woman across the room in a red suit leaves the table. As she passes, a watery light reflects off her black patent bag; the stiletto heel of her shoe is gold. Another solution would be to reduce the upholstery in each seat back, or another... The waiter removes their plates, just a white hand in a black sleeve, deftly sweeping the plate away and soon he places stemmed glasses with champagne sorbet in front of them to cleanse the palette, he says from a darker upper realm.

Somehow, unreasonably, Nick wants to be alone. He wants to absorb the glacial glamour of this room, the ice-pink sorbet, the glowing faces of candle-lit diners without the interruption of George’s conversation. The solution to the acoustic deficiencies of the recital hall will be found, every solution will be found, he is certain of this. That is what all of this means, every last detail of this restaurant, this meal, these people, every granite slab of New York pavement, every sales girl’s smile, every gritty swerving cab, every shoulder-padded suit and gold-heeled shoe, every exaggerated headline, every clattering bell of the Wall Street day—they all mean that every solution will be found in the endless beckoning tomorrows.

The Sancerre is finished. George orders another bottle and laughs and when Nick hesitates, when he says I think I’ve had enough, George’s eyes glint as if he is old and dangerous and Nick is young and cautious. Nick laughs too, and lets the wine flow into his glass and lifts it up in a toast. The medallions of Maine lobster are light, sweet, the potato basket, woven fine as thread, holds tiny glazed carrots, snow peas are arranged in a star. Everything floats on the large white plate and looks obliquely embroidered.

While they eat, Nick prepares a conversation in his mind, an exploration of his own architectural philosophy. He wants to challenge George’s ideas of architecture, which he believes are romantic, even poetic.

He starts speaking while George is eating. I think, George, that architects impose... and should impose culture on cities.
Bold statement Nick. What do you mean?  

The architect’s focus is the site. We think of how a building can exist as you would say, become on that site and imbue it with the timelessness and history that gathers around great buildings. But what defines that site? Does the city, the culture, the landscape define the site? No I think it is the building, the architecture of the building that ultimately transforms the site.  

Go on Nick develop the argument.  

Nick puts his knife and fork together on the plate, leaving the potato basket untouched. Architecture must reflect an internationalism of mind removed from even outside of the prevailing culture. A new building is a neutral territory. Utzon hadn’t even visited Australia when he sketched the winning scheme for the Sydney Opera House. He was working without any ideas of nationhood or culture he was working within his own singularity, with his own symbolic architectural language.  

He feels the emotion of Utzon’s triumph. He pauses, pulls back from this unexpected surge of feeling. Is it triumph that moves him? Only triumph? He continues in a tightened voice, And now, today, the Opera House is a powerful symbol of Sydney and Australia, as the Guggenheim is a symbol of New York. They are both icons of irreducible meaning. So, Sydney derives meaning from the Opera House, but the Opera House derives its meaning from Utzon’s mind. In fact in fact the Opera House has imposed Utzon’s cultural sensibility on the city. That an essential part of the way I see architects must impose culture on cities, otherwise their vision is peripheral and derivative. It is urgent that he express these ideas that alight in his mind. He knows that they are precocious, even arrogant things to say, but they distinguish him from the middle-aged man; these statements are young and full of iconoclastic energy.  

George finishes his wine, puts his elbows on the table and leans his chin on his hands. Other conversations in the restaurant intensify and become a collective even sound, now in George’s silence, more foreground than background.  

Nick, I cannot exactly agree. He deliberates. In some respects you are right, but I have a problem with the word impose, and I think perhaps what you suggest is a simplification of the art of architecture in fact it is more about the influence, perhaps career, of the architect than the process of his art. What I can say is that great buildings
embolden and console people because they cannot be conquered by the present. George places his napkin on the table, glances at his watch and signals to the waiter to bring the bill.

His ideas are imperative, sweeping, hot in his mind, yet they do not impress George Irvine. Surely in their presence George’s long reputation is placed in perspective; surely there is the rightful space for the next generation? In the thinning crowd of diners, the shivering pool, the spot-lit darkness he feels marginalised, suddenly surplus to the drama of the restaurant interior.

The bill arrives in a leather folder. George takes it courteously and signs it. He tucks the signed docket in the sleeve of the folder. He looks up and half-smiles at Nick. You make some sound points, Nick. But I think one of the most important elements of great architecture is the people who walk its floors and know that, a hundred or more years ago, people walked the same floors, and that in the future, other people will be standing in that same place. They are linked in a human chain to each other, and they and the building are both mortal and immortal, but eternally current. The ideas are inextricably linked. He rises from the table. We will no doubt have many more conversations about this over coming months perhaps it will take years. In fact this discussion could itself be eternal. George laughs wryly. Nick stands, unsmiling, wanting to disagree, but George continues. But right now, I think we should go home. We have a lot to accomplish tomorrow.

On the way out, George rests his hand on Nick’s shoulder, and Nick is faintly angry at the minor weight of the hand and the master architect who sees Nick’s youth and intensity and declines its full energy, draws back to the perspective of his years lived and is wise; who examines Nick’s conclusions and finds them unconcluded; who generously, affectionately slings his arm around his shoulder and hails him a cab and says, Your concept for the profile of the recital hall is visionary. Well done. And as Nick sits in the moving cab behind an Indian driver in a maroon turban who is regal and silent, sudden and impersonal night-shadows from the street roll over him, buildings flatten and enter the car as if someone has posted them through a slot, and now they fall all round him on their way to somewhere else. His heart hammers, his thoughts are slightly drunken and wild. He winds down the window and finds the polluted air is soft and surprising. It is
spring. He feels brave, he feels grossly underestimated and brave with all the history of the word brave apparent in his mind its youth, its prescience, its spirit to contend with circumstances that are momentous and unknown. He is ascending; he cannot be dismissed by George Irvine who, in his late fifties, might be past his prime. George Irvine did not see the perfect placement of the recital hall on the site, the nine degree gradient of the tilting shell, but Nick Barlow did. It is Nick Barlow who has given this building its destiny, its timeless becoming.

The foyer of the Sherry-Netherland is hot and stuffy, there is a tincture of moth balls in the air of his suite, mothballs and air-freshener, preservation and camouflage. He wants to find a new, modern hotel.

He lies in his bed, stirred, possessed, unflinching. He thinks of Helen, his wife of four years, but how should he think of her? And why? Is it a matter of discipline, of censoring his thoughts of her is it just that a choosing of love over intellect? Does love require mediation in order to set up a version of the person that can be loved? Isn’t this the opposite of what love is supposed to be an urgent well-spring of emotion? If he characterises her, trims off the aspects of her that disenchant him, does he make of her a child, someone less formed, but more ideal? An abstraction with possibilities and ambiguities, someone with room for the perfecting influence of the one who loves? Does he make of her a person in the perpetual act of becoming, whose possibilities are constantly enlarging? Is that where emotion lodges in everything in the divine, inestimable process of life and not in the set points of resolution? The questions trail, leave no trace.

He sleeps. If he dreams he does not remember.

*   *   *

The next week, George invites Nick to dinner at his apartment. He looks forward, he says, to introducing him to Eva Wegner, his German wife, his second wife, who is, he emphasises with a sense of prestige, a talented artist, quite some years younger than I.

At eight pm on the Friday, Nick arrives at George’s apartment block a neo-Gothic building on the Upper West Side heavy stone façade with a marble foyer and a
concierge that speaks with a New Jersey accent in proud courteous sentences, *the elevator is in excellent condition*, as he pulls back the concertina grill, *Yessir, just serviced the other day, so don’t mind the creaks, because this is one of the finest old elevators in New York City. Built to last.*

George opens the door of his tenth floor apartment in a suit. It is an unexpected transformation. Eva stands in the living room drinking champagne and moves towards Nick with her hand extended. Her palm is cool and shallow. Perhaps she is in her early forties, Nick cannot be certain, but he imagines she is at least ten years older than him.

She radiates cleanliness, as if she were born on a mountainside and has tumbled out of the womb over dewy grass. The reflective qualities of her face, sparkling eyes, shiny hair, luminous skin, large red mouth all combine in a vivid austerity. She wears her sandy hair tied low at the nape of her neck. A stylish primitive necklace of honed dark stone, threaded and knotted at random on Hessian twine is startling on her white shirt.

A large portrait of George dominates the living room. He is sitting in a lounge chair, formally posing against a backdrop of books. Nick thinks the hands folded in his lap look old, almost ineffectual, nothing like his real hands. George glances towards the painter as if his mind were pursed around one indelible thought. Eva has signed it in the corner with a sweeping E.

The interior is original, but in pristine condition. Parquet floor, mahogany panelling, dark and detailed with heavy mouldings, a stone fireplace which is not in use. Everywhere Nick can see evidence of George the architect, eschewing interior decoration, respecting the endurance of form.

Pools of light define a conversation area where a black leather Le Corbusier lounge is flanked by four white Barcelona chairs. Tribal sculptures on lacquered ebony plinths are spot-lit along one wall. Other than George’s portrait there are no other paintings. George and Eva’s things combine uneasily. Nick decides the room has a sense of refined tenancy as though they have failed to fully possess the space.

It is an awkward dinner. George seems introspective and unnecessarily solicitous towards his wife as if an argument or a series of corrections wait for him in another room. In the depths of the expansive living space, under the duress of an original chandelier, he appears more like his portrait.

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
Eva is listening closely to George talk about her career. "And just lately, Eva has won several prestigious prizes for portraiture in Germany including..."

"I have also some important commissions in New York. The Goldmans have asked me to paint their children."

"Who are the Goldmans?" Nick asks, reluctant to be impressed. Neither of them respond.

George makes an embarrassed gesture towards his wife inviting her to continue. "Tell Nick about the retrospective you have planned in Cologne." She speaks for a few minutes on this allocated topic in a stilted voice that retains a German cadence, an uneven mixture of exclamation and inquisition. Though she speaks fluent English, it is formal, academic, without nuance or humour.

"What do you think of the New York art scene?" Nick asks in a distracted way, feeling the need to say something. The question is too broad, too glib. George has prompted one discussion and then fallen into silence. Eva deals with the question as if it contains an inherent insult, an overstated and insincere deference.

"I cannot tolerate Andy Warhol," Eva says, "He debases art." An impressive damnation. She has Nick's full attention.

"That may be one of his intentions," Nick proposes.

"His blatant commerciality disgusts me. Also his repeated images. I read somewhere, a very clever critic, what was the phrase? These grids of images the Marilyn Monroe series and the Cow Wall Paper are like repetitions of a culture that does not advance, but is stalled, stuck like a record. They are meaningless. They are meant to silence us. Nihilist." She finishes her entrée, wraps the napkin around her index finger and dabs the corners of her mouth. The white napkin bears the brilliant red markings of lipstick.

Nick sits back in his chair and speaks slowly. "Warhol is just creating his own myth celebrity his own unknowable identity. The grids of photo images in their evenness and lack of narrative, in their visual beat, actually undermine the visual through repetition, or at least the meaning of the visual. The Cow Wallpaper is like a production-line approach to art. As if art is a commodity produced with a robotic ceaselessness that is impervious to human intervention. His art has a kind of menace."
Eva glares at him, waiting for his conclusion. He ruminates, ‘I think it’s intriguing. He’s intriguing. No one knows his age, his sexuality is ambiguous—he claims he’s celibate because he prefers voyeurism. Isn’t his aim to satirise the self-involved importance, the emphasis on self-expression in modern art?’

‘The German modern art scene is interesting,’ she says, ignoring Nick’s comments. ‘It is so alive over there. Beuys, Polke. Kipperberger. Kipperberger also has a perverse statement to make about art, but his art has content. Meaning. Life is lived more deeply in Europe.’

‘Kipperberger is just a jokester,’ Nick scoffs.

‘More than that I think, Nick,’ George cautions.

‘At least he is not insular, like Warhol, caught in a nihilist, no, nuclear culture, where nothing but he or America matters. We are stalked by a bomb that can end the world, can end it many times over. And everything now exists in this nuclear shadow and is trivialised. Andy Warhol merely represents a complete surrender to the annihilating power of America.’ She pauses to absorb the impact of what she has said and then adds in a vehement voice, ‘Kipperberger knows what is on the other side of the Berlin Wall.’

‘You mean East Berlin?’ Nick says, wanting to dilute her fervour.

‘Yes, of course. To you and George, that is all that is on the other side of anything—the East. The unforgivable world. The nothing people. The enemy.’ She says enemy in a mock terror voice.

‘I was being provocative,’ Nick says.

They both smile, but in this conversational game, the matter of her credibility is serious. Their sentences twine through each other like threads of wire, each glistening bend wrought and strained to compel proximity. He cannot unlock the psychology behind her conversation—does she use English to defend, rather than communicate? She makes a series of statements that demand recognition, statements full of her own emphatic presence—do they guard her against the encroaching culture of America? Nick wonders if she speaks this way in German. It seems that no language of childhood, no mother tongue eddies beneath this English-speaking persona. He cannot imagine her speaking the way foreigners new to a language often do—basing their attempts at communication on
the affection and familiarity of their own language, stumbling over words, leaving gaps, filling in with the gestures of friendship and excuse.

The air takes on the crystalline clarity of a deep cold. They are alone in the world, these three, trawling with forensic precision the small bones of an argument about art that increases the distances between them.

She lifts her chin up to speak, her voice builds to a climax—a portrait painter’s climax, a climax of atmosphere and mood, of lighting and colour-tone with an eye on the silhouette. Do not agree with your clever insights about Warhol. Though what you say is not new. It’s that idea, pop-art, post-modernist—whichever, that form is enough, that there does not have to be content—that the literal image in art, the phonetics of poetry, the prose of a novel that disrupts previous forms, supersedes content. It is a mockery of art through the exposure of its artifice. It is just scaffolding and can never be lived in. Narrative in art, meaning, content, reaches across lifetimes and cultures. But post-modernism is the assertion of an isolated artistic representation. Is Warhol saying art is over? Would he rather I stopped painting portraiture, do you think? Or is he mocking me?

Her eyes shine. She holds the outrage in her expression, commanding that Nick and George take her side. It is suddenly personal for all of them.

In the silence she finishes her wine. The glass table shimmers as dining activity ceases. George says he will open another bottle and leaves the room.

I am afraid George tires of these conversations. Our relationship is under some strain. Eva says in his absence, as if Nick has made an inquiry into her marriage. He is ambivalent, she continues. I can talk with you about it? George has an impairment. An inadequacy that troubles him. Sometimes he can. Sometimes he can’t. It makes him ambivalent.

All I know is that George is a fine man and a master architect.

Of course he is. She sips some water. Do know where you are staying. I will call on you.

After dinner Eva says she will leave them alone to talk and retires to her study. Nick and George stand at the window, drinking whisky. Below them in the dark rectangle of
Central Park, Nick thinks, there would be pickpockets, homeless men and women, thugs, rapists and murderers. Invisible lives in the blank space somehow stalk the conversation up in their eyrie. He wonders who the predators are in this city—thieves with a view to the horizon and everything within its rim, like a fort in the Wild West where men stood in towers and scanned their territory for enemies. Or those from the dark parkland below?

America and its culture of surveillance, he thinks wistfully. America. America, like a rich man or a gangster, cannot determine who are her friends and who are her enemies. America, obsessed with the quest to know the enemy over The Wall with alternating paranoia and naivety. Not just to name him, but to characterise him, second guess him, pre-emptively curtail or eliminate him, because from here in the fort tower so high, the horizon so far, he is impossible to just spot and kill. Can you live now in the nineteen-eighties without America’s leviathan and unfathomable character exciting your thoughts?

Nick wants to raise these ideas with George as they drink their whiskies, but they are just impressions, absurd juxtapositions of parks, the Cold War, the Wild West, the persisting thrill of Eva’s conversation, and they have struck up against each other and detonated their own paradoxes. But tonight Nick perceives a different George. There is an unfamiliar sourness, perhaps staleness, about him. He drinks his whisky, the ice tinkling, and stares out the window unwilling to converse.

Nick stands beside him and observes the street below, the ambulances and police cars, and the few scattered people walking on pavements. But he can hear nothing. The enclosedness makes him feel under siege, as if unheard elements are building with an escalating pressure on the glass. He is unreasonably reluctant to re-enter the New York streets, as if shutting out the sound of the city will incite a sudden aural violence when he goes outside. They turn back to the room. Nick says he should be leaving, and George phones for a town car.

* * *

Eva arrives at Nick’s hotel about seven the next night. He is not expecting her. She kisses him on the cheek and it is then that he smells Passion. She walks into the centre of
the suite and sits on the brocade sofa, talking all the time about her day at the studio in Soho. He knows she has come for sex.

Nick considers her within the vacuum of desire: her fluttering laugh, the shallow indentation of a soft V in her feminine lap when she sits, that elegant ivory throat, now bared as she looks up at him. She has sprung from the earnest cage of artist and become woman – not goddess, not chimera, but warm available woman.

George respects you. He is right. But also you are interesting, and talented. Though, I would say, misguided on the subject of art. It is, though, one of my best topics. You should visit my studio sometime.

She asks him about the Brooklyn Recital Hall and they discuss the progress of the design. Then suddenly she tells him that she does not wish to discuss George with him anymore. Loyalty is important, he is my husband after all, and suggests they go to bed. The clinical simplicity of it excites him; her unknowability excites him. What secret does he imagine can be accessed through sex?

She pulls him down onto the sofa. He kisses her, he feels the small abrupt curve of her waist, the compact breasts that sit high on her breast bone. Then she stands, moves away and undresses. When she is naked she turns around, arms out and the pronounced contours of her muscles disturb him, as if she has been stripped back to another layer of nakedness, a functioning anatomical nakedness that is more crudely human than sexual.

In bed she is strong. Her caresses are forceful, insistent. She tugs at him, shifts his body around to her preferred positions. She tells him where and how to touch her in a disembodied whisper. Whenever he makes an attempt to take control she sweeps his arms aside and lifts away from him, as if this territory between them is hers. In that gap her desire plays out. She eases herself down on him, and rocks with her eyes closed, concentrating on her own pleasure. She grips him around the neck. He can feel his lungs tightening and asks her to let go. She keeps pressing down on his windpipe. He throws her off in anger. She slaps his face. Her violence, her disregard for his pleasure, enrages him. He slaps her back, instinctively wields his man’s hand across her face. The sound of the slap is random, loud. He stands, steps back from the bed, but she lurches forward and slaps him again. Every act of hers is an insult, everywhere she touches him stings with
humiliation. He pushes her to the floor, turns her over and pins her wrists down with his hands. He rubs himself roughly against her.

She whispers to encourage him. She says, ‘That’s better, much better. You want to hurt me? Hurt me. I want you to.

Is this what she wants? She wants this? Not the first act of her domination over him, not her own violence, but this to provoke a reprisal. She groans and pushes up at him. At that moment anything is justifiable, to slap her, sodomise her, throw her against a wall. Anything.

He lifts off her and goes to the bathroom. He is disbelieving, breathless. How has he been led into this? He turns on the shower and stands under a deluge of hot water for timeless minutes, clenching his hands in fists, closing his eyes, tilting his face to the steady stream of water. Caught between her manipulation and her beckoning buttocks he is full of the desire to humiliate her. He turns the shower off when he can hardly breathe in the steam and heat. He delays in the bathroom for some minutes listening for sounds from the bedroom. When he opens the door he finds she is gone.

He thinks of her every day for more than a week. He thinks of her concealment, and her impenetrable emotions. He thinks of her and something angry and bereft of hope starts low in his stomach and powers the blood down.

He goes over the incident in his mind, takes each vivid action out, turns it round the tension of his muscles, the grip of his hands on her wrists, her small refined face slapped, a bland surface of resisting flesh, that all, no features, no warmth or breath, just a surface. He knows her now with his body, and it will not go away, this physical knowledge of violence, the rough handling of a woman. He turns each act in his mind, then he puts them back in the scene, in his life, and they don’t fit, but there they are, clear, unexcused by drunkenness or danger or desperation, conjuring their own precise despair.

Then as the days go on, he cannot stop thinking, through all the meetings with her husband and the development of the drawings, through the phone calls with Helen and the disturbed nights, with the blur of the city way beyond him and the stream of traffic at his door, he thinks, what is her purpose? What does she try to show me? Sex as a volatile rising and draining of desire the complete depletion of desire, the draining to emptiness.
and not the half levels of domesticated sex? Is she showing me that the limits I have constructed in my mind can be easily transgressed? That they exist in the absence of any test? She takes me to the dissolving boundary of violence, as if the word has lost its moral inflection in the reality of the act. She gloats; violence does not always feel wrong, sometimes it feels right, do not be conceited, do not think you know all the dimensions of another's taste, another's style and desire!

And further, she recommends violence, yes, she recommends its momentary solution, its spiral, its burst of power. She is its advocate, its practitioner. He thinks her sexual instincts are pornographic, but her art? Her art is portraiture. Is there a vanity about both?

And what of the context, her context? Is she a foreigner looking for notoriety in an alien land, a land that bears the international telephone code of the art of Andy Warhol, the money of the Goldmans and their progeny, the architect husband and the nuances of a language she may master but never inhabit? Is her consolation the insult she can make over dinner and the insult to a man's perception of his own morality, his own goodness? Does she make these insults because she cannot re-instate her significance, cannot re-contextualise her German life in the multifarious commercial culture of New York? She is angry and she wants to make other people angry, she wants to be a formidable opponent, not a compliant immigrant-wife. She wants to be as bad as she thinks America is, as empty and chaotic, nihilistic, as bent on the myth of the individual as Andy Warhol is. She wants to be more violent, more capable of bearing the insult than others are of making it.

Do these propositions hold? Do they approach the reality of the stinging slap?

Was her plan to transport him to a world where violence is at the base of everything erotic, and erotica the secret in everyone? Is that what she calls ambivalent? Is that the weariness in George's face when he sits with her at dinner and poses for his portrait? He has crossed her boundaries, hasn't he? Or has he pulled back? Does he live now in her company, in that other territory where he has married the moral foreigner? Is that the essence of her foreignness — her need for sadomasochistic sex? Not its pantomime but its actual rage and violence, the provocation of punishment through violence. And once in this cycle of sexual abuse and reprisal has George developed the taste for it?
Nick questions how George can ever occupy the terrain of passion again, ever believe in the small subtle gestures of love when all the calibrations of desire are now vast and boundless, and touching a hand or a cheek does not register on this new scale of lust for subjugation and humiliation and sex in anger, sex as insult, sex to spend yourself.

She has deposited a small bright fear in him—an awareness of a widened band of potentialities that do not lead in any one direction, that carry no intimations of destiny, but spawn variously, destructively. He has a new secret of self—a self that can be easily duped, can feel excited by violence, can dish it out. Had he thought he could simply move through screens of action with everything in tact, and only gains, only accumulations? He feels his limitations acutely, he cannot dismiss the feeling, he is penetrable—she is not. Simply within a brief hour she humbles him, slays him. He is chastened, he contracts, he steers a narrower course.

*   *   *

Now in 1999 he returns to all this as he sifts through his portfolio of buildings in his Sydney office on a clear summer day. From his window he observes that the harbour is shot with light, yachts like fine paper foldings lean into the breeze. He recalls the young Nick Barlow, the one who had thought himself capable of transforming architectural practice. He sees in this series of buildings before him, that he has failed. His limitations are evident. Now he must break through them.

He wonders why he did not just refuse Eva Wegner, why he wanted to enact revenge. Could he not have swept her arms aside and explained in a quiet but audible voice that violence was not to his taste? He believes she raised a question—what kind of man are you, here on this bed, when all your connections fall away? And he had stammered, stuttered, he had hit out, shamefully, without control, and then retreated, hung his head, and suffered.

Is Eva, the scratching, biting, hollow-haunched woman, better for the man whose passion is art? He concedes that George might truly love her. Loving her would be a hard, dry, essential emotion, scorched into reality. You would emerge toughened and fighting, feeling the invincibility of your wounds; believing that you will prevail no matter how art
assails you, since you can survive the perversions of the one you love. Is this how George feels?

Nick has collaborated with George Irvine on two more buildings following the recital hall and they have been firm friends for years. But he wonders now, would it be too dramatic to suggest that his subconscious atones to George by rendering lesser art, by allowing some veiled tribute to George that depletes the power of his own architecture? He finds the question stifling and decides it is pointless.

While he works through the schematic drawings of his past projects, he feels beleaguered and then, for no reason at all, he imagines going to Lilijana’s apartment and knocking on the door. And, if it does not open? He recalls something that Eva had asked him that night at the Sherry-Netherland: are you a sensualist or a romantic? The romantic, she had said, hesitates before his ideals.
Chapter Six

Nick

They sit near an open window at Spray, overlooking Bondi Beach. The sky is domed, sounds come late, full of air, thinned out. Way out from shore a man swims the length of the beach. The sea tilts all around him but he stays on his horizontal course, unperturbed by the deep unstable water. For a moment Nick thinks that the human can go anywhere, small and relentless, a daub of intention in the blue immensity. He listens distractedly as Roger Lawrence tells of his adventures in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

Forty foot swells in Bass Strait last year. Jamesie, our skipper, said itâ€šâ€™s the worst heâ€šâ€™s ever seen. It was his fifth, ahhé no, I tell a lie, sixth, yes definitely his sixth, Sydney to Hobarté ÔAs Lawrence talks on, Nick thinks of the breakthrough he had last week. He has resolved the geometry. He has abandoned the cube. Now the museum is comprised of two tapering elliptical buildings.

The restaurant is full of entrepreneurs in open necked shirts; women with tanned, bare shoulders; gay men in black; some wealthy retirees in shorts and polo shirts. Several anorexic girls walk past; linking arms they look like a loose macramé pattern. They thrust their hips out in heavy footed strides and glance about with sly open mouths like models. Then they laugh because they are young.

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
Nick’s oysters arrive arranged in a coronet on an elevated metal stand. He spikes one with the tip of his oyster fork and dips it in seaweed vinaigrette. The fumy taste fills his mouth. Roger Lawrence says that he prefers rock oysters; Pacific oysters do not have the same flavour. He has ordered salmon quenelles topped with fine tempura twists of onion, encircled by a sauce verge that meanders around the plate. It is such a wistful, almost angelic dish that Nick imagines it floating off, away from Lawrence’s thick and determined lips.

We would like to hold a forum to present the museum scheme to some opinion leaders and selected members of the public. What timing would suit? Lawrence asks, dipping a delicate quenelle into a slick of green sauce. Nick is unsettled by the dissonance between Lawrence’s cultured voice, now wet with wine, and the ruddy forceful hands that are reminiscent of hand transplants.

I’ll let you know by the end of the week. Nick has decided to stall Lawrence and the government; he has decided to develop the new scheme in secret, to unveil it as a fait accompli and test their resolve. What can they do? Sue him for breach of contract? Risk the delays and expense of finding another architect? Do they want to invite the furore that would ensue from a public fall out? He is prepared to take the necessary risks.

We would like to have a presentation within the next few months well before the Olympic Games. We don’t want anything to hamper the focus on the games, Lawrence says.

Perhaps. Though after the games the public will be in a very favourable frame of mind if the games go well.

The games will go well, Lawrence says brusquely. The stadium is ahead of schedule and on budget. The village will be completed within a month. All the facilities are way ahead of schedule.

But not all on budget?

What we want is the best games ever. World class. And when I say we, I mean everyone. Though of course the flow-on benefits to the economy will be substantial, there is not one person who doesn’t want this to be a stunning success, at any cost.

Nick perceives that inclusion in the Olympic spirit is a base line of decency for Lawrence.
Isn’t there? I guess you’re right—I the most important thing is to deliver the best quality event. The budget is secondary. That’s how I feel about the museum—long term it is the quality of the building that matters. Nick feigns a smile. Why does he strike out at the Olympic Games with such facetiousness? Is the ground he stands on so endangered that everything outside his art might encroach upon it? Is his time and talent so dwindling that he has lost the capacity for largesse and cannot bear ceding advantage to anything? Lawrence seems to sense Nick’s exposure and twists his signet ring with satisfaction, averts his gaze, looks over the restaurant and out to the sea as if his field of vision is greatly enlarged in the presence of Nick’s bitter ironies. Lawrence hails the waiter, relaxed in his steadfast belief in the democratic everyman who is rapt in the Olympic Games.

From the other end of the restaurant comes a loud, whooping sound; it is the young girls laughing.

Nick drives along The Esplanade beside the green glassy harbour. He winds down the steep descent of Bellevue Road, past an open-for-inspection flag at a terrace house and a sale board advertising, ‘A Grand Classic Terrace with a Latte Lifestyle’ Along the street at a small cluster of tables, people sit in shorts and hats reading magazines, drinking coffee. A square-jawed schnauzer slumps next to a stainless steel drinking bowl. This is, he notes, the latte lifestyle.

He is heading to Darlinghurst. It is presumptuous to think that Lili is waiting for him, for the man of the study and the museum. It is five days since he asked for her address and he has this sense that she is running out of patience.

He turns up the volume on Miles Davis, *Flamenco Fragments*. In the luscious tone he can believe in the beauty and purity of Davis. He can unknow the drugs, the girls, the shambling heart and just ride those notes.

He is excited to think of the progress he has made on the new scheme. Two tapering buildings intersect on a forty-five degree angle. Controversially, they have no view of the harbour. Now all natural light falls in patterns through glass apertures in the ceiling.
As he drives down Liverpool Street looking for Lili’s apartment building, the joy of his achievement mingles easily with the contrapuntal jazz from Davis’ trumpet. He turns right, past a small park where an elevated bandstand sits boldly in the middle. He imagines early settlers, nineteenth century citizens picnicking on the grass on a Sunday afternoon, taking comfort in the harrumphing screech of the amateur brass band as they mustered a sense of civilisation in this last of colonial outposts.

As he parks the car, he senses the air in Miles Davis lungs thin and the note soars but it takes his whole heart to do it.

He walks around the corner to the apartment block where Lili lives. Built in the 1940s when building materials were in short supply, it is red brick with small sash windows, the paint flaking on sills beneath shallow eaves. The building casts a sullen moderation over its surroundings, a reminder of its times, gone to seed in the jutting concrete pavement and tufts of yellow grass, in the wrappers slung in gutters, glinting in the sunshine like dying neon. He walks past an old lounge chair and an abandoned bar fridge that lean together on the pavement like collusive neighbours.

He finds the front door is not locked. It is not a security building. In the hall a skylight littered with bugs throws sallow light over eight wooden mail boxes attached to a stucco wall. There is mildew on the upper walls of the dank stairwell. He feels inexplicably precarious in the presence of this decrepitude. He can hear febrile mutterings and the hammer of old plumbing from behind closed doors with tarnished numbers. An oily jaundiced man scoots down the stairs hugging the rail, and leaves a trail of cigarette smoke.

On the second floor there are three apartments. He presses the bell of number seven and feels the heaviness of the seconds that follow. He has the sense of somehow being out of bounds in a game, but perversely capable of risk.

He hears her behind the door and knows she looks through the peep hole. There is fumbling with the deadlock and then the door opens. Lili is not surprised. None of the flurrying effort women usually make for visitors. She stands loosely at the door, her right arm concealed still holding the handle, she crosses one barefoot over the other. She seems not to matter to anyone. No one waits for her in another room. He finds it impossible to imagine her friends or family. She is unsupported, itinerate, incidental.
Hello, she says without inflection.

Can I come in?

Of course. She lets go of the door and it drifts back on its hinges. The short passage is dark; the only light comes through the doorway at the end. Dung-green carpet, threadbare down the centre, looks congealed and gritty beneath her bare feet. She wears a short loose dress, red with pink flowers and daubs of white as if the pattern has been hand painted.

Did you want a cup of coffee? This seems like a substitute for the question, what do you want?

Yes. Thank you. Just black. She steps into the kitchen and he sits on an ochre vinyl couch under the window. There is a 1960s easy chair with tan boucle cushions and wooden arms, a black beanbag, a small TV, and nothing else. He can hear the clink of a spoon against china, the rushing burble of an electric kettle, the spill of water into a cup. He does not want to go into the kitchen to speak with her as if he were her friend. He waits in silence. There is a faint smell of old apples and stored newspapers—a 1940s life smears the surfaces with its scent.

In his study he had wanted to touch her. The sublime trespass of her across his floors, looking at his drawings, massaging his wife. But he cannot touch her here. This is a place unowned, a couple of rooms adrift in a mass of humanity waiting for a momentary occupation, like a whore. What had he expected? He had expected only her; her body, her face and voice. He had not expected the meagre surrounds of her life.

She hands him a mug of coffee, sits on the chair and sips audibly from her mug, holding it with both hands as if she needs its warmth, the way you drink in winter.

How long have you lived here? I mean in Sydney? he asks.

About three years. I was a refugee from Bosnia. And you? How long have you been living in Sydney?

Why don’t you think I was born in Sydney?

I don’t know. Many people in Sydney were born in other places. She tilts her head as if she is working it out. You seem like you are from somewhere else. The way you talk about your museum, it’s like you are building it in a foreign place. A perfect place.
Not Sydney. She smiles at this little insult and takes a sip. He thinks she looks incongruously fresh in this worn room.

‘I am designing the museum for the future; it is meant to embody a vision of the future…’ He cannot explain it because he is struck by the truth of what she says — in his mind he does situate the museum in a perfect place.

The anonymity of the room strips the conversation back to an odd bluntness. In a brief silence, she places her mug on the carpet, leans over the couch and opens the window. It is like a movement in a play. There is no alteration to the air in the room. She sits back down in the chair.

He cannot pretend to her that he did not have some intention in coming here. But he feels absurd in her small faded living room. He is shocked by its austerity, its poverty, the dreadful coffee that he drinks, the sounds of voices through walls, a door slamming, the hectoring proximity of competing lives. The room itself, tinder dry, ready to snap and burn, is unspeakably lonely. Lilli’s flat — two rooms — its colours weathered, eroded by the city and ready for the wrecker’s ball.

Yet even here in this eroded room he must not delay. He is obliged to the spirit that has brought him here — the spirit that lurches inside him now — the possibility of her. He is a man seeking a sudden and immense inspiration. He is sweeping her up in this quest as if she were the final anchor to succumb to the swell.

‘I was thinking, I have a house at Palm Beach. I thought perhaps you would like to go there. Have you seen much of the coastline?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I could take you there if you like, sometime.’

‘When?’ she asks unexpectedly. This seems like a test, as if he cannot be trusted to do as he says. He is being asked to stand up, to not waste words, to make himself plain. There is a moral consequence in this austerity; the truth is pursued. He feels the rigour of her lack of affectation. Any form of lie in this small room will lay itself out on the green carpet like an outline of a dead man on a pavement. She knows it. It is her security, there are no hiding places. And he understands that she must see everything or some consolation will end up tyrannising her.
In his silence she persists, ‘When did you want to go?’ She says did instead of do, as if he has a plan for him and her. He cannot spare any time to go away for the weekend, he has an important meeting with the engineers on Monday morning.

‘Well, I would like to have gone next weekend, but I have to prepare for a meeting.’ Now under pressure he hesitates. The old fear of mistakes, the knowledge of his limitations returns.

‘Of course. But you could bring your laptop, papers, whatever it is with you, couldn’t you?’ This is an intractable mix of desperation and demand, unlike the usual negotiations with a woman. She does not pretend to be working her options. He thinks her ingenuousness comes, not from a place of innocence, but from some absence of collateral in life; artless and raw. Her face is expectant like someone listening very closely for her name to be called out. Her mouth tenses.

‘Yes. Well… we could drive down on Saturday.’

‘What time should I be ready?’ She draws all his sensitivities and trepidations into a thrilling smile.

‘I will pick you up at eleven.’ The room absolves him of further explanation.

‘Good. I would like to see Palm Beach.’

It is done. In this place where the future seems unattempted and unavailable, they have forged a plan.

He stands and she leads him down the narrow hall where he enters the relief of semi-darkness. When she opens the front door, the smell of sink water sucks into the breeze from her window.

In his mind Saturday and Sunday are a vacuum. He thinks of the arrangements. He will tell Helen he needs a break alone. He will pick Lili up. What they will talk about in the car he doesn’t know.

As he walks out into the afternoon, he contemplates slivers of her – her dress, loose and swinging gaily, her large opalescent feet, her fine long shins that she tucks beneath her on the chair. She is physically alive in a way that no one else has been for a long time. Yet from these fragments he cannot imagine the whole woman.

He had wanted to ask her questions, questions of intimacy and final consequence – where is your family? Will you ever go back to Bosnia? What does your future hold?
These would have been brutal intrusions. He had wanted to ask ġ do you love someone? With this question he could have dived straight into the heart of meaning without pretension or delay. He would have liked the heartfelt answer, distilled into truth by her limited vocabulary. He would not have asked it as a seducer, as a man wanting to slip through a door ajar and a trapezoid beam of light into a dimness where a coupling could take place. No, he would have asked it from a desire to know her possibilities. Also, he thinks, love was the dimension missing in the room, in her face, in the skimpy dress she wore. Her insufficiency is love. Even this conclusion quickly escapes him. She is both complete and incomplete in ways that he does not understand.

What does she do now up there? Does she take his mug to the kitchen and rinse it out? Does she make herself another coffee and read a magazine? She is out of range.
Chapter Seven

Lili

He drives fast, changing lanes, scanning the rear vision mirrors. Lili likes the black leather seat low to the floor, the dark moulded walnut dashboard. She likes the look of her hands when she talks, the shiny-pearl nails; she would like to pull the sun visor down and check her face. She feels the excitement of having wanted this moment and it having come.

Their occasional conversation does not disturb the cool quietness of the car, the rhythm of the buffering suspension, the low throated engine, the road threading behind them into an unseen network of other journeys. She imagines the stories she could tell him about her life. For the first time they play in her mind like stories and not just experiences. Some seal on them has lifted. They do not come to her in a voice, but in images re-sorting for the attention of another. But telling seems like a betrayal of what is lost, and she is their keeper. How to speak of them with all their meaning intact?

As they drive over Sydney Harbour Bridge, the steel girders cast a thick netted shade. Cars merge, speed up, jostle for space. Nick bears down on the car in front, making it go faster. She is not afraid of an accident. She is under some other skin in this car where her luck is transformed.
The suburbs and the road widen, the car consumes its own mirage, over and over it passes through wormholes of possibility, until it is caught in the monotony of the road. She remembers holding her breath as a child. The air unmoving in her lungs, the hardness deep in her throat, and then a dizzy feeling, her vision sparking with stars. She held her breath to get closer to death, but not believing in it. And today, again, she does not believe in it.

Along the roadside, shadows of cypress trees stain browning grass, the sun contracts overhead. It is nearly midday. They drive off the highway and park in front of a small shopping strip. She notes the dried edges of a bowling club lawn, the faded blue sweep of italic signage on a newsagent’s window, the tatty roses against a milk-brick fence. All these things are a sign of an ebbing pride, of a recent and insignificant era falling gently into dilapidation. Even in the three youths walking, caps wedged down over eyes, talking loudly to each other in strained predatory boy-voices, there is no wariness, no violence. Their surroundings are automatic in their minds.

Lili stays in the car while Nick goes into the newsagents to buy a paper. She pulls the sun visor down to check her face, to see what he might see. She smiles and her face sparkles. She narrows her eyes and looks shrewd and clever. He would be more impressed with people who are interested in ideas. He walks out of the shop. She flips the mirror back up as if she has been consorting with a person of uncertain quality.

She examines him as he backs out of the parking space; he has fine skin that grows coarser where the whiskers are; there are squinting lines at the corners of the eyes. She likes his maleness. He is quietly intolerant on the road, he is in a hurry. Her time slips into the speed of his time and becomes important. Other people will see them in the car and think this is her life, the life in the car with this man.

In the background a cello concerto plays on the CD player. She knows it, because before the war she studied and played the cello at school.

"I think this is Schumann. Who is playing?" she asks. She can see from his face that he is surprised. "I used to play the cello," she explains and feels a shadowy world move beneath her words – a world of broad, seductive impressions.

"Steven Issertis. He is wonderful, don't you think?" He glances at her.
‘Yes, I think,’ she says, precocious, casual. He laughs. Her wit is small, brief, surprising. And bolder than she is. Her mother used to tell her not to be rude and her father used to laugh and touch her head, lightly, just his big palm hovering on her hair, as if she could not be more intriguing. When Nick laughs, she feels fake in pretending to have the wit and life she once had. It doesn’t matter. She is riding in some slipstream of opportunity, and it doesn’t matter if she masquerades. There is nothing, now, at stake.

Against the backdrop of the plaintive cello she thinks of writing a letter home that would obliterate the grief of the unopened letters from her mother. She imagines her family, unchanged, waiting for her letters in some vacated chamber of her childhood.

Dear Mother and Father,

I am having a wonderful time in Australia. I went away for the weekend with a very interesting man. He is an important architect and quite wealthy. We drove down to the beach in his large black BMW. We have much in common; we both like the cello. He is very romantic…

It amuses her to compose the fictional letter with the airy significance of a new life. She could make it seem that he was somehow in her thrall. But they would have always thought of her as a good girl, not a seductive woman. She is forcing something new here. The man of fine and cool sensibilities is helping her to lose the taste for a sweet and wholesome life.

Sunlight falls through the windscreen across her knees. In the side mirror she checks her face; sunglasses on, glossy mouth. She can smell the leathery newness of luxury. The world has changed—I that she would end the letter: it is a different world over here.

As the road winds up through the hills, the sea is a widening blue band to her right. ‘Whale Beach,’ he says before she asks.

‘Oh. It’s lovely.’ She leans forward and looks across him to see it. When she rests back against the seat she feels the firm roundness of her bottom. Her arms look slim, she stretches her legs and points her toes down, and her ankles are fine, the tendons in her feet are taut, her sandal straps flatter her instep. She thinks she can be pleasing. Though
he is at the centre of some impenetrable zone where intimacy cannot be imagined. It will
be strange lying in bed naked beside him. And thrilling.

*Palm Beach is just the other side of these hills. You haven’t been there before have
you? He only half-hears the things she tells him.

She visualises the house, small, remote, overgrown by tropical gardens, a secret
haven. But a few minutes later when they pull up the drive she sees it is not a secret but a
declaration. A white box on stilts, with a wall of glass at one end like a huge slot.

Inside she walks through the living space to the edge of a vast deck bleached grey in
the sun, and looks over the top of eucalypts to the sea. Below her, down a steep hill, is the
monotony of dense bushland – tangled trunks, slivered shadows, tree ferns. She would
like to run through the slicing verticals of the trees that are like an inexplicable alphabet
and lose herself. All ways back and forward would be the same, each step the same as the
last. She peers into the grey-green landscape, mesmerised by its anonymity. It is
unidealised, symbolic of nothing. She wonders if this freedom will ever be enough. She
is an interloper. She tears up the letter in her mind, turns back to the room, stands in front
of the grey stone fire place and tells him it is a beautiful house. Her voice is too soft, he
doesn’t hear because he is on his way up the passage with their bags. In this larger space
things move away from her and dissolve and she wants to cry.

*I’ll work for a couple hours, then we might go for a walk,* Nick says eking out the
afternoon’s emptiness. *There are some magazines and books in the bookshelves. I think
there is coffee and tea, even food, in the pantry. Help yourself.* He would not be sure,
because his wife would have arranged the kitchen. His mobile phone rings as he walks
back to his room. Lili hears him answer, slightly guarded. *Just down at Palm Beach for a
short break* yes I’m working on it down here* His voice expands, flattens out,
chooses the plainest words he is talking to a man, not a woman.

The magazines on the bookshelves are stacked by title, then year and month. They are
mostly architectural publications. The books are all hardback and packed tightly in
alphabetical order. She takes, instead, a couple of loose magazines from the coffee table
and walks to the deck. She lies on a white mesh sun lounge, stretches her legs out and

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
closes her eyes. The sun is furry and hot-red behind her lids. She would like to sleep, but the possibility of him calling her or coming back into the living space for something prevents her. When she opens her eyes the scene is drained of colour, putty-grey, she puts her sunglasses on and everything glitters in the bronze tint of the lens. She smiles to herself, the cat-smile of sitting in the sun, unseen, watching the drowsy world with its rustling leaves. Old Anne O'Leary's cat, Moses, sits on Lili's window sill like this, looking out with an afternoon ennui, ready to flair and quicken with sudden movement.

The first magazine she opens features a profile of Nick Barlow, internationally renowned architect. There is a photograph of Nick in his office leaning across a boardroom table examining a model of the museum, followed by four pages of images of his projects—a recital hall in Brooklyn, a library in Dresden, an office tower in Detroit—a building is an icon, yet when Lili looks from one to the other, they seem as if they could be the one building evolving. Some central idea links them all. She is elated by this small revelation, this discovery of a path within his mind. In an obscure way, she wonders if she is part of this determination. Has he also selected her with his overwhelming presence of mind? On the last page is a photograph of his beach house, taken from inside looking out over the deck where she now lies. When she superimposes herself onto the image of the deck the picture takes on an illusory cartoon quality.

She flips through the magazines, then sits staring into the trees and the blank blue sky. She takes a notepad and pen from her handbag. The pages are filled with jottings of client details, doodles of geometric patterns down borders and faces drawn hastily. She turns to a new page and draws a doorway with a modest architrave. On the left side of the doorway she sketches a buffet cabinet with three doors, and a series of photo frames on a lace runner. The other side of the door, she draws a wing back chair and a footstool, both upholstered in striped fabric. This is her grandmother's chair. When the table beside the chair is finished she adds a pair of reading glasses, a book and a cup and saucer. She tries to draw their dining room table, but it looms from the picture and alters the proportion. No, it was not like that. She turns the page and starts again, this time with the table, making slow light marks to achieve a foreshortened perspective. Then she scales everything accordingly, closing her eyes to evoke the true image of the room. She places
the ornaments on the bookcase, sets the table, adds the prints on the wall each side of the
door. It looks like a doll’s house. It is not right. She drops the notepad on the deck.

She closes her eyes and thinks of the day her cousin, Murat, brought the wood stove
to their apartment. He said he had found it in a burnt-out house. *It will keep you warm,
and you can also cook on it, it’s nothing special*, he had said, *but I have some spare wood
I can give you, and if you think you can use it I’ll bring it over.*

It was January, sometimes snowing, often there was fog and sleet through the night
and in the morning the bleak street seemed hardly to have shed its gauzy darkness. The
gas and electricity supply had been cut. Most of the time there was no running water.
When the sun went down at four in the afternoon, they wrapped themselves in duvets and
sat playing cards by candle light or talking in low voices. It was difficult to read in the
flickering light, but Lilijana tried to study her text books, wondering whether preparation
for the future was a waste of time. School had already ceased and she did not believe she
would ever return to class.

They all – her mother and father, grandmother and brother and she – lived now in the
lounge room and the kitchen. When the mortar fire was intense, they went to the
basement where they sat huddled with neighbours. Sometimes for days they stayed in the
damp putrid air of unwashed people and the smell of the toilet bucket. They shared scraps
of food and survived on small mouthfuls of water.

She will never forget the freezing air of the lounge room. How her young bones
ached. During the day they wore jumpers and coats indoors. She felt as if they had
moved to another apartment, not their home, because without the warm air of heated
rooms, and her light indoor clothing and moving freely up the hall, she felt an enormous
alienation in the cold stillness. All their acts, except the most basic attempts at survival —
to feed themselves, keep warm, not get sick — were rendered pointless.

The gold damask cloth on the table was stained. Her mother would not change it
because they could not waste water on washing. About once a month they filled the sink
with cold water and bathed with a washcloth. Jars and packets of food were lined up on
the bench because the fridge didn’t work.

Her father went out for supplies when he could, but aid was not always available;
sometimes it was too dangerous to run in the street. The day the wood stove was

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
delivered he was late home and her mother was anxious because the mortar fire had started up as soon as he had left.

Even before the war, when her father went away hunting deer with his friends, tears glistened in her mother’s eyes. Lilijana dismissed it as melodramatic, a feature of a romance that she, as a child, was unable to feel. All this love. And what did her mother do with it? She foreshadowed its loss. It made her weak.

She begged him not to go. He should have been back by now, her mother said to Murat, nearly crying. Only Lilijana’s father could comfort her. He would place his hand on her cheek and reason with her in a quiet voice. He touched her tenderly, but she clung to his hand, embraced him for too long. He was her miracle. Her desperation made them all afraid.

Her father arrived home in time to help the others haul the stove up the stairs. Murat had brought a small trolley. She heard the sound of rasping exhalations drift up the stairwell and saw them clench their eyes shut and heave together. Every few minutes, they had to rest. When they reached the top floor they were sweating, even in the cold.

“How will you use it? You don’t have a chimney,” Murat said, holding onto the banister to recover his breath.

“Well I have thought of that. I am going to make a hole in the roof for the flue ū because we are on the top floor, it should be easy. I will go into the roof and find the best place for it. You will see! I will surprise you!” Her father slung his arm around Murat’s shoulders while the other men readied themselves to move the stove into the apartment. Her mother and grandmother stood back in the lounge room watching.

The rusted iron stove, blackened with charcoal, looked like a relic from a foundry. Her father climbed up a ladder, through the manhole in the ceiling. They could hear him in the roof, moving across the rafters. She expected to see his leg fall through the plaster and dangle beside the light fitting, the way people fall through ceilings in movies. Her mother watched the sound as it moved above them as if she were ready to catch him. Then he came down through the manhole and said that the best place would be where the rake of the roof was low ū in the kitchen to the side of the window.
He was panting and wiping his hands on a cloth when he came back into the room. Her mother wiped the cobwebs out of his hair, he bent his head forward and shook it, and she smoothed his hair with her hands.

“What are you sure that you will be alright up there?” her mother asked.

“Well I am better than you— who are scared of rats!” She gasped and he laughed.

He opened the tool kit, which he rarely used. He measured the circumference of the stove flue and from a step ladder he drilled a hole in the ceiling. Then he and Murat dragged the stove and positioned it under the hole. Her father went up into the ceiling to steady the flue as Murat passed it through.

“Do you want me to do it?” Murat asked.

Her father might have known he had cancer, even then, but he was determined.

“Yes, Lilijana’s mother said. “Let Murat do it.”

“No, no no. I am having an adventure in our ceiling.”

“Oh God…” her mother said and sat down full of wonder at the ingenuity and calm, the strength of her husband.

Lilijana heard her father lift a roof tile and feed the flue through. He told them everything he was doing, his voice accompanying the sounds in the roof to render the images in their minds. It was typical of him to cast them all together, in the one frame, in the one predicament, indivisible in those days. Later, when he was taken by the soldiers, Lilijana was haunted by his voice, a small distant voice speaking through thick walls or dense woods, telling from afar, what was happening to him. *I am being beaten in a cell, where men around me are starving, I am being taken in an open truck to the edge of a forest, and pushed from the truck, I line up with the others and the soldiers shoot, all round me are clods of freshly dug earth…* Sometimes in dreams she has believed he is speaking from the roof and will soon come down. Where has he gone? What has happened to him? She is desperate for his face, his presence.

He patched the surrounding hole with the timber and tin Murat had brought. The sound of banging and sawing echoed in the roof. A freezing draft came in through the hole.

“Now all we have to do is clean it,” her father said when he came back into the kitchen. Lilijana’s grandmother went to the cupboard and took out a wire brush and
cleaning powder and poured a small amount of cold water into the sink from a plastic container. Silently she scrubbed the stove in small frothy circles that turned from white to grey to black. Lilijana and her mother wiped it dry with cleaning rags. It is strange to think how they tended that rusty stove, the momentary return of hope salvaged from a house where people had died in a mortar attack.

Then they lit a fire and slowly it warmed the room. They stood around it, took their gloves off and held their palms out to the heat. The next day the wind was blowing in the wrong direction and the room flooded with smoke. Her mother was frightened of starting a fire in the roof. Rain leaked through the hole made for the flue. It was a foolish project, the rusted wood stove sitting in a suburban kitchen like the remains of a funeral pyre. They grew quieter towards each other and felt less equipped to survive. After a few weeks they did not light the stove and did not speak of it again.

She shivers now in the sun to think of the cold dead air of their rooms, the lumpy shadows that lifted off their faces in the light of candles. Small parcels of cold food slumped on plates, the watery brine from cans seeping around the edges. Never enough food. They knew people were starving to death. The sunlight through a leaden sky. The grit of sleep in the dried-out cold, caked at the corners of their eyes, clumped in lashes.

Her mother’s face, changed, papery pale, her mouth and voice pinched. Her brother’s cheeks reddened and flaky in the freezing air. Lilijana’s clothes smelt, her hair was never clean, her scalp itched. The crack of snipers shooting, mortars pounding down from the hills, the whirring randomness of grenades. Her grandmother and father watching over them. Her future sucked out that hole in the ceiling into the endless war.

The baleful bark of a dog locked in a yard jolts her into the present. She sits up, rubs her face and is astounded to think that two such different places can exist within her experience — one full of love and sorrow, and one, loveless, where she will not starve and will not be killed for what she thinks.

Mid-afternoon she goes for a short walk down a sandy track to the beach. She does not find any beauty in the durable grey gums or the withered tea tree. They are not like the coconut-laden palm trees that sway in the tropics of travel brochures. As she walks through the thin shade of straggly branches where the air is hot and cloistered, a goanna
runs across her path, a thunderous flash of scales in the crackling undergrowth. She is shocked by the size and speed of the giant lizard and stands breathless for a few minutes.

When she reaches the small cove, she looks out over the bright airy beach and yearns for the shadows of the path. She turns, anxious, and heads back, plunging the balls of her feet into dirt-darkened sand, careful to avoid the scraps of wood sharpened by erosion and shallow buried, like bones. In the heat that rises, crimped and hovering at tree tops, the cicadas load the air with their shrill siren – an even, total, unattended emergency. At the top, panting, she pauses and looks back down the path where a tanned man carrying a boogie board walks casually with a girl in a bikini, as if the path to the beach is a languid pleasure.

Back in the house, she makes a cup of coffee and moves the sun lounge into a slab of shade cast by the roofline. In the distance she can hear laughter, people playing in a pool, their voices fading in and out as the breeze gusts. She is on some permanent outer rim, beyond the corner of the eye, a shimmering simulacrum.

Nick comes out onto the deck in the early evening and leans over the railing. In the varnished light refracted off the sea, gulls drift like kites. All through the afternoon she could hear the subdued voice of his phone calls, and once he came out, opened the fridge and went back down the passage. She did not turn around or speak; she did not want to break his concentration.

Oh lost track of time. It’s too late now for a walk. Let’s just go to dinner, he says. She imagines what he sees when he looks down at her reclining; her coffee cup beside her with the brown swill of milk, the slick of gloss on the rim of the cup, her legs pink from the sun. He is standing with the sun behind him, a dark shape. She puts her hand to her brow to shield her eyes. He is frowning at her.

OK, he says, thinking she has waited too long for him. In the intervening hours she has realised it was a mistake to come here. She will be reserved and do what he wants. It is foolish to want anything else, foolish to be here in this strange important house with a man whose time is too valuable for her.

Did you want to change or shower? he asks as if she is a guest to whom he is offering the standard courtesy.
Yes. Thank you, she says, standing.

There is a bathroom you can use, just down the hall, the last door on the left.

Thanks, she says and walks into the cool house, stepping tentatively across the polished concrete floor, feeling pointless and unforgiven.

At dinner he is distracted. They read the menus without discussion, he orders Moreton Bay bugs and she says she will have the same. He rubs his hands behind his neck, sighs and opens the wine list. She looks out the window over the beach where people still surf and swim in dusk light.

The seafood is always good here. What would you like to drink? White wine?

He asks her, looking through the wine list.

I don’t mind. When the waiter comes he orders a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

Did you get much work done this afternoon? She wants him to talk about the museum, to take her back to the conversations of his study.

Not enough. Anyway it was always going to be a difficult week.

After an hour they have eaten their main courses and Nick has said that he doesn’t want dessert. Lili, also, doesn’t want dessert. The sun has gone down, he looks out the window to the black expanse of sea and, still pre-occupied, asks her, Have you been back to Bosnia?

No.

Do you have any family in Australia or are they all in Bosnia?

My family were killed in the war. She looks directly at him, wanting her words to register on his face, to elicit a softening voice, for him to feel chastened.

Oh, Nick says, tonelessly.

When the waiter comes Nick asks for the bill. As they leave the restaurant, he stands back to let her go first. Outside they walk side by side to the car and he places his arm in the small of her back as if she might fall backwards at any moment. She walks ahead, away from his innocuous arm; she strides out in the blazing moonlight strong and glittery, hips swaying and mouth full of unspoken insults.
When he closes the door of the house he steps forward and kisses her. He runs his hands down her bare arms, pulls her against him. She is overwhelmed by his urgent and intense attention, feels his mouth and body in amazement. Time is simplified, solidified around her body; stretched and slackened by the afternoon hours of waiting it springs back into the tensed certainty of sex.

In the night she half-wakes and hears him go to the bathroom; the low creak of the mattress as he lifts off the bed, the crack of the bones of his feet as he walks across the floor, the brittle tapping noise of an insect darting at the window. The tiny clicking sounds of the world adjusting.

Just before sunrise, the temperature drops and she has an intense dream. It is her father telling her again what has happened to him, only this time she can see it all.

_Bullets weave, dozens of men are running away into the forest, and the bullets weave around us and for a moment we think that they are wasps and we swat them with our hands, they hurt our palms, they pull back and hover and we feel a brief victory. But then we see they are not wasps, but steel and brass bullets, small shining torpedoes that were once ideas in a mind, designed with a hand. Now we are evading the idea of bullets, the drawings of bullets, and each one has a mind and an intention, and the intention is to kill. We mutter each to the other, kill or die, kill or die, the world is kill or die. And then a shard of light is thrown down from some great hand as if someone pointed and from their index finger a ray of light shot out and spread over the forest floor and we can see everything. Everything that is large and small, green and brown, is illuminated in the light from someone’s hand – the grass, the pine trees, the smell of snow in the air, even the feelings in our hearts, all our memories, the people we love, and ourselves – our faces, our dirty shoes, our lost happiness, all illuminated in the light and again the bullets are suspended in the air. We think that the bullets are shamed in the light, we think the light is cast to save us. Then one bullet flies forward and I hear a thud, a crumpling sound and a body falls. A man, standing in a blue sweater, a brown corduroy jacket, woollen trousers, and big brown shoes with thick leather soles, tough shoes that look like they could keep him walking forever, except his face is thin and beneath his jacket is the angularity of bone, this man falls. He folds down slowly, falling first to his knees,
shivering in the cold and then falls sideways and dies. It is me, Lilijana, who dies all curled up, your father, on the forest floor. And then all the bullets fly at the standing men and they fall, one by one, softly. From behind a tree a deer comes out and just stares at the bodies of the men in the light from the hand. And the deer smiles. The deer, the one used to bullets, the one with the ears and eyes ready to outsmart bullets, with the legs ready to outrun bullets, is pleased, because today ordinary men stepped in the path of bullets and took the meaning of their blunt heads blasting though the red softness of bodies. And the deer thinks that she will have a faun now, now that men are killing men instead of deer.

Lili wakes as the sun pierces through the edges of the blind. She lies completely still, heart pounding while the world of the dream pulls back. Nick is still asleep, facing away from her. Gathering thoughts of him tighten in her mind; his words, his hands on her, the sensation of his face close to hers, his body, the night-sound of him. It is more than half an hour before he turns and reaches for her. She loves the visual scramble of his face as he kisses her with his slow mouth. He is in her, the slipping rhythm like breathing, like even days and nights. She feels the sensuality of this rhythm, the spin of all connections. She thinks that life is not a line, but this, this watery diving circle.

Then he conceals his face in her hair and neck. She can feel the hot suction of his lips, can sense his features blur against her skin. She is suddenly anxious for him, for his body losing it solidity and calmness as it passes through intense undulations to an unseen confusion. Then he slumps against her and lies still for such a long time, his face still concealed in her neck, that she comes to think of him as blind.

Lying there beneath him, while his flesh resumes its weight and shape, she is filled with a quivering weakness that also feels like power. It seems that he has briefly surrendered his senses to her, that she is his sensual agent capable of feeling their coupled experience in a way that he cannot. She closes her eyes, the new elemental woman, in brief possession of a man transformed in her realm. Finally he kisses her on the temple and in one movement rolls off the bed and goes to the bathroom. When he returns from a short rushing shower, his face is clear, the air smells of soap-vapour and he smiles, too lightly she thinks.
Chapter Eight

Nick

As Nick leaves the house for his morning run, he contemplates the weekend he spent with Lili at Palm Beach. All the time he had been aware of her in the house, a shape along the hall, languid on the deck, disrupting and exciting him from a distance. Her body tinged with anxiety, with sweat not just sexual but ever-present, laid on by life. He had reached into her, grasping for her history, for a denser, sharper life. Over the last couple of days his desire for her has intensified, a desire knotted around sensory recollections of her indefinable presence.

He changes his usual route and runs towards New South Head Road. He will not run along the cliff today. He thinks as he jogs that he might brush by her apartment. Though he is reluctant to ever visit her apartment again. There is shame in his image of the two of them sitting, standing in her living room. The room demands something that he feels but cannot give. He envisions himself running past, her waiting at the window like a woman in a tower, condemned.

He veers off the main road into Paddington where the sound of his cushioned thudding amplifies on narrow empty roads. He jogs past rows of terrace houses, packed together, iron lace verandas scrolling up and down undulating streets. He likes the meander of the pavements, the slanted yellow light that illuminates verandas and doorways. He likes the sense of lives freshly sprung, rising into the bright morning as he sweeps past.
Magpies warble above telegraph poles and tree tops. The sound is elderly, mellow. In their moist and warm tones a white sun, grey gums, the still, steady heat that wavers over a hills hoist clothes line, a patch of balding lawn, a concrete driveway are all evoked. From the pulsating throat of a magpie rises the Australian arcadia of small spaced lives that haunts all the crisp and new realities he runs past ï white boxy art galleries and breakfast cafes, million dollar terrace houses with topiary trees and black doors and glass extensions that take in harbour views.

He crosses the road to avoid the street sweeping vehicle with its whirring brushes like outsize paws. The city shudders and stirs on washed pavements. By noon, city workers will be everywhere, turning at right angles, banking at corners, waiting for lights to change. Like opposing armies, they will advance and drift by dreamlike without touching, without recognition of any kind.

A moon lingers in the white-blue sky, a shimmering membrane, somehow cold and weak, like something dying. We are losing our planet, he thinks, it is now a fact that it will end and we are hastening its destruction. The climate is changing dramatically and it is barely newsworthy. He is quietly panic stricken by the inexorable move forward into oblivion ï his own oblivion, accompanied by what he thinks will be the end of the era he believes in: twentieth century culture, art and architecture.

When he arrives at the Quay, the early ferries are departing like bustling midwives; their ample bows crest choppy water as they head to the North Shore. Through the Bridge, he sees the carnival maw of Luna Park. He turns away, he does not stop. He resists the sentiment of the site, of his own yearnings now densely dwelling on that plot of soil. He is afraid of becoming emotional as he grows older, of not being able to speak of anything that matters without a fluid throat and prickling eyes.

He knows that out beyond all this, miles and miles to the west and south is a sprawling morass of suburbs, of curved streets and backyard pools and shrub gardens and mock architecture of every type ï Georgian, Tuscan, Federation, Victorian ï all on the foreshortened scale of re-creation, mimicry, of decorations not understood, but applied in the simple spontaneity of taste.

He cannot hold the city in his mind all at once. It has no stable essence. He perceives the meanness, the narrowing vision in all the new buildings from the vernacular house
and land package, to the new towers that rise, passionless, dollars lifting from every reinforced concrete floor.

Back along Williams Street he observes a homeless man who walks slowly, eyes clapped on the heavens, rubbing his hands together in a kind of torment, as if he is winding back a prayer, grinding it to dust. Nick has seen him before. He automatically attaches the smell of the city to the man—the wet-salt and exhaust fume air mixed with bitumen made spongy from heat, as if the man is a residue of old tar rising from the road. As the man nears he throws back his head and looks down his nose at Nick and his grey eyes carry their own light; they do not beseech him, they have given up on men. There is no way to reach into the man’s despair; it is complete, it is an endless incantation of ritualised hands gone mad in their implorations to the divine. The man’s torment momentarily enters Nick and creates its own black and seething space.

Nick’s throat is dry. He stops at a Subway store to buy some water. He stands in the street with one hand on his hip and pours the water down his throat. He glances back up Williams Street to a Coca-Cola billboard glittering emphatically in the sun. It is, he thinks, the century’s exclamation, profane yet religious, ephemeral yet monumental. Its molasses fizz lasts seconds in your mouth, burns your throat, roils in your gut. Yet it is an icon of freedom.

He is awash with sweat. He pulls his t-shirt up and pats his face; he pours the remaining water over his hands and shakes them dry.

Now at night he hardly sleeps. He wakes every day asking himself, *what am I not seeing in the museum scheme?* Even though he has resolved the new concept, he must refine the details. He attempts to crystallise his precise intent. But his intent is not precise, it is wild and fragmented. It is embedded in an ambient malaise, an atmospheric fakery that militates against art and architecture. Yes, he thinks, running towards the Coca-Cola billboard, it is epitomised by the Coke bottle. A beverage that is bigger than a human.

He senses a collective, gathering dread about the future that is not yet coherent. A dread that is potentially so paralysing as to require daily simplification, the elevation of the artificial and superficial in order to salve the craterous wound that widens just ahead of the present. This is such a powerful sensation that he cannot deny the truth of it, yet he cannot approach the truth of it.
The future, he believes lately, will trivialise him. He will not be celebrated. In the future he will be at most a quiz show question: Who designed the Luna Museum? Will someone know the answer?

He nurtures the unwieldy century in his head, full of love for its grand waves of thought, for the modernist philosophy of a new and cleansed human at the centre of progress. What such wave will come now? What philosophical wave could find traction in this fragmented world? In the instantly proliferating world, where ideas only matter if they make money and careers? In a world without parenthesis, without pause, a world of a trillion trashed images, what can take hold of the imagination?

He throws the plastic water bottle in a bin. Now he knows he runs towards her. After only three days apart, he runs to cleave to her in the apathetic air of her apartment.

Minutes later he walks through the front door of her building. Even in the early morning, the foyer smells of charred meat. Today he notices a piece of strapping loosened from the ceiling, a section of carpet lifted and not re-laid. It is as if he has entered an earlier era of marginal poverty, that he thought had passed, but now knows will never go away. Does she do some sort of penance in this place? She drifts around in a flood of light and takes her punishment. When he enters her space, does he disturb what he does not understand? A couple of flights of stairs away he will stand in the midst of all her reasons for being here and living like this but he will not be privy to any of them.

Now he waits at the bottom of the stairwell while an old woman with black hair walks slowly down. She grasps the rail and studies the stairs as if they are constantly moving. Her shapeless legs dangle from beneath a navy blue skirt, a string-puppet weakness at the knee. She purses her lips and raises her brows in acknowledgement of him as she passes. In the background he thinks he hears her call out, ‘Moses,’ but decides, without curiosity, that he is mistaken.

He checks his watch at the top of the stairs. It is nearly seven and he has a meeting in the city at eight forty-five. He knocks on Lili’s door impatiently and within a few seconds she stands in the doorway in a short floral robe, wet hair, shiny face, smelling of fragrant water, pulling the robe closed. In the background wash of sunlight from her living room the scene resembles an old master painting, perhaps a Vermeer; a classic domestic
woman set against the light of the exterior world, but unravelled, undone, hair loosened. Fresh, close to her nature, unadorned.

Hello, she says, without accusation.

The meeting is much simpler than he had imagined. In her apartment, he presses her against the wall of the passage and feels unexpectedly desperate for her. Her body seems entire, can be held in his hands, can be fitted within his embrace. Her noises are small and dense as she pulls him to her.

When he leaves, though she does not ask, he promises he will call. But he knows he cannot promise anything. He can think she is beautiful, soft and lean when pressed against the wall, but he cannot promise anything.

As he runs home, the streets change from Darlinghurst to Woollahra. From beyond high fences, plane trees and fig trees grow over the road. Stainless steel and brass escutcheons gleam on gates in the bright sun, mondo grass borders grow along the base of fences. There is a restful interiority, a reason, in these quiet cool homes, not to move, to resist what is happening outside in some other populated place where the tidal flow of people and the intensity of incident are barely resistible. These are streets to stroll along, to glimpse from windows, to glide through in a car. They are streets full of a diffuse and indispensable solace.

It is nearly eight when he arrives home. Helen is in the kitchen, which at this time of morning is like a transept, lit by a skylight and a window at the end. She wears her silk dressing gown and stands at the bench scoring a mango, turning it inside out like a hedgehog. She works with a ceremonial concentration, methodical and slow.

Without looking at him she says, That was a long run. A very long run. She rounds out the Rs so they hang like musical notes beneath the high ceiling. Sometimes she speaks to him like this, as if her voice carries a familial intimacy; cadences that could be cautionary and knowing, the way he has heard her speak to the children when they were small. Then she turns and asks, Mango?

Don running late. I haven't got time. Sorry, he says, like a young man apologising to his mother for not confiding his night time activities.

* * *

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
He takes a room at the Wentworth Hotel every Wednesday night so as he can see Lili. He goes there after work and they have a late dinner, sometimes in the hotel restaurant, sometimes in the room.

Tonight they dine in the restaurant. Behind the Carrara marble bar, two waiters work bottles of spirits and liqueurs in swift practised arcs, pouring fine streams of liquid, stirring, shaking, garnishing an array of cocktails. Along a mirrored wall rows of Campari bottles smoulder like exquisite coals.

He does not like the restaurant, its derivative designer format, the bland international luxury of the nugget-brown banquettas and the white Jacobsen chairs, the lurid drinks funded by expense accounts.

\( \mathfrak{d}\) like this restaurant,\( \mathfrak{L}\)Lili says leaning forward on the table and looking around, her bare shoulders glazed by candlelight.

\( \mathfrak{d}\)Why?\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)

\( \mathfrak{d}\) just like it.\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)She rarely explains her reasons for anything. She just likes or does not like. He thinks her opinions are intuitive, unmediated by analysis.

\( \mathfrak{d}\)tell me about the new museum,\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)she says conspiratorially.

\( \mathfrak{d}\)he new museum is reluctant.\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)He knows she wants details. Her interest in the museum strikes him as child-like \( \tilde{\mathfrak{r}} \) over past weeks she has asked him about the galleries, which she calls rooms, and how they relate one to the other. She wants him to walk her through the spaces and describe how they look.

\( \mathfrak{d}s\) it the museum or you who are reluctant?\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)She raises her eyebrows.

\( \mathfrak{d}\)You are right. It is both of us.\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)He would like to tell her that she gleams and is beautiful. He studies her secretly while she reads the menu and contemplates the day when her youth will be lost to him.

\( \mathfrak{d}\) want to know. Tell me.\( \mathfrak{\hat{d}}\)She sits up imperiously, staging a new authority. She seems ready for everything \( \tilde{\mathfrak{r}} \) for the restaurant, for his conversation. She has been seduced and it has made her capable of all this and more. She is touched by the recent sophistications and splendours that surround her. What will happen, he wonders, when the affair is finished and these extravagances are no longer available to her? Will she find another man to provide them to her or let them go?
I’m working on the concept of two buildings with a void between. It’s the void that seems to define the new scheme. He is diffident, not wanting this conversation.

What a void? she asks.
He wants to laugh with affection for her candour.
A void is an empty space.
Why do you need to design an empty space? Isn’t it just empty? She smiles, knowing she provokes him.

Now he laughs. It would seem so. A void is an emptiness, but it is not nothing. A void is defined by its perimeter. It possesses a quality due to the surrounding horizontals and verticals. It is a trapped emptiness, it is not a free and open space, but contained.

So a room could be a void?
No.

She throws her hands out in feigned exasperation, but she concentrates on his face. He is inclined to change the subject, now she believes so entirely that this answer, perhaps all answers, reside in him. I know it doesn’t seem to make sense. It’s complex, he says.

I want to know why a room is not a void, she presses him.
A void is a space that cannot be occupied. It exists between other spaces or planes.

Why don’t we change the subject?
She closes the menu and does not respond.
Let’s talk about you. Do you miss Bosnia?
I miss the ice-skating, she says flatly, reflecting the superficiality of his question.

She reverts to the menu, avoiding his gaze. He has a sudden, disturbing image of her plump childhood face swathed in a scarf; a lone, twirling figure in a glacial landscape, putting one foot in front of the other amidst exploding mortars. Her presence here takes on a new, miraculous vitality.

After a short silence, she looks up and asks, So a void separates?
Yes, it separates. He capitulates. It defines the surrounding planes and makes them relational. It is not an interstitial or transitional space that you walk through, but a space that cannot be occupied, that is elemental to the experience of the architecture.

I think I understand, she says, frowning.
Later when they return to the hotel room, he walks ahead of her, through the sitting area to the bedroom.

©Can we talk first?©she asks

©Yes. What about?©He walks past the bed that is turned down with a chocolate on each white linen flap and opens the wardrobe door. He takes his jacket off and hangs it up. He does not want to talk further tonight.

She removes her shoes and sits on the couch with her legs to the side. ©am still trying to understand how you have changed the scheme. How will it feel inside the museum looking out? What will I see from the main rooms?©

©You will look across an empty space into the façade of the other building. That is all.©He holds back, the remote public life, the future of the building guarded in his mind.

©think it feels dark, that space between the buildings, doesn't it?©Her face is turned up, questioning, asking him to know every nuance of feeling that his building might evoke. He is irritated by her repeated use of the word feel; it is inaccurate and suggests the architecture is only sensory. He wishes she would ask a question that related to the intellect of the building’s conceptual or aesthetic elements. She picks up a beige silk cushion and hugs it while she waits for his answer.

©Perhaps,©he says, sensing she is insisting on something complicated and wary of where it may lead. He brushes his hand against her cheek. ©Let's go to bed,©he says.

She asks him as he rises to his feet, ©Do you think I could be an architect? I mean after a long time of studying? Is it possible isn’t it?©

It is the first time she has proposed anything about the future. He is not prepared for this sudden insight into her thinking. The question implicates him in her life. He realises how much she must have thought about becoming an architect to ask it. Even though she is twisting her loose hair in her hands and smiling, the question is not a casual inquiry, but something of distilled and vulnerable significance. In his surprise he hesitates.

She laughs and says, ©Of course not. I was just joking. I am a professional masseuse, and I believe a good one!©©She gives him a sly, sharp sexual look that
is loaded with accusation. He thinks it is the kind of exchange that requires mutual forgiveness to move past, but this is not a marriage. He kisses her on the cheek.

She grips him, full of disenchantment, and kisses him forcefully. He pulls away gently, uncertain how to reconcile his immensely superior knowledge with the fluctuating and tender perceptions of her unstable world. How can he reconcile these things without loving her?

In bed she is at first elusive, teasing, then she submits distractedly and falls asleep. He also sleeps, but after half an hour is woken by her scream, a bolt of sound, then a short silence followed by a spattering of Slavic words all with equal tone like running footsteps. He strokes her arm, puts his cheek against her ear. She opens her eyes. Her body heaves with each breath. She does not move and seems not to be fully conscious.

"Lili?" he says.

After a few minutes, she replies, "I am okay. It must be time for you to leave."

"Yes," he says and moves away, but she turns and clings to him. Pulling him on top of her she is fossilised beneath him. In the slim space of her breathing, she whimpers, as if this is neither joy nor sorrow, but something essential, rightful. Her outline within the confines of his outline, their planes touching, a primal certainty of existence held to tightly. He thinks she lies beneath him to be known, to be touched back into life. It is too much to expect of him. He eases out of the bed and dresses in the dark.

As he bends to kiss her goodbye, she switches the lamp on. Her face surprises him, it is alert, vigilant. She raises herself on her elbow to watch him leave.

At the door he turns and says, "I'll see you next Wednesday."

"Yes," she says.

He believes in her capacity to sustain this ardour, for it to come from some Slavic soul that is belligerent and enduring. He reassures himself as he leaves her that he can depend on her fidelity.

In the mirrored elevator, immersed in the weight of the departure, he imagines her lying there alone. He thinks he should stop seeing her. The farewells that are now cool will become bitter. Is the affair descending into a confusing series of negotiations and misapprehensions?
She does not have the sparkling and attractive lightness of other young women he has known, women who possess a sexual efficiency, a casual friendliness. When the sex is finished, they re-assert their vertical selves, their careers, their other lives which are full and waiting. He lists their qualities now in his mind, as if they were one, simple, knowable woman. Their attachments and detachments are clean and speedy and free of any humiliations. All the components of their lives are given the slick attention of a curriculum vitae. Though their manners are sweetened by education, he detects that they are slightly anti-intellectual. Childhood stalks them with a nostalgic whimsy manifest in the taste for chocolate or pink or cats or flowers. He thinks of the new girl in his office, who amidst the minimalist rigour, has brought in a photo of her ginger cat. When you sleep with them, he believes they do not regret you leaving, they do not feel sad or angry. The parameters of their worlds are clear, and they have a latent anxiety about staying within those parameters. That’s what assures their futures. Their voices lilt and carry up towards the end of a sentence as if they are always appealing to the listener with a question that anticipates affirmation. They do not understand anything precarious, unstable or ambiguous. Somehow they have developed an unstated belief that deep and obsessive experiences like love and art are dangerous and can destroy you. The way they walk and sit and have sex, it seems as if a camera trails their every movement. No, he thinks walking into the street after midnight, a driver asleep in a taxi, the air clear and brittle, a otherworldly glow of mass electricity hovering above city towers, Lili is not like those women. When he is with her, she makes life new.

*   *   *

He is earlier than usual. It is still light. He opens the door of the hotel room where she waits. She rises from a chair near the window and throws her arms around his neck. Her bare feet are brown on the cream carpet, she looks small in the thick pile of the white towelling hotel robe.

‘Let’s have room service,’ he says, feeling tired.
If you want, she says, but he can see her black dress hanging on the wardrobe door and her high heel pumps set together. She wants to go out to dinner at Cusp, as he has promised.

No, we'll go out as planned.

She sits on his lap, smiling.

I have been thinking, she says, as if she whispers a confidence, that I should tell you, I think I am falling in love, her voice is vaporous and damp near his ear.

A coldness creeps up from his jaw line to his temple. He wants to reject her ideas of love outright, clearly, to speak with the voice of common sense. He wants to recoil to a hard and practised place. Yet he has pursued her, he has been sleeping with her for months, and if not for this, then what for? If he cannot expand into the love of this girl whom he wants, even for a short while, how will he ever expand into the truth needed for his architecture?

Don't do that, he says. Then he rises and gently tips her from his lap, catching her hand, let's just go to dinner.

With some effort she keeps her movements light and playful, still in the last moments of a smile she walks to the bed and takes off her robe to change. She pulls up her hose, slides her dress over her head, and is suddenly starkly separate.

They sit under the awning overlooking the marina. At six-thirty the sun is still brilliant across the viridian water and the still, white yachts. Next to their table a water tank gargles. Lobsters pile up at one end and scuttle back away from the waiter who approaches with a scoop. A large claw scrapes the glass.

I can't sit here, she says, urgently.

Why not? he asks.

can't watch these lobsters with their claws tied. They know. Can you see? she gestures to the tank, they watch the waiter, they pull back from him. They know what is going to happen to them and their friends. How desperate must they be in that tank, trapped and kept barely alive? How can you not see that? She stands accusing him and motions to the young waiter.
When the waiter is in ear shot, Nick speaks to him, ‘Could we move to the table in the corner?’

‘Of course.’

Lili picks up her handbag and moves to a table where the lobster tank is not in view.

‘Let’s eat quickly. I don’t like this restaurant,’ she says. ‘I will have whatever you have. Please order for me. Not lobster.’

She crouches in the shadows of the interior corner table, out of sight of the yachts and sea and lobster tank.

‘I understand,’ he says in a cool voice to emphasise her over-reaction.

They do not speak much during the meal. In his agitation, Nick surveys the other diners. He tries to see them as he imagines Lili might see them – their gluttonous mouths and self-satisfied faces ordering a scuttling lobster that is scorched in boiling water, split, flamed with sauces. Just behind the wall against which they sit, the killing goes on and becomes small cargo pierced by cutlery – the little levers of civilisation that move the dead into mouths. He momentarily understands her outrage, but as the waiter appears at the table in his long white apron and pours red wine into her empty glass, Nick reverts to his own reality. He thinks she is drinking too much. Her face is flushed, her eyes glittery and evasive.

She has barely eaten, but indicates to the waiter that she is finished. He clears their plates and returns to swirl a small metal tool over the table, harvesting remnants of the meal into a miniature dustpan. The table is neutralised.

She sits, nervously pushing back her cuticles and glancing about the restaurant. He thinks she needs reassurance. He thinks he understands how a lack of money and security makes her feel vulnerable. This must be at the core of her over-reaction to the lobsters, though he does not know how. She is irrational, sometimes superstitious.

‘I have been thinking that there is no need for you to keep coming to my house each week for the massage,’ he says, imagining it will be a relief to her to relinquish the appointment with Helen.

‘Why not?’

‘I would have thought the reasons were obvious.’

‘Not to me. How do you know why I come to your house?’
But it's not necessary, Lili. He is amazed by her defence of the massage appointment. She resists, as if he is interfering in an arrangement between her and his wife. He wonders why this appointment must proceed regardless of its context, why this little commerce must go on. He wonders whether it is to do with some conceit on Lili's side: does she want to maintain access to his other intimacies? Or is it the surface that must be maintained in order to sustain the secret? Does she feel she will become all but invisible to him, except in the artificial corner of a hotel or a restaurant, if she cannot walk his floors, touch his wife? He is unsettled by her cool ability to remove herself from the obvious inappropriateness.

He persists, convinced that he can make her see his point of view, don't mean that you should be disadvantaged financially. I have been thinking of offering you a weekly allowance to assist you. Perhaps you would like to move to a better apartment.

Why should I? Why should I give up visiting your house to do my job and why should I move to an apartment that you would prefer? Why should I start doing these things because of you? You are not my father. Her voice rises on father as if he has taken a terrible liberty.

I was thinking you would be doing them for yourself. He ignores her reference to her father; he is shaken by the dimensions of the idea, unable to grasp why she would say it. Now, as the late sun strikes under the awning and reaches inside the restaurant in a sharp oblong and illuminates the harmony and moderateness of other diners, the niceness of their faces, the practical knives and forks relaxed at the edges of plates, the waiter innocuously lifting a manacled lobster from the tank, he perceives a collegiate civility that would reject the rising and obscure hysteria of a young woman.

No, you did not think that, she says, decisively, accusing him of a deceit he does not feel. He wants to end the conversation. He has been generous in his consideration of her and cannot be expected to tolerate this.

Let's go, he says and pushes his chair back, fearful that he cannot predict her increasingly mercurial behaviour. He reflects on how much she has drunk. Too much he thinks.

As she stands to leave the restaurant she leans across the table, takes his half-finished glass of wine and skols it. Standing at the table she drains the wine while he
waits for her. Then she puts the empty glass back at the side of his place setting with an incongruous delicacy, the way a waiter might place it for the next sitting. A couple of men at the next table watch her do it. She drinks the wine down as if things that seem abundant might actually be limited. He wonders if she sees her life like this as if everything must be stolen; it is not that the thief steals, he just does not believe in ownership; there is no justice he understands that can deliver to him what he needs, and so he steals. Is that what she does or what she thinks has been done to her? Perhaps by others, perhaps by him? She does not see things rationally.

He feels her insolence and greed directed towards him, he feels she takes some revenge for him letting her say that she is falling in love.

She is developing a taste for lifestyle, for benefits by association — eating fine dinners, staying in five star hotels, riding in his car, drinking the dregs of his wine while he waits. And him wanting her and having her. He senses the cheapened edges of this arrangement, a drift of value. In that version of her he finds a new ruthlessness. Why should he imagine he is accountable for her in some way? How could he be, when she is so unknowable? He can be excused for this indefinable affair.

Is she piecing together a life that she could almost have by existing on its margins? Is this why she will not relinquish the visits to his house? Is that better than holding out hope of regaining the things you have lost — family, love, career, culture? She drinks the red swill of tannin, dredges the sediment and it emboldens her with its fluid and grit. And then she places the glass back on the table and looks up at him, flushed, and sees his embarrassment. He feels the conceit of his disapproval. He feels judgemental and old and deceived by desire. The waiter draws back, readying himself to bid them goodnight.

Nick thinks that he has gained an insight into some candid truth of her. He sees it as others might see it — the cliché glimpsed and fully known — the older successful man, the young foreign woman — the flat reality of it. No other woman he knows would do such a thing — they would not notice the discarded wine, they would rise, careful of their appearance and leave the table intact for the waiter to clear. She is distinguishing herself from him, she is saying, I cannot afford to throw things away, Can you?

The mood between them deteriorates into unspoken hostility. As she moves through the tables of the restaurant, she swaggers theatrically, and keeps turning to ascertain her
affect. He senses an insult to his generosity, a full embrace of a mutual exploitation. In
the car she reaches across and puts her hand between his legs. At that moment sex seems
like an assumption, a social comfort, an escape from the brutal encroachments of age –
something as ordinary as kindness. He places her hand back in her lap and looks at her
coldly. But she is granite faced, colder than he. She stares him down and judges him. He
feels a harder edge to the world, an urgency, a clarity. She opposes him, the government
opposes him, Helen opposes him. He has taken latitudes that others are trying to rein in.
They will not succeed, he thinks, feeling the set of his jaw tighten, a combative pulse in
his temple.

He drives her back to the hotel, he says he has more work to do and will not come up
tonight. That's fine, she says and steps out of the car, a serious young woman, her
independence immediately restored as she walks alone through the automatic glass doors
into the hotel foyer. She could be a woman on interstate business who is going to her
room to call her husband or her mother. Not a woman sleeping with a middle aged
married man, not a woman who has lived through a war and lost everything and cannot
speak of it. But another woman. He watches her through the multiple reflections of the
street and the people walking in and out, and even in the confusion of images, he can see
her indignation. He can see that it is more powerful than his; it flares, defends, insults and
draws her up out of the car, through the slivered perspectives of the hotel foyer, a single,
elegant figure, complete in her indignation. It occurs to him that indignation might be all
she has. She is prepared to live it out, make it bite in the fatigued squalor of her
apartment, in the massage of her lover's wife. There can be no boundaries around her;
she will take her indignation anywhere she chooses. She will not live under siege.

He watches her dip her head to the concierge who greets her from behind his
desk. He watches her step into the lift and tuck her hair behind her ear in the gesture that he knows,
then he drives off.

He drives into the office car park a few blocks away, confused about her reasons for
skolling the wine so blatantly. Has she expressed opportunism? Perhaps nothing can
matter between them and they should take what they can, like the hapless and desperate
sex of war time, the little spasms of pleasure released from their peace time conventions
in the gruesome tableau of killing.

*The Luna Museum* ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
He tries to work for a couple of hours, but cannot concentrate. Then he walks back to the hotel room. Without turning on the light he undresses and slips into bed. She is awake and waiting. Full of silent anger, she is vigorous, hard-bodied, matching her mouth to his. She turns away at the end. He pulls her back and covers her still body with his. Cast briefly in the semblance of love, in its physical curiosity, mingling breath, in the charge of a held gaze.

“So you think you are falling in love?” he says, smiling.

She laughs, a tightened percussive sound, “What a joke,” she says, “Not with you.”

He holds to her as if he has fallen from the sky onto this hard white remote bed.
Chapter Nine

Helen

Helen stands at the wrought iron gate reluctant to press the intercom and enter the marvellous world that Stephanie makes inside her home. She looks across the road to the steel frame of a house under construction. It glints in the early evening light, staggering along the cliff like the ribcage of a dinosaur, or an acropolis without history. It could be in a state of dilapidation. But it is not. It is the most expensive house ever built in Australia, costing over thirty million dollars according to Stephanie.

Overhead currawongs call each other, their screech like the last post rising and dying on melancholy notes. They ignore the human world; closed in the sentiment of their own cries, they glide above her as if this is just another wilderness.

She is arriving alone; Nick will probably not be coming. Even on a Friday night he is working. She pictures him sitting in his office, his concentrating face and the white hands that refuse her version of love. Is it too extreme? He has imparted to her the virtues of moderate, manageable feelings. He has kept her back from the brink, perhaps to save her from thrashing about in the air and dashing herself on rocks and walking cadaverous through life, the love bled out of her all at once. If he were here at this gate the
currawongs' cry would be soundless, the frame of the house a sketch in the air and he and she would be standing solid and opaque. But without him, she is permeable.

The dinner party to meet Jacqui's new husband, Bob, waits inside, as yet unhad. It waits to be lived through. The concave button of the intercom is cold on her finger. Stephanie's voice distorts through the perforated steel grid, shrill and synthetic. Come in, darling. A command in a series of life commands.

She walks the sandstone path with a gritty scuff, up the steps, between the lime-washed lions and the rows of box hedge. On the top step she closes her eyes for a second to savour the breeze wafting from the harbour carrying the scent of salt and newly sprouting leaves and soil tilled by gardeners. She holds onto her shoulder bag too forcefully and is reminded of how old women clutch their bags, anxious for the money and medication that rest inside. Tomorrow is the fifth anniversary of her mother's death and here she is, Helen Barlow, upright and alive. She relaxes her grip on the bag. When she opens her eyes, the Tuscan-style villa is sparkling rose in the dusk light and Stephanie's black glossy door is opening.

Five years ago she drove back along the Monaro Highway to her mother's funeral. Nick was overseas — Berlin? New York? The children were in their teens, sullen in the glassy car. Milky heat hung low over escarpments. Vast paddocks of parched silky grasses were fine and stranded against the orange and purple hues of hills. The great passive landscape waited there for humans to pass and never return; a future time of long extinction already evident in the quiet cleavage of ancient valleys and the rusted roofs of final, tottering sheds; and the road — just one road like a seam over which aeons of emptiness will eventually wash. A rippling mirage lifted off the bitumen and synchronised with a thrumming in her heart and throat. Hot winds quickened along the flanks of the car. She remembers the smell of the grey, moulded dashboard beneath the windscreen, silver with light, ready to shatter. Some half-known rudimentary truth pushing against her, making all life seem improbable.

A dilating desolation had emptied into her as she travelled back to lower her brittle mother into a grave. The grave, the smallest place on earth, the lone marker. No more time to restore any faith between them. Once she had returned to the city, the broadened
tracts of landscape and death had pulled back into porous boundaries, but had not assuaged. She has always known it. Has known the way escape can ramify and imprison.

She slips through the door that Stephanie holds open, and glances back to the garden where a jacaranda tree in radiant bloom is so intensely lilac it could be artificial. As she joins the others on the terrace, she has the sense that she is partaking in a ritual of last things. She will not come here many more times. She will soon cease to be friends with these people, these people she has known for years. They move about her, relentless in their aspirations, unchallenged in their beliefs. What do they believe? She wants to ask them, now, in the hum of conversation about the new Jeffery Smart painting and talk of a holiday in Venice — what do you believe? But the answer is all around her — they believe in this — this harbour view, this expansive house, Stephanie’s face lift, Jacqui’s new husband, Friday night with friends and fashionable canapés. And wine, they believe in wine, but not Chardonnay anymore. Lately they believe in Sauvignon Blanc. They believe in ensuites and spa baths, and smooth, sleekly quiet cars in colours called cubonite, iridium and tanzanite. These people believe in terraces, in hedges and air conditioning; in Louis Vuitton handbags and large carry-on luggage. On a subdued, less frenzied level of despair, she concedes, they believe in each other, they believe in their times. But she does not. Whatever she believes in is not here in this room.

‘Tom bought it at Sotheby’s for our anniversary,’ Stephanie says, as they examine the Jeffrey Smart painting. An aged man cast in an industrial landscape leans against a concrete wall and looks aghast at the group of living people in their lounge room. Helen wants to loiter in the clear colours of the painting, to seek companionship in the hard edged light and blinding isolation of his world.

Outside the lights of the city appear greasy in heavy rain, the harbour ripples like oil. Inside smiles and laughter mingle unremarkably among the colour and flesh of the dinner party guests. Helen thinks she is a cold-climate woman, too measured, a little pale for this tropical life. She is here because she started out, years ago, to arrive here. And so here she is, starkly tall and neutral, polite and reserved, holding herself in a cooler dimension. Is this how she seems to them? A woman tainted by the imperiousness and inaccessibility of the arts, due to her husband, the architect who has rendered buildings they admire but do not understand? Or perhaps do not admire, perhaps detest?
Jacqui’s new husband, Bob, is offering Helen more wine. He is dressed like a commodore in navy blazer and fawn pants, and is full of cruise ship bon-vivantness. He beams and says absolutely repeatedly, as if yes were a word of insufficient conviction. Jacqui’s tanned breasts crest the neckline of her yellow strapless dress. She looks perceptibly finer; love has trimmed her off in some subtle way, but Bob’s belt dips at the gold buckle to accommodate a soft paunch. Helen wonders if there has been a re-distribution of fat from one to the other, as Jacqui obsesses about her naked body and feeds Bob his favourite food.

Stephanie asks Bob about his business. I’m in furniture, he says. We have a couple of factories in Ryde and a few retail outlets.

Bob is being modest, Jacqui says, smiling at him. He has built a national network of stores, and last month started exporting to Asia.

Well, this is true. But it wasn’t always like this. I started out. He tells them about his poor schooling, his first job as a labourer, his ambition and hard work — all with the sincere folksiness of a favourite parable. The pride of all the work he’s done lodges in him, none of it let go — all the struggles, all the small jobs that led to the big jobs, everything fresh and real in him the way it was when it first happened. Helen thinks he could turn at any moment and walk back down the path of his life with familiarity at every juncture. He has no altering perspective, no shifting alliances with his past, it is all productivity in a frozen world with the simple engine of hard work at its heart.

At the end of his story Jacqui reaches over and caresses his face. Romance has cast its pattern over their lives — young enchantments are being drawn back down into gestures under the illusion of eternal beginnings. How all the guests flutter in their cages, how they squawk and feed and chase and are delighted. And Helen? She grips her perch with whitening claws and looks around her. They are better, surely, than she?

After the barbecued snapper and the figs and brie, Helen says she must go home, yes it is early, only ten o’clock, but she has the beginnings of a migraine.

She walks through the undisturbed oblivion of her house, turning lights on as she goes, leaving vacant rooms glimmering behind her. She breathes in the still air of the hall, and
thinks that she will never again be in a house that smells or is like her mother’s. The rose-soap and dust air, the carpet swirled with maple leaves; the bench with the bakelite tea caddy and the biscuit tin-lid with a picture of a lake rimmed by snow-capped mountains, the deep click as her mother re-sealed it over a sheet of grease-proof paper; the acrid-sweet scent of the citron air freshener hanging in a frilled pouch on a nail in the toilet. Her mother sitting in a deep-buttoned colonial recliner, curled up like a wren in a larger bird’s nest in the suffocating air; a whiff of gas from the heater panting with orange flames while she read *New Idea* and tapped occasionally at the oxygen tube in her nose, adjusting it across her cheek where it left a permanent indentation and looped back over her ears and into the tank. There were photos of her father everywhere, her father who had died a few years before. Her parents, ghost-like, drifted among the possessions they had put in place and kept for decades. Now these random objects cling to her memory like barnacles. How she abandoned that world.

In the bedroom she undoes the beige linen pants that sit exactly at her waist and folds them over a wooden hanger. She unfastens the concealed buttons of her cream silk shirt that pop through finely stitched holes like upholstered peas. The air conditioning is too cold, so she moves the dial minutely one degree to twenty-two. She draws her white waffle robe around her. There is a hard stillness in the cavity of her chest, a terrible idleness that contains her like walls, like the idleness of old age when small habits do not move you one way or another. She thinks now that she acts out repetitive, meaningless tasks to save herself. They dam up around her and if she lets one go, she will flow out like water and be quickly absorbed without trace. She shivers and takes purposely strident steps to the study to watch late night television.

Why had she thought Nick would come to Stephanie’s dinner party? He told her it was unlikely, but all the time she had expected him to enter the room. She replays that expected moment as if part of her still believes it possible that he could have been there. Then it would have been a different dinner party. He and she would have stayed later; there would have been a sombreness in the car on the way home, a mutual discontent that she finds solace in, that protects her from the eddying happiness of others.

She places a cushion at her back on the deep Cassina couch. Her mother had sat here when she came to stay, oxygen tank at her side, looking like a withered child with frank
and trusting eyes, watching *Days of Our Lives*. When Helen came home from a fashion parade she was annoyed to find her mother had placed the pillows from her bed on the couch to support her. As she entered, her mother had looked up and pressed the mute button. The characters in *Days of Our Lives* embraced in their dim opulent room, their traitorous faces hungry and glistening. *Did you have a nice lunch, darling?* Her mother had asked. *Yes thanks. You look uncomfortable Mum – are you uncomfortable?* A laugh had spluttered in her mother’s throat, short of air, *the couch is so deep my feet don’t even reach the floor!*

Helen had longed for her mother to go home. She had felt desperate for her in this house with full height doors that swing on pivots and seal rooms into walls, with windows of plate glass and vast stone floors. Helen and her mother could only understand each other when they were sitting in that old living room with the swirling leaf carpet and the tedium of small ornaments. There her mother was not diminished or outmoded as she was here, in her pleading floral dress, sitting politely, full of unspoken longing for all the things she had lost. And Helen incapable, even afraid, of talking about lost things, because the words betrayed her. She forced herself to be nice to her mother, forced herself against a failing belief in the continuity between their lives, to be nice. Recalling all this, her heart races, she wants to cover her face with her hands. They are barbarous thoughts, one hair’s breadth from nomads leaving the ailing behind to die.

She turns on the TV and flips through the channels, stopping when she finds a documentary on SBS. Film footage from the early seventies shows a female sex therapist in a white coat speaking to a group of women. The therapist points to a florid pink diagram of female genitalia and explains the areas of sexual function and stimulation. Helen thinks the ordinary-looking women have the physical predictability of teachers or secretaries, but here, eagerly focused on their new sexual potential, they merge together in the voodoo aura of women compelled to shudder, flail and shake.

She hears Nick open the door from the garage and walk up the hall. As he enters the room, a woman on the documentary surrenders to hypnosis and quivers on a therapist’s couch like a pupa about to burst its membrane.

*What are you watching?* He sits down on the edge of the couch. He looks closely at the screen, the blue light reflects over his face. *My God, what is this?* He turns to Helen,
bemused, as if she should offer an explanation. He laughs; the sound of it surprises her, its deep loosened tones, its throaty immediacy. She laughs too. Now there is an aerated spaciousness in her chest. This is why she had wanted him to sit beside her at the dinner party, for this burst of honesty.

‘It’s a documentary on the revolution in women’s sexuality.’

‘How was the dinner?’ he asks, watching a man with a face the colour of ham speak into a camera that is uncomfortably close.

‘Why didn’t you come?’ Why is she still disappointed?

He speaks as he stands up, ‘I told you I probably wouldn’t make it. You knew that.’

She looks up at him, standing there, the lineaments of his face remote above the halo of TV light, his eyes grave. His brow faintly stirs. She wants to ask him if there is something wrong, but it is an incongruous question in the aftermath of their laughter and the sterility of the documentary voices. He lingers in silence for a few seconds too long.

She turns back to the TV. ‘The dinner was terrible.’

‘I thought so,’ he says, focussing on the screen as if it is the new medium through which they speak. ‘I still have work to do.’

He leaves the room almost soundlessly.

The documentary continues; the cadences of the nineteen seventies TV people are righteous. A blade-faced blonde woman is explaining to a group of women how she guides couples with sexual dysfunction back to intimacy. The group concentrates on the lesson as if they are being trained to operate an advanced machine, that mishandled could injure or catch fire or simply seize up. Helen is suddenly angry. Is a woman a secret that must be turned inside out? Must a woman be physically and sexually quantified in order to become emotionally real? Nick is right – from this perspective, the nineteen ninety-nine perspective, it is laughable. She turns the television off. She needs the concealment of sleep.

She walks past Nick’s study on the way to the bedroom. The door is closed. There is no one else in the house; the door is closed on her. She slows as she passes and has the urge to stop and weep silently with all the pathos that she feels; to abandon pretensions to dignity and fall down on the hard floor. But she continues on, shamed by her pitiful inclination to breakdown.
Later when Nick comes to bed, she wakes but does not move. She can tell by the way he moves between the sheets that he is naked. He draws up to her back and rests his arm across her waist. She thinks of her flawed body—the loose folds of her stomach from pregnancy, the stippled beginnings of sun damage on her décolletage. Everywhere she is marked by years lived. She waits a few seconds then turns her head, just her head. His arm remains across her waist, heavy, disconsolate, indecisive. His face is close, looming, his eye quivers in the dark like a small black fish.

‘Goodnight,’ he says, and slowly lifts his arm off her, as if to do it rapidly would break her in two.

In the night she has a dream she has not had for a long time. She is standing on a blustery corner, the street emptying around her. There is an atmosphere of the nineteen thirties depression. She is dressed in a drab grey coat and brown knitted scarf. It is cold, she is poor, she looks down at her laced boots that are loveless and frightened. She is shocked to see her hands are an incandescent sour-white and her nails are yellowed. Then a strange man with a lovely face simply envelopes her in his arms and completely knows and accepts her. And she knows him in the way that she can trust all his thoughts and actions and this knowing between them is unique. Then she is suffused by a deep sense of permanence. She wakes, feeling she has stepped through a vacant lot of litter to a pristine upland. Is this a dream about God? She has wondered over the years, is this a longing for God? She had recounted the dream to Nick when she first had it long ago. Halfway through her explanation she had faltered, not sure how the dream should fit their lives, and said, falsely, hopefully, *It must have been you in the dream. It’s just a dream,* he had said.

Now she sits up and looks across at him sleeping. The night has slackened, its indigo depths broken by swathes of moonlight slung across the room. He is on his side, his arms stretched out with an equine grace—though in the dissembling light he could be a man found in the peat—a twenty-thousand year old man fallen on his side in a bog. All resistance in her collapses—the light, the world is tender. Moonlight glitters on his brow.
and casts back over the scrolls of his ear. He is impossible to touch, like the peat man, he is too precious, too full of life's evidence to touch.

He has had a haircut and behind his ear is a perfect boyish edge, like a mown field. He is, lying here, the genesis of all she had expected — the love, the innocence, the endurance, the unmitigated truth. How he and she sparkle while the whole house falls away into shadow. This is private life, she thinks, awake in your bedroom while another sleeps, when the silver light of the universe is reticent on your floor, gentle on your walls; when the fire of the sun rages and licks the other hemisphere and you shelter here and pluck these little minutes up, these minutes that rarely enter consciousness, these secret, extra minutes meant for sleep. She plucks them up because they are more than she expects, they are little charms that remind her of the great cornucopia that is this blue and green planet.

Of course she wants to leave this house, for all it has come to mean, for all the things that have not been fulfilled — but here in these minutes the house is not itself, and she and Nick are not themselves — they are resting quietly in another story, the story of moonlight.

If death is here in this room — if it is — it suckles quietly on the little crystal cells of her being, which she imagines are hexagonal and fit together in a mosaic. This death is not violent, it is not invasive, it simply works hummingly with its lapping tongue to render her completely limpid and then she will painlessly dissolve, much as she now seems dissolved in this old grey light. But death is not in the room — not yet.

Suddenly she thinks of daylight as a furnace and cannot bear to contemplate dawn. She thinks of it as one does a terrible planned event that has a precise breaking moment — like an execution or the dropping of a bomb. She cowers before the threshold of the inevitable day that will shred this soft moment in the bedroom with her husband who sleeps and shines.

* * *

It is only late morning and Helen has already sorted through one wardrobe. The clothes and accessories to be discarded have been divided into a box and a large rubbish bag. The
bag will go to St Vincent’s and the box to the girl who is coming this afternoon to give her a weekly massage. She guesses the girl’s feet are about the same size as hers so she has selected two pairs of shoes – Walter Steiger black suede pumps and woven Pancaldi sandals, hardly marked, but out of fashion. She has included some old scarves, mostly black and beige and a red Gucci handbag. She doesn’t wear red anymore. Also four Qantas business class toiletry bags with samples of Orlane lotions – perhaps the girl won’t need these, she probably has access to cheap cosmetics through her massage agency. Helen decides to include them anyway. These things, packed into a green-grocer’s box swirled with a picture of a carrot and a cabbage, look aged and unfamiliar. She is momentarily alarmed by the synchronicity of discarding old things on the anniversary of her mother’s death. It had not occurred to her before but now the connection is brought to consciousness, she finds it disturbing.

She carries the box to the massage room, leaving the top flaps open so the girl can see what’s inside. She thinks Lili will be pleased when she receives these expensive, admittedly outmoded, but carefully kept things. Things Helen is glad to turn her back on, for whatever irrational reasons. She is over-sensitive. It is just today, tomorrow will be more concrete. Soon there will be an adjustment back into hard reliable realities.

She walks down the passage and into the kitchen where midday sunshine throws a white unblemished beam through a skylight, down onto the floor. She is struck by its purity. Outside is an industriousness, a clashing and mingling of people that is entirely absent in the square of light that she traverses from fridge to stainless steel bench as she assembles a ricotta cheese salad.

She scoops up the last of the cheese onto a butter-lettuce leaf and recalls a lunch at her parent’s beach house when they were in their sixties. They had been renting an old fibro bungalow each summer for over twelve years. It was full of unmatched and unmended things – a webbed tongue of curled linoleum in the kitchen, a half dozen tea-stained mugs, a shower over a lilac bath with stiff chrome taps that hurt her hand. We like it, it’s relaxed. Come down with the kids for a few days. Nick was working in the States. The children didn’t like the cold lamb and salad her mother prepared, or the plum pudding, dark and bitter-sweet with spice.

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
Images of that last summer before her mother was diagnosed with emphysema haunt Helen now. After dinner her mother had smoked, her arm out, with the long white smoking stick in her fine hand, the thing straddled by tapering, frost-pink nails. Her mother’s blond tipped and tiered hair rose from her forehead above her widow’s peak in a perfect roll. She wore ice green Capri pants, a crisp striped shirt. She sat in a cane chair with a casual assurance, neat and fastidious, enjoying her after dinner cigarette. The next day, slim and brown, basking on an orange banana lounge in the backyard, she smoked throughout the afternoon.

Helen tries to gain perspective on all these memories as she rinses her plate and places it in the dishwasher. They form a portrait of her mother’s times, of its small pleasures and brief flamboyance. Had her mother just expected that the repetition of these ways of life held some possibility of limitless repeats? Of humble worn-in rhythms for which there would be no retribution? Can’t you give up smoking? I don’t want to. It will kill you Mum. You’ve got to die of something.

For decades the smoke scrolled into her mother’s lungs, spreading its light zing and atrophying chemicals. In the final years of emphysema, cortisone blackened her hands and legs. She stumbled against the glass coffee table, the blunt edge sliced her shin open. The inner churning Helen feels when she thinks of that injury never abates. Injuries everyday, her father told her on the phone one night in the confidential voice of doom. Then he died of heart failure and left her mother to carers and Helen’s occasional visit.

I’m worried about my wedding gifts, she told Helen once. So many beautiful things people saved up to give me. I have kept them in the buffet. What will happen to them? Helen will you look after them? Then her mother had knelt down beside the buffet cabinet to take them out. A few boxes of unused gifts with soulful, hopeful cards attached. For your future happiness. Six silver teaspoons engraved. A punch bowl. A silver brush and comb set. Champagne flutes etched with willow trees. Worthless possessions. All of them old and worn, but never used. Yes Mum, of course. When Helen thinks of them, stacked in a large carton in the garage, uncoveted, their accrued meaning covered in dust, crushed into boxes with yellowing cards inscribed with messages in tiny even-flowing handwriting, she is overcome with panic, and sees her mother’s big eyed face, all ridges of bones and sunken perceptions.

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
Was her mother glad she smoked? Glad she did the fashionable daring thing, the modest rebellion that was something a woman could do just for herself? Sex before marriage and outside marriage resonated with consequences; spending more money than you had was unthinkable; the opportunity to be independent was only for the ambitious and the gifted. Smoking was social power. Movie stars, fashionable women smoked. The smoky-veiled new woman with her man’s habit was alluring in her gauzy enigma.

Helen washes her hands in the sink, a childhood habit Nick does not understand. Then she wipes them on the handtowel with a forceful and brisk intolerance. The time? Lili will be here in five minutes.

As she changes into her robe, the intercom beeps.

‘Yes,’ she says, and presses the gate-release, not waiting for an answer.

The girl comes each week and without variation follows the routine that Helen has set. It has become, she thinks as she walks into the vestibule and opens the door, almost an obligation.

Lili stands on the doorstep. The garden fans out behind her, benign and orderly. Helen thinks the day is alive with possibilities she has not considered and now she is cloistered in the house for the afternoon. How might she suggest that the full massage and facial be reduced to a forty-five minute session? There is something like this on the list of treatments – a mini-executive-pick-up?

‘Hello, come in,’ Helen says.

‘Hello,’ Lili says, steps inside and waits for Helen.

She can sense the pressure of Lili marching closely behind her as they walk through the house and decides it is easier not to alter the arrangement.

In the massage room, Helen points to the green grocer’s box and explains, ‘I’ve been sorting through my wardrobe and thought you might like... that these things might be useful.’ The girl glances at it, but does not move. Instead she appears startled.

Helen is compelled to project a friendliness she does not feel. ‘Take a look,’ she urges, lifting the box. ‘Don’t know whether we are the same shoe size or not, but I thought we might be, so, lifting out the shoes and placing them on the massage table, I selected a couple of pairs of shoes that I have hardly worn.’ On the clean crisp sheet Helen thinks the shoes look oddly organic, brown-black and scaly like salted cod. Lili is
silent and watchful as if each item accumulates some revelation about Helen that a naked back beneath massaging hands does not.

Helen proceeds, “Here are some scarves, silk, Italian. I don’t know whether you like scarves? She glances at the girl who wears a scoop-neck t-shirt with a short flounced skirt and cannot imagine her in a long black scarf.

“Have I thought about it,” Lili says. Perhaps Helen has thought about it too much?

And just some cosmetic samples, Orlane. Helen lifts up a navy blue toiletry bag but stops short of taking out the tiny white tubes. Why does she insist on this full presentation in the thickening silence? She feels like a department store demonstrator trying to sell a gift-with-purchase. But if she relents, the girl’s sullen judgement will fill the room undiluted.

Helen holds up each object like a shield, she defends herself against the glossy haired girl who studies her and wordlessly flaunts herself—her young neck unaccustomed to scarves, her too-full mouth that does not thank, her glassy silky eyes that gather things up and do not capitulate.

Lili turns her back and bends down to unpack her bag of treatments. Helen puts her things in the box and thinks of folding the four flaps in together to conceal the contents, but when she tries her hands tremble. She places the box on the floor near the door.

“Okay?” Lili says, indicating she is ready to start the massage.

“Yes,” Helen replies, lying face down on the table.

As Lili begins, Helen thinks the hands that work the oil along her spine have an altered energy. They skim, they touch her unevenly. Some code has been broken. In the silence, Helen’s breath rustles in her nostrils, brushes her throat and snags on the idea of the girl’s durable, insurmountable youth hovering over her.

After ninety minutes, there is a brief flow of red light behind Helen’s closed lids and the soft thud of a door closing. The girl is gone. Lying here on the board-stiff massage table Helen feels a gelatinous instability, boneless and limp.

She sits up, siphoning the energy from her flushed skin back into her limbs. She is invaded by weakness and starts to weep. Tears enliven the fragrance of her moistened skin. All of the falsehood attached to the power of aromatherapy oils—lavender for sleeping, eucalyptus for rejuvenation—fuses with the frustration of tears. Massaging
hands embody comforts too trivial to address the subcutaneous condition of life. She raises the blind. The room is pitiless, unattended. She sits back on the massage table like a spoilt child unsure of her exact misery, full of contradictory things, uncertain limits, swept up by a flow of unnamed feelings, left alone to cry it out.

She takes the towelling hair band off, puts on her robe. As she turns to leave the room, she notices the box near the door. Lili has left the box behind to humiliate her, to insult her. She will call the booking agency and cancel the massages. She will complain about the girl. How? How will she complain? I wanted to give the girl a box of accessories, worn yes, but still nice and she didn’t thank me and she wouldn’t take them. But that doesn’t explain it, there is so much more. The girl holds me in contempt. The girl makes me feel morally inadequate, she manipulates with her silences, she is not polite, not grateful, too proud, not... Are you dissatisfied with the massage? No, no you don’t understand, it is the girl, not the massage! It would be impossible to explain.

In the bedroom she glances in the mirror and scoffs at her reflection. Her hair is flat, pink blotches cover her face, fine smarting oils leak onto her lashes and into her teary eyes, making them bloodshot. This is one bewildered woman, she says to the reflection, almost laughing, putting her lips close to the mirror, receiving the glacial gloss of its surface on her hot face and then the return of her warm breath like an unreceived kiss. She is an afternoon woman, an idle exotic — robed, fragranced, reflected, practising intimacy on a mirror while she waits for a man.

She thinks of the phone call from Katie last night. Katie is not coming home for Christmas. And neither is Emma. They will spend Christmas in London, then fly to Val d’Isere for two weeks skiing. They have boyfriends Helen has not met. You will love them Mum – they are great guys. Though mine is the nicest. Katie had laughed. James is a banker – he runs the trading room at Deutschbank. He’s leased this luxury chalet. It’s going to be amazing. When are you coming over? Soon. How soon?

Emma and Kate have slipped into the world like launched yachts — built by Helen and peripherally by Nick, but somehow not made by them, made by the world. Made without the shuffling proximity of a small family in a small house with a straggly garden, like the home Helen was raised in. Her children have grown up sleeker, more reputable, closer to the surface of public life. The world has contributed to their nurturing through its myriad...
points of access to their lives through satellites and cables and sound waves, via towers sending messages of bitten reality back and forth, sullying the development of pure attachment, spawning a frightening mobility of affection, placing a globalhood in their minds and paths, an uber culture awash with possibilities that only they understand. Helen would have liked to bring them up differently, then they might not have left her so immediately. But their future was waiting. Even though she left her own parents at eighteen they have always been so densely at the heart of her. Her children’s future is too magnetic, too full of impulses in an expanding and marvellously fragmented world, spanned by jet routes and editorialised destinations, celebrities and brand names that woo and enfranchise.

When was her own moment of most possibility? It must have been, though she cannot decide conclusively, the day she set off for university. Summer. The glare of the sun soaked into the landscape, a glare that in the city bounces off the sharp edges of buildings and roads with a piercing light. Her father drove her because her mother did not want to witness her disappear into some labyrinthine life. Helen’s confidence abounded. Now this confidence seems wistful, like a season, like the summer in which her father put her cases and bags and books into the boot of the car. The sun reflected off the green duco of the Falcon as they drove into the countryside, gum leaves flickering, infinite flawless sky, all elements compelling the good fortune possible and due.

In the bathroom she winds her hair into a chignon and splashes her face with cold water to bring her flushed skin tone down. She holds a wet face washer over her swollen eyes. She needs fresh air. Perhaps she will take a walk to a Queen Street café, sit, read a magazine, run into someone she knows. She takes the face washer off, pats her face dry and applies moisturiser in brisk upward sweeping movements.

For a year she went home nearly every weekend. In second year she visited infrequently. Once, when her parents had been waiting eagerly to see her, her favourite food prepared by her mother, she greeted them indifferently and slept nearly all weekend. I am grateful for you and your mother, her father had said. You seem not to be grateful for anyone or anything. Then he went out into his small earth-scented garage and tinkered with the car. It was the angriest thing he ever said to her.
She thinks of her mother standing at the gate when she was in her seventies, dying of emphysema, waving until Helen’s car turned the corner, and her mother getting smaller and smaller in the rear vision mirror, the splayed fingers of her arthritic hand waving side to side, widening the arc of the wave as Helen drove into the distance. She had made excuses not to visit as her mother became frail because she could not bear the intensity of need in her mother’s face.

As she walks up the passage to the kitchen, her memories absorb into a spectral emotional self, leaving the sorrow of her own questionable loyalty. The phone rings. She goes into Nick’s study to answer it. Outside his window, beyond the deep shadow of the eaves, the day is still bright and she is anxious to be in its midst. Perhaps she will not answer the phone. But it could be Nick. She sits in his leather office chair and picks up the receiver. It is Stephanie.

“What are you doing tonight? I thought we could meet up with Jacqui for drinks, if you’re over your migraine.”

Helen replies absently, “I don’t know.” She looks over Nick’s study with a sense of both trespass and entitlement. His black leather in-tray is tidy; his plans are arranged in piles on the credenza.

“Well, you could come here for a drink and then we could go out to The Pier for dinner.”

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Helen. Phone and tell him you’re going out. He won’t mind.”

“Why not?”

“Nick might be coming home for dinner, Ié. She examines the printed drawings. Two rectangles intersect at ninety degrees like a cross. In each quadrant abutting the wings of the building there is a grid of paving and frilled circles indicating shrubs. Nick has scribbled across the quadrants in brilliant red ink, Where is my vision? This is like a shopping mall!”

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Helen. Phone and tell him you’re going out. He won’t mind.”

_The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008_
Helen doesn’t recognise the winning scheme in this drawing. Is this a new scheme? He hasn’t mentioned that he is revising the museum. Why hasn’t he told her? She should know. Other things she should know suddenly stir in his stack of documents.

She really don’t feel like it. Her throat tightens. In small handwriting hurrying down the side of the page he has written, *When I look at this, I see how stunted my spirit is. Dry years of life behind. And ahead?*

‘Are you crying? What’s wrong?’ Stephanie’s satisfied voice sucks back as if she calls out into the force of a gale.

‘Don’t crying,’ she says, to comfort herself and suppresses a sobbing convulsion.

‘There is nothing wrong.’

‘Well if there is, don’t sit around waiting for Nick. God, come out to dinner with us.’

‘Is it that simple?’ Helen pushes the words out her wavy mouth. *Dry years.*

‘Whatever problem you might have can be solved. You can do whatever you want. What do you want to do?’ The advice is clear, but it cannot be applied.

‘Don’t know. Let’s catch up later in the week.’

Stephanie is silent for a few seconds then she says in a purposely calm voice, ‘Why don’t you leave him Helen?’

Helen’s tears fall, fuelled by humiliation. She takes a deep breath and forces the air into a stony voice, ‘We are discussing dinner, Stephanie, not divorce. I’ll ring you later in the week.’ She puts the phone down. Will life be like this from now on, a series of severances necessary to maintain a grip on a steady voice?

She gathers a few piles of plans together, places them on the desk and unfolds them one by one. There is a southern elevation where two tapering buildings intersect on an acute angle. Across the top he has written, *does this free me from my reputation?* Along the side in red, *I have achieved nothing in my lifetime if this building is not an icon,* and then underneath in blue, perhaps added later, *or iconoclastic?* On a revised plan of the main galleries that are now facing east, he has written, *will I be lost or found in the twenty-first century?* And, *this is a near-sighted homage, I am overwhelmed by history.* Inside the rectangle of the gallery space, *what do I not see? This is a last chance. Memento mori!* On another plan where he has drawn the pattern of light that would fall through glass perforations in the ceiling, *the precise moment and the infinite – how to*
achieve? On all these drawings of a new and secret museum, are his sharp red arrows, his sweeping red lines, his terse exclamations, the terrace is vernacular! eliminate the harbour view – eliminate visual jargon! Scrawled across a northern section showing classic modernist galleries, where is the future in all this?

She realises that these are not the plans that he takes to his office, but his private set of drawings. These insurgent messages are to himself. He berates himself. This fracturing vision! This is all just an atonement! This is all a simulation of truth, of spirit, of love is it not?

She unfolds the last plan on the desk. He has written across the printed blue lines of the main façade, What is the emotional distinction between intersection and collision? They are both piercings of one trajectory into another, but the collision is catastrophic. It is violent. It transforms. Intersection is a structured encounter. So – have we intersected or collided? I want to think collided, burst from the random, perhaps the apocalyptic. And so pure. Have I the courage?

She cannot understand the man who makes these notations. She is embarrassed by his humility and self-effacement, and the violent red-inked search. What is he searching for? Is it just the museum? The notations are a strange mix of yearning and doubt, of philosophy and emotion. They are romantic, and also raw. How can she respect such provisional, candid reckonings on paper?

She folds the plans up swiftly and places them back on the credenza. She wants to escape, urgently, the chalky masculine light of his study, the symmetry of his solid walnut desk and all the papers that wait for him. In her robe she floats like a circulating mist around these things that deny her.

Are there other secrets? On her way out, she stands in the centre of the room and contemplates his in-tray, black and muted, resting only half-full on the edge of his desk. If there is an affair, will there be traces? And if she finds traces, what will she do? She hesitates; she is clinging to her marriage. Though the chance to fall, to drop down back to nothing, to a different life not yet known, excites her.

She reaches over to the edge of the desk and picks up the in-tray. It is light in her hands, inconsequential. Right there on the top is a blue envelope with a hand-written
Dear Mr and Mrs Barlow,

Forgive me for writing to you at your home address, but I have not received any reply to my letters sent to Mr Barlow’s office. With some modest investigation I have been able to find out your residential address. In due course I would like to call on you. If you, Mr Barlow, are not available to meet with me in the near future, I would like to meet with your wife, who looks to be a reasonable family woman. I have seen her driving into your garage and shopping in the supermarket in a quiet and respectful manner.

As I have written in my previous letters, I have had a vision of a grand new cathedral. God is directing me in this, make no mistake. In the Bible it is very clear that we are all either humble disciples or doomed to hell.

I do not mean to be rude, Mr Barlow, but you have designed a Godless building. Perhaps you think, as many men do nowadays, that you are God. Well, I am afraid you are not. Your building is pointless and merely occupies good land and destroys the family enjoyment of a fun park. So many injustices will come about because of your museum. It is a sin and there will be punishment, you can be sure.

I offer you the chance to repent by spending some time in service to God. In this way you will not be doomed to hell. Please design a cathedral for the Luna Park site. You are influential and can take up this cause. If you refuse, then you must withdraw your design and leave Luna Park there for generations of future Australians to enjoy. These are the only choices. Please let me know your decision, so as I can plan what to do next.

I look forward to your prompt reply.

God bless you both.
Yours Truly,

Anne O’Leary
Helen reads the letter again. The writing paper quivers in her hand. She remembers reading some letters to the editor from this woman. Now this fanatic knows their address and wants to call on her. But Anne O’Leary does not disclose her address, so she cannot be traced.

Surely no one believes anymore in this kind of god? Good and evil—sin and punishment—the Old Testament taken in its literal meaning. Some obscure suggestions of damnation. A new cathedral?

Why hasn’t Nick warned her? Does he think his wife too neurotic, too nervous and fragile or stupid and unpredictable to share with her the news that they are under threat from a stalker?

Helen puts the letter down. She needs to hear his and her voices raised in anger together, she needs to brush up against the truth of him, to conflict with him, to be outraged. Conflict then, she thinks standing here, is the stuff of life. It is what the ubiquitous and phantasmal Anne O’Leary recommends in her letter. The brushing of shoulders, the jostling of enemies declared. An unsettling and momentary sense of Anne O’Leary’s far-flung quest for an elusive justice touches Helen. Who the hell does Nick think he is? Mad Anne O’Leary knows, he thinks he’s god. But he is not. He is not god. He is a stranger.

He speaks to her quietly in his study. The letter is in its envelope on the desk. Late afternoon sun casts the shadow of a branch fluttering with leaves against a translucent blind. They sit on the black leather couch.

She smooths her hair with both hands and tweaks the collar of her grey cotton shirt. She is nervous and cannot find a comfortable position in which to sit. There is a stale metallic taste at the back of her throat and her stomach gnaws. She glances at the desk where she sat two hours ago reading his notations, where he conducts, within the house they share, his private abstract life. Though now he speaks with her, steadfast and substantial, and is not the man who draws red arrows or deprecates himself in a way that embarrasses her. She had thought he would have more pride in his reputation and talent.
It had not occurred to her that he was fighting for the sublime or the iconic or the deeply personal. It exhausts her to contemplate whatever it is he fights for with his remote and fervent sincerity.

He holds her arms to steady her because she is shivering. Why? Why should the artist take his time with the woman who wants to erupt into anger? How does she fit into his secret self-admonishments?

\textbf{\textit{Why didn't you show me the letter? Why didn't you tell me? I am under some threat from a lunatic and you don't tell me. I don't understand,}} she says, with quiet fury.

\textbf{\textit{This campaign of letters...}}

\textbf{\textit{Campaign? How many?}} She is ready to interrogate everything, every phrase and word of his.

\textbf{\textit{I don't know. Probably six or so,}} he says. She sees he does not understand her need for precision. She wants nothing vague, nothing comforting.

\textbf{\textit{A number. I want the number, Nick.}}

He is quiet, thinking, then he says, \textbf{\textit{Eight over about...}} over three months. He loosens his grip on her arms, but still holds her, seeming to believe that she will eventually emulate his equilibrium. \textbf{\textit{She will tire of it, Helen. I've seen it before.}} She is not a stalker but just a harmless old-fashioned Christian. There is nothing to be concerned about.

As Helen listens to his unfamiliar voice, one that is buried in his throat, and looks into the face that is intent upon her mood, she cannot hold all her trouble in her head. She must let one thing in and one thing out or she is overcome. There is her long and dreadful marriage, and her ascetic husband who writes secretly to his soul, and then there is her other husband who is materially, undeniably a brilliant success. There is the grief and guilt she feels for her dead parents. There are her children who have left her. And there is the encroaching terror of a stalker. It is only this last problem that he addresses. They are focused on the threat of the religious fanatic. They are to pretend that this is now the organising principle of fear.

He has been speaking, \textbf{\textit{there is no need to alter our daily activities. The house is very safe. I only mention these things to reassure you. I don't for a minute believe we are living under any threat.}}

\textit{The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008}
I do, she says quickly. I believe that there is a woman out there who is deranged, who watches me while I drive around, while I shop, and who thinks that I should convince you to abandon your museum and if I don’t, there will be punishment. Punishment for your godless ambition. And why do I believe this? Not because I want to, but because she writes it in a letter. Can you see that the woman is a fanatic?

I don’t…

I demand you give me the other letters. Her voice is loud, strident, the way you talk to a part-deaf person.

The little shadow she saw cross his brow last night returns; a vibration of expression illuminated by a thought or a regret that he does not disclose. He releases her arms and places his hand over hers. She understands, palpably, that he is afraid of wronging her, hurting her. He is afraid of his capacity to hurt her.

The rest of the letters are in the office. I’ll bring them home tomorrow. But think about it this way Helen: if Anne O’Leary were not wielding her god, would you still be frightened? If the woman had just written a letter saying that she felt lonely, perhaps overlooked, and did not want Luna Park to be demolished, then wouldn’t you just accept her as an objector? It’s because Anne O’Leary uses ideology to amplify her position, to make audible her voice, that the threat is enlarged. She arms herself with religion and we are meant to cower. Why should we believe her? We do not believe in god.

Her crazy power-of-god idea makes it much worse. Why? Because for her to believe *that* in this world, she sweeps her arms out to encompass the room, the house, the city, seems so unhinged that I don’t know what she is capable of. I can’t predict her. I don’t know her mind, and neither do you!

Who knows what her real reasons are. God is her stated reason, but her real reasons are probably private. No doubt she has some fixation, some sense of injustice that we will never know. But with or without her god, she is the same pathetic woman incapable of rational thought, and certainly incapable of carrying out violence.

It is difficult to grasp that this solicitous moderate man is the one she married. Where is the strong clear face of his twenties? Is it concealed somewhere like a hologram, beneath the clouded expression of the middle aged man? She feels a sudden longing for

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
her young husband. He is gone, erased. She is free, free to abandon her guilt about the seduction all those years ago, free to surrender the allegories and tropes she has made to bind their lives together.

When you have given me all the letters I will go to the police, she says, but she has never been inside a police station. This talk is like an echo from a character, not a person like her, not her. But this is what she wants now, to give it all over into professional hands – divorce lawyers, accountants, therapists. Why not the police?

Don’t not certain they will be much help. This sort of thing is part of public life. Democracy, free speech in action. People get angry over architecture. They have all sorts of different perceptions of justice. O’Leary thinks that demolishing Luna Park is unjust because no one asked her. So now, without being asked, she tells us. His shoulders give a brief tremor, like a shrug, an everyday exasperation that he expects is shared by those outside this room who understand public life. She knows the shrug is not meant for her, it is a momentary drift of focus out into the wider world, his preferred world.

Though he takes this time with her she believes the threat means nothing to him except how to manage her reaction. His problem really is her; how to deal with her. Is this a long enduring problem for him?

The woman is dangerous. She is not a theory, Nick. Don’t try to rationalise Anne O’Leary in an attempt to rationalise me! She screams into his face. He flinches, but he does not move away. You never attach yourself to anything I feel. Forget about what you intellectualise and try to understand how I feel. Think and feel different things, Nick. I tell you I feel fear. And the only solution I can see, the only one that makes me feel safe is wanting the woman dead. When I think of her dead, then I feel safe. But while I know she can watch me, approach me, take up some terrifying god-fearing revenge for your hubris, while I spend so much time here alone and her out there knowing that, I feel fear. I want her dead. Does that indicate to you how I feel? Is that clear enough for you? She has never before wanted anyone to die, but she arrives at this solution swiftly. Helen, the well-groomed wife on the couch, wants the retribution of murder for a woman who writes a polite letter of threat. It is natural. The woman is her enemy.
He is silent for awhile and then he stands. *Why don’t you think it over for a few days? If you still want to call the police, then do so, but be prepared for their response. They may not regard this letter as stalking.* He picks up the little envelope with a flourish when he says *letter.* Then he sighs as if he has done all he can and sits in his office chair. His hands rest on the desk, intently still, waiting, she knows, for her to leave so as he can unfold his plans and make some new notations. Where does he keep the red pen? She can’t recall seeing a red pen on his desk.

Then her shivering subsides and she says in a clear voice, *If Anne O’Leary tries to stop me in the car, I will drive off. And if she gets in the way, I will drive over her.* But in her mind she cannot picture it. She has never even seen the woman’s face.
Chapter Ten

Lili

Lili moves with the shambling bus as it winds along New South Head Road to Vaucluse. On the hill, she looks back over the harbour. The city in the distance is a group of blocks like a replica, picturesque and pointless. She is only moved now by the way Nick perceives and makes beauty, imbuing it with meaning that arises from his unique creative vision.

She turns back to the few people scattered on the bus, a middle aged man sitting opposite reads a thick paperback; an old woman with short grey hair, mannish and defensive, clutches a shopping bag on her lap. Young boys rustle and yelp up the back.

She has checked the map; the address of the massage appointment is two blocks from the bus stop. She alights near a large old sandstone school with small ecclesiastical windows, built along a ridge overlooking the city. Peering through the iron gate she imagines a European life watches over the grand light of the harbour from cloistered rooms. Pared back religious lives would once have kept to the lessons of another time within the insulating walls. A bell rings and girls in bright blue uniforms flow out through a stone arch, talking, animated, tossing their hair and flirting with each other, flocking like marvellous migratory birds. Did Nick’s wife wait here on this curb side for his beautiful daughters?
Now, when she goes to Palm Beach with him she walks along the foreshore in the afternoon while he works. She minces on the soft sand, drawing back from the lacy reaching waves, and lets the minutes slide in their perfect evenness into the late afternoon when they meet for drinks. She takes on the pretence of being marooned, of living in the grip of amnesia as she walks the length of the beach, but by the time she reaches the rocks and turns back, her inner fictive drama is overwhelmed by the glaring indifference of the calm, blue leisurely sea. Drowning in that sea, she thinks, would be instant and soundless.

Last Saturday morning, sitting on the deck, she watched him return from his run along the beach, the newspaper rolled up high under his arm, his house key swinging from the leather ring that he looped over his index finger. His calf muscles bulged as he took the steps two at a time. He did not waste a movement. He smelt of brine and sweat, his face and limbs were flushed. He kissed her, just the stiffened rim of pursed lips brushing her cheek, like the greeting of an uncle. She laughed and turned her face to kiss him on the mouth. Then they went to bed, her lost in his humid biology; the flat lean contours of his belly, the grey-ginger glistening chest hairs, mottled sun spots across his shoulders. Then the tension in his face, his expression pulled back from the bones, mouth loosened. After, in his recovering eye, she watched for the returning intellect, the mannered distances. She is amazed by sex, by its strange, transformative and sudden power.

As she walks down the hill to Olola Avenue, the dusty, puckered leaves of a plane tree crunch underfoot. The air is lighter now in mid-autumn, the sea breeze is lovely on her face and in her hair. She stops at the corner and rests her massage table against a stone fence. She is completely alone on the street and even in the park where there are swings and garden benches there are no people. In the distance she can hear a car, and within seconds a grey four-wheel-drive with two girls in the back seat and a mother driving speeds down the hill and slows at the give-way sign. The mother turns her head, checking for traffic, says something to her children, then proceeds up the hill. Lili watches the back of the gleaming vehicle, and the shadowy heads inside. Children are being ferried home along these gentle solitary streets.
She picks up the massage table and crosses the road thinking that tonight Nick will phone to tell her what time they can meet on Wednesday. She wonders how he avoids referring to the existence of his wife. He never slips up even in a casual conversation. She thinks of Helen Barlow as part of his house. Permanent, detached. Whenever she massages her now, sensations of jealousy and conceit come over her. While her hands pummel Mrs Barlow’s back she has a faint pity for the thinning skin that ripples with little resilience beneath her hands. Mrs Barlow’s back is tended, but unloved. The working rhythms of the massage pull Lili’s mixed feelings together into one volatile sickness: sweet, painful, furtive beneath the obligations of vocation with its intimacies and sacrifices. She wants to faint when she thinks of the betrayal and wonders if betrayal is a permanent part of her character.

She arrives at 24 Olola Avenue for her appointment. The house is modest compared with the surrounding neighbourhood, though it has a lush garden and a paved path which winds artificially across a lawn to a brick portico. A small excitable woman answers the door.

“Yes, of course, come in. I am so glad to see you, the woman urges. The house is a mess, please excuse it. What lovely hair you have.

Thank you. Lili follows her over scuffed terracotta tiles, past a family room scattered with toys. From another room, she can hear a television and the shrill, chortling voices of children fighting.

I am so looking forward to this massage, the woman says, as they arrive in a bedroom with a double bed made hastily. She laughs and crinkles her eyes at the corners. Her voice is confidential and smiley, like a voice-over for a soap powder advertisement.

While Lili sets up her portable massage table, the woman takes off her t-shirt and jeans. She hops onto the table, wiry and ready, chatting about her children. When she is lying face down, she continues speaking, her busy words muffled beneath the table. Her small bristling muscles loosen and surrender easily under the heel of Lili’s palms, and the warm kindred voice talks on, vibrating through her spine and into Lili’s hands.

* * *

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
Lili collects two letters from her wooden mail box in the foyer. Inside her flat, she makes a cup of coffee, sits on the couch and opens her bank statement. The whispered roar of rock music comes through the window from the terrace house next door. She pulls the window shut so as she can concentrate on the columns of numbers, the deposit entries and fee deductions, the standard weekly withdrawals. She smiles at the final balance – she has saved $16,219. She believes there is a wisdom in the unassailable fact of money saved. Through living in this dilapidated building, sleeping in a second hand bed, buying grocery items on special, by watching every dollar and working up to six days a week, she has, in three years, saved a significant sum. This is more than pride. It is solid, traceable life. It is fortification against the hopeless ideal of happiness.

When she has finished her coffee, she will take the other envelope, the latest letter from her mother, and put it in the shoebox in the hall cupboard with the other unopened letters. In them is the life she has refused to live. She knows the siege is finished, but still she imagines the letters contain an ongoing, endless tragedy over two years of time in which her family move, grieve, perhaps get sick and die. So long as she does not read the letters, then none of the terrible things that have happened have happened to her. One day, when she has enough money and enough good fortune to bear the news inside she will open them.

For now, her family are as she left them. Grieving, afraid, bleakly sad. She still cannot understand the savage pressure of her mother’s embrace when she left. Her mother had rejected all love in the aftermath of her father’s disappearance, and then at that crucial moment had held Lili to make some last urgent claim. Her grandmother had taken Lili’s face in her trembling hands. Her brother had stood limp and distracted, while he wept. Her mother’s voice, reedy, struggling: Of course, we understand why you must go – you are clever and you will be a success in Australia. Then you can come back to us – when you have some money. But you will come back to us? You might not be here, she had thought in a cold, desperate anguish, eager to be over the horizon and released from the siege.

Her mother would not leave; she still believed her father would return. She kept watch over his things, his hat on the hat stand, his medicines on the bench. Her grandmother
was too old to leave, her brother too young. You have to go. No accusations. They made it sound as if her leaving was a painful consequence of war, a forced exile. They made it possible for her to abandon them. Why? They seemed to have surrendered the power to wish for things, even to wish for her to stay. Why did they not howl with the emotion she had detected in their bodies when they embraced her?

The look her father had given her as he was taken away has infused her with a profound sense of duty to life. Her life. He has given her a mission to live. She thought to do that she would have to leave Bosnia, to honour his constituency, the constituency of the condemned who pass to you their legacy. At the moment he was shunted off to die he invested in her a fierce hold on life that lifted her out of the shared fate of her family. It was, she thinks, a moment of destiny. She has taken up his simple command to forbear. She scoffs now as she thinks of how many times she has played this justification. This is too neat and fitting, she says to herself as she puts the shoebox back on a shelf lined with old wallpaper, you did it for yourself. Walking back to the living room, past the bedroom mirror she is disgusted by her smooth and untroubled appearance.

She had promised her mother that she would write when she found a place to live. She thinks of the short factual letter she posted to assure her mother that she had arrived safely. It was an unnecessarily cool letter, intended to dampen their ardour and make some space for her new life. I am fine, please none of you worry. And at the same time she was telling people in Australia who asked, that her family were dead.

At first Lili opened her mother’s letters. They were full of a small distant domestic drama, stalked by war and poverty. Today they shelled the western side of the city all afternoon. Today, Murat smuggled some bread into us. Today it is quiet. Some say the siege will end soon. Dare we believe them? The repetitive movements of the three of them in the apartment, the food they ate, the longing for her, the longing for her father. The news of other relatives and friends who were grieving, starving, injured and killed. And the memories of their lives together that they kept re-telling like a plea not to forget them. All these letters had made her angry. What was she supposed to do? Grieve her whole life like an old woman in a headscarf crying?

For a few months after she arrived, she did not miss her family. She completed the massage course and set about her life with an austere self-sufficiency, proud of her...
detachment. She had felt the power of her own will, of her improved opportunities, she had imagined distances developing between their separating worlds that were buoying and just. Then she stopped opening the letters. Every few months she wrote telling them of her new life in clipped respectful tones, and felt the power of an accumulating hardness. Of its necessity. She had cleansed herself of moral confusion and momentarily of guilt. She had willed her own private forgetting.

Within the first year she believed them somehow superseded. Life could be managed by a series of decisions – you decide to leave your country for a better life, you decide to get a job. You do these things and you feel a gap closing between your thoughts and your actions. This way you can step out of one life into another, this way you can step up in life. You can become automatic.

She recalls Nick’s recent lecture on what he called, the automatic life: When I ask you if you would like to go to Palm Beach, he said, you say, of course I would like to go to Palm Beach. I ask you, are you ready for dinner? Of course, you say. She was silent, uncertain of his meaning, but he continued I ask you what do you think of the museum? You reply that it is beautiful, of course. That’s not saying anything Lili. Do you, in your heart, think it is powerful? Of course, you say. Well, I don’t want any more of courses! Why of course? Nothing is of course. This life is not automatic. You cannot deny experience or passion by making everything seem expected and mundane, otherwise you deny experience. Life is not weary; it is wonderful. Please do not just swallow life whole like that. Please stop saying, of course, as if you live an automatic life!

In Nick’s mind was an indestructible world. Creative, ambitious, alive to the moment. His time spent was never relinquished. His experience accrued. It was difficult to reconcile his intensity with the wife who needed to be massaged, who needed the long physical exhalation of her cooped-up, festering experience. Now Lili thinks of massaging Helen Barlow’s cool back, she sees the irony. His wife conforms to an idea of success and affluence, she is full of all of Nick’s detested ‘of courses’. The woman is rigid and nervous, and while she is preserved, Lili cannot help thinking that Helen Barlow is barely alive. She lays herself out on the massage table, in beauticians’ treatment rooms, at the hair dressers as if she is an old ornament in need of restoration.
place, it seems to her, want to exorcise experience. She does not understand it – why, when their experience is pleasant, even shallow, and easily erased?

Becoming Nick’s lover has given her some shelter from this superficiality, this inexplicable anxiety. She has connected, in a taut sexual spark, to the spirit of the monumental and exists now in a skerrick of future history. His idea of the museum seems like a bastion, impenetrable by mortar fire, unconquerable by cruelty. She thinks it is beautiful how he loves it, and works so exhaustively to make it magnificent.

She opens a kitchen drawer, takes out a blue folder, brushing away a small cockroach that skates on the paper. On the living room floor she opens the folder and spreads sheets of drawings on the carpet. She has started to draw buildings. A few weeks ago she bought a book called *A Summary of Classical Architecture* and copied all the columns Corinthian, Doric, Greek. Then she went to the library and borrowed books with architectural drawings of ancient buildings. The Roman baths in Bath, the Duomo in Florence. She looked at photographs of Pompeii and tried to reconstruct the original buildings from the broken facades, using her imagination. When she is walking to her appointments, she will often take out her sketch pad and draw an outline of a house that impresses her. Then, back in her apartment she devises plans for the houses that she sees. Though she has only been in three rooms in Nick’s house, she has sketched the entire plan and a side elevation which she believes is accurate.

The other day she found the crumpled drawing that she started the first weekend at Palm Beach. She realises that this drawing of her sitting room in Bosnia is amateurish, but as she smoothed it out, she thought it had some integrity. Perhaps the careful yet inexact proportions can be reworked. She turns her sketch pad to a blank page and starts the drawing of her old lounge room again, but once again feels obliged to include everything she knows about the room. After some minutes her paper is a jumble of things that do not match. She cannot make art out of the reality of the room in Bosnia because she cannot bear to leave anything out. It strikes her that while she tells people the lie that her family is dead, she cannot kill off any detail of her memory even for an unimportant sketch. She feels weak and whimpering towards them, increasingly lonely for their company, for their forgiveness, more like a child now she has had the greater experience

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of adulthood. She gathers herself, flips the page over and starts drawing the window of the room in which she sits.

Nick will phone tonight or tomorrow night and make an arrangement to see her. He said last time they met, that he might take her overseas with him, when he is travelling on business. *Have you been to Paris? No, I have not really been anywhere.* The word Paris has taken on an intimate inflection, a mesmerising representation of the progressed woman she could become.

Last week the man at the massage booking agency asked her if she had been to Luna Park. She blushed, the words connecting her like a hot cord to the secret of Nick. Then, on a Sunday, alone, she walked under the Bridge and looked across the harbour at Luna Park, and was sad, knowing it would soon be demolished. She thinks if she ever loses her mind, it will be on a Sunday, in the listless open-air hours of blandness. She had sat opposite the hilarious mouth and clown face sensing its extinction was a kind of crime, exhilarated to think that Nick possessed the power to transform things from trivial to significant.

She sits cross-legged, back straight, examining her drawing. When Nick looks at his plans, she has noticed he sits upright and studies them as if something is moving and only he can decipher the life in there. His art is in him, cannot rub off on anyone or be understood by association. He is complete and cannot be dismantled. She brushes against him, but she does not enter him the way he preoccupies her. In any case it is more than she expects. She counts him, along with her savings, as a calibration that marks the distance between her and desolation, her and poverty, catastrophe and war. Now she has put some obstacles in the way of disaster.

The phone rings and she answers it immediately. It is the man from the massage booking agency. He tells her that Mrs Barlow has cancelled her regular weekly booking. He tells her that there are no complaints. He will be easily able to secure her another client. *Oh, I thought everything was alright…* a shrill tone. He hears the panic and compensates with a hasty reassurance. *Yes, I’m sure it was. Not to worry.*

Does Helen Barlow know? She feels a gust of shame. Does the wife know? She can never visit Nick’s house again. The thought of him talking to her in his study is suddenly euphoric and incredible.
For two days, Nick does not phone. He usually calls her every couple of days. She does not want to call him in his office. The idea seems to place her at a disadvantage, as if she is making a request that a receptionist or secretary has the power to decline. Does she qualify to be put through to Nick Barlow, who is busy and whose time is very valuable?

* * *

Shall I say where you are calling from? They would ask. No, she does not want to leave a message. She does not want to deposit a small desperate piece of herself in his office where it can be observed and judged.

Why does he not call? Because she has been too forceful, too perverse, because she has misjudged his feelings for her? Because she is too proud? Will she only be loved when she completely surrenders herself? If he calls now, this moment, she will do whatever he wants.

On Wednesday, though he still has not called, she packs her overnight bag and goes to the Wentworth Hotel as usual. A young woman with a sleek strawberry-blonde ponytail taps the computer to check her reservation.

No, she says, her freckles quick and merciless around her smile, there does not seem to be a reservation. Could it be under another name?

Lili laughs as if she expects some mistake has been made. Probably. I will check.

Then she walks across the black granite lobby, past the grey ottomans and club chairs, the lift ping in the background, the concierge phone trilling, a waitress switching on low lamps in the front bar.

She had not thought it would end like this, a formal notice via the booking agency, the unmaking of a weekly arrangement, then a silence, as if this thing between them had no roots, no entanglements. Is it so easy to exit a secret? The wife and husband stand together in their rejection of her, and the wife speaks for him.

She goes home on the bus, hating the overnight bag, humiliated by its folded underwear, its special toiletries and the next day's clothes.
Have you been away? The woman, Anne O’Leary, asks, standing in the foyer, holding her cat as Lili enters the building. Anne’s face, yellow in the sour light from the skylight, is curious.

Yes. To Queensland. It is lovely this time of year, Lili says and smiles at Anne.

Oh. I am from Queensland in Brisbane. I would have thought it would be stormy and inclement.

Oh, no. The weather was perfect.

I have just come from the post box. I have been busy writing some important letters. Id like to tell you about them. Do you have time now? Anne O’Leary speaks excitedly, eyebrows active above her glasses, new confidence in her voice.

She stands, looking immensely satisfied, waiting for Lili to follow her into her apartment. She could make some tea.

The prospect of this strange and pathetic company makes Lili feel deeply lonely.

I hear the phone, Lili says and runs up the stairs. But there is no phone ringing.

Inside her apartment she drops the bag in the hall and goes straight to the living room where she pulls the phone plug out of the wall. She does not want to think, that when it rings, it could be Nick. She does not want to ever hope for that.

* * *

At five-thirty the next Wednesday, when she would normally be checking into the Wentworth Hotel, she sets out to the Edgecliff Centre to buy some groceries. There are many stores that are closer, but this is where Helen Barlow probably shops, this is where Nick might drive by on his way home. She puts a denim jacket on over her skirt and blouse. Outside it is cooler than she thought and she is immediately cold.

She walks past the tight impoverished terrace houses crammed together against the skyline, a traffic jam of gabled roofs. She passes the house on the corner with the British flag draped across a four-paned window. She turns into Victoria Street, where a parking sign is bent over and defaced and the café strip is filling up with people drinking wine under awnings at outdoor tables. They have an end of day loudness, a forced relief. Each step on the asphalt jolts in her head, she feels a weakness at the ankles. In her sandals her

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feet are cold. She jerks along, graceless, her heart ripping up its memories into shreds, then chasing them to put them back in place. She steps over the ruptures in the unkempt footpath thinking it will not matter if she falls over.

She strides down the hill to Rushcutters Bay, working up a pace to keep warm. People are walking their dogs across a diagonal pathway and along the harbour foreshore: a man with an edgy Doberman on a taut lead, a couple flanked by two small terriers. The terriers undulate like grubs, their legs concealed in lush white fur that almost sweeps the ground. The transcendent calm of the fig trees under which these people walk appals her. Their huge stiff leaves, their gigantic gothic branches, and the mild contented figures that weave about harbour paths with pampered dogs on leads appal her.

When she had first arrived in Australia, she had thought that everything she saw could be part of her life, if she had wanted it. Why could she not progress, have access to everything, equally like everyone else? She had once considered it possible to become one of these people strolling in the dusk light. Now she realises there is no path to these people's lives for her. The steps that must be taken to reach that immunity are unknown and unknowable. The universe is fixed: she stands on a street longing, they glide, cinematic, emitting their own light. She is effaced. She has fallen below the sightline of the world; purposely obscured and inaccessible to her family and a secret in Nick’s life. Did he ever even say her name to another person?

How did anyone come to the insanity of evening walks in light of all miseries? They are like splayed brush strokes in a painting of fading light while another world bums. And now in Bosnia, yes the siege is over, but do the seedlings of great trees sprout to replace what was destroyed for firewood? Have all the shattered windows been re-glazed? The houses re-built? Have the corpses been given names and gravestones? No. But walk your dogs, keep the pace brisk and even, watch the rippling clouds of sunset colour the sky, go home, take a hot shower, eat well, bid each other good night, another good night. But do not think it could not happen to you. Be warned, there is a latent malice in everything. Even small white dogs bark and bite at their boundaries. Do not think that fig trees cannot be used for firewood.

She pulls her jacket around her, trembling. She walks past the supermarket and along Edgecliff Road to Nick’s house. From across the street, she stands staring at the high wall.
and the flat roof beyond. Even this is not permanent. One day someone will tear it down. She feels the pull of her connection to the house, thinks of the casual disinterested way she once walked through it when it was a neutral place. Her mind clamours over its rooms and walls, the unique quality of the silence in there, a space-ship silence. Another place lost. Just a few words and a few days ago, she had a right to be here. But now her humiliation is complete. It is unbelievable. It is to be expected.

The sun flushes an intense rose-gold on the rendered walls of his house. She turns around and makes her way back to New South Head Road as the light fades and the street quickly becomes dark. Red tail lights, blinking amber indicators, the dark gleam of cars, tentacle shadows of bare trees in headlights — the street is full of ordinary alarm — shapes skewed by lights and the switched-on glow of windows, and people moving into houses and closing doors on other people.

Lili had always thought him estranged from his wife, but now it seems that Helen Barlow has power over her husband, that she represents him. Mrs Barlow has decided that they are to have nothing more to do with Lili. He is not Nick the architect, the man of long pauses and studied work, who holds a vision of something perfect and rare. He is not rare, he is a husband, he exists in a web of connections that refuses to release him.

She buys a frozen lasagne at a local delicatessen. It swings, cold and heavy in the bottom of the plastic bag, occasionally the sharp foil edge scrapes her leg. Should she catch the bus home? It’s cold. The bus pulls into the stop ahead of her. She will walk instead. Without the sun the city is like a cavern, the air a cold metallic grit that catches in her throat, that only screaming would expel.

The moon is out. A trembling sliver. Did her father die under this moon? Did they take him to an enclosure, keep him and beat him for a while, cage him with dozens of others, make him crouch in mud, hugging his knees, knowing he shared the fate of all those men? Like one merging, molten soul, the solitary thought of life flickering in their freezing skulls? There would be no privacy there; he would close his eyes for privacy, for the thin-tissue madness of consorting with his mind in the momentary dark. Would dew have clung to grass, lit like tinsel in the light diffused from flashlights, sweeping over men cowering in a ditch? She hungers for these last details, she hunts them down. They belong to her.
No, she thinks, No, no. You have the world all wrong. You give the horror a weight, a significance it does not have. The killers asserted dominion over life. No, it was not a crime, but a casual triumph to kill these people. They were non-human. The killers were bold; they did not need the drama of darkness and moons to conceal a crime. It was not a tragedy. It did not interrupt evening walks in parks in peace-loving cities. They killed them in the daylight, any light, without stealth, unceremoniously despatched them and buried their warm bodies. They stormed houses wielding machetes and beheaded old people and let their severed heads roll onto the floors of once-loved living rooms where they stared back at their lives in disbelief. A woman in the re-settlement camp had told her, *They took my sister’s baby and threw him in the river. Then they shot her when she tried to jump in to save him.* How do you fight against that? Do you invent a moon, a night forest and faceless men with flashlights in order that life and death should keep their significance? Do you remove it to a dramatic realm in order to accept it? No, no, the point is that the other human, the wrong human, alive or dead, is not significant. That is the point they make in the daylight, while they shoot and raise their thumbs in victory and wave their flags. Then they make a fire and the deeds still fresh on their hands, they drink beer and sing their songs. Later they thank god, speak of their honour, their courageous history, their religion, their mothers and their fathers and the job well done today. It is the physical routine of killing, the military methodology and the work-a-day aftermath that Lili cannot grasp. What ideas have they convinced themselves of? What perversion of the imagination occurs in a man who denounces and murders another man he does not know? It is absurd.

It will happen over and over, it will go on for years, she thinks it will go on forever all over the world. And something like the museum will never stop it. She had thought it might, that it should. If you could understand such a thing as Nick’s museum, how could you kill? But it seems that all a museum does, all the soft tree-lined streets and generous houses and arranged gardens do, is pretend. That is all. They pretend there are no strange and evil conditions that would make destruction and slaughter here it only happens in other distant places for reasons not understood, for a type of human that is entirely different. But it is not so. And Nick, he makes a defence, yes it is an attempt. She had thought it could be her defence too the museum, the beautiful place of culture and

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spirit, infused with his purest intent. *It’s my life’s work*, he had said to her, his face naked and believing. She did not disenchant him; she did not describe the other world. She knew in her heart that he did not want to know.

Her father too was believing. Even being led away he did not think that murderers and haters knew the truth of life. He thought he was superior, that he knew better than they. She hopes that as he was murdered he held to that belief, that he crumpled in the conviction of his own light, never surrendering to their darkness. But as she wishes this, she wonders if it is too much to ask of him — even of the memory of him. Has she purified him to the point where, in death, he has been denied the natural savagery of his thoughts? Does she deny him hate? Shouldn’t she let him take in the hell his way, whatever unknowable way that is? But she is his daughter, she guards his honour, she demands of him all the absolutes of love.

Now in her anger and disillusion, should she contest her father’s version of truth? In the abandonment of her family, in her own youthful selfhood, does she share the version of life that the murderers believe in? The one where every act can be explained in terms of self-preservation? Does she approach their iniquitous moral order? Does she stand at the edge with a match while they light the fires? She wavers, she does not know what she believes, she does not know if you can conjure belief from suffering or if belief is only a theory.

She thinks she will never see the museum. It is too far into the future. How she has loved its innocent spaces, its pure, heartfelt art. And knowing the sincerest part of Nick the architect. Even if he phones her now and she flies up into his arms and they continue for a while, it is broken. It is turning its completeness in her mind.

Near her apartment, she passes the area where transvestites prostitute themselves. There are two, standing on the footpath; their cigarette ends glow like fireflies. One wears a short skirt and fishnet tights. His legs are muscular and male, cinched at the knee. He wears a red bra with black lace, the skin of his mid-riff exposed. The other one, dressed in a leather bustier and black skin-tight pants, leans against the pole of a street sign. They quiver in their boredom, waiting, stimulated by drugs, exhausted by the streets, spending their misery so at the end of each night the misery is all gone, and they can collapse back

*The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008*
to nothing, the equilibrium of being no one, nowhere. In a comprehending glance, she
discards them.

She climbs the stairs to her flat. She is overwhelmingly breathless. Pains in her chest
move with her gasps for air. She lies on the couch, the vinyl cold against her curled body.
In the raw anguish of not seeing beyond this moment, she sob.

She hugs herself; her arms tighten around her, reaching almost to her shoulder blades.
She is too small to contain this turbulence. Lying against the abraded surfaces of her
apartment she tries to will the hardness demanded of her by Nick’s silence. All she can
hope for is some control over herself. Otherwise what is she? A ghost of his desire?

She weeps with her whole body and when she eventually rises from the couch, her
flesh blurs. In the bathroom she splashes her face with water. When she looks in the
mirror, she has the glassy throbbing face of fear, of a creature naked and quelled.

*   *   *

A few nights later she wakes at eleven, thinking she has heard a knock on the door. Her
heart races. Did she imagine it? Was it a knock or just a sound from another apartment?
Her head aches. Her body is a raw circuitry of nerves. Even if it was a knock, she decides
it was reluctant and wavering. She waits in the bed until she is sure there is no one at the
doors.

Then she goes to the kitchen in the dark and drinks a glass of water. She turns on the
light in the lounge and, without hesitation, as if she has entered a new mechanical system
of living, she goes to the hall cupboard and takes the shoebox of her mother’s letters out.
She takes a letter from the top — the latest letter and tears it open, indifferent to its power
over her, exhausted by resistance.

It is a simple letter. They do not mention the siege, the siege is over. They are well.
They do not beg her to come home. Her mother does not mention her father. Cousin
Murat has given them a small dog. Then something emotionally, shockingly vivid:

_The weather has been warm, we went to the beach the other day and it was so hot that
even your grandmother took off her tights, lifted her skirt and paddled in the sea. You_
know the delicate soft skin of your grandmother’s legs – they look like they have never seen the sun. She says to tell you that she understands the beaches in Australia are beautiful, but the sea over here is nice too.

The image strikes Lili as starkly, profoundly real. The unsentimental joy of her grandmother’s soft plump legs in the cool sea. How beautiful! Her grandmother’s body, a profound corporeal defence against misery. The most true thing Lili can think of. She smiles at the audacity of those soft swollen ankles paddling in the sea.

Fragmented intimacies flood her mind – her father’s fierce and loving expression, her grandmother’s vulnerable defiant body, her mother’s anguished embrace, the touch of Nick’s hand on her cheek and his dense sleeping breath. She finds in these recollections an escape from history. She finds in them the private sorrow and narrow joy that sanctifies life in a godless world.

She cries and hugs the letter to her breast. She has kept her home, its Bosnian landscape, the low leaden skies, the vaulted chill, and now also, its summer.

Did the world fail them? She can see from the letter, they have not failed each other. Her history lightens and lives in the modest smile of an old woman cooling her ankles in the sparkling sea, sending her incantation across an impossible distance, we know, we understand, it is alright for you to come back.
In the evening, back at the Royalton Hotel in New York after George’s funeral, Nick goes to open the window and finds it is fixed. Unaccountably he thinks of that first time he went to Lili’s apartment, over seven months ago now. He recalls the arid light, her firm smooth arm reaching behind him to push the old double hung window up on its discoloured cord. An image, almost an idea of what lay outside returns to him — backyards of sandstone terrace houses; a crepe myrtle tree, the ephemeral beauty of its pink flowers above grey and plaintive paling fences. The colour of the blooms unsettling, the feminine heat of them against an absolute sky. Beyond that the silky, languid expanses of sea and light liquefying the city, making of it a quivering mirage. His purpose breaking down. The sound of her sipping lips on the brown mug as meek as a child. He, not understanding his sense of crisis.

He leans in to the closed window of the hotel room and looks over the street. He wonders if he has left them behind — his wife who has moved out, his lover who does not answer the phone, who does not know where he has gone.

Will he keep the house? Will he pull back into one corner of its white spaces — perhaps his study — and insist on a life of dimensions now transfigured, letting the wide rooms breathe and haunt while he recedes to the smallest place? He smiles to himself. He could be a recluse. It is possible. He could be a man who is rich with no purpose for his riches.
Outside the air is unmoving in the celestial blue and freezing night. Something brooding at its heart. April 2000 already and he is standing here in a tensed twilight that has no antecedents and only one trajectory. The museum is the only thing he knows of the future. It fills his full range of vision; it sucks him forward, ineluctably into the next century. Without it, he thinks, he would probably die. It is rapture, it is an apocalypse; he is not sure which. He imagines that other things as yet unknown crouch in darkness ready to spring.

Alzheimer’s. George had shot himself because he had Alzheimer’s. Because he knew he could not count on this standing at a window in an unseen reverie, recalling and remaking his life. Someone at the funeral said a strange thing about Reagan. George couldn’t face losing his mind. He didn’t want to be like Reagan – you know Reagan can’t even remember he was once president? Nick thinks he understands. In their shared disease George and Reagan would have been almost indistinguishable. For any purpose the same man. The same vegetative expressions flexing across their hollow faces with the rampaging panic of not remembering, of losing it all.

After the funeral, on the steps, the morning air vicious with unseasonable ice. And Eva, hunched against the wind, a shifting sliver amid straight tall figures in black.

Now he can hear the low growl of the city through the glass the inner churning of engines continuing into the night. It is dense with effort and seems to come from a subterranean and primal stirring of life. It is a lonely sound, he thinks.

He turns back to the room that is dark except for a thin rod of light that falls from the bathroom door along the carpet. The white bed looks muted, like an unadorned sarcophagus carved into the room; sharp, still, patient, chiselled from lucent stone. He wants no other light. In this semi-darkness he is relieved of yet another impersonal arrangement of things.

He draws a chair up to the window and sits, gazing at the rain sluicing across streetlights, the bland flat roofs of slow cars. He imagines all the people he has known walking towards him. They approach like the credits that roll at the end of a film. Finally liberated from their characters, do they come forth to declare who they really are? To accuse him of misunderstanding their implicit reality?
That day in Lili’s apartment when she leaned over to open the window — the meaning of it comes to him now. It was his first glimpse into a time when he would be of no account. She would have made that movement whether he was there or not. He had been incidental, released from the centre, briefly in a place where his presence made no difference. A place that she embodied.

What had he wanted when he was young? Mastery over his life? Now he knows and also he does not know — and what he does not know has its own power to transform, to exact its own existence.

The others still come, below him on the street, the ones he recognises and now behind them the discs of new faces, unknown, as yet unexpressed, just the force of their bodies, the static of their sparking genes, their nascent minds. The swell of them jolts him to the side.
Epilogue

Sydney Morning Herald
September 12th 2010
ARTS AND CULTURE

Last week, after eleven years in the making, The Luna Museum on Sydney Harbour was finally launched. Nick Barlow, an Australian architect now based in New York, developed the concept during the pre-Olympic euphoria of 1998 and subsequently beat off an esteemed clique of international architects to win the design competition in 1999.

Barlow endured much brouhaha over the initial concept. Undaunted, he then audaciously re-designed the winning scheme, raising the museum thirty-eight metres above the foreshore to deliver a radical and significant monument. The battle with the government was legendary but it is reduced to folklore when viewed in the context of the final building.

Great architecture often attracts controversy. Karl Weiss, who has collaborated on projects with Barlow in Europe, declared that, "The Luna Museum focuses us on the metaphor in architecture in a completely new way. Others are not so affirming. One dedicated modernist, who declined to be named, criticised the building for its lack of unity. It looks like a symmetrical train crash waiting for the salvage team to move in and clean up."

Barlow has developed his own complex advocacy of the building as a symbol of the displacement of the arts and humanities from the centre of culture. But first the monument. Two long tapering buildings intersect at their respective centres. Clad in distressed titanium, these wings, or as Barlow has called them, "trajectories" take on the patina of industrial disuse, while simultaneously evoking the supersonic. In this Barlow establishes the presiding paradox of the building — it exists both in the past and the future. And further: is it unfinished or in a state of dereliction? Is it travelling through space or tethered to the land? Does it exhibit art or merely warehouse it? Is it a monument to
culture or industry? The Luna Museum ignores the modernist tenet that form follows function — in this building there is a surreal disconnection between exterior and interior. This is both metaphor and meta-form — the function seems incidental and transitory, the form seems simultaneously futuristic and superseded.

The interior is a series of raw unfinished spaces. The main picture gallery is cavernous, a double storey volume redolent of an aircraft hangar that overpowers the paintings. This juxtaposition of scales creates an intense alignment of the human with the art — we share the same scale and by implication, the same fate.

Some galleries are small, some asymmetrical. You pass through a narrow, dim bridging space and find in a spot lit corner beneath a beam, a giant canvas. You look through an unfinished wall to the space beyond and beside an exposed air conditioning duct is a sculpture. You ask, Where am I? Am I in the aftermath of some cataclysmic event? A post-war diaspora? Am I in a vacated industrial estate? A crashed jet or a submarine? In these trammelled spaces, elevated as if disconnected — art is in storage or in transit. Consider, the building says, a world in which art does not have a central place in culture. The Museum is portentous.

Barlow spurns modernism’s cohesion, and presents us instead with manifold opposing and ambiguous ideas. In this the Luna Museum might seem post-modern — however it does not appropriate mixed styles or pop-culture icons. It opts for the weight of paradox over irony. It shows us, with an ahistorical seriousness, the consequences of the marginalisation of the metaphysical in favour of the material. In this it possesses a religiosity of intent that seems ancient and claustrophobic — yet it is encased in a purely industrial form on a space age journey conveying cultural artefacts into the unknown. Within this hostile structure, the freight of the Museum — the objects — the art — possess a dwindling, almost archaeological sanctity, made palpable by their precariousness.

When he delivered the Arthur Phillip Lecture at the Sydney Museum last week, Barlow pronounced, ‘the monumental form and the arts are in danger of becoming ossified in our past and revisited as a spectacle or area of specialist study. And further, the seminal cultural role of the humanities is under threat from the frenetic demand of capital to extricate the consumer from the citizen.’ The Museum is a world where post-modern fragments have become remnants.

The Luna Museum ©Julie Ann Morrison 2008
In his lecture he expounded how the building encompasses a sense of enlarged encounter. The Luna Museum is a moment in the infinite made solid. Parallel lines in geometry travel through space on atomised, infinite journeys, isolated in their own trajectories. If one line tilts even a fraction of a degree inward, then at some future point they will intersect. The lines, represented by the buildings, will go on travelling away from each other after that point, but what is interesting is that moment of intersection between humans, in art, in all narrative.

He went on to develop his themes further, As we erode the perceptive and emotional faculties by which we receive the arts and come to embrace solipsism entirely we become entirely without a vision of the future. We are monopolised by the immediacy of the current moment.

We are dealing with extinction on many levels not just in the planet’s environment but in the endangerment of our cultural distinctions and the art that invites us to enter the world of another human being. We live in an old story that is fracturing and fragmenting and can pass as inexorably, methodically and economically as a rainforest. As we can hold the sentiment of the landscape in our minds whilst forsaking it, we are also capable of the sentiment of art and culture, even as we lose it.

The brilliance of Barlow’s Luna Museum is that he captures the moment that travels across time, back and forth, that makes us feel, briefly, ancient and future. This building is not an end point not holistically bound within its own aesthetic logic like Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim or Utzon’s Opera House. The Luna Museum seems precarious, as if one day we could look across to the site and it will be gone.

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