Writing ‘The Shyness Lists’: an autoethnography of social anxiety

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Sian Prior

BA (Hons), Grad Dip Opera, Dip Professional Writing & Editing, Cert IV Training & Assessment

School of Media and Communication
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

December 2014
DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the durable record is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Sian Prior

25 November 2015
Explanatory notes

This PhD has been conducted by project and consists of two separate but related documents: the creative work, a memoir entitled ‘The Shyness Lists’; and an exegesis which addresses a number of research questions raised in the production of the creative work. It is envisaged the creative work will be read first, followed by the exegesis.

Please note that the version of the creative work included in this PhD submission has not been substantially edited or re-drafted since December 2013. That draft was accepted for commercial publication by Text Publishing and in January 2014 I began re-drafting it (with the advice and assistance of a Text Publishing editor) for publication in June 2014 as a work entitled *Shy: a memoir* (Prior 2014). In order to ‘quarantine’ ‘The Shyness Lists’ from that process so that the work in its entirety remained my own creation, without the influence of an external editor, I retained a copy of the December 2013 draft for submission to PhD examiners.

Acknowledgements

For their invaluable advice and support for this project, I would like to thank my supervisors, Associate Professor David Carlin and Dr Brian Morris, and my previous supervisor, Associate Professor Andrea Chester.

For their collegiality and for their helpful comments on the creative work-in-progress, I would like to thank Associate Professor Francesca Rendle-Short, Dr Craig Batty, the members of the RMIT HELP group and my RMIT teaching colleagues.

For proofreading, thanks to Lorna Hendry.

I would like to thank all the friends who have supported me over the last four years, in particular those who offered useful feedback on the creative work-in-progress.

And finally, I offer my abundant love and gratitude to the members of my family who have so generously allowed me to write my version of our shared stories in ‘The Shyness Lists’. 
Publication acknowledgments


Earlier version of Chapter 4 of the exegesis: article entitled ‘Writing the shy body: a textual immersion in social anxiety’, Creative manoeuvres: making, saying, being – The Refereed Proceedings of the 18th Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs 2013, University of Canberra.
Contents

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ 1

CREATIVE WORK .......................................................................................................................... 2

Prologue .......................................................................................................................................... 5

Part One
But Why? ......................................................................................................................................... 6
What If? ......................................................................................................................................... 10
The Boys ....................................................................................................................................... 14
Mistaken Identity .......................................................................................................................... 16
Mirror Mirror ............................................................................................................................... 20
Invisible Me ..................................................................................................................................... 23
Nice Girls ......................................................................................................................................... 26
Approach Withdrawal .................................................................................................................... 28
Prior Print ....................................................................................................................................... 34
Small Talk ....................................................................................................................................... 38
Psych Talk ....................................................................................................................................... 44
Planet Earth ..................................................................................................................................... 46
Unsent Letter ................................................................................................................................... 51
Two Legs ......................................................................................................................................... 55
Shy Guy ........................................................................................................................................... 60
What’s That? .................................................................................................................................... 66
Laboratory Setting .......................................................................................................................... 67
The Lump ......................................................................................................................................... 68
Globus Hystericus ........................................................................................................................... 72
On Lists ........................................................................................................................................... 74
Goodness Me .................................................................................................................................... 76
Not Helpful ..................................................................................................................................... 82
So Lucky .......................................................................................................................................... 84
Fake It ................................................................................................................................................ 87
An Apology ..................................................................................................................................... 92
Darwin’s Blushes ............................................................................................................................ 96
Virtual Self ................................................................. 102
The Wireless .................................................................. 106
On Entomology ................................................................ 109
Which Poison? .................................................................. 113
Invisible Him .................................................................. 117
On Mortality .................................................................. 121
So Temperamental .......................................................... 124
Self/Other ..................................................................... 127
Don't Look ..................................................................... 131
Then This ..................................................................... 138
On Etymology .................................................................. 142
Sunday Paper .................................................................. 143

**Part Two**

Four Thirty Three .......................................................... 145
Belonging and Apart ....................................................... 147
On Textual Intercourse .................................................... 149
The Catalogue Aria .......................................................... 150
One Last Mirror ............................................................. 152
What I Wanted .................................................................. 153
A Masked Ball ................................................................. 154
A Merry Christmas .......................................................... 156
Self In Other .................................................................... 159
A Different Poison ........................................................... 161
Air of Yesterday ............................................................... 163
Black and White ............................................................. 166
Fact versus Fiction .......................................................... 167
Three What Ifs ................................................................. 170
Stranger Than Fiction ....................................................... 171
The Final Interview .......................................................... 172
Three Possible Definitions ............................................... 181
Brahms’ Clarinet Sonata ................................................... 182

**References: Creative Work** ............................................. 184
Chapter Four

Writing the shy body: tracing corporeal history in memoir .....................................242
Bodies have stories ..................................................................................................242
Why the body matters ..........................................................................................244
Why write about a real body? ..............................................................................245
Non-fiction precedents for writing the shy body ..................................................246
The shy body and metaphor ..................................................................................249
Shyness and metamorphosis ..................................................................................251
The invisible body ..................................................................................................252
Exposure therapy ..................................................................................................252

Conclusion ..............................................................................................................255

‘The Shyness Lists’: a contribution to knowledge ..................................................255
Reflections on the uses of memoir ..........................................................................256
When the intellect meets the imagination ..............................................................259

References: Exegesis ............................................................................................261

PROJECT BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................266
ABSTRACT

This PhD by project sits within the discipline of creative writing and aims to address the question: how can the literary form of memoir produce knowledge about the experience of shyness/social anxiety? As a reflection on the affordances of memoir, the project examines the formal considerations and narrative strategies that can address, through life writing, the lived experience of shyness/social anxiety. It discusses the issues raised when an explicitly autobiographical (‘self-presented’) mode of writing is used to address questions of anxiety around self-presentation itself.

Employing an evocative autoethnographic approach, the project aims to bear witness to shyness/social anxiety, to provoke empathy in those readers who do not self-identify as shy, and to provoke self-recognition and self-understanding in those readers who do self-identify as shy. It discovers how one can situate and articulate the ‘I’ voice in a memoir about shyness/social anxiety, and what tensions are generated by the multiple and at times conflicting versions of the ‘self’ we present in public and with which we enter into internal dialogue as we negotiate with our own shifting sense of identity. Analysing examples from published memoirs including Joan Didion’s The year of magical thinking (2005) and Lauren Slater’s Lying (2001), it demonstrates how life writers can employ a range of different voices with which to stage the ‘problem’ at the heart of their narrative.

The project discovers how multiple identity performances can be used to answer questions about truthfulness within the memoir genre, and how these multiple identities can be represented in text by disintegrating the apparently unified ‘I’ and manifesting the internal conversations of the ‘dialogical self’. It demonstrates how a writer can employ elements of form to communicate key ideas relating to their memoir’s primary subject matter, and contends that ‘writing the body’ can be an effective strategy for conveying the lived experience of shyness/social anxiety in memoir. The project also demonstrates how ‘writing shyness’ can function as immersive exposure therapy for the writer (and potentially the reader), helping to produce the kind of personal transformation that Birkerts (2008, p. 23) contends is necessary for a memoir to be successful.
CREATIVE WORK
‘The Shyness Lists’

For Margot, John, Yoni and David
Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety
Twice in the past thirty years I have extracted a mirror from my bedroom. The second time, not so long ago but in a different life, I returned to our house with a screwdriver in my pocket. After making sure that Tom wasn’t home I slipped inside and knelt in front of the wardrobe beside our bed, the screwdriver threatening to escape from my shaking hands. A few twists for each screw, I loosened the metal brackets and gently lifted the glass from the front of the wardrobe door. The reflection of the blue doona cover disappeared, replaced by a close-up of my own headless torso as I carried the mirror out onto the verandah, across the overgrown lawn, through the gate and onto the footpath, keeping my head down to avoid the gaze of any curious neighbours. I laid the mirror on top of a blanket in the back of my car and drove home to my sister’s house.

I have been learning a lot about fear lately. It comes in many guises and one of the strangest is catoptrophobia: the fear of mirrors. Or more accurately, the fear of the reflections within mirrors. Some catoptrophobics are afraid of their own image in the mirror. Some are afraid of words that are reflected by mirrors. Others fear that a mirror might steal their soul.

I wonder if there’s a different term to describe a fear of the reflections to be found in mirrors that no longer reflect you.
PART ONE

But Why?

That's not where it began.

It began a couple of years earlier. At a birthday party. It began with me standing outside of me, watching as I stood silently on the fringe of a group of strangers. A familiar sensation was seeping through my body. It was as if someone had spiked my drink so that instead of a glass of sparkling mineral water I was now sipping a kind of effervescent concrete mix. My limbs were growing rigid and my smile was a rictus grin like the ones you see on the faces of young ballet dancers whose pointe shoes are killing them.

It was a Saturday night in winter and I had been at the party for half an hour. The birthday girl was busy talking to other people and I couldn’t see anyone else I recognised. My partner Tom was there, somewhere in that art gallery full of strangers. Tom’s football team had triumphed earlier in the afternoon and he had celebrated with a couple of whiskies between leaving the stadium and meeting me at the party, and now I couldn’t find him in the crowd.

Sweat was trickling down the insides of my arms under a green jumper that felt too tight and no doubt looked too bright. My stomach was churning and my fingers gripped the glass so tightly they were beginning to ache. And now I was watching myself sidling towards the door.

The car needs to be moved. An hour-long park won’t be long enough. There must be a better one somewhere close by. Or far away. At home, perhaps.

My movements had become as fluid as a cat after a bird. Putting down my glass of fizzy concrete-mix, I moved three steps closer to the door, passing a wall mirror on the way. A calm, confident blonde woman in a perfectly fitting green jumper glanced back at me as I passed by.

A few seconds later I was outside and free and moving fast now, so fast it must have looked suspicious but I could see the car and I was pressing the blue button on the key ring and the headlights were flashing and my fingers had hold of the door handle and now I was inside the car and alone and safe.
After a few deep breaths I started the engine and drove around the block, trying to decide what to do. An empty parking spot with no time limit soon appeared, so there went my one excuse for not returning to the party. Still, I couldn’t go back.

Resorting to my customary technology-of-cowardice I pulled over, found the phone and sent Tom a text, apologising for my disappearance and telling him I’d see him later. I couldn’t remember when I had last felt this lonely.

I turned off the phone and restarted the car and drove slowly home. If it hadn’t been so ridiculous I would have laughed out loud. What was a polite middle-aged woman doing leaving a party without even saying goodbye to her partner, let alone to the host?

Regressing, that’s what. Behaving like she used to before she became Professional Sian. Like she did in the bad old days, when she was Shy Sian.

Shy. It’s such a shy word; a timid little word that begs to remain noticed. Only three letters long and it begins with an exhortation to silence: ‘shhh’.

Reserved is different. Tall men with jutting jaws. Prime ministers can be reserved, but never shy. And quiet implies choice; you could be loud, but you prefer not to, instead perhaps watching purposefully, critically from the sidelines. Strong, silent types are quiet. People like Tom.

Restrainted carries itself with dignity; with an implication of control. Even introvert has a whiff of authority about it. These people have been tested; Myers and Briggs have awarded them an impressive three-syllable psychological label. And most introverts probably don’t mind the label. They have proven themselves useful in the workplace; they make a positive contribution to group dynamics; they don’t usually embarrass themselves in public.

But with the word shy there’s no authority, no control. It’s a blushing, hunching word; a nervous, knock-kneed, wallflower word. A word for children, not grown-ups, because surely grown-ups grow out of shyness. Don’t they?

If I hadn’t been so shy, I could have conducted a little research project at that birthday party. Pretended for a moment that I was my mother, the psychologist. Asked everyone else how they were feeling. There’s a good chance that I was not the only party guest with a burning desire to melt through the floorboards. If I had been pretending to be a psychologist in order to conduct my research project with the partygoers, I probably wouldn’t have used the word shyness. Apparently the clinical term for this thing is social anxiety, a term that has been leached of the redeeming sweetness of ye olde worlde shyness. Jane Austen’s fictional heroines could be shy but still lovable. They were the Nice Girls, young ladies of fine character, excellent marriage material for local landowners.
A **socially anxious** person, on the other hand, is best avoided. Anxiety can be contagious, leaping from person to person like static electricity. I know because I’ve observed myself passing it along on countless occasions.

*Social anxiety* may lack the poetry of *shyness* but, once you put the symptoms together, it’s hard to argue with the diagnosis. If you’re feeling shy you’re worried about something. If you’re a persistent worrier, you’re anxious. If you’re anxious, your mind enters into a pact with your body, sending it forth into the world with an armoury of self-protective physical responses. Danger! Quick – get more air – in case you have to make a run for it. Alarum! Make sure your body is ready to run – use that sweat to cool yourself down. En garde! Here – have a shot of adrenalin – your hands might shake but your legs will move faster when you need to take off.

Except you’re never quite sure why you needed to take off so fast in the first place.

Back home after the birthday party I gave myself a very hard time. Reformed alcoholics berate themselves every time they fall off the wagon; I’d spent a lifetime mentally beating myself up every time I let my anxiety get the better of me. What on earth was there to be afraid of? Why was I still dealing with this irrational response to being in the company of strangers? How would I explain my sudden disappearance to the birthday girl, and to Tom?

I tried to remember previous battles with better outcomes; parties that had metamorphosed from Hieronymus Bosch triptychs of hell into Pieter Bruegel paintings of jolly wedding festivals, where I’d gone from wanting to disappear into the wallpaper to swapping email addresses with half the party guests. Alcohol had often helped. But this time I was on the wagon in preparation for a singing recital – hence the mineral water. Did that put me in the clichéd category of grog-dependent social animals?

Waiting alone in bed for Tom to return, my self-flagellation gradually gave way to something else. I was in my forties, not fourteen. Too old to be sideswiped by these ridiculous fears. Too stubborn to let myself avoid situations that might provoke them. There had to be a way to remove this thing, or at the very least to control it.

To control something, surely you must first understand it. As a journalist, I had made a living out of asking questions. Lying there in the dark under the blue doona, I began listing them in my mind.

What exactly was shyness and how did other shy people feel?

Was shyness the same as introversion?

If so, how could I account for my complicated professional life, which had mostly involved being a show-off in front of a multitude of strangers? Showing off as a radio
presenter, showing off in newspaper articles, showing off as a musician, showing off as a writing teacher, showing off so often that most people would never believe me if I told them I was shy.

But where had it come from, this fear?

Was shyness born or bred, or both?

Were there any advantages to being shy?

Did shyness ever magically disappear?

Why was I still fighting this battle after all these years?

And why did that matter so much to me?

I recalled one of my extroverted friends rolling her eyes and declaring 'Shyness is SUCH a waste of time!' She was right. It usually felt like a waste of time. Blushing, trembling and hyperventilating in the presence of other mere mortals – or working hard not to blush, tremble and hyperventilate in their presence – chewed up an insane amount of emotional energy. I wondered what Charles Darwin would think of shyness; whether there was any evolutionary benefit from this affliction.

Affliction? Surely I exaggerate. Affliction is an even more olde worlde term than shyness. In the Bible affictions that cause trembling and gasping are mostly the work of evil spirits acting on behalf of the Devil. We the afflicted must battle the malicious authors of these mysterious maladies in order to attain a state of grace.

In my family we held no truck with the Bible and its invisible agents of evil. In my family, mysteries were simply things about which you hadn’t yet asked enough questions. And yet. For me, there had always been a battle for a state of grace, or at the very least for some equanimity, in the presence of human company, and the cause of my distress had remained a mystery.

In my late teens I bought a pair of dangly black and white earrings at a street market. On each earring was printed the words DON’T PANIC. I wore those earrings to university almost every day and people noticing them often assumed I was a Douglas Adams fan. In fact I hadn’t yet heard of the British writer’s fictional e-reader, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,¹ whose front cover apparently sported the same instructions. Those earrings carried a message to my young adult self.

Other humans are not aliens. There is no need to be afraid. They will not harm you. Relax.

I was still trying to follow those instructions. Sometimes, perhaps often, I failed. But why?
What If?

When I was ten years old I had a friend called Sally who lived up the road and around the corner. She’d been to Disneyland.

Sally had sporty parents who always wore runners. They taught Physical Education at the local high school and were as short as each other. Sally’s family had spent some time living in America (America! Where colours were brighter and everything happened long before it happened here, where everyone spoke televisionese and they had Disneyland in 3D). The sporty parents talked to us kids like we were adults and all the kids in Sally’s family had blue eyes like all the people in America.

Sally was my best friend at primary school, when she could fit me in around also being best friends with the other Sally in our class whose Dad went to Vietnam and then came home and killed himself and wasn’t that a strange thing to have in common with someone, a dead dad? We all played netball at lunchnode and because I was tall I got to be goalkeeper and because Sally was small like her shorty sporty parents she played centre. And on the weekends when I was bored I would miss Sally and her neat, hard little netball throws and I wished we could play together.

‘She’s just up the road and round the corner’, my Mum said. ‘Why don’t you go over there?’

Over there they had:

- A basketball ring
- A trampoline
- Handsome brothers who could do tricks on the trampoline
- Coca-Cola
- A colour television

At home we had:

- Fruit trees
- A piano
- A stepfather who sold trucks
- A sister who was almost never home
- A brother who played the trumpet
- A lot of books
- A framed picture of Bertrand Russell
'It's such a shame you won’t go and visit Sally', my mother said.

What if: I got there and Sally was busy playing with the other Sally and they didn't want me there?

What if: I got there and Sally was out and I'd have to make grown-up small talk with the shorty sporty moustachioed Dad?

What if: I got there and the eldest blue-eyed brother looked at me and I blushed?

What if: I got there and Sally wasn't playing with anyone else but she said she was too busy to play with me?

What if: I got halfway there and decided Sally probably wouldn't want me there and had to turn around and come home?

What if: I got there and Sally didn't want me there?

I could no more go up the road and around the corner than I could go to Disneyland.

Not long ago I heard those two words what if repeated over and over in a swanky city hotel. In my spare time I had begun trying to answer my list of shyness questions. A simple Google search had already turned up some useful information. If asked, up to forty percent of us would describe ourselves as shy. At least thirteen percent of us spend some part of our lives suffering from a form of shyness so extreme that it has been labelled a phobia. But in my town, Google told me, there were ‘recovery’ programs available for sufferers, and the same organisation that offered those recovery programs also ran an annual seminar on social anxiety. I decided to check it out.

Calming ambient music wafted through the conference room as we all took our seats in front of a wall of art deco mirrors. Whoever thought seating a bunch of shy, self-conscious people in front of a bank of mirrors was a good idea, I wondered? A female psychologist from the Anxiety Resource Centre walked to the lectern and began describing the typical thought processes of the socially anxious. 'Here's a case study', she told us.

She’s a woman in her thirties and she’s been working in the same small business for fifteen years. She did very well at school, well enough to enrol in a law course. So she drove to university for her first class. But she couldn’t get out of the car. She was too afraid. 'What if the other students think I’m stupid, or awkward? What if the teacher thinks I’m weird?' she thought to herself. So she drove home again and instead of becoming a lawyer she got a job in accounts where she didn’t have to interact with many people. She never applied for a promotion or took up any training opportunities in her job because that would involve putting herself forward. But she
was bored and depressed working in accounts, she was actually highly intelligent, so ten years after her first attempt, she applied to do law again. Once again she was accepted and once again she drove to university for her first class. This time she managed to get out of the car and go to a tutorial. But she was extremely uncomfortable being surrounded by all those strangers. And when the teacher told everyone they would have to do a verbal presentation of an essay, she panicked. ‘What if I open my mouth and I can’t speak? What if the other students laugh at me? What if the teacher thinks I’m an idiot?’ The woman fled the class and never returned.

And if I had been there too, that first time? If I had clambered off my stepfather’s motor scooter in the university car park and noticed the woman sitting in her car, gripping the steering wheel as if she was on a boat in heavy seas? Would I have realised she was just like me, steeling herself against the rising terror of stranger danger? Would I have knocked on the car window and offered her a shy smile?

Or if I had been there the second time? If I had sat next to her at the back of the crowded tutorial room, would I have seen her rigid shoulders, her shaking hands? Would we have recognized each other, felt the thrum of each other’s anxiety, heard the silent whisper of each other’s what if s? Or would we have remained invisible to each other, both avoiding eye contact with everyone in the room, in case we were found out?

Would I have kept my head down but my ears open, listening out for the most talkative student, the one who made the grumpy tutor smile in spite of himself, and nursing a small hope that this extrovert would notice me, take me under their wing, rescue me?

I’m afraid so.

If you’re shy, the words what if line up in front of you like a row of hurdles on an athletics track. Leap over one and there’s another one waiting for you. Some days it can be hard to find the energy to keep leaping.

My grandmother Peg Jones rarely encountered the what if hurdles. Or if she did, she hurtled towards them at such speed, she knocked them flying. Peg had no fear. She would talk to anyone, anywhere, about anything. Complete strangers would be bailed up in trams and enlightened about her grandchildren’s prodigious (and at times imaginary) talents. Teenagers nodding under headphones would be enlisted to help carry her shopping trolley up and down the stairs of buses. Random dog-walkers would be encouraged to help her pick up litter on her beloved bay beach.

And she would help anyone out, any time, whether they needed it or not. Peg wasn’t a Bible-basher, but she went to church often and she took her Christianity seriously. Her
God had high expectations of her and she did her best to meet them. She drove old ladies from nursing homes to supermarkets to do their shopping. She looked after the neighbours’ triplets when their parents needed a break. She leafleted entire suburbs for her favourite local politicians. And perhaps in resolution of some simple karmic equation – when she asked for help, it would usually be given.

As a child, I was often embarrassed by this free exchange of facts, fabrications and favours. ‘What if they don’t want to know that I play the clarinet?’ I begged her. ‘What if they don’t need your help?’ (‘What if they think you’re a crazy lady?’ was one question I never spoke out loud, nor its anxious corollary, ‘What if they think I’m crazy like you?’) Peg would look at me as if I was speaking a foreign language and hurtle onwards.

As an adult I learnt to admire this quality of fearlessness in Peg, even to envy it. I grew protective of her in these encounters, filling in the gaps for surprised strangers, like a translator. ‘Peg’s been looking after this beach for years’, I would explain. ‘She helped plant these dune grasses herself. She really hates to see rubbish lying around.’ Or ‘Peg is nearly ninety, you know, she’s very independent but she needs some help getting down the bus steps.’

And when, as an eighty-three-year-old widow, Peg fell breathlessly in love with a dapper gent a couple of years her senior, my admiration only grew. When she took the two single beds that she and my late grandfather Lloyd had occupied and converted them into a double bed for lovers, there were no what ifs. (What if her friends are shocked? What if her daughters are offended? What if she breaches some unspoken rule about sex between octogenarians?)

When Peg and her boyfriend bought themselves a tandem bicycle and took to cycling up and down the beach path each morning with Peg’s small dog perched in a basket on the handlebars, there were no what ifs. (What if she falls off? What if he has a heart attack? What if people driving past in their cars laugh at these silver-haired eccentrics?) Peg just pedalled on into the bracing sea breeze.

Four grandparents: Peg and Lloyd, Mavis and Stan. And before them, eight great-grandparents. Sixteen great-great-grandparents. Ad infinitum. All that DNA, flowing like sap down the family tree towards me. All those character traits pooling in one random puddle of personality. Where did Peg’s fearlessness go? Such a strong streak in her character, so apparently absent in her blinking, blanching granddaughter.

Perhaps not absent. Just trapped, like an insect in amber, by chronic embarrassment.
The Boys

I began borrowing books from the library. Books on blushing, on embarrassment, on anxiety. Journal articles about the parenting of shy children, about the differences between shyness and introversion. They piled up on the bedside table, teetering towers of tomes with alliterative titles and ludicrously long subtitles.

Tom was reading the Bible again.

'But you don't believe in God any more', I said. 'You're a lapsed Catholic. You don't think those stories are all true, do you? Surely it's just one big mash-up.'

'Who knows what's truth and what's fiction?' Tom answered. 'Does it matter? It's the poetry that interests me.'

I remember believing in Father Christmas.

I remember believing in the Tooth Fairy.

I think I even believed in the Easter Bunny for a while.

Clearly, as a child, I had no problem with magical thinking.

But I don't remember believing in God, which was a pity. An invisible friend would have come in handy in the loneliest moments of shyness.

Once, though, I thought He was worth a try.

In grade five things were on the turn. Boys and girls had moved from occupying separate demarcated zones in the schoolyard to 'going round' with each other. Sally had an eleventh birthday party and invited some boys and she went into her bedroom and kissed one with her tongue and then she came out of her bedroom and told us all about it. She said he tasted of Twisties.

I felt sick.

I could almost taste those wet salty crumbs in my own mouth, feel his gluey tongue poking around my metal-filled back teeth, imagine his orange saliva mingling with my fizzy lemonade saliva. Sick.

But still. I wanted one of the boys to want to kiss me too.

Boys didn't kiss shy girls, especially not tall, awkward, bookish ones. They barely even noticed us.

Then one day some magic happened.

On the walk home from school somehow I managed to invite some boys to my house and – miracle of miracles – they came.

They came in a hurly-burly bunch of boyness, their grey school shirts streaked with darker patches of grey from falling over (boys were always falling over, they seemed to
love it, I couldn’t think of anything worse), their shoes smelly, their hair sweaty. They came down our driveway and into our backyard and there they discovered our orange tree, heavy with unripe fruit.

Oranges became missiles.

All the boys took turns picking green oranges from the tree and hurling them over the fence and into the neighbour’s swimming pool. Every splash raised a cheer from the boys. (Boys were so loud.)

Mum was at work. My teenage sister Yoni was never home. Where was my brother David? I don’t know. There was just the eruption of boys and the hard green missiles zinging through the air into the invisible swimming pool. And deep in the pit of my stomach the fizzy excitement of Having The Boys There mingled with the salty terror of What The Boys Were Doing and I wanted them to stay/go/please stay/please go/just go now/would you all go away now please?

But I said nothing. Shyness had got my tongue.

Eventually, when all the green oranges were gone, all The Boys went home, leaving me to wait for The Repercussions.

And soon after my mother arrived home from work there was a knock on the front door and from the other end of the hallway I could tell it was the neighbour. And though I couldn’t hear what was being said, from the apologetic pitch of my mother’s voice I knew that now she knew. About The Boys.

Then she came to the room I shared with my brother and words were spoken and the ones I remember are: You must go next door in the morning and apologise.

Apologise to The Neighbour. An adult whom I didn’t know but to whom I would have to make my shameful confession. About The Boys.

That’s the first time I wanted to die.

And that’s the last time I tried God.

I lay in bed that night hyperventilating with fear and having a silent word – the last word – with God.

If you do something that stops me having to go next door and apologise to The Neighbour, God, I said, I will believe in you. I will. Always, from now on. If not, I would like to die now.

It seemed like quite a good deal for God.

But He failed to deliver and that was it for me and God.

And, with the exception of one persistent redhead, that was it for me and The Boys for a long time.

They were too dangerous for shy girls.
Mistaken Identity

Cold air on the back of my neck. Light-headed without those long golden locks.

*Rapunzel, Rapunzel, where did all your hair go?*

The smell of boiled cabbage and milk custard mingled in a swampy overload.

In a long lunch queue in an interminable lunch hour in a noisy cafeteria in an overcrowded comprehensive school in bus-laden London at the fag end of the 1970’s slouched a tall fourteen-year-old with a haircut she regretted.

A tap on the shoulder. ‘Two pretty girls in blue pencil skirts. Both frowning. ‘Excuse me, but we was just wondering, are you a boy or a girl?’

He/she/it stopped breathing.

Something shifted and crumbled. The last certainty. The thing I couldn’t laugh at. ‘Girl’, I whispered and turned away.

My mother Margot, a psychologist, had taken study leave from her academic job in Melbourne to spend six months at London’s Maudsley Hospital. My sister Yoni had just finished high school and left home but the rest of our family – me, my brother David, and our stepfather John – accompanied Margot to England.

There had been a few laughs, new-school tales recounted by my brother and I when we were safely back home in our green-carpeted rental flat in Dulwich. One of my classmates had inquired, ‘How come you speak such good English?’ *Neighbours* hadn’t been invented yet, Londoners watched *Coronation Street*. Australia was a mutant starfish clinging to other side of the spinning globe. *Terra nullius* for the school kids of Crystal Palace and Dulwich Village. My down-under accent was, at times, impossible for them to understand.

‘Are all Australians really tall like you and your brother?’ was another question, and ‘What are you hiding in that briefcase you carry around with you all the time?’

The ‘briefcase’ was a velvet-lined double clarinet case that I carted from class to class, waiting for after-school big band practice; the only time I felt anything close to comfortable amongst the other students. No speech required, just another piping tone in the mix of hoots and tweets and blasts. Sometimes when I arrived early for practice the West Indian boys who played in the steel drum band would be swaying in a ragged line, brown arms waving over the metal pans like card trick magicians, conjuring the sound of shy church bells seduced by calypso. I wanted to curl up inside one of those drums and let the music undo me.

I can’t remember whose idea the short haircut was. Maybe mine; a new me for a new country. Something more sophisticated for someone who would soon be fifteen. A
Princess Di cut, two years before the shy English bride-in-waiting first appeared in front of the homicidal cameras.

Under my lovely golden locks hid a crown of darker hair, a post-pubescent inheritance, a saboteur of self-image. I went into the Dulwich Village salon a blonde and came out a boy.

Before landing in London, I thought I was:

Female (but not girly)
Tall (but not too tall)
Blonde (like my father)
Articulate (like my mother)
Normal (though self-conscious)

I had never thought about the fact I was:

Australian (not English)
Accented (Australian, not English)
Middle-class (not working class)
White (not black like most of the kids at my school)

It turned out I was also:

Androgynous
Enormous
Brunette
Incomprehensible
Different

In London I was an Austr-alien. My parents interpreted my dark moods as sulkiness and/or ingratitude. After all, not every fourteen-year-old had the opportunity to travel and live in Europe (Europe! Where history is more historical, where people ride around with baguettes in their bicycle baskets, where horizons can be widened).

Shyness left me lonely. I spent most lunchtimes in the library, reading Jane Austen. It wasn’t that my fellow students were particularly unfriendly. I was irrelevant to them. After their initial curiosity faded, I became invisible. And I couldn’t work up the courage to try and insert myself into the tight little cliques that formed the social ecosystem of this vast comprehensive school.
One day in a sociology class, towards the end of my five months at Kingsdale Comprehensive, a girl called Marie with an exotic French-sounding surname (her father was from Mauritius) invited me to come ‘darn the chipper’ with her and her mates after school. Those words made no sense to me. Was it a sewing club? Something for birdwatchers? I hadn’t a clue. I was so grateful for the invitation that I accepted.

And immediately panicked.

I couldn’t sew. I didn’t know anything about birds. What if? What if what if what if what if?

My patient brother, who was a couple of years ahead of me in the same school and apparently coping better with this strange new world, translated for me: ‘She means the fish’n’chip shop. Down the chipper. For some chips.’

So after school the next day I handed my briefcase full of clarinets to David to take home for me and followed Marie to the high street. I hovered awkwardly in the semi-dark outside the front of the chipper, nibbling on hot chips, saying almost nothing, while my new friend chatted with a group of white boys from our class. I watched as she sidled closer to the tallest lad, twirling her hair around her fingers, making him laugh with her vocab of filthy French words. Trapped in my alien man-woman costume, with my newly short dark hair and my chunky jeans, I was incapable of flirting with those boys. I wanted to, but it simply wasn’t in my repertoire.

About a year after my return to Australia, Marie gave birth to the daughter of that lad and dropped out of school. She wrote to me every few months in mutant schoolgirl Franglais about life as a sixteen-year-old married lady. It didn’t sound to me like she was having as much fun as she’d had darn the chipper.

I have made half a dozen visits to England since that first sojourn as a fourteen-year-old. Each time a pall of misery has descended on me, like the early twilight that fell as I walked home from school that winter. Even if I’ve been having a lovely time, wish you were here, visiting old friends, strolling the city streets with Tom, some part of my brain has always been sucked back to that London lockdown.

My thoughts turned to the Austral- alien girl at Kingsdale Comprehensive as I sat there in the social anxiety seminar in the hotel conference room full of mirrors. The psychologist told us that shy people have a neat self-sabotaging list of assumptions about themselves.

If you suffer from shyness you worry a lot about the impression you’ll make on others. Your mind circles obsessively around thoughts such as: I’m different to everyone else; I’m weird; I’m going to be embarrassed when people notice me and how different and weird and therefore unlikable I am. Irrational thoughts from a mind that
imagines a critical audience scrutinising your behaviour. A mind that is constantly self-monitoring, creating a vicious circle of clumsy behaviour, social avoidance and an impoverished repertoire of social skills.

It all sounded horribly familiar.
**Mirror Mirror**

The first time I removed a mirror from my bedroom wall I was nineteen years old. It was a plain circular mirror, the size of the windows on the Titanic, and it hung beside the door. I slipped my fingers behind the glass. Trying to ignore the clinging cobwebs I found the thin metal chain and lifted it off the nail. I climbed on a chair and slid the mirror on top of the wardrobe, catching a last glimpse of my frowning face framed against the ceiling as I pushed the reflective glass out of view. From now on, whenever I left the privacy of my room, I would have to be myself, not who I was trying to present myself to be. That was the theory, anyway.

I was at university, a place where I would finally feel like a grown-up, where I would magically shed this feeling of not quite belonging in the world. This had turned out to be a fantasy, and checking how I looked before entering the world had become a habit bordering on a compulsion.

I was as interested in my appearance as the next nineteen-year-old. It wasn’t exactly narcissism, though. In Caravaggio’s portrait, Narcissus stares into the glassy pool with a foolish smile on his face. This pretty boy is convinced of his own incomparable beauty. I, on the other hand, rarely smiled into my little ship’s window. Reassurance is what I sought, a guarantee that I was neither invisible nor freakish, that my face, my body, my being, would hold together outside the safety of that room. I needed to be convinced that I was still in one piece because it seemed faintly possible that overnight my left eye might have slid down my face to my chin, like one of Picasso’s portraits of a soon-to-be discarded lover. I was reading Kafka, immersed in his oddly familiar world of frightened outsiders. *What if*, like Kafka’s character Gregor Samsa, I metamorphosed overnight into a disgusting insect, scuttling along the wall and hiding behind the mirror with the spiders?

I needed the mirror to compose my features, set my expression, straighten the mask. I had to see myself as others were about to see me – or as I wished them to see me. If I thought it was possible, for example, that the dark-skinned stranger with the fringed shoulder-bag whom I’d been staring at for weeks in the university I might be ahead of me in the coffee queue that day, it was even harder to drag myself away from my reflection and get to class.

Twenty-five years later, my quest to understand shyness was turning me into an amateur psychologist. Sitting up in bed surrounded by books and articles about social anxiety, I laughed out loud as I read about a researcher who had invented a mathematical formula for the impulse that had been tugging me towards my own mirror image back.
then. According to the formula I found buried in a psychology journal, my mirror problem could be reduced to a small collection of letters and numbers:

\[
SHYNESS = M \times (1 - p)^2
\]

The formula made no immediate sense to me. Maths – I had always hated it. So neat and precise. Every *what if* seemed to have an answer in maths. (There was one exception. I loved the simple mathematics of wave sets; the mental calculations you made to catch one. The quiet sea rising up and pulsing shorewards; first a small one (not worth it) then a medium (careful) then a large (maybe not) then an even larger (forget about it) and finally the one to catch, the afterthought, the steady, pulsing wave that gently picked you up and carried you high above its foaming froth all the way to the shallows. Waves ignored you. You were the invisible unselfconscious rider. I loved that.)

Fortunately, though, there was a translation for the shyness equation. Apparently \( M \) equalled the degree to which I was motivated to make a desired impression on others, and \( p \) equalled how likely I thought it was that I could make that desired impression. My level of \( SHYNESS \) would increase when I was motivated to make a desired impression but doubted I would be able to do so. In other words, the more anxious I felt about whether my chunky spectacles would be a turn-off for Mr Hippy Shoulder-Bag in the university I, the more shy I felt and the more time I spent staring at those plastic-rimmed lenses in the mirror, wishing them away.

Of course we all worry about what others think of us. If we didn’t care at all, we would probably be psychopaths. The rub for shy people, according to the experts, is the extreme level of discomfort and anxiety we experience over the impression we think we’re making.

My fixation with mirrors resurfaced in print in my mid-thirties. I was writing opinion columns for broadsheet newspapers (having always had a lot of opinions) and print was the perfect medium for the physically self-conscious. One of those columns was about a fictional character called Magazine Woman. The column described the sensation, particularly for women, of being shadowed by an imaginary creature of such physical perfection that she showed us up wherever we went – at the beach, in the gym, in the mirrors of change rooms in clothing stores.

I grumbled about how, in one part of our cynical media-savvy brains, we knew all about her hair-brushing, her airbrushing, her waxing and teasing and plucking, her tinting and fudging, her rigid work-out regime, her dental and her cosmetic bills. We understood she was a ‘pawn of the industrial/entertainment complex’ designed to stimulate our desire for retail therapy and distract us from the real problems facing this over-consuming society of ours. And yet still she haunted us.
This fantasy woman was partly a vehicle for my feminism, a way of venting my irritation with the saturation images of unattainable female beauty in the media. At university I had read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*; perhaps I was unconsciously echoing her words: ‘Even if each woman dresses in conformity with her status, a game is still being played... she is... the character she represents, but is not... she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus to seem to herself to be stabilised, justified in her splendour.’

In retrospect, my rant against Magazine Woman was a sign that, in spite of my ongoing campaign to banish the shame-ridden self-consciousness that had plagued me as a teenager, those feelings had never entirely gone away. My desire for a ‘stabilised’ self-image, my anxious quest for perfection, was still chewing up a ridiculous amount of mental energy.

Was she my ideal self? Or my reflected twin, like that of Narcissus, always just out of reach? ‘She’s in the bathroom mirror’, I wrote, ‘standing just behind you, smiling seductively with her hair all tousled and her fashionable pink bathrobe framing her perfect neck. Her skin is clear, her scent is fresh, and she’s putting you to shame again... She’s your greatest friend, your worst foe, your Nemesis – she’s Magazine Woman.’

There was a time, half a decade ago, when I thought I had become reconciled to my image in the mirror. When I thought Magazine Woman had been banished for good. My brother’s wife was getting rid of some furniture and she suggested I take a look before it went to the hard rubbish. I salvaged a long narrow mirror from the pile and took it home to Tom in the back of my car. Then I got out the power drill my stepfather John had given me and screwed the mirror onto the door of the wardrobe beside our bed.

Now as we sat propped up on pillows, Tom reading his Bible, me reading my library books about social anxiety, there were four of us in the room; the bookish couple and their mirrored twins. But only four.

With Tom beside me there in the bed, Magazine Woman disappeared.
Invisible Me

I began asking around, trying to work out if my self-conscious adolescent anxiety had been unusual or if everyone felt the same way at that age. Most of the teenagers I knew seemed so much more confident than I had ever been, including Tom’s two teenage daughters. One night when they were visiting us for dinner I asked the eldest about the kids at her high school. She quickly summed up the social cliques in her year with a neat list of shorthand labels: ‘You’ve got the Fashion Girls, the Cool Guys, the Nice Girls, the Arty Crowd, the Sports Jocks and the Invisibles.’

At the last label I caught my breath.

‘You know’, she explained patiently, ‘the ones you don’t notice much. They don’t belong to any group and never really say anything. So, like, they’re invisible.’

I did know, and could recall how often I felt like one of them.

Some time in the early 1980s I went away to a national music camp in a bluestone boarding school just outside of Melbourne. On the first morning of the camp I squeezed myself onto the end of a long bench at the communal breakfast table. The dining room had high ceilings and leadlight windows, a Hogwarts set-in-waiting, decades before the bespectacled English schoolboy first slipped on his invisibility cloak. The long table was crowded with young people I had never met.

As I began to eat, shyness struck like a sudden palsy. The spoon full of soggy cereal started to shake and I had to put it down. There were two certainties in my mind, and they were entirely contradictory. First: everyone is looking at me. Second: no one can see me.

A thin boy sat down opposite me and introduced himself. (So I’m not invisible then.) His lips were bruised a deep pink from the pressure of his trumpet mouthpiece. I blushed and stammered but somehow we managed to have a conversation. He was in the first orchestra; I was down in the third. He enthused about his conductor who apparently liked to sing a line from the orchestral score in a high falsetto voice and then make the player whose line it was sing it after him. (I would rather die.)

The trumpeter was not handsome but he had absurdly long eyelashes. As I watched him demolish a dozen Weetbix, my gratitude morphed effortlessly into a romantic crush. This brought its own fresh bout of paralysis. And so communication became almost impossible.

After rehearsals I kept a covert watch on him from the other side of the school swimming pool, silently making lists of the opening lines to conversations we might have.
'Bartok – the Concerto for Orchestra – wow – what about those muted trumpets in the second movement!

Or

'Stravinsky – A Soldier’s Tale – how HARD are those rhythms! Do you reckon your conductor could sing the trumpet part?'

Or

'Thanks for the chat at breakfast. Do you want to marry me?'

If I had been invisible I could have floated silently across the pool, past the dive-bombing trombonists and the dog-paddling flautists, slithered up onto the hot concrete and lay there eavesdropping as the trumpeter chatted to the oboist with the long curly hair and the perfectly filed fingernails. I could have listened and learnt how girls with perfectly filed fingernails perfected their small talk.

My parents had first met at the same annual music camp about twenty-five years earlier. He was a trumpeter; she was an oboist. Like me, she chewed her fingernails. Maybe he did too. They were both Methodists back then and they were both shy. It’s a miracle I was ever born.

But happily there was a lot of horseplay around that same swimming pool in the 1950s. There were pranks and hi-jinks and come-hither looks. Maybe she took a chance and swam to the other side one day for a chat. Or maybe he did, but somehow they got talking. He had a small motorbike called ‘The Eggbeater’ and she rode on the back of it with her arms around his broad trumpeter’s ribcage. He took up jazz. She gave up religion. They got married.

Together they produced one bold child (my sister Yoni) and two shy children (my brother David and me) who all played musical instruments. The youngest one grew up and went to Music Camp and met a trumpeter. We didn’t get married. In fact we never even got fresh. Decades later, though, I am still absurdly grateful for our breakfast conversation (mistaking gratitude for romantic love became a habit of mine). In my memory it was an oasis of communion in a desert of social anxiety.

But memories can be lies.

Not long after I had started my shyness research I wrote an essay about my memories of battling with social anxiety at that music camp. The essay was broadcast on the radio and after it went to air a female listener sent me an email:

Sian, I remember you from those music camps. I was back there in the brass section. As a shy person myself you seemed part of the ‘cool’ crowd and assured of your place in the social hierarchy. What an arresting thought all these years on that the
sense I had of your being unapproachable might have been about your shyness, not just my own shyness or my failure in all things ‘cool’.

Maybe she was mistaking me for someone else? I rifled around in my wooden box of precious things and dug out my diaries from those teenage years, looking for the entries about music camp.

Well what do you know: the social desert turns out to have been teeming with life. There were trips to nearby surf beaches with flocks of flautists. Breathless moments on the basketball court with a double bass player. Late night deep-and-meaningfuls in the dormitory with a lesbian harpist. And exhaustion, constant exhaustion, constantly diarised – perhaps the exhaustion of the socially overwhelmed? Or the exhaustion of passing for someone you’re not?

There were even letters from the long-lashed trumpeter, just a handful, written during the months following the camp. He lived in a different state and the letters petered out after a while.

But why hadn’t I remembered that part of the story? How had I forgotten all the frenetic social activity surrounding those orchestral rehearsals? Which part of my brain had been editing those scenes, giving Shy Sian the starring role and leaving Sociable Sian on the cutting room floor? Perhaps if my shyness had faded away in the intervening years I might not have retained such vivid memories of that shaking spoon.

My fellow Music Camper concluded her correspondence:

Like you, my path beyond shyness has also involved putting it into words. By talking about it in the context of relationships where I am accepted rather than judged, it has moved from the ‘zone of shame’ into the zone of normal human experience…

Thank you again for such a candid piece of writing.

Candid? Now I was the one in the zone of shame: ashamed of the gulf between my self-pitying memories of loneliness and the recorded history in my diary of constant companionship. Facts revealed to be partly fiction.
Nice Girls

This is what really happened. I often felt like one of The Invisibles, but each time the black hole of social invisibility threatened to swallow me up, some extrovert would appear and rescue me, some social comet in whose wake I could trail, enjoying the fizz and spark. My closest friend was often the person who told the funniest stories to the largest number of people at any social gathering, and I was usually happy to lead the laughter. People like:

Sally the netball star with her glamorous American ways.

English Marie darn the chipper with her flirty French ways.

Mieke with her Dutch cheekbones and her anti-authoritarian ways.

Mieke had adopted me on my return from London when I was struggling to find a place in the social ecosystem of my old/new school. The gap left by my absence had closed over and at lunchtimes I was drifting around with a group of Nice Girls whose conversation topics tended towards male tennis stars and the girls' budding interest in Christianity. (One of those Nice Girls made contact with me many years later and reminded me of the time I announced to them all that religion was 'for people who can’t handle the knowledge of their own biological insignificance'. Not Nice.) My repertoire of small talk on either of those topics was practically non-existent and I was still lonely.

When Mieke joined our year I noticed she was soon moving effortlessly between our own school’s cliques of Arty, Sporty, Nice and Cool Girls. She even found ways to make her cloud-grey uniform look fashionable, leading the trends in sleeve-rolling and hemline length. Somehow I caught her eye and she decided to make me her confidante and co-conspirator. As always, I was the approachee rather than the approacher. For a long time I couldn’t understand why she wanted to be my friend.

Mieke was often in trouble at school, mostly (it seemed to me) for the crime of fearlessness. She was unembarrassable. She called me ‘Prior’ and introduced me to wearing eyeliner and to breaking the rules. And she banished my loneliness.

One school day after classes had finished Mieke led me to a squat Victorian cottage just a few streets away from our girls’ high school. There was a red light on the porch and curtains over the windows. Mieke knocked confidently on the front door. When a tired-looking woman appeared Mieke smiled at her and said, ‘Hello, we’re from the school around the corner and we wondered if you had any work for us, you know, doing massages?’ We were sixteen years old.

The woman looked us up and down, clocking our school uniforms, our long stocking-clad legs, Mieke's pert Dutch cheekbones, and invited us in. As we walked down the shag-pile-carpeted hallway of the brothel we peeped inside the rooms. Red satin sheets on king-
sized beds. Clothes racks with lacy things hanging in neat rows. Ashtrays and wine glasses. My heart was thumping behind my breasts.

In the room where the cash register lived the woman told us ‘the boss is out at the moment, but if you could come back in a few hours, I’m sure he’d like to meet you. You do realise you’d have to do more than just massages, don’t you?’

Mieke was all innocence. ‘What else would we have to do?’ The tired woman looked increasingly dubious.

‘The boss can explain later’, she said, ushering us back down the dark hallway and out into the sunshine before closing the door firmly behind us. We hung on until we had run around the corner then fell onto the grass verge, hyperventilating with laughter.

I couldn’t remember ever having done something so naughty. Mieke was my Bad Influence and I loved her for it. This was a whole other kind of what if thing my new friend had going on, and it felt like freedom.
Approach Withdrawal

In between work deadlines – teaching, singing, writing freelance articles – I was now spending most of my spare time in the library. The shyness research had become an obsession. Meanwhile Tom had gone overseas again. He was a songwriter and his work often took him away from home for several months each year. I hated our separations, dreading them for weeks in advance, enduring them by burying myself in work and writing him long emails. The ever-changing pile of shyness-related books beside the bed was a distraction from the empty space where Tom’s body should have been.

I found a reference to shyness in a book called Emotional intelligence by American psychologist Daniel Goleman.⁴ It was in a chapter on temperament, which Goleman described as ‘the background murmur of feelings that mark our basic disposition… the moods that typify our emotional life’. To some degree, he wrote, we each have a favoured emotional range – temperament is a given at birth – but the question is ‘whether such a biologically determined emotional set can be changed by experience… Can even an innately shy child grow into a more confident adult?’ Good question.

Goleman cited the research of another American psychologist, Jerome Kagan, who had studied the physical symptoms of so-called ‘timid’ and ‘bold’ children. According to Kagan timid children have a neural circuitry that is highly reactive to even mild stress. They sweat more and their hearts beat faster in response to new situations. They are paralysingly anxious in company and they ‘treat any new person… as though (they) were a potential threat’.

I thought of those DON’T PANIC earrings I had worn all through university, and their message rattling in my ears: Other humans are not aliens. They will not harm you. Relax. Tell that to my DNA.

I first became acquainted with the term ‘temperament’ two and a half decades ago, when I spent a summer squeezing a stapler. It was during a hiatus between finishing my undergraduate degree in politics and heading overseas with a backpack, and I needed to save some cash. In a sweltering university office I sat collating and stapling pages of typed questions before shoving them into envelopes. The envelopes were being mailed out to 2500 mothers of newborn babies, and were the first of hundreds of thousands of questionnaires that would be sent out over the next three decades to the participants in a new Australian study of temperament. The summer stapling gig was the result of benign nepotism. One of the psychologists behind the Australian Temperament Project was my mother Margot. She had made a decision in her mid-thirties to change career from
orchestral musician to psychologist and Margot was part of the team of researchers conducting the new study.

I now know they were trying to work out how to measure this slippery ‘temperament’ thing. How early could they identify children with easy or difficult, shy or sociable types of temperament? Was temperament fixed, or could it change as children grew into adulthood? When I was collating the Temperament Study questionnaires, though, I was blissfully ignorant of those research questions. It’s a shame I didn’t pay more attention. Those questions were about to become starkly important to me, as I prepared for six months of solo travel in Europe. Six months of staying in youth hostels full of complete strangers; six months without friends, family members or my usual routines; six months of making decisions, alone, about how to fill every minute of every day. For a shy person, this was a bit like holding your hand over a burning flame to see just how much suffering you could endure.

My mother spent many years of her professional life analysing those returned questionnaires. (She was also the person who first tried to encourage me to behave like a confident child rather than a shy one. If I would pluck up my courage and go round the corner to visit my friend Sally, for example, she would offer to give me a reward. It rarely worked.)

Maybe Margot would have a few useful things to tell me about shyness.

In the front room of her Victorian cottage Margot and I sat down together next to the walnut piano that used to belong to my father’s father, Stan Prior. As a child I had spent hundreds of hours with her sitting beside me at the piano while I picked out the black and white notes of the scales she taught me, major and minor, melodic and harmonic, Margot instructing and correcting, demonstrating and listening, her busy brain no doubt simultaneously:

- deciding what to cook us all for dinner that night,
- thinking about the oboe students she had to teach the next day,
- planning the psychology tutorial she had to run the day after that,
- pondering the latest journal articles on autism she had been – reading for her PhD-in-progress,
- worrying about my teenage sister Yoni and her smoking habit,
- fretting about my grandmother Mavis Prior and her creeping memory loss,
– choosing the colour of the floor-to-ceiling curtain that would soon be installed down the middle of the bedroom my brother David and I shared, to stop us fighting over territory,

– making a list for the supermarket shopping she would do after delivering David to his trumpet lesson on the weekend and before delivering me to my clarinet lesson, and

– reminding herself that there would be extra mouths to feed when her stepchildren came to stay for the weekend,

while I sat there grizzling about the difficult fingering for G flat major, and asking again why I had to learn boring scales and arpeggios, and waiting impatiently until I could

surf slow waves triplets

the rolling of

in the Chopin waltz I was learning until they carried me gently to the shore of that final minor chord.

Back then, overlooking all my music lessons, there was a framed black and white photo sitting on top of the piano. It was a photo of the very same instrument, Stan’s piano. Sitting on top of the piano in the photo there was another black and white framed photo, this one an image of my late father Glen. And in front of the framed photo on the piano in the photo stood a quartet of Glen’s loved ones: my sister Yoni (aged seven), my brother David (aged two), my grandmother Mavis Prior (old), and in her arms, one-year-old Sian, already avoiding the camera’s gaze. A bevy of blondes, the progenitors and the progeny, the genes that came before and the genes that followed. The photo within the photo, the invisible link, all of us joined by this walnut piano.

Turning away from the photo I switched on my tape recorder and tried not to think about the fact that I was interviewing my mum. Professional Sian would have to conduct the interview with Professor Margot

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: So what did you discover with that Temperament Study – what IS shyness exactly?

PROFESSOR MARGOT: It’s a personality trait, or if you like, a temperament trait. An inborn but not immutable biological disposition. As children we all fit somewhere on a spectrum called ‘approach–withdrawal’, ranging from the most engaged, extroverted kids who are happy to be with anybody, to the most withdrawn kids who hang their heads, won’t pay attention and seem fearful and anxious. To find out where the children in the
Temperament Study sat in this spectrum, we asked parents questions like how does your child react the first time a babysitter comes, or if you introduce some new experience or throw them into a new group of people? Do they approach and engage or back away and hide behind your legs?

**SHY SIAN:** I remember being in a crowded town hall a few years back, at the end of a public forum that I had been hosting, and meeting an older cousin who hadn’t seen me for many years. He was shaking his head: ‘I can’t believe that was you up there. I remember when you were about four and you would hide behind your mother’s legs. I used to try and get you to talk but you were such a shy young thing.’ And I remember him as a beanstick-thin giant with John Lennon spectacles and a blue sailing boat he had pulled up onto the sand on a windy bay beach and I could recall the shrinking, scalding feeling all over my body and the flap of my mother’s sundress around my head and the squinting sun watching me and even as my now grey-haired cousin and I were laughing about the fact that he was still wearing exactly the same glasses, I knew that that old please-go-away-please-don’t-look-at-me fear was still only a shallow breath away. But why was I still afraid? And why did it matter so much to me?

**PROFESSIONAL SIAN:** But why are shy kids always hiding behind their parents legs?

**PROFESSOR MARGOT:** Shy kids have feelings of fear and inhibition that cause them to withdraw. This has to come from some biological factor, from the reactivity of the nervous system. Think of a child seeing a Father Christmas figure for the first time, say, or if something looms up in front of them. With some kids the looming thing doesn’t have to get very close before they will react, negatively and intensely and quickly. Others will take it in and think ‘this is frightening’ and then cry.

**PROFESSIONAL SIAN:** You said it’s ‘not immutable’. Do some kids grow out of shyness?

**PROFESSOR MARGOT:** It all comes back to where you sit on the approach–withdrawal spectrum. The more extreme the shyness, the more likely it is to persist. If, by the time you’re nine or ten, you’ve been shy all along and you’re still shy, then it's a pretty enduring characteristic. It also usually means you’re going to be vulnerable to anxiety as an adult. But lots of kids are initially shy and grow out of it. The way the parents handle it can make a difference, whether the parents are shy or anxious themselves. It’s hard if the parents are biologically inclined to be shy and are modelling shy behaviour. But if the parents
model brave behaviour, then that can help. If the kids try to reach out and become less shy, it can become less scary.

SHY SIAN: You’re shy too. You’re brave but you’re shy. I’ve seen you with the same wincing smile on your face that I’ve seen in photos of myself, seen you duck your head when you meet strangers, like I do, seen you sitting quietly and listening while the loud folk tell the crowd exactly what they reckon. I’ve seen you happily lost in a book while the rest of the world rushes by.

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: What about introversion, is that the same thing as shyness?

PROFESSOR MARGOT: No. Not all withdrawn people are shy and not all anxious people avoid approaching others. Introversion and extroversion are on a slightly different spectrum to shyness. They’re more expanded traits – the products of temperament plus experience, if you like. There are plenty of introverted people, including many scholars, writers and musicians, for example, who couldn’t be described as shy because they don’t find it distressing being in the company of others. Their preference is for being alone, in their own world, but they’re not lonely. They don’t find their withdrawal distressing in the way shy people do. They avoid small talk not because they’re worried about it, but because they don’t have much need for it.

SHY SIAN: That could be a description of Tom. He’s often quiet but rarely seems anxious. Not opinionated, like me. He opens up when he’s writing but in person he is always careful with his words. Sometimes I have no idea what he’s thinking. Perhaps Tom’s introverted, rather than shy. Or perhaps he’s just keeping his counsel.

Enough about the research, Ma – let’s talk about your youngest daughter.

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: What do you remember about me as a shy child?

PROFESSOR MARGOT: I remember that you only played with a small number of other kids and that it always had to be arranged. You weren’t like Yoni who would rush up and make friends with whoever, and you were more shy than David who would go up to a group of kids and introduce himself in a diffident kind of way, but then he would settle. I do remember trying to bribe you to visit Sally because you wouldn’t spontaneously go and play with her. But that’s not unusual, some people like to have a small number of close trusted friends and others like to be one of the crowd. And I remember you would get
stuck into kids who were being mean to David. You would stick up for somebody you loved if they were in trouble. So obviously shyness was a really big thing in your head but not such a big thing in mine. I thought you were doing fine. People liked you, you were good with old people and with little kids, so I didn’t worry about it the way you did.

**SHY SIAN:** She’s right. Little kids usually trust me. Ageing parents of friends still ask after me. Why is that? Because my guard is down when I’m with the very old and the very young? Because there’s less fear in me?

**PROFESSOR MARGOT:** But I also remember being really proud of you when you grasped this shyness thing, because I knew it was at a high cost. In your professional life, nobody would ever dream you were shy.

**SHY SIAN:** So why do I still feel like I haven’t ‘grasped it’, this shyness thing? Why am I sitting here with this list of questions, interviewing my own mother, for god’s sake?
Prior Print

My grandfather Stan Prior, Glen’s father, was a printer. *Prior Print* it said on his homemade business cards. As a child learning to read I found this alliteration intensely pleasing, the popping plosives in my mouth, those two big P’s like hot air balloons straining to get away. Stan’s fingers were always stained black from printer’s ink and he wore an apron. My grandmother Mavis’s apron had ruffles but Stan’s was a manly apron, inscribed with the hieroglyphics of innumerable inky finger wipes.

In a shed in the backyard of their home lived a black-and-silver printing machine. I say ‘lived’ because it seemed alive to me; a squat, wheezing, Nazi-saluting robot that sucked in blank sheets of paper and cardboard and spat out personalised wedding invitations and programs for Gilbert and Sullivan operas. When I first saw the poster for Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent film *Metropolis*, I had a moment of déjà vu. That sleek metallic head staring out from below the skyscrapers, Machine Man, was surely the humanoid face of Stan’s printer.

Stan was always old. Born in 1890, he and my grandmother had married when he was in his mid-forties. Had enlisting in the First World War got in the way of him finding a mate? Or was he too shy for courting? She was in her mid-thirties when they married. Why had it taken her so long? Too late to ask them now.

Stan was still running *Prior Print* when he was in his eighties. His favourite phrase was “‘t’any rate’, as in “‘T’any rate, whatever they say about Sir John Monash, he was the only one who knew what he was doing at Gallipoli’. Or “‘T’any rate, it’s time I got cracking to the old folks home to play my cello. Helps gives them a bit of a lift.’ Somehow he never thought of himself as one of the ‘old folks’.

In Stan’s shed there were wooden boxes full of tiny metal letters that he lined up to create an infinite variety of lists and labels. Paper napkins printed for the wedding of **Hilary and Raymond**, for example. Stan printed too many (or was the wedding cancelled? Did the bride take fright at the altar, shy away from marriage? Where are they now, Hilary and Raymond?) and my mother was given a lifetime’s supply of these monogrammed objects. In our household, serviettes thereafter became known as 34hovel-n-raymonds, as in ’Pass me a 34hovel-n-raymond, would you, I’ve got tomato sauce everywhere’.

Scattered over the wooden benchtop in Stan’s shed was a collection of red magnets about the size of matchboxes. I think he used them for picking up the metal letters. I called them push-me-pull-yous. My favourite thing was to climb on Stan’s bench, line the magnets up end-to-end and experiment with the forces of attraction and repulsion. Slide two attracting ends together and the magnets would rush headlong towards each other
like desperate lovers. Push a repelling end towards another repelling end and it was like sideways levitation – unsecured objects moving of their own volition – pure magic.

Often when I meet someone new, I am overwhelmed by something like those same strange forces – simultaneously. So curious to know everything about the person, so desperate to read their mind, I could crush them with my enthusiasm. Yet so overcome by my own self-consciousness and anxiety, I want to back away from their outstretched hand and I can’t hear them when they tell me their name. Exhausted by the rush of opposing emotions even before I’ve opened my mouth to say hello. Filled with self-doubt at the very moment I am most eager to please.

Approach.
Withdrawal.
Approach.
Withdrawal.

Push me – pull you – push you – pull me.

I want to be alone
I crave company
I need solitude
I hate being by myself.
I can’t breathe, you’re too close
I can’t breathe, I’m so lonely

Leave me alone
Don’t leave me.

Stan Prior didn’t want to leave us. He lived for more than a century. Maybe shyness had made him cautious and caution could help you to live longer. Take fewer risks and keep out of trouble – although Stan did take a ride in a hot air balloon on his hundredth birthday so he wasn’t completely risk averse. He even made it into the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest brass band member in the world. After surviving two world wars (was he a cautious soldier or a lucky one?) he was still blowing his cornet in the local brass band at the age of one hundred. Though, to be honest, by then he was more of a human mascot than a fully exhaling member of the cornet section. Stan didn’t stop exhaling till he was one hundred and two.

At his funeral the crowd at the church was so large it spilled out into the street. My sister and I, arriving late from a snarled freeway, couldn’t get in the door. We stood in the
vestibule and listened as the local mayor sang Stan’s praises and the local choir, of which he’d also been a long-serving member, sang his favourite hymns.

Afterwards, out the front of the church, my sister and I tried to make small talk with our Prior uncles and cousins, virtual strangers since our grandmother Mavis Prior had died a decade and half earlier. But the threads that bound us together had loosened and frayed and we soon ran out of things to say to each other.

Small talk was never my forte anyway. Words were precious currency, I told myself. They needed to be lined up carefully, as they were on Papa Prior’s printing press.

Yeah sure.

In fact, my self-consciousness was often at its worst when called upon to make small talk with people I didn’t know very well. It was as if I had missed out on learning the formulas and platitudes that most people take for granted. Or perhaps I was so busy feeling anxious and self-conscious in those moments when small talk was most useful, I had never had an opportunity to practise.

My stepfather John had done his best to give me those opportunities. John had been part of our family since my kindergarten days. I don’t remember a time without his loving presence in our lives. I do remember occasions when he tried to help me overcome my fear of strangers. On summer holidays, cruising through bleached country towns in John’s latest new car, the vinyl seats still smelling of the factory floor, there would be an inevitable search for public toilets. Slowing the car beside a perambulating local, John would instruct me to ‘roll down the window, Sian, ask him where the loos are’, and every time I would refuse. Speak with someone I don’t know? In a place I’ve never been before? About TOILETS? I’d rather chew my own arm off.

Frustrated and busting, he would try my mother next – ‘just ask him, Margot, quick, before he nicks into a shop’, and like me, shy Margot would often protest, ’No you ask him, John.’ It would be left to my brother David, also reluctant but usually more accommodating, to make the approach.

John had more success in teaching me practical skills. How to use a power drill. How to start a recalcitrant mower. How to make mashed potato patties from leftovers. How to change a tyre. How to bluff mechanics into thinking I knew more about car engines than I did, so they wouldn’t take advantage of the fact I was female. How to climb into the cab of a Mack truck in two easy steps. How to make a raspberry lemonade spider. How to cradle an injured possum in the palm of your hand. How to make Margot laugh.

John never stopped encouraging me to approach strangers but he rarely succeeded. It must have been baffling for him. What was wrong with this family? Other humans are not aliens and if they’re locals they generally know exactly where the nearest public toilets are.
For my stepfather, small talk was as effortless as breathing and almost as necessary. His job as a truck salesman required him to win the confidence of strangers every day and there is nothing more winning than an easy social manner. He could talk to anyone, any time, about practically anything, especially if it was anything practical. Cars, trucks, bicycles, boats, livestock, crops, weather, How Things Work, these were all fertile conversational territory for someone as socially skilled as John. His sisters, my country aunts, were even more virtuosic. Words came spilling from their mouths like baroque cadenzas as soon as you answered the phone and heard the beep beep beep of their long-distance calls.

Don’t get me wrong. Around the dinner table at home we could be as noisy as the next fractious blended family. But as soon as he drove us away from our domestic comfort zone, John sometimes found himself in the midst of a tribe of near-mutes. If raising someone else’s child is a valid way of measuring the relative impacts of nature and nurture, in this instance nurture simply couldn’t get a look-in. At the time, John’s modelling of non-shy behaviour appeared to be having no impact on my idiotic fears.
Small Talk

At the age of fifteen I wrote a poem about my maternal grandfather Lloyd Jones. It rhymed with pedantic precision, vowels and syllables carefully matched at the end of every line. Lloyd’s wife, my extrovert grandmother Peg, insisted on showing the poem to everyone in the extended family and to practically everyone they had ever met. For a while there I thought perhaps I had the makings of a poetic genius, although I also remember being a little worried about what Grandpa would think of me using the word ‘taciturn’ in my portrait of him. Still, taciturn was a pretty impressive word. Or so I thought at the time.

When Peg died in 2009 one of my aunts found a copy of that poem amongst my grandmother’s papers and returned it to me. Any remaining hopes about my latent poetic genius were quickly doused. My pompous fifteen-year-old self (the same one who had told the high school Christians they ‘couldn’t handle their own biological insignificance’, no doubt) had described Grandpa Lloyd as a man with a ‘taciturn manner of speech’. My forty-five-year-old self had figured out that the word ‘taciturn’ actually meant silent or uncommunicative, which kind of ruled it out of being a ‘manner of speech’.

Peg and Lloyd lived in the same beachside suburb as our family when I was growing up and every now and then Lloyd would drop by during his daily constitutional and ask me to play something on the piano or the clarinet. He would sit quietly on the couch, eyes closed, hands clasped in front of him, fingertips tapping gently in time with the music, until the piece was finished. Then he would offer me a lopsided smile and a few brief words – ‘Lovely, dear, you play so musically, keep it up’ – before striding off again, hands clasped behind his back, to continue his solitary walk along the beach path.

Tom often reminded me of Grandpa Lloyd. Neither of them had a lot to say at large social gatherings but when either of them spoke I listened carefully, and when their speech involved praise I stored it carefully away in my memory.

As a young man Grandpa Lloyd played the organ in church and had a sweet baritone singing voice. Most of his brothers and cousins and nephews sang too – most of them terrible show-offs, according to Lloyd – ready to deliver a Gilbert and Sullivan duet at the drop of a hat. By the time I was fifteen and waxing poetic about him, Grandpa Lloyd never sang in public. I suspect his reasoning was that if it couldn’t be perfect, it shouldn’t be done. Or perhaps he was just too anxious.

Lloyd had been a high school teacher, eventually promoted to headmaster. Mr Jones had a reputation as a strict disciplinarian. One of his former students, a woman in her eighties at the time we were introduced, told me that Mr Jones once made her write out the sentence procrastination is the thief of time five hundred times. She could still precisely
imitate his yard-duty walk, hands clasped behind his back, eyes alert for signs of adolescent time wasting.

In the Olden Days, Lloyd would have been described as gruff. He was often abrupt, especially with his wife. Although we loved him, I suspect we were all a little frightened of him. What I didn’t understand at fifteen, but what seems obvious to me now, is that Lloyd was shy. And he didn’t do small talk.

As a shy teenager I developed a list of justifications for why small talk was beneath me. It was tedious talk. Repetitious talk. Work-avoiding talk. Unoriginal talk. Talk for people with poor vocabularies. Talk for people who couldn't cut to the chase. I crossed the street many times to avoid having to engage in small talk. Once I even climbed a tall ladder at a party to avoid having to try.

It certainly wasn’t that I hadn’t felt the need for it. When I was stapling Temperament Study questionnaires for my mother in that hot university office, my inability to do small talk was one of the things I fretted about as I mentally planned my backpacking trip around Europe. It was a fear that would have to be overcome if I was to survive those youth hostels.

But how on earth did one do it?

What’s happening?
What do you say to a question like that? I’m breathing in, breathing out, same as you.
What do you know?
Where do I start? I know how to count up to ten in ten different languages. Not as useful as you might imagine.
How was your weekend?
How’s tricks?
I wish I had a few up my sleeve. Like how to make myself invisible. Or how to do small talk.

Were all shy people bad at small talk, or was it just me (and Grandpa Lloyd)? Time to go back to the library.

The books on small talk were divided into two camps: self-help books and books by linguists and anthropologists who used terms like ‘conventionalised and peripheral modes of discourse’. Both camps seemed to agree, though, that small talk had had a bad rap and was a valuable part of human communication.
American small talk ‘trainer’ Debra Fine was partial to the exclamation mark. She had even inserted one in her book’s exhaustingly long title: *The Fine Art of Small Talk: How to start a conversation, keep it going, build networking skills and leave a positive impression!* Clearly Debra wasn’t short of a word or two.

There was a dedication in the front of the book to her husband who she described as ‘the gentle wind beneath my wings’. At this point I nearly stopped reading. Originality in language use was not going to be Debra’s strong suit. But then again, small talk wasn’t meant to be about originality. Perhaps the fear of being platitudinous had been one of my biggest hurdles.

More interesting was Fine’s self-description as someone who grew up quiet and shy, the ‘reticent kind who sat invisible in the back of the class, often excluded’, who withdrew into a world of books and ‘had no idea how to make a friend or have a friend.’ Consequently, Fine explained, she never learned how to talk to her peers. She could have been describing the androgynous Austr-alien in London, circa 1979. In spite of her exclamation marks and the wind beneath her wings, I began to warm to Debra. She was a woman on a mission and I was ready to be converted.

Debra’s strategy for learning how to get over an aversion to making small talk involved two basic rules. Number one was ‘Take The Risk: it is up to us to take the risk of starting a conversation with a stranger… even if we are shy’. (But *what if, Debra, what if* they don’t want to talk to us, or we can’t think of what to say?)

Rule number two looked more promising: ‘Assume The Burden: it is our responsibility to come up with topics to discuss… to assume the burden of other people’s comfort’. Now you’re talking, Debra. Helpfulness. I can do that. I had spent over a decade working as a radio broadcaster, hour after hour of speaking with complete strangers where it was my responsibility to start the conversation, keep the conversation going, steer the conversation in the direction I wanted it to go, end the conversation when I wanted it to end, make the interviewee feel good about the conversation, make them feel engaged and stimulated and comfortable. Surely that was about ‘assuming the burden’.

Why had I been so apparently adept at that particular conversational art and yet having a chat with a colleague in the tearoom about what she’d done on the weekend had sometimes caused me to squirm with discomfort? It wasn’t just about the subject matter, either. It was more about who I felt I was when I was having those two different types of conversation. Two different people. One was a confident, skilled professional talking into a microphone, being helpful. The other was just me, undefended. Being evaluated?

I turned from the self-help books to the books by anthropologists. They were on a mission, too, but theirs was to rescue small talk from the ignominy of being dismissed as
mere gossip. In place of that sibilant, girly label they had substituted the rather spiritual-sounding phatic communion. It sounded to me like something out of the Bible.

**Welcome, all ye sinners, to the blessed house of phatic communion, where even the lowliest lexicon can be resurrected in the eyes of the good Lord who rules over all our discourses.**

The Polish anthropologist who came up with the term phatic communion, Bronislaw Malinowski, had something in common with Debra Fine: why use two words when you can use a whole bunch to convey the same idea? For Malinowski small talk was ‘a type of... free aimless social intercourse... in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words... purposeless expressions of preference or aversions, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious... functional in defusing the threat of taciturnity.’ 6

No wonder we were all a little afraid of Grandpa Lloyd. His ‘taciturnity’ was a threat. But to whom?

Another anthropologist, an Englishman called Robin Dunbar, had looked at small talk through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Dunbar thought human chatter was a form of social grooming, a bit like the concentrated insect foraging that monkeys conducted in each other’s furry pelts, and just as useful. In *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* he wrote: ‘If being human is all about talking, it’s the tittle-tattle of life that makes the world go round, not the pearls of wisdom that fall from the lips of the Aristotles and the Einsteins. We are social beings and our world – no less than that of the monkeys and apes – is cocooned in the interests and minutiae of everyday social life.’ 7

Einstein rang a bell. Wasn’t he shy too? Googling Einstein + shyness I found a website called shakeyourshyness.com. There the famous scientist was included in a list of eighty ‘painfully shy’ people who had become household names. The website had a whole page dedicated to ‘Tips For Shaking Your Shyness’, including ‘Conversation Topics – Never Leave Home without Them’.

‘Brush up on current events and the weather’, was the advice proffered, ‘and anything else that might be the small talk you need to get the conversation going!’

Small talk – again. If only they had invented the internet a century earlier. I imagined Albert Einstein perusing this chirpy little website then checking his pockets before setting off to collect his Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921:

Handkerchief, yes. House key, yes. List of conversation topics for the after-party, ah yes. Should I start with the weather? Rained today, could be sleet tomorrow. Or would current events be better? Jolly interesting news about the majority support for
Silesia’s reannexation to Germany, don’t you think? And presumably you’ve heard that they’ve given women the vote in Sweden? By the way, did I mention that I’m painfully shy?

Strangely enough, it’s possible that Einstein would have felt entirely comfortable speaking from the distance of the Nobel Prize winners’ stage to a thousand awestruck fans of his theory of relativity. As I had discovered, shyness doesn’t necessarily impede public performance, especially when you don’t have to interact one-on-one with your audience.

Anthropologist Robin Dunbar seemed to have a good understanding of the approach–withdrawal tango. ‘Social animals hang in perpetual balance between two forces: the centripetal forces, driven by fear of predation, which have produced the feelings of sociableness that make us seek out company; and the centrifugal forces, generated by overcrowding, that send us scurrying for the sanity of a solitary life.’ Centripetal and centrifugal forces: just like Stan Prior’s printing magnets. What a perfect way to describe those hideous contradictory surges of emotional energy I experienced when meeting people for the first time.

Dunbar argued that our primate heritage had left us with a habit of living in social groups as a way of warding off predators. Social grooming, including gossip and small talk, helped to keep the group together. On the downside, some monkeys and apes used their social skills to exploit each other, in order to ensure their dominance in the group. Harassment was a handy tool for lowering the rank of other apes in the group, for rejecting them and pushing them to the outer edges of the crowd hanging around the local fig tree.

If you’re not one of the harassing, bossy, rejecting types but instead find yourself pushed to the edge of the group, there’ll be fewer figs for you and a higher chance a tiger will pick you off. When you’re trying to avoid tigers, Dunbar pointed out, ‘the edge of the group is never a good place to be’. Was this why I had been fighting my shyness for so long?

I remembered Margot once describing my father Glen as someone who always hung around at the edge of a social group, never the centre. Had he felt safer being on the edge? Less chance of critical scrutiny? Less necessity to make small talk with others in the group? Or had that primal, primate response kept him quiet and vigilant on the periphery as he monitored the shifting alliances of the other group members? The anthropologist Malinowski reckoned that small talk could defuse the ‘threat of taciturnity’. Was it possible that my father’s quiet ways had seemed threatening to those around him? Had he found, like me, that his shyness was sometimes interpreted by others as haughtiness or a lack of interest in the doings of the group?
Reading the anthropologists’ theories on small talk, I recalled a time in my early twenties when my anxiety about talking to other humans, sometimes even my close friends, had led me to consult a counsellor. Monday to Friday I was entirely engrossed in my job as an environment campaigner but weekends could be lonely.

After I had explained to her the self-consciousness that would overcome me when it was my turn to take the lead in casual conversations, the counsellor recommended that I attend some group sessions. Assertiveness Training, she called it. I must learn to be more assertive. Move in closer to the centre of the group around the fig tree, Robin Dunbar would probably say.

So one night after work I drove to a big red brick house in the suburbs where the group was to meet. There were about ten of us, all seated in a circle, all no doubt embarrassed to be there with our shameful little social problem. All struggling with phatic communion and hoping to be saved. I was one of the youngest in the circle. The group seemed to be dominated by middle-aged men who couldn’t look you in the eye and who confessed to being unable to gain promotion in their workplace because, well, perhaps the meek wouldn’t be inheriting the earth after all.

The group leader asked us each to say something as we went around the group, tell a story about ourselves, or introduce ourselves to the next person, and I recall feeling completely out of place. Whatever the task was, it seemed easy to me. Surely I couldn’t be one of these people. While they were losing promotions, I was saving the world. I had no problem speaking in this company and felt impatient with the anxieties of those who did. Why was I here? That night I talked away confidently to the assembled crowd of strangers, trying to help everyone else feel a little more comfortable and after the first session I never went back.

Perhaps I was in the wrong company. I could ‘Assume The Burden’ of leading the conversation, as Debra Fine suggested, because I didn’t feel like I had to ‘Take A Risk’. It wasn’t assertiveness that I lacked. In spite of my shyness, in the right conditions I could be positively bossy (just ask my brother David) or, at best, an enthusiastic leader. So perhaps ‘doing’ small talk had never been the problem. Perhaps it was that I could only ever do it when I didn’t really care what my interlocutor thought of me. When I could hide behind some kind of professional persona. When I was there to help.

And when Tom was beside me.
Psych Talk

Small talk might have been scarce in our household when I was growing up but, courtesy of my mother Margot, we had our very own family psych talk.

Ten Typical Terms

1. Auty: colloquial noun to describe a person with autism.
Example: My mother’s PhD in psychology was all about trying to understand the auties.

2. Aspy: colloquial noun or adjective used to describe a person with, or exhibiting behaviours typical of, Aspergers Syndrome.
Example: That guy who just bought John’s car might have been a bit aspy, given how keen he was to tell us the mileage stats of every car he’d ever owned.

3. Learned helplessness: a term used to describe someone who refuses to learn how to do something they’re not interested in, or are afraid of, or want someone else to do for them.
Example: It was time I learnt how to catch the train by myself to basketball training, Margot said, because she didn’t have time to take all of us to our music lessons AND drive me to basketball every weekend. Protesting that I didn’t know how to catch the train was just a form of learned helplessness.

4. Self-actualisation: a term used to describe the process of fulfilling your unique potential as an individual.
Example: Unless I could get on top of my shyness it seemed to me it would forever be getting in the way of my self-actualisation.

5. Disinhibited: a term used to describe someone who is definitely not shy.
Example: It was best to try not to be embarrassed when my grandmother Peg boasted to strangers about us. She did it because she loved us, Margot explained, and because she was disinhibited.

6. CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy): a term used to describe a therapeutic approach that aims to change dysfunctional thoughts, emotions and behaviours.
Example: If I had been able to change my *what if*s into *so what*s when I was worrying about visiting Sally, it would have been an example of what CBT experts describe as replacing ‘unhelpful thinking’ with ‘realistic thinking’.

7. *Labile*: a term used to describe someone perceived as unusually emotional.
Example: After Peg got together with her new beau when she was in her eighties, my mother said, she became much more *labile*.

8. *Neg re*: abbreviation of the term *negative reinforcement*, meaning to discourage someone from doing something by giving them negative feedback on their actions.
Example: It was best not to complain about the noise of my brother’s trumpet playing, my mother said, because it was hard enough to get him to practice without the added *neg re*.

9. *Pos re*: abbreviation of the term *positive reinforcement*.
Example: When I was a child my mother offered to give me twenty cents as *pos re* if I would go up the road and round the corner to visit my friend Sally on the weekend.

10. *Positive re-framing*: (NB. *Not* to be confused with positive reinforcement) a term used when someone describes something as positive or beneficial that could be seen as negative or harmful.
Example: Isn’t it amazing, my mother said, how Peg always manages to *positively re-frame* every situation where she takes a risk, gets into trouble and has to seek help from a stranger?
Planet Earth

I found an educational video called *I Think They Think: Overcoming Social Phobia*.8 The filmmaker had interviewed three ‘sufferers’ and one ‘expert’ on social anxiety. You couldn’t tell just from looking at them which ones were suffering and which one the others had sought help from. Through the camera’s lens they all looked perfectly normal.

Eric was in his sixties, a slim man with a moustache. Sadness had settled on him like a shroud. ‘I’m on planet earth, I look around, I’m with other human beings, and they’re doing what I want to do’, he told the invisible interviewer. ‘But I’m trapped here in this body and I can’t do any of those things. For forty years of my life I felt that a cruel joke had been played on me. My body looks perfectly fine to everybody but in actual fact I was extremely disabled.’

Jon was in his late twenties and handsome in a square-jawed, blue-eyed way. But his speech was hesitant. ‘If you can imagine… Being in a… constant state of fear’, he said, pausing often. ‘Rapid breathing, muscle tension, disassociation. Not really being connected or in touch with your true feelings. It’s very demanding in terms of energy.’

Lisa was English and in her mid-thirties, with a loud voice and a nervous laugh. ‘It’s very hard for people to understand what you’re going through until they’re in your situation. Shopping is so simple to those who don’t have social phobia. It used to wear me out. I’d be exhausted. Just horrible.’

The social anxiety expert had pale red hair and a sympathetic voice. ‘We view social phobia as being on a spectrum’, he said. ‘On one end is normal social anxiety, the desire we all have to be liked and approved of by people. Then we have shyness, which is a degree up from that. People are more anxious in more situations, reticent in novel situations, hesitant to take the initiative in social situations. With an increased level of social anxiety you get to social phobia, so severe that it causes discomfort or causes people to avoid certain social situations. It’s out of proportion.’

The editors cut back to young Jon: ‘By the time I was thirteen I was very, very phobic. I had an inability to function in the world at all. My first experience of a panic attack was on a Saturday evening. I went to a social event, got to the door and ran away.’ Me too, Jon, I told the television screen. I ran away from a party too.

Loud Lisa again: ‘I used to have to take my little boy shopping with me so he’d be the centre of attention. I couldn’t make eye contact with the woman in the shop. Had to use my little boy to give her the money. I’d walk out with horrific headaches and a hot flush.’
And back to Eric: ‘I had these problems all through my teens, twenties and early forties. I didn’t have the skills so I was continually banging my head against a brick wall, making no progress.’

Eric paused for a moment and the invisible interviewer waited patiently. ‘We all are extraordinary but social phobia took that away from me. I had no sense of the wonder of being a human being.’

The expert talked about something called ‘graded exposure therapy’, where you deliberately expose yourself to situations you fear, starting with the least frightening then moving through to the hardest of all. Eric described forcing himself to drive to the hall where the bush dance would be held, just to ‘get to know the lay of the land’. On his next attempt, he might manage to go inside and have a dance. It was all about planning, making yourself a list of scary things you could work your way through.

At the end of the video the filmmaker wanted us to know that Eric was A Success Story. He could now go to a social gathering without having to leave immediately.

*But you’ll never get those years back, Eric, I told the hissing, snowy screen.*

With a bit of research I tracked down the redhead anxiety expert who had been interviewed on the video:

*Professor Ronald M Rapee*
*Department of Psychology*
*Macquarie University*
*Expert in anxiety and cognitive behaviour therapy*
*Qualifications: Ph.D.*

What a lovely set of rhymes. They reminded me of an A.A. Milne poem called ‘Disobedience’ that Margot used to read to us when we were children. It’s about an anxious little boy with the unlikely moniker of James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree who took great care of his mother ‘although he was only three’. Until the day his mother walked right down to the edge of the town and never came home again.

Which reminded me in turn of my father who walked right down to the edge of the sea. My five-year-old sister asked our mother if he would be coming back as she watched him entering the surf. Or so the story goes. Sometimes, it seems, a child’s anxiety can be prescient rather than neurotic.

Professor Ron was flying to Melbourne for a work meeting and agreed to meet with me in a city I. On the appointed morning I was running late and feeling flustered (shy) and for...
the first couple of minutes of our conversation I wasn’t really listening. You are a journalist, I told myself. This is an interview. Get a grip.

Professor Ron had pale pink skin to go with his red hair. I wondered if he was a blusher. Maybe Professor Ron was shy too.

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: When did psychology researchers first start looking seriously at social anxiety?

PROFESSOR RON: The history of social anxiety as a recognised clinical condition is quite recent. In 1980 the DSM III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) included social phobia for the first time as a diagnosis. Social phobia and social anxiety had been talked about for decades, for centuries even, but to become of interest to research people in psychiatry, psychology, mental health, it has to officially get in the book. So all of a sudden everyone went ‘ooh, interesting, there’s a real disorder’, even though everyone knew that already. It had a lot to do with Isaac Marks, a British psychiatrist who did work on panic attacks, anxiety, panic disorder and agoraphobia. His group was the first lot who started using the words ‘social phobia’ as opposed to just ‘shyness’, differentiating it from the literature that talked about shyness as a broad personality style. He said, ‘No, we can treat it, we can do something about this disorder’.

SHY SIAN: Ah the mysterious powers of taxonomy. Name something, put it in a list and suddenly everyone takes it seriously.

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: How many people are suffering from social phobia?

PROFESSOR RON: The latest Australian figures show about five percent of the population could be said to be suffering from social phobia. You have degrees of shyness then at some point the Official People say ‘this is social phobia’. But deciding where the cut-off is, is completely arbitrary. The statistic commonly used for shyness is forty percent of the population but studies around the world show if you change the wording or criteria slightly, then the figures for prevalence rates change massively. So in some ways the figures are fairly silly. If you diagnose someone as suffering from social phobia, that implies a reasonable level of life impairment. The difference between shyness and a disorder is where it starts to cause problems in the person’s life.
SHY SIAN: I like Professor Ron. A man who is willing to describe aspects of his chosen profession as 'fairly silly' and refer to his colleagues as 'the Official People'. I bet he’d understand all our family psych talk too.

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: How do you diagnose someone with social anxiety?

PROFESSOR RON: The core diagnostic criterion of social anxiety and social phobia is ‘fear of negative evaluation’; worry and fear about being evaluated by others. A diagnosis requires that people avoid social situations because of that concern about being evaluated by others. A lot of shy people are worried about eating, drinking, or writing in front of others. They have physical symptoms, like shaking. Those people say, ‘When I pick up a coffee I will shake and people will say I’m weird’, or ‘My writing will be funny, my hand will tense up and people will wonder what’s wrong with me’. There are some people out there, very rare ones, who say ‘I’m perfectly outgoing in every other way, I talk to strangers on the street, but if I have to pick up a cup of coffee in front of someone, I’ll die’.

SHY SIAN: So my shaking and abandoned spoon at the Music Camp breakfast table might have been enough evidence for the Official People to diagnose me as a social phobic. Would that diagnosis have been helpful, or more anxiety inducing, I wonder? There was a lot of psychological jargon flying around in my family but I don’t recall us talking about ‘fear of negative evaluation’. If we had talked about a ‘fear of neg ev’, I wonder if I would have been able to stop dreading it so much.

PROFESSIONAL SIAN: Has anyone looked at the question of whether shy people are particularly bad at small talk?

PROFESSOR RON: There’s an ongoing argument in the world of shyness research on this subject. One argument says that for people with social phobia or anxiety the problem is entirely about perceptions. You think that you’re incompetent at small talk, but actually you’re not. The other camp says no, these people are incompetent, they haven’t developed the skills to do small talk, and part of their concern about being negatively evaluated by others is realistic. My view is that it’s all perception. Socially anxious people are perfectly competent at small talk but they perceive themselves as incompetent. If they don’t perform very well at small talk it’s probably a result of the anxiety rather than the cause of the anxiety.
PROFESSIONAL SIAN: Where do shyness, social anxiety and social phobia intersect?

PROFESSOR RON: It’s a spectrum. Shyness is not exactly the same as social phobia. The clinical disorder and the temperament personality are different. You can get some highly shy people who get on with life and don’t let it stop them. But people who are highly shy are the ones most likely to be socially phobic, and it can manifest in so many different ways. An interesting one came up in a phone conversation I had yesterday. The medical name is paruresis and it means an inability to urinate in front of people. I remember one case many years ago, a salesman who was extremely outgoing, he’d go up to anyone, sold fridges, no problems. But he couldn’t use a toilet outside his own house. He had to make sure he had appointments near his home and he couldn’t travel interstate. It was very debilitating, and bad for sales.

SHY SIAN: I knew a bloke whose life was a bit like this, Professor Ron. Come to think of it, I know quite a bit about how phobias can shut a person down. I could give you an eyewitness account.
Unsent Letter

Dear Andre (aka Mr Hippy Shoulder Bag),

I’m swimming out beyond the breakers at Sydney’s Coogee Beach and I see a sleek black head emerge from the water thirty metres away and it’s you, it’s definitely you. I’d recognise the shape of your head anywhere, even out here where the horizon lurches like a tightrope-walker’s pole.

Except of course it can’t be you. Not just because you can’t swim (you never learnt and you wouldn’t let me teach you) but because you would never be here, so far from home. You wouldn’t even make it to the airport.

But the colours and shapes of you must be so strongly imprinted on my mind (like those hidden 3D Magic Eye images where, once you’ve picked them out of the pixelated blur, they’re all you can see) that even now, more than two decades after we parted, you’re still popping up everywhere I go.

Backstage at one of Tom’s music gigs, you’re in the food marquee, helping yourself to something from the steaming bain-marie. Except you haven’t aged at all; how could that be? In a supermarket you’re ahead of me in the checkout queue, but you’ve grown taller and put on weight.

Smells can do it too. Tiger balm. Sandalwood incense. Dusty books. Chicken curry. One whiff of cumin and I’m back in your darkened bedroom, listening to you reading the poetry of e e 51 hovelli in your gentle baritone and pronouncing the Vs as Ws.

‘Poverty’ was my favourite, and it’s a word that came up often because you’re from a country with a lot of poverty so you talked about it often. I loved watching those wonky Vs forming on your lips when you were trying to help me understand how impoverishment had contributed to the civil conflict in the country where you were born. You would have gone back there, if you could, and tried to help put an end to the fighting, I would have gone with you, too. But that would have involved you getting to the airport.

I’ve been reading about us in my diaries – the first time I’ve looked at them for twenty-five years – trying to remember the details of my campaign to have you. Because it was a campaign, a series of strategic manoeuvres designed to outpace my own anxieties. Shyness had been a kind of palsy that had struck every time I saw someone beautiful and therefore desirable, and your face was the turning point. Enough of the blushing and hiding, the faked indifference, the self-flagellation after every missed opportunity. Enough loneliness. It was time to get on top of this thing.

According to my diary, I even gave my campaign a name. I called it my ‘New Social Policy’, or NSP for short (guess who was studying Soviet politics at the time?) In
retrospect, it was a kind of self-prescribed ‘graded exposure therapy’. I forced myself to approach you on campus, to engage you in conversation about whatever political cause was obsessing me at the time. And what do you know, it turns out you had quite a thing for political causes too.

Nuclear disarmament, the Nicaraguan revolution, ending third-world hunger, we couldn’t possibly be in more furious agreement about how urgent these things were. And every time we discussed them I got to study that beautiful face of yours in more detail. The Jimi Hendrix skin, the James Brown jaw, the Jim Morrison eyes, the James Dean mouth: you had all my favourite Jimmies covered right there in the one face.

You even wrote like Henry James, in long letters you would compose for me late at night when you couldn’t sleep, describing the authors and musicians and political thinkers you admired and the books and music and ideological tracts you thought I should be consuming, and admitting that you struggled with shyness, just like me, and explaining all the reasons you thought we would be friends for a long, long time.

Friends? No way. I had to have you.

Eventually I did, and for a while there was nothing but strange new pleasures.

And in a strange, new, pleasurable world, there is much we don’t question, assuming there are rules we haven’t yet learnt.

For a long time I accepted your excuses about why you couldn’t drive the rusting car sitting in the backyard of your share house; why you wouldn’t come to any of the concerts I was singing in, or to my parents’ place for a meal, or to parties or picnics or political rallies with me. The fact that you were from another country, another culture, almost another generation (there were fifteen years separating us), all these facts made me reluctant to question your odd and disappointing refusals.

I was in love but I was often lonely.

Still I believed you when you told me that the little blue pills you pulled out of the bottom of your heavy shoulder bag every day and swallowed with mouthfuls of sweet milky tea were to cope with the pain of an old spinal injury. After I made fun of your ‘pill popping’, though, you didn’t speak to me for a week.

And when finally you returned my calls, you were ready to confess. In a quiet corner of the university I, you explained that the reason you couldn’t visit my parents’ house was that you suffered from agoraphobia. The pills were Valium, you said, prescribed for your panic attacks when they first began a decade ago. You were now addicted to the tablets. And not only had they failed to prevent you from tumbling down a dank well of panic every now and then, heart hammering so hard you thought you were going to die, in fact
you believed they had made your symptoms worse. But if you didn’t take the little blue pills every day you would suffer from withdrawal and become very, very ill indeed.

Phobias, panic attacks, drug addiction, withdrawal; I felt like Alice in Wonderland trying to make sense of a landscape that had suddenly begun shrinking and bulging. Isn’t agoraphobia a fear of open spaces? I asked. How come you can walk across the vast university quadrangle, but you can’t get into my little orange Corolla and come to the theatre with me?

No, you explained, it was more complicated than that. Confined spaces could be just as difficult as open ones, hence your inability to get into an elevator. It was more about needing to be in familiar places, ideally close to medical help in case you had an anxiety attack.

As a consequence of all this, you’d spent the last decade of your life largely confined to approximately three square kilometres of suburban Melbourne. And it was no coincidence that those same three square kilometres contained three of the city’s best hospitals.

Once I had digested all this information – and it took a while – it was inevitable I would start planning my next campaign. There was a strong tendency towards helpfulness in my family. We all loved a good old-fashioned rescue, and your story was ripe for a happy ending. Hadn’t I just had an outrageous success in the campaign to conquer my own anxiety? You had been my prize and, like a gambler who’s just hit the jackpot, I knew I could do it all over again. Only this time you would be the beneficiary.

There’s nothing like being in love to generate a semitrailer-load of hubris.

I found a clinic specialising in treating anxiety disorders. I suggested strategies for gradually reducing your drug intake. I enticed you into my car and drove further than I’d promised. I even managed to get you to the beach one day, where you waded in the water fully clothed, laughing like a child at the circus.

But it always felt like one step forward, one step back. You wouldn’t come with me to the anxiety clinic because it was too far away. You couldn’t go back to the beach because you had checked in the street directory and there were no hospitals nearby.

Meanwhile, I was learning many new and interesting things about the human mind. I learnt that it was possible to develop a phobia about literally anything, from ablutophobia (fear of washing) and zelophobia (fear of jealousy) to sclerophobia (fear of bad men).

I learnt about the fear of fear (phobophobia), and how it can bring a person to their knees as violently as a physical assault. I learnt how hard it is to hang onto your dignity when the simplest requests from someone you love are impossible to grant. I learnt about the intricate craft of lying that a phobic person must learn in order to hide their shameful
anxieties from the world. And I learnt that love can’t survive on a constant diet of disappointments.

Do you remember that poem you wrote about falling in love with me, dashing it off on a scrap of paper one night and handing it over without saying a word? A taut, tender poem about spring and the colour of my eyes. Mr e e 54 hovelli could learn a bit from this guy, I thought to myself.

And do you remember, a few years later, the day we were in a group of people watching a decade-old video of your best friend’s wedding? How we listened to the speech in which your friend told the story of how you’d helped him woo his wife-to-be by penning a beautiful love poem for him to give to her? And how you became agitated and tried to get someone to stop the video? But no one would, and then on the screen the groom started reading out the poem and it was all about spring and the colour of her eyes. I was sitting there beside you feeling nauseated with the shock of it, the betrayal, the tawdry pre-loved moth-eaten trickery of it all, and we couldn’t look at each other for hours afterwards.

Shyness isn’t the only reason it can be hard to meet someone’s eyes.

We lasted nearly five years, you and I, and we ended with a whimper, not a bang – a painful, protracted withdrawal. No matter how trapped I felt by your fear and its bewildering prohibitions, I never stopped wanting you. Sex was the one arena where your fears receded and you knew exactly what you were doing. Relinquishing that pleasure gave me some belated insight into how hard it was to kick a drug addiction.

But over the ensuing decade, when we occasionally met up for a cup of sweet tea, I couldn’t stop myself offering yet more advice and solutions for your ‘problem’, as I still saw it. Compulsive helpfulness is a hard habit to kick, too.

I would love to be able to tell you that I’ve learnt a bit since then; that we’re all afraid of something, and we’re all battling with or accommodating those fears as best we can. That, in spite of the success of my New Social Policy circa 1984, shyness still challenges me to a daily arm-wrestle and I don’t always win.

The truth is, though, I feel guilty. A quarter-century on, the fact that my love couldn’t cure you of a severe anxiety disorder still feels like a failure. It seems I’ve not always been as helpful as I wanted to be.

Then again, who knows? It’s been a few years since we last met. Maybe that really was you swimming out beyond the Coogee breakers, enjoying the last hours of your Sydney holiday before catching a cab to the airport; transfixed by the dip and sway of the horizon and by the knowledge that the distance between you and it is no longer infinite.

I hope so.

Love Sian
Two Legs

Tom was away again. Another work trip, interstate this time. His absences were getting me down. I may have been in love but I was often alone. I decided to escape Melbourne’s bitter winter for a long weekend of Queensland warmth. I needed to immerse myself in those tropical waters, shed the weight of all this introspection. Catch some oblivious waves.

Dining alone one evening at a pavement I on the Sunshine Coast, I entertained myself by people-watching. A frowning teenage boy wandered away from the table of adults who had brought him to the I. He stood in front of the blackboard menu, stroking the chalk letters until they were smearable, then swerved to the left and walked towards and past me. Stopping suddenly beside a light pole, he looked left and right nervously, as if awaiting instructions. Flicking his fingers like a pianist limbering up for a recital, he swerved and strode back to the blackboard to begin stroking again.

The adults ignored him and chatted on. I sipped my wine, enjoying the humid tropical air on my bare arms as I watched him flick and swerve, flick and swerve. And as my eyes followed him back and forth across the pavement I remembered watching another boy just like this one, far away in a Victorian country high school in the dry heat of a southern summer. I was about eleven years old, which makes it the mid-seventies.

That boy had a neat wet comb-over and high-belted corduroy trousers and he was standing beside the entrance to the school dining room, greeting people as they arrived for dinner.

No, he wasn't greeting us. He was oblivious to us all. His forefinger was on the light switch beside the door and he was pushing it up and down, up and down, up and down. He was staring at the ceiling as if he was watching an action movie in full flight. The whole room was flickering like a darkened cinema as the lights went on and off, on and off, on and off. I was feeling a bit dizzy. No one made a move to stop him though. We carried on collecting our plastic dinner trays and scooping beef stew into our plates and shuffling to our places on the long tables.

The quiet roar of conversation in the dining room was punctuated every now and then by a hoarse adolescent scream. No one looked up. I was sitting with my brother and some new friends we had made here at the holiday camp. One boy in our group smiled at me often. He had red hair but no freckles. His older sister was one of the screamers. I tried to avoid his gaze.

The formal name for this gathering was the Mansfield Autistic Centre Family Playschool. We just called it Auty Camp. Our psychologist mother was researching for a
PhD on autism. She had been invited to join the families with autistic children who got together each summer for a kind of live-in communal therapy session. My stepfather John, my brother David and I went with her. Mum was looking for research clues to this mysterious affliction and offering advice to bewildered parents – how to get their autistic teenager to ingest something other than tomato soup and Coca-Cola, for example.

My brother and I hung out with the little gang of the ‘normal’ siblings of the auties (was I normal? At times, back then, I felt as disconnected from the people around me as the light-flicking boy. What made me so sure I wasn’t one of them?) We roamed the school grounds playing chasey, riding bikes, occasionally retiring to someone’s tent for card games and illicit bags of mixed lollies. Our freedom felt unprecedented, exhilarating. A taste of things to come, here on the cusp of puberty.

Mostly we ignored the auties (well those related to them did; I tried not to stare but couldn’t help myself sometimes, with so many weird and wonderful moves going on around me, the finger-flicking and head-banging and rocking and rolling, it was like I’d joined the circus) but every now and then we had to appeal to a higher authority when one of the auties took over the school trampoline and we couldn’t get a turn.

‘She’s not even jumping on it!’ we protested to the nearest grown-up. ’She’s just lying there looking at her fingers, can’t she do that somewhere else?’

Most of the adults were well used to this kind of arbitration (well over it, I’d imagine). They suggested alternative activities, like rehearsing our songs for the camp Musical Evening. My brother and I had agreed to sing a song each from the musical Oliver. We’d seen the movie at the drive-in and everyone reckoned my blonde brother was the spitting image of little orphan Oliver. He would sing ‘Where is love?’ and I was to perform ‘Who will buy?’

Love appeared to be on offer from a red-haired boy called Jason. I was mortified and also flattered. Every time we played chasey, Jason chased after me. I was tall and fast so mostly I got away. Every now and then though, he caught me (did I let him?), throwing his arms around me and hanging on for dear life. I didn’t know what to do with him. Flirting simply wasn’t in my repertoire. I stood there stiffly and waited for him to take his arms away, then half-wished he hadn’t. We were both teased – ’NOW I know your GIRLfriend’ – and I resented him for drawing attention towards me (please don’t look at me). Jason didn’t seem to mind.

One day a big group of us – parents and sibs, mostly – went for a bushwalk in the nearby mountains. The adults trudged up the narrow gravel road in clusters, flicking off flies with broken twigs and comparing notes on how to deal with their auty children’s
terror-tantrums. We kids soon separated from our parents. I walked with my brother and Chasin’ Jason and a few other boys for a while, but then they all decided to jog.

I was a sprinter, not a stayer, and I couldn’t keep up with them. As I slowed down to catch my breath they disappeared around a bend in the road.

I walked on, swatting at flies, fretting about the camp Musical Evening. People would be looking at me. A hall full of people. I would have to look back at them. I would have to watch them watching me, as well as sing a song for them.

What if the sight of them watching me sucked the air out of my lungs and I couldn’t sing the song?

What if I couldn’t remember the words to the song because I was watching them watching me and worrying about what they were seeing?

What were the words to the song? The fears flicked and swerved inside my belly. At some point I looked up and there was no one around. No one at all.

I waited for a while in the shade by the side of the road, thinking some parents might catch up with me, but the gravel track remained empty. Had I missed a turn-off? Was there a map I should have been carrying? Had someone given me instructions about where to go when I wasn’t listening? Why hadn’t my brother waited for me? Why had I let my anxious thoughts blind me to what was happening around me? I walked on because it seemed as useful – or useless – as going back. At some point I began to whimper.

What if I was walking in completely the wrong direction?

What if no one noticed until the end of the day and by then I was miles and miles away from Mum? My whimpering grew louder.

Eventually I came to a high bridge over a river and saw a group of people way down below, tiny people with tiny fishing lines. Standing on the edge of the bridge I cupped my hands to my face and shouted, ‘Help. I’m lost. Can you help me?’ Someone looked up and waved. They couldn’t hear what I was saying.

I yelled louder. ‘Help. Can you tell me which way to go?’ Another one waved and shouted something back at me but I couldn’t hear what he was saying. And I couldn’t shout again because now I was crying and it was blocking up my throat.

There was probably a way to climb down from the bridge to the tiny people, but I felt too shy and embarrassed to go any closer to them. I stood in the middle of the bridge, weeping, knowing somewhere deep in my brain that I was acting a bit crazy. If Nana Peg was here, I told myself, she would just bowl up to the fishermen and persuade them to give her a lift back to camp. But the fear in me was too strong to resist.

And where was my redheaded pursuer now?
Three decades later an email appeared in my inbox entitled: YOU WERE THE FIRST GIRL I KISSED. They’re getting creative out there in spam-world, I thought. I was about to delete it when I realised the sender’s name was vaguely familiar. ‘Now that I’ve got your attention’, the email read, ‘that’s not just a good headline but a fact’.

The redhead had grown up to become an advertising copywriter and, in an idle moment in the office, he had Googled my name. Jason reported that he was married and had a child, and enquired after my mother and brother.

Had he kissed me? It might be true but I couldn’t recall the event. I couldn’t even remember what had happened at the Camp Musical Evening. Perhaps the audience had bought my nervous rendition of ‘Who Will Buy’. Perhaps it had been a triumph and that was why I had been compulsively performing in front of audiences ever since. All I remembered was the bridge of terror, the miniature waving fishermen, and the unutterable relief of seeing a group of familiar adults emerge from a track beside the road about a hundred metres away.

Why do we remember our failures and sufferings so much better than our pleasures and triumphs?

Sitting alone at that Queensland beachside I, watching the boy with the constantly moving hands, I wondered about the world he saw between his flicking fingers. Were the rest of us like those tiny fishermen had been for me, waving at him and making noises, but so far away, so inaudible, he couldn’t make sense of it? Perhaps he was so consumed by the way his fingers looked and felt as they danced in front of him that there was no room in his mind for anything else. Or perhaps those hands were comforting to him, something to focus on to combat the sensory overload of the world around him. Something that shut out the terror. Was my terror the same as his terror?

Back home in chilly Melbourne, I called Margot again. I wanted to know if there was any crossover between shyness and autism.

**PROFESSOR MARGOT:** No there isn’t. Even though they might have been mistaken for each other in the past, people with autism are on a different spectrum again to shyness. That’s why it’s called Autism Spectrum Disorder. Part of autism is being withdrawn and living in your own world, but that’s not shyness. It’s more of a cognitive thing, something about the way they process or fail to process the world. They may be very withdrawn because they haven’t a clue about what’s going on around them. In extreme cases they don’t understand what these things are that walk with two legs, these humans, and why they do what they do.
So although I sometimes felt like an alien living amongst humans, it seemed I wasn't perched anywhere on that autism spectrum. I knew what was going on around me. In fact I spent way too much time with my social antennae fully extended, processing the world, worrying about what other people were thinking, about whether anyone understood me.
**Shy Guy**

At last Tom was back from his travels and he had brought me a gift. A new mix tape (on CD). The last few had been little spinning discs of musical propaganda, attempts to seduce me into loving the music he loved: first country music (it was hard but I was trying), then sixties soul (no need, already converted), Italian mafia music (hair-raising howls from the mountains of Sicily), flamenco songs (hair-raising howls from the Moorish south of Spain). I was developing a taste for hair-raising howls.

This time Tom had followed me to shy-world. He had mixed together a dozen songs about socially awkward guys and gals longing for love and missing out on love and falling in love and losing love. From doo-wop to Brit-pop via Bollywood. I was entranced.

**Ask – The Smiths**

Morrissey made it sound so simple. And he was right. When you took away the complicated explanations about temperament spectrums and fears of negative evaluation and mathematical equations for measuring self-consciousness, shyness was just a stupid thing that could get in the way of you doing what you wanted to do. The Smiths’ cheery little tune with its noodling high guitar riff and sweet harmonies somehow made escape seem possible, even inevitable. And I loved Morrissey’s image of the buck-toothed Luxembourg girl smiling as she read her suitor’s latest rhymes.

Tom and I had wooed each other with writing. We had met professionally a couple of times in the past but then came his out-of-the-blue email. Short and sweet, complimenting me on something I’d had published. I responded, thanking him, and he wrote again. Those initial exchanges turned into six months of missives; sometimes one a week, sometimes daily. Sometimes he sent me his latest writing. Sometimes we exchanged lists: everything from Pet Hates and Worst Personal Faults to Favourite Books and Reasons To Live.

It turns out that email is the perfect medium for shy people. The pace of self-revelation is controllable. The lack of physical proximity spares you the agonising self-consciousness of social anxiety. There’s just your busy brain and your tapping fingers (and your beating heart).

On the computer screen we could be nutty, nuanced, nonchalant. Nothing seemed to be at stake, nothing required except to entertain each other with words. We told each other stories from our past, we compared our reactions to novels we’d read, we even offered tidbits of regret about past relationships. Writing to Tom, I felt weightless.

And in one of those early emails, when I confessed to being shy, he simply replied: *As Morrissey says, shyness is nice.*
I felt like I’d been found.

**Secret Heart – Ron Sexsmith**

From The Smiths to Ron Sexsmith. Nice segue. Sexy.

Tom had introduced me to Ron Sexsmith’s songs early on in our courtship, when my own secret heart was still full of fear. I knew that my hungry body was tugging me towards something my anxious mind still wasn’t sure about, and this song seemed a perfect expression of the tussle between the two of them.

Sex was one of the things I sometimes felt shyness had stolen from me. Not just fucking, but everything that usually came before it; the subtle semaphore of attraction. My past seemed like a trail of missed opportunities.

The beautiful brown-eyed boy glimpsed in the stairwell of my first high school, his Adam’s apple moving gracefully inside his long neck as he and his friends swore at each other in Greek. *Scasse malaka, gamisou*. Filth that sounded like poetry to me. I spent long lunchtimes waiting to catch a glimpse of him then looking away if he so much as turned his head in my direction. Stricken.

The blue-eyed double-bass player who teased me in the break at youth orchestra rehearsals, making the laughter bubble up from my lower belly where I sometimes imagined him placing his big bass-bowing hand. There was one party where we sat on the sticky floor of someone’s lounge room and that hand of his moved to stroke my calf and the blush went all the way down from my neck to below my belly and yet still, still, I couldn’t move, my secret heart trapped inside this frozen-molten body. Locked in.

The dark-haired unionist who sang his lungs out in the trade union choir, *oh comrades come rally*, we were all comrades back then, I was Comrade Choir Mistress, but this comrade couldn’t bring herself to let that comrade know that there was a reason she smiled at him in rehearsals and it wasn’t just because of the sounds that came out of that full-lipped socialist mouth of his. At the pub after choir practice she watched him leaning on the beer-puddled bar, those lips opening and closing as he analysed the factional warfare in the Labor Party.

*The workers united will never be defeated* but this worker had no idea about how to unite with that worker. Desire was defeated by terror. But what was I so afraid of? Was desire defeated by pride? But why was admitting desire a matter of pride? Because the underside of desire is loneliness and loneliness is something to be ashamed of?

*Arise ye workers from your slumbers, arise ye prisoners of want*. Arise ye prisoner of shyness. That seemed even less likely than the socialist revolution. Every song, every anthem seems in retrospect to have been a corny commentary on my infinite want.
There had been some exceptions. My campaign to have Mr Hippy Shoulder Bag had been a success. Just occasionally I could override the fear in social situations, reach out and give a signal that I was available. And sometimes, when I was far from home (or drunk, or both) and could pretend to be someone else, someone with less dignity to lose, someone less hemmed in by what ifs, I surprised myself with just how strong those signals could be.

On a train between East Berlin and communist Krakow I once met a Polish environmentalist with liquid brown eyes and an unpronounceable name who asked if I would smuggle out his underground pamphlets then took me to a two-room flat in the smog-ridden outer suburbs of his home town for the night where he gave me half a bottle of vodka and relief from want.

At a surf beach on a faraway coast I met an artist who held my calf gently as he removed a fishhook from my bleeding toe and offered me two years of romantic respite from loneliness.

And from the back row of the trade union choir I was eventually courted by the dark-haired baritone who offered to carry my electric piano from the car to the rehearsal room and from whom I gratefully accepted almost a decade of loving kindness. But I was still hiding, sheltering behind a version of myself that felt somehow inauthentic. Still playing it safe. Still feeling that want.

And then along came Tom.

Sad Sad Girl and Boy – Curtis Mayfield

Curtis Mayfield’s song about the lonely couple shyly acknowledging each other’s sadness seemed to carry a special message from Tom to me – a suggestion that we were two of a kind.

How do you know if you are two of a kind?

What if you both:
- prefer lying on a bed reading a book to any other activity (except having sex)
- love that poem by Les Murray where he becomes the multiple selves of a herd of cattle about to be slaughtered, channelling the shit-streaming terror, the bovine ‘us-ness’ of them all
- spend a lot of time at social events worrying about whose name you’re going to forget next
- know that if you’re not reading a book or having sex, you would be happiest catching a body wave at a deserted surf beach (although every time Tom catches a dumper
and surfaces a little later than you might expect him to, you believe for several long
seconds that he has drowned)
- love Curtis Mayfield and his sweet high keening voice that could persuade a nun to
give up her habit
- like sending rhyming text messages to each other
- sometimes wish you could live another life in which you travelled the world learning
new languages
- like each others family (Tom's felt like an extension of my own; same kind of people,
just less anxious)
- laugh way too long when one of you concocts a stupid sentence full of rapidly
changing vowels and tries to say it with a New Zealand accent
- express the hope that you'll still be laughing at the same stupid joke when you're in
the nursing home together
- love writing lists
- know it's not a good idea to tell anyone how ridiculously happy you are to have
found each other, because sometimes the happiness of others makes people sad
- reckon you're shy

\textit{Hidden Place – Bjork}

Like me, the ‘slightly shy’ narrator of Bjork’s song knows all about hiding. About disguising
yourself. And, maybe, about wanting to be discovered.

Not long after we got together I persuaded Tom to try the novels of Jane Austen. After
he had read a few in a row he said he understood why I loved her. The silent observer. The
outsider watching the humans interact. Sitting on the chaise longue in a long chaste frock,
eyes narrowed, listening intently.

In return, Tom put me onto a Japanese author called Haruki Murakami. I read a novel of
his called \textit{The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle}. I remember there was a woman called Nutmeg and
a boy who couldn't speak. There was a missing cat and there must have been a wind-up
bird but what I remember most clearly was a man in a well. It seemed as if I had been
down there with him. Until Tom came along with a rope ladder.
Shy – Simon and Garfunkel

The poor shy guy in this song spends a lot of time in front of a mirror, wishing and hoping and sighing. Scared to death. I wanted to tell him: if you’re shy the mirror doesn’t help. In fact it just makes things worse. I figured that out long ago.

Don’t Be Shy – Cat Stevens

This song advises shy people not to ‘wear’ their fear. But what exactly is that fear we’re wearing, Mr Steven Georgiou-hiding-behind-the-persona-of-Cat-Stevens-hiding-behind-the-persona-of-Yusuf Islam? It seems to me fear is not a singular noun but more like a series of Babushka dolls; there is always another one nestling inside the last.

Shyness is fear of other people.
Fear of other people is social anxiety.
Social anxiety is the fear of being negatively evaluated.

But what is the final, the deepest, the most shameful fear? What happens if other people negatively evaluate us?
Shyness is fear of rejection.

On the radio I heard an American pre-school teacher use the phrase ‘the habit of rejection’. Her name was Vivian Gussin Paley and I found her book in the library: You Can’t Say You Can’t Play.⁹ So Vivian was a rhymer too. I liked her already.

I liked her even more after I read about her ‘experiments’ with kindergarten children. Vivian had noticed that some children in her class were habitually the rejecters and others were the rejected. ‘By kindergarten’, she wrote, ‘a structure begins to be revealed and will soon be carved in stone. Certain children will have the right to limit the social experiences of their classmates. Henceforth a ruling class will notify others of their acceptability, and the outsiders learn to anticipate the sting of rejection… Rejection in play is the forerunner of all rejections to come.’

Recalling her own kindergarten experiences as one of the outsiders, Vivian decided to post a sign for her young students advising them of a strict new rule: YOU CAN’T SAY YOU CAN’T PLAY.

‘I announced the new social order and, from the start, it is greeted with disbelief.’ Vivian describes in hilarious detail how these little adults-in-training tried to find loopholes in the new rule so they could continue to exclude certain children from their games. In particular, they seemed to fear that if they couldn’t exclude some children, they couldn’t protect their ‘best friend’ relationships.
‘Is the primary purpose of play to have and to hold a best friend?’ Vivian asks. ‘Or to establish who’s the boss? If, indeed, possessiveness comes first, then how can any plan work that attempts to eradicate exclusive ownership?’

Vivian’s stories reminded me of a grammar-nerd joke I had once heard: ‘I used to have a Greek friend called Apostrophe. She was so possessive!’ I had always been the possessive type, always on the lookout for intense one-on-one friendships. Was that a shyness thing? Did best friends offer more security, less anxiety than friends of uncertain status?

I recalled hearing my young nephew using the term ‘rejected’. He and his primary school mates had been learning about the evils of bullying and how unkind it was to reject another child in the playground. Within the space of a few days, though, the word had morphed into a weird new insult, a freshly minted synonym for ‘loser’. For example, he told me, ‘When I drop the ball playing footy the other kids say, “Oh you’re so 65hovelli!”’ What had begun as an appeal to the children’s better natures had been converted into the very thing the teachers were trying to outlaw; the message that ‘you are not acceptable’.

I couldn’t recall having been systematically bullied during my own primary school days. Everyone copped it at some point but many others copped it worse than me. I knew about rejection, though. The most painful memories were of my extroverted Best Friends losing interest and moving on to other Best Friends; more a downgrade of my emotional status than an outright dismissal. My attachments had always been limpet-like and I took these things hard. But it seemed to me that nothing in the history of my social life could explain the visceral fear of rejection that had accompanied me all through adulthood. Nature had simply obliterated nurture.

**Shy Guy – Diana King**

According to the narrator of this song, shy guys don’t mess around with other women. They stick with you ‘till the end’.

If you’re shy, these things are important.

Too hard to start again.

Too much to lose.
What’s That?

When I told people ‘I’m researching shyness’ they would sometimes hear me say:

- I’m researching Chinese
- Or
- I’m researching shiners
- Or
- I’m researching shameless
- Or
- I’m researching charmers
- Or
- I’m researching Sian-ness

Yes. I was researching Sian-ness.
Laboratory Setting

I sent an email to a Chinese psychologist at a university in Canada, an expert in something called ‘shyness-inhibition’. I wanted to find out about shyness and cross-cultural differences. In the email I asked if I could do a phone interview with him. He didn’t say no but he didn’t say yes. Instead he sent me back a draft book chapter he had recently written. His chapter told me:

- the term shyness-inhibition refers to ‘vigilant and anxious reactivity to stressful or challenging situations’
- in North America parents typically react to their children’s shy-inhibited behaviour with disappointment and rejection
- Chinese children display more shy behaviours than Canadian children in a laboratory setting
- in self-oriented cultures (like North America), taking the social initiative is ‘viewed as an index of social maturity, but display of shy-inhibited behaviour is considered socially incompetent’
- in group-oriented societies (like China) shy-inhibited behaviour may be encouraged because ‘it may be conducive to group organization’

After I had read the chapter I emailed the Chinese psychologist again, asking once more if I could do a phone interview with him. He didn’t respond. I think perhaps he was too shy to talk to me. Or was he too Chinese?

On the wall beside my desk I had stuck a handwritten note:

‘All writers have to first charm and then betray.’

Could I write a book about shyness?

No, a book about Sian-ness?

Could I be shameless?

Would I be able to charm you?

Or would I betray myself to you?
The Lump

In 1987 I graduated from university with an honours degree in politics and no idea what I wanted to do next. Things were messy with Andre. We were still deeply entangled and I wished he could come to Europe with me. I also knew I would have to leave him. I couldn't rescue him from his intractable fears but neither could I live with them. Stuffing the last Temperament Study questionnaire into its envelope, I packed my new backpack and flew to Europe. My plan was to cart that pack through Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal and figure out what to do with the rest of my life. And along the way I was determined to beat this shyness thing before it, too, became intractable.

After a few months my arms were stronger than they'd ever been, or have ever been since. Ropes of new muscles moved sinuously across my shoulder blades as I hoisted my backpack and trudged from the latest youth hostel to the nearest train station. One of my toes had a permanent blister, the result of the next toe along pressing down on it inside my once-white runners. Curved hammer toes like my mother’s, a cheap prize from the DNA lucky dip, along with shyness. With every step on the hot summer pavements I could feel a rhythmic sting move up my foot like a small electric shock.

The aches and the stings were only to be expected. Daily punishments from a body being pushed further than it had ever been pushed before. Hundreds of kilometres of city pavements, station platforms, gallery corridors, cobbled town squares, circular stairwells, stony beaches, damp heaths, had passed under my feet.

But the lump in my throat, that was a different thing.

A mystery.

A treachery.

At first I thought there was something stuck down there, a piece of crusty bread or a tiny olive pip, something lodged above my larynx. I swallowed and swallowed, swigging away at my water bottle, trying to dislodge it, but nothing worked. The lump sat there patiently, waiting for me to carry it to our next destination.

Some days it would seem to shrink; days when I found brief companionship in hostel dining rooms. Shiny-haired Californian girls with a good line in complimentary small talk: ‘It’s SO inner-esting to meet an Australian, I’ve heard you have a beaUtiful country!’ Watchful Canadians with maple leaf flags sewn onto their backpacks ‘so no one thinks we’re American’. We would share stories about tourist sights to seek out and places to avoid: ‘You’ll be robbed in Naples, for sure’. The more I spoke, the less the lump bothered me.
For a few weeks I travelled through Italy with a Canadian woman called Linda. She'd spotted my grubby copy of Margaret Atwood’s novel *The handmaid’s tale* as I pretended to read at the hostel breakfast table in Florence and quizzed me about whether I would ever allow men to have the kind of power over me that they had over the women in Atwood’s futuristic novel. Linda reminded me of my sister Yoni – her peaches and cream complexion, her gesticulating hands, the way she cut straight to the chase. I trusted her immediately. And it turned out that, like me, Linda was running away from a sticky relationship with an older man.

We sat on the tiled porch of that hostel on the outskirts of Florence talking endlessly about these men, hers unavailable by way of a decade-long marriage, mine unavailable by way of a decade-long phobia. We found common ingredients, like secrecy, shame, unreliability, and always the feeling that we came second to someone or something else in our lovers’ lives. And yet we both missed these men like we missed sleep.

Linda and I visited the museums and galleries of Florence and stood, still as statues, before Michelangelo’s ‘Lamentation Over the Dead Christ’, taking in that twisted marble torso, those sunken ribs, the strange gracefulness of the dead man’s ankle. In my travel guide there was a quote attributed to the sculptor: ‘In every block of marble I see a statue as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.’ Is that how we shy people feel, I wondered? Like unfinished sculptures, waiting for someone to chisel us out from inside this marble casing of self-consciousness.

Linda and I shared a day-trip to Pisa, taking photos of each other in front of the drunken tower with our arms stretched out, pretending to hold it up. We fretted about the black oil we had found stuck to the bottom of our sandals on the polluted beaches of Greece and about the begging children we had tried not to see in Naples. We shared our lists of All The Things Wrong With The World. As I offered her my theories about how it could All Be Put Right, I had never felt more articulate or more certain that I should try to Put It All Right. The words chased each other along my tongue and the tightness in my throat eased to an occasional flicker.

Once again my gratitude for friendship morphed into a crush and I desperately wished Linda would come with me to Barcelona. But companionship was always temporary in this backpacking community of colliding atoms. Linda had already been to Spain, and besides, her money was running out. She had to go home to Canada. When we parted and my voice once again fell silent, the lump expanded.
Lying on my hostel bunk in the middle of the night I would feel it resting there, nuzzling thickly at my vocal cords, teasing me with the possibility that it might spread over the entrance to my lungs while I slept, barring the way to all oxygen.

One night in a train cabin where the seats slid down to lying position, loneliness threw a blanket over my conscience. A newly wed Italian couple had befriended me, filling in the gaps in my fragmented Italian and telling me all about their wedding. Later, when the lights had dimmed and the rocking train had lured the bride to sleep, I felt the husband’s hand gently stroking the back of my calves. I didn’t move, either to stop him or encourage him, and as the stroking moved slowly along my thighs I could feel the lump in my throat melting under the wave of heat that spread over my chest and neck. So conversation was not the only cure for this mysterious ailment.

In the morning, though, when the groom caught my eye and winked at me in the narrow corridor outside our cabin, the lump was back again, worse than ever.

In Rome an overworked English-speaking doctor diagnosed the lump as a kind of spasm, an involuntary clenching of the throat muscles. He offered no theory about the cause but reassured me it wasn’t dangerous and prescribed some anti-spasmodic tablets. After a couple of weeks I stopped taking the pills. They made no difference to the lump and seemed to be wreaking havoc with my bowels. The lump and I simply grew accustomed to each other in the end, like my new shoulder muscles.

In a youth hostel on the Spanish coast just south of Barcelona, I was sitting on a narrow bed, feet resting on my backpack, listening to the murmurs of some young men in the next room. Their words were muffled by the door between us, but from the pitch of their cadences, they sounded like they might be English. I was rigid with indecision. It had been almost a week since I’d had a conversation in my native tongue and the lump in my throat felt the size of a walnut.

I had been travelling for six months and had had enough. I had proven my point. I wanted to go home.

The staccato sounds of the glottal stops coming from next door were unmistakable now, and I really wanted to know what they were saying. And yet they were strangers. The what ifs were whispering to me again.

What if I couldn’t think of anything to say to them?

What if they didn’t want to talk to me?

What if they were quite happy with their own company, thanks very much, and didn’t need some random Aussie bird barging into their boy’s own adventure?

What if they could smell my loneliness?
I sat there in the empty room, armpits drenched, throat clenched, locked in battle with myself as one form of distress competed with another. Finally something tipped and I stood, took the three steps to the door and knocked. The voices went quiet and after a little while I knocked again and, without waiting for permission, I opened the door.

And the world did not come to an end.
Globus Hystericus

What had been inside that lump? Was it an ingot of unspoken words? Had my anxious thoughts tumbled down my 72hovelling tubes, slid down the back of my throat and got trapped there under my vocal cords, waiting patiently for a chance to leap out of my mouth and into the waiting world?

So much to worry about. So much to say.

TEN THINGS WRONG WITH THE WORLD ACCORDING TO SIAN PRIOR, CIRCA 1987

1. Acid Rain in Europe.
2. Apartheid in South Africa.
4. Uranium Mining in Australia.
5. Rainforest Destruction in Brazil.
6. Ozone Depletion in the Stratosphere.
7. Indonesian Military Forces in East Timor.
8. Nuclear Weapons in the USA and the USSR.
10. The Patriarchy Absolutely Everywhere.

After six months of travelling the hopelessly flawed world, this list seemed to be worrying me a bit more than my shyness. Perhaps fixing all these wrong things would be a good way to distract me from myself. I had decided what to do with my life. I would be a professional good influence. I was going to save the planet.

As a first step, soon after my return to Australia I applied for a job as a campaigner with a national environment organisation. I still remember that job interview almost word for word. It was as if someone or something else took over my brain. I went into the interview room knowing very little about the Australian Conservation Foundation’s history or goals and came out charged with the responsibility of alerting the nation to the looming threats of radiation contamination, ozone depletion, chemical pollution and global warming.

Shy Sian had been abducted by aliens, leaving behind a replica, Professional Sian, to make her debut in the adult workforce.

Globus hystericus. It sounds like a perfect description of how the world looked to me back then. We were suffering from a kind of global madness, a heedless, headlong descent into political and ecological chaos. We had to be stopped, and I was just the gal for the job.
In fact *globus hystericus* was the term that could have explained my mysterious lump. Twenty-five years later a quick Google search revealed all.

‘Stress or anxiety may cause some people to feel tightness in the throat, or feel as if something is stuck in the throat. This is called *globus hystericus*, or more commonly, *globus pharyngia*. Swallowing can be performed normally, but it can become quite irritating. In some cases the cause is unknown and symptoms may be attributed to a psychogenic cause *i.e.* an anxiety disorder.’

Of course.

Two weeks into my new job with the ACF I was required to speak to a crowd of twenty thousand people at an anti-nuclear rally in Melbourne’s Myer Music Bowl. Again, I remember the details of that performance (because it was a performance, I was playing a part) with freakish accuracy. I was wearing a pair of blue striped shorts I had picked up on a Greek island a few months earlier. When the MC introduced me as ‘a representative of Australia’s largest environment organisation’ I felt the invisible cloak of my new job settling around my strong backpacker’s shoulders. My speech was ready. My cause was just. The citizens of Planet Earth must be saved from self-destruction.

As I walked onto the stage, leant into the microphone and spoke the words that had been building up in me for years, the tightness in my throat eased and the last traces of the lump faded away.
On Lists

*Three reasons why shy people might like writing lists:*

1) Lists generate a sense of control over the things you're listing. Acute social anxiety, by contrast, can make you feel like you've lost control of:
   - your body
   - your emotions
   - your intentions
   - your mind

2) Lists can distract you from the whispering *what ifs* by giving you a series of achievable goals, such as:
   a) say hello to the neighbour next time you're weeding your front garden
   b) accept the handsome baritone's next offer of a lift home from choir practice
   c) ask your work colleagues what they did on the weekend
   d) don't leave the birthday party early

3) Lists can be used to log your small victories in the battle against social anxiety, such as:
   a) smiled at Mr Hippy Shoulder Bag in the university
   b) chatted to the woman working at the supermarket check-out
   c) accepted an invitation to the work Christmas party
   d) resisted the urge to cancel the session with the professional photographer

*A strange fact:*

In 2009 the Italian writer Umberto Eco curated an exhibition for the Louvre Gallery called *Mille e tre* ('One thousand and three'). It was an exhibition about lists.11

*Four reasons Signor Eco is partial to lists:*

'The list is the origin of culture'

'A list allows us to question the essential definitions'

'Lists make infinity comprehensible'

'We like lists because we don't want to die'
One reason why a shy person might feel embarrassed about writing so many lists:
It might make them wonder if perhaps they suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder as well as social anxiety.

Some consolations for a shy list-writing person:
Lots of people write lists, not just the shy ones.
   Umberto Eco writes lists.
   Tom writes lists.
   It’s probably one of the Hundred Habits of Highly Successful Humans.
Goodness Me

Ten things that are (allegedly) good for you

- Going to bed early
- Only consuming alcohol in moderation
- Only bathing in cold water
- Drinking chamomile tea
- Not consuming too much salt or sugar
- Enduring regular doses of boredom
- Staying fit by walking up the stairs rather than catching the lift
- Staying healthy by eating a lot of brown rice and tofu

- Minding your manners
- Establishing friendships with sensible people

Remembering that scene with the self-actualising super-heroine in the striped shorts had raised yet another shyness question. Could there be a link between my hubristic plans to save the world and a shy temperament? I went back to the transcript of my interview with Professor Ron.

PROFESSOR RON: In our social anxiety treatment programs for children we talk to parents about how, on the negative side, their kids are prone to being anxious, depressed and stressed, but on the positive side, they’re usually also very reliable, conscientious and so on. Shyness is correlated with high empathy. I’m sure you’d find that, professionally, shy people are often in caring roles. It makes a lot of sense because it would take the attention away from you. In jobs where the focus is entirely on some other thing, it’s off you, and that could make a shy person do something that’s seemingly outgoing.

He was right. It did make a lot of sense. The imminent demise of the ozone layer had certainly taken my mind off my anxious self-consciousness, at least when I was working. I should have been pleased with Professor Ron’s description of all the positive attributes of being shy.
A List of Whens and Whats

When Mieke and I became friends in high school she stopped mucking around so much in class. She finished her homework more often. She tormented her teachers less. ‘You’re a good influence on her’, they murmured to me in the corridors.

What the teachers didn’t know is that our torments (because now I joined in) merely became subtler. She (we) replaced her ear-popping, class-stopping pantomime sneezes with a constant high-pitched hum. School madrigal practice had given us both an extra few top notes in our soprano range. We sat at the back of the class, faces studious, mouths closed, and sent those mosquito whines straight up our noses and out towards the blackboard. We made sure our noise was just quiet enough for its source to be impossible to locate, but just loud enough to cause vague, constant irritation to whichever teacher was in charge. In this way Mieke could be bad and get away with it. And I could be bad and be a Good Influence.

When Andre and I became lovers he tried to reduce his daily dosage of Valium. He tried to push the limits of his agoraphobic comfort zone. He re-enrolled in his university degree and talked about trying to get work. His family was pleased. ‘You’re a good influence on him’, they whispered to me in his kitchen.

What they didn’t witness was my refusal to turn the car around when he clutched at his constricted chest and begged me to take him home; the times he overslept and missed his university lectures and instead got a lecture from me; my refusal to spend the night with him because most nights he couldn’t sleep until dawn. Tough love. Negative reinforcement in uncompromising doses.
When Tom and I first got together he was an irregular heroin user. He was bad company when he was stoned. If I told him interesting stuff he just said, ‘Yeah whatever’. And I was worried it was going to kill him. I asked him to choose between heroin and me. Eventually he chose me. His friends were relieved and grateful. ‘He looks so much healthier since you’ve been together’, they said. ‘You’re so good for him.’ Even Tom told me ‘I like who I am when I’m with you’.

What they couldn’t know was that when he slipped away one morning and allowed himself a little taste, I refused to go with him that afternoon to the wedding of one of his closest friends. ‘I don’t care what you tell your friend’, I said. ‘Tell him I’m sick. Sick of who you are when you use heroin.’ Hardline neg re. Self-righteous helpfulness.

When as a teenager I first read Louise May Alcott’s novel Little women I was fascinated by the character of Beth.12 I recall that this third child of the March family loved kittens and knitting. Above all, though, I remember that Beth was good. Beth was so good that she was willing to put her own life in danger by volunteering to visit a family who had scarlet fever. Then poor Beth got sick and her family had to volunteer to nurse her. I knew I was meant to admire Beth and her gentle kitten-loving ways. She had more empathy than you could poke a stick at. She was super-helpful. Beth’s goodness rubbed off on her tomboy sister Jo, who resolved to be a better person, a person more like Beth. I should have identified with Beth. After all, she was shy and musical, just like me. She confessed to her sisters that her greatest burden was ‘being afraid of people’. And Beth was a Good Influence.

What I never admitted to anyone, though, was that I couldn’t stand Beth. She was a goody-goody and her goodness made everyone around her look wicked in comparison. She was a sickly, saccharine character, a passive, bedridden, boring victim who seemed two-dimensional compared to feisty Jo. And her goodness turned out to be a terminal condition. I didn’t want to be like her. It might kill me.

When I first started researching shyness I thought perhaps I could write a book about it. At work one day I found a piece of paper left on the photocopier by another writing teacher. It had a list of instructions about how to write something called a ‘self-referential joke’.

Exercise One: Devise Punchlines That Undermine or Confirm Their Premise.
Example: Confirm – I’m very shy. Oh dear, I’ve said too much.
Undermine – I’m very shy. Let me tell you about it.
What it made me wonder was, if I wrote a whole book about my shyness, would anyone actually believe that I was shy? Or would they think it was a joke?

When I decided I would try to write about book about shyness anyway, I thought perhaps I would write a self-help book for shy people. I could tell My Story, offer My Insights, share the Inside Information I had gained by reading all those library books and talking to all those experts. By the time my shy readers had finished my book they would understand exactly why they sometimes felt like an alien amongst humans, and they would have some Useful Strategies for dealing with their Irrational Fears.

What I realised, though, is that I’m not interested in self-help books. They induce in me the same faint nausea that Beth March in her sickbed used to provoke. I haven’t read many self-help books but I imagine they are full of trite phrases like ‘being your Best Self’ and ‘undertaking the Learning Journey’, phrases that reproach their readers for a failure to self-actualise. I don’t want to be a Good Influence any more. I don’t want to help others. I’m not interested in writing a self-help book because, ironically, it’s actually self-help I’m interested in.

When I say I’m trying to help myself, though, am I still trying to be A Good Influence, but this time on Shy Sian? Am I trying to understand shyness in order to eradicate it because my shy self is not and has never been and will never be my ‘best self’? Because I’m on a Sisyphean mission of self-actualisation?

What can you do? According to something Professor Ron had told me in our interview, if you’re shy, being a Good Influence seems to be hard-wired:

PROFESSOR RON: When we talk to parents who are worried about their shy kids we tell them that there are positives that often go with it, like greater sensitivity and greater levels of honesty. Things that are seen as ‘good person’ emotions, less self-serving emotions. With empathy, there’s that idea of putting yourself in other people’s situations. Shy people are often good listeners. So there are non-self-aggrandising, non-domineering positives that often go with shyness.

SHY SIAN: It’s true, I have spent a lot of time worrying about whether I’ve said something to hurt someone, been unsympathetic, failed in compassion. So it’s a shyness thing, all that fretting about what others are thinking and feeling. How exhausting. And yet, when you say
nice things like that about us – about me – I’m not sure I believe you, Professor Ron. Maybe my hard line good-influencing has been a form of self-aggrandisement. Maybe little Beth March and I wanted to make ourselves feel important by helping others.

PROFESSOR RON: Shy people often discount positive evaluation entirely. They are more strongly attracted to negative evaluation information. When socially anxious people get positive comments from another person it often increases their anxiety at the next interaction. One study showed that where there are two people interacting and one gives the socially anxious person compliments like 'you look fabulous' or 'you're doing a great job', and later you ask the socially anxious person, 'how do you feel about mixing with that person again' they will say 'I'm more anxious now because the bar's been raised – that person thinks I’m really competent but I'm not, so I'm really in trouble!'

SHY SIAN: But empathy hasn’t always made me helpful, Professor Ron. I have not always been kind to other shy people. In fact I have often been irritated and impatient when it seemed they weren’t making an effort to fight the good fight against their own temperament trait. I didn’t want to be one of them. They were the risk-avoiders, the failing self-actualisers. I wanted to be one of the loud ones, the assertive ones, the popular ones. And sometimes my social anxiety has got in the way of kindness.
Not Helpful

You’ve been asleep for ten hours but you wake up and it’s actually only been ninety minutes and what woke you up was the sound of the woman in the next hospital bed whimpering with pain.

Her whimpers turn to sobs that turn to groans as her head threatens to explode from pain. Where the hell does it come from? The doctors can’t say, it looked like an aneurism but all the tests in the world, the MRI tube of pain, the dye of pain, the lumbar puncture of pain, can’t confirm or deny their vague diagnosis.

So she’s crying out for the nurse, who gives her Panadeine Forte, but that takes a good twenty minutes to work, and in the meantime her arms and legs start tingling and pretty soon she can’t feel her hands, and who is there to comfort her? The nurse has gone away to page a doctor, and the woman is calling out, ‘Come back. Don’t leave me. I’m scared. Somebody?’

You’re lying two feet away from her in your roofless tent, earplugs out, wide awake, wondering if you should ease yourself painfully out of bed and go to the side of this woman and hold her hand (*what if* she doesn’t want you to?) and tell her someone cares (*what if* she doesn’t believe you?).

You don’t move.

You lie there silently and half of you is resenting your broken sleep and wishing she’d shut up and the other half knows exactly how she feels, how unspeakably awful this pain is, how you think you’re going to die and you half wish you would. But you don’t move.

You just lie there behind your sky-blue hospital curtain, blushing with shame.

Eventually the pills kick in and she sleeps. But you don’t, not for a long time.

In the morning you offer your sympathy, too little too late, and she apologises for waking you in the night. Somehow the night’s dramas have opened everybody up and pretty soon the other two women are telling their stories too.

There’s Polly who has five kids from three different fathers, but her new boyfriend is different, she’s sure of it. She’d been having a holiday, the first day of a week-long holiday from her job cleaning in a nursing home where she really loves the old folk. She says they have a great sense of humour. One old woman, Gladys, said about a new resident, ‘Who’s that bastard?’ and when Polly said ‘I beg your pardon’, Gladys said, ‘Whose is that basket?’ and smiled a sly smile.

So Polly’s on holiday and she’s kissing her new boyfriend and suddenly it feels like a small plane has done a suicide plummet into her temples and she can’t stand up for the pain. Her boyfriend calls the hospital and she has to be airlifted from her country town to
Melbourne because they don't have the technology to sort her out up there. The trouble is, they don't seem to have it here either. She’s been through all the technologies of pain too, and they can't figure her out. She’s also had a drip inserted into the wrong part of her body all night so instead of reaching her veins it's gone into her soft muscle tissue and her arms have swollen up. When the offending doctor comes around in the morning to sort it out, she apologises to him for causing trouble.

And then there’s Beryl whose son-in-law has promised to buy her a Frankenstein mask because that’s what the new scar on her temple reminds him of, and she thinks it’s a hoot. She’s quite disinhibited and often talks to herself, and you’ve learnt not to feel like you have to respond. Beryl got sacked from her job last week, by letter, because her boss couldn’t wait the three months it will take her to recover (if she’s lucky). So she’s asking the nurse if there are any jobs for her at the hospital, and offering to go to a job interview in her nightie.

She asks you if you’re married, or have any children, and when the answer is no, she (they all) lose interest in you. You’re half disappointed and half glad, because even though you could tell them some stories, none of yours could compete with theirs.

Even when you close your eyes you can’t block out their pain and their after-midnight groans and their sad, worried children and their uncertain futures. You ache with the relief of knowing that soon you’ll be out of here, now that they’ve chopped the protruding bit off your dodgy spine, but next week these women will still be here, propped up on their pillows, hair awry, mouths dry, waiting for the next round of pills and the next visit from the be-suited young doctors who hold all the answers – except maybe they don’t.

You wonder for a long time afterwards why you hadn’t gone to the crying woman. And what if you had?
So Lucky

Tom and I had a dinner date. After all our time apart in the last six months I was hungry for his company. Pushing open the door of a dimly lit Italian restaurant not far from our home I walked towards the bar where a waiter was directing people to their seats. Tom was following close behind me. And it happened.

The moment.

The turning of the heads. The torsos leaning towards each other. The gesturing with a sideways jerk of the head. The widening of the eyes as recognition dawned. The waiter was answering my question but looking at Tom, his voice oleaginous with pleasure. ‘Not a problem, absolutely, one hundred percent’, he beamed.

As we took our seats in the crowded restaurant, it seemed as if all eyes were turned towards us. And I disappeared.

Tom was famous, you see. Over the decades his songwriting had built an elegant but sturdy bridge between the worlds of high art and popular culture and his work had found a huge audience, even making it onto the high school syllabus. Now the shape of his head was instantly recognisable to most Australians under the age of about sixty. People often stopped him on the street to ask for his autograph and, if they were brave, a photo. ‘Love your work’, they’d say. ‘Mate, you’re a legend.’

Mostly they waited impatiently for me to step aside so their phone cameras could get an unimpeded view of Tom’s famous head. Sometimes they instructed me to take the photo while they leant in close, an arm around his shoulders, smiling proudly at the camera for their disbelieving friends.

Once in a bar in Norway where a small crowd had come to hear Tom’s songs, a young man got the photograph with his hero that he had flown all the way from the Arctic Circle to get. As Tom shook his hand and walked away, the young man turned to me and said, ‘Are you his girlfriend? You’re so lucky!’

‘Why, would you like to be his girlfriend?’ I snapped. ‘Maybe he’s the lucky one to have me.’ As the young man’s ruddy Arctic face filled with confusion, I felt ashamed of myself.

In the beginning, I had obliged the photograph-hunters. I had smiled and waited patiently for them to get themselves into position. I had clicked and clicked again, just to be sure. Lately, though, I had become less obliging, often continuing down the street and letting Tom catch up when the fans had gone. Had the interruptions to our precious time together become more frequent? Too frequent? Had Tom become more willing to oblige the fans, less willing to create boundaries between his professional and private personas, to give us some breathing space?
Or was it my ego? Did I resent not being the one who was having their photo taken? After all, I famously *hated* having my photo taken. I was the woman who had always longed for invisibility. But not like this. Not now that everybody/nobody was looking at invisible me. Each time it was as if I was still sitting at that breakfast table at music camp, squirming with discomfort, wanting to be noticed, befriended, admired, but instead feeling insignificant and trapped and alone.

Who was I kidding? I didn’t want to be invisible. You don’t agree to lobby politicians and do television screen tests and sing in opera recitals and host public forums and teach classrooms full of students if you want to be invisible. I craved public acknowledgement as much as Tom did. I enjoyed the adrenaline rush that came from pleasing the crowd in the same way he did. It was the self-consciousness I couldn’t stand, the way my own mind habitually stood outside itself, training a camera on me watching me, evaluating me. The constant performance anxiety in the presence of other humans.

Alone, I could walk down the street and be just another person walking down the street, being ignored by all the other people walking down the street. In the company of Tom the scrutiny I imagined myself to be under in my most anxious moments became painfully manifest as the eyes swivelled towards us and the whispers followed us down the street.

They looked.

I felt them looking.

I worried about what they were thinking.

I couldn’t act normal because I knew they were watching.

I straightened my back and lifted my head higher.

I chose my facial expressions with care.

But I knew they were not really looking at me.

They were looking at him.

And I hated that.

I hated that their focus on him prevented them from seeing me.

Even though I hated them looking at me.

What *was* that?
Was that the difference between being shy and being an introvert?

Or between being a shy extrovert and an introvert?

If I had been an introvert I wouldn't want them to look at me.

I might be relieved to walk away and let them take his photo.

I didn't want them to take my photo.

But I wanted to be the one they were interested in.

Or the equally interesting one.

That's why I had fought it so long and so hard.

Found ways to have my say.

Pushed myself into the world.

I didn't want to be interesting only because I was with him.

But I wanted to be with him.

He made me feel interesting.

Interesting, isn’t it?

The oily waiter found us a table down the back of the restaurant, away from all those eyes.

Tom was quiet, distracted. ‘Is anything wrong?’ I asked.

He fiddled with a napkin, folding and unfolding it. ‘The songwriting’, he said finally. ‘I haven’t written anything new for months. I’ve just been out there selling the old stuff. Slicing the same old salami. I feel kind of useless.’

‘You’ve got some time at home now’, I said. ‘You can write.’

‘I don’t really have any ideas. And I don’t have that much time’, he said. ‘I’ve been asked to another festival. Next month.’

There was a flicker in my throat. Everyone wanted Tom.

I knew he would go. In spite of the salami. And I would be left at home. Waiting.

Don’t say it. Don’t cling. If you do, they can’t breathe.

Reaching for my wine glass I took a big mouthful and swallowed away the ghost of a lump.
Fake It

One day I heard a woman on the radio talking about social media and ‘the virtual self’. She described how people use Facebook and Twitter, posting photos and updates, comments and gags, to ‘display themselves’ to the world. The presenter asked her if she thought we were all ‘tinkering with what we’ve put online in order to project the image of ourselves that we want to project.’ The social media expert told him we’re all ‘sculpting ourselves’ using the medium of digital data, creating ‘virtual doppelgangers’ out there in cyberspace in order to ‘craft Brand Me’.

The radio program was all about The Future. The presenter spoke with a breathlessness usually reserved for Exciting Medical Breakthroughs or for Evidence of Life On Mars. But that’s not so new, I told my radio, that ‘crafting Brand Me’ thing. There’s a bloke who figured out fifty years ago that we’re all trying to ‘fake it till we make it’. I had discovered him in the library when I was researching shyness.

Erving Goffman started his working life in the 1940s when he was employed by the Canadian National Film Board. One of the Board’s earliest missions was to create government propaganda during the Second World War and their films included some ‘morale-boosting theatrical shorts’ called Canada Carries On. Goffman must have seen a lot of people carrying on for the camera back in those early years. A lot of people pretending to be something they weren’t. A lot of strategic fakery. Later Goffman became a sociologist and in 1950 he wrote a book in which he argued that we’re all creating a kind of daily theatre out of our lives, applying the dramaturgical touch to our interactions with other humans. ‘Creating Brand Me IRL’ (In Real Life), he might say if he was still alive today.

In The presentation of self in everyday life Goffman described how every social interaction we have involves putting on a mask and playing a role. These performances are designed to influence how others (‘the audience’) think and feel about us. Sometimes we’re sincere in our performance, he wrote, and sometimes we’re cynical:

The individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation a particular way, and he may seek this judgment as an ultimate end in itself, and yet he may not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self which he asks for, or that the impression of reality which he fosters is valid.

Reading the first few chapters of Goffman’s book, I thought of Shy Sian metamorphosing into Professional Sian in that job interview for the ACF. Was she being sincere or cynical in there? Was she convinced by the version of herself that she was presenting to the
interview panel? Or had her sincere belief in the greater cause (saving the world) enabled her to leapfrog any cynicism or self-doubt about her own performance?

I recalled another scene from my earliest performances at the ACF. About a month into the job the boss called me into his office to tell me there had been a leak of radioactive material from a tailings dam in a Northern Territory uranium mine. He urgently needed a press release sent out. I had an hour.

I can still feel the wave of anxiety that went through me as I nodded and walked briskly back to my desk. I had never written a press release before, had no idea where to start. But I had talked my way into this job, hadn’t I? I’d put on the award-winning performance for the interview panel. The mask couldn’t be allowed to slip now.

Back at my desk I was finding it hard to breathe. After several long minutes I crossed quietly to the other side of the open plan office, trying not to draw attention to myself, and opened a filing cabinet that had been used by my predecessor. Rifling through the drawers with trembling fingers, I found a file on Australian uranium mines. No press releases. Damn. But there was a name and a phone number in there for a campaigner at the Northern Territory Environment Centre. I dialled the number and, putting on my best new Professional Sian voice, asked this invisible stranger for a ‘briefing’.

The press release must have gone out. The stranger at the end of the phone later became one of my closest confidantes, gratitude morphing into friendship, yet again. My memory of the rest of the performance has faded, leaving me with just the scene where the woman playing the part of the environment campaigner realises she’s a fake. And yet I got away with it. The performance was working.

But why on earth had it seemed so vital to maintain the illusion of a self-confident professional persona that day? Why hadn’t I just said to the boss, ‘You know what, I’ve never actually written a press release before and I could do with some help’? Erving Goffman had an answer for this one too:

Performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period. In all of this the performer may receive tacit assistance from the establishment in which he is to perform.

Tacit assistance. So my ‘audience’ of employers wanted me to pretend to know what I was doing? If Goffman was right, in order to keep the job I probably didn’t have any choice except to try to ‘fake it till I make it’.

Years later when I first heard the term ‘Impostor Syndrome’ I knew immediately what that felt like: ‘a psychological phenomenon in which competent people find it impossible
to believe in their own competence’. Tom had his own label for it. He called it ‘the pretendies’ and we had often compared notes on those moments when you suddenly and inexplicably lose faith in your ability to carry off the things you’re meant to be competent to do, like writing anything of any interest to anyone ever again, for example. And yet we both continued to write.

People had often told me that I seemed to be a very calm person. A long time ago a poet I desperately wanted to undress (but never came close to trying) described me as ‘inaccessible, like a kind of mystic’. More recently the wife of Tom’s manager had said to me ‘you’re so still, you’re like a sphinx’. At the time we were seated next to each other at a dinner table full of people who were strangers to me. My sphinx’s mask was hiding a sandstorm of social anxiety that was threatening to suck me off my chair and under the table.

Erving Goffman would have been right onto me. ‘Perhaps the focus of the dramaturgical discipline is to be found in the management of one’s face and voice. Here is the crucial test of one’s ability as a performer. Actual affective response must be concealed and an appropriate affective response must be displayed.’ Hence my fake air of calm. In fact it was when I appeared most Zen that my ‘actual affective response’ was off the Richter scale. So why had I always believed that my anxiety had to be hidden from the world?

After some more ferreting around in the library I discovered that, about five years ago, Goffman’s theory about social interactions as a series of staged identity performances by human ‘actors’ had been picked up by an English sociologist called Dr Susie Scott and applied specifically to shyness. And Dr Scott was not happy.

‘What is it about our culture that demands that we pretend to be poised, skilled and assertive in our dealings with others, and what happens to those who appear to deviate from this norm?’ she asked. ‘Indeed, we might enquire as to what extent any of us are ‘really’ like this underneath, and why we have this need to maintain the illusion of competence.’

You mean everyone else faking it too? Then why do I usually feel like I’m the only person who doesn’t know what they’re doing in social situations? The English sociologist seemed to have an answer for every question. In Shyness and society: the illusion of competence Dr Scott wrote:

The shy person is extremely concerned about the risk of making a faux pas and exposing what they see as secret flaws in their characters, most notably their perceived lack of social skills. At the same time, shy people report feeling as if everybody else seems to know the unspoken rules of interaction and thus are able to
provide a more poised, socially competent performance. This feeling of relative incompetence is central to the experience of shyness.\textsuperscript{14}

If only Susie Scott had been teaching sociology at that London school I attended in 1979. She could have explained to me why I was spending lunchtimes hiding in the library instead of flirting in the schoolyard. ‘How might shy actors devise strategies to help them “pass” in social situations?’ Dr Scott enquired. My hand was up and waving madly from the front of the imaginary classroom.

That’s what the sphinx’s mask is for, Dr Scott. That’s what my invisible professional cloaks have been for, the ones that allowed me to stop being \textit{just me} and instead transform myself into a representative of something much larger and more powerful than \textit{just me}. That’s what the protective initialisms were for: ACF campaigner, ACTU community artist, ABC broadcaster, RMIT lecturer. And that’s why it made perfect sense to me that so many successful actors were self-confessed shy people. They could spend their working lives hiding behind the characters they were playing.

I remembered reading a magazine profile of Oscar-winner Judy Davis. The self-described shy actor talked about the ‘pathetic subterfuges’ (her words) she employed to avoid dealing with people.\textsuperscript{15} She explained how she would hide beneath a floppy hat and flourish a notepad and pen – ‘these ridiculous props’, she called them – so she wouldn’t have to talk to strangers at her children’s school sports events. ‘It’s pathetic that an adult would behave like this’, Davis berated herself. But why did Judy Davis feel the need to berate herself? Why was she ashamed of her shyness? Why was \textit{I}? Dr Scott had a theory about this, too:

Shy people are intensely aware that this is a negotiated social order and that by being withdrawn and reticent they might be seen as failing to pull their weight. Their behaviour can variously be normalised, sanctioned as social deviance, or pathologised as a mental disorder… The idea that shyness is a personal affliction that holds us back from social life is one so widely accepted that it seems like common sense… And yet it is these very taken for granted, common sense statements about ‘what everyone knows’ that exert a subtle and complicit form of control over social behaviour.

But according to the psychiatric manuals, Dr Scott, if your shyness is so bad you can’t leave the house then it \textit{is} a mental disorder. Even though I had almost always been able to make myself leave the house in spite of it, shyness \textit{had} felt like an affliction that had held me back, and not one imposed from the outside but from inside my own anxious brain. It was
hard to believe that Judy Davis and I were passive victims of a hegemonic shyness-hating culture. Dr Scott was adamant:

'The shy may represent one of many groups of modern-day folk-devils about whom there is a moral panic... The dominant message... is that non-shyness is normal and acceptable while shyness is deviant and undesirable, carrying with it the risk of social exclusion... It is time to stop berating shy people for their presumed misanthropy.

Folk-devils? Moral panic? Good grief! Dr Scott was in such a lather on my behalf. I still wasn’t convinced, though. Moral panics usually manifested themselves in avalanches of indignant talkback calls or populist promises from politicians to put more people in jail. I hadn’t heard any shock jocks foaming at the mouth about the threat to the civil order from deviant shy folk. Socially anxious people like me weren’t being tossed in village ponds to see if we would sink or swim.

And yet hadn’t I already confessed my impatience with other shy people and my desire for them to conquer their fears? Maybe I had been unconsciously reflecting the shyness-hating values of the exhibitionist, competitive, extrovert-worshipping society in which I had been raised.

Or maybe I just didn’t want to be battling this shameful thing alone.

'The misperception of shyness as rudeness or aloofness is one that "plagues" shy people’, Susie Scott continued, 'but their accounts suggest that they actually feel the complete opposite way about social life’. Aloofness, yes, I had been accused of that. Selfishness, that was another interpretation I’d been offered for why shy people behaved shyly – we were not prepared to 'pull our weight’. I’d even had one socially confident person tell me she thought shy behaviour was a form of emotional manipulation, a strategy for making other people feel sorry for us in order to get what we want from them.

'Wanting desperately to participate but feeling ill-equipped to do so, the shy recount feelings of frustrated sociability, alienation and exclusion’, wrote Susie Scott. That’s the essential difference between shyness and introversion, I thought, right there. As Margot had explained, introverts are not necessarily unhappy being alone. I, on the other hand, had often felt an urgent desire for human company, for intense connection with others, but had had to fight my way through a thicket of fears to find those things. The pattern of behaviour that had begun all those years ago with my childhood friend Sally, a reluctance to visit anyone unless I had received a clear invitation, had continued to the present day. Most of the time social spontaneity was out of the question. Stupid and self-limiting, but so deeply ingrained I couldn’t seem to break out of it.
An Apology

Actually I tell a lie. Shock jocks in Australia had been foaming at the mouth about the threat to the civil order from deviant shy folk. From one shy woman, anyway.

On my computer desktop there was a newspaper photo I had downloaded from the web. In the background of the photo was a higgledy-piggedly line of hand-painted banners and placards. On one of the banners a black cartoon witch was perched on a black cartoon broomstick and surrounded by black stencilled words in aggressive caps: DITCH THE WITCH. Beside this placard there was a poster with more black text, this time in curly lettering hand-drawn over the top of leaping orange flames that look like they’d used up a big box of someone’s prized Derwent pencils: JULIAR... BOB BROWN’S BITCH. The signs were being held aloft by a smiling crowd of my fellow Australians and their target was the nation’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

After Ms Gillard took over her party’s leadership about a year before this photo was taken, a small clutch of male shock-jocks began a campaign of unprecedented public vitriol against the PM. Their listeners responded by holding a series of public rallies at which the banners had become progressively more lurid. The leader of the conservative opposition attended a few of these rallies, and in the photo saved to my computer his white business shirt and shiny orange tie were perfectly colour-matched to the leaping flames of hell on the banner behind him.

In the midst of this flurry of protests the then Prime Minister gave a speech at a Press Club luncheon during which, it was reported, she described herself as having been a ‘shy girl’ when she was young. Not just described, but ‘tearfully confessed’, according to some journalists. Reading the prurient, patronising headlines, I found myself squirming with a mixture of empathy and disapproval. Why did you let them see you cry? Why admit this publicly? What good could possibly come of it?

I knew a bit about politics. I had an honours degree in the stuff. And now I knew quite a lot about shyness. Once again, my hand was waving hard from the front row of the classroom. I would have my say.

So I sat down and wrote a cool, clinical opinion piece for the newspapers, arguing that the PM’s admission of shyness had been a political mistake. Public perceptions of shyness are linked with a Rubik’s cube of negative stereotypes, I argued, including self-consciousness, self-pity, emotional withdrawal, social awkwardness and a lack of assertiveness. Publicly ascribing these qualities to one’s own personality is no way to win friends or influence people. After all, who wants to vote for an unassertive leader?
Confessing to shyness can often provoke bullying rather than sympathy, I added, and besides, the fact that the Prime Minister didn’t behave in public like a stereotypical shy person meant she risked confirming the shock jocks’ assertions that she wasn’t an honest person – that she was ‘Ju-liar’.

But wait, I had more to say.

Perhaps the biggest problem for our shy Prime Minister, I continued, was her gender. Many of the attributes ascribed to shyness have been associated with stereotypically female behaviours. Men are assertive; women are timid. Men speak, women listen. Men stick to their guns, women are easily swayed by their emotions – or so the myth goes. Most female political leaders are forced to counter these stereotypes throughout their careers or risk being dismissed as unfit to lead. With that one small ‘s’ word, our PM would potentially confirm the prejudices of those who were already suspicious of her simply because she’s a woman.

The piece was published and I felt the usual rush of self-congratulatory pleasure when I read my own by-line on the opinion page. In the days following its publication, though, I began to feel less and less like congratulating myself. My email inbox was soon overflowing with readers’ responses.

Sian, when I read your article regarding Julia Gillard’s comments about her shyness I thought you must be one of those right-leaning journalists who have been lining up ever since Julia became Prime Minister to having a go at kicking her down until she gave up.

Dear Ms Prior, I read your article in today’s newspaper. What can I say? Great effort at sinking the slipper. You sound like the thinking person’s shock jock. Ever considered a talk-back career?

Dear Sian, re. your piece in the paper today. Seems Gillard’s either a liar or weak. I guess shy people can’t get a break, eh? Seeing as you describe yourself as shy, makes me wonder about your website. Are you weak or a liar too? If either, why should we take any notice of you, your blog site or your pop-psychology effort in The Age?

What are your qualifications to write the rubbish you wrote?

I felt sick. My so-called clinical political analysis had turned out to be just another hand-painted placard of insults waving in the wind. ‘All writers must first charm, then betray’. In trying to show off my newfound knowledge about shyness it seemed I had committed an act of public betrayal.
Like me, the Prime Minister had found her voice (and maybe an escape from her shyness) through student political activism. Unlike me, she had had the guts to stick at it. I didn’t agree with all of her policies but I admired her willingness to stand up to the entrenched misogyny of Australian party politics. As I forced myself to read through all the angry email responses, two ideas collided in my mind:

1) Shyness is a form of weakness (deep down, I had always believed this)
2) Women are weaker than men (deep down, I had never believed this)

and produced a third idea:

3) My oh-so-clever opinion piece wasn’t about the Prime Minister. It was about me.

And maybe it was another piece in the puzzle.

I remembered my paralysis as the boys from my primary school disappeared down the end of our driveway, leaving the orange tree stripped of its fruit, me stripped of my voice. I remembered the cold wet remnants of fear in my gut, fear that they wouldn’t like me, fear that if I said anything about the naked tree they would never come back. I remembered how, even way back then, I felt ashamed of my weakness, my silence, my need for their approval.

And I remembered the relief of getting to university and discovering that this weakness, this shame, this need for male approbation, had a cure. It was called feminism and I embraced it like a drowner with a lifebuoy.

My battle against shyness hadn’t just been a campaign of self-improvement. Somewhere along the line it had got tangled up with my understanding that, as a woman, I would have to fight against the assumption that I was inevitably weaker than men and therefore undeserving of an equal voice. I couldn’t be a shy feminist; it would be an oxymoron. And I would be feminist. So I would have to stop being shy.

Maybe the shock jocks had been foaming at the mouth not because Julia Gillard was shy, but because she was a woman refusing to behave like a weak person, and that represented more of a threat to their sense of civil order than an entire army of shy people.

It turns out I was not the only opportunistic journalist who leapt on the Shy Julia story that week. In the days after her speech the airwaves were full of conversations with social anxiety experts and all the radio hosts were inviting their listeners to ring up and talk about shyness. I started taking notes, looking for evidence.

‘Maude’ rang in to report that, although she felt her shyness was a negative, she knew that her friends and colleagues respected the fact that she was ‘a quiet one’. No social stigma to report there – just the usual anxious self-criticism.
But then talkback caller ‘Emma’ described how she was sent off to do an assertiveness course for her shyness, where she was told that ‘to be self conscious is selfish’. It was ‘the comment that’s changed me the most’, she said.

And ‘Bill’ informed the listeners that he ‘sometimes perceived shy people as having a lack of generosity of spirit, an unwillingness to get involved... they’re a bit like people lying down in shopping malls to test if someone will stop’. Weak self-centred people, Bill, looking for sympathy.

Random talkback callers do not make a representative sample, I'll admit, but there seemed to be plenty of anecdotal evidence to support Susie Scott's theory that shyness is seen as a form of anti-social deviance. And to support my instinct that the Prime Minister would be judged poorly for her admission of shyness. I was right back where I had started.

Three years after she first became the prime minister, Julia Gillard was replaced by the man she had deposed to get the job. The day after her colleagues booted her out, a political commentator wrote in the Guardian newspaper about the ‘public perception that Gillard’s prime ministerial identity was a protean thing, never entirely convincing, never entirely stable. Was she the “real Julia” or something else? ... She was intensely private, contained, reserved – stubbornly enigmatic and withholding for a person so long in the public spotlight. She rationed appearances by her best self.’ It all sounded so horribly familiar.

She was a blusher, our first female prime minister. Carefully applied make-up had kept her face looking creamy pale on my television screen night after night, but I had seen the treacherous colour creeping up her neck. I could feel that heat, sense the effort it cost her to keep the cool professional façade in place. She was one of my people.
**Darwin’s Blushes**

One hundred and sixty-five years ago Mr Charles Darwin sat down at his desk to make some notes about shyness. He was planning a new book, *The expression of the emotions in man and animal*, and had been sending questionnaires all over the world to physicians and scientists who he thought might be able to help him with his investigations.16

When he sat down to write, though, it was the expression of the emotions in the bodies of women that seemed to be of most interest to Mr Darwin. In particular, he wrote, he was ‘desirous to learn how far down the body blushes extend’. Darwin reported that his friend Sir James Paget had found ‘with women who blush intensely on the face, ears, and nape of neck, the blush does not commonly extend any lower down the body…’

Sir James had further advised that ‘it is rare to see it as low down as the collar-bones and shoulder-blades; and he has never himself seen a single instance in which it extended below the upper part of the chest’. Sir James had been watching blushes both come and go.

Blushes sometimes die away downwards, not gradually and insensibly, but by irregular ruddy blotches. In most cases the face, ears and neck are the sole parts which redden; but many persons, whilst blushing intensely, feel that their whole bodies grow hot and tingle; and this shows that the entire surface must be in some manner affected.

Darwin’s observant friend seems to have had quite an impact on the ladies.

Sir James Paget, whilst examining the spine of a girl, was struck at her singular manner of blushing: a big splash of red appeared first on one cheek, and then other splashes, variously scattered over the face and neck. He subsequently asked the mother whether her daughter always blushed in this peculiar manner; and was answered, ‘Yes, she takes after me’. Sir J. Paget then perceived that by asking this question he had caused the mother to blush; and she exhibited the same peculiarity as her daughter.

Genes will out. Mr Darwin had shown us that. Cherchez la mere.

A certain Dr Browne offered Mr Darwin some intimate observations from within an insane asylum. A woman suffering from epilepsy was, according to Dr Browne, ‘much agitated and tremulous’. Dr Browne took it upon himself to unfasten the collar of her chemise ‘in order to examine the state of her lungs; and then a brilliant blush rushed over her chest, in an arched line over the upper third of each breast, and extended downwards between the breasts nearly to the ensiform cartilage of the sternum’.
'The foregoing facts show', Mr Darwin concluded, 'that, as a general rule, with English women, blushing does not extend beneath the neck and upper part of the chest.' But what of the other races, Mr Darwin?

Fortunately the scientist knew some observant chaps in far-flung parts of the globe and they had kindly been filling out questionnaires for him too. 'Mr. Swinhoe has seen the Chinese blushing, but he thinks it is rare; yet they have the expression “to redden with shame”', wrote Darwin. 'Mr. Geach informs me that the Chinese settled in Malacca and the native Malays of the interior both blush. Some of these people go nearly naked, and he particularly attended to the downward extension of the blush.'

The intrepid Mr Forster clearly enjoyed doing the research for his eminent friend, reporting with enthusiasm that 'you may easily distinguish a spreading blush on the cheeks of the fairest women in Tahiti'. Furthermore, Darwin wrote, 'a perfectly characterised albino negress... showed a faint tinge of crimson on her cheeks when she exhibited herself naked'. The strategic employment of the Male Gaze in pursuit of scientific truth: now that's fieldwork.

Darwin's report is so full of lovingly detailed descriptions of the female body, it is hard not to read them now as a kind of genteel pornography. But Mr Darwin's blushing women were merely a prelude to a lengthy dissertation on shyness, shame and modesty, which he described as 'the mental states which induce blushing'. And Darwin was right onto those tandem torments of social anxiety; self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation.

It is not the simple act of reflecting on our own appearance, but the thinking what others think of us, which excites a blush... Shyness seems to depend on sensitiveness to the opinion, whether good or bad, of others, more especially with respect to external appearance.

Darwin's shyness chapter includes a tender description of his two-year-old son who exhibited signs of the 'condition' after his scientist father had returned from a week-long absence. Darwin gently exhorts his readers not to reprimand children for being shy as they grappled with the scrutiny of 'the unmerciful spectator'. Those genes again. If his son was anxious perhaps the boy had inherited his father's shyness. Perhaps, like me, Mr Darwin was conducting an investigation of his own temperament. Perhaps he was trying to figure out why such a tortuous genetic inheritance persisted, whether there was any evolutionary benefit involved.

I stopped reading Darwin's chapter for a moment and opened up a transcript of my interview with Professor Ron. Darwin's theory of evolution had come up in our
conversation, I recalled, when I had questioned him about why shy people were so fearful of negative evaluation.

**PROFESSOR RON:** Some people talk about it as an evolutionary thing, in terms of affiliation and keeping the group together – the idea that perhaps it's good for some creatures within a species to be more socially withdrawn than others. If everyone was equally outgoing then you would have a lot of aggression within the species. But if you've got some who are happy being down the bottom of the pack and others who are the more dominant ones, it's protective. The shy person is not going to get beaten up by the leader because they'll do what the leader says and the leader will protect them, as opposed to the more aggressive ones who might get kicked out of the group.

I certainly didn't want to risk being kicked out of any group, but 'down the bottom of the pack' was never a place I had wanted to be. No wonder I had been fighting this thing so hard.

Googling 'shyness' and 'evolution', I found a recent article in *The New Scientist* magazine about how Darwin's evolutionary theories had been applied to the study of shyness in the late twentieth century.17

Turns out humans are not the only creatures born somewhere on the 'shy-bold' spectrum. One researcher had discovered that some salamanders are shyer than other salamanders, and that the shy ones are better at avoiding being gobbled up by predators than the bold ones. On the other hand, the bold ones eat more and grow faster, which helps them to stay in the evolutionary race. Amongst bird species, the article reported, boldness was manifest as a personality trait called 'exploration'. Again, there were evolutionary costs and benefits to being an avian explorer. In some years the environment favoured the bold birds, in other years it favoured the shy birds who preferred to hide in the nearest nook or cranny. Both ends of the shyness spectrum were important for species survival.

I went back to Darwin.

Shyness, as the derivation of the word indicates in several languages, is closely related to fear, yet it is distinct from fear in the ordinary sense. A shy man no doubt dreads the notice of strangers, but can hardly be said to be afraid of them, he may be as bold as a hero in battle, and yet have no self-confidence about trifles in the presence of strangers.

Bold as a hero, like my shy father.
Darwin's segue from evolutionary psychology to etymology raised yet another question. How far back in history did the word shyness go? Fortunately I didn't need to send questionnaires around the globe and wait for sailing ships to bring them home again. Google had the answers for me in half a second.

One dictionary reported that the English word ‘shy’ was already in use by the twelfth century and that it came from a Middle English word ‘schey’. This word had come from the Old English ‘sceoh’ which was akin to the Old High German word ‘sciuhen’. As Mr Darwin had reported, all these words referenced the idea of being afraid.

Were shy English-speaking people in the twelfth century just as afraid as we shy English-speaking folk in the twenty-first century? Presumably they mostly lived in small villages and encountered fewer strangers in their daily lives. On the other hand, stranger-danger was probably a rational response to the lawlessness that reigned in England for much of that century. Random robberies were rife. Protection money was regularly ‘levied’ from poor villagers and torture was commonplace. No blushing body part was safe from the noose, the chain, the stone, the iron or the adder. Maintaining a healthy fear of negative evaluation by those you didn’t know was probably wise in those circumstances.

Another dictionary website reported that in the nineteenth century the word ‘shy’ took a strange swerve and was used colloquially to mean ‘disreputable’, possibly leading to the word ‘shyster’. I briefly wondered if Shakespeare’s fictional usurer Shylock had had anything to do with this transmutation but none of the dictionaries made the connection. One offered the advice, however, that the word ‘shylock’ was now being used to mean zipper or fly, ‘as a security feature for your shy bits’.

Perhaps that’s why Mr Darwin’s ladies had been blushing so furiously. There had been no security features available in the doctor’s surgeries. All those medical men staring at their shy bits, causing them to feel ashamed. Interesting, how the words ‘shame’ and ‘shy’ feel so similar in your mouth when you speak them out loud. I had always felt ashamed of my blushing shyness. But why?

Ferreting around in the library again I found a book called *Blush: Faces of Shame* by an Australian cultural theorist. Professor Elspeth Probyn was a shy blusher, too, often bewildered by her body’s treacherous reactions, and she had decided to get to the bottom of it. In investigating why we’re ashamed to admit to these feelings, Professor Probyn had found a way to ‘positively re-frame’ blushing and shame.

‘Shame makes us quiver’, she wrote. ‘Being shamed is not unlike being in love... The blush resonates with the first flush of desire... the skin feels raw.’ I knew what she meant and could still remember the quivering feelings of the early days of my relationship with Tom: the fluttering in my belly, the heat in my face, the hyper-acuity that engulfed my
senses, as if I was permanently on the verge of a pleasurable migraine. They may have
dulled a little over the years but those feelings hadn’t entirely gone away.

According to Professor Probyn, what we desire when we feel shame is ‘positive
evaluation’ from others. ‘If you’re interested in and care about the interest of others, you
spend much of your life blushing’, Elspeth Probyn wrote.

Shame highlights different levels of interest (and) interest involves a desire for
connection. At a basic level, it has to do with our longings for communication, touch,
lines of entanglement and reciprocity... The things that make me feel ashamed have
to do with a strong interest in being a good person.

Elspeth Probyn’s book was an extended argument for the social utility of shame. Shame
made us better people because, she wrote, ‘shame brings the fear of abandonment by
society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind’. If I hadn’t cared as
much about what other people thought about me, hadn’t been so afraid of their ‘negative
evaluation’, I probably wouldn’t have spent so much time trying to be a Good Influence.

Was this was another difference between shy people, including shy extroverts like me, and
introverts? Perhaps introverts didn’t have as much invested in what others thought of
them, and consequently didn’t feel the same level of shame about their inability to behave
like social butterflies.

Professor Probyn believed it was possible that ‘shame involves an internalization of an
idealized other to which the self has failed to live up: the sense of shame is a reaction... to
the consciousness of this loss’. Reading these words I remembered Magazine Woman and
how she had haunted me, a flawless fictional female, my idealised other. These days
people worried about their flaws can pay a medical expert to tidy them up. If only there
was a medical procedure you could have to remove the chronic embarrassment that
accompanied shyness. Perhaps that’s what the blushing female patients of Mr Darwin’s
medical colleagues had been secretly hoping for too.
Virtual Self

I had started observing my writing students more closely, trying to figure out which ones were shy and which ones weren’t. In each group there was the usual mix of willing speakers and near-silent listeners. I now understood, though, that the speech-to-silence ratio wasn’t always the best indicator of who was grappling with social anxiety.

Many of them brought their laptops to class and one day as I was walking back to my desk I passed behind a pretty young woman who had been staring despondently at her computer screen for much of the class. She was usually the most talkative in the group but that day she had said very little. Glancing down I saw her face staring out from the glowing screen. She had the computer’s camera trained on herself and so engrossed was she by her image, she didn’t even notice me looking at her. I wondered if, in her mind’s eye, she could see Magazine Woman standing behind her – if she was negotiating with the same fearful self-consciousness that had drawn me to the mirror when I was her age.

The quietest student in that group, another young woman, usually spent a lot of class time tapping on her keyboard. She was one of the more diligent ones and I had assumed she was taking notes. I’d been worried about her. She never seemed to mix with the other students in the I but spent the break alone in the classroom. She must be shy, I told myself. And lonely. One day, before the other students had returned to class, I asked her what she was writing. Coyly she turned the computer towards me and there, scrolling across the screen, was a conversation in text, a witty, flirtatious interaction between someone called ‘Honeyman’ and my student, known to her correspondent as ‘Cute’n’Cuddly’.

I should have been grumpy with her, flirting online instead of noting down my pearls of wisdom. Instead I was full of admiration. She’s not lonely, I thought, and she’s not unsociable. She’s adaptive. The digital world has offered her a safe way to have the kind of flirtatious fun that extroverts take for granted.

I went looking for information about shyness and the internet. In a book called *Cyberspace romance: the psychology of online relationships* two social psychologists, Monica Whitty and Adrian Carr, had surveyed the latest research on how people used the internet to find new friends and to look for love.19

According to one study, many shy people used online dating sites to ‘overcome inhibitions that would normally have prevented them from attempting to initiate a relationship face to face’. Other researchers claimed that the visual anonymity of online communication and what they called the ‘lack of co-presence – the physical isolation – of the communicators add to the interaction possibilities, and for some this is the ‘magic’ of online relationships’. Was that the magic of invisibility that I had always longed for?
I thought about how Tom and I had emailed each other for months before we got together, enabling me to detour around the physical self-consciousness that usually got in my way when I was keen on someone. Whitty and Carr should have interviewed us. We could have confirmed their findings that internet users felt less aware of ‘being socially evaluated, which in turn allowed these individuals to reveal intimate details about themselves while maintaining distance and personal space.’

The ghost of Erving Goffman haunted this book, with many researchers talking about the different ‘selves’ we carry around with us. The one that interested me most was called the *true self*, a version of ourselves that includes characteristics that we would *like* to express but are not usually able to demonstrate to others. ‘People who are lonely or are socially anxious in traditional face to face interaction settings (are) likely to feel better able to express their *true self* over the internet and so to develop close and meaningful relationships.’

What characteristics had I been able to express in those emails to Tom that I would never have dared to show in person? I remembered grumbling to him about watching a theatre production with a so-called ‘interactive’ plot. The audience had to decide which direction the story would take. Most of the other critics had raved about how transgressive this production was, and I was worried about whether my reactions were too conservative. With Tom, though, I’d been perfectly frank.

‘Call me old-fashioned’, I wrote to him, ‘but what’s wrong with a plot with a beginning, a middle and an end?’ The appreciation of a good old-fashioned linear narrative turned out to be yet another thing we had in common.

The book used a metaphor for internet dating called ‘bundling’. This was originally an American colonial practice in which a young woman would invite a suitor to go to bed with her, fully clothed, in her own home. In some cases there was even a board placed between their bodies to prevent any sexual contact. Bundling offered young people a chance to get to know each other in private but without any risk of ‘inappropriate’ contact.

Imagine it, the warm breath on your face, the shy confessions, the comforting layers of cotton and wool between your flesh and his. It sounded like my kind of courting. It also sounded like the kind of safe intimacy I had felt with only a computer screen between Tom and I.

In recent years some of my female friends had joined online dating sites. At least one had since married a man she’d met online. The awkwardness that used to accompany admissions of internet dating had all but gone. But how did it work? I tried to sneak a look at one of the most popular sites but it required me to join up to get access. Feeling like a fraud, I set up an account for myself with a pseudonym and an alternative email address.
After all, it wasn’t as if I was actually looking for love. I had found it with Tom, in spades, and had no desire to muck it up with any untoward digital bundling.

Ignoring the advice on the dating website to post a photo of myself, I scrolled down to the section that required a brief self-description and wrote: ‘I’m shy, are you?’

In the days that followed I was astonished by how many men responded to my one-line description. Some sent pro forma requests to get to know me better. Some even invested money in sending me sweet emails, confessing their own shyness. Once again I was full of admiration. These men were shy but determined not to be alone with it. I trawled through their photos and profiles; men on fishing boats, men holding hands with their smiling children, men who looked like they’d had limbs removed because they’d cropped a photo of themselves with one arm around the shoulders of some long-gone woman. So much loneliness. So much hope. Such risk of rejection.

After a couple of weeks I couldn’t stand my own fakery and deleted the profile.

I was retrospectively envious. If only this option had been available when I was younger. My students could socialise while sitting alone in their bedroom in front of a PC. They could join invisible communities of people who shared their own obscure interests. They could create semi-fictional characters to inhabit while conversing with other possibly semi-fictional young folk. They could guide digital avatars of themselves around imaginary worlds, cartoon characters who were possibly better dressed, better looking and more socially skilled than their creators.

During my own adolescence there were no PCs, no emails, no Facebook and no Second Life. Most of my vicarious experience of the world came from books, and as a teenager I had spent many weekends lying under the glare of a bedside lamp, avoiding new, interesting and unpredictable social interactions in order to read about them.

Eventually, though, Professional Sian had taken me to many of the places I would have lacked the courage to go on my own. She was my tool for self-reinvention, the version of myself who had allowed me to make it up as I went along, Some of the time, anyway.
When it came to work, sometimes I had pushed myself into the professional world and sometimes the professional world had come calling. The medium of radio had sought me out like an extroverted new friend. Working as an environment campaigner I had always loved doing radio interviews: invisible me, hiding behind my world-saving persona, using my voice, preaching for my cause – the microphone drew me in like a bee to a flower.

Saving the world had proven to be too big a task for one person and after three years of intense campaigning I needed a break. Besides, staying on top of the maths of climate change and ozone depletion, all those terrifying parts per million, was slowly crushing the words and music out of me. I spent a year doing a community arts traineeship with the trade union movement, organising concerts in workplaces and starting up the trade union choir (aka Comrade Choir Mistress). Just as the traineeship was about to end a team of community radio broadcasters offered me a job. They made current affairs programs about all those things that I still thought were Wrong With The Planet. It sounded perfect. So there I was, saving the world again, one radio program at a time.

It turned out that radio reporting was a dream job for a shy opinionated helpful show-off:

- Meet new and interesting people every week.
- Interview them within a limited time frame, avoiding the need for small talk.
- Send them away again.

After a couple of years in community radio I did my impersonation of a successful job interview candidate again and landed a gig as a reporter on a daily arts program at the ABC, an even more perfect job for a shy opinionated arty show-off. What could possibly be more interesting than interviewing:

- A linguist who translated Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be’ speech into the made-up Star Trek language of Klingon
- A digital artist who created photos of a fashion model holding a mouse which had a genetically engineered human ear growing on its back
- A theatre director who produced a show in which audience members were offered fellatio on stage
- A shy writer whose memoir described her life as a heroin-addicted prostitute working in brothel under a protective professional pseudonym
- A photographer who superimposed images of Elvis Presley’s face onto black and white photos of heroes of the Russian Revolution (aka Comrade Elvis)
- A composer who wrote a chamber opera about Australian surf lifesavers
A songwriter called Tom who, many years later, would send me an email that changed everything.

For half a decade Professional Sian was happier than she had ever been before, travelling around the country visiting arts festivals, interviewing humans about the sublime and ridiculous products of their imaginations. Being an arts critic allowed me to feel helpful, too. I could give an artist pos re when their work was good, praising them in front of an invisible audience of radio listeners, and offer some gentle neg re when it wasn’t. Being a Good Influence on the national culture.

I developed a drug-like dependence on the hormone highs that came from regular doses of performance anxiety. In the hours leading up to the moment when the microphone was switched on and my voice went to air, I would invariably endure a racing heart, a dry mouth and a churning gut. Classic fight-or-flight response, the neuro-scientists would say. The body priming itself for danger with a flood of adrenaline and noradrenaline. Once I started speaking, though, my words usually flowed in a perfectly logical order. And when the microphone was turned off I would float back down the corridor to my office in a state of elation. This stuff was addictive. It was worth fighting the fear for the pleasure that came afterwards. Had that been a factor in my battles with social anxiety? Had I become addicted to post-exposure therapy highs?

Eventually I was asked to present my own weekly arts program on the radio. The what ifs kicked in immediately. What if the listeners didn’t like me? What if I choked on air? In spite of my anxiety (or perhaps because of it) I couldn’t refuse. There was no other job I would rather be doing.

Many years later, teaching a university course in writing for radio, I concocted a list of the things I thought listeners were looking for when they turned on their radios:

- Vicarious experiences
- Opinions
- Information
- Company
- Entertainment
- Stimulation

This list could equally have been a description of what a socially anxious show-off got out of working in radio. Sometimes being a studio presenter felt like being in a tour bus at a free-range zoo. Safe inside my sealed capsule I could observe and discuss the fascinating
habits of homo sapiens without any risk to life and limb. Although I was interacting with the people I interviewed, we were in a highly controlled environment. My audience couldn’t see me and I couldn’t see them, so it was impossible to tell if they were evaluating me positively or negatively. Protected by my cloak of invisibility, freed from physical self-consciousness, I could be a confident, articulate, disembodied voice.

At times that disembodiment felt quite literal. Sometimes I would meet people in social situations years after Professional Sian had interviewed them on the radio. Shy Sian would squint and duck her head in the usual awkward way, not realising until they mentioned it that we had met before. The person talking to all those strangers on the wireless hadn’t been the same person who was now shaking their hands. She was my professional avatar.

Even after I moved into arts journalism my youthful list of Things Wrong With The World wasn’t forgotten. When, just occasionally, those things were righted, I wanted to be there to celebrate. After East Timor finally gained its independence from Indonesia early in the new millennium I packed my recording equipment and flew to the capital, Dili, to find some stories to tell.

I wandered the streets of the burnt-out capital, meeting with strangers in noisy roadside cafes, plying them with questions about the ecotourism potential of this reef-fringed island. I accepted lifts from strangers to the far end of the island where I sat on other strangers’ porches, their roosters pecking around my feet, and interviewed those strangers about national language policies. I drank gin and tonics with yet more strangers in beachside bars and asked them about the rehabilitation of violent prisoners in East Timor’s overflowing jails. I recorded interviews with the freedom-fighter-turned-president about how he planned to turn this nation of torture victims into a utopian model of civil society. I consulted with the foreign minister (a Nobel Peace Prize–winning helpful person) about the idea of helping him write his autobiography. Once again I was determined to be a Good Influence and, in the guise of Professional Sian, I could be virtually fearless.
On Entomology

Whenever Tom went away for work I tried to fill the gap with social events. Theatre dates, book club get-togethers, clothes swap nights, DVD marathons: my diary was a hieroglyphic maze of activities. Anything to distract me from missing him. ‘You’re such a social butterfly’, one friend said to me at the end of a particularly manic week.

Now there’s an ambiguous term. Is it a compliment or an insult? Aren’t social butterflies the people whose attention you can never hang onto because as soon as their interest wanes they’re up and away, fluttering off to the next social interaction? Surely being shy precluded the lightness of touch implied by this metaphor. In the company of people I didn’t know very well I usually felt as cumbersome as a beached walrus.

On the other hand, butterflies are known to be brilliant mimics. In the middle of the nineteenth century an English naturalist called Henry Bates spent a lot of time lurking in the Amazon rainforest watching butterflies flutter by. He figured out these clever creatures could imitate other less appetising insects to protect themselves from predators, a natural phenomenon thenceforth known as Batesian mimicry. Some folk who appeared to be social butterflies might just be mimicking the real thing. Impostor butterflies, trying to avoid being seen as party-poopers.

I was more familiar with another rabble of metaphorical insects: butterflies in the stomach. Whenever I felt shy an aviary full of captured Amazonian butterflies made a bold bid for escape from my digestive system. It wasn’t until recently, though, that I began to understand the treacherous connection between entomology and gastroenterology.

On a social anxiety website I found a notice about a public talk on something called the brain–gut axis. The guest speaker was an Australian clinical psychologist, Dr Simon Knowles, who worked with people suffering from chronic illnesses of the gastro-intestinal system. Dr Knowles began his talk by describing several case studies based on women who had consulted him about their misbehaving bowels. He had assigned them a series of pseudonyms.

‘Ms Overwhelmed is a perfectionist, a worrier, and highly sensitive to stress. She spends a lot of time focusing on “109hovel”’ like “I should never make a mistake” and telling herself “If I make a mistake I must be stupid”. She has had gut problems for years but they got a lot worse after she had a relationship break-up.’

Then, he continued, there was ‘Ms Work Pride’, a ‘habitual catastrophiser who had been to see a GP, a gastroenterologist, a dietician and a psychologist to try and sort out her digestive problems. She had also had investigative surgery, all with no benefit. Like ninety percent of people with these gastro-intestinal problems’, the psychologist concluded, ‘the
women I’ve described were very high functioning. In other words smart, and very anxious.’

What creative pseudonym might Dr Knowles invent for me if I became his patient? How about ‘Ms Butterflies’? I could practically write the case study notes for him myself.

‘Ms Butterflies first noticed her symptoms when she was backpacking around Europe in her early twenties. Her digestive system was like a runaway train and she had pains and bloating in her belly. Over the ensuing years she found that her symptoms worsened when her work involved public performances and stressful deadlines, or when her relationships were going badly. She consulted her GP. The GP sent her to a gastroenterologist. The gastroenterologist advised her to have a colonoscopy. No cause was discovered with this investigation. Next she had a gastroscopy. Again, no luck. Meanwhile Ms Butterflies was finding that more and more different types of food could set off her distressing symptoms.

‘She consulted a Chinese doctor. The Chinese doctor persuaded her to spend a lot of time boiling up herbs to produce a viscous brown liquid that tasted like sump oil. The sump oil had no appreciable impact on her guts. She consulted a naturopath. The naturopath prescribed her a beanbag’s worth of tiny white pills, but to no avail. She tried acupuncture. This made her scalp tingle as if she had butterflies in her brain. It did nothing to prevent the butterflies in her stomach mimicking a swarm of angry bees. So back she went to the gastroenterologist, who arranged to have her tested for coeliac disease and fructose intolerance. The test results were inconclusive. Her symptoms, however, were real. Eating often made her feel wretched.’

According to Dr Knowles, Ms Butterflies’ symptoms were probably the direct result of anxiety. Most of his anxious Ms’s were suffering from IBS, or irritable bowel syndrome, an inflammatory bowel disease caused by an interaction between the gut’s nervous system and the brain. The IBS symptoms he described exactly mirrored my digestive torments, including butterflies in the tummy, the result of ‘the gut reacting in a protective, survival response’. Clicking through his PowerPoint presentation, Dr Knowles pointed to a list of the factors associated with IBS:

1) Genetic pre-disposition (Ms Butterflies remembered her grandfather Lloyd sitting up to dinner at exactly the same time every evening, fingers drumming nervously on the dining table, his meals a limited rotation of easy-to-digest dishes invariably chased down by an over-ripe banana – she could never throw out one of these flaccid specimens without thinking of him.)

2) Visceral hypersensitivity (Ms Butterflies thought she knew what hypersensitive meant, it had been part of the family psych talk, but this sounded more clinical: she made a note to look it up later.)
3) Psychosocial factors (Ms Butterflies listened to the psychologist's description of the stress-prone, perfectionist personality type most vulnerable to IBS and recognised herself as if in a mirror.)

4) Early family environment (Ms Butterflies wondered about those months following her father’s death and whether the sudden flood of grief and anxiety in her mother could have somehow stimulated a permanent protective, survival response in her infant digestive system.)

‘You could think of the gut as being like a second brain’, Dr Knowles continued. ‘Two thirds of IBS patients have a psychiatric disorder such as generalised anxiety, social anxiety and panic disorder. All of those can be accompanied by nausea, muscle tension and abdominal distress because anxiety leads to an over-activation of the fight-or-flight response.’

It was disconcerting hearing my anxiety described as a psychiatric disorder. But when I recalled my panicked flight from that birthday party, guts churning like a front-loading washing machine, the evidence was hard to deny.

The good news, Dr Knowles reported, was that effective treatment techniques are available for anxiety-induced IBS, including ‘Breathing, Relaxation, Mindfulness and Acceptance, Exercise, Meditation, Yoga and Gut-Focussed Hypnotherapy’. That last one made me giggle. I pictured a dark-eyed 111hovelling111g111t with a curling moustache and a slow-swinging fob watch staring soulfully at my belly button while intoning 'you’re getting sleepy' in his deep baritone. Lulled by his dulcet tones, all the butterflies in my tummy would stop flapping around and settle down for a nice long nap.

I couldn't help wondering about another tummy metaphor and how it might relate to the brain–gut axis. Dr Knowles had explained what goes wrong in your guts when you’re feeling fearful. Why, then, did we often describe courageous people as gutsy? Were they the ones who were willing to ignore the warnings coming from their stomachs and carry on regardless? Or the ones whose bellies knew no fear?

Henry Bates must have been a fearless chap. His parents reportedly wanted him to settle down to a quiet job in manufacturing. Instead Henry chose to spend eleven years camping out in the Amazon rainforest, battling tropical diseases and collecting more than fourteen thousand butterflies. Sounded gutsy to me.

Then again, perhaps the people I had encountered on Professor Ron's Overcoming Social Phobia video – handsome Jon, laughing Lisa, sad Eric – were even more courageous. Having a casual chat at the supermarket check-out or going to the local dance may have been infinitely more frightening for them than camping alone in a mosquito-infested...
rainforest. Somehow they had managed to do those things in spite of the dire warnings from their guts.

If I had spent my life avoiding every situation that made me feel anxious, perhaps I would still have a perfectly functioning digestive system. No foods would be off the menu, no Chinese sump oil concoctions or naturopathic bean bag fillers required. I could have sailed quietly through my life as a social isolate, living vicariously through the characters in my favourite novels. Instead I had pushed myself over a million small cliffs. My guts had paid the price.
Which Poison?

Before I met Andre, Valium was just a pop-culture cliché to me. The word conjured up technicolour images of apron-clad 1950’s housewives obsessively wiping their white cliffs of cleanliness and going crazy with boredom. ‘Mother’s Little Helper’, it was called, the pill prescribed for women who actually needed a strong dose of second-wave feminism. Before Andre I had never encountered it as a medication for a severe anxiety disorder and, judging from its impact on Andre’s life, it had only caused his world to shrink even further.

Perhaps that’s why I never considered taking anti-anxiety drugs for my shyness. They didn’t seem to work. Or perhaps I never really thought of myself as ill and in need of medication. I just thought I needed to work a bit harder to control my neurotic fears. Me and half a million other Australians.

When I was tracking down Professor Ron I found a website for the Macquarie University Anxiety Research Unit where he worked. ‘Over 400,000 adult Australians suffer from significant social anxiety problems each year’, the website informed me, but ‘only a small number of sufferers seek help’. As a result, ‘social anxiety can be life-long if not treated effectively and can also lead to depression and alcohol abuse’. I remembered the birthday party in the art gallery and my flight to the safety of the car. If I hadn’t been avoiding alcohol that night, would I have been able to sedate myself out of my state of panic? And might this whole quest to get to the bottom of my shyness never have begun?

Reasons why I love a glass of wine (or three):

- the feel of the cool strong glass in my hot trembling hand, liquid sand alchemised into solid clarity
- the first few sips of tart sweetness and the way they slide down the back of my throat, easing the tightness in there
- the next few sips, tartness gone, nothing but sweetness now, and the way they gently euthanase the butterflies in my belly
- the first few sips of the second glass, firmly clasped in my cool strong hand, and the way they lengthen my sentences, widen my smile
- the next few sips going down my relaxed throat and the way they meet the laughter on its way up
- the last dregs of the second glass, surely the best glass of wine I have ever tasted, at this, the best party I have been to in years
- the first few sips of the third glass and the way my hips have begun swaying ever-so-slightly, waiting for just the right music to come on
the next few sips of the third glass and the way it doesn’t seem to matter if my sentences don’t quite have endings or, um, you know, that thing...

the last few sips of the third glass – gone so soon? – and the way I can stop talking now and just smile benignly at the lovely, fuzzy people having a lovely, fuzzy time all around me.

Alcohol worked a treat for shyness, as some anonymous wag in cyberspace had attested:

Subject: Fw: Important Advice for all Women

Do you suffer from shyness?
Do you sometimes wish you were more assertive?
Do you have feelings of inadequacy?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, ask your doctor or pharmacist about Sauvignon Blanc. It can help ease you out of your shyness and let you tell the world that you’re ready and willing to do just about anything.

You will notice the benefits of Sauvignon Blanc almost immediately and, with a regimen of regular doses, shyness and awkwardness will be a thing of the past. Stop hiding and start living. Side effects may include dizziness, nausea, vomiting, incarceration, erotic lustfulness, loss of motor control, loss of clothing, loss of money, loss of virginity, delusions of grandeur, table dancing, headache, dehydration, dry mouth, and a desire to sing Karaoke and play all-night rounds of Strip Poker, Truth Or Dare and Naked Twister.

One author I had come across would definitely not have been amused by this caricature of a drug company PR blurb. In 2007 English journalist Christopher Lane wrote a book entitled Shyness: how normal behaviour became a sickness. Lane set out to prove that shyness had been deliberately pathologised by a small but influential group of American psychiatrists working hand in glove with the multinational pharmaceutical industry. 'Shyness isn't just shyness any more', Lane wrote.

It's a disease (with) a variety of over-wrought names, including 'social anxiety' and 'avoidant personality disorder', afflictions said to trouble millions... And since the early 1990s, when (it was) agreed that powerful psychotropic drugs were suitable ways of treating these conditions, countless Americans and Britons have daily
swallowed large doses of Paxil, Prozac, Zoloft and other pills for routine emotions that experts now consider medical conditions.

Lane argued that we have dramatically narrowed our conception of healthy behaviour. Our ‘quirks and eccentricities’, he wrote, have now become problems that we fear and that we expect drugs to fix. It was all part of a pervasive cultural push towards mood brightening and the consequence, Lane concluded, was ‘a vast, perhaps unrecoverable, loss of emotional range, an impoverishment of human experience’.

Reading Christopher Lane’s elegant well-researched rant, I wondered again why I had never asked a doctor for some pills to muffle my anxious what ifs. It’s not as though I had a blanket prejudice against the use of drugs to treat psychological problems. I had several friends whose lives would have been almost intolerable without antidepressants. One of them had literally found life with depression intolerable and had opted instead for a snaking hose filled with carbon monoxide. I had wished, hopelessly and retrospectively, that some smart doctor had thrust a prescription at him before it was too late.

Maybe, for him, anxiety had been in the mix too. According to Professor Ron’s website, anxiety and depression often went together in what was termed a ‘co-morbid’ relationship. What a gloomy word morbid was. The dictionary told me it meant ‘of the nature of, or indicative of, disease’, but for me the word morbid was inextricably linked with the word fears.

Ever since that long dark London winter when I turned fifteen, I had had to drag myself out of regular lengthy bouts of profound gloom. As with anxiety, I’d never sought medication for my gloom, but I understood why others whose gloom was even more crepuscular than mine might need help finding the daylight. Sometimes drugs were the only good solution, at least in the short term.

In retrospect, maybe if I had opted for drugs rather than trying to will my anxieties away, my guts wouldn’t have paid such a high price. Perhaps I could be tucking into a generous bowl of searing hot Indian curry right now instead of waiting for someone to invent a pill that could replace a main meal.

Why had I thought anti-anxiety drugs weren’t for me? Did it come back to my determination not to allow myself to be ‘weak’? All along I’d been convinced that if I just tried hard enough, I could beat this shyness thing. As the daughter of a behavioural scientist, perhaps I had unconsciously absorbed the message that cognitive therapy – even if self-prescribed – was a better way to treat psychological distress than popping a pill.

I had to admire Christopher Lane’s painstaking analysis of the complex and compromised process by which the DSM II (Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental
disorders) had been updated to include the psychiatric labels for social anxiety disorders. It seemed to me, though, that Lane sometimes conflated shyness, introspection and introversion, and that he underestimated the distress that social anxiety could cause for shy but sociable people.

‘Almost overnight’, he wrote, ‘shyness and many other routine moods and ailments became bona fide diseases.’ Shyness – a mere ‘routine mood’? I thought of the people I had observed in Professor Ron’s video on social phobia – handsome Jon and loud Lisa and sad Eric – and how palpable their grief was for the years they had wasted being afraid of other humans.

Again I went back to my memories of that birthday party when my legal drug of choice, alcohol, had been off the menu. Tom hadn’t been on the wagon that night. He had started drinking even before he arrived. He had seemed perfectly relaxed, at least for the few brief moments when I’d seen him there. Tom was shy, or so he said, and although he was rarely drunk, he loved a drink or three as much as I did.

The first time I had invited him to a party with my friends Tom was still using heroin. He arrived at my place sleep-eyed and slurring. I remember him leaning against the kitchen bench, staring at me with a wonky grin, while all around him my friends drank a bit more quickly while they adjusted themselves to the disturbing presence of his fame.

Now I was curious. Had heroin been his drug of choice to combat these stupid fears? Tom was away again but I sent him some questions in an email. What effect had heroin had on his shyness? ‘My shyness disappeared’, he wrote back. ‘Heroin immediately lessened all my anxiety, and the right amount – not too much – made me perfectly at ease.’

Falling in love had done the same for me. It hadn’t entirely taken away my physical self-consciousness. That had morphed into a constant state of hyper-awareness of where my body was in relation to Tom’s body. But the elation of finding someone whose very presence in the world seemed to be an extension of my own had often made my shyness evaporate, especially in the early days.

So what was Tom’s strategy now, I wondered. How did he put himself at ease since he had given up heroin? It was a conversation to be had in person, not on email, so I left it for later. He would be home soon. Hopefully then we would have some time together, at last.
Invisible Him

A friend of mine told me about a middle-aged man she knew who was very shy. ‘Painfully shy’, she said. The shy man had won many awards during a long career as a photographer, often putting himself in physical danger in order to capture just the right image. A courageous man, she said. If you met him at a party, though, he could scarcely meet your eye. Conversations were almost impossible.

The man behind the camera, not in front of it.
The observer, not the observed.
The capturer, not the captive.
The fearless human with a terrible fear of other humans.
The invisible man.

I wanted to meet him.

My friend sent him an email, asking if he would speak with me. It took a few weeks, but eventually the shy man responded to me by email. He didn’t really want to meet up, he wrote, but if I sent him a postal address he was willing to send me a file of newspaper clippings he thought might interest me. Another few weeks later a fat orange envelope arrived in the mail. Inside was a handwritten note:

Dear Sian,

Please excuse the delay. Other events overtook me. For the last 40 years I have cut out huge numbers of articles about all sorts of things from papers, magazines etc and I was in the midst of a big ten yearly sort out when you contacted me.

Enclosed are all the articles I have cut out about shyness. When I say all, there are only about ten, which is most surprising. I would have cut out every article I saw on this subject and am therefore amazed there are so few articles about it.

I hope these are useful.

Please return them if possible.

Kind regards,

L

As the yellowing pieces of paper slid out of the envelope, a familiar smell escaped with them, the acrid smell of old printing ink. The smell of my grandfather Stan Prior. ‘Pass me a 117 hovel-n-raymond, would you?’ I said out loud to no one as I unfolded the first clipping.
You Won’t Be Snubbed: The story of a man who overcame his fear of approaching strangers.
*By Henry Morton Robinson. The Reader’s Digest, August 1964.*

Published in the same month of the same year I was born. My parents had been *Readers Digest* subscribers. I imagined my shy father reading this article when the crying of his newborn daughter woke him in the middle of the night.

Henry Morton Robinson describes meeting a man called David who is willing to talk to anyone, anywhere, with the greatest of ease, melting ‘the icy cellophane that most human beings come wrapped in’. Henry confides to his new friend David that all his life he’s ‘wanted to mingle with strangers who could widen my interests, yet I’ve always hung back, afraid of a rebuff. How does one overcome this fear of being snubbed?’ David delivers a little homily. ‘My own fear completely disappears when I remember that the dearest friends I have were once strangers.’

I remembered meeting my friend Gabby, a six-foot-tall stranger who shook my hand firmly in the cramped arts office of the Trades Hall. Gabby took on belligerent abattoir bosses by day and sang sweetly in the alto section of the Trade Union Choir by night. She courted my friendship in the pub after rehearsals and I didn’t shrink from her overtures because I wasn’t Shy Sian in this company. I was Comrade Choir Mistress. The one in charge. I wasn’t afraid. In reward for her friendship I gave her solo parts. Blatant favouritism.

The next file to slide out of the cinematographer’s envelope included three pages of ads for a course in ‘Auto-Psychology’. The pages weren’t dated. From the look of the bouffant hairstyles in the accompanying photographs, though, they were printed in the mid-sixties too. The course came from somewhere called ‘The Institute’. It could be sent to you in instalments in plain sealed envelopes. ‘Every care is taken to meet the wishes of Correspondents with regard to privacy’.

Just like porn, I thought. For the purposes of Auto-Pleasing. Same shame-filled need to hide your desires from the world. Except in this instance all you desire is freedom from self-consciousness.

The first page announced in bold caps:

**HOW TO STOP BEING SHY!**

‘If you are nervous and shy; if you blush and stammer when embarrassed in company, especially in the presence of the opposite sex; if you are letting opportunities slip
Dear Institute people, I wanted to write back, our blood is already red. Everyone can see that when we blush. And when we are angry. Anger makes me brave; red-blooded; forceful. Not shy at all.

The next page was a series of Questions and their Answers.

**Q. Is the Course likely to make one Introspective?**

_A. On the contrary, the Course does exactly the opposite, because it shows you how to ‘get outside yourself’. It definitely discourages morbid self-examination and stimulates creative expression and active co-operation with your environment._

I was confused. Surely ‘getting outside myself’ had been the problem, not the solution. Standing outside, looking at myself, then looking at others who were looking at me. Trying to pre-empt or control what they saw. Rather than just being me. Inside me. Looking out.

And there was that awful word _morbid_ again. ‘Morbid self-examination’ – is that what I’d been doing with all this shyness research, all this self-disclosure? What was the point of it all? To stimulate creative expression?

Page Three: _‘WHAT IS AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX?’_

_An Inferiority Complex is a disturbance in the Subconscious Mind which manifests itself in Self-Consciousness and Lack of Confidence – in nervousness and ‘nerviness’ – in causeless worry – in depression and sense of futility – in lassitude and lack of enterprise – in weakness of will and habits... These are symptoms of ‘something wrong’ within your personality which you can put right – the effect of conflicting forces within yourself or the result of some emotional experience or some destructive influence during your personality development._

Those capitals were so authoritative. So irrefutable. Lack of Confidence. Inferiority Complex. Did I believe I was inferior to other people? It was a question I had put to Professor Ron in our interview.

**PROFESSOR RON:** If you’re asking me do shy people perceive others as better than they are, then the answer is no. People with social anxiety are pretty accurate at assessing others’ performance and attractiveness and abilities. They’re just not very accurate with
their own. But they don't dislike themselves normally. That's linked more with depression, and social phobia and depression often go together. But they're not the same thing. There are a lot of social phobic people who are not depressed at all and don't have that self-dislike.

As for the 'emotional experience' that triggered this 'causeless worry', perhaps the Institute People who sent out those furtive parcels of assertiveness in the mail hadn't yet heard about temperament theory and how we were all born somewhere on the approach-withdrawal spectrum. That's what Professor Margot had told me.

There had been that one time, though, during our shyness interview beside the walnut piano when she had stepped outside the boundaries of temperament theory. When Margot had wondered aloud about the weeks that followed Glen's death. Those long days and longer nights when the fear must have gripped her so tight she could hardly breathe. When she might in turn have held on tight to that newborn child during the long months after the brave shy father stepped back into the waves and disappeared. Just that once she had wondered aloud about whether fear might have passed through her rigid body and into mine, a bitter cocktail of breastmilk and liquid terror.

At the bottom of the brave cinematographer's pile of clippings was a newspaper article from some time in the 1980s. Prince Charles and Princess Diana smiled awkwardly at the camera, her long vulnerable neck tilted at that shy angle. 'HOW TO BEAT SHYNESS...' the headlines read. Both members of the royal couple are shy, the author told us.

'Shy people are besieged with negative thoughts... Fear of rejection is behind all shyness. It is important that a shy person makes him or herself do, every day, an action that they fear'. Exposure therapy, they call that.

But when is taking action that you fear a good thing, and when is it foolish? Did my anxious father fear going into the surf that day? Or was all fear banished the moment he decided to try and help?
**On Mortality**

Sometimes when I’m at a surf beach I half expect to see him out there, floating serenely in the waves. He’s enjoying the feel of the water on his broad shoulders, the warmth of the sun on his wet scalp. He’ll come in soon and towel off, squinting into the glare, and then he’ll smile at me with my own shy smile, my mirror-face. We’ll sit together under a striped umbrella and watch the families gathered in little clutches around their blue and white Eskies, or spread out in human join-the-dots patterns, playing with wet tennis balls. The children with sand clinging to their legs, women tugging at their bikinis, men standing in pairs at the water’s edge, arms crossed in identical poses as they exchange information about the latest cricket scores.

But that’s not how the beach looked that day. That day the beach was wind-whipped and empty, until the busload of blinking orchestral musicians piled out onto the sand. A day when no one should have been swimming but some couldn’t resist. That’s what I’ve been told. I think. I can’t be sure now.

There were two of them leading the way to the water’s edge, young ones, feeling immortal. I picture them hopping over the waves, their pale musicians’ arms flapping at the froth under the scudding clouds. Then quickly sucked out beyond the shallows by the furtive rip. Arms flapping harder now, salt water leaping into their mouths. Frog-legs kicking. Frog-voices croaking uselessly under the roar of the breakers.

And the father suddenly forgetting about himself and hauling off his shirt. Running now, running away from his wife and children and into the clutching water. Those trumpeter’s lungs breathing deep, that blond head diving over and under the waves as he heads for the furthest immortal.

And the rest of the orchestra watching, not breathing, as the slow-motion father reaches the furthest immortal and puts his hand under a chin and hauls the young body backwards through the overtaking waves until he can feel the sand under his feet.

Is this what happened? Or was there a rope around his waist and a silent group of onlookers at the other end, slow-motion-tugging them back to shore? I’m not sure. I have to fill in the gaps for you. And for me.

The rest of the orchestra is watching, breathing again, as the first immortal staggers onto the shore. But the father turns (isn’t one enough? Why so helpful?) and goes out again. He’s tiring now, trumpeter’s lungs seared with salt, legs kicking slower, but he makes it to the gulping violinist. Again that strong hand under a chin and the slow progress away from the horizon. The onlookers turn to each other, shaking their heads in amazement. A hero!
My mother looks down at her eldest daughter and mouths ‘yes’ in response to a question that can hardly be heard over the whipping wind.
And when they all turn back the second immortal is safe.
Safe but alone.
The father has disappeared.

I imagine it as an upside-down pyramid of suffering in the remnants of our family that day, gradually diluting as it goes down the family structure. Margot first: pure scarifying misery. But how can I conjure that?

My five-year-old sister is next, the one who had asked our mother ‘is he coming back?’ The one to whom Margot replied ‘Yes’. (But did my sister really say that? Have I made it up? Embellished the story?)

Then my brother, nearly two years old and so like his father already, everybody says so, the spitting image. Holding onto our mother’s legs for dear life as the sand whips around his chubby ankles.

And at the bottom of the pyramid there is me, the three-month-old baby, blissfully unaware. Safe in Margot’s arms, eyes shielded from the whipping sand by a soft blanket. But I feel her heartbeat. It thuds against my ear, too fast. I feel her chest rising and falling as the fear sucks the air from her oboist’s lungs. I feel her arms tightening around me.
Perhaps too tight.

There is a photo I’ve seen (or do I imagine I’ve seen?) in another yellowing news clipping. Pinned up at my grandfather Stan Prior’s place, maybe. A woman is standing on a beach. Standing where the wet sand meets the dry, looking out to sea. She looks so alone, in spite of the three small children with her. She’s waiting, as I sometimes do, to see those shoulders rise above the waves and begin the slow swim back to shore.
Perhaps it’s not a photo I remember but a dream. I wonder if all four of us have had variations of the same one. He waits until we’re asleep and then he appears way out beyond the breakers and he’s swimming towards us. Pretty soon he’s stumbling through the shallows to the shore, tired but safe. We’re relieved but we’re also angry. Where have you been all these years, we ask? Why didn’t you come back? Didn’t you realise we’d be worried sick? Did you think about us at all before you leapt into the surf to save someone else’s children?

Sometimes when I’m swimming in surf I dive under the waves and stay down there while the water pummels my legs. I try to imagine how it must have felt for him in those last moments. Did he crash into some hidden rocks and then know nothing more? Or did
he feel that pummelling too and fight to be able to breathe again? I wait until my lungs are screaming and then I surface, gasping like a fish, and stumble through the shallows to the shore, tired but safe. Like my dream father.
So Temperamental

The beeping started before dawn. My dreams mutated from the usual mass drownings to smoke alarms going off in buildings where the flames are licking the walls and people are trapped. Alarum alarum. Beep beep. Half waking, I remembered it was the tip-truck arriving to carry the topsoil away from The Somme (as Tom and I had christened the muddy building site next door to our home).

I found a pair of pre-loved earplugs under my pillow and jammed them in. Even with wads of pink waxy stuff tickling my eardrums, the noise was barely muffled. Beep beep. My teeth grinding was getting worse.

The beeping continued all day. In between beeps, there were revs and rumbles, shouts and whistles, and the occasional seismic juddering when the earth needed more punishment from a bigger machine. The constant noise made me feel as if a pair of miniature jackhammers had taken up residence just below my earlobes. The empty paddock next door was about to be colonised by a five-storey apartment building. Tom and I had briefly considered selling up and moving out. But who would want to buy this place now? Tom suggested it might be worth approaching a government department to see if they might have been interested in buying the house for its heritage value, because of his status as a famous Australian songwriter, but I was dubious.

If only we could leave town. Ever since Tom had returned from his latest trip I had been fantasising about weekends in the country. Nights in chilly B’n’Bs with frilly bedspreads. The way the silence pressed down on my eardrums like a masseur easing a knot of muscle. Lying awake listening to the absence of sound. The blissful quiet.

I was teaching in a writing course and it was time for marking. The assignment on the top of the pile was from a woman who was writing a book about babies and parenting. Her extract was entitled Temperament. Sheesh. Even when I wasn’t actively researching this stuff, it was following me around.

Shyness-Hypersensitivity: Some children seem to be fearful of anything new in their lives – people, food, places, and even new toys. With stimuli such as noise or light, those children’s reactions will occur at a low level. If a noise is annoying, some children will react with a very strong response (crying, yelling, covering ears, jumping around, whinging) while other children will simply find a way to avoid the noise. Some children are viscerally hypersensitive all the time and have no way of understanding why they cannot bear the stimulus.
I remembered being about eleven years old. The noise from Yoni’s bedroom was driving me crazy. She was sixteen and in a year’s time she’d be gone, off in search of new people, food, places, embracing life with an abandon that filled me with horror – and envy. But right now she was listening to the latest Pink Floyd album on her little blue record player and so we all were.

The guitar riff snaked out from under her door and slithered down the hallway to the room I shared with my brother. I was lying on my bed, teeth gritted, trying to read. It was impossible. Stomping down the hall I found my mother working in the soundproof study that doubled as our music practice room.

‘Mum, Yoni won’t turn the music DOWN’, I protested. ‘It’s not FAIR. I can’t CONCENTRATE. Mum? Can you TELL her?’ My teary voice rose and fell like an ambulance siren.

Decades later my sister the actor could still mimic, to the precise semi-tone, the pitch of my whining. ‘Mum’, she would carol, ‘Yoni won’t let me put my CLOTHES on, Mum! Yoni is sitting on my CLOTHES and she won’t let me put them ON.’

I had to laugh, every time, because she was funny. But I could still feel that child’s anger, her skin-crawling, teeth-gritting irritation with loud noises, bright lights, big crowds, strong flavours, cold weather, a whiff of acrid perfume, sand stuck between her toes or a scratchy woollen jumper rubbing at her neck.

There had been a primary school camp. Endless hot walks through coastal heath and, at the end of one hike, a Special Treat. A giant mud-pool that we were allowed, no, encouraged, to jump into fully clothed. I remembereded the squealing, near-hysterical joy of my schoolmates, used to being herded by parents away from all mud-puddles, now being given carte blanche to wallow, and my own silent near-panic at the thought of getting dirty, of having to walk all the way back to camp caked with crusty black mud, of all the washing involved. Worse, almost, than being asked to strip naked. And I remembered the strange shame of my goody-goody cleanliness when we finally turned back towards camp.

As I read my student’s neat summary of my own temperament traits, I found myself wondering if hypersensitivity made everyday living kind of painful. There was a layer of skin missing, a protective membrane, or so it seemed.

And what did my mother make of this difficult child and her frequent complaints? An anxious child with a tendency to sulk when life’s settings weren’t quite perfect. A child with an insatiable appetite for affection. A watchful child. A vigilant analyst of fairness and favouritism. A nurser and 125 hovelli of grievances. A weeper, a fretter, a clinger, a grizzler. A child for whom slumber parties were endurance marathons in separation anxiety. Was Margot exhausted to death by it all? Or did my mother’s growing understanding of
temperament psychology allow her to stand back and get the measure of her youngest child, perched precariously up one end of the Shyness–Hypersensitivity seesaw?

The hypersensitivity had never gone away. This princess still had an aversion to peas. Even without the Battle of the Somme going on next door, I needed earplugs to get to sleep most nights. But my student had given me another piece of the jigsaw puzzle: ‘It can be argued’, she wrote, ‘that it is perhaps shyness in combination with high reactivity which contributes to vulnerability for anxiety problems, rather than shyness alone’.

Maybe I wasn’t just a shy person. Maybe I was a viscerally hypersensitive over-reactive socially anxious shy person. How exhausting – for me and for everyone around me.
Self/Other

At last Tom and I were going away together for a weekend. It was my birthday and I wanted to celebrate with him. He had been travelling off and on for three months out of the last nine and missing him had been like nursing a permanent bruise. Besides, off and on had never suited me. To avoid those flickers of stranger-danger, even with the people I knew most intimately, I needed frequent close contact, a regular groove. It was a shyness thing. Or was it?

During my undergraduate degree one of my politics lecturers introduced me to a theory he had developed about social relationships. Back then I was working hard to find escape routes from my shyness. Any information that could help me predict how people might behave in social situations was of intense interest to me. The subject was Psychosocial Politics and Graham Little’s theory posited that we all favoured one of three styles of relating to others; one of three distinct friendship modes.21

The first friendship mode he called ‘Self-vs-Other’. These were the people whose social relationships were essentially competitive and utilitarian. They were the strategists, looking for order and opportunity in friendship. ‘If you scratch my back I’ll scratch yours, and just quietly, I’ll prove I’m a better back scratcher than you.’

The second mode was called ‘Self-in-Other’. These were the people who sought a sense of solidarity and community with others. They avoided competition if they could and instead looked for security and social connection in relationships. They were the co-operators, the empathisers, the communicators. ‘Solidarity Forever’ could well have been their theme song.

The final mode was called ‘Self-and-Other’. These were the people who were much more interested in inspiring or being inspired by their friends rather than in being helped, or helpful to, them. They were the confident, charismatic ones, the leaders whose authority came from their ability to generate new, interesting and even risky ideas.

My anxious brain was attracted to this neat little list. I was also sceptical about whether something as complex as friendship could be reduced to something so simplistic. The list had stuck with me, though, and over the years I had sometimes used it to try and work out whether I should feel safe with certain people.

I had never seen myself as belonging to the first mob, the Self-vs-Other utilitarians. When it came to engaging with other humans, back-scratching had never been my forte, nor 127hovelling127g. I had always been too awkward, or too direct. Too awkwardly direct. Or perhaps shyness had rendered me so socially underskilled that I couldn’t even try to turn a relationship to my advantage. I didn’t like these people very much, didn’t trust
them, didn’t want to have to compete with them. Besides, they were the ones who were usually most adept at small talk and I had never been good at that stuff.

Occasionally, though, I envied them. I watched them manoeuvring in the workplace, manoeuvring at the pub, manoeuvring others into place around them. Watched them figuring out how other people could help them to get what they wanted. I envied their breezy extroversion, their smooth-talking ways, their career ladder-climbing success. I envied the way they rarely wasted emotional energy on dumb things like fear of negative evaluation. They just got on with the business of life.

Self-in-Other, now they were more my kind of people. I met a lot of them in the environment movement and the trade union choir. Helpful people. People who believed that working alongside other people, rather than competing with them, was the best way to get things done. They were loyal friends, the ones who wanted to see you regularly and not because they wanted anything from you. They just wanted to stay in touch, to keep up with the soap opera of your emotional life. My grandmother Peg was part of the Self-in-Other gang. Nothing gave her more pleasure than putting herself at the service of others. In a previous decade I had lived for nine years with a man who fitted this profile perfectly. Self-in-Other people made you feel safe.

The ones I was most drawn to, though, were the third mob: Self-and-Other. I could list them: Sally, Marie, Mieke, even Tom, in spite of his quiet ways. The charismatic ones who drew others towards them with an invisible force, like the magnets in Stan Prior’s printing shed. They were the ones I always hoped would notice me because I rarely found the courage to approach them. Too shy to make the first move. Too busy with what the psychologists would call my ‘safety behaviours’: avoiding eye contact; staying on the edge of groups; rehearsing an escape plan. I was an expert at all of those. Perhaps you could add to that list maintaining monogamous sexual relationships.

‘Vigilant and anxious reactivity to stressful or challenging situations’: this had been on the Chinese psychologist’s list of ‘shyness-inhibition’ symptoms. What could be more stressful or vigilance inducing than constantly wondering who else your beloved might be loving? Whose deliciously novel amorous repertoire might lead them to negatively evaluate your own wearily familiar one? I couldn’t bear it.

When Tom and I first got together, the question of fidelity vs promiscuity had been one of the biggest knots for us to untangle. Nothing else caused us as much grief, except perhaps his heroin use.

I could find ways to cope with his frequent long absences. He always wrote to me while he was travelling and I wrote back, every day. Hundreds of thousands of precious words, each one a crumb on the trail that would eventually lead him back to me.
I could find a way to cope with the editors who rejected my proffered articles but would virtually go down on bended knee to ask Tom for some of his prose writing. I couldn’t promise not to grumble about it, but I would cope. There was a perverse pleasure in knowing that occasionally he used some of my writing, sometimes entire paragraphs from my columns (with permission), in the material he would offer to those grateful editors.

I could find a way to cope when I became invisible in his company, when the new people we met together became focused on keeping his attention and forgot to include me in the conversation. I understood the deep pleasure of winning his attention.

I could find a way to cope with the daily email inquiries from correspondents wanting me to forward their requests directly to Tom so they didn’t have to run the gauntlet of his manager. I knew I wasn’t his personal assistant, even if they didn’t.

I could find a way to cope with his multitudinous fans and their autograph-hunting, photograph-taking presence in our lives. Even the obsessed ones who sent me emails describing me as ‘Beyond Disgusting’ and a ‘Bitch Prostitute’ and threatening me with a ‘Bloodbath’ for my ‘Mountain of Faults’. I deleted their emails and told myself I was glad not to be living in their skin.

And I could even find a way to cope (just) when he took the morsels of grief I shared with him in the dark and turned them into songs.

But unless Tom gave up using heroin and fucking other women, I couldn’t feel safe. The choice was his: them or me.

He had been reluctant. By all accounts a needle full of heroin feels pretty good. I had never wanted to find out for myself. As for fucking other women, it wasn’t a moral thing for me. I understood the pleasures of wanting and being wanted.

There had been that one time, towards the end of an earlier relationship, the one-off that becomes the beginning of the end. Forbidden pleasures often turn out to be so much less pleasurable than you anticipate. Once you’ve broken the rules and gotten away with it, though, it can be hard to find a reason not to break them again. ‘Don’t pull on a thread’, my grandmother Peg used to tell me. ‘The whole thing could come apart.’ And it had. That’s when I realised I had to be monogamous. To stop things unravelling.

Of course I understood that charismatic Self-and-Other people usually get a lot of offers and that famous charismatic Self-and-Other people like Tom probably get more offers than they can poke a stick at. But it wasn’t something I could live with. I offered to walk away, no hard feelings, if Tom preferred those pleasures to being with me.

Eventually Tom had agreed, on both counts. Heroin had been killing too many of his friends lately. As for monogamy, he consoled himself out loud with the quote attributed to
the actor Paul Newman: ‘Why go out for hamburgers when you’ve got steak at home?’

Even if the feminist in me winced at the raw meat comparison, it was at least some kind of ‘positive evaluation’.

But after all our time apart in recent months, the old itch of anxiety had resurfaced. It had to be scratched. Over my birthday dinner at a country hotel I posed the question: ‘Monogamy’s not so bad after all, is it?’

It was a rhetorical question. We were the lucky ones, the ones who had found each other. Found ourselves-in-another. Tom looked away for a moment then smiled and took my hand across the table. ‘You needn’t worry’, he said. ‘I am true to you. You make monogamy a good place to be.’

Still safe then.
Don’t Look

Back in town, an email request arrived. A team of film producers was making a feature-length documentary about Tom, and his family and friends were all going to be involved. Was I willing to be interviewed?

I was torn. There was plenty to say and I wanted to be able to help. But the thought of sitting in front of a camera, trying to sound lucid and insightful while answering questions about someone I loved, filled me with anxiety (of course). I asked Tom what he thought, half hoping he would tell me not to worry, that there were plenty of others with plenty to say. He had told me that he’d retained final editorial control over the film so he must have had a view on who should be interviewed. But he gave nothing away. So I said yes. And for the next few nights I lay awake at 3 a.m., heart racing, trying not to think about posterity.

Or that camera.

When I was working in radio in the 1990s, television came sniffing around me every couple of years like a curious dog. Someone had heard me on air or seen me at an ABC event. Someone had said something to somebody about me. There would be a call from someone with an overly familiar phone manner inviting me to do a screen test. Somebody somewhere was making a pilot for some new arts program or current affairs show or a new talking heads panel. Someone thought I might be suitable for the job, and wanted me to come to a television studio for a try-out.

Each time that call came through I would have two simultaneous and opposite reactions. I would be flattered by the attention and excited about the possibility of Having A Say on national television (Television! Where everyone’s hair stays in place and everyone speaks in perfectly grammatical sentences and no one is in two minds about anything). And I would be terrified by the thought of looking into that camera.

But which of those two made me say yes every time – the flattery or the terror?

Here’s what I remember:

It’s 1998 and I’m sitting on a sagging purple couch, trying to look relaxed and comfortable. I don’t know what to do with my hands. Surrounding me on the couch is a flotilla of leopard-print cushions. A woman with skintight jeans has just finished pointing a sawn-off blow dryer at my head until my hair surrendered. My lips have been painted into a glistening pout. Mascara-laden lashes frame my vision like torn fly-wire. And beside me
on the couch lounges a rock star in a brown shirt. I haven’t heard of him before and it’s going to be a problem.

I’m here to audition for the pilot of a funky new pop culture show and they want me to interview funky Mr Brown Shirt. The producers have given me no warning about who the ‘talent’ is, and no chance to prepare. They just want us to have a chat. The rock star is wearing a brown shirt unbuttoned to just above his diaphragm. Maybe he wants me to talk to his chest hair. Or to his three-day growth. I don’t want to talk to him at all. What am I doing here? But the camera is waiting.

Leaning back a fraction (that brown shirt hasn't been washed since the last gig, I’d bet a month’s rent on it) I swivel my stiff neck towards the camera until I’m looking directly into that circle of blackness. I try to imagine it’s a person. That’s what I’ve been advised.

Imagine it's your closest friend.
Imagine it’s your grandmother.
Imagine it’s someone who loves you.
Imagine it’s someone who needs your help.
My imagination is failing me.
Imagine it’s a reflective window hiding a team of miniature psychologists: Anxious, hmmm, very anxious.

The camera's looking at me and now I’m looking at him but he's looking at the woman with the skinny jeans who’s hovering in the background with her hair dryer at the ready, just in case. He’s giving her a special smile. I’m trying to think of some funky small talk to start the conversation but all I can think about is the camera looking at me.

I’m used to being prepared. I’m used to making sure I don’t need to improvise, doing the research, preparing an angle, having a list of questions ready. Ensuring I have a fallback position. But that’s not what they want from me here. They want me to Have A Chat.

But I don’t do chat, I want to tell the camera. I do interviews. Conversations with a beginning, a middle and an end. Orderly interactions that I can control. Interactions for the efficient delivery of information, not verbal playtime with a rock star, the exact nature of whose oeuvre currently escapes me.

I have a stab. I ask about his latest album. About his recent gigs. Whether he has any touring plans. But nothing flows. There are awkward pauses. Between his answers. And my questions. He seems faintly bored. Eventually he gives up looking at me and begins speaking directly to the camera, giving that black circle his best rock star smile, as if it’s his best friend’s new girlfriend.
I am a ventriloquist, pleading silently with the camera. *He should be fronting this funky TV show, not me.* The camera stares malevolently back at me. Mute.

I never did get a gig on television.

So disappointed.

So relieved.

Mostly relieved.

* I didn’t want to work in that stoopid shallow medium anyway, * I told myself each time. I had no real investment in that screen test. I wasn’t interested in learning how to speak Televisionese. Radio was the medium for people like me (invisible people). The camera wasn’t rejecting me. *I was rejecting the camera.*

Yeah sure.

In our family photo albums my sister Yoni is always looking directly into the camera’s lens. Sitting in dappled sunlight with baby Sian on her lap, she looks like a Madonna-in-training. In a group shot with all our blonde Prior cousins, she is grinning as if she’s just been made the boss of us all. In a studio photo at the beginning of her acting career she is the seductress, looking back over her shoulder, daring us to resist her golden beauty. The camera loves her and she knows it.

In those family albums there are dozens of images in which I appear to be striking a pose, the same pose every time. My head is tilted to the left, chin pointing towards my right shoulder, left shoulder slightly raised. Eyes squinting, smile tight. On the front porch in a pink tutu, feet splayed, aged six. In front of a music stand, holding a clarinet, aged ten. Leaning on a balcony, new green frock, sixteenth birthday. Sitting on a couch, wine glass in hand, twenty-first birthday. The head tilted, always tilted, as if it’s trying to escape from the torso. Leave the rest of the body to deal with the camera’s gaze.

*Please don’t look at me.*


Here’s what I remember:

It’s 1982 and I’m standing on a suburban beach, trying to decide between another swim or another ice-cream. My final school exams finished two weeks ago and most days it feels like I deserve at least three ice-creams. I notice a blonde woman in her late thirties staring at me from her lounge chair. She notices me noticing her, rises more gracefully than
anyone should ever be allowed to rise from a lounge chair, and comes over. 'Are you a model?' she asks.

Are you kidding? I blush and shake my head.

'I run a modelling agency and I wondered if you’d like to come and talk to me about joining. I think you have the look of today.'

The look of today: a collection of words that belong on a screwed-up piece of paper at the bottom of a rubbish bin in a windowless room in the basement of a third-rate advertising agency.

Deep inside my head, though, there lurks a homunculus of the Austr-alien schoolgirl in London with her chunky jeans and her dodgy haircut, her lonely lunch hours and her ambiguous gender. She’s sick of hiding in the library. She’s decided she wants to be a Woman. In fact, she wants to be the kind of Woman that other women want to be. The kind of Woman that men want. She wants to be Magazine Woman.

So I take the business card that is offered to me and on the way home I make sure it doesn’t get wet inside my beach bag. It takes me a few weeks but eventually I find the courage to call the number on the business card and the process begins.

The blonde woman is called Fiona and she used to be a model herself. Her facial features are so even, I find myself staring covertly at them in our meetings, looking for a flaw. This is in the days before Botox injections and facial reconstructions had become as common as leg waxing. That perfectly symmetrical face of hers is probably the real deal. As she sits on the other side of an empty desk in her light-filled office by the bay, inducting me into the strange rituals of the modelling world, I am often distracted by my search for those non-existent flaws.

First there are The Shots. Fiona sends me to the suburban home of her photographer friend, another absurdly even-featured woman in her thirties, whose living room is lit up like a small football stadium. She instructs me to remove my chunky spectacles and put on the bathers I’d been wearing at the beach that day. She paints my face until I hardly recognise myself in the mirror. She puts handfuls of gel in my hair (The Wet Look is in’), draws lines around my lips so they look cartoon-sized (The Full-Lipped Look is in’), tells me to lie on my side on her light-drenched lounge suite and asks me to pout.

As her children argue on the other side of the living room about which TV show they want to watch, the photographer leans in close, pointing the camera at me. My face aches from pouting. The camera clicks and clicks. Because my hand is on the side of my head, preventing it from tilting away from the black clicking circle, my chin draws further and further into my neck.

I am not a model.
I am a slow-blinking tortoise on a lounge suite.
I am an amphibian in a one-piece bathing suit.
I am a web-footed creature stranded on a sun-bleached rock.
I am trying to pretend that I am invisible.

*Look at me.*

*Please don't look at me.*

At last it is over.

But because a part of my brain has already decided that whatever frightens me most, that is the thing I must do, it's not really over.

Fiona the modelling agent puts in a bulk order for something called a Composite Card. This is a glossy black and white calling card on which are printed several light-drenched photos of the pouting tortoise, its first name and its vital statistics. When the cards are ready I am sent on a series of go-sees.

This involves ringing up a list of advertising agencies, photographic houses and fashion magazines and telling them that I'm new to the agency. Would they like to look me over? If they say yes, I put on the pouting mask of make-up and Go-See them.

'Had much experience?' Fiona has strongly advised me to lie. She has even offered some suggested lines.

'Oh-yes-I've-just-come-down-from-Sydney-where-I-was-doing-some-work-for-Fosseys.' What even IS Fosseys?

'How are your legs?' That one throws me. I nearly say 'Fine thanks, how are yours?'

Waiting for job interviews is possibly the worst part. Lining up on comfy chairs outside the casting person's office with ten other girls, all of whom presumably also have The Look of Today. Girls with full lips and no hips. Girls with aggressive smiles and submissive hairdos. So many sets of flawless features in such a small space. So little apparent self-consciousness. What strange planet is this?

I never land a modelling job if there has been a screen test involved. Sometimes I see a fashion ad on TV and recognise it as one I've gone for. Watching those slim young things giggling and wriggling their way across the screen, I silently thank the camera for its judgment, for sparing me this indignity. Still, though, I don't give up.

Once every few months someone offers me a job simply on the basis of the photos on the composite card. A costume hire company dresses me in a nineteenth-century ladies riding outfit, complete with tall hat and riding crop. They send a black limo to drive me to every advertising agency in the CBD, where I hand-deliver invitations to their annual Costume Ball. Clambering out of that four-wheeled coffin onto busy city pavements, trying not to lose my hat, I feel like a reanimated corpse condemned to wander amongst the
staring pedestrians of the late twentieth century. Partially reanimated. There is always that stiffness, the creeping rigor mortis of the physically self-conscious.

It doesn't end with a bang. Not even with a whimper. I just stop calling Fiona at the agency. Eventually she stops calling me too. The pile of composite cards is consigned to the bottom drawer of my desk, which is covered in university library books about feminism. I am learning about The Patriarchy and The Male Gaze and how together they produce strange ideas like The Look of Today, an idea that makes girls with less than perfectly even features feel deeply imperfect. (The limo driver cops a lecture from me about The Evils of the Male Gaze. Plenty to say, even back then, when I found a cause more powerful than my own fears.) If I’m honest, though, it is technology as much as ideology that made me give up on modelling in the end. That camera. That all-seeing, all-knowing lens.

I still have a paper bag full of those yellowing composite cards. I know exactly where it is. Down the bottom of a big wooden chest, hidden underneath decades of collected letters from friends and garish family photo albums. If I wanted to, I could dig out those cards and have another look at that pouting girl in her one-piece bathers. The siren of the suburbs. Try to see what the camera saw three decades ago. I never dig them out and I never show them to anyone. My little brown paper bag of shame.

The team of blokes making the documentary about Tom arrived at our house in a tangle of extension cords and camera equipment. I had put on some make-up and my face felt stiff with foundation. And with fear. Who was it who first described the camera as a ‘mirror with a memory’? Perched on the edge of a chair in our dining room, I tried to calm my breathing while the blokes checked the light levels.

The interviewer, a small intense man who sat too close to me, opened with a question about Tom’s writing voice. As I began speaking I could feel the fear draining out of my body like a hot bath slowly emptying. Of course. This wasn’t about me. This was about something much bigger than me. I was a proselytiser, here to persuade people that Tom was extraordinary. I had cover. Camera? What camera?

I spoke about the rhythm of Tom’s writing, about the poetry hiding beneath the simplicity, about how his words had resonated with me, about witnessing fans trembling in his presence. When the interviewer asked about Tom’s heroin habit and whether he gave it up ‘for me’, I shook my head. The last thing I wanted was to be defined as the Good Influence here. Forever frozen on screen in helpful mode. I wouldn’t be the shy girl with her gentle moral persuasions, the character who had escaped from the pages of Little women. Not for posterity. No way.

‘It was his choice’, I said. ‘I told him what I thought about it and then I left it up to him.’
The interviewer wasn’t happy with my response. Stories of salvation required the intervention of angels and I wasn’t playing my part. He asked the same question in a slightly different way. My journalist’s brain admired his persistence. I would have done the same. 'It was his choice, his decision', I said, smiling beatifically into the camera’s shining lens.

What else do you want to know about my love, about my cause?
Then This

An ordinary day. Minding Tom’s three-year-old grandson together, a child for whom I would fight off a pride of hungry lions.

Tom kicked a football to him. I let him have a little go at holding onto the buzzing electric mower with me while I tidied up our life.

A trip to the theatre. I wore a grey striped dress.

‘You look like a symphony in silver’, Tom said as we leave the house.

Pos re. I was warm all over.

The play was Hamlet. An interactive version. Which way would the Danish prince jump? It was up to the audience members to decide. (I was defensive on Shakespeare’s behalf. Call me old-fashioned, but why mess with the original story?)

Convincing madness, nevertheless.

When Ophelia said, ‘we know what we are, but know not what we may be’, I thought about what else I may be if I could stop being shy. Or stop worrying about being shy.

At interval a photographer from the Sunday paper asked Tom for a photo.

Tom grabbed me by the waist and smiled into the camera’s lens. Click click.

On the way home Tom’s phone beeped repeatedly. While I drove he was busy reading his text messages.

‘I have to do a photo shoot. At six. In the morning’, he said.

So early? Those cameras again.

We’d been together for ten years.

We were home by eleven.

Into the bedroom.

Then this.

We need to talk, he said. I’ve decided I want to be single again.

A shock of scalding heat flushed through my ribcage.

The air was sucked out of my lungs and then my heart began its race to outrun those words. Suddenly I was not standing but sitting. On the bed we had shared for a decade.

Oh, I said to the red rug on the polished floorboards. Wow. This is big, I told my knees as all the flesh above and below them turns to liquid. Stupid, small words.

My hands clutched at the blue doona cover, trying to steady my torso against the shuddering force of that heartbeat.
When I spoke again there was so little air in my lungs, my words were just above a whisper. It was someone else’s voice speaking these words.

*Why?*

*I want to be able to be with other women. I don’t want to be in a long-term relationship with just one person.*

*Oh. But. Is there someone else?*

*No. There’s no one else.*

**Is there someone else?**

*No.*

It didn’t make sense.

*Have there been others?*

*Yes. I have been with other women. But there’s no one in particular. I don’t want to be in a relationship any more. I’m sorry.*

Finally it had caught me.

All those years of tip-toeing around it, of risk-avoiding and safety-net securing, of *what if*-ing and *better not*-ing and rejecting others before I could be rejected, of withdrawing and giving up before I’ve even tried, of choosing only those who I thought would never leave.

*Now this.*

**Liquefaction.**

The sudden dissolving of all that was once solid. Nothing but wet grey mud inside me, around me, on top of me.

*Fight or flight?*

*I could not fight this.*

I hauled myself up, every particle trembling, and escaped the room. Into the next room, pacing for ten long seconds, what to do, where to go? Out again, back to the red rug room, grabbed my mobile, out again, down the hall, into the lounge room, shaking fingers tapping my sister’s number onto the glowing screen. From the edge of the couch I whispered into the phone.

*Yoni are you still up? Can I come over?*

Back down the hall, into the red rug room. Tom was sitting at the end of the bed, head down. I reached up to grab the black suitcase on top of the wardrobe but it was so high, too high, and my treacherous fingers couldn’t reach. I stretched and failed and failed again. Pathetic.
Tom left. Went to another room, I don’t know where. The other end of the house. As far away from my stretching, shaking hands as possible. I found a chair and placed it in front of the mirror attached to the wardrobe door, the mirror that had watched us sliding in and out of each other for so many years, watched us liquefying each other in the big blue bed.

Clutching at the suitcase I climbed down from the chair and scuttled around the room like a startled insect. I was grabbing things and hovelling them inside in fast-motion, a cartoon character packing a cartoon suitcase, my clothes spilling out over the sides, my shaking hands struggling with the zips.

And yet, some part of me was very sensible. Very helpful.
Ticking things off a mental list.
– Take ear-plugs, sleep will be hard.
– And an eye-mask.
– Take your thyroid pills, you’ll need those.
– And lanolin for dry lips.
– Take hankies, you will need hankies.
– Bathers and goggles, you will need to swim.

What sort of a strange holiday was I packing for here?
A holiday on the island of grief.

I zipped up the suitcase and headed for the door and I was out and almost running to the gate with the suitcase lurching and jerking behind me and now I was at the car and I pressed the blue button and opened the door and threw the suitcase across and fell into the driver’s seat.

As
The Boys disappeared down the end of the driveway
The Father walked into the surf
The Lover withdrew his love
and I was alone.

But not safe. Not now. Not yet.
Not for a long time.
Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety
On Etymology

*Two further definitions of the word shy:*

- To move suddenly in fright or alarm.
- To come up short, insufficient, less.
Sunday Paper

On the back page of the Sunday paper the famous songwriter leaned into his beloved, a proprietary hand on her hip. She was wearing a grey striped dress and stood up straight, except for her head, which was tilted slightly to the left, chin pointing towards her right shoulder. Her left shoulder was slightly raised, her eyes squinting, her smile tight.

*Please don’t look at me.*

*Yes look at me.*

*Don’t believe what you see.*
Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety
PART TWO

Four Thirty Three

There is no sleep. There is just my fast-beating heart. It comes with me to my sister’s
bathroom where there are too many mirrors, too well attached. I turn my head away from
them as I fill and drink glass after glass of water. At 2:21 a.m. At 4:33. And again at 6:11.
Glass after glass until I am pure liquid. Nothing can quench this thirst. Not enough water,
not enough air.

Because I am not enough.

Food is almost impossible. No room, too much liquid, even though most of the liquid
seems to be spilling out from the holes between my forehead and my cheekbones. And the
lump in my throat is back, after all these years, threatening to block any solids I try to send
down there. Is it another ingot of unspoken words, everything I could have said to Tom
before he made this decision about my future? Or a swelling of defiance against his silence,
his subterfuge? Too late.

The day after I flee to my sister’s place a short email arrives from Tom, offering to pay
for me to live somewhere else for a while. Offering me money so as not to have to be close
to me. But I need to be near people who want to hold me close or I will drown. A few days
after that, there is a phone call.

I don’t understand, I tell him. I need you to help me to understand.

The thought of being with any woman for the rest of my life makes me feel like I’m in a
cage.

But I’m not ‘any woman’. I’m this woman. The woman you chose. Because you liked
who you were when you were with her.

You mean the thought of being with me makes you feel like you’re in a cage? My voice has
dropped half an octave.

I’m sorry but I need more variety. With more women.

Variety? Hadn’t I given him variety? Here, let me list them all:

- Shy Sian
- Show-Off Sian
- Smart Sian
- Silly Sian
- Sexy Sian
– Sulky Sian
– Sympathetic Sian
– Shameless Sian
– Singing Sian
– Social Butterfly Sian
– Hold The Fort Sian
– Welcome Home Sian
– Take the Photo Sian
– Creative Collaborator Sian
– Opinionated Sian
– Acquiescent Sian
– Grumpy Sian
– Good Influence Sian
– De Facto Sian
– Stepmother Sian
– De Facto Step-Grandmother Sian.

I contain multitudes. I am a one-woman variety show.

But ‘one woman’ seems to be the problem here. I can be all of those people but I can only offer Tom one body.

A final question. It is rhetorical.

*If I said to you, ‘Okay, no worries, have as many women as you like, we can still be together’, what would you say?*

There are several long minutes of silence. Then I hang up.

I thought it was an ocean, this love. Vast, endless, embracing around the corners of continents. But it was a mere tarn, a small body of water trickling into a smaller body of water and then into another even smaller, constantly emptying until it was all gone. How did I get it so wrong?
Belonging and Apart

The days can be got through, just. There is still work: classes to be taught, articles to be written, songs to be learnt. Work has worked for me before. Temporary respite from fear. And I don’t have a better plan.

I make lists of all the work to be done and whenever the liquefaction threatens to drown me I sit down at the desk in my sister’s spare room and work my way through the tedious lists. I feel like an impostor, someone pretending to be Sian until the real Sian can be found. Even her clothes don’t fit me. They have developed baggy creases where the flesh is eroding from my bones.

The nights are another thing. I still can’t sleep. My heart won’t slow down enough for my brain to stop working. It is jammed in fight-or-flight mode. I lie awake replaying that conversation at the end of the blue bed, over and over, as if my mind is trying, belatedly, to warn me of the wave about to overtake me. Without sleep, though, I can’t work and without work I can’t get through this thing.

I visit a doctor, a young man whose desk is covered with photos of his wife and children. His face fills with something a bit like shame when I describe what has happened. He quickly gives me a prescription for some white pills that will pull me under and hold me down when I need them to.

I try to keep researching shyness, tracking down journal articles on social anxiety and the fear of rejection. Now more than ever I need to understand this thing and how it might be controlled.

I walk my sister’s dog, or allow the dog to walk me, up and down the path beside the river, past the industrial warehouses converted into waterfront condominiums, past the Vietnamese fishermen squatting in silence on the old wooden jetties, under the railway bridges where neon graffiti defies the shadows. I stop to stare at a trail of starfish washed up on the riverbank, their pocked arms curling in the sun, and wonder what these creatures are doing so far from where they belong.

And I swim. I find an outdoor pool near my new home and every day I slide under that shimmering sheet of blue and let my fast-beating heart power me up and down, thirty long laps, staring through the wet blur inside my watertight goggles, trying again and again to make sense of that night. Through some strange alchemy of reverse deliquescence, when the chlorinated water embraces my liquid body my flesh becomes solid again. For about an hour after I haul myself out of the pool, calves cramping, I feel calmer. The day can be got through, just.
But then the fear returns and with it, the overwhelming sensation that a part of me is missing. Because we are apart.

**Belonging**: to fit into, have a home, have a rightful place, to go with, be part of, related to, attach to, be connected with, have a proper place, be associated with, be included in, be allied to, be affiliated with, be an adherent of.

With Tom, I had belonged. And when we were apart I would be longing for him. But that was okay because I knew that we would be together for a long time. Not owning each other, not completing each other, just connecting, fitting together. It didn’t make sense.

When I can’t make it make sense, I do what we have always done. Smothering my pride, I write to Tom, a long loving email suggesting he reconsider his decision. I remind him of all the pleasures there have been and there might yet be if we can just find a way through this strange mess. The next morning there is a short reply waiting for me in the inbox. He’s sorry but he still feels the same way.

‘All writers have to first charm and then betray’, says the quote stuck to the wall above my desk. I thought it was a metaphor. Perhaps I have been wrong about that too.
On Textual Intercourse

When Tom was working away from home he used to write to me every night. A letter from London. A missive from Massachusetts. A poem from Paris. Words were our love tokens. It kept the connection. It counted for a lot.

So when the actor Russell Crowe was being pilloried for throwing a phone across an American hotel lobby because he couldn’t call his wife back home in Australia at precisely the time he had promised to call her, I surprised a few friends by defending him. ‘Maybe she really needed him to make that call’, I said. ‘Maybe the timing of that call counted for a lot’

Some Questions You Might Ask Yourself at 3 a.m.

Did Tom sit down and write to me before he had chosen the other woman? I guess that way he could feel like he had a clean slate. No sin had yet been committed, no shame could seep into the text. The coast was clear.

Did Tom sit down and write to me after he had chosen but before he had fucked the other woman? I guess that way he wouldn’t have to worry about forgetting to write to me afterwards, or feeling too post-coitally sleepy to bother, or accidentally letting slip some detail in the email that might make me suspicious.

Did Tom sit down and write to me after he had chosen and after he had fucked the other woman? I guess that way he wouldn’t have to risk any stray thoughts of me interrupting his manoeuvres. He could send her home and get back to his laptop.

Did Tom sit down and write to me in between fucking different women? I guess there’s no reason he should have kept it to one a night. If the offers were there, I mean. What’s the difference between one or several other women? Writing to me might have been a nice little break. A palate cleanser.

Did Tom think of those other women as hamburgers or as steak? Or as some other variety of meat?
The Catalogue Aria

The white pills from the doctor give me a few hours sleep each night. During the days, though, they make me want to lie down all the time. One evening Professional Sian drags me off the mattress on the floor of my sister's spare room and drives me to the theatre. I am there to review Don Giovanni, an opera about a man who brags he has had one thousand and three lovers – 'mille tre!' – in Spain alone. I need a drink before the show begins. My friend and I prop at the bar next to the theatre.

'So Tom has been spotted', she announces. 'With another woman. Another blonde.'

*Please don't tell me.*

_Tell me._

'They were at a restaurant and he was holding her hand.'

_No don't tell me._

'She looks a bit like you, apparently, only younger.'

I flee to a toilet cubicle where breathing is almost impossible.

'I am true to you', Tom had said.

'You make monogamy a good place to be.'

'There's no one else.'

Don't tug on a loose thread. Once the thread has been loosened, though, sometimes the whole thing will come apart of its own accord. Ten years of facts are unravelling, leaving only loose shreds of fiction.

'Who knows what's truth and what's fiction? And does it matter?' Tom had asked.

Yes. Yes it does.
Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety
One Last Mirror

A month after Tom ends our relationship I return to our home with a screwdriver. Knowing his habits, I wait until he will be out for the afternoon. A few twists for each screw and the mirror comes away from the wardrobe door. I hug the reflection of my headless torso as I carry the mirror out through the gate and lay it carefully on top of a blanket in the back of my car. Quietly closing the front door on The Living Museum of Me, I drive back to my sister’s house.

*Catoptrophobia* means the fear of mirrors. Or, more accurately, fear of the reflections within the mirror itself.

I wonder if there’s a different term to describe a fear of mirrors that you imagine might be reflecting someone else.
What I Wanted

I don't see Tom any more. There are still emails, tedious negotiations over my need to collect bits of my stuff from the house we used to share. There are pseudo-polite letters between our lawyers. Our bodies remain apart.

Tom is famous, though, so Tom is often in the media. My sister advises me to stop reading the newspapers but I am a journalist. I have to keep up. So she tries to shield me by checking the arts pages before I read them. Every now and then the system fails. An image of Tom’s face ambushes me from the dark forest of newsprint and my startled heart pounds away at my ribs, trying to escape.

In an article about the local film industry an excited reporter mentions that the documentary about Tom is nearly finished. Remembering the hymn of praise I offered up in my interview with the documentary-makers, my stomach turns over. I can hear posterity snickering. I send a brief email to one of the film’s producers, asking for my interview not to be used. His response is all barely suppressed irritation: as a journalist, surely I should know how inconvenient that would be for the documentary-makers?

Clearly he has no idea what had happened.

I politely suggest he asks Tom why I might prefer my interview to stay on the cutting room floor. The interview is duly dropped and I wonder briefly if, somewhere in the world, there is a special cemetery where all the tragi-comic, mistimed interviews that have no place in posterity are laid to rest.

I remember then that Tom and I used to have a running joke. Every time he took a photo of me, some part of my body would be missing. Half a head. An arm severed from a shoulder. Legs chopped off below the knees. His ‘arty shots’, we called them. ‘You’re trying to make me disappear, aren’t you, one limb at a time’, I once suggested with a smile.

When the documentary about Tom is released my sister’s protective strategy fails completely. He is ubiquitous. And like a ghost haunting her own wake, I can’t resist reading some of the newspaper articles about the film. One writer expresses mild curiosity that, although Tom’s two ex-wives were interviewed in the documentary, there is no footage, no mention at all, of his former girlfriend of ten years, Sian Prior.

I have become what I always wanted to be.

Or what I always thought I wanted to be.

Invisible me.
A Masked Ball

The trade union choir is having a twenty-first birthday party. I was hounding them earlier in the year, encouraging them to celebrate. At last they have decided to mark the milestone with a big old knees-up. They want me to host the event.

I can't do it. They will see through me, through my professional façade. See that I have changed from solid to liquid.

But if I say no to this, what other battles will I concede to my fear? And then what will be left of me? I have to hang onto the part of me that hasn't been dependent on Tom’s regard.

So I put on a pink spotted party frock and go to the Trades Hall with my carefully written script and my even more carefully constructed party smile. Waiting in the foyer beforehand I practice my small talk with the comrades and avoid any questions about my private life. I hide my shaking glass of water under a seat and when the time comes I step up to the microphone and become Comrade Choir Mistress again. The fear-adrenaline that has been coursing through me for days is instantly converted into a fizzing performance high.

I tease, I praise, I flirt, I reminisce. I remind them about our first ever gig in a high wind under the West Gate Bridge, how helpless we all felt when the choir's four-part harmonies collapsed just as the bridge itself had collapsed two decades before. I joke about shaking Nelson Mandela's hand on stage at the Town Hall after we serenaded him with the ANC's unofficial anthem, and how I hadn’t washed my hand since. I dole out generous dollops of pos re, describing my memories of recording our first collection of songs in a bluestone church where even the hard-line atheist comrades sang like angels.

At the end of the evening when the comrades are backslapping their way to the pub for a few rounds of nostalgia, I quietly slip away. The choir mistress persona has served me well but the fear still lies just under the surface. Better not push my luck.

Now that I have proven to myself that I can keep it together in public, I begin accepting other gigs, even seeking them out. I host a symphony concert, copresent a radio program, interview authors in front of a live audience. I take on more teaching. I even agree to sing in a theatre production to be performed in a festival in France. I just keep saying yes to anything that I think will test me.

Sometimes, though, even Professional Sian can't hold back the liquefaction.

I agree to help interview a batch of prospective writing students at the university. Sitting with a colleague in an airless fluorescent-lit classroom, I try to maintain a reassuring smile as the candidates file in one by one to answer our questions about their
reading and writing habits. I can see their top lips beading with sweat, their shoulders hunching with nerves. I can hear how self-consciousness is robbing them of the ends of their sentences, can tell how desperately they want this thing that we can offer or withhold, and how much they fear that we will reject them.

Somehow their distress begins to leak into mine, swelling my throat. Blocking my lungs. When the door closes behind a girl whose handshake is slippery with sweat, I call a halt.

‘My back is killing me’, I tell my colleague. ‘I need to lie down for fifteen minutes or I won’t get through the day.’ It isn’t exactly a lie. Over the past few weeks grief and over-exercise has hardened my body into a knot of pain. But this is something different.

After my colleague has set off to find a cup of tea I lock the door and lower myself to the classroom floor. Looking down at my prone body I register a series of small shocks. There are my feet, splayed at the end of my trembling legs. There are my hands, clasped tight over my churning belly. But are they really mine? It seems doubtful, because surely I have melted into the sticky carpet like a cartoon character. Scrabbling for the mobile phone I dial the number of my friend Nella.

‘I can’t manage this thing’, I whisper to her. ‘I feel like I’m disappearing. What should I do?’

‘Remember, it’s not about you’, Nella says. ‘It’s about him. There’s nothing wrong with you. Just keep telling yourself that. It’s not about you.’ The meaning of her words can’t penetrate the fog but just the sound of her voice begins to open up my constricted lungs. It is a sound I first heard when we had shared a house two decades ago, a sound that had accompanied

– New Year’s Eve dinners on a long dining table that we hauled across the road from our house to the local football oval
– consultations over the lending and borrowing of frayed op-shop treasures from our wardrobes
– sweaty garden bees where we hacked into the backyard jungle of our rental house like Victorian lady explorers
– weeping sessions in the bathroom when one of us regretted dumping a boy we could never love enough.

Had those boys felt just like this? Until now I had always been the one who withdrew, the dumper rather than the dumpee, never giving myself a chance to practice dealing with this kind of calamity.

I lie there taking shallow breaths while Nella talks and talks into my ear, reciting lists of people who care about me, talking me back into my body, until I can get up off the sticky floor and re-affix the professional smile to my face.
A Merry Christmas

In mid-December I catch a cold. The lump in my throat becomes a sore throat which becomes laryngitis and my voice disappears. Something else is happening to my nervous system. My entire body begins to feel slightly numb. It is as if I’ve had a massive dental anaesthetic that has spread from my face to my toes, then failed to recede when the drugs wore off.

Is this the extra layer of skin I had craved? Or an invisible scarring of my epidermis to protect what’s inside? If anything, I feel less protected. With the outer layer numb, it simply means the next layer is more exposed. My taste buds join the strike and eating becomes even more of a chore. Some sensations remain, like heat and cold, and the fear still washes through me every hour or so like a scalding tide.

When my voice begins to re-emerge it is a hoarse, broken thing, like a weak radio signal coming and going. Entire syllables drop out of the middle of my words, forcing me to repeat myself like a perseverative child.

The week leading up to Christmas Day (the day for families, for children, for the gathering of clans) is like sliding down the inside of a volcano. Below me is a spitting broth of oneliness and self-pity. There is nothing I can do to slow my descent. I try, though.

I write lists.

– Christmas presents to be bought (a shorter list this year, since my family circle has more than halved).
– Possessions to be retrieved from my former home the next time I can bear to go there (the garden lawn I used to mow is now almost knee-high).
– Houses for rent on the other side of town (clicking through images on cheery real estate websites, endless photos of rooms with all the lights on but nobody home).
– Things to pack for a walking trip to the mountains with Nella (comforting self-protective items like insect repellent, sunscreen, elastic bandages and vodka).
– A new file on my computer entitled Consolations: Things I Will Be Glad To Do Without from my relationship with Tom (surprisingly long and occasionally comforting, like swigging on a cough elixir).
– A list of the human qualities I value and can’t allow to be swamped by my anger and fear – kindness, compassion, love, empathy, love, generosity, love, love, love.

On Christmas Eve there is no list that can prevent the slip-slide towards the caldera. A brief email from Tom submerges me entirely. After all those freshly minted words of passion he has written to me over the years, so carefully crafted to surprise and delight, he
Sometimes banality can be the cruelest language of all.

That night I lie on the mattress on the floor of my sister’s front room and allow the tears to overtake me, croaking and gulping like some strange amphibious reptile, soaking handkerchief after handkerchief. Pure liquefaction. I am trapped. There is no way back, and yet I can’t see a way forward. Nothing can fill the hole left by the loss of that love, that fantasy of love.

I feel my sister kneeling beside me, smoothing my hair, kissing my forehead over and over, patting my shoulders and whispering, ‘This will pass, I promise you, this will pass’.

When my sister leaves the room I stare at the small mountain of boxes lined up on the bedside table, different coloured sleeping pills from several different doctors. I stare at them for a long time.

Somehow the night passes and somehow when I wake on Christmas morning the sun has come up. We sit on the carpet beside the gum tree branch serving as a Christmas tree and exchange gifts. I find that by concentrating hard on my nephew’s face as he tears at the wrapping paper I can keep my own face fixed in an indulgent smile. Fake it till you make it.

The swimming pools are all closed so I can’t do my laps. I have made a list of small tasks to get me through the day. Tasks to stop me panicking.

– Vacuum the car (something comforting about the violent rattling of small pebbles as they hurtle up the tube and into the bag).
– Wash the car (the day is sticky with heat and my own sweat washes down me as I hose the bird shit off the burning bonnet).
– Research bushwalks at Mt Kosciuszko (copying and pasting great slabs of Wikipedia entries about the brave Polish explorer and the mountain named after him).

When I run out of things to do my sister sees my glassy eyes and gives me some new tasks to keep the fear at bay.

– Wash the dishes generated by Yoni’s cooking frenzy.
– Set the dinner table for our family of ten (not eleven, not any more).
– Spoon creamed cheese onto slices of smoked salmon, roll them up and tie them off with a bow of home grown chives. Stinky fiddly finger work that chews up the interminable minutes of this longest day.

Outside the steamy weather develops its own momentum. Huge black clouds roll over the western suburbs and hurl punishing bolts of lightning at each other. As I lean over the kitchen bench, tussling with the sticky pink flesh of the smoked fish, I think of King Lear,
incandescent with rage, shouting uselessly at the thundering skies. Shouting for me and for all the rejected self-pitying people who have ever trodden the earth. If my voice was working properly I might have gone out into the garden and stood under the crazy hailstones and done some shouting too. But where was the dignity in croaking at clouds?

When the rest of the family arrives – Margot and John, my brother David and his wife and daughters – I submerge myself in the crazy-weather talk and the ritualised teasing, the gift-giving and joke-telling and overeating. With every glass of champagne the slow minutes speed up until I stop noticing them passing.

When the food has all been eaten and the rain and hail have finally abated, and when my brother and my parents have gone home, the rest of my old-new family and I go walking up the street, merry-Christmas-ing the neighbours who have come out for some fresh air. At the local park the dog sniffs every tree (‘checking her messages’, Yoni says) and I throw wide balls to my patient nephew who hits them back to me with a yellow plastic cricket bat. The black cumulus clouds have gone, replaced by a symphony of pink and orange cirrus. And I am still here.
Self In Other

Surprising Things That Your Friends Might Do

Send you a letter in the mail containing a voucher for a massage with a thin Frenchwoman whose surprisingly muscular arms will bully the pain out of your body and leave you feeling temporarily weightless.

Invite you to their home and persuade you to climb onto the inflatable dinosaur in their swimming pool and take a photo of you laughing with surprise as you fall off it, just to prove to you that you can still laugh.

Take you hiking for a week up and down snow-capped mountains and distract you from your breathless grief with their surprising knowledge of linguistics terms, including ‘Janus words’ – words that can have completely opposite meanings – a term which makes you wonder if perhaps the word ‘monogamous’ could legitimately have opposite meanings for you and for Tom.

Encourage you to start playing multiple Words With Friends games with them on your mobile phone, an activity that offers you surprisingly effective respite at three in the morning from the endless mental replays of your last night with Tom.

Send you long emails expressing how surprised – no, devastated – they are to hear that you and their old friend Tom are no longer together because they thought he had never before seemed as happy as he had since the two of you had been together.

Take you walking along the beach path in a bracing wind and listen to your interminable theme-and-variations about what had happened between you and Tom and refrain from telling you that perhaps it wasn’t entirely surprising that a man who had already left two wives might have gone on to leave his long-term girlfriend.

Take you to a twilight concert at the Zoo and let you lie on their picnic rug and weep behind your sunglasses while they dance to the sound of lions roaring with rage at the sound of humans playing intolerably loud rock’n’roll.
Invite you to the beach and accompany you into the surf, even if it’s thirteen degrees Celsius and raining hard, because they know only the surf can pummel your grief into submission.
A Different Poison

Physical attributes I share with my mother:

- thin wrists
- thick hair
- hammer toes
- sprinter’s legs
- restless fingers
- acute hearing
- a bad back
- a good sense of pitch
- poor circulation
- straight teeth
- dodgy guts

Not long after I first start sleeping on the mattress in my sister's spare room Margot is laid low by a series of headaches. Her headaches turn into migraines, a cavalcade of them colonising her skull, leaving her reeling with pain and nausea. She takes to wearing earplugs and sunglasses day and night to try to shut out the assaulting world. Nothing the doctor prescribes makes any difference to her symptoms. Each time I see her she seems to have shrunk a little more. I contact friends of mine who suffer from the same affliction, interrogating them about causes, treatments, cures, snake oils, but nothing seems to help.

Margot’s symptoms become so acute, John has to take her to hospital. There she is hooked up to a drip of painkillers and anti-nausea drugs. ‘We need to break the cycle’, the doctors tell us. It is the same hospital where my brother David, a cardiologist, is working. He comes straight down from his office and meets us in the ward, where the three of us hover anxiously beside Margot’s bed, tugging the thin cotton blankets over her cold feet.

Seeing her lying there with her eyes closed, her skin grey and her mouth slightly open, for the first time I can picture what my mother might look like inside a coffin. The snaking fear in my belly coils even tighter. I can’t lose anything more. It can’t be survived.

The doctors eventually send Margot home again and the search for the right migraine pills continues. There is a steady flow of emails between my siblings, our aunts and Margot’s friends, all of us fretting about how helpless we feel. In one of those emails an old friend of Margot’s hints to me that she thinks there might be a link between my current misery and my mother’s illness, and that when I start feeling better, perhaps Margot will too.
I stare at the computer screen, reading those words over and over. We share so many minor pathologies, my mother and I. Until now I have been spared her migraines but grief produces some of the same symptoms: feelings of dislocation and distortion, hypersensitivity, and the desire to hide behind sunglasses. Constant pain, although with grief it is impossible to put your finger on exactly which body part it is emanating from.

There has always been an empathy feedback loop between Margot and I. Sometimes we have tried to hide our unhappiness from each other to avoid causing the other distress. Sometimes the feedback loop is a three-way thing, with Yoni making up the triangle. We all spend a lot of time worrying about whether the other two are okay. These last few months, though, I haven’t had the wherewithal to hide anything, not from my family. They are my refuge. Has my liquid terror somehow leaked into my mother’s brain and poisoned it?

If so, it is another good reason for me to find a way to get on top of this thing. Time to break the cycle. Gritting my teeth, I email Tom (who is away travelling yet again) and make arrangements to visit my former home one last time. I will pack my life into cardboard boxes and put it into storage until I can find somewhere else to live. A clean break is required. A full stop. Or at least a semi-colon.
Air of Yesterday

There is one cardboard box I can’t leave in the storage warehouse. *What if* there is a flood or a fire? *What if* the heavens crack open again and a rogue lightning bolt takes out the big metal container where my possessions are stacked to the roof? On the long dusty day I spend dismantling the Living Museum of Me, I carefully pack a box of treasures that I can’t think of losing and take it home to Yoni’s: letters, photos, diaries, several crumbling music scores that belonged to my grandparents, and some fragments of my father’s life.

- A green *Musician’s Union Diary*, no bigger than the palm of my hand, from the year 1964.
- A Cambridge Holy Bible, not much bigger than the diary, with a zip-up leather binding and the letters *G.C.P* printed in gold on the front.
- A Baby Brownie camera, a little box of hard plastic and corroded silver.
- A silver metal compass with a dented casing and a wobbling blue arrow.
- A leather motorcycle cap, its fur lining moth-eaten and falling apart.
- An empty brown leather glasses case labelled *Optical Prescription – Spectacle Makers Pty Ltd*.
- A collection of black and white photographs, the smallest passport-sized, the largest framed behind glass.
- A hard-back children’s picture book that has begun to warp in the middle.

A few weeks after I lock the gate at Tom’s home for the last time, I pull the box of treasures out from where I’ve stashed it behind the couch in Yoni’s spare room. Opening the plastic bag containing the collection of Glen’s things, I begin pulling them out one by one.

The black binding of the picture book is fading to grey but the title still stands out in bold silver lettering: *THE BOOK OF SPLENDID ‘PLANES*. Even if it hadn’t been in such a worn condition, the book’s title would give away its age. It has been many decades since anyone bothered putting an apostrophe in front of the word ‘planes’. And ‘splendid’ disappeared from the Australian vernacular about the same time as ‘rum cove’. I open a page at random.

A sheep and a cockerel are standing rigid, facing in opposite directions, and a duck is peering out from between the sheep’s front legs. Above their heads hangs the moon-like orb of a hot-air balloon. Behind them a snow-capped mountain rises in the distance. The animals look so surprised to find themselves in Monsieur Montgolfier’s new flying machine.
The image has been reproduced from an old engraving and the heading reads *The Air of Yesterday*. Sounds like poetry to me. Where can I get some of that? A woman squats in the foreground of the picture, her hands hanging loose and empty, her bonnet-framed face lifted to the skies in wonderment. Above the picture on the opposite page it reads *The Descent of the Air Balloon* and by the look of it they have had a crash landing. In the foreground, the squatting woman now tumbles on the grass, bonnet askew, feet waving in the air. Oh foolish, frightened woman.

I find myself wondering whether there is a connection between the masculine derring-do depicted in *The book of splendid ‘planes* and the story I had heard of teenage Glen canoeing down the main street of his home town when a sudden flood turned it into a river. Or the story of his death. A shy man who had pushed himself out into the world. A physical risk-taker.

I’ve had this picture book for many years, stored with other treasured objects – love-letters from Andre, a fragment of pink coral, a piece of the Berlin Wall – in a polished wooden box that my stepfather John made for me when I was a teenager. I can’t remember when the book came to me or how, but I’ve been keeping its existence quiet in case one of my siblings tries to ‘borrow’ it. Ever since my brother claimed ownership of our father’s leather motorcycle jacket not long after I started wearing it to university, I have said nothing about my small collection of Glen’s possessions. Perhaps my siblings have been doing the same with theirs.

On the first page of *The splendid book of ‘planes* there is an inscription written in my grandmother Mavis’s elegant cursive: ‘For Glenthorne Cadle Prior, Xmas 1943’. He would have been about nine years old. Turning over the yellowing pages, staring at the black and white photos of leather-helmeted men in their magnificent flying machines, I realise that this is the first time I have ever looked closely at the book. It has moved with me from house to house, relationship to relationship, and I have occasionally referred to it nostalgically in conversations with friends. In an abstract way, I have always liked the idea that my hands could touch something that Glen’s had touched. In all this time, though, I have never actually read it cover to cover.

Why have I had so little curiosity about this man until recently? He has been a cardboard cut-out father, propped in the wings, waiting for the appropriate cue in the melodrama of my life before he can be dragged out into the light. Or a sentimental treat, perhaps, stored up for a rainy day when I am feeling wistful and want to prolong the feeling. Now I feel wistful for the days when wistfulness seemed like a potentially enjoyable emotional state.
Next I open the green diary from 1964. On the first page is printed a list of the names of the National Executive Committee of the Musicians Union of Great Britain. At the beginning of that year Margot and Glen were still living in London, playing in orchestras together. *Arise ye workers from your slumbers* with your galloping French horns and your rumbling bass clarinets and your angelic harps. So my trumpet-playing father was a union comrade too. Good on him.

Most of the entries in Glen’s writing seem to be about orchestra rehearsals and performances. Messy handwriting. Drunken ant-trails, like mine. Lists of times and initials, shorthand, minimal. No clues there. Some time in the first half of the year I know my parents returned to Australia by boat, Margot retching her way across the oceans with a combination of morning sickness and seasickness.

The date of my birth, 22 August, has two scribbled entries for performances, one at 2 p.m. and one at 8 p.m., and judging from the number of scrawls in the following pages, the week after I was born was the busiest of the whole year for Glen. Poor Margot.

I flip forward to 18 November. It was a Wednesday. There is something written in pencil there, a full sentence rather than the usual lists. I can’t decipher it. *Green something something park up the something something*. I stare and stare at those words, holding them up to the light, trying to make sense of the sentence. Wednesday. What were the orchestra comrades doing, having a picnic at the beach on a Wednesday?

The handwritten entries continue, at last for a while. More times and initials, more rehearsals planned, even a reference to a birthday party Yoni was to go to a couple of weeks later. All the way up to 19 December 1964, when the diary tells me Glen was due to play in a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. Why am I so surprised? Diaries are for planning ahead. Did I think the pages would go blank from that day in November just because he had stopped breathing?

Handel loved the trumpet. He must have. So many exquisite solos and duets for sweet high brass. How many times over the years have I listened to the *Messiah*, this hymn of praise to a man who so many believe will never die? I wonder who played Glen’s parts in the orchestra that night in December 1964 and whether they knew they were playing in the place of a dead man.
Black and White

- A studio photo of Glen in profile, blond short back and sides struggling to escape the Brylcreem, wearing a suit and tie, holding his trumpet to his mouth. Hands slightly blurry from movement, as if he really was playing, not just posing for the picture. One elbow leaning on a raised knee, those long legs covered in baggy pants. Glasses hiding his eyes, staring straight ahead, avoiding the camera's gaze. Face unlined, my nose, my chin. Black suit, white background. Chiarosuro Dad.

- A black and white photo of Margot and Glen standing on a city street. Holding hands. He is a head taller than her and they are leaning in towards each other, their torsos pulled together by an invisible force, like Stan Prior’s magnets. She is wearing a pale cardigan and she's smiling into the camera. He is in a thick roll-neck jumper but he’s not smiling. Serious Dad.

- A newspaper clipping of a man holding five-year-old Yoni in his arms, smiling so broadly the whole shape of his face has changed, disintegrated. Mine does that too when I smile. The doting father, home from a country tour with the state symphony orchestra. Happy Dad.

- A torn black and white photo of Glen leaning forward, eyebrows raised, pretending to sip tea from a thimble-sized teacup, the tiny toy saucer held carefully in his long fingers. Nutty Dad.

- A photo of a group of musicians on a stage, girls in cardigans dancing together in the foreground, a curtain festooned with balloons in the background, an upright piano against the wall, and in the backline of the band a blond head with glasses, a trumpeter. Jazz Dad.

- On the last page of The book of splendid 'planes there is another black and white photo. A boy wearing shorts, long socks and a black cap has climbed a tree. He is staring away from the camera, holding onto a dead branch and leaning back into the sky. Above his cap a dozen 'planes are frozen in a perfect V formation at the edge of the picture. Behind the tree in the distance is a bank of clouds and, by chance or by artifice, the boy looks like he is standing on a thick cushion of cumulus. Beside the photo is printed one word: 'Goodbye'.
Fact versus Fiction

When my best friend Sally turned nine she invited all of her best friends to the movies. For her birthday outing she chose *The Poseidon Adventure*, a film about a cruise ship capsized by a tsunami. We sat in the dark chewing on Fantales and watching the cruise ship passengers partying on New Year’s Eve while the wave hurtled towards them. There was a minister who was questioning his faith in God. There was an elderly Jewish woman who was off to visit her daughter in Israel. And there was a shy bachelor, obsessed with his health.

After the wave hit and the ship turned upside down I stopped eating the sticky lollies and instead clung on tight to the leather elbow rests beside my seat. One by one the characters were picked off by the screenwriters, a different gruesome end for each party guest, but only after each of them had tried to save all the others. The elderly Jewish woman swam to her death. Her husband wasn’t sure he could endure the grief of losing her. At the end of the movie the survivors climbed, blinking, out into the glaring sunshine that poured down on the bottom of the capsized ship. As the theme song played – ‘there’s got be a morning after’ – we all followed Sally, blinking, out into the glare of the cinema foyer.

I couldn’t speak.

For months after Sally’s birthday my nightmares were filled with burning bodies and mass drownings and waves that lurched up out of nowhere and swept me away. They still are.

Six months after the night I packed a suitcase and drove to Yoni’s house, I move out again and into my new home. The suburb where I lived with Tom now feels like a radiation exclusion zone for me. I have found a place across the river, on the other side of town. I throw a house-warming party, inviting all my friends and many of Tom’s relations, and give a speech. There is a long list (of course) of all the people to be thanked. I describe myself as a ship that has gone aground and tell them they have hauled me to safety. I reassure them I am safe now and they don’t need to worry about me any more. That is almost true and they seem happy to hear it. I drink more than three glasses of wine and don’t mind that most of my friends are too busy talking to each other to bother dancing. Talking is good. Silence has never suited me.

After I unpack all the cardboard boxes and set up my new home office, I plug my father’s name into an internet search engine. This is the second time I have tried googling Glen and, once again, three entries came up.
The first entry takes me to a list of the participants in National Music Camp, 1952, including Glenthorne Prior – Cornet. There are other names on the list that I recognise: the first husband of my clarinet teacher; a trombonist who taught my step-brother to play; a double-bass player who was a close friend of my father’s. Names that conjure the smells of cork grease and bamboo reeds, of saliva dripping from tarnished brass bells, of rosin and lip balm and teenage sweat and dusty sheet music. How many of these people are still alive, I wonder, and of those, how many would remember Glen? What stories could they recall about him now and how many of them would be true?

The double-bass player had been in jazz bands with Glen and he and Margot had remained friends after my father’s death. I remember he once described how my father had struggled with the musical freedom that jazz offered, saying that Glen wasn’t ‘loose enough to let it swing’. It is a phrase that has sometimes snuck into my head when I have been feeling rigid with shyness.

The second Google listing takes me through to a website called ‘Find A Grave’. Glen’s name sits there quietly in the middle of the screen while pop-up ads for fee-free bank accounts and video software flash around it.

The third item on the Google list is a website address: Listphile.com A website for lovers of lists. I click through, hoping there might have been a change since the last time I looked. But no – the same words appear.

**World Shark Attack Database: Fatal Shark Attack, Prior.**

**Description**
Glenthorne Prior age 29 was fatally attacked on November 18th, 1964 while swimming to rescue swimmers in trouble out at Fingal Beach, near Tweed Heads.

*Daily Mirror (Sydney), 11/19/1964 edition*

**Date of Attack**
November 18, 1964

**Type of Shark**
Unknown

**Survive**
No

Hands poised over the keyboard, my fingers begin to tingle with a familiar blood-rush. Not true. There was no shark. He drowned. They found his body, eventually. Washed up, days later, further down the coast. Intact, as far as I know.
There was no shark.

Someone made that up. Someone on the Daily Mirror (a journalist maybe, someone like me) decided the story of a father of three who drowned saving the lives of two young people while his wife watched from the shore wasn’t an interesting enough story. So they added a shark for dramatic impact. Then someone took that story and added it to their list of shark stories and now Google was spreading the lies.

There was no shark.

Why am I so angry? Because someone else has been careless with the truth?

‘You make monogamy a good place to be’, Tom said not long before the end of us. ‘I am true to you.’ Perhaps, in his mind, what Tom said was a version of the truth. A story he told himself until he was overtaken by ‘the pretendies’ and had to stop. Perhaps, all along, he had been trying to be something he wasn’t, as I had been with my teeth-gritted refusal to be a shy person.

Tom has just recorded a new collection of songs about a relationship break-up. In one of Tom’s songs the man desperately wants to sleep with someone new, but decides he won’t because he still loves the woman he’s with. Later in the narrative, the woman leaves the man anyway.

A sympathetic female reader might fall a little bit in love with the man who is left by the one he remains faithful to. Or even with that man’s creator. But only if she mistakes fiction for facts.

Sometimes the truth slips between the gaps in the stories we tell about ourselves. Sometimes we push it through the gaps ourselves so we can make better stories. Reshape the characters. Make them more interesting, more heroic, more lovable. More deserving of sympathy. Less likely to be rejected.
Three What Ifs

One morning as I’m eating breakfast in my new kitchen a report comes on the radio about a mathematician who is trying to find a formula to measure the relative danger of waves on surf beaches. It’s for safety reasons, he says. To prevent drownings.

The story reminds me of something I wrote earlier, something about my love of the simple maths of wave sets and how I’ve used it to predict which ones were safe to catch. It reminds me, too, of the mathematical formula for shyness that I had found in the psychology journal.

We humans are so optimistic, I think as I listen to the wave mathematician. We persuade ourselves that if we can find a way to quantify things, or to understand exactly how they work, we can control them. Or at least control their effects. That’s what I wrote at the very beginning of this story, isn’t it?

What if Glen had been able to mathematically predict the danger of the waves at that surf beach? Would he have stopped himself entering the water? Would he not have tried to save those people from drowning?

What if I had thought for a moment about the simple mathematics of Tom’s past relationships; twice married, twice divorced, both times after he left her? Would I have tried to stop myself falling in love with him?

What if there was a mathematical formula that could prove to us that for every moment, every hour, every year of intense happiness we experience in our lives, we will experience an equally intense period of misery? Would we try to avoid happiness?
Stranger Than Fiction

I have been asked to perform a song cycle in an art gallery. The song cycle is called Sea Chronicles – five songs for soprano and string quartet and all the musical texts in the song cycle are about the sea.

The third song is based on a poem written by an Australian arts journalist named Elizabeth Riddell. The poem is called 'Life Saver' and in this song I have to sing the words

*He is drowned, the tall one.*

*Thin brother Death has him by the throat*

*On the sand, in the sun.*

Learning this song cycle is proving to be quite difficult. A familiar lump swells in my throat every time I try to practice, getting in the way of the music. But it will be okay on the day. Professional Sian will see to that.
The Final Interview

You tell an interesting tale here but I’m afraid my research has revealed some gaps in your story. You’ve taken a hole-punch to the truth. You call this ‘non-fiction’ but there are omissions and exaggerations. Shall we begin with your trip to Europe in 1987? You described it as ‘six months of solo backpacking’ but that’s not strictly accurate, is it?

(Blushes) You’re right. I have left something out. Maybe I wanted everyone to think I was braver than I was. Too embarrassed to admit that I needed a buffer for my fears. For the first month of that trip I was actually with Margot, staying in a university town in northern Italy where she was working. Rehearsing my Italian phrases. Gathering my courage. Sitting alone in cafes in the town square drinking too much coffee and eating too much everything. Hovering at the back of a crowded room in a thirteenth century building as a bunch of Italian university students planned an anti-nuclear campaign. Wanting to be part of it but unable to join in. Missing Andre. Practising for being lonely. But when I sat down to write about my memories of that trip, that’s not the stuff I remembered. I remembered what happened when I was travelling alone. When I was missing a layer of skin. If those memories are true, then the rest of that story was true.

There’s another omission here. Why did you stop working in radio? You told us how much you loved being a presenter, and then later you told us all about the print articles you were writing, but what happened in between? Why did a radio host suddenly become a newspaper columnist?

(Pauses) I got sacked. They don’t call it that, they call it a ‘non-renewal of contract’, but effectively you’ve been sacked. I still don’t know why. The reason I was given was that my program wasn’t attracting high enough ratings. The boss had just been reassuring me that as long as they were climbing steadily (and they were) my position was safe. Then suddenly he changed his mind and I was out. Some of my friends favoured a conspiracy theory: too many strong opinions on too many awkward topics, too openly expressed. Trying too hard to be helpful, maybe. Personally I doubt it. But perhaps the reason I didn’t mention it earlier was because, deep down, I’ve always wondered if someone ‘upstairs’ at the radio station could hear my whispering what ifs. Maybe someone saw through the ‘illusion of competence’ and decided that Shy Sian couldn’t carry it off. Losing that job was the biggest rejection I had ever encountered. It nearly sank me. It certainly helped to sink the relationship I was in at the time. I was in love with radio and radio no longer wanted
me. It was my first, maybe my only, rehearsal for dealing with Tom’s rejection. One minute you’re in favour, the next minute you’re not. Inexplicable.

I’m sorry to have taken you back to such a painful episode in your past. Here, have a glass of water. Do you need a little break? No? Great, then we’ll continue. Now you implied that Tom’s rejection came as a complete shock to you but surely there must have been signs before that night? You had recently been overseas together having a holiday by the sea. What happened on that trip?

(Pauses again, longer this time) There was a small earthquake. I was in the shower. Open-air shower. Frangipani flowers hanging above my head. Feet covered with shampoo suds. Cold tap on for the sunburn. The door of the bathroom was open and I could see, through the bedroom window, dozens of tiny fishing boats skimming across the sea, on their way home. I wanted to be on one of them. When I came out of the bathroom Tom was lying on the bed reading. His feet looked so beautiful there on the white sheets. He said, ‘I wonder if we should be worried.’

‘About what?’ I replied.

‘About the earthquake..

‘What earthquake?’ I said.

‘The one that just happened!’

But I hadn’t felt it. I had no idea. If he could feel it, why hadn’t I felt it?

I see what you’re doing there. Not exactly an original metaphor but I get what you’re trying to say. I’m not convinced, though. No tremors even, on that trip? Would you mind if I asked you to consult the records in your private journal for this one?

I’m sorry but I don’t have to do everything you tell me to do. I don’t want to consult that journal. I’m not ready. I do want to talk about fiction and non-fiction, though. Tom mostly wrote fiction. That’s what he claimed, that his songs were not true stories but made-up stories about made-up characters. But I assumed what he said to me about us was fact. And when someone you love tells you something as fact, you have to believe them, don’t you? Because once you stop believing them the whole thing can unravel. So when he wrote a song about a guy who was planning to fuck dozens of women once he’d broken up with his girlfriend and had stopped seeing her image in his mirror, I had to believe him when he said it was fiction. Tom knew how frightening it was for me when he showed me those songs. Maybe part of me wondered if it was predictive non-fiction. But what should I have
done? Checked his phone messages? Spied on his emails? Asked his friends if he was lying to me? I would have gone mad. He had told me he was true to me. ‘You make monogamy a good place to be.’ I just had to keep treading water and hoping the fear would pass. I was so used to condemning my own anxieties as irrational, so used to being ashamed of my fears, maybe I didn’t allow myself to listen to them. I still don’t know if I was a loyal lover or a naïve fool. Probably both.

What about that party you described for us at the very beginning of this whole saga, the one where you had a panic attack and drove home without saying goodbye to anyone. You told us you couldn’t find Tom in the crowd. You weren’t even sure if he was still there. You were so caught up with trying to get to the bottom of this shyness thing, you never stopped to ask yourself – where was he that night? Why were you alone? And if, as you imply, you thought Tom was the ‘solution’ to your shyness, why were you having a panic attack at a party you were meant to be attending with him?

That’s a triple-barrelled question, you realise. Bad interview technique. You should brush up. Journalism 101. Your interviewee never knows which question you want them to answer. I’m afraid my answer to all three questions is the same. I don’t know. Maybe Tom was avoiding me already. On the look-out for someone else. Already with someone else. Maybe my dread that night wasn’t about the strangers at the party after all, but about Tom. Sometimes an adult’s anxiety can be prescient rather than neurotic. Wouldn’t that be ironic? I start writing a book about social anxiety because of a panic attack that was actually caused by the imminent end of a love affair. Serious mis-self-diagnosis. That’s what happens when you let amateurs try and do the work of professionals.

There’s another omission I need to ask you about. You tell us Tom is famous, so everyone is probably wondering who he is, but you don’t tell us his real name. Why so coy?

Because if you write a story that happens to have a famous person in it, everyone thinks you’ve written a story about a famous person. This isn’t a story about Tom. This is a story about you and I and about shyness. Anyone can find out who Tom is if they want to, but I’m hoping they’ll read the book first and realise that although every famous person is different, fame itself doesn’t change much. It always attracts the same kind of prurient and obsessive behaviour. It always draws attention towards itself and away from everything else. It makes potentially more interesting things fade into invisibility. And fame makes
the famous feel like gods. Perhaps it's inevitable. All that relentless positive reinforcement. It's toxic.

Let's move on to the topic of drugs. No doubt some readers will have noticed that the two men you've fallen for hardest, Andre and Tom, both had drug issues. Do you see a pattern there? Something about your helpfulness?

I didn't know they were using drugs when I fell in love with them. Call me naive, but it took me ages to figure out what was going on, in both cases. I didn't set out to rescue them. But maybe there was something about their shameful secrets that drew me closer to them. Like Stan Prior's magnets. Centripetal and centrifugal forces. Shame seeks out shame, anxiety seeks out anxiety. I certainly thought, for a while at least, that I could rescue Andre. I don't think I ever imagined Tom needed rescuing.

Did you think he could rescue you?

What do you mean?

You said that you were in a well and he sent down a rope ladder. Had you been waiting all along for some handsome prince to rescue you from your shyness? And if so, how does that fit with your views about women and the disempowering effect of the Male Gaze? It's Feminism 101, surely, that women don't need the prince's kiss to deliver them agency?

Touché. No flies on you.

And speaking of rescuing, I can't help wondering what impact the manner of your father's death might have on all this. The man who died rescuing people. Other people, not you. The hero who disappeared from view. The unreachable, unattainable male.

Didn't I tell you that I was an amateur with this stuff? Which I guess makes you one too. You're just better at bluffing. I don't know why, after all those years of being relatively disinterested in him, now just thinking about Glen turns me to liquid. Maybe I've been hanging around on surf beaches my whole life waiting for him to reappear. Waiting for a cold wet hug from a guy who was never loose enough to let it swing. Waiting for someone who knew me because I was just like him. Someone who loved me because he had to, because it was biologically predetermined, like our shyness.
But you didn’t wait for rescue from your shyness, did you? You’ve had yourself on an intermittent program of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for decades, trying to eradicate these fears. Lists, immersions, professional personas, helpfulness, exposure therapy, counsellors, you’ve tried all sorts of strategies. Your faith in CBT is quite touching. Cherchez la mere, again. And after the break-up you pushed yourself even harder, didn’t you? Approached new friends. Got yourself back on the radio. Even writing this book could be seen as a form of self-prescribed extreme exposure therapy. Tell everyone everything about yourself and risk their negative evaluation. Madness.

I haven’t told them everything. That would be extremely tedious.

Were you hoping that Tom might provide you with a permanent shortcut out of your shyness?

I usually felt less shy when I was with him. Something about being bathed in his positive regard. Tom is a man who once said to me ‘I like who I am when I’m with you’. Maybe, like you and I, there were always several different versions of him and one of them was always going to leave me. While Tom and I were emailing each other during those first six months, I constructed a version of him based on what he wrote to me and what I’d read of his published writing, a version that fitted what Shy Sian needed. I thought what we had was romantic love. I thought we were a poem. In the end, though, we were just a string of platitudes.

(Silence)

The other day I heard an anthropologist on the radio saying that what we call romantic love is nothing more than a ‘longing for association’. The social scientists always strip the poetry away, don’t they? Maybe that’s why I never wanted to be a psychologist. If they’re right about that, you could say that I longed for someone like Tom so I imagined him into being. He was always a fantasy figure. So often silent. So often absent. If we’re going to continue this amateur psychologising, I’d say that I projected onto him a whole lot of qualities he never had. Filled in the gaps with whatever suited me. And there’s something more I need to say about love. You’re not going to like this. It will make you squirm. The object of my love may have been imaginary but the love was real. It was the strongest
thing I’d ever felt, stronger than my shyness. No wonder I didn’t want to let it go. It was just misdirected.

*(Not squirming but sceptical)* How can you be in love with someone for ten years who was only ever ‘imaginary’, as you put it?

Because any evidence that didn’t fit my fantasy was immediately dismissed. The version of Tom that I fell in love with had been crafted in text long before the first time we kissed. But our textual versions of ourselves can only ever be partial versions of ourselves – personas – just like you and me. And everything that happened after we met, I sculpted and reshaped to fit the imaginary version. When Tom was cool or dismissive with me, when he flirted with other women in my presence, when he lied to me about fucking those other women, I edited out the evidence that didn’t fit with my fantasy. Because that perfect, imaginary version of him was my safety zone, the place where I believed I was accepted and loved for who I was, in spite of this shy disfigurement. You remember how sometimes I confided in Margot about how difficult I found it dealing with Tom’s frequent long absences, and with the way he always put work before everything else? And how she once told me ‘He’s just like your father, Glen’s work always came first, it’s a kind of deep selfishness’. I didn’t want to hear those words. I edited them out too. I didn’t want anything to topple the giant heroic statues I had made of both those men. But I never really knew Tom. I imagined a depth of intimacy that didn’t exist, a strength of loyalty that was never there, a level of respect that was impossible. Margot knew Tom would leave me. She had even saved up some money to help me out when (not if) it happened. There’s no way she could have warned me, though, is there?

No way at all. But she’s pretty smart, our mother. Interesting, how you used the word ‘disfigurement’ back there to describe your shyness. There’s a psychological condition I’ve been reading about called ‘body identity integrity disorder’. People with this condition sometimes try to hack off one of their own perfectly normal, functioning limbs because they are convinced that limb doesn’t belong to them. They believe it’s an interloper and quite possibly dangerous to them. Perhaps shyness has been for you like one of those unwanted limbs. It’s a perfectly normal, natural part of your identity that you’ve been unable to acknowledge belongs to you, and you’ve been trying to remove it for decades.

That’s a good theory.
So maybe you can give that up now, that self-mutilation thing? And while you're at it, you could also give up that looking-for-a-shortcut thing with dangerous imaginary men. Sorry, I don't mean to turn this into a counselling session, but ever since I can remember you've been sandwiched between these two fears – fear of people and fear of loneliness. Leave me alone, don't leave me. Maybe you can stop waiting to be rescued and try a bit of solitude for a change. It won't kill you, you know.

I overheard a conversation on a train recently. There was a woman sitting in front of me talking to her friend on a mobile – practically everyone on that train was doing something with their phones – and at one point she said to him 'So what is your strategy for feeling safe with other people?' It sounded like a good question to me. I wrote it down in my phone. Then I thought about it some more. Maybe what we need is not just a strategy for how to feel safe with other people, but for how to feel safe without other people. We're so afraid of loneliness. Sometimes the fantasy of romantic love can offer us respite, or a voice on the radio. But it's always there, waiting for us, looking back at us from the mirror when all we can see is a reflection of ourselves, alone.

I have one last question for you. Why are you so down on helpfulness? Maybe it's not such a bad thing, in spite of your hostility towards poor little Beth March.

I do like to help. It's nature and nurture. It's in the genes and it's been modelled for me by most of my elders, just like shyness. And it's too late, isn't it? I can't get rid of either of them. Shyness belongs to me; I am affiliated with it. And I'm still a compulsive improver.

That old list of ours, Things Wrong With The World, hasn't exactly shrunk in the last couple of decades. The world could still do with some improvement. In spite of your reservations, maybe this could be a self-help book after all, for other shy people. But you and I could give ourselves a break now and put that helpfulness energy elsewhere instead of focussing it on ourselves. I'm a bit sick of us. In fact, here's an idea. Maybe we could stop thinking of ourselves as two separate personas, at least one of who is in constant need of improvement, and get together. You and I could just be me.

Or me. Sure. It's worth a try. (Pause) You remember our grandmother Peg on the tandem bicycle with her octogenarian boyfriend?

Of course.
So. *(Pause)* You know we'll probably do it again, don’t you?

What?

That longing for association thing.

*(Silence) (Smiles indulgently)*
Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety
Three Possible Definitions

My favourite word in the English language is *limpid*:

- Marked by transparency.
- Clear and simple in style.
- Absolutely serene and untroubled.
Brahms’ Clarinet Sonata

There on the shining timber stage is a black music stand all spiked and waiting. Waiting for the dapper man with the ripple of silver keys in his hands to lick the sliver of bamboo and flex his elbows.

As if by magic he begins playing at precisely the same millisecond the pianist begins playing and suddenly the spike and the dapperness are gone and it’s all heart.

It’s all honeyed phrases spiralling into the hall and through your body and into the past when you knew these phrases better than you’ve known any music since, phrases that took hours of mingled pleasure and resentment as you bit down on the reed and ignored the sunny afternoon outside so you could make the honey flow.

Back then there were the Saturday morning clarinet lessons and the teacher with the chic bob who stood beside you singing the honeyed phrases and telling you about the sadness of Brahms and about this, one of the last chamber pieces Brahms ever composed, at the exhausted end of the Romantic era. The last flare of music from the saddest of men in that era of mannered sadness.

Telling you about Brahms and his sadness, willing you to understand and to make the understanding into honey, and part of you knew what she meant, but most of you didn’t really know, and that unknowing part knew that you would have to wait, that you would only truly know when you’d had the sadness too.

And there on the shining timber stage, just behind the dapper swaying clarinettist, sits an invisible man, a ghost man, a man called Tom who just one night ago in this very same hall breathed this very same air and sang his ghost songs to a crowd just like this one. Except you weren’t there. You’ll never be there. Not any more.

And as the clarinet sings the sadness of Brahms into that very same air, you remember the last time you played this music to an audience, just the three of them, seated in a row behind a long table, heads down, scribbling into their notebooks just as you’re scribbling in this notebook now.

Three decades ago you played them the honey and when you had finished the audience of examiners looked up and smiled their widest smiles and said – What next?

You turned the page to the next piece, another sonata, and nodded to your pianist. And just as you were about to play, one of the three audience members held up her hand and said – No. You can’t. Not this one. It’s not permitted. It’s not on The Syllabus.

And all the lonely sunny afternoons spent in front of the spiky music stand suddenly froze into One Big Mistake. It’s the wrong music.
It’s the best, most brilliant, most difficult music you’ve ever learnt. It’s music that would make this audience of three sit back in their chairs and stare in wonder. But it’s the wrong music. Not this one. You can’t.

And was it in that moment that you decided? Was it in front of the spiky music stand three decades ago that you first knew there was a choice?

That you could make a big mistake, and you could give in to the fear and the sadness, and you could give up.

Or you could put down your clarinet, walk out into the hallway where all the other trembling clarinettists were sucking on their bamboo reeds and waiting to take their turn in front of the Examiners. You could go up to each of those clarinettists and say – What music do you have?

That you could grab something that looked playable and walk back into the room and pick up your clarinet and sight read the piece note perfectly so that the audience of three sat back in their chairs and stared in wonder.

That you could beat the fear and the sadness.

And as the dapper clarinettist flexes and sways there on the timber stage through the final movement of the Brahms sonata, the ghost man fades from view. You know that the man who gave up on the conversation with you, who taught you the most about the fear and the sadness, a lesson that can never be unlearnt, that that man is truly nothing more than a ghost now.

And as the dapper clarinettist plays the last phrase and the silence becomes the honey, you look up from scribbling in your notebook, put down your pen, sit back in your chair and stare in wonder.
References: Creative Work

3. de Beauvoir, S 1979, The second sex, Penguin, Great Britain.
EXEGESIS
INTRODUCTION

Situating the research

This inquiry began with a series of questions: about myself, about shyness, and about writing shyness. What is shyness? How has my shyness—and my idea of myself as a shy person—influenced the narrative of my life? How has my perception of shyness been shaped by the wider cultural discourse surrounding this particular temperament trait? And how might the memoir form produce knowledge about shyness/social anxiety?

The creative text, a memoir entitled 'The Shyness Lists', employs life writing as a strategy for understanding and coming to terms with the 'shy self'. Together, the two components of this work (memoir and exegesis) aim to demonstrate the uses of memoir as a tool for self-understanding, for both the writer and the reader. The creative project is an autoethnographic inquiry into the causes and effects of self-identifying as a shy person. Paul John Eakin (2004) writes: 'As a discourse in identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in day out, autobiography structures our living' (p. 122). This project traces—and challenges—the discourse in identity that I have engaged in over the past five decades, both with myself and with others, as I have constructed my 'shy self'. In so doing, it demonstrates the potential uses of memoirs as self-help 'manuals' for those readers who are interested in exploring their own identity discourse.

One of the repeated motifs in the creative work is the mirror: my fraught relationship with my own image in the mirror; the camera's role as a 'mirror with a memory'; and at a deeper level, the memoir itself as a mirror in which I try to examine myself (or selves) and in which my reflected image will be seen/read by an invisible imagined readership. As a tool of inquiry, autoethnography can also be seen as a kind of mirror in which the researcher examines her self, describing and reflecting upon her personal experience in order to situate that experience within the broader culture. As a strategy for exploring the lived experience of shyness, and thereby demonstrating the possible affordances of memoir, the idea of 'mirroring' that lived experience in text has proven to be a useful approach in choosing the voices, forms and narrative structures employed in the memoir; in aligning form with intended function.
Background: developing my practice

Shyness has troubled me all my life. As author Alistair MacLeod has said, ‘There is a theory that writers write about what worries them’ (Collinge & Sohier 2003). In order to explore my troubled relationship with shyness I wrote an essay on this topic for the Meanjin literary magazine (Prior 2009). Still, though, my curiosity had not been fully satisfied, and I decided to keep writing about it.

One of my aims in embarking upon a PhD in Creative Writing was to develop my professional and creative practice by writing a book-length work of non-fiction. The project was initially conceived as an informative non-fiction book that would incorporate elements of life writing, but would potentially fit most comfortably within the commercial publishing genre of informative self-help books. At the beginning of the research phase I employed the research skills I had gained in my professional life as a journalist, contacting and seeking advice from experts and institutional representatives working in the field of social anxiety, searching library databases for texts with relevant titles, and conducting internet searches for relevant newspaper and journal articles. In this way I gradually formed a more comprehensive understanding of the causes and effects of shyness/social anxiety.

Simply re-presenting and/or re-contextualising the expert information I gathered in this way, however, would not have significantly challenged my practice as a writer. In order to move beyond those basic journalistic approaches to research and writing, testify to the lived experience of shyness, and transform my writing practice, it became clear that I needed to experiment more with elements of the autobiographical form and challenge my preconceptions about the limits of the self-help genre.

As a journalist I had been writing for a living for two decades. However the formulaic nature of the journalist’s craft necessarily imposes limitations on how to deal with content: the traditionally distanced, observational positioning of the writer; the necessity to strive for balance in the opinions, information and anecdotes related in the articles; the requirement to adopt and adapt to a publication’s ‘house style’. In writing about shyness/social anxiety I wanted to escape those limitations, to reduce the distance and ignore the need for balance, and instead explore new ways of combining elements of style.

---

1. In writing ‘The Shyness Lists’ I have used excerpts from a two interviews I conducted with psychologists about shyness/social anxiety and temperament theory (Rapee R 2009; Prior M 2009). These interviews were conducted as part of the research for a separate and earlier writing project for Meanjin literary magazine (Prior S 2009). As both interviews were recorded before I embarked on this doctoral project I was advised by Deputy Chair of the RMIT College Human Ethics Advisory Network in the College of Design and Social Context (DSC) that they were considered ‘pre-existing data’.
I wanted to move beyond being a gatherer of facts and to evolve as a storyteller. As Robin Hemley observes in *A field guide for immersion writing* (2012), 'While the journalist at least attempts objectivity, there’s no such constraint upon the memoirist' (p. 48). In pursuing this research project I wanted to grant myself permission to explore without knowing precisely where I would end up: to be tentative, speculative, meditative and reflective, rather than definitive and authoritative; to privilege *pathos* and *ethos* over *logos*. I wanted to challenge myself to forge a new form, to find new voices, and in doing so to find a new synergy between form and content.

Over the course of the inquiry, therefore, new research questions emerged as the creative project evolved from an informative book about shyness to an immersive memoir with elements of the self-help genre, weaving together narrative and non-narrative knowledge, and employing poly-vocal forms and narrative suspense to convey key features of the lived experience of shyness.

*On memoir*

According to Smith and Watson (2010), memoir is a form of life narrative (or life writing) in which ‘the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation’ (p.1). It is a form of life writing distinguished from the more traditional narrative mode of autobiography ‘by density of image and self-reflexivity about the writing process’ (p. 4).

G. Thomas Couser (2012) contends that ‘as a non-fiction genre, memoir depicts the lives of real, not imagined, individuals’ (p. 15). The term ‘memoir’ derives from the French word for memory, ‘memoire’. Thus, Couser contends, ‘calling a narrative about yourself a memoir usually signals that it is based primarily on memory, a notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty’ (p. 19). This characteristic unreliability is acknowledged by William Zinsser (1994) in his description of memoir as ‘the art of inventing the truth’ (p. 99). Zinsser argues that ‘no other non-fiction form goes so deeply to the roots of personal experience – to all the drama and humor and unexpectedness of life’ (p. 98). What gives memoir its power is that ‘unlike autobiography, which spans an entire life, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it’ (p. 99). Whilst my memoir contains autobiographical episodes that span from soon after my birth to the ‘present’ (i.e. when I finished the book) it omits any episodes that do not relate in some way to the over-arching theme of shyness.
To write a good memoir, Zinsser contends, 'you must become the editor of your own life, imposing on an untidy sprawl of half-remembered events a narrative shape and an organising idea' (p. 99). In 'The Shyness Lists', the organising idea behind the memoir was to come to a better understanding of a life lived with, and in many ways defined by, social anxiety. The narrative shape, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, was determined by the challenge of artfully communicating how it feels to be shy: over moments, years and decades.

For Paul John Eakin (1999) the formal distinctions between memoir and autobiography are less interesting than the function they have in common – to remind us that self, memory, identity and the body are all inextricably linked:

we are all becoming different persons all the time, we are not what we were; self and memory are emergent, in process, constantly evolving, and both are grounded in the body and the body image. Responding to the flux of self-experience, we instinctively gravitate to identity-supporting structures: the notion of identity as continuous over time, and the use of autobiographical discourse to record its history (p. 20).

This notion of an emergent identity 'grounded in the body and the body image' proved to be central to the self-reflexive inquiry I engaged in whilst writing the memoir 'The Shyness Lists'.

The current popularity of memoir is situated within a contemporary artistic movement described by David Shields (2010) as 'reality hunger'. Shields identifies 'self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography' as key components of this movement (p. 5). In a chapter of his book Reality hunger (2010) entitled 'autobio', Shields asks of autobiography, 'To what degree is this a solipsistic enterprise?... To what degree can solipsism gain access to the world?' (p. 153). In relation to this research project I have interpreted Shields' questions to mean: to what degree can self-reflexive life writing offer writers and readers insights into the way individuals and societies function? Further, to what degree can this self-reflexive life writing project illuminate for readers the way socially anxious people might view the world around them? These are some of the questions I have endeavoured to answer in this 'writing shyness' inquiry.

The memoir form has traditionally consisted of a range of sub-genres, summarised by Couser (2012) as conversion narrative, apology, confession, bildungsroman (or coming of age narrative), and testimony. However as Couser acknowledges, literary genres are no longer thought of as pure, stable, discrete entities: 'Instead, genres are seen as hybrid, dynamic, malleable and culture-bound' (p. 34). 'The Shyness Lists' evolved to incorporate
elements of all five of Couser’s sub-genres, as well as borrowing elements from other literary forms and genres, thus demonstrating the fluid, hybrid nature of contemporary life writing.

In *A field guide for immersion writing* (2012), Robin Hemley identifies a further sub-genre: the immersion memoir. According to Hemley, the immersion memoirist:

> takes on some outward task or journey in order to put his/her life in perspective... the immersion memoirist is interested in self-revelation or evaluation... The immersion memoirist is interested primarily in understanding the Self... (p. 11)

The inquiry into the ‘self’ that unfolded during the writing of *The Shyness Lists* employed immersion as method, including an immersion in memories, as well as research forays and dialogues with experts and intimates. It has been dominated by the drive towards self-revelation and self-evaluation. Given that evaluation and self-revelation have both been identified by psychologists as particularly anxiety-inducing dynamics for self-identified shy people, the inquiry has therefore involved a second layer of immersion in some of this author’s deepest fears.

Hemley identifies several different categories of immersion memoir, and *The Shyness Lists* evolved to incorporate elements of at least two of those categories. The *investigation* form of the immersion memoir is one in which the memoirist explores a personal obsession, producing a ‘detective story’ in which:

> (it is) the memoirist’s unenviable tasks to sift through the crimes of the past and try to assign culpability. Often the blame rests on the memoirist’s own shoulders, or if not blame exactly, at least a kind of personal responsibility for the past that he or she has not been able to face until now (p. 49).

This memoir has been written in a confessional style and the inquiry conducted during the writing of *The Shyness Lists* has involved an attempt to identify what responsibility can be assigned to my anxieties – and perhaps more importantly, to my attitude towards my anxieties – for determining the narrative trajectory of my life. I repeatedly ask myself: what blame can be attached to my shyness for the events and encounters (or absence of events and encounters) in my life that I now regret? And how might I survive my sudden immersion in the deepest fear that haunts most shy people?

Patricia Foster (2004) contends that contemporary memoir offers an alternative to the previously dominant narrative of progress:
Although the prevailing myth of the late twentieth century is one of social, economic and political progress, the current memoir suggests a countermyth of private shame and disgrace, a narrative of breakdown and recovery, a spiritual longing that goes unfulfilled (p. 83).

The Shyness Lists’ certainly fits within this definition of a contemporary countermyth suggested by memoir, although in this instance I would substitute for Foster’s notion of ‘spiritual longing’ a term that sits more comfortably within the discourse of the social sciences: a longing for self-efficacy and self-actualisation. This memoir traces an individual’s lifelong quest to become the person she thinks she could – and should – be, in the light of one troubling temperament trait.

Philip Lopate (1995) contends that the dynamism in personal narrative non-fiction texts comes from ‘the need to work out some problem, especially a problem that is not easily resolved’ (p. 178). The Shyness Lists’ could be described as ‘an investigation into the problem of me’: more specifically, why I have been so obsessed with, and judgmental towards, my (self-assigned) identity as a shy person, and why I have been so anxious for so long.

It could also, however, be described as a quest memoir. According to Hemley, ‘A quest suggests a journey, but there certainly are quests that are not so much about travel as about personal goals’ (p. 50). The quest behind this inquiry was to write about shyness in order to understand the influence of my shy temperament on the ways in which I have constructed a particular narrative understanding of my life and, ideally, to gain more of a sense of control over that narrative in the future.

**Understanding shyness**

Because the focus of the creative work was to write about an individual life through the prism of shyness/social anxiety, I first had to develop an understanding of what these terms are understood to mean. In the initial research phase of the project my sites of inquiry included three different areas: firstly, a range of disciplines within the social sciences that directly or indirectly addressed the causes, manifestations and treatment of shyness/social anxiety, including psychology, sociology and anthropology, and several disciplines that cross over with the humanities, such as cultural studies and linguistics; secondly, narrative non-fiction and memoir studies; and thirdly, the field of creative practice research.
As Saunders and Chester have noted (2008), shyness is a difficult term to define with precision or unanimity. The term’s history, definitions and synonyms have been discussed in the creative work. I will use the term shyness in this exegesis to refer to a temperament trait that exists on the withdrawal end of the approach–withdrawal spectrum (Prior M 2009, pers. comm., 14 March) and that, for most individuals, entails inhibited social behaviour, discomfiting self-consciousness, and apprehension about being negatively evaluated in social situations (Saunders & Chester 2008; Rapee & Heimberg 1997). Social anxiety is the form of anxiety commonly suffered by people on the low to middle range of the shyness continuum, with social phobia being the term used to describe the middle to upper end of the continuum (Rapee & Heimberg 1997).

My understanding of shyness has also been informed by the work of a number of sociologists, including the pioneer of self-presentation theory Erving Goffman (1959), Monica Whitty and Adrian Carr (2006) who wrote about the ways shy individuals use online dating sites to overcome their inhibitions, and Susie Scott (2007) who contends that a so-called ‘illusion of (social) competence’ has led to the stigmatisation of shy people. The work of cultural studies academic Elspeth Probyn (2005) and evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin (1872) has informed my understanding of the role of affects such as shame and fear in the emotional lives of shy people, and the research of evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar (1996) and anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (in Coupland 2001) furthered my understanding of the potential value to shy people of embracing small talk in social interactions.

The creative work has also been informed by a range of non-academic and ‘genre’ texts, including self-help books about small talk (Fine 2005) and blushing (Edelman 1990), journalistic articles and essays about shyness, and non-fiction books that in some way addressed the subject of shyness, including Christopher Lane’s ‘expose’ of the over-prescription of pharmaceuticals for social anxiety (2007). The influence of the work of many of these writers, and of the social scientists mentioned above, will have been apparent to readers of the creative work ‘The Shyness Lists’. The process by which I chose to focus on these texts will be further discussed later in this Introduction.

In order to familiarise myself with how others had ‘written shyness’ in the past, my inquiry has involved the close reading of a number of autobiographical works whose narrators clearly identify themselves as shy, including memoirs by Janet Frame (1987), Renee Fleming (2004), Kate Holden (2005) and Helen Rivas-Rose (2010). Since ‘The Shyness Lists’ also addresses the intersection of discomfort, grief, loss and anxiety, I have
also studied a number of memoirs whose authors were exploring the experience of discomfort, grief, loss and/or anxiety, including works by Joan Didion (2005), Siri Hustvedt (2010) and Jonathan Franzen (2006).

Further, as this project sits within the field of studies of life writing/memoir, the research has involved reading a wide range of texts that address writing the ‘self’; the role of the first person narrator in non-fiction; the uneasy situation of the ‘self-in-text’ as character, performer and/or persona; the ‘uses’ of memoir; and the role of the body in the construction of narrative identity.

**Autoethnographic inquiry**

In gathering together a mix of factual and personal anecdotal material during the research and writing process, I have adopted an autoethnographic approach to the inquiry. Carolyn Ellis (2004) describes autoethnography as ‘research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political’ (p. xix). In 2011, Ellis and her co-authors further define autoethnography as seeking to ‘describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)’, and treating research as a ‘socially-conscious act’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, section 1). In telling a personal story about living with a shy temperament, part of the aim of this inquiry was to connect my personal experience with the broader cultural understandings of, and change some of the perceptions around, shyness/social anxiety.

Smith and Watson (2010) note that ‘autoethnographic projects may... be a blend of scholarly criticism and first-person testimony’ (p. 157). In writing ‘The Shyness Lists’ I combined a critical engagement with other writers and theorists on shyness/social anxiety and a ‘poetic engagement with metaphors’ of shyness in telling my own stories (Smith & Watson 2010, p. 157). By explaining the nature of shyness in accessible language, ‘confessing’ to having felt ashamed of and confused by my own shyness, and examining some of its more positive attributes, I hoped to clarify, de-mystify and positively re-frame this temperament trait for my readers, in particular those who might share these feelings of shame and/or confusion. Writing this text has been a socially conscious act to try to put memoir to use by testifying to the lived experience of shyness.

According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), writing personal stories makes ‘witnessing’ possible – the ability for participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better
testify on behalf of an event, problem or experience (section 4.2). It is my hope that by bearing witness to social anxiety in ‘The Shyness Lists’, I can potentially broaden the cultural understanding of this experience, which in turn could lead to more empathetic responses to self-identified shy individuals in social situations, a broader range of coping strategies for shy/socially anxious individuals, and a greater awareness of the positive contributions shy individuals can make to their communities and cultures.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) remind us that conventional ways of doing research can fail to acknowledge that ‘different minds of people possess different assumptions about the world’, stemming from race, gender, age, ability, class, education or religion (section 1). Employing an autoethnographic approach to the research and writing of this project has involved an attempt to consciously acknowledge and reflect within the creative work on the impact of my race, gender, age, class and (lack of) religious belief on my experience and understanding of shyness/social anxiety. For example, several chapters in the memoir reference the influence of the scientific method on my upbringing, the reliance on empirical evidence in the way members of my nuclear family have approached ‘mysteries’, and the ways in which a lack of religious faith may have influenced my shyness when I was a child. In another chapter I relate the episodes during which, as a teenage schoolgirl, I came to understand that I belonged to a particular class, race and nationality, and that my physical appearance was somewhat androgynous. And in a later chapter I reflect on the impact of my gender and my feminist beliefs on my desire to rid myself of shyness.

Ellingson and Ellis (2008) make a distinction between analytic autoethnography and evocative ethnography:

Analytic autoethnographers focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena, whereas evocative autoethnographers focus on narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses (p. 445).

Although some chapters of ‘The Shyness Lists’ address theoretical explanations proposed by social scientists and journalists about the causes, definitions, roles, stigmatisation and pathologisation of shyness/social anxiety within the broader social realm, the inquiry that produced this creative work sits more comfortably within the evocative ethnography category, as defined by Ellingson and Ellis. By posing a range of questions within the creative text, and then attempting to answer them by describing and reflecting upon my personal experiences, I have sought to open up a conversation about shyness/social anxiety and evoke empathic emotional responses from my imagined readers. It has been
both a conscious and an intuitive effort to impose meaningful order on those particular personal experiences.

In relation to the research process, I have employed an autobiographical method that has been described by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) in these terms:

an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences... these experiences are assembled using hindsight. In writing, the author also may interview others as well as consult with texts like photographs, journals, and recordings to help with recall (section 2).

In researching and writing 'The Shyness Lists' I consulted photos, diaries, letters, recordings and emails, and spoke informally with friends and family members. I did this in order to both prompt and verify my memories, and in the hope of generating a series of personal epiphanies which I could then write about in the memoir. In this way I employed writing as a way of knowing; thinking and remembering as ways of making.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) identify the importance of identified epiphanies in this style of autobiographical writing. These are:

remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience and events after which life does not seem quite the same (section 2).

In 'The Shyness Lists' I trace a series of key moments (including emotional 'crises') during the research for, and writing of, the book; moments where I reached a better understanding of my own identity formation and the impact of a shy temperament on my life. Tracing these moments of illumination during the research was a key part of the self-reflexive creative process through which the memoir was produced.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) further contend that scholars employ ethnography as a way of

producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (section 1).

My research, and my personal experience, revealed that social anxiety and its clinical extreme, social phobia, can induce fear and shame in those who experience them, emotions that can in turn lead to silence on the part of 'sufferers'. Part of the project of 'staging shyness' in 'The Shyness Lists' has been an attempt to end that silence, to
demonstrate a model of creative agency in addressing 'the problem of me', and to thereby encourage other self-identified shy/socially anxious people to speak more openly about their own experiences.

**Self-reflexive creative practice**

In order to write about shyness so that readers would identify with my own experiences, I began to weave together the results of my investigations of the work of shyness experts with episodes from my own life as a self-identified shy person. In the process I began finding new connections between what Elizabeth Colbert (2009) describes as 'explicit' and 'tacit' knowledge of my subject matter (shyness/social anxiety), connections that helped me to re-trace the process of identity formation, and of identity narrative-making, as a shy person (pp. 4–5). Colbert argues that the task of the practice-led researcher in creative writing is to merge two different ways of knowing: the presentational (emerging from experience) and the propositional (knowing through ideas and theories) (p. 5). In order to try and achieve the merger Colbert describes, I kept a self-reflexive journal of the critical and reflective thinking that accompanied the ongoing reading and writing process. In this journal I noted the questions that were raised when information gleaned from the experts seemed to relate to my own experiences, and when my memories sparked questions that might be answered by reading what the relevant experts had written. I also noted in this journal the shyness-related revelations that occurred to me when those two elements – memory and new information – came together.

Robyn Stewart (2006) contends that:

> Autobiography is *self-research, self-portrait, self-narrative*... Its methods lead us to address aspects about the artist by the artist, as a personal investigation of the self. Its processes enable us to apprehend artistic practice by revealing personal experience as the basis of research (p. 6).

The self-reflexive dialogic process of journaling throughout this inquiry became a useful tool in that self-research, as the creative work moved slowly but inexorably away from the original vision of an informative book to an autobiographical self-portrait. All of these different modes of inquiry involved mindful methods of research and reflection.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the research also involved what could be described as the examination and incorporation of serendipitous inputs. These included overheard snippets of radio programs, conversations with friends and relations,
correspondences past and present, and the quiet contemplation of found texts, images and sounds (including photographs, media clippings and songs). I began to develop an alertness to the events and inputs in my daily life that in some way related to the questions and themes emerging in the creative work. This was inevitably a messy and at times apparently random process, gathering ingredients for the creative text from whatever came to hand. Robyn Stewart (2006) describes this approach as coming under the banner of Personal Experience Methods:

where the researcher’s experience is intermingled with the narrative and material is selected as a constructive act dependent on the intentions of the researcher. Using personal experience methods involves the creation of a research setting in which text is generated or a story is situated within the context of a personal larger life story… Personal experience methods assume that the study of experience is the study of life, looking at epiphanies, rituals, everyday actions, metaphors and routines (p. 7).

Noting epiphanies during the research process was a vital part of the generation of the creative text, and the construction of the narrative in the text could be seen as a self-reflexive mapping of those epiphanies, particularly in relation to the personal anecdotal material, as I followed unpredictable associative leaps of memory that related in some way to shyness/social anxiety. Melissa Trimingham defends and validates the disorderliness of this approach in ‘A methodology for practice as research’ (2002):

...the material on which the research conclusions are based depends almost entirely on a creative process, and the process, in fact, has many disorderly features… The ‘disorderliness’ of the creative process must be incorporated into the methodology (p. 56).

Engaging in a disorderly and reiterative model of research facilitated a series of renewed understandings throughout my inquiry: of the nature of shyness/social anxiety; of the accretive process of my own identity formation as a self-identified shy person; and of the ways in which I might attempt to ‘write shyness’.

It is important to note here that at certain stages in the research I had to make some difficult decisions about which areas of knowledge relating to shyness I would not try to investigate in as much depth as others. In part these were pragmatic decisions. If I had continued in this pleasurable, disorderly way to discover new areas to research, I might never have completed the creative work. The term ‘kill your darlings’ can be applied just as much to potential fields of investigation as it can to the editing of the writing you have already done. For example, I became interested in the ways different languages approach the term – and the temperament trait – ‘shyness’, and what that might tell us about the
comparative value attached to shy behaviours by different cultures (Chen 2010). I touch briefly upon this subject in the creative work, but as I have pursued a broadly autoethnographical approach to the research, and as this area of knowledge did not resonate strongly with the personal story I wanted to tell in the memoir, I decided not to pursue this line of inquiry.

**Exegesis structure**

In Chapter One I explore how one might situate and articulate the 'I' voice (or voices) in a memoir about shyness/social anxiety, and the tensions generated by the multiple and at times conflicting versions of the ‘self’ we present in public and with which we conduct an internal dialogue. I investigate how several other life writers have employed a range of different voices with which to reveal the ‘problem’ at the heart of their narrative. I demonstrate the ways in which the creative text ‘The Shyness Lists’ represents a range of identity performances through which the author has presented herself in public and private realms. Further, I argue that the concept of multiple identity performances can be used to answer questions raised about truthfulness within the memoir genre, and that these multiple identities can be traced in text through making overt the internal conversations of the dialogical self.

In Chapter Two I reflect on shame, self-pity and agency in memoir writing and investigate how an author’s anxiety about her readers’ possible negative evaluations of her autobiographical text might shape her self-portrait, and therein her voice. I contend that it is necessary to avoid a voice of self-pity in life writing, and reflect on the apparent contradiction of the simultaneous challenge of engendering empathy in the imagined reader. Further, I demonstrate the usefulness of employing alternative temporal vantage points in memoir in order to trace a personal or identity transformation for the author in the quest to grapple with the ‘problem’ at the heart of the memoir.

In Chapter Three I reflect on the affordances of memoir by investigating how a writer might employ elements of form to communicate key features and ideas relating to their memoir’s subject matter. I contend that in order to write about shyness so that readers would find my experiences resonant, it was necessary for me to impart both narrative and non-narrative knowledge in ‘The Shyness Lists’. I analyse a range of published autobiographical texts in order to test the claim that something needs to be ‘at stake’ in a successful memoir. I contend that at times the developing life story of a memoirist during
the writing of their memoir can dictate the advisability of employing a broadly sequential narrative, to convey what happened ‘then, ‘now’ and ‘right now’. Finally I explore how elements of form and style can be employed to mimic the lived experience of the memoirist.

In Chapter Four I explore ‘writing the body’ as a strategy for conveying to readers the lived experience of shyness/social anxiety in memoir. I contend that reading is at times a search for the visceral experience of empathy, and that in order to induce empathy for shyness I needed to decipher the ways in which shyness can become inscribed upon the body.

Through a close reading of a range of fiction and non-fiction texts, I investigate how other writers have written about the shy body. I argue that to fully convey the self-consciousness and other physical symptoms that accompany shyness it was necessary to immerse my imagined readers in the bodily experience of social anxiety. I explore the affordances of metaphor as an effective strategy for writing the shy body, drawing on a range of images and imagined states of being that are employed in ‘The Shyness Lists’. Finally I contend that writing the shy body can function as a form of immersive ‘exposure therapy’ for the socially anxious writer, helping to produce the kind of transformation that some theorists contend needs to be demonstrated in order for a memoir to be successful.
CHAPTER ONE

Staging shyness: self, truth and voice in memoir

Who am I, and why? These are the questions at the heart of a memoir. In Telling lives Marianne Horsdal (2012) asserts that ‘our own emotions and our motives for action may at times seem incomprehensible and invite narrative explanations’ (p. 18). Using an evocative autoethnographic approach, my aim in this project has been to investigate the use of memoir as an artful way of communicating some of the apparently incomprehensible events, actions and emotional reactions we can trace in our own life stories.

Part of the ‘artfulness’ of memoir writing lies in the crafting of an autobiographical voice (or voices) with which to tell this particular story. This inquiry has therefore focused on how one might situate and articulate the ‘I’ voice in memoir, and in particular, on how the ‘I’ might function as the insider who explains shyness/social anxiety to the uninitiated (Eakin 1999, p. 77). This in turn has led to an investigation into how one might ‘stage the drama’ of the quest for self-understanding, and in doing so illuminate the affordances of memoir as a tool for readers to gain understanding of this temperament trait.

Defining the ‘self’

As this project sits within the field of studies of life writing/memoir, the research has involved reading a wide range of texts that address writing the ‘self’, the role of the first person narrator in non-fiction, and, the uneasy situation of the ‘self-in-text’ as character, performer and/or persona. Further, because this creative project has involved researching shyness through the prism of the social sciences, in this exegesis the term ‘self’ has been approached through the dual prisms of the social sciences and the humanities.

The concept of ‘self’ is widely used in social psychology, sociology and related disciplines, as sociologist Jack Barbalet notes in ‘Weeping and transformations of self’ (2005), and yet its definition remains elusive and in many ways unresolved (p. 1). According to Barbalet, the notion of ‘self’ refers to:
the sense or awareness a person has of their own existence as an object. In this sense “self” includes a process involving an interaction or exchange between the subject and object of experience classically summarized as the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ respectively, through which an individual structures and regulates their activities or conduct and identity, necessarily involving a consciousness of self (p. 1).

This interaction, contends Barbalet, is understood to be:

structured by or formed through feelings provoked by the subject’s suppositions regarding other’s judgments of them. Selfhood thus involves emergent awareness or consciousness about a state of being that, while not necessarily continuous, is typically experienced as biographically coherent. In this sense the conception of self that a person has is ever revisable... (pp. 1–2).

Part of the project of The Shyness Lists’ has been to trace the narrator’s conception of self over time, how that conception has been revised, and in particular to reflect on the way in which a heightened ‘consciousness of the self’ (or self-consciousness) and anxiety about ‘other’s judgments of them’ (both key features of shyness) can impact on an individual’s sense of self. The creative challenge has been to depict that reflective journey in an autobiographical text.

The ever-emergent self

A more comprehensive exploration of the idea of the ‘ever-revisable self’ can be found in Calvin Schrag’s book The self after post-modernity (1997). Schrag traces the history of philosophical debate about definitions of the human self after post-modernity, and the way in which questions about self-identity, the unity of consciousness, and centralised and goal-directed activity have been displaced in the wake of these debates (p. 1). The ‘manifesto of post-modernity’ on matters of the human subject, he writes, is the assertion that self ‘is multiplicity, heterogeneity, difference, and ceaseless becoming’ (p. 8). Smith and Watson (2010) note that, in the wake of post-modern theorizing about the subject, ‘the self is split and fragmented, it can no longer be conceptualised as unitary. At a given moment what calls itself the self is different at any other given moment’ (pp. 204–206).

It is important to acknowledge that the ‘self’ who is described and embodied in ‘The Shyness Lists’ is not a fixed thing, but rather a fluid and ever-changing heterogeneous entity with multiple public and private identities and personas, all of which are influenced by social positioning within particular moral orders (Raggatt 2007). In conducting this
inquiry I have consciously tried to reflect on how to present ‘self’ and narrate ‘self-
experience’ without falling into traps of essentialism about the ‘unified self’. Schrag (1997)
defines the ‘narrating self’ thus:

A storyteller who finds herself in stories already told and strives for a self-constitution by
emplotting herself in stories in the making. To be a self is to be able to render an account of
one self, to be able to tell the story of one’s life... One might speak of such a self as... emergent
from and implicated by... variegated forms of discourse... (p. 26).

The self who emerges from the pages of The Shyness Lists’ is a version of the self who has
been constructed from a necessarily limited number and type of stories and accounts of
that self, stories seen through the prism of shyness, stories that are ever-changing as the
self is ever-emergent and ever-mutable. Furthermore, the self described in this creative
work has inevitably been changed by the choosing and telling of those stories within the
framework of this creative inquiry, gaining self-knowledge, self-efficacy (Bandura 1977)
and a newly-revised image of the ever-emergent self, as observed in the ‘mirror’ of this
memoir. According to Schrag:

The story of the self is a developing story, a story subject to a creative advance, wherein the
past is never simply a series of nows that have lapsed into nonbeing, but a text, an
inscription of events and experiences, that stands open to new interpretations and new
perspectives of meaning... (p. 37).

Further, Schrag contends, ‘The who of discourse is an achievement, an accomplishment, a
performance, whose presence to itself is admittedly fragile, subject to forgetfulness and
semantic ambiguities’ (p. 33). Performance, fragility, forgetfulness: these are all themes
that I have explored both within the creative work and within this exegesis. For example, if
the ‘who of discourse’ is a performance, then how might a memoirist ‘cast the characters’
to represent the fragmented and ever-emergent self in text? The answers to this question
will be explored throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Casting the character(s) in memoir

One of the key challenges for a creative writer working in the genre of personal narrative
non-fiction is to establish the ‘I’ voice (or voices) most appropriate for the story that will
be told; to select elements of one’s personality to foreground, and to use language, style
and point of view appropriate to convey those elements; and to represent the controlling
presence behind the emerging text. Voice is the means by which the writing persona is
represented in text, and the vehicle with which the personal narrative non-fiction writer can illuminate what Vivian Gornick (2001) describes as 'the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say' (p. 13). If one is to 'stage the drama' of the autobiographical quest to gain insight into the impact of a shy temperament on an individual's life, the challenge then is to establish the voice (or voices) that can convincingly convey the personality traits and anxieties typical of such a temperament.

Memoir writing can be described as the 'staging of a drama' because in constructing a memoir, a writer must choose which version (or versions) of the self to portray for their readers. A number of theorists have acknowledged the performative nature of the self in text. Ander Monson (2010) writes that 'telling is performing, even if it seems effortless' (p. 13). Susan Bradley Smith (2010) contends that 'life writing could be viewed as an attempt to forge an identity through public performances of the self' (p. 2). The terms 'character' and 'persona' are often used interchangeably by theorists writing about the role of the 'I' voice in life writing. Vivian Gornick (2001) argues that crafting voice in personal narrative non-fiction requires the author to adopt an 'unsurrogated persona' (p. 7). Phillip Lopate (1995) asserts that 'the writer needs to build herself into a character' (p. 177). Lopate describes this process as being akin to the task of an actor performing a theatrical role:

> we may still need to maximise that pitiful set of quirks, those small differences that seem to set us apart from others, and project them theatrically, the way actors work with singularities in their physical appearances or vocal textures (p. 178).

However before the memoirist can decide which character or version(s) of the self to perform in text, they need to clarify exactly which 'story' they have come to tell from the 'situation' of their life (Gornick 2001, p. 13); to get to the heart of their memoir.

**The performance of multiple selves**

In 'The Shyness Lists' I describe the identity performance strategies I have adopted in an attempt to overcome social anxiety, particularly in professional contexts. In my professional roles, for example, I could 'perform' a series of more confident versions of the self who could represent, even if temporarily, the authority, nobility or benevolence I perceived to be embodied in the institutions that employed me. In this way I could silence (or at least mute) the self-conscious, self-critical inner monologue that often accompanies shy people throughout their lives. In approaching the task of life writing I explored different ways of representing these different identity performances by separating the
narrating voice into a series of separate personas: 'Shy Sian', 'Professional Sian', 'Comrade Choir Mistress', etc. The crafting of the voices for these different personas will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

However the process of creating and, at times, naming these different personas in text led me to query whether such an approach could undermine the perceived trustworthiness and authenticity of the author and her story. Philip Lopate (1995) contends that the writer of first person narrative non-fiction 'must above all also be a reliable narrator; we must trust his or her core of sincerity' (p. xxvi). As Lauren Slater asserts in her memoir Lying (2001), however, 'What matters in knowing and telling yourself is not the historical truth... but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful’ (p. 220). These two versions of 'what matters' in writing memoir would at first seem to be quite contradictory – one privileging reliability, the other privileging 'bendable' truth. Slater’s book is ostensibly about a life of a person with epilepsy, but as she reveals towards the end of the memoir, her diagnosis with this disease is uncertain, and her reliability as a narrator is questionable. The reader is left wondering if perhaps they have just read a work of fiction rather than non-fiction.

In approaching the task of 'staging shyness' in 'The Shyness Lists' via a range of separate personas, it seemed possible that there was a risk that this memoir might be read as Lauren Slater invites us to read her memoir – as, at least in part, untrue. If some of the voices narrating 'The Shyness Lists' did not represent the qualities we traditionally associate with shyness, there seemed to be a risk that the readers' response might echo those of a fellow student with whom I workshopped early drafts of the memoir: 'I'm not sure yet whether I buy it – that you’re actually shy, I mean'. This led me to examine more closely the role of 'truth' in memoir writing.

*The paradox of 'truthfulness' in memoir*

There is an apparent paradox in one of the most commonly expressed prescriptions for effective, artful memoir writing. Honesty, veracity, reliability, reality, integrity, plausibility, truth, verisimilitude, authenticity, 'based in autobiographical fact' – all of these words and phrases have been used to describe the qualities of the best personal narrative non-fiction writing (Gornick 2001, Eakin 1992, Horsdal 2012, Monson 2010, Shields 2010, Ellis et al 2011). In terms of the level of truth telling required, Vivian Gornick (2001) describes the process as being 'like lying down on the (analyst's) couch in public' (p. 7).
On the other hand, many writers of and about non-fiction have noted the sleight of hand required to craft a ‘truthful’ tale. William Zinsser entitled his book on the art and craft of memoir *Inventing the Truth* (1998), and in the introduction to this book Zinsser describes the use of humor as ‘one more distortion of the truth’ (p. 11). Rachael Cusk, in the Introduction to her memoir *A Life’s Work* (2001), goes even further, contending ‘whether a thing is called fiction or fact has no particular bearing on... the pursuit of truth and beauty, even on the task of fabrication itself’ (p. 1).

Lopate (1995), referring to the idea of the writer’s mask, argues ‘if we must remove the mask, it is only to substitute another mask’ (p. xxvii). Micaela Maftei entitled her book about autobiographical writing *The Fiction of Autobiography* (2013). Masks, distortions, presentations, performances, fabrications, fictions: surely these words exclude the possibility of ‘truthfulness’ in a memoir? The tension between these apparently contradictory notions of what constitutes ‘truth’ in life writing has been the subject of much debate within the creative writing field in recent decades. David Shields, in his non-fiction manifesto *Reality Hunger* (2010), addresses what he believes is a growing hunger for ‘larger and larger “chunks” of “reality”’ in a multitude of artistic forms and media (p. 3). And yet, as in the instance just cited, Shields frequently uses qualifiers when he refers to reality:

What the artist **thinks** is reality... (p. 3)

*Reality*, as Nobokov never got tired of reminding us, is the one word that is **meaningless** without quotation marks (p. 4).

the lure and **blur** of the real (p. 5)

Shields’ qualifications go to the heart of what might be described as the problematisation of truthfulness within the genre of memoir. They acknowledge the uneasy situation of the ‘self’ within this genre, and the apparent contradiction between the idea of the memoirist as being willing to ‘open a vein’ for their reader – to show *all* the truth – and the memoirist’s need to ‘choose’ which ‘I’ they will inhabit in order to tell a version of their story. Gornick (2001) believes that the question being asked in an exemplary memoir is:

Who exactly is this ‘I’ upon whom turns the significance of this story-taken-directly-from-life? On that question the writer of memoir must deliver. Not with an answer but with a depth of inquiry (p. 92).

If, as Gornick’s observation implies, there are a number of different ‘I’s who might be employed to tell the story in a memoir, each of whom is ‘performing’ a chosen version of
the self, how can we (as readers) trust any single one of them to tell the ‘true’ story? How do we know whether any of them are ‘fictional’ rather than ‘real’? Carl Klaus (2010) also addresses the idea of memoir writing as performance, using the term ‘impersonation’ to describe the paradoxical nature of ‘writing the self’ in personal narrative non-fiction writing:

The ultimate source of impersonation probably should be traced to the paradox that exists at the heart of any personal essay, which by virtue of being an act of self-dramatisation is at once a masking and an unveiling, a creation and an evocation of self (p. 47).

The terms ‘impersonation’ and ‘creation’ could imply a level of duplicity in the approach to the presentation of the self in memoir, even perhaps a mode of deliberate fictionalisation. I would argue, however, that both the ingredients discussed above – the truthfulness and the performativity – can co-exist in the one autobiographical text, just as ‘Shy Sian’ and ‘Professional Sian’ could co-exist in the one ‘self’ whose story is explored in The Shyness Lists, and that both are ‘non-fictional’ rather than fictional characters. As Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman pointed out in his pioneering book The presentation of the self in everyday life (1959):

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (p. 249).

In the same way that the socially anxious person might choose aspects or versions of themselves to ‘perform’ in social and professional situations, the memoirist can employ a range of writing personas and stylistic devices with which to convey the ‘thing they have come to say’ (Gornick 2001, p. 13). Further, those different personas can become the vehicle with which to engage in the depth of inquiry that Vivian Gornick insists must be in memoir. Marianne Horsdal (2012) describes the process by which the memoirist makes choices about how they depict themselves as a character precisely in order to try to create a plausible depiction of their life:

We select, accentuate, and point out certain parts of our experience in our continuous attempt to create a plot marked by necessity, verisimilitude and plausibility... Understanding is a process. Meaning making is ‘performance’ (p. 18).

If memoir writing is about performance, and if the focus of the memoir is shyness, my task as the writer was to ‘perform’ shyness for the reader; to foreground those personality traits that are typical of a socially anxious person in the character and the voice of the...
author, and to select for inclusion in the story those aspects of the author’s lived experience that relate most directly to shyness. In so doing, however, I was forced to acknowledge the ‘lure and blur’ of the so-called real self; the fluid, fragmented nature of that self; the ways in which the self changed depending on my age, my location, my experiences and my social environment; and the impact of that fluidity and that fragmentation on the emergence of my narrative identity. American author Mark Leyner, in an interview in The Paris Review (Lipsyte 2013), alludes to this task of forging the identity of the writer of his own books:

A certain kind of writer will say, I needed to discover the narrative voice of this book before I could do anything. My problem was prior to that. I felt like I had to discover, invent, concoct, configure the writer.

The question of how to ‘invent’ the narrative voice challenged me throughout the writing of 'The Shyness Lists', and in part the question was answered by employing what Micaela Maftei (2013) describes as:

autobiographical writing that embraces multiplicity in terms of narrative voice and understanding of past events, sees uncertainty as seductive rather than irresponsible, and shies away from the notion that the definition or purpose of autobiography is to give voice to a single, true story (p. 1).

In part, the inquiry in ‘The Shyness Lists’ was into how a memoirist might represent that multiplicity and that fragmentation in text, as a way of offering insights to those readers seeking a better understanding of social anxiety.

The dialogical self in memoir

If the story one has come to tell in a memoir is in part about the existence of multiple versions of the self, and the dynamic conflict between those selves, then the model of the ‘dialogical self’, as outlined by psychologist Peter Raggatt (2006) can be illuminating. Raggatt straddles the fields of psychology and creative writing studies with his analyses of the ‘dialogical self’ in autobiography. Drawing on the work of personality psychologist Hubert Hermans, Raggatt challenges the fiction of the unified self, describing the self as polyphonic; ‘a conversation between a society of minds’ and a ‘dynamic multiplicity of “I” positions in the landscape of the mind’ (Raggatt 2007, p. 357). Using Raggatt’s model of the dialogical self I would argue that one of the ways the memoirist’s consciousness contends with experience is through a series of dialogues with different versions of the
self. Raggatt (2006) contends that in the process of constructing for yourself a narrative of your own life – the story of ‘I’:

the story you tell will probably be but one story from a number of possibilities, and therefore the life story could never be encompassed by a monologue... the life story is really more like a conversation of narrators, or perhaps a war of historians in your head (p. 15).

The inquiry in ‘The Shyness Lists’ has been an inquiry into the ‘I’ who believed her life had been detrimentally impacted by one particular temperament trait, who wanted to understand how and why, and perhaps to try to transform her ‘self’ – to forge a new identity through life writing. Raggatt (2007) defines the dialogical self as:

a conversation between voices in the person, and between those voices and others in the outside world; at the same time, the dialogical self is also the histories and stories behind those voices (p. 357).

For the memoirist, attending to these internal conversations, and to their histories, can be a vitally useful tool for choosing how to say what Gornick (2001) calls ‘the thing one has come to say’ (p. 13). The journal I kept during the research and writing phase of this inquiry became a record of these internal conversations. As an approach to storytelling in ‘The Shyness Lists’, I experimented with externalising this ‘conversation of narrators’ both as a way of establishing the parameters of the autoethnographic inquiry (the questions that might solve the ‘problem of me’), and to represent these identity splits and deploy these shifts in voices. Much of the text is made up of a series of questions and tentative (and at times conflicting) answers about shyness; a performed ‘dialogue with the self’. The title of the first chapter is a question (‘What If?’) and the chapter contains seventeen direct questions to myself, some neatly listed in a logical order. The voice in this section of the first chapter could be described as the voice of the detached, inquiring journalist, coolly and clinically outlining the terms of the investigation, in an attempt to gain control over the situation. This is the voice of one particular ‘self’, the calm logical list-maker, who has tried to protect me from my fears in the past.

Yet, just a few paragraphs earlier, the voice had been starkly different; a ‘self’ stricken by anxiety, expressing myself in an ‘I’-laden stream of consciousness as I fled from a party. This slippage between different voices could be seen as representing in text what Raggatt (2007) describes as the ‘potential for rapid changes or oscillations of the self through time’ (p. 357). It could also be seen as an example of the dialogue between my anxious self and the self that is constantly trying to assert agency in the face of that anxiety; both of them
non-fictional ‘characters’ engaged in staging shyness through the textual performance of separate dialogical selves.

**Inside out**

As described above, in ‘The Shyness Lists’ I have experimented with making overt in the text the various dialogical selves residing within one memoirist’s consciousness. I have also used this dialogical approach in attempting to convey, in the memoir, the insights I have gained during the research and writing process about my own identity formation, and in revealing the conflicting, and at times ‘untrue’, memories that I have held onto during this process of identity formation. In the first chapter, for example, I explore conflicting ideas about my personality in an interior monologue. Raggatt (2007) contends that there are four important sources of dynamic conflict that may contribute to the formation of a dialogical self: moral career, affect, agency and communion:

> we can think of the dialogical self as a conversation that involves taking different moral or value positions, exploring conflicting ideas about what constitutes ‘the good’ and the ‘not good’ (p. 364).

This dynamic conflict can be seen in the way I attempt to establish my strong moral disapproval of what I thinks of my shy self in the first chapter; describe my lack of agency over my affective response to the debilitating symptoms of shyness; and expresses regret over the loss of potential communion – with the other party guests and my partner – as a result of my fear-driven behaviour. In this chapter the self-critical, inquiring voice comes and goes within the prose narrative: ‘What was a polite middle-aged woman doing leaving a party without even saying goodbye to her partner, let alone the host?’ (p. 6) However, as noted in the previous section of this chapter, this version of the self is mediated by another more confessional self embedded in the text, one which expresses more empathy for my anxiety: ‘I couldn’t remember when I had last felt this lonely’ (p. 6).

Later in the memoir, in the chapters entitled ‘Approach Withdrawal’ and ‘Planet Earth’ in which I conduct interviews with psychologists Ron Rapee (Rapee R 2009 pers. comm., 20 April) and Margot Prior (Prior M 2009 pers. comm., 14 March) these two separate ‘dialogical selves’ are given clear names and separate voices. The first of these voices, Professional Sian, conducts the interviews ‘out loud’ in a logical orderly fashion, while the second voice joins the conversation ‘silently’, expressing in italics the more self-revealing interior observations and questions of Shy Sian: ‘So why do I still feel like I haven’t
'grasped it', this shyness thing? Why am I sitting here with this list of questions, interviewing my own mother, for god’s sake? (p. 32).

Annie Dillard, in Inventing the truth: the art and craft of memoir (Zinsser 1998), describes this movement between our inner and outer selves as ‘the vertical motion of consciousness, from inside to outside and back’. She observes how our interior lives are constantly informing our external behaviours and utterances:

The interior life is in constant vertical motion; consciousness runs up and down the scales every hour like a slide trombone. It dreams down below; it notices up above; and it notices itself, too and its own alertness (p. 144).

Dillard explains how she consciously tried to depict this movement between her inner consciousness and her physical presence in the landscape in her memoir An American childhood (pp. 143–146) to capture two co-existing versions of her self in the one text.

The three-way interviews in the ‘Planet Earth’ and ‘Approach Withdrawal’ chapters of ‘The Shyness Lists’ attempt to conjure in text the vertical motion between two different versions of the narrating ‘self’ – one interacting socially in the world, the other reflecting and commenting on those interactions like a Greek chorus – and to demonstrate how I believe my professional self enables my shy self to function in an socially acceptable way in public, in spite of my shy self’s anxieties. Towards the end of the memoir, in a chapter entitled ‘The Final Interview’, this division of the narrator’s identity into a multiplicity of selves (Maftei 2013, p. 5) literally becomes a dialogue. The self-critical voice that first appeared in the opening chapter escapes the confines of the prose and solidifies into a separate persona who engages in an inquisition with another authorial persona. Thus the self-consciousness that typically accompanies the experience of social anxiety – the sense of standing outside and critically scrutinising the self – is played out within this mock-investigative interview:

There’s another omission here. Why did you stop working in radio? ... Why did a radio host suddenly become a newspaper columnist?

(Pauses) I got sacked. They don’t call it that, they call it a ‘non-renewal of contract’, but effectively you’ve been sacked. I still don’t know why (p. 165).

Although the identity of these interview protagonists remains ambiguous, they debate conflicting ideas about the role of shyness in my life, contesting different versions of their (or ‘my’) history, and come to a form of cathartic consensus about how they (or ‘I’) should proceed. This poly-vocal technique of fashioning imagined interlocutors could be seen as
an attempt to expose and illustrate the tension between the memoirist’s conflicting
desires to simultaneously conceal the self (to be invisible, unscrutinised, unself-conscious,
protected) and to reveal the self, as a way of bearing witness to shyness, reaching out to
the imagined readers and seeking their sympathy and approval.

In summary, the memoir form affords the writer the opportunity to ‘stage the drama’ of an
investigation into the ever emergent and evolving self. Within this model, the self is cast as
a character or persona whose voice (or voices) can be employed to illuminate the author’s
discourse in identity, and to convey key elements of the central focus of the memoir; in
this particular instance, the experience of shyness. Raggatt’s model of the ‘dialogical self’
can be used to explain the apparent conflict between the idea of the memoir as real,
truthful, authentic and reliable, and the idea of the craft of memoir involving invention,
impersonation and distortion of the truth; a model which acknowledges that we all
perform a different versions of ourselves, depending on the social context, and that those
different versions are in constant conversation. In tracing my own multiple identity
performances in ‘The Shyness Lists’ I have employed a range of different voices to make
those conversations overt, and to stage my conflicted attitudes towards shyness.
CHAPTER TWO
What will you think of me?
Shame, self-pity and time in memoir

Memoirists who write about themselves with the hope of being published also write knowing that every decision they make about their self-portrait could potentially lead their readers to like and respect the version of ‘self’ they describe, and/or to dislike and disapprove of that version. In other words, they risk being positively or negatively evaluated by their readers. In 2010 Jonathan Franzen, best-selling American novelist and author of the memoir *The discomfort zone* (2006), told an interviewer with the *Paris Review* (Burn 2010):

I spend vastly more time nowadays trying to figure out what’s stopping me from doing the work, trying to figure out how I can become the person who can do the work, investigating the shame and fear: the shame of self-exposure, the fear of ridicule or condemnation…

Franzen’s confession resonated strongly with me as I negotiated with shame and fear in writing ‘The Shyness Lists’. I wondered how my readers might feel about me if I exposed myself to them. I worried about how they might judge me when they finished reading the memoir. Phillip Lopate (1995) believes the writer of personal narrative non-fiction ‘is not necessarily out to win the audience’s unqualified love but to present the complex portrait of a human being’ (p. xxix). According to Lopate, ‘the mistake many beginning essayists make is to try so hard to be likeable and nice, to fit in, that the reader, craving stronger stuff (at the very least a tone of authority), gets bored’ (p. 178).

As Jonathan Franzen’s confessions reveal, however, ‘beginning’ essayists (or memoirists) are not the only writers who must negotiate with this desire to be liked, and with a concomitant anxiety about being negatively evaluated, by their potential readers. Franzen’s fears of self-exposure and condemnation are echoed by Katherine Angel in her essay, ‘Unmastered: on writing for myself’ (2013):

When I let myself think about audience, I felt intense anxiety... Creating anything that will go out into the world is inherently an exercise in vulnerability, and in loss of control... If you write in anticipation of what might be said about you, you shut down.
Given that the main subject of ‘The Shyness Lists’ is social anxiety, and that social anxiety is usually accompanied by a heightened fear of ‘what might be said about you’, it is hardly surprising that as a self-identified socially anxious writer, I would find the experience of presenting myself in text to my invisible evaluative readers deeply troubling. One of the challenges in trying to paint a picture of the experience of social anxiety in this memoir, then, was how not to try too hard to be ‘likeable and nice’, as Lopate puts it, in order to avoid the imagined reader’s negative evaluation of the person writing the memoir.

*Negotiating with fear*

One potential solution to the problem of the ‘fear of ridicule or condemnation’ that Franzen identifies, and the risk of ‘shutting down’ that Angel describes, was for me to openly acknowledge that fear to my readers; to ‘let them in on’ my anxieties as I wrote, in order to convey to them what was at stake for me as the author of the memoir. This is one of the strategies I employed in ‘The Shyness Lists’ as I grappled with my own intense fears about how readers would feel about me. In a chapter entitled ‘Laboratory Setting’, for example, I pose a series of questions in which I admit my fear of ‘betraying myself’ to readers of the memoir:

- Could I write a book about shyness?
- No, a book about Sian-ness?
- Could I be shameless?
- Would I be able to charm you?
- Or would I betray myself to you? (p. 66)

Although these questions are addressed to myself, the last two are also addressed to the reader. In this way I attempted to convert my anxiety about the readers’ perceptions of me into a means of conveying to readers a key element of the lived experience of social anxiety; specifically, the shy person’s intense fear of negative evaluation.

In the chapter entitled ‘The Final Interview’, the inquisitorial voice I employ to conduct the imaginary interview with myself could also be seen as embodying the socially anxious person’s typically fierce inner critic. It is one of several examples in the memoir of my attempt to protect myself from the discomfort of the anonymous reader’s anticipated criticism of my behaviour by ‘getting in first’ and criticising myself. In ‘The Final Interview’
the unnamed interviewee acknowledges her fear of judgement by admitting that she has tried to control her readers' opinions of her in the way she has chosen to tell certain personal anecdotes: ‘Maybe I wanted everyone to think I was braver than I was’ (p. 165).

Lauren Slater, author of the memoir *Lying* (2001), uses a similar technique in a chapter in which she describes her college experiences. The author tells a story of using an imaginary dialogue to try to communicate her experience of epilepsy with her fellow students (pp. 172–174). Slater describes how she invented an alternative persona for herself who she named Juliette Epstein, and how Juliette conducted an interview with Lauren for the campus newspaper. Unlike the critical, judgmental imaginary interlocutor in 'The Shyness Lists', however, 'JE' is kind and encouraging with her interviewee: 'JE: Do you mind my asking, what is it like to have a split brain? I know we’re off the subject of creative writing here, but it's pretty fascinating…' (p. 173).

Perhaps this is the imagined voice of the caring, empathic mother Slater longed for, but felt she never had. In the past (i.e. at the time Slater concocted this interview) the imagined Juliette persona was a vehicle for the narrator to explain her situation, and to seek sympathy from her imagined readers; at that time, her fellow students. In the 'present' (i.e. at the time of writing the memoir) the author’s decision to relate this anecdote could also be seen as way of provoking empathy for her vulnerable younger self from the imagined future readers of her memoir.

In an earlier draft of 'The Shyness Lists', I experimented with a much more extensive use of this technique of writing sections of dialogue between an inquisitorial voice and a shy voice. The voices were clearly named Shy Sian and Professional Sian and they appeared at the end of approximately every third chapter, commentating on the chapter's content and often (in the voice of Professional Sian) fiercely criticising Shy Sian's actions. At the end of the chapter entitled 'Invisible Me', for example, the two voices argued about the ethics of including a story involving an old friend who might have preferred not to have been included. These other dialogues were removed from the final draft, however, for three main reasons. First, I judged there was a risk they could undermine my authorial credibility by revealing too much about the ethical compromises I was apparently willing to make about my friends' possible desire for privacy. (It is worth noting here that writing about my concern about the readers' judgement in this dialogue did function as a useful reminder to make more of an effort to disguise the identity of this friend in other sections of the book.)
Second, I judged that too much self-criticism (even if in the voice of an imaginary ‘persona’ representing myself) could potentially alienate the reader of a memoir. For example, if there were too many of these dialogues they could be interpreted by the reader as a clumsy attempt to gain sympathy from the reader for the apparently ‘shy’ persona who is under attack from the inquisitorial persona. Further, I feared that these frequent self-critical breaks in the story could lift the reader out of, and distance them from, the affective journey of the chronological narrative, and thereby prevent the reader from gradually gaining empathy for my quest to understand and control my shyness. My aim was to avoid appearing as if I was seeking the reader’s sympathy, and yet to engender empathy from the reader for the lived experience of shyness.

This raises the inevitable questions: what is it about the story unfolding in ‘The Shyness Lists’ that might provoke empathy in the reader? What problem is being grappled with in this particular memoir that might provoke empathy in the reader? Before I answer that question, I will examine the problems several other writers have grappled with in their memoirs, and how they have done so.

**Getting to the heart of the problem**

In *The made-up self: impersonation in the personal essay* (2010), Carl Klaus argues that the first person narrative non-fiction writer crafts a persona or a ‘self out of words’ (p.2) who becomes the vehicle with which the memoirist attempts to deal with ‘the tyranny of a single image, idea, memory, or problem – and the compulsion to understand it’ (p. 24). In order to interrogate Klaus’ notion of the persona created by the memoirist who is grappling with a ‘problem’, I have analysed the work of two other memoirists who have each identified a problem that they are struggling to address in their life narratives, and who have crafted writing personas specifically to convey that struggle.

In Joan Didion’s memoir *The year of magical thinking* (2005) the problem being addressed by the memoirist is how to come to terms with the sudden death of her husband; in other words, how to manage grief. The writing personas crafted by the author allow her to convey to the reader her struggles to assert control over her apparently involuntary memories, and the painful emotions that accompany them, by applying her ‘ingenuity’ to the problem – for example, the strategising intellect trying to take charge of the disabling emotions (p. 113).
At the beginning of the book Didion tells us that she repeatedly described in forensic detail ‘to everyone who came to the house in those first weeks’ exactly what had happened on the day of her husband’s death as a way of trying to come to terms with, and assert some control over, her situation (p. 5). In the following section she offers the same kind of clinical description to her readers, listing the events of the day moment by moment, in a voice characterised by short, simple, repetitive, unemotional phrases such as you might read in a police report:

I said I would build a fire, we could eat in.

I built the fire, I started dinner, I asked John if he wanted a drink.

I got him a Scotch...

I finished getting dinner... (pp. 9–13).

Didion’s strategy is to directly reveal to her readers the nature of her emotional struggles with grief (the ‘problem’), and then to embody that struggle by employing a narrating voice characterised by an absence of emotion. She minimises the confessional tone in her writing and instead foregrounds the active struggles of her intellect; privileging *logos* over *pathos*. For example, she records her attempts to order her memories with the frequent repetition of phrases – lists of remembered facts, recited like mantras – which convey her attempts to focus on information rather than on emotions:

I recall being told that her coma could continue for days or weeks.

I recall being told that it would be a minimum of three days...

She could develop an infection.

She could develop pneumonia... (p. 101).

In an example of embodying in text what Raggatt (2007) describes as ‘the dialogical self’ Didion also uses devices such as instructional notes-to-self: ‘Read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information is control’ (Didion 2005, p. 44). She does this in a voice that is assertive and directive, offering herself stern advice about how to cope. At other times Didion writes paragraphs full of sentences beginning with simple active verbs, emotionless lists of the deliberate practical actions she took to try and keep one step ahead of her grief (pp. 94, 95). She addresses the problem of potentially overwhelming grief at the heart of her memoir by employing a voice whose distancing tone works to keep the freight of emotion at bay.
By way of another example, Lauren Slater also demonstrates how it is possible to first reveal the ‘problem’ at the heart of her memoir and then to embody and illuminate that problem by crafting different ‘I’ voices. In her memoir *Lying* (2001) the problem being addressed by the author is how to understand her compulsion to tell lies about herself, and how that compulsion might relate to her history of physical and mental illness – both of which may (or may not) be related to a diagnosis of epilepsy. In admitting to being a liar, Slater inevitably invites her readers to question what, if anything, she tells us is ‘true’. She oscillates rapidly between describing herself very clearly as a liar: “I am dying,” I whispered to Sarah… She believed it (p. 66) and telling us about events which she later reveals may in fact be lies:

I was still a girl with epilepsy… (p. 65)

the text I've created uses... the metaphor of epilepsy (p. 219).

Slater’s memoir not only ‘foregrounds the challenge of telling a credible story’ (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 146) in a work entitled *Lying* but, as Kate Cantrell (2013) has noted,

The result of this playfulness and general misrule is that Slater writes herself into a double bind: on one side, she is the child narrator who inadvertently misrepresents events and misdirects readers, and on the other side, she is the untrustworthy author who employs metaphor as a licence to lie (p. 76).

The narrator telling these stories in *Lying* is deeply unreliable and the voice she employs often resembles that of an unrepentant child whose moral universe is still forming, and who is trying out different versions of the ‘truth’ in order to gauge the reaction of her audience. The effect on the reader can be profoundly disorienting, as we move between belief, disbelief and suspension of disbelief. As Slater argues in her book, however, ‘everyone knows that a lot of memoirs have made-up scenes; it’s obvious… my purpose (is)… to ponder the blurry line between novels and memoirs’ (p. 160).

To convey this ethical provocation and her intent to deliberately blur fact and fiction, Slater crafts a persona for herself in text that is (in her own words) ‘slippery, playful, impish, exasperating’ (p. 221). The voice is at times self-absorbed and confessional, the text laden with ‘I’s (no less than 36 of them on pages 132–133) and at other times apparently dissociating, with frequent slippage between points of view. On page 216, for example, the second person ‘you’ moves rapidly from representing the (first person) narrator (‘You give up the ground which you never really had to begin with’) to a form of direct address to the imaginary reader (‘You tell me’), to representing the narrator’s
mother (‘Oh, Mom, I miss you’), in a carefully crafted rendering of the narrator’s apparent mental chaos.

In *Lying* Slater seems unembarrassed by her tendency to bend and distort the facts about her own life. The work is book-ended by the two-word Chapter 1 – ‘I exaggerate’ – and her admission in the Afterword that this is ‘(a book) in which I am more interested in using invention to get to the heart of things than I am in documenting actual life occurrences’ (p. 219). It is possible, though, that Slater’s willingness to admit to – and to continue to engage in – the practice of lying is not only a playful engagement with the ‘slipperiness’ of narrative truth but also a strategy for dealing with residual shame about her past behaviour. Publicly confessing to acts that are generally considered to be anti-social, or signs of character weakness, can be a way of relieving oneself of the burden of shame in relation to those acts (and positively re-framing one’s anti-social behaviour as a post-modern narrative strategy can be another way). Slater writes in the Afterword to her memoir that epilepsy is a metaphor she employs to describe those events in her past ‘for which I have never been able to find the words’ (p. 219). In ‘The Shyness Lists’, I have also attempted to find ways to express aspects of my own behaviour that I have been either unable or unwilling, for reasons of shame and embarrassment, to articulate in words.

*Writing shame*

As I have described in the previous chapter, the primary ‘problem’ I set out to address in ‘The Shyness Lists’ was how to understand and therefore potentially control my shyness. The challenge, therefore, was to craft a writing persona (or personas) who could both *represent* the particular facets of this anxiety condition and *reflect* on them; to simultaneously ‘stage’ key elements of the shy temperament (as theorised by psychologists), debate the nature and influence of those elements of temperament, and stand back from those processes and analyse them.

Social anxiety often inspires shame and embarrassment in its sufferers and a reluctance to admit to the condition (Saunders & Chester 2008, pp. 2650–2651). Many memoirists have chosen to write about their ‘shameful’ experiences or psychological conditions as a means of bearing witness to those experiences and conditions, of making sense of them, and perhaps encouraging others with the same conditions to feel less shame. Memoirs about being over-weight and having eating disorders, alcohol and drug addictions, criminal behaviour, mental illness and ‘survivor guilt’ often fall into this category (Birkerts 2008).
American author Patricia Foster, in her essay 'My savage mind' (2004), describes the autobiographical writer as having 'a savage mind... obsessed with itself, obsessed with its stigmata of shame' (p. 83). According to Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard, 'concealing what is shameful to you will never lead to anything of value' in literature and writing (Baron 2013). Knausgaard's contention inevitably raises the question: what is the value of revealing that which you find shameful in your writing?

Elspeth Probyn, in her book Blush: faces of shame (2005), argues that shame:

> goes to the heart of who we think we are... it reveals with precision our values, hopes and aspirations (and our) deep worries and concerns.... Shame highlights different levels of interest... Interest involves a desire for connection. At a basic level, it has to do with our longings for communication, touch, lines of entanglement and reciprocity (p. x).

The act of writing a memoir is often an attempt to convey the 'worries and concerns' of the memoirist to the imaginary reader, and in doing so, to enable the memoirist to 'connect' and 'communicate' with that reader; to try to engender empathy in the reader for the memoirist’s experiences; and, in the process of sharing the burden of shame with the imaginary reader, to create a relationship of reciprocity. 'Here am I, and here is what worries and shames me, and perhaps this worries and shames you too', the troubled memoirist says to their reader, 'and in revealing and sharing our shame perhaps we can exorcise it together'.

Probyn further contends that shame leads to 'an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves':

> Why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions that have either brought shame upon myself or caused someone else's shame? Shame is... positive in its self-evaluative role: it can even be self-transforming (p. xii).

Chronicling (or confessing) one’s shame in a memoir, and undergoing the self-evaluative process induced by the confrontation of that shame, can potentially help the memoirist to transform herself, and provide a model of self-transformation for the reader. In reflecting on my life in writing, I came to realise that shyness had always caused me shame; I perceived it as a form of weakness that needed to be overcome. In part because I was ashamed of it, I had tried to hide it. 'The Shyness Lists' became a re-construction and re-evaluation of the history of that particular shame, and an interrogation of the values upon which that shame was based; values that privileged the consistent public performance of social competence, for example, and ignored the more positive character traits that often
accompanied shyness. The re-assessment of those values became part of the process of personal transformation – the re-fashioning of the ‘I’ – chronicled in this memoir.

Avoiding the voice of self-pity

One of the risks for a memoirist writing in a confessional style is that, in revealing her anxieties and her negative self-feelings such as shame and embarrassment, the memoirist could be perceived by the reader as being self-pitying. In my role as a mentor of non-fiction writers, I have at times advised my students that writing personal narrative non-fiction in which their self-portrayal is dominated by a voice of self-pity, unmediated (for example) by self-deprecating humour or by the promise that there will be a moment of insight into (or a ‘reconciliation’ with) the self, can potentially curtail the reader’s empathy.

In an essay written by a young man who participated in one of my writing workshops, for example, the writer described discovering that his girlfriend had had a sexual encounter with his best friend. The writer constructed himself as the passive, undeserving ‘victim’ of their actions – a subject without agency – and unquestioningly assumed that the readers would be ‘on his side’, offering their (imagined) condolences. I suggested to him that perhaps he was still too close to the events that he described, and that as a result the narrator’s voice sounded overtly self-pitying, all of which meant he risked alienating his readers.

In analysing the decisions made in writing ‘The Shyness Lists’ I was curious to investigate my apparent assumption that it is legitimate to try and invoke empathy in the readers of personal narrative non-fiction writing, but not to appear to be overtly sympathy-seeking or self-pitying. For example, one of the concerns I brought to the writing of this creative project was the fear that shyness was not a dramatic or miserable enough theme to justify an entire memoir. Shyness is not something you ‘suffer from’, because genuine suffering is something much more dramatic.

Further, deep at the heart of this particular anxiety was the suspicion that, as the book’s author and subject, I had been ‘guilty’ of the shameful and self-indulgent emotion of self-pity, and that I was attempting to engender ‘pity’ in my imagined readers for the author. I was curious to discover, therefore, whether similar concerns might lie behind Joan Didion’s ‘note to self’ in the opening paragraph of her grief memoir The year of magical thinking (2005):
Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self-pity (p. 3).

Didion seems to be acknowledging here the unavoidable challenge for the confessional ‘misery’ memoirist of negotiating a path through the ‘danger’ of self-pity. Several theorists have referred explicitly to the importance of avoiding the traps of self-dramatisation and self-pity in memoir writing. In The situation and the story (2001), for example, Vivian Gornick suggests that writers need to avoid ‘falling into the pit of confessionalism, or therapy on the page, or naked self-absorption’ (p. 12). In Ander Monson’s essay ‘Voir dire’ (2010) the author rails against the solipsistic ‘primacy of I (which) suggests that we should care about it because it is an I, because it has incurred slights at the hands of others, of the world’ (p. 13). Henry Louis Gates (Zinsser 1998) writes, ‘The danger is self-indulgence. When you write an autobiography or a memoir you’re indulging yourself in your own sentimentality’ (p. 108).

Self-involved, self-absorbed, self-indulgent, self-pitying: all profoundly negative terms incorporating the word ‘self’. Yet, as Henry Louis Gates acknowledges, ‘a memoir is all about the unfolding of your ego...’ (p. 109). The ‘self’ almost inevitably needs to be placed centre stage in such a project. If, as American writer Patricia Foster contended in a writing workshop I attended at RMIT University in August 2011, a memoir is inevitably and necessarily about the ‘unravelling of the self’ in a quest to understand the formation of the self’s identity, the question arises as to how and why the writer might try to avoid adopting a self-pitying voice, especially when the ‘problem’ at the heart of the memoir involves distressing experiences.

The question of agency

There are numerous definitions of (and causes ascribed to) self-pity but common ingredients appear to be the idea of victimhood and a consequent potential loss of agency; we speak, for example, of someone ‘wallowing’ in self-pity. Dictionary definitions include phrases such as ‘self-indulgent dwelling on sorrows or misfortunes’ and pitying oneself in an ‘exaggerated manner’. Self-pity has also been described as a state of mind in which an individual has not accepted a situation, believes they are a victim of events and therefore
deserving of condolence, and as a negative emotion that does not generally help deal with adverse situations (Stöber 2003). A self-pitying tone of voice in a memoir could therefore be perceived as evidence that an author is unable to deal with the adverse situation they are describing; that they lack agency over their life narrative.

Smith and Watson (2010) note that agency is not the same as ‘free will or autonomy’ (p. 59). Agency, they contend, implies not merely ‘the exercise of control over one’s interpretation of one’s life’ but also ‘openness to the self’s opacity and its ethical obligation to the other’ (p. 58). Joan Didion’s memoir is profoundly engaged in the project of examining the apparent opacity of the self in a moment of emotional crisis, and re-examining the ethics of her relationships with her family members. After Joan Didion (2005) reveals her concern about ‘the question of self-pity’, she goes on to conduct a forensic examination of exactly how she did cope in the year following the sudden death of her husband, at the same time as her only child was gravely ill in hospital. Naming ‘the question of self-pity’ in the first paragraph was perhaps Didion’s strategy for reminding herself (and her reader) that one of her tasks in this life writing project was to illuminate exactly how she had retained a sense of agency – including an ‘openness to the self’s opacity’ – at the same time as she dissected all the ways in which her agency – indeed her very sense of self – was under threat during this time.

Unmediated self-pity in the voice of a memoirist could be perceived by the reader as evidence that the memoirist has not yet achieved the necessary emotional distance from the events they are writing about (thereby communicating to the reader that they ‘have not accepted’ those events and do not have ‘the confidence nor ability to cope’ with them, as Stöber (2003) suggests) in order to write with insight and self-knowledge about the aspects of their own behaviour that have influenced these events. Jorge Luis Borges’ lecture-turned-personal essay ‘Blindness’ (1985) is a masterful example of how a writer can eschew self-pity in spite of writing about a debilitating condition. In the essay Borges describes at length the ‘gifts’ blindness has given him and specifically mentions self-pity in quoting from one of his own poems:

No one should read self-pity or reproach

into this statement of the majesty

of God; who with such splendid irony

granted me books and blindness at one touch (pp. 378–379).
Borges argues that the writer needs to accept their misfortunes as having ‘been given as clay, like material for one’s art’ (p. 385): ‘Those things are given to us to transform, so that we may make from the miserable circumstances of our lives things that are eternal, or aspire to be so’ (p. 385). William Zinsser (1998), in citing some examples of what he considers to be ‘the new memoir at its best’, argues these books elevate the pain of the past with forgiveness. There’s no self-pity, no whining, no hunger for revenge: the writers are as honest about their young selves as they are about the sins of their elders. We are not victims, they want us to know (p. 5).

One strategy for eschewing self-pity, avoiding casting oneself as a ‘victim’, and achieving distance through the use of voice in life narrative, then, is to try to demonstrate that there has been some kind of transformation of the misfortunes or miseries that are described in the narrative. This is particularly relevant in what Sven Birkerts, in The art of time in memoir (2008), calls ‘traumatic memoirs’:

> Trauma-based accounts are very often private salvage operations. Rather than assuming continuity they must, at the deepest level, reflect and somehow compensate for (the self’s) destruction (p. 145).

In the next section of this chapter I will explore how a sense of emotional distance might be achieved, and a voice of self-pity eschewed, when writing a memoir that incorporates very recent distressing or traumatic events; when it becomes a ‘salvage operation’.

**Transformation in memoir**

Sven Birkerts (2008) has identified the manipulation of the ‘double vantage point’ – of remembering the past and reflecting on it in the present – to convey the themes and connections at the heart of the memoirist’s quest (p. 17). Like Borges, Birkerts emphasizes the importance of ‘transformation’ as a way of avoiding self-pity in writing about the self.

> I need to give the reader both the unprocessed feeling of the world as I saw it then and a reflective vantage point that incorporates or suggests that these events made a different kind of sense over time... This is the transformation that, if done well, absolves a memoiristic reflection from the charge of self-involved navel-gazing (p. 23).

This transformation is precisely what was lacking (for me as a reader) in my student’s personal essay about his unfaithful girlfriend. There was no alternative temporal vantage point. He was still in the ‘then’. There had been little processing of those events, and there
was no sense that he had developed a better understanding of what had transpired, or that he had regained a sense of agency in the 'now'. Years on, he was still inhabiting the unself-conscious role of victim.

Didion (2005) employs masterful braiding of alternative temporal vantage points. The narrative telescopes rapidly back and forth between the starting point of the book (nine months after her husband's death) and the night of his death, and a multitude of moments in between those two dates. At times she re-visits the same events multiple times, as if repetition might help to strip them of their distressing accompanying emotions. Eventually the narrative comes to rest, at the end of the final chapter, in the 'now; i.e. three months after she first started writing the book. At times these telescoping movements are almost giddying for the reader, as we try to keep up with the 'when' of the narrative, and with what Raggatt (2007) describes as the narrating self's 'potential for rapid changes or oscillations... through time' (p. 356). At the end of chapter five, for example, there is a rare example of Didion's narrating voice directly communicating raw emotional distress:

I wanted more than a night of memories and sighs.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted him back (p. 75).

On the following page, though, the temporal vantage point immediately shifts back several years to a day when the author was walking the streets of New York, 'Quick sunlight dappling, yellow leaves falling...' (p. 76), and the voice becomes distant and analytical again. The constantly changing temporal perspective in this memoir could be seen as one of Didion's further answers to 'the question of self-pity'. As soon as she feels herself about to be overcome with grief – an emotional state she labels 'the vortex' (p. 112) – she moves backwards or forwards in time, fleeing from her unruly emotions to safer ground, and taking us with her.

During the writing of 'The Shyness Lists' the question of self-pity became pressing for me after the sudden end of my relationship with 'Tom', and my subsequent decision to include that event and its aftermath in the memoir's narrative. The book's themes expanded to incorporate the experience of grief and loss, and an exploration of how those emotional states were related to one of the most common anxieties experienced by shy people; the fear of rejection. The memoir had become, in Birkerts' words, a 'salvage operation'; a written record of an attempt to salvage a sense of agency for an author who had suddenly become lost in a frightening emotional landscape.
In Part Two of 'The Shyness Lists' the humorous self-deprecating voice that comes and goes throughout the first two thirds of the book all but disappears, and the dominant conversational tone is replaced with a more emotionally direct, raw, confessional voice; a voice in the act of revealing the 'right now', rather than the 'then, again' as Birkerts terms it. Controlling the level of apparent self-pity in this section of the memoir, however, required much re-drafting. The first versions of much of this post-break-up material were written within days of the events they depict – whilst I was deeply immersed in anxiety – and they were like unedited diary entries in which the writer assumes there will be no reader other than herself. For example, in the chapter entitled 'Textual Intercourse', the term 'fan-girl' was employed in the first draft to describe the author's fantasies about her lover's other sexual partners: 'Did he write to me before he’d chosen the fan-girl?' In later drafts the term 'fan-girl' was replaced with a less emotionally laden and less petulant term: 'Did Tom sit down and write to me before he had chosen the other woman?' (p. 143) In the chapter entitled 'Then This', the following confessional paragraph from the first draft was eventually removed entirely, because I deemed it to be too melodramatic:

All those fears of not measuring up, of being somehow wrong, flawed, hollow, a pretender, a fake. All those fears suddenly realised with one sentence mumbled at the end of this bed. Here now at the end of this bed with the red rug under your feet and the blue doona cover clenched in your hands and your heart expanding like a giant engorged thing that might explode, splattering across the red rug and covering him with your red and blue liquid insides.

In re-shaping this original confessional material for inclusion in the memoir the language had to be toned down, stripped of some of its childish spite, its piled-up similes and overwrought emotional metaphors.

Confessional writing is perhaps the form of writing most commonly associated with the idea of writing as transformation and/or catharsis. Patricia Foster addresses the idea of confessional memoir as catharsis in her essay 'My savage mind' (2004): 'You might call it self-surgery and repair all bound together into one, for a savage mind is obsessed... the with potential heat of catharsis’ (p. 82). In the second part of 'The Shyness Lists' I wanted to offer the reader a raw textual experience of intense longing and emotional rupture, but to mediate those emotional outpourings with a careful crafting of the 'voice' to signal that I have, since these events, gained some distance from them. I wanted to reassure the reader that although I was suffering in those moments, I had regained a degree of agency in the intervening time and that the experiences related in the book had led to a cathartic transformation of my sense of identity.
In summary, one solution for writers of confessional memoirs who are negotiating with fear of being judged by their potential readers is to reveal these fears self-reflexively in the creative text. In 'The Shyness Lists', a memoir about a temperament trait that induces a pervasive fear of negative evaluation, I discovered that by confessing and reflecting upon those fears I was able to convey to the reader a key feature of the lived experience of shyness. An analysis of the memoirs of Lauren Slater (2001) and Joan Didion (2005) provides evidence for Carl Klaus' contention that at the heart of the life narrative revealed in memoir lies a 'problem' that the author is compelled to understand. Further, a voice of overt, unmediated self-pity can signal to the reader a failure on the part of the memoirist to gain that understanding and to thereby achieve self-transformation. That 'problem', and the struggle to grapple with it, can be conveyed by crafting a range of different 'I' voices and by manipulating temporal perspective to convey a sense of agency within a life narrative. In the following chapter I will explore how elements of form and style can be employed to evoke key features of the lived experience of shyness.
CHAPTER THREE

Evoking shyness: form in memoir

Henry Louis Gates, in his essay ‘Lifting the veil’ (Zinsser 1998), describes how he made decisions about form and shape in writing his 1995 memoir Colored people: ‘I wanted to write a book that imitated the specialness of black culture...’ (p. 109). To borrow from Gates’ description, I wanted to write a book whose form in some way evoked the special qualities of shyness. However, because I chose to write a book in which shyness is viewed through the prism of the ‘self’ (rather than, say, a primarily informative text, a novel, or a biography of another shy person) the inquiry also required me to discover the narrative strategies that would best serve the story of my own particular identity formation as a self-described shy person. The challenge was to investigate how the form might be dictated by the path that shyness, and my memories of a shy life, have led me on. In her essay ‘To fashion a text’ (Zinsser 1998) Annie Dillard writes:

The best memoirs, I think, forge their own forms ... There's nothing you can't do with [literary non-fiction]. No subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own form every time (pp. 144, 160).

In relation to this topic area, my inquiry has focussed on discovering what knowledge can be gleaned about the formation of identity, about social anxiety, and about memoirs more generally, from ‘forging the form’ of ‘The Shyness Lists’.

Narrative vs non-narrative knowledge

In order to write about shyness I needed to understand exactly what it was. I began reading the work of a range of shyness experts, including psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, sociologists, cultural theorists, linguists and evolutionary biologists. If I had simply consulted a range of academic texts and reported on what the ‘experts’ had discovered about shyness, however, I would have risked producing what Phillip Lopate (1995) describes as writing that is merely ‘pleasantly smooth’ (pp. xxv–xxvi). I wanted my imagined readers to experience the particularities – and above all the distress – of having a shy temperament as they were reading.
In her memoir *The shaking woman, or a history of my nerves* (2010), American writer Siri Hustvedt addresses the question of how to convey the particular stories and experiences of people dealing with psychological distress. She refers often to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), the psychiatric manual used to explain and diagnose recognised psychiatric conditions (including social anxiety and social phobia). As Hustvedt points out, though:

> [t]he DSM does not tell stories [...]. Its mission is purely descriptive, to collect symptoms under headings that will help a physician diagnose patients [...]. The fact is that all patients have stories, and those stories are necessarily part of the meaning of their illnesses (p. 63).

In the absence of individual stories, the information contained in the DSM about social anxiety and social phobia could be described as non-narrative knowledge. Rita Charon (2006), in *Narrative medicine: honouring the stories of illness*, defines non-narrative knowledge as attempting to ‘illuminate the universal by transcending the particular’ (p. 9). In contrast,

> narrative knowledge, by looking closely at the individual human beings grappling with the conditions of life, attempts to illuminate the universals of the human condition by revealing the particular (p. 9).

With the exception of Charles Darwin (1872), whose writing on shyness and blushing briefly describes individual case studies, most of the information contained in the texts I read by shyness experts (most of them social scientists) could also be described as non-narrative knowledge. The language of these texts is steeped in the careful, clinical jargon of their respective fields, employing generalisations rather than human anecdotes. Like the DSM, they are written to convey information for the purposes of diagnosis and to further specialist research, not for the purpose of narrative-based storytelling or to convey the experiences of unique individuals.

In the preface to her memoir *A life of one’s own* (Field 1934) Marion Milner (aka Joanna Field) writes:

> There is all the difference in the world between knowing something intellectually and knowing it as a ‘lived’ experience... The more I read scientific books on psychology the more I felt that the essential facts of the experience were being missed out (p. xxxiv).

In order to write about shyness so that ‘the essential facts of the experience’ would be conveyed to my readers, and so that those readers would resonate with the experience, real stories were required, as well as information sourced from experts. I began
excavating layers of autobiographical memory and mining specific personal anecdotes – the lived, the remembered, the mis-remembered and the performed – to write about my own life as a self-perceived ‘shy person’. These anecdotes became the narrative knowledge with which I could attempt to convey to my reader how shyness feels, and helped me to re-trace my own process of identity formation and identity narrative-making as a shy person (Eakin 2007). Through this iterative process ‘The Shyness Lists’ initially emerged as a series of eccentric lists and short personal essays, weaving together narrative and non-narrative knowledge about social anxiety and related subjects. Questions still remained to be answered, however, concerning how these disparate elements might be woven into a form that staged the experience of living with social anxiety, and how the form might be illuminated by, and help to clearly establish for the reader, exactly what is at stake in this memoir.

**Establishing what was at stake**

At the beginning of the writing stage of this inquiry, I did not yet have an answer to the question of what was at stake in my memoir; what I stood to lose (or gain) in the process of reflecting upon and writing about my life. In *Vanishing point: not a memoir* (2010), author and writing teacher Ander Monson asks the following questions in the essay ‘Voir dire’: ‘How often is something at stake in essays, in memoirs, in most of the non-fiction I read (and perhaps write), I wonder? How often is there actual risk involved, invoked? ’ (p. 13) Monson believes that unless a memoirist firmly establishes what is at stake in the telling of their story, it is difficult for a memoir to ‘make something of itself’ (p. 13). John D'Agata (2003) uses the same phrase when describing Joan Didion’s 1979 personal essay ‘The white album’:

Didion involves us in her pursuit. When she fails, as she claims, to package the Sixties in an easily portable container for us, we fail, too. Or else we feel more tangibly what was at stake in this pursuit (p. 45).

When you have something ‘at stake’ you are at risk of losing it if a plan or action is not successful. Until I had established what was at stake with my memoir, and decided how that could be illuminated by form and structure, it was difficult to make any final decisions about exactly which ‘story’ should be told from this ‘situation’ (Gornick 2001).

One book in particular functioned as a useful ‘anti-model’ for me in examining the role of this question of ‘what’s at stake’. In Jonathan Franzen’s (2006) memoir he not only
eschews a chronological narrative, but he deliberately disrupts his own autobiographical anecdotes by inserting other anecdotes in the middle of many of his stories, and at times refusing to supply his reader with endings to the stories he begins to tell. Franzen confesses his dislike of the ‘so-German organizational consciousness at work’ in Thomas Mann’s 1924 novel The magic mountain in which Mann ‘has every symbol worked out perfectly’ (p. 151). Mann’s rigid structure, he writes, ‘made me groan the way an elaborate and successful pun does’ (p. 151). Perhaps it is his revulsion for predictable structural formality that persuaded Franzen to avoid any clear structure in writing his own memoir. Franzen employs instead a braided narrative, weaving together several different thematic strands, in several different voices, within the one larger text.

The book’s title, The discomfort zone: a personal history, implies the work will be an investigation of the formation of the author’s dis comforted sense of identity. The apparent lack of connection (if not chronological, then at least emotional) between chapters and anecdotes, however, undermines the possibility of a coherent theme emerging (around the idea of discomfort, for example) or of creating a series of emotionally engaging ‘vertical drops’, as described by Patricia Foster (Foster & Porter 2012, p. xxiv). As Edmund White notes in his review of the Franzen memoir in The Guardian (2006), the author ‘gives endless detail about his teen years and then skips over two decades into the present, thereby avoiding all the messy mishaps of adulthood.’ In short, nothing seems to be at stake for the author; he appears to have nothing to lose in the process of examining the personal material covered in these essays, and in revealing this material to his readers. And in part this is the result of the form he has chosen to employ for this material. The memoir reads more like a collection of unrelated essays than ‘a personal history’.

‘Discomfort’ was certainly part of my aim in writing ‘The Shyness Lists’. I wanted the reader to feel the unease and embarrassment I have experienced as a result of my social anxiety. However a more useful model for me was the previously mentioned Didion memoir (2005); in contrast to Franzen’s book, the question of what is at stake for Didion in her memoir becomes clearer as she gradually reveals the depths of her grief and the strategies she employs to try to gain and maintain control over her emotions following her husband’s death and her daughter’s life-threatening illness. The risk she faces is of becoming lost in what she calls the ‘vortex’ of grief with no way out; these are the stakes for the writer.

Didion’s memoir’s structure is broadly chronological, beginning with her husband’s death. Analeptic episodes from the past are then woven together with ever-progressing episodes
from the ‘present’ and with frequent circling back to re-visit the same recent episodes, like a spiral interspersed with figures of eight. Each accretive episode from the past serves to further illuminate the intense emotional investment Didion had in the relationships with her husband and their only child, and intensifies the reader’s empathy with what the author has lost, and with what she could yet lose, given her daughter’s serious illness. The narrative circling motion could also be used to describe the ways in which Didion’s first person character moves backwards and forwards between various stages of grief, as outlined by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969); denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. In this way, the structure of the narrative serves to illuminate both the emotional landscape Didion inhabits during this time, and what is at stake for her in this story.

One of the challenges in writing 'The Shyness Lists', then, was to discover and reveal a sense of ‘what’s at stake’ for the author in writing this memoir, and to investigate how the answer to that question might help to determine the organising principles of the memoir’s initially disparate elements.

Decisions on form

In order to settle upon a narrative structure in autobiographical writing, memoirists must inevitably choose which of their complex and accretive life experiences to foreground and illuminate. In her 2003 essay ‘The white album’ (in D’Agata 2003), Joan Didion writes:

> We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience (p. 47).

In 'The Shyness Lists', the central idea with which I attempted to ‘freeze’ my experience was the idea of a ‘shy life’. In structural terms, the option of employing a fragmented non-linear narrative at first seemed appealing. Fragmentation was an apt metaphor for the way in which the shy narrator of this memoir describes herself as inhabiting a range of different various public and private personas, and perceives her identity as fundamentally dialogical and unstable and her self as ‘heterogeneous’ and ‘ceaselessly becoming’ (Schrag 1997, p. 8). It was also a familiar writing form for me, as I had previously spent three years writing a weekly newspaper column. These personal columns were discrete and non-linear, in the sense that they addressed different (although occasionally related) topics each week. I could write a work of first person narrative non-fiction consisting of a series
of column-like chapters addressing separated but related topics around the central subject of shyness/social anxiety. In order to challenge my practice as a writer with this creative project, however, I would need to move beyond this familiar form and into new storytelling territory. I would need to focus on the act of emplotment, a process Horsdal (2012) describes as ‘organizing the events into a coherent composition which transforms the accidental and discordant elements into a concordant meaningful plot’ (p. 15).

In *The art of time in memoir: then, again* Sven Birkerts (2008) argues against the unquestioning employment of sequential storytelling in memoir, and in favour of discovering the non-sequential connections between our life experiences that allow those experiences to make larger sense (p. 8):

> The impulse to tell sequentially works with gravity-like force, generating structures that sag from the tedium of ‘and then… and then…’ recounting and produce dense thickets of ostensibly relevant information (p. 60).

Birkerts’ advice to create a story from the unlikely preserved traces of memory, to work with those traces using them as ‘prompts and points of access’ (p. 10), was a useful approach to mining the remembered (and misremembered) past for scenes and anecdotes that illustrated the accretive formation of identity. Each vivid memory that I summoned of a moment in which I had felt intensely shy (or had found ways to overcome my shyness) led to a new direction in the research and writing. In the end, however, I chose to disregard Birkerts’ advice *against* using a chronological narrative when it came to the overarching narrative structure within which these anecdotes would be embedded. Birkerts writes, ‘The point is story, not chronology. The question is not what happened when, but what, for the writer, was the path of realization’ (p. 61). Sometimes, though, that path of realisation *is* chronological, and sometimes the point *is* ‘what happened when’, *as well as* ‘what was the path of realization’. Moreover, sometimes events that occur in the developing life story of an author *in the midst of* writing a memoir can prove the value of a chronological narrative.

Sven Birkerts’ advice assumes that the memoir writer is writing from the temporal perspective of ‘now’, or the present, about events that happened ‘then’, or in the past. In the case of *The Shyness Lists*, however, the unexpected event that took place *during* the writing of the memoir – i.e. the relationship break-up – intervened in the otherwise calm, reflective, textual layering of self-discoveries that had been forming the first draft of the work; ‘now’ was interrupted by ‘right now’. That event brought with it a ‘dynamic of escalation, eruption and consequence, and (one hopes) recovery’, as Birkerts describes the
typical flow of so-called ‘survivor narratives’ (p. 61). The formal decisions I made in structuring the ‘The Shyness Lists’ were inevitably influenced by the sudden end of my relationship during the writing of the book. It was the event that revealed exactly what was ‘at stake’ for me as the author of this memoir.

Horsdal (2012) counsels against writing autobiographical material whilst ‘in the middle of a crisis’, arguing that:

> life stories told in the middle of a crisis may fail to achieve a meaningful configuration of lived experience... the experience of crisis may undermine previous configurations, and a new understanding and interpretation of existence depending on a re-configuration of meaning, cannot be achieved right away (p. 21).

In the case of ‘The Shyness Lists’, however, the ‘crisis’ that occurred during the writing of the memoir, in the form of the relationship break-up, served to confirm the gradual epiphany that had begun to emerge immediately prior to the break-up; at the heart of shyness is a fear of rejection. This crisis and its accompanying insight proved to be invaluable in constructing a ‘meaningful configuration’ of the ‘lived experiences’ described in the work.

**Using form to evoke lived experience**

As a screen-writing colleague remarked to me recently in describing what makes an effective suspenseful film plot, ‘If the main character is afraid of the dark, then the lights had damn well better go out.’ The question of ‘what’s at stake’ in a memoir about social anxiety was starkly revealed when the anxious fear at the heart of shyness suddenly became a reality, and a new choice of narrative structure became available: a two-act drama – effectively ‘before the break-up’ and ‘after the break-up’ – that allowed for the staging of the process by which I confront and ‘survive’ the anxiety at the heart of the lived experience of shyness. The relationship break-up became the pivot point around which many of the analeptic personal anecdotes could coalesce, and the primary narrative text could be a broadly chronological description of the months during which I pursued my social anxiety research quest – the ‘order of history’, as Gerard Genette describes it in his essay ‘Fictional narrative factual narrative’ (1993, p. 60). Into this could be embedded past and present details of my de facto relationship, culminating with the sudden disruption to the relationship and its aftermath. In addition, this narrative structure could be used to convey some of the particularities of the lived experience of social anxiety.
If I had chosen to alert the reader to this disruptive event only at the moment (within the story's chronology) that it actually occurred, the end of the relationship might have come as a complete surprise to the reader. However, in order to induce a sense of anticipatory anxiety in the imagined reader, I decided to embed a narrative fragment in the opening prologue of the memoir to set up the expectation that a dramatic and distressing event would take place within the relationship at some point in the narrative.

Shyness is often experienced as a form of dread; a diffuse, and at times acute, sense of apprehensive anxiety; the persistent anticipation that something bad (in this instance negative evaluation and social rejection) might be about to happen (Saunders & Chester 2008, p. 2650). In narrative terms, triggering a sense of dread in the reader is typically achieved by employing techniques of suspense. In Narratology, Mieke Bal (1985) defines suspense as

the results of the procedures by which the reader or character is made to ask questions which are only answered later... If suspense is to develop then the questions will somehow be recalled repeatedly... suspense can be generated by the announcement of something that will occur later, or by temporary silence concerning information which is needed (p. 160).

By beginning the memoir with a scene that could provoke anxious questions for the reader about the future of my relationship, I was aiming to mirror the shy person's typical experience of persistent low-level anxiety/dread as a technique of suspense.

Author Katherine Harrison uses a similar technique in her memoir The kiss: a secret life (1997). The opening chapter hints at the possibility that the narrator is involved in a sexual relationship with her father. Twenty-five pages later there is another hint, but still no confirmation of the reader's suspicion. It is not until almost seventy pages in that the kiss alluded to in the title, a clearly erotic encounter, comes close to confirming that the father and daughter are going to embark on a sexual relationship. Later, that relationship is eventually described in great detail. But we the readers are left waiting and wondering – in suspense – for a long time. The suspense established in the first chapter is partly about our prurient desire to know the answer to the question 'have they really done it?' and partly about a second series of cascading questions; 'when, how and why did they do it?'

My intention was to induce the same set of dread-infused questions in the mind of the readers of 'The Shyness Lists'. The prologue hints that I am no longer living with my partner, and I am living with great fear: 'I wonder if there's a different term to describe a fear of the reflections to be found in mirrors that no longer reflect you' (p. 4). This opening prologue serves to alert the reader to the existence of a 'threat', as Bal (1985) describes it:
‘A character makes a mistake. Will it realise this in time? ... The information can then be gradually revealed’ (p. 161). Mark Leyner (Lipsyte 2013) describes using the same kind of approach to sustain the reader's interest with a suspenseful narrative:

I’m really after keeping the reader in a heightened state of vigilance, like some kind of animal in a field who senses a hawk, where all the senses are really keyed, almost hyperacute, because I think that’s a condition that will make that reader ... most wonderfully susceptible to what I’m going to do... Now, it seems to me the best way to do this is to ensure that the reader doesn’t know quite what they’re confronting.

Leyner’s description of the vigilant hawk with its hyper-acute senses is an apt metaphor for describing how socially anxious people often feel in company. In order to make the readers of ‘The Shyness Lists’ ‘susceptible’ to the very same emotional state, in the first two-thirds of the memoir I repeatedly remind the reader of the questions that have been raised in the prologue – i.e. what will happens to the relationship, and when – by inserting small details about the ongoing and slightly troubled nature of this relationship. The reason for the change in my relationship status is not revealed until the end of Part One, approximately two-thirds of the way through the book, by which time it is hoped that the emotional stakes of such a schism for an individual with social anxiety – and a concomitant deep fear of rejection – have been firmly established.

The uses of lists

One of the key features of shyness is a perceived loss of control over one’s emotions and physical behaviours when in the midst of a bout of social anxiety (Saunders & Chester 2008, p. 2652). Part of the project of ‘The Shyness Lists’ was to document the strategies I have used to try to regain a sense of control, or agency, when coping with social anxiety, as a record of the lived experience of shyness. One such strategy, for example, has been the use of lists to set goals for engaging in non-shy behaviours, and to record successes (and failures) in this endeavour. Therefore, in an attempt to mirror the experience of shyness for the readers of this memoir, one formal strategy I employed was to insert a series of lists throughout the text: lists of questions, self-descriptions, tasks, anecdotes, definitions of words, and song titles, for example.

This strategy of using lists to convey a non-fiction author’s attempts to gain a sense of control was first recorded at least five thousand years ago. In The lost origins of the essay (2009) editor John D’Agata opens with a list written by a Sumerian man called Ziusudra
who somehow survived after ancient Sumer was dissolved ‘back to mud’ (p. 3). ‘The list of Ziusudra’ offers the reader advice about how to behave in social situations – stay away from quarrels, do not disgrace yourself, do not tell lies (p. 8) – and according to D’Agata it is:

the beginning of... a form that’s not propelled by information, but one compelled instead by individual expression – by inquiry, by opinion, by wonder, by doubt... a mind’s inquisitive ramble through a place wiped clean of answers (p. 4).

It could also be seen as a mind grappling with chaos by trying to impose order: the list as a control mechanism. Umberto Eco poses the question: ‘How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections...’ (Beyer & Gorris 2009, Part One). When one’s own behaviours seem incomprehensible, lists can help to try and make sense of those behaviours. When those incomprehensible behaviours induce fear and shame, then perhaps naming and ordering them can help to de-mystify and strip them of some of their distressing affective load.

Five thousand years after Ziusudra first wrote his list of rules for social behaviour, the list form is more popular than ever. Lists dominate the digital communication realm; as Umberto Eco points out, ‘Google makes a list’ (Beyer & Gorris 2009, Part Two). According to American writer Mark O’Connell, ‘the list is the signature form of our time’ (2013). In an essay entitled ‘10 paragraphs about lists you need in your life right now’ (written in the form of a ten-point list) O’Connell argues that in the 21st century, news media and social media have become colonised by what he calls ‘listicles’. Describing the list form he notes

the tension between its gesturing toward order and its acknowledgement of order’s impossibility. The list – or, more specifically, the listicle – extends a promise of the definitive while necessarily revealing that no such promise could ever be fulfilled. It arises out of a desire to impose order on a life, a culture, a society... (no. 5).

In ‘The Shyness Lists’ the list form is often employed to ‘gesture towards order’ in those moments when I am feeling the impossibility of such order most acutely: in the wake of the relationship break-up, for example, when I list endless tasks I used to distract myself from grief.

It is not just in the digital realm that lists feature as a contemporary form. For instance, the last two essays in John D’Agata’s influential anthology The next American essay (2003), written by Jenny Boully and Joe Wenderoth, are both in the form of lists. American writer David Shields has employed lists in his essays, in his memoir How literature saved my life (2013) and in Reality hunger (2010). In his essay ‘Life story’ (in D’Agata 2003), for
example, Shields gathers together a list of American bumper sticker slogans and uses them to construct a loose story mirroring the arc of a human life from youth to death:

You're only young once, but you can be immature forever...

Choose death (pp. 339–341).

Buried beneath the superficial inanity and feeble punning of these listed quotes lies the profound desire for agency over a life narrative; a list of rules for everyday living not unlike Ziusudra's; a belligerence towards any person the anonymous imaginary narrator believes might try to limit that agency; a futile quest to maintain control:

If this car is being driven recklessly, please call 1800 EAT SHIT...

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do own the whole damn road...

I may be growing old, but I refuse to grow up... (pp. 340, 341).

In 'The Shyness Lists', some lists are similarly used to convey the author's attempts to impose order and assert agency in her life, but other lists acknowledge the absurd futility of such a mission. In a chapter entitled 'What's That', for example, I try to demonstrate the impossibility of controlling how others respond to or understand us by compiling a list of anecdotes that describe the random and absurd ways in which people have misheard the subject matter of my shyness research: 'Chinese', 'shameless', 'Sian-ness'.

Paul Kelly's memoir How to make gravy (2010) is structured as a series of lists within lists. In a self-reflexive gesture towards a series of ‘A to Z’ concerts performed and recorded by this Australian musician in the mid-2000s, the overarching structure of the work is based on an alphabetical list of the author's own songs. The anecdotes and reflections that follow are thematically linked to the lyrics of the songs. Furthermore the list of songs that head up each chapter in part mimic the song-lists that were hand-written by the author and used to guide performances each night during the ‘A-Z’ concerts (images of which are printed in the memoir). Within the broader alphabetical list structure are to be found other lists, such as songs on the theme of Christmas (pp. 205, 206) and lists of the names of other musicians and songwriters (pp. 159, 160). These lists serve to emphasise the importance of the author's vocation as a songwriter to the formation of his identity, as explored within the memoir.

Lists can also be used to try to make sense of the fragmented sense of identity. In 'The Shyness Lists', I have tried to document the sensation of identity disintegration that followed an encounter with my greatest fear: social rejection. I employ an alliterative list
to convey my attempts to control the vertiginous effects of that fragmentation by corralling my identity into a series of identifiable ‘selves’, including Shy Sian, Smart Sian, Silly Sian. Even the alliteration could be seen as an attempt to impose order, or at least an element of ‘sameness’, on things that seem out of control. This list tacitly acknowledges the kaleidoscope of personas with which we present ourselves in the social realm.

Furthermore, lists are employed in ‘The Shyness Lists’ to mirror the form of the advice offered to distressed shy people. At a seminar in Melbourne on social anxiety, for example, I collected a range of information leaflets designed to help those people suffering from social anxiety and social phobia. One was entitled ‘Questions To Ask Your Therapist’ and included a list of forty such questions. Another offered the ‘Ten Commandments To Remember During A Panic Attack’. These lists are aimed at helping anxious people find ways to gain control over their social behaviour, and are mirrored in my list of ‘achievable goals’ in the chapter entitled ‘On Lists’ and the list of ‘Questions You Might Ask Yourself at 3 am’ in the chapter entitled ‘On Textual Intercourse’.

Some lists in the memoir are used to mimic other traditional list forms and/or to offer insights into the history of the author’s identity formation. In the chapter listing ‘ten typical terms’ of ‘psych talk’ I have borrowed from the listing-style and language of the dictionary and the encyclopedia. This list offers the reader an insight into how the clinical language of psychology has influenced the author’s understanding of her emotions and her sense of identity, and her attempts to change her own social behaviours. It could also be seen as an example of what Foucault (1970) describes as ‘the exotic charm of another system of thought’ (p. xv); a gentle, playful mockery of the way the social sciences attempt to systematize the human social behaviours that frequently ‘resist’ our attempts to control them. Mark O’Connell (2013) writes: ‘But even the most definitive-seeming inventories are always undermined by a sense of their own arbitrariness. There’s an absurdity – a hysteria – that lurks between the lines of the most stern and sober of lists’ (no. 6).

Achieving that particular mix of the hysterical and the sober was precisely my aim in the list of ‘Questions you might ask yourself at 3 am’ in the chapter entitled ’Textual Intercourse’. This absurd list of questions about the logistics of infidelity is written in the sober language of clinical inquiry, but is aimed at conveying a state of extreme emotional distress; a textual structure employed to contain an excess of feeling:

Did Tom sit down and write to me after he had chosen and after he had fucked the other woman? I guess that way he wouldn’t have to risk any stray thoughts of me interrupting his manoeuvres. He could send her home and get back to his laptop (p. 143).
Some lists in the memoir are used as a form of self-mockery, to indicate to the reader that the author has some distance from and perspective on her younger self; that she is writing about ‘then’ from the perspective of ‘now’, as Birkerts would describe it (2008, p. 6). The list of ‘Ten things wrong with the world according to Sian Prior’ is a form of self-directed satire that exaggerates, using the distanced third person description, aspects of the author’s (self-perceived) personality.

Author and musician Robert Forster (2009) also uses a list of ‘ten things’. He begins his collection of personal essays with a chapter entitled ‘The 10 rules of rock and roll’ (also the title of the book). This ‘listicle’ offers the reader some of Forster’s tongue-in-cheek insights into the more narcissistic aspects of the rock and roll industry; ‘The guitarist who changes guitars on stage after every third number is showing you his guitar collection’ (p. 5). It also serves to establish Forster’s chosen voice/persona in this collection; ironic, distanced, witty, critical and analytical. In ‘The Shyness Lists’ I have employed some lists as way of gesturing towards my professional persona, by borrowing from the craft of journalism. The ‘list of whens and whats’ in the chapter entitled ‘Goodness Me’, for example, is a nod to the journalist’s oft-quoted task of answering ‘The Five W’s’: when, what, where, who and why. Other lists, such as the list of kindesses from friends in the chapter sub-titled ‘Surprising things that your friends might do’, are used to give what Mark O’Connell (2013) describes as:

> a structure – a numerical narrative – to a text that would otherwise lack any kind of internal architecture... The enumeration itself, the getting to the end of the counting, becomes the point of the writing (and the reading) (no. 8).

There is no particular chronology to the events listed in that passage of the memoir, and it is by no means comprehensive, but ideally it paints an impressionistic picture of a social support system being offered to an individual in a state of extreme emotional distress.

Even the lists of chapter headings in parts one and two of ‘The Shyness Lists’ are intended to convey to the reader aspects of the author’s anxious, perfectionist, controlling personality. I constructed a rigid system of two-word headings in Part One and three-word headings in Part Two, many of which could be described as ‘shy’ headings. They embody in text a tension between revealing and obfuscating, in their apparent reluctance to offer much clear information about each chapter’s contents; a textual structure designed to contain an excess of feeling; formal rigidity designed to provide a contrast to the lyrical confessional style of the chapters. Often these chapter headings also set up a small riddle for the reader to solve by the chapter’s end, to ‘make sense’ of the choice of title. This
pranksterish approach to chapter headings is intended to reassure the reader that the author has been sufficiently transformed by the journey of self-discovery chronicled in the autobiographical work that she is now able to joke about it; that she has been able to assert her agency in the writing of the memoir.

The chapter entitled 'Four Thirty Three’ not only quotes one of the times at which the author wakes in a panic – ‘At 2:21. At 4:33. And again at 6:11.’ (p. 139) – but it also references a musical composition entitled ‘4’33”’ by American composer John Cage. His provocative 1952 work consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. Cage’s work was partly driven by the intention to have audiences reflect on a lack of silence, on the ever-present noise of the body and its nervous system (when the heart is racing with anxiety, for example). The chapter title is an elliptical but playful nod to the silence at the end of the phone call described in this chapter – ‘there are several long minutes of silence’ (p. 140) – and to Tom’s self-description in the phone conversation as feeling like he is ‘in a cage’ (p. 139). Humour is applied as an astringent in an attempt to dilute any residual self-pity in this emotion-laden scene.

Finally, using the word 'lists' in the title of 'The Shyness Lists' privileges this formal technique above all others, signalling to the readers that they may find many of the answers to the questions (overt and implied) posed in the memoir with a close study of these lists. I wanted a title whose combination of words made no immediate sense to the uninitiated; a title to pique interest from a position of ignorance, just as my interest in shyness had been piqued by my own ignorance; a title which was itself a riddle to be solved, just as shyness has been a riddle for me to solve; a textual evocation of the bewildering experience of shyness.

In summary, my inquiry into the affordances of memoir has demonstrated how a writer can employ elements of form to communicate key features of and ideas relating to their memoir’s subject matter. In order to write about shyness so that readers would resonate with my experiences, it was necessary to impart both narrative and non-narrative knowledge in 'The Shyness Lists'. By analysing a range of published autobiographical texts I have offered evidence for the claim that something needs to be 'at stake' in a successful memoir. Further, I have argued that a sequential narrative can be the most appropriate choice of structure when dramatic events take place in the life of a memoirist during the writing of their memoir, in order to convey what happened ‘then, ‘now' and ‘right now'. By deploying the list form it is possible to evoke the socially anxious person's typical desire for more control over their emotions and their life narrative.
In the following chapter I will re-visit this idea of the shy person's desire for more control by analysing how a range of life writers have explored the power of the body to shape identity, and investigating the affordances of the 'embodied' story in conveying to the reader of a shyness memoir the particular corporeal features of social anxiety.
CHAPTER FOUR
Writing the shy body: tracing corporeal history in memoir

In Paul Auster’s memoir Winter journal, the author states ‘Writing begins in the body, it is in the music of the body’ (2012, p. 224). As Auster observes, the impulse to write often comes from the desire to express our corporeal history in words. The piece of writing that initially inspired ‘The Shyness Lists’ was an eight-hundred word description I wrote of how shyness felt in my body during a party at which I suffered a bout of extreme social anxiety. In The affect theory reader (eds Gregg & Seigworth 2010), Australian cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn asserts ‘[w]riting is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers’ (p. 76). Probyn’s and Auster’s statements are both accurate descriptions of that initial impulse behind my ‘writing shyness’ project. The memoir-in-full became a vehicle for tracing how living in a shy body for four and a half decades had profoundly shaped my sense of identity.

**Bodies have stories**

This project aims to testify to the lived experience of shyness (or social anxiety), and to generate empathy in the non-shy reader and self-recognition and self-understanding in the shy reader. To attempt to achieve those aims, I contend, it was necessary to convey to the reader the very particular corporeal features of shyness; to interrogate the ways in which our emotions are experienced and inscribed in our bodies and our temperament traits are manifest in our emotional and physical responses to being in company; and to explore how the socially anxious body manifests the shy self. As Laura de Nerveaux-Gavoty points out in Writing the self: essays on autobiography and autofiction (Shands et al, 2015), most autobiographical texts ‘tend to assert the primacy of the mind at the expense of the body, and to show the former in control of the latter’ (p. 258). Shyness is a temperament trait that can manifest in, at times, debilitating physical symptoms. Writing a memoir about shyness therefore requires an acknowledgement of the complex interplay of corporeality and textuality involved in the construction of the shy self (p. 258).
As Paul John Eakin argues in his essay 'What are we reading when we read autobiography?' (2004), the self is 'first and last of and about the body; to speak of the embodied self would be redundant, for there is no other' (p. 126). Eakin's prolific and detailed analyses of the body's role in manifesting a sense of self, and in articulating autobiography, have informed my inquiry into writing the shy body. 'Our bodily existence is the central fact of our mental life,' Eakin writes. 'Bodies have stories' and play an important part in 'our endless fashioning of identity narratives, our performance of the autobiographical act' (2005, p. 154).

How, then, might one offer the reader an insight into the corporeal experience of shyness, and how might the reader's body respond when he/she is reading an autobiographical narrative about a shy body? Phillip Lopate, in the introduction to The art of the personal essay (1995), refers explicitly to the reading and responding body when he analyses what makes a successful personal essay. If the essayist

stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece... will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition – equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror – which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward (pp.xxv–xxvi).

From Lopate’s description of the reading body we learn that readers often long to feel what the writer has felt; that reading is at times a search for the visceral experience of empathy. In The made-up self (2010), Carl Klaus uses a similar metaphor in referring to the physical effect of the ‘voice-print’ of a personal essayist:

even when I’m silently reading an essay, I often find myself resonating with something that’s hauntingly akin to the sound of a person’s voice, as if another person inside my head is talking to me (p. 45).

Both Lopate and Klaus judge the quality of personal narrative non-fiction writing, in part, by the effect (real or imagined) it has on (or in) their bodies as they read. Ander Monson, in his essay 'Voir dire' (Monson 2010), imagines the memoir-reader's experience as a kind of 'habitation' of the writer's corporeal experience: 'inhabiting their experience allows us to share it, know it. This is called collective knowing' (p. 13). Part of my project has been an attempt to induce a kind of 'collective knowing' about shyness in the bodies of my imagined readers, and to convey how the corporeal experience of shyness has impacted on the construction of the 'self' whose unfolding consciousness is traced in this memoir.
Why the body matters

Before the question of how to write the shy body, however, there is another question: why is the body particularly relevant when writing about shyness?

As Smith and Watson (2010) have noted, ‘life writing about the body has… enabled people to confront the destiny of the ill or impaired body; their own or someone else’s’ (p. 53). Because social anxiety manifests in the body as well as the mind, it can be experienced as a form of physical impairment. Smith and Watson (2010) point out that ‘the body has always been there in life writing as the source and site of autobiographical utterance’:

By exploring the body and embodiment as sites of knowledge and knowledge production, life writers do several things. They negotiate cultural norms determining the proper uses of bodies. They engage, contest and revise laws and norms determining the relationship of bodies to specific sites, behaviours and destinies...’ (p. 64).

Throughout ‘The Shyness Lists’ I explored my body as a site – and source – of knowledge about the experience of social anxiety. Telling stories about my body enabled me to reveal some of the struggles I had engaged with as I tried (in vain) to ‘re-model’ my identity as a non-shy person.

According to psychologists Ronald Rapee and Richard Heimberg (1997), shyness is a temperament trait that exists on a spectrum, with the most shy amongst us being situated on the withdrawal end of the ‘approach-withdrawal’ continuum. They describe the manifestation of shyness as a form of social anxiety (or, at its most extreme, social phobia) that usually provokes a range of physical symptoms from blushing, trembling, sweating, hyperventilating and feeling physically stiff to hyper-vigilance and hyper-awareness of one’s physical presence in social environments (p. 744). Shyness induces intense physical self-consciousness; a perpetual state of performance anxiety when in company. The shy person’s mental preoccupation with how they are being perceived (and judged) by others stimulates the physical symptoms listed above via the autonomic nervous system. The visible aspects of arousal (blushing, trembling, etc.) can in turn increase a person’s feelings of self-consciousness. In social situations, the shy body can easily become caught up in a distressing feedback loop of awkwardness and discomfort. Over years, even decades, these repeated experiences of anxiety-related distress (and the mere anticipation of these experiences) can become inscribed upon the body. In the process, they can become part of the construction of a life narrative and an identity. Deciphering these inscriptions upon my own body, and embodying them in text, has been a key focus of this autoethnographic inquiry.
"Why write about a real body?"

When I decided to embark on an investigation of the writing of shyness, the option of doing so through fiction was available to me. I could have chosen to write a novel or a series of linked short stories with a shy main character, drawing on my own experiences. Alternatively, I could have written an informative book in a journalistic style, with a narrating voice that was objective, clinical, authoritative and distanced from the subject matter. In planning the practice-based research project for my PhD in Creative Writing, though, I chose instead to embark upon an autobiographical work. In life writing the author usually employs a first person voice that, according to Vivian Gornick, 'must identify openly with those very same defenses and embarrassments that the novelist or the poet is once removed from' (Gornick 2001, p. 7).

In the preface to her memoir A life's work (2001) Rachael Cusk writes:

> You listen to a made-up story with a reflective, passive, interpretive ear. But an account of real events arouses you more physically: it actively engages your fears, your capacity for courage or terror, your outrage, your jealousy, your sympathy (p. 2).

It is precisely this kind of physical arousal – this engagement with – the shy body that I was interested in provoking in readers of 'The Shyness Lists'. As Smith and Watson note, 'life narrators are multiply embodied: in the body as a neuro-chemical system; (and) in the anatomical body...' (p. 50). They are further 'embodied', I would argue, in the 'body of work' they remember and reproduce in their life narratives; 'the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied' (Smith & Watson 2010 p. 49). In part, my decision to explore shyness in life writing was based on an intuitive understanding that to immerse my readers in the experience of the shy body I needed to immerse myself, both emotionally and physically, in the subjective experience of shyness; to literally write from inside the shy body. David Shields (2010) argues that in non-fiction

> the mediation between writer and reader is thinner (than in fiction). Serious non-fiction removes fiction’s masks, stripping away monuments to civilization to arrive at truths that destroy the writer and thereby encompass the reader... (p. 149).

As a way of engaging in self-reflective practice, I needed to simultaneously inhabit and reveal the shy narrator, unprotected by a fictional mask or a distanced journalistic stance, so that I could risk critical judgement from an imagined audience with every sentence. Both the act of writing a confessional memoir about shyness and the act of imagining it being read by invisible readers could therefore be seen as forms of physical immersion in
the symptoms of the anxiety that lies at the heart of shyness: the pervasive fear of negative evaluation by others.

**Non-fiction precedents for writing the shy body**

In order to discover how other self-described shy memoirists have written about their bodies, I examined the work of four memoirists who have tried to convey the corporeal experience of dealing with social anxiety. 2

New Zealand writer Janet Frame refers often to the physical manifestations of shyness in the second part of her three-part autobiography, *An angel at my table* (1987). In Chapter Two, for example, Frame describes herself arriving at her Aunt Isy’s house in Dunedin where she is to live while she goes to college. ‘I stood smiling my shy smile which was more close-lipped than usual...’ (pp. 21–24). Her unflattering description of herself as ‘close-lipped’ is typical of the way self-consciousness often leads shy people to stand outside themselves, critically observing their own physical appearance and social behaviour. Frame describes herself as ‘too shy to sit with Aunty Isy in the small dining room by the fire’, and instead eating by herself in her room. Ashamed to admit her ‘anxiety’ and ‘timidity’, Frame uses the excuse that she is ‘the girl with the tiny appetite’, and as a result she is ‘often hungry’. In this instance, acute shyness leads the author to starve her body of the nutrition it requires rather than have to force herself to be sociable with her own relatives (p. 23).

The possibility of sexual engagement with her fellow students remains out of reach for Frame. She describes herself as ‘sexually curious as well as ignorant’ (p. 16) and as someone who longs to take part in the erotic life of the university. But she remains a shy outsider, looking on:

> They – we – the quieter ones – talked of the wilder exploits of certain other students, enviously noting who ‘went with’ a medical student, for medical students were said to ‘know everything’ about sex’ (p. 31).

---

2. I also examined a number of novels whose main characters were shy and in which the impact of shyness on those characters’ bodies was a feature of the character portraits. These included Sue Saliba’s *Something in the world called love* (2008), Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), Amy Witting’s *I for Isobel* (1989), Fiona Wood’s *Six Impossible Things* (2010), Georgia Blain’s *Closed for Winter* (1998) and Deborah Robertson’s *Careless* (2007). However I decided to limit the focus of my analysis to depictions of the shy body in memoirs, as these were most pertinent to my inquiry.
In Chapter Four, Frame describes a journey to Central Otago where she goes strawberry picking. There, she tells us, ‘the farmer’s sons were like younger gods: I watched their faces, studied their hands, arms, legs, glancing briefly but often at the bulge... between their legs’ (p. 35). For Frame, though, there are ‘invisible boundaries’ between their bulging bodies and her shy one. Instead her physical longings are projected onto the New Zealand landscape, with its ‘naked hills covered only in their folds by their own shadow’ (p. 35).

Frame’s physical self-consciousness and restraint is contrasted with detailed descriptions of the body of her extrovert younger sister Isabel, a girl who makes friends – and finds handsome boyfriends – easily, and who exhibits a sense of physical freedom that separates her from her shy sister: ‘I think her separation from me was accomplished in those evenings when she skated spinning round and round the rink almost as if unwinding an anchoring thread from her body’ (p. 42). Frame’s body, however, remains wound up, entrapped by her awkwardness and her fears of physical proximity with other humans. At a dance she is partnered by a boy called Morrie but is unable to prevent her treacherous body from revealing its anxiety: ‘I enjoyed the otherness of his presence beside me but we were both too shy and when we glanced at each other his face was a dusky red and mine, I know, had its self-conscious blush’ (p. 44). For the young Janet Frame, shyness creates a kind of corporeal prison from which she is unable to escape.

American opera singer Renee Fleming, another self-described shy person, describes the physical inhibitions that impeded her stage performances early in her career in the memoir The inner voice (2004). As with Janet Frame, allowing her body to behave in an overtly sexual way seems to be an impossible task for Fleming:

> My extreme inhibitions prevented me from displaying any of the sass and sway needed for a seductive Musetta [...] ‘Just walk across the stage and swing your hips.’ But I couldn’t manage even that. Musetta, of course, is a legendary coquette, and I was a famously shy girl from upstate (p. 36).

Fleming perceived her shyness as a physical and emotional hurdle that had to be overcome before she could achieve self-actualisation as an opera singer. The tone of her physical self-description is self-critical, her attitude one of shame: ‘I couldn’t even manage that’ (p. 36). She describes her body as having been ‘a quivering bowl of Jell-O’ (p. 50) and herself as unable to control the impact of her emotions on her anxious body. Fleming felt she needed to grow more thick-skinned if she was to get through life: ‘All of my emotions sat too close to the skin, and I needed to rein them in’ (p. 50). Her
A treacherous shy body lets her down in the very moment when her career progression depends on that body's cooperation.

The idea of the shy person's skin as somehow inadequate for the task of social survival is also employed in Australian author Kate Holden's memoir *In my skin* (2005). Holden conjures the fight/flight response that usually accompanies the experience of social anxiety, and conveys the loss of physical control that shy people often feel when in the presence of others, in this description of her blushing teenage face: 'I faltered. I withdrew behind my long hair, lowered my face. I could never quite understand what my new friends saw in me, gauche, try-hard, blushing with my gummy smile' (p. 7).

As with Frame and Fleming, the physical self-consciousness and the visible autonomic nervous system symptoms that accompanied Holden's social anxiety lead to a sense of shame, a loss of confidence and a self-critical attitude in the shy author. Unlike Frame, however, sex offers Holden temporary escape from her shyness. Her career as a sex-worker allows her to inhabit – and hide behind – the skin, and the professional persona, of 'Lucy' the prostitute (Holden 2005). Lucy's body is cooperative rather than treacherous; sexually attractive rather than hunched with anxiety; her skin providing 'shy Kate' with a mask to hide behind:

I was Lucy, but Lucy was not me: she had my stories, but she bragged when I would not have bragged, she felt satisfactions that I would not have. Lucy was braver than I, more open, behind her mask (p. 239).

When Holden was 'performing' the role of Lucy the sex-worker, the internal voice that usually criticised her physical appearance was replaced with a voice of praise, even erotic self-love: 'So I bought a luscious crimson velvet grown... In it I looked like a queen... My breasts jutted out in the push-up bras; even I wanted to hold them they were so appealingly voluptuous' (p. 241).

In the prologue to her book *Brave: a memoir of overcoming shyness* (2010) Canadian author Helen Rivas-Rose describes her body as 'semi-paralyzed' by shyness:

I looked down and saw my pathetic lonely self at forty-one years of age and, after a moment, saw that self standing next to me at age eighty-two, white-haired and withered, still not knowing people (p. 2).

Describing her childhood she relates an episode in which she is enrolled in a ballet class: 'probably to help me along'. However instead of overcoming her shyness, the author tells us that performing the delicate movements required by the ballet class 'made me feel
clumsy and self-conscious’ (p 15). In the company of other humans her body is a source of shame and embarrassment to her. In contrast, when she is alone or with her horse Jenny, the author feels physically liberated, and the body becomes a space of hope: ‘I loved snow eddying around my eyes... I felt alive, strong and fearless...nimble as Tarzan’ (pp. 44–46). Like Kate Holden, Rivas-Rose’s body was temporarily liberated from anxiety by sexual desire. Describing an encounter with a teenage boyfriend, she writes, ‘looking into his eyes, an electric current subdued my worries. His kisses relaxed me and freed me from loneliness’ (pp. 61, 62).

All four memoirists discussed above describe the distress they feel when their body asserts itself as an autonomous entity (Nervaux-Gavoty 2015, p. 259). They depict their shy bodies as lacking agency, ambushed by the debilitating symptoms of social anxiety, and all three are intensely critical of their body’s apparent treachery – characteristics that are typical of the shy person’s experience of their body. These memoirists have all chosen to foreground the corporeal experience of shyness in constructing a life narrative for themselves.

**The shy body and metaphor**

Author and medical doctor Leah Kaminsky, in a short online essay on writing about pain, argues that ‘in order to imagine a character’s pain, a writer needs to empathise with them, and truly get under their skin’ (2014). I would elaborate on this statement: in order for a reader to imagine a character’s pain – in order for there to be an exchange of subjectivities between reader and character – the writer needs to find ways to engage the reader’s empathy so the reader can truly get under the skin of the characters. As the psychologists explain, one of the defining characteristics of social anxiety is the level of distress – both emotional and physical – experienced by sufferers. In order to write about shyness so that readers can ‘get under the skin’ of the shy characters, then, it is essential to convey how these forms of distress feel in the shy body.

In her essay Kaminsky describes turning to the poetry of Emily Dickinson in order to find fresh language with which to describe pain: ‘The use of fresh metaphors... adds depth to expressions of physical pain and enables us to share the experience at a deeper level of understanding and empathise more with suffering’ (p. 1).

In a similar way I have sought to pay attention to the details of the experience of shyness, and to find metaphors to convey the physical and emotional distress of social anxiety in
'The Shyness Lists' to invite the reader to get ‘under my skin’. Drawing on my own memories, I began to explore in text the loss of physical agency that often accompanies shyness; the sense of alienation from one’s own body when one’s autonomic nervous system goes into overdrive; the hot flush of shame that is so often produced in the body of the shy person as they recognize the all-too-familiar symptoms that are overtaking them. What emerged was a series of metaphors relating to agency, alienation, pathology and shame.

In the first chapter of 'The Shyness Lists', for example, I imagine shyness as a kind of poison being administered to my body by an unknown enemy. Later in the memoir, the idea of shyness as poison is broadened to include other metaphors of affliction and pathology. In the chapter entitled ‘The Final Interview’, for example, I draw a direct comparison between my social anxiety and a psychiatric condition called ‘body identity integrity disorder’ to explain why I have tried to extricate myself from my shyness. This metaphor directly acknowledges the experience of acute social anxiety as a physical affliction (though often an invisible one) as well as a form of psychological distress.

As my research revealed, at times the pathological impact of shyness on the body is literal rather than figurative. In order to convey the long-term impacts of shyness on the narrator’s health, in some sections of the memoir the connections between shyness and pathology are interrogated through a series of fragmented narratives in which personal anecdotal material is woven together with ‘expert’ content, a creative process that draws both on experiential knowledge and on external, researched sources of information. In a chapter on the effects of social anxiety on the human digestive system, for example, information gleaned from a talk by an expert on the so-called 'brain-gut axis' is braided together with anecdotes about the history of my own digestive problems. I describe Melbourne psychologist Dr Simon Knowles giving a public talk in which he lists the risk factors associated with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a condition from which socially anxious people frequently suffer. This interrogation of the pathological impact of shyness on my digestive system details how decades of social anxiety have left a corporeal inscription more permanent than an ink tattoo.

Other chapters of the memoir reference more fleeting and unpredictable pathological symptoms of shyness, including ‘globus hystericus’, a spasmodic sensation of tightness in the throat that afflicts my body in periods of intense shyness, in particular when anxiety has led to a loss of verbal or emotional agency. Pathological physical symptoms such as these are examples of how shyness can lead to a loss of corporeal agency. At times,
however, the psychological symptoms of shyness, such as awkward self-consciousness, can also manifest as physically disempowering. Psychologists Peter Saunders and Andrea Chester describe chronic shyness as debilitating: an ‘inhibition that interferes significantly with participation in desired activities’ (Saunders & Chester 2008, p. 2651). This medical condition is anthropomorphised and characterised as having power over the shy person's body, power that the shy person herself lacks.

**Shyness and metamorphosis**

In 'The Shyness Lists' I have drawn on the idea of the metamorphosis of the shy body to convey the shy person’s longing to be transformed; the body as a space of hope. In the chapter entitled ‘The Lump’ I refer to the marble blocks from which Michelangelo carved his religious sculptures, drawing a connection between these imagined, immobilised figures and the physical rigidity of the shy body. Like the as-yet-unrevealed figures awaiting the artist's chisel to free them from their solid rock casing, the shy person is imagined as physically entrapped, longing for metamorphosis and hoping for the chance to escape the casing of awkward self-consciousness and emerge fully formed into the waiting world as their ‘true self’. While this metaphor renders shyness as a form of solidity, other physical metamorphoses described in the memoir reference liquid states, including: the visceral sensation of liquefaction that can accompany an anxiety reaction; the shy body temporarily liberated from anxiety through the liquefying sensation of sexual desire; the socially anxious person longing to be limpid, a liquid state defined as 'absolutely serene and untroubled'; the shy body frozen solid by fear and self-consciousness; and the way the shy body's experience of being weighed down by anxiety can be temporarily assuaged by the relative weightlessness of immersion in liquid, through swimming and surfing.

Other imagined metamorphoses in ‘The Shyness Lists’ play with the idea of Otherness: the shy body in front of the mirror transformed into an insect, scuttling around like Kafka’s (1972) character Gregor; the shy body in front of the camera transformed into a slow-blinking tortoise; the shy body imagined as a human body surrounded by the bodies of threatening aliens, or an alien body surrounded by threatening humans. All of these metaphors are employed to convey to the reader the sense of dissociation that can accompany the physical experience of social anxiety.
My research into the psychology of social anxiety revealed that the concept of audience is critical to the experience of shyness, with many socially anxious people describing 'concerns that people are watching and evaluating them [...] because there exists [...] the potential for negative evaluation by the audience' (Rapee & Spence 2004, p. 744). Could invisibility provide the solution to this problem of the imagined critical scrutiny of the shy body?

The longing for disembodiment, or for the erasure of the shy body, is examined in a chapter of the memoir entitled 'Invisible Me' where I describe attending a music camp as a teenager and imagine the physical freedom invisibility would bestow. A later chapter entitled ‘Virtual Self’ examines the potentially benign effects on the shy body of corporeal ‘invisibility’ in the context of internet dating. The longing for invisibility is also traced through my professional career, when in a chapter entitled 'The Wireless' I describe working as a radio broadcaster, a profession in which ‘protected by my cloak of invisibility, freed from physical self-consciousness, I could be a confident, articulate, disembodied voice (p.105). In the chapter entitled ‘Don’t Look’ my physical invisibility as a radio presenter is contrasted with my acute physical self-consciousness in front of cameras, the ‘mirror with a memory’ in front of which I can never be (or imagine myself to be) invisible: 'The camera stares malevolently back at me. Mute. I never did get a gig on television' (p. 129).

If, as the social anxiety experts contend, the shy person’s body endures something akin to a state of constant performance anxiety, then being in front of a camera and its unknown audience – or indeed portraying yourself textually for unknown readers – could be seen as a kind of exposure therapy for a socially anxious person.

Exposure therapy

Elspeth Probyn asserts that ‘writing affects bodies. Writing takes its toll on the body that writes and the bodies that read or listen’ (eds Gregg & Seigworth 2010, p. 76). I have been curious to understand how the act of writing a confessional memoir about shyness might affect the shy body, and how that might in turn influence the storytelling in the memoir. To write a first person memoir about shyness for an imagined critical readership could be viewed as a strategic act of deliberate immersion in the very same feelings about which you are trying to write: shame, self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation.
To return briefly to the idea of shame: in a chapter in *The affect theory reader* (eds Gregg & Seigworth 2010) entitled ‘Writing shame’, Elspeth Probyn describes herself experiencing shame *as she was writing about* shame in her 2005 book *Blush: faces of shame*:

Shame is a painful thing to write about... I was experiencing the terror of not being equal to the interest of my subject. The idea that I would not interest readers triggered what seemed to be a mix of fear and shame... There is a shame in being highly interested in something and unable to convey it to others, to evoke the same degree of interest in them and to convince them that it is warranted. The risk of writing is always that you will fail to engage or interest readers (pp. 72–73).

As discussed in Chapter One of this exegesis, in order to convey the experience of shyness, it was necessary to ‘perform’ (or inhabit) the voice that most authentically embodied that experience: the shamed, confessional, self-critical persona anxiously anticipating negative evaluation (including from the reader) and ineffectually longing to escape the confines of their shy body. In the chapter entitled ‘The Final Interview’, the narrator imagines herself being grilled by an invisible interviewer, an anonymous ‘character’ who questions the veracity of some of the personal anecdotes that have been related in the memoir and accuses the author of being passive, vengeful, melodramatic and even unoriginal. At one point in the dialogue, the narrator is described as blushing in response to this grilling, her invisible body betraying her shame and self-consciousness in the midst of this inquisition. This narrative strategy is aimed at engendering empathy in the reader for the lived experience of shyness.

In summary, testifying to the lived experience of shyness in a work of personal narrative non-fiction has involved an exploration of the corporeal features of shyness, and an interrogation of the ways in which our emotions are experienced and inscribed in our bodies and our temperament traits are manifest in our emotional and physical responses to being in company. If, as psychologists contend, a key feature of shyness is intense self-consciousness, then it is important to note that self-consciousness is not only cognitive but also affective and emotional, as in self-feelings (Barbalet 2005, p. 125) and that the quest to understand and convey shy self-consciousness involves a quest for a kind of body-knowledge. In ‘The Shyness Lists’ I endeavoured to meet these challenges by weaving together narrative and non-narrative knowledge and employing metaphors of alienation, pathology and metamorphosis to convey the findings of my own personal quest for body-knowledge. In this way I also endeavoured to remind readers of their own embodiment and ‘push the potential of life narrative to capture lived experience through... the senses’ (Smith & Watson 2010, p. 53).
Thus, the memoir that begins with a true story about a physical immersion in feelings of anxious self-consciousness at a party ends with a self-prescribed imagined immersion in that very same state; a staged textual exposure of ‘Shy Sian’ to the thing she fears the most – negative evaluation. Further, by describing this imagined exposure therapy to readers of the memoir I can potentially provoke in those readers a visceral empathic response – a ‘shiver of recognition’, a ‘collective knowing’ – a writing of shyness into the body of the reader.
CONCLUSION

'The Shyness Lists': a contribution to knowledge

This creative practice doctoral project in the field of narrative non-fiction has involved several sites of inquiry, and therefore several overlapping methodological approaches for each stage of the research. In this exegesis I have recorded the process of creative inquiry that followed the initial phase of research into the current understanding of shyness/social anxiety within the social sciences. I have contributed to the advancement of knowledge in the field of life writing by fashioning a range of writing personas to illuminate the anxieties, self-consciousness and professional masks of the self-identified shy memoirist; by identifying how to employ those anxieties, that self-consciousness and those masks in the writing process; and, by representing in a memoir a deeper understanding of the nature of shyness as a temperament trait, as a form and/or a source of identity performance, as an evolving and contested attribute of character over time and within different cultures, and as a lived, visceral human experience.

Ander Monson, in his essay ‘Voir dire’ (2010), writes about the need to consider form; to examine the inherent instability and self-serving nature of the first person authorial phenomenon; and to tell a compelling story that includes ‘the unreliability, the misrememberings, the act of telling in starts and stops, the fuckups, the pockmarked surface of the I ... that which engages the whole reader’ (p. 17). ‘The Shyness Lists’ has emerged as a textual performance of the shy self, and a representation of the self as a cumulative construct of the selective and serendipitous memories and ‘misrememberings’ of a shy life. Employing the memoir form has afforded me the opportunity to develop and articulate in text a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of my own narrative identity as a way of elucidating for readers the concept of multiple public personas who ‘perform’ different versions of the self in different contexts (for example ‘Shy Sian’ and ‘Professional Sian’). By employing elements of form and style I have demonstrated how it is possible for a memoirist to evoke and ‘mirror’ the particular qualities of their subject matter; in this instance, key features of shyness/social anxiety, revealed in research and confirmed by an individual’s lived experience, and reflected in the voice, form and structure of a life writing project about shyness.
In closely examining a number of other relevant autobiographical works, I have offered evidence for the assertion (Monson 2010) that one of the memoirist’s key tasks is to clearly establish what is ‘at stake’ for the narrator in his or her memoir. Investigating this assertion enabled me to make the difficult but necessary decision to include a description of my relationship break-up in the memoir, as a way of revealing the ‘stakes’ for a shy person when they encounter social rejection. As a reflective practitioner I have discovered how to articulate my tacit understanding of social anxiety, and how to weave it together with the expert knowledge of social scientists, privileging neither, in order to create an evocative but accessible text with which to immerse readers in the lived experience of shyness.

Reflections on the uses of memoir

Why do we read memoir? This is the question posed by American author Beth Kephart in her essay 'The signifying life: in praise of the outward-looking memoir' (2013). Kephart’s answer could also be interpreted as a response to the question: why do we write memoir? It refers in part to the idea of the relationship between the memoirist and their reader:

Because memoir at its very best is the start of a conversation. It makes its interest in readers explicit, offering not just a series of life events, but a deliberate suggestion of what it is to be a human being... True memoir is a singular life transformed into a signifying life... a writer acknowledging that he or she is not the only one in the room (p. 1).

In conducting an autoethnographic inquiry into shyness I have employed the memoir form (to borrow Kephart’s simile) as a way of beginning a ‘conversation’ with readers about shyness. Writing ‘The Shyness Lists’ has enabled me to demonstrate the affordances of memoir as a way of illustrating ‘new perspectives on personal experience—on epiphanies—by finding and filling a “gap” in existing, related storylines’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, section 3).

There is, however, an unavoidable irony here. In contemporary English-speaking societies the term ‘shyness’ often conjures a range of popular stereotypes and clichés, most of them associated with quietness, hesitancy, self-effacement, non-communicativeness, lack of agency, even voicelessness: ‘shy and retiring’, for example. One writing mentor suggested to me that I could consider representing shyness with a blank page: the textual equivalent of silence. Psychologists confirm that individuals who suffer from social anxiety (Saunders & Chester 2008) can often be reluctant to express themselves in social situations,
eschewing intimate self-revelation for fear of being negatively evaluated. As Saunders and Chester point out, ‘it is easier for a shy person to say nothing than to risk disapproval or rejection from others’ (p. 2650). In other words, shy people often try to avoid ‘the start of a conversation’.

Although people with social anxiety may often appear reticent to communicate in social situations, according to psychologists this reticence does not mean that they do not long to be able to share their thoughts and experiences with others; that they do not strive to overcome their fears and to find strategies in order to be able to do so. Within this inquiry I have found a ‘voice’ (or ‘voices’) with which to describe the experience of living with shyness/social anxiety. This phrase has a dual meaning within the context of this project: firstly, to counter the stereotype of the silent shy person by breaking that silence; and secondly, to testify in the first person to the experience of social anxiety. I chose to start what I consider a deeply self-revealing conversation, both with my ‘selves’ and with my readers, in the form of a memoir in part because I wanted to let my readers know that, although shy people often remain silent, it is not usually because they have nothing to say; in most cases they do have an ‘interest’ in other people.

To employ another of Kephart’s terms, in the beginning of ‘The Shyness Lists’, my ‘interest in my readers’ at first appears to be a conflicted one. On the one hand, I confess my anxiety about the imagined reader’s evaluation of my character, and my antipathy towards the self-help genre. On the other hand, I flirt reluctantly with the idea that this memoir might indeed be a self-help book, to be used as such by myself as its author, in a therapeutic sense, and by those of my readers who might be looking for insights into the causes of, and possible cures for, social anxiety. This ambivalence is enacted most clearly in the dialogue between the two authorial ‘personas’ appearing in the chapter entitled ‘The Final Interview’:

I have one last question for you. Why are you so down on helpfulness? Maybe it’s not such a bad thing... In spite of your reservations, maybe this could be a self-help book after all, for other shy people’ (p. 171).

At the conclusion of this research project this ambivalence has been resolved. I have attempted to demonstrate how a hybrid text such as this can function both as a memoir and as a ‘self-help memoir’, operating in the space between two different genres and embracing an aesthetic of between-ness. According to Horsdal (2012), ‘we identify emotionally with narratives of personal experience’, and we use ‘the vicarious experience embedded in narratives as analogies and parables when we confront new experiences we
do not immediately understand’ (p. 26). I hope that the stories in ‘The Shyness Lists’ have the potential to help shy readers who identify with these stories to better understand, and therefore better deal with, their social anxiety. I also hope that the vicarious experiences of shyness embedded in this work provide useful insights for those who don’t see themselves as shy, in their encounters with people who are socially anxious. Given this project has been framed as an autoethnographic inquiry, potential ‘usefulness’ is surely a key question in determining the project’s success. According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011):

An autoethnography can also be judged in terms of whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or the author’s own. In particular, autoethnographers ask: ‘How useful is the story?’ and ‘To what uses might the story be put?’ (section 4).

In relation to the usefulness of the inquiry for the life of this particular author, it is worth noting that since the conclusion of the writing process for ‘The Shyness Lists’ I have experienced a noticeable decrease in the level and frequency of my own bouts of social anxiety. The insights I have gained have ‘improved’ my life to the extent that they have reconciled me to the idea that I am shy whilst simultaneously (and ironically) lessening my shyness-related distress in most social situations. As Smith and Watson (2010) note, ‘in the contemporary culture of self-help, some people are... drawn to personal narratives of debasement and recovery as models for conversion, survival and self-transformation’ (p. 124). To that list of models I would add ‘self-acceptance’. Although it is not possible for me to determine whether or how the work has ‘improved’ the lives of its readers, it is also worth noting that since the commercial publication of Shy: a memoir (Prior 2014) – the version of ‘The Shyness Lists’ published by Text Publishing – I have received dozens of emails from self-described shy readers. Many of these correspondents have expressed relief at having had the reasons for the distressing and at times incomprehensible symptoms of their social anxiety explained to them in this memoir. They have been able to situate themselves within a wider community of imagined shy people. They have also expressed anticipation that the insights they have gained from the memoir may lessen their distress, aid their quest for self-acceptance, and allow them to speak more openly with their friends, relatives and work colleagues about their shyness.

Put simply, these readers are finding the memoir useful because it contains information they can use. Their emails offer evidence that the published version of this text has opened a site of agency for some of its readers, in the form of an imagined community of other socially anxious individuals (Smith & Watson 2010 p. 57). Ellis, Adams and Bochner
(2011) contend that the ‘questions most important to autoethnographers are: who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?’ [5]. The emails I have received from readers since the publication of my memoir have provided anecdotal evidence that some readers have been affected positively by the published outcome of this autoethnographic inquiry, and that it has stimulated further conversations about shyness/social anxiety for them.

According to Vivian Gornick (Shields 2010) ‘Writing enters into us when it gives us information about ourselves we’re in need of at the time we’re reading’ (p. 156). I would add, in re-phrasing this statement, that often writing emerges from us when it can give us the information about ourselves we’re in need of at the time we’re writing it. Writing ‘The Shyness Lists’ has involved a journey of personal transformation for this author. My sense of identity has shifted away from that of an intensely self-critical, socially anxious journalist to a more self-forgiving, less socially anxious life writer. This transformation has been facilitated, at least in part, by the insights and the information about shyness – and in particular about my shyness – I have gathered over the course of the inquiry.

**When the intellect meets the imagination**

With this research project I set myself the goal of both building on and at the same time challenging my creative practice as a non-fiction writer. Earlier in this exegesis I described the method by which I conducted the research for, and the writing of, this project as somewhat ‘disorderly’. As a journalist whose professional practice has relied on a high degree of orderliness in both research and writing, the discovery of a less formulaic and more unpredictable approach to non-fiction writing has been both revelatory and transformational. In producing a text that is longer, more self-revealing, more exploratory, more experimental, and yet more rigorously structured than any text I have written in the past, I have discovered new paths for my own writing practice.

In reference to creative practice research, Elizabeth Colbert (2009) contends that the creation of the artefact is a lived experience that often includes unconscious activity (p. 6). Colbert describes this creative process as a synthesis of both the intellect and the imagination, and argues that ‘inherent in this synthesis is the movement between conscious and unconscious activity, between the intentional and unpredicted or the highly planned and intuitive’ (p. 5). The process by which the primary narrative strategy behind ‘The Shyness Lists’ emerged involved a complex intermingling of the lived, the
remembered, the performed and the serendipitous. It synthesised the work of the 
organisational consciousness and the intuiting imagination in depicting in text the events 
and epiphanies that surfaced and occurred during the writing process. As a form of self-
reflexive practice, the sense-making effect of this conflation of both forms of knowing 
provided insights into the formation of my identity as a shy person, insights that I 
described in the chapters that emerged in the first draft of the memoir, and that led me to 
a narrative strategy for determining the book’s eventual form. Writing (and publishing) 
this memoir has functioned as an intervention in my creative practice that has opened up 
a new space of agency for me, both as a shy person and as a creative writer (Smith & 
Watson 2010 p. 57). At the same time, it has offered me a model for future long form 
writing projects as I continue to develop my creative practice.
References: Exegesis


Borges, JL 1985, Seven nights, New Directions, New York.


Cantrell, K 2013, ‘Lying in all honesty: capturing truth in women’s confessional memoir’, L i NQ 40, pp. 76–86.

Charon, R 2006, Narrative medicine: honouring the stories of illness, OUP, Great Britain.


Eakin, PJ 2004, ‘What are we reading when we read autobiography?’, *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 121–132.


Klaus, C 2010, *The made-up self: impersonation in the personal essay*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City.


O’Connell, M 2013, ‘10 paragraphs about lists you need in your life right now’, *The New Yorker*,


Rivas-Rose, H 2010, Brave, a memoir of overcoming shyness, Periwinkle Publishing, Maine, USA.

Robertson, D 2007, Careless, Picador/Pan Macmillan, Sydney.


Project Bibliography


Bakewell, S 2010, How to live, or a life of Montaigne, Chatto and Windus, Great Britain.


Beauvoir, S de 1972, The second sex, Penguin, Great Britain.


Bennett, A 2005, Untold stories, Faber and Faber, London.


Boyd, N 2010, 'Strange loops and confessions: in search of creative writing research methodology', PhD thesis, School of Humanities, Queensland, Griffith University.


Cantrell, K 2013. 'Lying in all honesty: capturing truth in women’s confessional memoir', *L i N Q*, vol. 40, pp. 76–86.


Eakin, PJ 2004, ‘What are we reading when we read autobiography?’ *Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 121–132.


Gare, S, 2008, 'Intolerable truths: exposing the memoir', *Australian Author*, vol. 40, no. 1, Australian Society of Authors, pp. 13–16.


Hawley, J 2011, 'The quiet achiever', *Age*, 10 September.

Hecq, D 2011, “'Oranges and lemons': art, therapy, subjectivity', *TEXT*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 1–16.


Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety


Klaus, C 2010, *The made-up self: impersonation in the personal essay*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City.


Mordue, M 2008, 'The Devil is in the Details', *Australian Author*, Australian Society of Authors, April, pp. 6–10.


Range, L & Kovac, S 2002 ‘Can writing autobiographical essays lessen suicidal thinking?’, *Archives of Suicide Research*, vol. 6, issue 4, pp. 373–382.


Rogers, M 2013, 'Resolving the madwoman: unlocking the narrative attic by writing the maternal journey', PhD thesis, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne.


Writing 'The Shyness Lists': an autoethnography of social anxiety


