

Masters of Creative Arts, Creative Writing

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Title of Research Project: If The Sky Should Fall

Research Statement: To explore, in the form of novella, how my family's primary grief and loss led to my secondary grief of a crisis of faith, prompting my twelve-year quest to explore how and why we value our beliefs, and to examine, through fictionalised characters and events, how particular worldviews (Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and New Age Spirituality) inform the universal human experience of grief and loss.

Exegesis: 15,040 words

Novella: 31,819 words

I think of him.

What did I learn? That it is easy to be convinced of anything, if you only read one side of the argument.

Abelson's assumption is that individuals value their beliefs and the social benefits associated with their community of believers, above all else. Yet rather than valuing the status associated with my belief inside the church, of being married to the minister, I would rather be valued by the academy for rigorous scholarship and by the publishing industry for engaging fiction. However, it is likely I would be more readily accepted in both arenas if I were to reject or hide my belief and associations, as maintaining a religious belief or attachment is viewed as biased (as if other worldviews are objective), and/or anti-intellectual.

It could be said that I suffer economic, social and psychological losses because of my beliefs and associated role. My "sunk costs" are considerable, yet I view the relative gains of abandoning them, as outlined by Abelson, to be higher. I am confident that I would not even lose my marriage of twenty-one years if I rejected my beliefs, as my husband empathises with my position and encourages me on my journey of exploring other worldviews. Notwithstanding the stated penalties of maintaining my beliefs, considering we cannot convince even ourselves that we are right in our belief (Sire, 1994), I acknowledge there could well be emotional or sentimental reasons that persuade me—or perhaps I am not persuaded by any replacement belief.

In my creative artefact, I focus on the interplay between the primary grief of loss, and the secondary grief associated with each character trying to make sense of their loss

through the prism of their worldview. This secondary grief is explored through the thoughts, actions and dialogue of members of the Livingston family, as they each struggle to make sense of their shared primary loss and how it fits with their own, and each other's, worldviews.

Worldviews:

According to Griffiths (2007), worldviews are representations of the world that give us a vision and language with which to evaluate our concepts of the world. And the merits of any particular worldview rest primarily on the superiority and plausibility of its theories over rival theories. Worldviews are paradigms of ontological and epistemological assumptions and presuppositions on which individuals base their understanding of the world. Griffiths argues that epistemology (the logic of justification—the process of testing rival theories on the basis of their internal coherence and the correspondence of their causal hypotheses with empirical data), is more important than ontology (the logic of discovery—the mysterious process by which one adopts a particular worldview).

Joseph Campbell's (1993) psychoanalytical examination of worldviews highlights their commonalities and, based on their shared elements of myth, Campbell extrapolates that all worldviews are fundamentally the same and only superficially different; that they are all born of myths and legends that appeal to human nature and longings and follow the same narrative structure: a hero, or messianic figure's call to adventure, and their overcoming obstacles to bring rescue or redemption to others. Conversely, as a religious historian, Dickson (2004, pp. 10-11) asserts that worldviews are only superficially the same and are fundamentally different and

argues for the importance of approaching them on their own terms, suspending assumptions and preconceptions, in order to give them each the respect they deserve. The focus of my research and creative artefact is on the essential differences among worldviews in relation to grief and loss.

Grief in Literature:

After five years of reading about worldviews, philosophy, religion, arguments and counter-arguments on whether science has buried the need for a creator in order to explain the origins of the universe, I started to write what I realised was memoir about the early years of coping with grief and loss. But I came to see that I was writing what was primarily my sister's personal grief, which I felt uncomfortable with, so I decided to employ the narrative device of fiction, to allow me the freedom to use my personal experience to explore different worldviews through fictional characters and events. Research into posttraumatic growth suggests it is not unusual for creative growth to evolve from a trauma that shatters prior assumptions about the world and oneself (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 30).

From the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, through Dante, Gray, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Tolstoy, to the twentieth century writers such as Hardy, Eliot, Auden, Woolf and Laurence, to contemporary Australian writers such as Carey and Winton, the themes of grief and loss are significant in the history of literary expression (Riegel, 2003). Riegel theorises the “work of mourning” evident in Canadian author Margaret Laurence's work and suggests that while some of Laurence's writing is memoir, much of her mourning involved “writing fictional texts that explored autobiographical material” (2003). This

is the context in which I write my artefact: I draw upon my own “work of mourning”—memoir and journal entries written over the years—reflections on my primary and secondary grief, to inform my fictional characters’ responses to grief and loss. The process of thinking about grief, and the act of writing about grief in my artefact, will continue my work of mourning and, my hope is, bring resolution to my grief.

Methodology:

I conducted research-led practice initially, so the line of questioning was: do individuals inherit their worldview from family? Is it typical for individuals to question the origins of their worldview? Is it typical for individuals to consciously hold to a comprehensive and coherent worldview? What causes individuals to assess, amend or reject their worldview? What makes some individuals impervious to other modes of thinking about the world? But the need to focus my research steered me towards *practice-led research*, so that questions and conundrums that arose from my fiction set the direction for further research.

This change of methodology has led to a shift in the line of questioning from my initial research application to how worldviews are arrived at; whether worldviews are constructs to help individuals make sense of life and make friends with the idea of death; whether grief can cause a cognitive dissonance between beliefs and actions; how suffering can consolidate someone in his or her worldview; how even between those who share the same worldview, differences of belief can create friction and cause suffering and, inversely, how belonging to a like-minded community can moderate feelings of grief; and the issues of Fate/Destiny/Human sovereignty

concerning choices and outcomes; and how despite an individual's best efforts, life can veer sharply from their plans; and finally, how to process that grief if a worldview does not bring comfort or assurances.

Fiction-based research challenges the fact/fiction dichotomy that has historically dominated our understanding of what is and is not considered research (Leavy, 2013, p. 24), with practice-led research asserting that creative work in itself is a form of research that generates detectable research outputs; that the training and specialised knowledge creative practitioners have, and the creative process they engage in, leads to specialised insights, which can be written up as research (Smith, 2009). Moreover, Ellis and Bochner encourage researchers to: "...explore the intersections of social research and fiction in order to produce well-written, vivid, and engaging texts that have the potential to connect the particular and the universal" (Leavy, p. 33).

I draw upon social research in the field of psychology, on the nature of belief, and studies conducted on whether worldviews moderate grief. The intersection of social research and fiction is where, in my artefact, I connect the particulars of worldviews with the universality of grief. Leavy argues that fiction is an ideal mode of research for exploring cultural events and ideas because it can help us to understand and bear witness (p. 28).

The ontological position of my research is Reality as Symbolic Discourse, which sees the social world as a pattern of symbolic relationships and meanings sustained through a process of human action and interaction and the fundamental character of the social world as embedded in the network of subjective meanings (Morgan, 1980).

The epistemological framework of the research is Constructionism, which holds that while things exist in the world independently of human consciousness, we construct meanings and reasons for such things by our consciousness (Crotty, 1998).

The new knowledge that I contribute to the practice of creative writing, through the methodology of fiction-based, practice-led research, is an exploration of how a novella can portray the experience of grief and loss through the lens of comparative worldviews, by employing different literary techniques and devices.

Importance of the Research:

Just as my artefact is motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, Barrett (2007) argues that this is often the case for creative arts research, which “operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit knowledge”. An innovation of the subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view particularities that reflect new, marginalised, or not yet recognised realities, to established social practices and discourses.

The not yet established social practice that my artefact seeks to address is discourse on comparative worldviews in relation to grief and loss.

Worldviews are an important area of study, whether or not what individuals believe is true, because of the impact of those beliefs on the world. Yet until the last fifty years, anthropology explored religions and ideologies not for their own sakes, and typically described in a hostile or deprecatory manner worldviews that were “foreign” (N. Smart, 2000). However, because of the differing or competing worldviews and

diverse cultural mix of people living in Australia, as the 2011 ABS Census data shows, it becomes essential to gain an understanding of the different beliefs and values represented, for peaceful co-existence (Griffiths, 2007).

In seeking to make sense of grief and loss, humanity is united, even if in our conclusions we profoundly disagree because of the different lenses through which we view the world. The experience of grief and loss provides the basis for empathy, the distance—and connection—I need as the author, to depict characters of differing and conflicting worldviews:

Empathy and intimacy are two types of inquiry into the other...having empathy and having the distance that comes from not being a member of whatever groups can be a powerful tool for observing (McDonell, cited in Baranay, 2004:7).

And fiction-as-research is an ideal form for exploring grief and worldviews, for Leavis (2005) defends literature as a form of knowledge that has intellectual authority and can function as a force for social and cultural renewal, saying the surest insight into human nature, human potentiality and human situation is that accessible in the great creative writers, as they establish what human centrality is.

Themes:

In my artefact, I address a scope of worldviews (Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and New Age Spirituality), and seek to individualise characters and their worldviews by acknowledging and representing different stages and types of belief. By referring to religious “groups” individuals within those groups are, in effect, painted with the same brush, as if they hold exactly the same beliefs, to the same degree. The challenge, then, is to avoid writing stereotypes or propaganda.

Gibson (1999, p. 8) argues that the novelist presents us with individuality and diversity alike without any attempt to reduce either to the terms of a singular scheme or totality. Hence the novel[la] becomes the form for and expression of an ethics of free, democratic pluralism. I seek to achieve this by humanising objective, abstract ideas within worldviews, through the portrayal of subjective characters, contrasting the nominal with the pious or zealous.

Marilynne Robinson says, “There’s a lot of writing about religion with a cold eye, but virtually none with a loving heart” (Mason, 2014). Therefore I seek to write each character and their particular beliefs with compassion and empathy. This does not mean the narrative is without conflict, tension and misunderstanding; I aim to give a contrapuntal thrust to the characters’ relating and arguments, and to provide anecdotal evidence for how or why they each believe what they believe. I aim to portray—through dialogue and action—whether or not each character is settled in their beliefs and whether they arrive at their position through intellectual assessment, circumstance, or experience (Schulz, 2010, pp. 87-110).

To add tension to the narrative, the characters are in close relationship with one another and face a shared experience of grief and loss. Through dialogue and action, their worldviews—and differences—become apparent. I represent and interpret different worldviews using the artistic freedom that Ommundsen gives in the name of cultural diversity:

...that the individual artist is free to explore, modify, subvert or reinvent particular cultural traditions and customs whether or not the artist belongs to or is accepted by the communities or cultural backgrounds, through characters and settings that may have nothing to do with his or her own cultural background (Birns, 2007).

Australian Literary Context:

Many Australian novels deal with the themes of grief and loss. Some novels explore grief and loss from the context of a particular worldview, such as winner of the 2002 National Association for Loss and Grief Award, *Café Scheherazade* (Zable, 2001), which explores grief and loss from the perspective of Judaism. However, I conducted a quantitative study of the Austlit Database and found no Australian novel or novella representing the experience of grief and loss from a comparative worldviews perspective. Therefore my novella contributes a unique premise to the Australian literary landscape.

Form:

The form of my creative artefact is a novella. The novella had a strong influence on social, political and religious developments in Western Europe during the

renaissance. With its roots in Italian literature, the traditional novella consists of four aspects: the cornice—usually an unhappy act of God or deed of man, time unity, evolving length, and the thematic classification centering on the everyday dramas of men and women (Clements, 1972). The novella is therefore a form well suited to my purpose of exploring the thematic of grief and loss from a comparative worldviews perspective, as the narrative of my artefact centres on the everyday dramas of one particular family in the wake of their tragedy.

Innovation:

As well as innovation in content, which I discuss in a moment, my innovation of form consists of subverting the time unity aspect of the traditional novella, not only chapter-by-chapter, but also within chapters, so that flashbacks and scenes are told out of chronological sequence. I also marry to the novella literary devices normally employed in the short story composite, such as Tim Winton's *The Turning* (2004), where different stories are written in different voices, tenses, and points of view. In my artefact I use first person, third person limited, and second person points of view, and employ past perfect, and simple present tenses. Where a composite novel is a patchwork narrative joined by characters and theme (Sponsor Kuttainen, 2007), my artefact has one overarching narrative focused on Simona's grief, which progresses through each chapter, consistent with the form of the novella. The chapter with the least focus on Simona is 'Seeking Shalom'; however, it still ends with a reflection on Simona's response to grief at that point in the narrative.

Each chapter is either told by, or focused on, a different character's point of view—and worldview—and includes reflections on their journey of grief, coming to a

dénouement in the final chapter, when Theo confronts Simona about her choices: to come to terms with, or compound her grief.

The innovation of content in my artefact is to expand on the exploration of a particular worldview through the lens of grief, to an exploration of grief from a comparative worldviews perspective, and of differing worldviews through the lens of grief. This innovation is best explained by contrasting my artefact with my exemplar, as I do in the following section.

Exemplar:

The exemplar for my creative artefact is Tim Winton's *The Turning* (2004), a composite novel set in Western Australia. The eponymous central story is a third person account of Rae, a woman who lives in a domestic violence situation, in a caravan park with her two young daughters and her abusive husband. Rae makes friends with a new temporary resident, Sherry. Rae wonders what makes her new friend so different, having a sense of peace about her and seeming to have her life together. Rae discovers that Sherry and her husband are new converts to Christianity, after making a mess of their lives. At first Rae is upset about the religious dimension to their lives, but as her abusive situation worsens, Rae comes to wonder whether she too needs a saviour.

The Turning deals with characters reflecting on their worldview in response to grief. Winton's adult novels are known for religious themes set against harsh Australian landscapes and relationships:

At the time I started writing, religious themes in Australian novels were just unheard of. Unless they came from Institutional Catholic situations... Australia is an anti-religious place. There are lots of reasons to do with our history... The role of the church was pretty rocky, I think, in early Australia. It bred a huge distrust of authority and religion. It's very much harder to float a religious notion in any sense in Australia... Faith is generally seen as a bit embarrassing (Winton, interviewed by McGirr, 1999).

Like Winton, I am interested in exploring relationships, loss, and the interplay of grief and worldviews. But as part of my innovation of content, I expand my exploration to include worldviews other than Christianity, some of which (Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and New Age Spirituality) have been introduced to Australia and its citizens through the diversity of thought and religious faith integrated through the social policy of multicultural immigration. I also expand on Winton's exploration of grief being the catalyst for adopting a worldview, to include characters assessing, amending and defending their worldviews, in response to their grief experience.

Praxis:

Fiction writers seek to build believable representations of existing or possible worlds and to truthfully or authentically portray human experience (Leavy, 2013). To help me achieve this I employed Smith and Dean's (2009) 'iterative cyclic web' whereby my practice sets the direction for my research and my research shapes my practice. The themes of my artefact required that I conduct research on the differences between worldviews (Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and New Age

Spirituality) on their presuppositions relating to human origins; their understanding of how we invoke meaning in our experience of living, where our notions of morality arise from and assumptions surrounding human destiny in relation to death and dying (Zacharias, 2014). I formulated a diagram outlining their different paradigms of reality, their starting point for explaining the world (see Appendix 1, p.64), and a mind map summarising their differences in understanding suffering and grief (see Appendix 2, p.65).

I employ ‘the creative writing kaleidoscope’, a methodology developed by Nash (2012), focusing on creative outcome, format and structure, genre, discipline, and research into worldviews and grief, to give my writing direction and to enrich its themes and discourses. I researched the nature of belief and made notes on ideas for setting, dialogue and characterisation. To further my research into creative writing practice, I listened to Elizabeth Gilbert speak at the Brisbane Powerhouse on the process of writing her novel, *The Signature of All Things* (Gilbert, 2014). Gilbert advocates the humble colour-coded index card filing system. So I assigned each worldview a colour and continued to read and make notes in a way that was more easily accessible to inform my creative artefact.

This reflective-practice research-cycle has the dual emphasis of theory and practice, on researcher and practitioner. In this way my creative writing practice, research into theory and cultural studies (how worldviews moderate grief, and the nature of belief), continue in a cycle of informing one another until both the research and artefact are complete.

'The Endearing Perspective of Youth'

The opening chapter of my artefact, 'The Endearing Perspective of Youth' introduces the protagonist, Simona, reflecting on the difficult reality of her present life as a twenty-five year old living with the immeasurable grief and incalculable loss brought about by the unexpected death of her daughter.

Responses to grief are not uniform, even amongst those who share the same worldview—due to differing emotional make-ups, degrees of conviction and levels of understanding of a set of beliefs. Even grief itself "...is not neat like a narrative arc. It does not end; it is not 'resolved'. It does not follow a checklist of emotions from beginning to end. It is not one thing, or the other thing; it is lots of things" (Davis, 2012).

Yet, in my artefact I do try to fit Simona's grief into a narrative arc, beginning with the opening paragraph. In this first person account Simona sets out the terms of her present grief, compared to her puerile understanding and experience of grief in her teens. At the outset Simona expresses anger at her mother, Peggy, in her grief—an emotion that adds complexity to their relationship throughout the narrative—and which Simona is forced to confront in the dénouement (which I discuss in 'Frayed Ends and Loose Threads').

To bring emotional depth and passion to my characters, I researched the emotional emphasis individuals place on their beliefs because of what philosophy calls the *First Person Constraint on Doxastic Explanation* (Jones, 2002), which points to our emotional rather than logical attachment to our beliefs. To inform the interaction and

dialogue between characters of differing worldviews, I researched ‘the bias blind spot’, ‘the ignorance assumption’ and ‘the idiocy assumption’, which is human tendency to employ in relating to individuals who hold beliefs different to our own (Ehrlinger, 2005).

The first example of an emotional response to differences in coping with grief is shown midway through ‘The Endearing Perspective of Youth’, as Simona and her family experience a new level of grief at the deterioration of their Grandpa’s health. This is also Simona’s first experience of dealing with a shared grief differently to how the rest of her family deals with it; a frustration that she again takes out on her mother (Peggy) after she stops visiting Grandpa (Len) in the nursing home:

Mum persisted a while longer. When she stopped, I said, ‘How can you be so heartless to stop visiting your own father?’

She said, ‘He has no knowledge of whether any of us are there—he doesn’t even know us anymore. You may have the constitution to keep visiting him, Simona, but not all of us do. And you would do well to remember that you are visiting him for your own sake, not his.’

‘And whose sake are you staying away for?’ I yelled, surprised by the intensity of my anger.

‘For the rest of the family’s,’ she quietly said. ‘Between your sisters and your Gran, I’m the family Sherpa, expected to carry everyone’s emotional baggage.’ (82)

As a character, Grandpa (Len) serves to inform Simona and her sisters of the universality of grief and suffering; that they are experiences central to the human condition:

Think of this as sharing in the sufferings of loved ones. And you might as well get used to it, 'cause if you haven't suffered in your first thirty years, you fluked it. But don't get too cocky; it'll catch you in your second thirty. And if you make it to the third thirty it'll be nothing *but* suffering. (77)

By the end of the first chapter, Grandpa's death serves as the inciting incident for Simona's first real experience of primary grief—the grief of loss, and secondary grief—of questioning her worldview as a result. Simona's secondary grief, emerging at the end of the first chapter, reflects the experience I had in the months after my brother-in-law's death.

To legitimise my protagonist, Simona, asking philosophical questions of God in relation to her Grandpa's disease and death—and to show that her primary grief led to a secondary grief, causing her to assess and later reject the foundations of her worldview—I include that she questions from the presuppositions of the Judaeo-Christian worldview, taught in Religious Education classes throughout her public schooling (83). Scientific Naturalism has no basis on which to question human suffering, as Atheism holds that life is random and therefore disease, suffering and accidents, are expected. Although Buddhism was born out of a rejection of Hinduism (particularly the authority of the Vedas and the Caste system), both worldviews share the tenets of 'karma' and 'reincarnation' (though different in essence, as Buddhism

rejects the notions of ‘soul’ and ‘self’). Simona could not have asked where God is in human suffering from the Hindu worldview, as it teaches that suffering is a result of ‘karma’—*payment for past actions*. Nor from the Buddhist worldview, which holds that suffering is because of our desires, as well as karma. Simona could not have asked the question from the worldview of Islam, because it teaches that Allah is sovereign, and so human suffering is ‘Inshallah’—*the will of Allah*. And New Age Spirituality holds that the rule of attraction means suffering is a result of thoughts that we put into the Universe. It was therefore only from the Judaeo-Christian worldview that Simona could legitimately lament that suffering is part of the human condition, as though things are not as they ‘should’ be, and remain philosophically sound and consistent with the worldview in raising the question (RZIM, 2015).

Simona’s secondary grief leads her to pursue a career as a biologist, which leads her to form a Scientific Naturalist (atheistic) worldview. Her character suffers the primary grief (along with Theo) of the loss of her daughter in an ‘accident’. Although the atheist worldview accepts accidents as reality, it seemed that a ‘premature-death-by-accident’ would sufficiently challenge the foundations of Simona’s worldview to provide the internal drama of secondary grief:

...every cell in Simona’s body screamed *why?* But she’d rather burn at the stake than denounce the universe as random (except for the laws that sustain it). Yet this incongruity, of belief from experience, felt like being ravaged by the family pet...Simona was now a mother, without a child. And *why* was the wrong question. The non-question. (142)

It would also provide the external drama of Simona's character clashing with the ensemble cast of supporting characters—family who share in her grief and loss:

‘How do you make sense of it?’ [Simona] asked her sisters.

Claudia said, ‘Everything happens for a reason, even if we don’t understand why.’

Simona cut her off with Ockham’s razor, ‘Yeah, it’s called cause-and-effect!’ To her mind, Claudia always ignored Cause, parsed some eisegetical life lesson from Effect and called it Reason. As though Libby was killed for some higher purpose and not just because a drunk driver smashed into the car their mum was driving. (142)

Making the terms of Simona’s grief clear in the first chapter provides the reader with context for the action, interaction and dialogue in the rest of the novella. To set the theme and tone of the rest of the narrative, I ended the chapter with the internal drama of Simona comparing her grief over her Grandpa’s death, to the particulars of her present grief:

...there’s something far harder than grieving the loss of a loved one who lived a full, senescent life: grieving a loved one who hadn’t. There is no consolation and I doubt the first year’s the hardest. Each year surely magnifies the grief of unrequited life: Of what could have, would have, should have been. We say time heals, but it merely gives us enough distance to forget the precise dimensions of our grief. (86)

'The Apparition of Self'

As the title of the second chapter suggests, its primary purpose is to explore grief from the worldview of Buddhism, through the first person account of Esther (Gran). Lines of reflection and dialogue throughout the chapter suggest Esther tries to live and think consistently within the Buddhist worldview; that it gives her a functional framework through which to view the world:

'But once she's relinquished her desire it will happen...' (91)

I was meditating in the back room... (92)

It's a noble profession, but... (93)

...we can change nothing but our selves. (94)

Right speech is just as important as right intentions. (96)

'Right effort isn't always acknowledged, but that doesn't diminish the intent; it's still good karma.' (97)

...lacking in right speech, right action and right intention, Natasha's little stunt didn't help her pregnancy cause. Karma keeps a tally and gives you your comeuppance, good or bad, one way or another. (98)

However, by the end of the chapter Esther struggles to reconcile the teachings of her worldview with the reality of her grief. Buddhists explicitly acknowledge the impermanence of the world and the non-reality of the individual ego, and posit that suffering is caused by attachments to particular people or objects that are fleeting or illusory (Halifax, p. 360). Buddha claimed that ultimately there are no persons, only physical objects, feelings, perceptions, volitions and consciousness—and that suffering predominantly characterises all sentient existence—an idea intimately

bound up with our mortality. On the Buddhist analysis, suffering will inevitably come to predominate in the life of any minimally reflective person, but it's not inescapable; the key to the cessation of suffering lies in coming to see that there is no self (Siderits, 2003).

Esther understands that there will be no more suffering when she reaches Nirvana—an essential nothingness. She tries to discipline her thinking to be in line with Buddhist teachings, but admits the idea of self is 'entrenched' and that it 'unhinges' her a little to think that in order to no longer suffer, she will have to no longer exist: "There are degrees of grief so acute they threaten to undo your mindfulness, unravel your understanding; entice you to concentrate on what is lost instead of what is gained" (102).

According to Siderits (2003), Buddhism teaches that grief can lead to spiritual transformation although wisdom and compassion are not given to us, they can only be discovered. And, that when an individual moves through the transformation of the elements of loss and grief, he or she may discover the truth of the impermanence of everything in life and life itself. This is the comfort that Esther offers Simona when Simona asks Gran what Liberty had done to deserve a violent, premature death. The absence of a divine being and of the human soul are the shared tenets between Buddhism and Atheism, a link I allude to when Esther reflects on Princess Diana's death with intones of Nietzsche's *The Parable of the Madman* (1974) "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him... who will wipe this blood off us?" The differences in Esther and Simona's understanding of their shared grief and loss

become apparent when, in the final paragraph, Simona accusingly questions Gran on the matter of karma (104).

The secondary function of 'The Apparition of Self' is to introduce the worldview attachments of different characters, through scene:

Theo shook Jonathan's hand, 'G'day mate,' and did a subtle double take when he noticed Jonathan's skullcap (149).

And dialogue:

Bob said, 'Bloody religion! It's the longest, ugliest sibling rivalry in history: Isaac. Ishmael. Who cares which son Abraham never sacrificed or which rock he never sacrificed him on?'

Jonathan cleared his throat, 'I think it's a bit more complicated than that, besides, it was only a test; Yahweh provided the sacrifice himself.'

Natasha linked her hands around Jonathan's arm and smiled that taut smile at her father.

Theo said, 'And Christians reckon God's own son—'

'Sorry mate,' Bob said, 'but I don't put much stock in what Christians say; they're a bunch of holier-than-thou hypocrites in my book... ' (95).

The apparent differences between worldviews also serve to add tension to the narrative, for instance when Simona says, "Some walk by faith. I walk by sight: show me the proof", as if her worldview does not require faith, and Natasha responds, "theories aren't proof" on the basis that Darwinism is another faith—a loyalty to a vision of the nature of things despite its inaccessibility to demonstration (Robinson, 1998, p. 39). I establish the tension between the different worldviews of the

characters early, before the family’s catastrophic loss, so that minimal explanation is required during the action, dialogue, and character reflections in the wake of their loss. In representing characters of different worldviews, my challenge is to create rounded characters, not mere mouthpieces for each worldview.

The Nature of Belief

To create believable, nuanced characters—not stereotypes or archetypal representations of each worldview—I researched the nature of belief: distinguishing among worldviews, beliefs, and values, (worldviews and values are both beliefs, but values represent only one of several types of belief: descriptive, existential, evaluative, prescriptive, and proscriptive) (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, pp. 4-5). I looked at how and why individuals arrive at their beliefs—whether for cognitive, social, experiential, or pragmatic reasons, touching on the proximal-distal belief continuum on which individuals consciously and unconsciously plot their beliefs; and how beliefs impact opinions, values and behaviours (Agnew, 2000). This research informed my artefact in that each character holds to their worldview with varying levels of commitment, as outlined by Abelson (1986) in “Beliefs are like possessions”. Abelson points to the following linguistic expressions of beliefs that correlate to the metaphor of ‘possession’:

- | | | |
|------------------|----|--------------------------------|
| <i>Having</i> | -- | to have a belief |
| <i>Obtaining</i> | -- | to acquire a belief |
| | | to adopt the view that... |
| | | he inherited his views from... |
| | | she found God |
| | | he received the Holy Spirit |

<i>Keeping</i>	--	to hold a belief
		to hold onto a belief
<i>Valuing</i>	--	to cherish a belief
		I'm reappraising my position
		you don't appreciate my position
<i>Losing</i>	--	to lose your belief in...
		to disown your belief
		to abandon your belief
		to surrender your principles.

Each category of metaphor is represented in my creative artefact, by different characters:

Having: in 'The Apparition of Self', Bob is the character that does not seem to reflect on, or acknowledge that he has a worldview, but examines the worldview of others (95).

Obtaining: in 'Seeking Shalom', Natasha gives a first person account of why she converted to Judaism (155).

Obtaining: in 'Frayed Ends and Loose Threads' Simona reflects on how her experience of grief led her to gain a new understanding and empathy towards other people's worldviews (181).

Keeping: in ‘The Miracles and the Fish’, Peggy’s New Age beliefs are reinforced when she visits the clairvoyant after her granddaughter’s death (131).

Keeping: in ‘Frayed Ends and Loose Threads’, Rasheed (Richard) holds onto his worldview with discipline and difficulty, after the murder of his brother (176).

Valuing/Assessing: in ‘Life, Love, and Liberty’, Theo returns to the church of his childhood, to reassess his present beliefs and revisit his old beliefs, in response to the death of his daughter (121).

Valuing/Cherishing: in ‘The Apparition of Self’, Esther (Gran) consciously applies the tenets of her Buddhist worldview to her understanding and experience of grief (102).

Losing: in ‘Seeking Shalom’, Len (Grandpa) reflects on how his worldview had grown dim over the years, sliding towards agnosticism in his old age (152).

To Abelson’s list I add another category:

Sharing -- to offer your belief to another.

Sharing: in ‘Frogmore’, Claudia tries to console Simona by offering the understanding of her own worldview to the event that led to Simona’s grief (145).

In ‘Frayed Ends and Loose Threads’, Claudia suggests to Simona remedies (yoga, reiki, flower essences) for her grief that are consistent with her own New Age worldview, not Simona’s atheistic worldview (178).

Abelson argues that each of these categories gives some support to the “possession” metaphor but acknowledges that the metaphor doesn’t extend to the market exchange, in that they are free to acquire, making them ‘free belief commodities’ except for when an individual ‘buys into a belief’.

In my artefact, I examine the psychological and emotional ramifications of rejecting a familial worldview, through the character of Theo. Although he intellectually rejects the Christian worldview in which he was raised, a residual psychological and emotional attachment is evident in his reflection and discussion with Simona on the issue of abortion:

It didn’t occur to him that she might not want to keep the baby. He fancied himself a Renaissance man; thought morals were merely shellac and the idea of Truth, passé. In theory he was *for* a woman’s right to choose and prided himself on *live and let live*, but faced with the potential of his own offspring, live and let live felt a lot like live and let die.

‘My body: my choice,’ she said.

He said, ‘Your body. But *our* baby.’

‘It’s not a baby; it’s a zygote.’

So went their debates.

... Simona’s pregnancy gave him a new appreciation that love was at least giving the other the freedom to make their own decisions. It gave him a fresh understanding of the memory verse he’d learnt as a boy, ‘God is love’ (108).

Abelson acknowledges that the value of a belief may differ for an individual, depending on whether the belief is *instrumental* or *sentimental* in nature.

‘Love, Life, and Liberty’

The differences between Simona and Theo’s worldviews become more apparent in ‘Life, Love, and Liberty’, through their grief. Simona’s Atheism is instrumental to her functioning in the world and is, for her, a coherent worldview. Simona understands their lives and the tragedy that befalls them as ‘flotsam’—as though life were a shipwreck, with no meaning or purpose. For Simona, life is full of random events with no overarching narrative, and she responds consistently within her worldview, even finding a way to ‘redeem’ the tragedy in accordance with her worldview, by telling Theo she wants to donate Liberty’s organs to research because “*something* worthwhile has to—[come of this tragedy].” (117)

Whereas Theo, who rejected the worldview he was raised in—Christianity—does not have a coherent worldview, shown by the fact that he wants a meta-narrative over life; to believe they were ‘jetsam’—jettisoned on purpose, for a reason, with the expectation of redemption, while still rejecting the essential tenets of the faith that *provides* a meta-narrative, because he dismisses Christianity with the psychoanalysis explanation that messianic figures of all faiths are merely one hero with a thousand faces (Campbell 1993).

There are three tests Naugle (2002, p. 298) suggests to assess the sustainability of a worldview: The coherence test—do the propositions of the worldview agree with each other or are they contradictory? The reality test—does the worldview fit with

reality and is it capable of giving satisfactory explanations for the totality of things? And the pragmatic test—can it be applied to human experience and does it have something meaningful to say about key concerns and issues of life? However, Abelson (1986) makes the case that balance, or consistency of beliefs, shifted towards the end of the twentieth century; that cognitive consistency as an idea was more popular in the 1960s. With the rise of postmodern thought in the ‘70s, individuals began to favour the mechanisms of cognitive balance maintenance over the logic of arguments and became skeptical that meta-narratives were simply used politically and culturally as instruments of power for controlling knowledge (S. E. Smart, 2007, p. 63).

In his lecture, *On Fairy-Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien (1939) suggests that what we believe about the world as we experience it is a Primary Belief, and that myths and legends and fairy stories try to invoke in us a Secondary Belief, in the way that Art asks us to suspend disbelief in the artful lie in order to see the truth it contains. Joseph Campbell (1993) says that mythology is psychology misread as biography, history and cosmology—that through myths, “symbolic expression is given to the unconscious desires, fears and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behaviour” (p.256). Campbell suggests that where a Lao-tse, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, or Mohammed has touched inherited symbols; these mythological figures are:

...not only symptoms of the unconscious...but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained as constant throughout the course of human history as the form and nervous structure of the human physique itself (p.257).

Tolkien agrees that the elements of myth—particularly the consolation of a happy ending and escapism from death—are constants throughout the history of human narrative. However, where Campbell points to shared similarities as evidence that all myths are essentially one myth in different masks, Tolkien posits that all myths contain the keys to adventure Campbell outlines (p.245), but that they do so because the innate human longings for consolation and escapism, and the elements of myth such as a virgin birth, crucifixion, atonement, and resurrection, are a foreshadowing of the Christian Story, the narrative overarching history:

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe (p.24).

The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s History. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation. Tolkien says: “...the Christian Story has entered history and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation” (p.24).

Rather than myths being born merely of human psychology, as Campbell suggests, Tolkien intimates that myths exist because as sub-creators we imitate our Creator, affirming the story of redemption with stories that incorporate our human longings and echo elements of the gospel. Tolkien surmises that the Christian Story is where

“Legend and History have met and fused,” and therefore “The Evangelium has not abrogated legends, it has hallowed them, especially the ‘happy ending’” (p.24).

I too believed that the Christian story means life will culminate in the happy ending, though aware that this fusion of legend and history is pinned on the resurrection of Christ, “And if Christ has not been raised, [my] faith is futile” and “[I am] to be pitied more than all men” (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). My journey through secondary grief led me to the realisation that the ‘happy’ ending in relation to Clint’s death is dependent on ultimate, cosmic Justice, rather than justice here-and-now, a concept Theo explores with Reverend Joe in the last scene of ‘Life, Love and Liberty’ (121). Theo seeks to unravel the strands of God’s sovereignty, free will, and human responsibility that seem plaited together in life; drawn and repelled by the ideas the Christian faith holds in tension: justice and mercy. But Theo does not question his real motive in returning to the church for answers, as C.S.Lewis does (1961, p. 57): “Am I just sidling back to God because I know that if there’s any road to [Liberty], it runs through Him?”

The reader is only told that Theo returns to the church out of anger: “He entered God’s sanctuary for the satisfaction of holding him responsible. But when Reverend Joe walked in, Theo knew his interrogation would fall to him by proxy. Well, he had nominated himself as God’s representative” (121).

'Frogmore'

The chapter is titled 'Frogmore' because it is the name of the place where the narrative is set—the holiday house of familial sentiment where Natasha and Claudia take Simona, to support her in her grief. In this third person narrative, the importance of 'place' and 'space' in the grieving process emerges. Though, the full significance of bringing Simona to Frogmore, and its close association with grief and loss, does not become clear to the reader until two chapters later, in 'Seeking Shalom', when Natasha reflects on Grandpa's death and how they scattered his ashes in the garden there.

The importance of 'place' in the grief process is touched on in earlier chapters:

At Macquarie Park cemetery about twenty of us gathered around the small tear in the earth (103).

He sighed, '—If you let her funeral be at mum and dad's church.'

She shook her head. No. (117)

In the above scene I seek to show Theo and Simona trying to agree on an appropriate 'place' to mourn and farewell their daughter: Theo will agree to donate Liberty's organs for research *on the condition* that Liberty's funeral be held at his parents' church. Although Simona says no in this scene, Esther says in 'The Apparition of Self': "Theo walked slowly down the aisle of his parents' church, his arms and neck straining under the weight, his tears falling onto the rainbow of gerberas atop the small white coffin" (102).

So the reader can surmise that Simona does compromise, allowing Liberty's funeral to be held at Theo's parents' church.

But more than simply compromising, it was necessary—for the reader to hope that their relationship might continue—to provide anecdotal evidence of common ground, a way for Simona and Theo to be united in their grief, especially as bereavement following violent loss by accident increases the risk for complications in grieving. Given the constructivist model of grief—that proposes sense-making and suggests the capacity to construct an understanding of the loss experience mediates the association between violent death and complicated grief symptomatology (Currier, 2006), it was important to concretise the abstract idea of 'common ground' for the expression of Simona and Theo's grief. I settled on a 'roadside memorial' to mark the place of the car crash where Liberty died. However, Simona and Theo don't agree on this outright: 'Or we put a memorial cross, with her name, at the site of the accident?' She said, 'Not a cross' (118).

This solution is particularly fitting as it hints at their underlying worldview differences. Also, the phenomenon of constructing modern roadside memorials may be seen as a specific expression of a growing disregard for institutional forms that once sufficed for the crisis moments of life: taking spirituality and meaning-making out of the hands of the government or established religious institutions. Those who construct memorials now often speak of not finding meaning in the rituals of conventional religion and see their memorials either as an alternative or even in outright opposition to conventional religion (Clark,

2006, p. 583). That said, the act of commemoration is basically a religious project to secure some form of immortality, a rejection of “the horror of extinction and utter oblivion” (Margalit, 2002, p. 25).

For the sake of Simona and Theo’s ongoing relationship, I had to establish agreement between them for a ‘place’ to memorialise Liberty, as they spend their time mourning Liberty in different ‘spaces’. In ‘Frayed Ends and Loose Threads’:

Theo came home to take Vashti for a walk each evening, but spent his days at his parents’ cutting out rust from the 1969 VW... (119)

And later:

He entered God’s sanctuary for the satisfaction of holding him responsible.
(121)

While Simona:

...hadn’t left the house; just dozed on the lounge day and night... (119)

Until:

...her sisters hauled Simona away for a week, to the family holiday house... (120)

It is in the chapter—and place—‘Frogmore’, that Simona’s grief arc reaches its zenith, through interactions and confrontations with her sisters. Firstly, by exploring the philosophical basis for punitive justice and whether Simona’s expectation of justice is consistent with her worldview:

‘Calm down,’ Natasha said, ‘we’re on your side.’

‘Then you should want to see him strung up by his gonads!’

Natasha cocked her head towards Simona, ‘So let me get this straight: you reject the idea of Rosh Hashanah, of the great Day of Judgment, but *you* want to be judge and jury here and now?’

Simona huffed and strode off ahead. They walked the last five minutes in silence. (143)

Then, by exploring the notion of *sharing* a belief and how that is received—no matter the intention—through Claudia consoling Simona with sentiments from her New Age worldview:

Claudia said, ‘Take a deep breath, Simona, and say, “I let go of my anger so I can see clearly”.’

The hoe was heavy and Simona was tired. She yelled, ‘Don’t tell me I can’t be angry!’ and struck the bush again. She dropped the hoe and started grabbing at branches, snapping them off with her hands and throwing them on the ground.

Claudia dragged the hoe out of reach and put her hand on Simona’s shoulder, ‘I know it feels like the sky has fallen Simona, I honestly do. But in reality there *is* no sky: it’s only an illusion. It’s just Raleigh scattering particles around the atmosphere making the light *appear* blue.’

Simona ripped a bunch of petals off the tree and strew them at her feet.

She collapsed on the front step. ‘But death isn’t an illusion, Claudia: Dead is dead is dead.’ (145)

Simona rejects Claudia's insinuation that Liberty's death is really a new beginning, with "dead is dead is dead"; a nod to the line in Gertrude Stein's 1913 poem, *Sacred Emily* "rose is a rose is a rose", meaning that things are what they are, so death cannot mean new life. The scene is inspired by C.S. Lewis's reflection:

It is hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter'. There is death. And whatever matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible. You might as well say that birth doesn't matter. I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn? (*A Grief Observed* 1961, p.15).

The importance of 'place' in religious mourning rituals is also inferred in 'Seeking Shalom', with Natasha's reflection on the Jewish practice of lighting a candle in synagogue a year after the death of a loved one (156). And the importance of 'space' is shown in 'Frayed Ends and Loose Threads', when Rasheed closes himself in the bedroom, to kneel and pray to Allah (facing Mecca), in private (177).

'The Miracles and the Fish'

This is the only chapter that employs the literary device of second person narrator. I made this artistic choice with the rationale that a second person narrator would give the reader a closer understanding of Peggy's experience than third person narration,

but also to indicate that she is too traumatised by her role in the death of her granddaughter to give a first person account. So that the reader would know Peggy's worldview by the time they reach 'The Miracles and the Fish', I place hints in earlier chapters that Peggy is a New Age Spiritualist:

“...that's what Athena meant by “Expect to face an issue with loved ones with no immediate resolution.”” (74)

Peggy asked Theo his star sign. He said, ‘No idea, but I'm March 21st.’

‘Aries: Interesting.’

‘How so?’

‘Opposites attract. Simona's Virgo: you say adventurous, she'll say foolhardy. You say courageous, she'll say daredevil.’ (91)

‘This room's a negative energy trap. The bed shouldn't be aligned with the window—it doesn't allow for positive energy flow, and the lounge should never be near the door—.’ (113)

According to Zacharias, a philosopher and Christian convert descended from the Brahmin (highest) caste of Hinduism, New Age Spirituality is best understood as an amalgamation of eastern mystical practices and beliefs repackaged to appeal to the West (2012, pp. 1-19). The New Age response to grief and loss brings about one of two possibilities: to resist, or yield. Peggy resists because of her sense of guilt in her role in Liberty's death, creating a strong mental image or thought form of seeing herself as a victim due to concomitant circumstance, people's actions, unjust fate, and

God, thereby creating emotions of anger, resentment, and self-pity (Tolle, 2005, p. 57), portrayed in the following excerpts:

You get the feeling that [Natasha's] concern costs more than she's prepared to pay. She has a protective hand over her belly the whole time, which makes you wonder if they will ever trust you to look after their baby (129).

[Esther] encourages you to repeat the mantras, 'Suffering is a sickness of the mind,' and 'the past has no power to stop you from being present'. But you don't want to be present. And you fear your suffering will send you insane (129).

The following scene serves to show that Bob softens towards Peggy's worldview, though Peggy's worldview doesn't initially provide comfort in her loss, or healing for her grief:

Bob usually derides your amulets and talismans, but the day after your accident, he brings in a bag with your rose quartz and malachite and citrine stones and quietly places them on your bedside table. He doesn't say much, and you don't tell him that *he* is your rock; that it's *his* presence that brings comfort and healing (129).

By contrast Claudia, who is also a New Age Spiritualist, *yields* to her grief and loss, leading to an inner acceptance of what is, becoming compassionate, wise, and loving;

opening her up to the consciousness and coincidences of the Universe, reinforcing her certainty in her worldview (Tolle, 2005, pp. 57-58):

[Claudia] visits you in hospital every morning and Simona at home every afternoon. You think *she's a true Pisces: compassionate* (130).

Claudia says, 'Just go in and see her. Think about how *she* must feel' (130).

Claudia's confidence in her New Age worldview perspectives and coping strategies leads her, in 'Frayed Ends and Loose Threads', to encourage Simona to partake in practices that she has traditionally rejected on the basis of her atheist worldview, stirring a cognitive dissonant response from Simona:

'Take it, or don't. But you came here for my help, so you need to ask yourself why, if you're not going to accept it.'

'Fine.' Simona straightened her face and swallowed the tincture. 'But if I overdose, it's your fault.'

'It's impossible to overdose. It's self-regulating. It just raises the vibration of your energy, so you can commune with the Spirit of the Universe.'

Simona rolled her eyes, 'Whatever'.

'In the morning, I'd like you to come to the studio for some yoga and Reiki.'

'Well, you'll have to wake me' (178).

According to the induced-compliance paradigm, dissonance is aroused when a person does or says something that is contrary to a prior belief or attitude. From the cognition of the prior belief or attitude, it would follow that one would not engage in such behaviour. On the other hand, inducements to engage in such behaviour; promises of reward or threats, or in Simona's case, a desire to be comforted in her grief, provide cognitive justifications for the behaviour (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 8).

Inversely, Peggy coerces herself to act in cognitive consonance with her beliefs, to visit a clairvoyant despite doubting her worldview because of the lack of comfort it brought in her acute grief. While doubt has negative connotations for cognitive function it is ultimately a positive, rational, reasonable response. By contrast, certainty of conviction can erode imagination and empathy—necessary attributes for compassion towards other people. Doubt also illustrates that it is not the *amount* of faith in something that matters, but rather the efficacy of what/whom that faith is placed in that is the measure of its trustworthiness. Although small amounts of (anecdotal) evidence are sufficient for us to assess our beliefs positively and leap to conclusions in support of them, anecdotal evidence that does not support our beliefs is seldom sufficient to make us amend or abandon them (Schulz, 2010, pp. 124,164). This is illustrated through Peggy's response to the clairvoyant giving her the message 'remember the rainbow fish' (131).

The 'miracles' the title of the chapter refers to are the clairvoyant knowing about Liberty's rainbow fish painting; the painting surviving the accident, and the miracle of forgiveness—which comes when Theo's parents, Lyn and Grant, respond consistently within their Christian worldview, offering 'grace'—*unmerited*

forgiveness, evidenced by their pastoral care visit (134). The ‘fish’ refers to the rainbow fish painting Liberty made for Peggy, and the meal of tuna mornay that Lyn and Grant take over for Peggy.

The chapter ends with Peggy breaking the New Age ‘law of attraction’ link as she ponders forgiveness:

With a mouthful of tepid tuna mornay and gluggy rice, you are overwhelmed by the realisation that [Grant and Lyn] seem to have forgiven you for the death of their only grandchild. You wonder whether Simona will ever forgive you, and whether you can forgive yourself (134).

‘Seeking Shalom’

In Natasha’s first person account of her conversion to Judaism, ‘Seeking Shalom’, she begins “Call me Ruth”—a line borrowed from the opening of *Moby Dick*, “Call me Ishmael” (Melville, 1993)—to illustrate her affiliation with Ruth, the Moabitess, whose conversion to Judaism in the Old Testament was also a familial loyalty. It is customary for traditional Jews to not write God’s name in full, to avoid the risk of defacing His name. Because ‘Seeking Shalom’ is written in first person, I have written G-d, as if Natasha had written it.

Natasha’s account serves to show that we do not just hold a belief; we hold a membership in a community of believers. Rather than basing our beliefs on the ideal of intellectual inquiry and thorough source evaluation; in the day-to-day, human tendency is not to trust a piece of information because we have vetted its source, but

to trust a source, and therefore accept its information (Schulz, 2010, pp. 142-143).

Individuals are therefore not so much caught in a web of beliefs, as caught in a network of witnesses (Margalit, 2002, pp. 180-181).

Len serves as an example of how, when a believer is distanced from their community of believers, it can lead them to question their convictions. (The fact that Len's grandparents were Scottish Presbyterian, so he had a second-hand Bible knowledge and faith, did not make it to the final draft of the artefact on the basis that the same principle could apply to any belief). Len uses inductive reasoning as a way of losing, and justifying the loss of his beliefs. Psychologists and neuroscientists increasingly think that inductive reasoning undergirds virtually all of human cognition. We make guesses based on our cumulative exposure to the evidence every day, both unconsciously and consciously—it is how we learn almost everything we believe about the world (Schulz, 2010, p. 119).

To show the reader Len's thought process on the matter of belief and convictions I allude to the movie, *Pollyanna* (Swift, 1960) and its theme: "the glad game".

Pollyanna hangs prisms in the homes of old people she visits, so they can marvel at the rainbows reflected on the walls when the sun shines through them, refracting the light. This provides the trope of 'prisms' for Len's reflection on the decline of his health and his faith. The line 'proud livery of youth' is borrowed from *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* (1980) [ii] "Thy youth's proud livery":

You eventually realise it was the brilliance of the sun shining on the proud livery of youth that made rainbows with such conviction. Take away the

light, the joy, the colour, and the same prisms invert you. You end up everything you thought you weren't. (153)

Grandpa's anticipation of his own decline plays into the issues Jacques Derrida raises in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Volume 2; of dying a living death, and of the phantasms associated with it; that any thought of our death is always already bound up in life and in images of a living death. Even though Grandpa says he is glad for the small condolence of not bearing witness to his own putrefaction (153), Derrida argues that this reflection means he *already* bears witness to it; that to image oneself as dead-alive, is to die a living death:

To see oneself or to think oneself dead is to see oneself surviving, present at one's death, present or represented in absentia at one's death even in all the signs, traces, images, memories, even the body, the corpse or the ashes, literal or metaphorical, that we leave behind...this banality of survival that...does not even wait for death to make life and death indissociable, and thus the unheimlich [uncanny] and fantasmatic experience of the spectrality of the living dead. Life and death as such are not separable as such... (BSII 117/176 as cited in Naas, 2012, p. 319).

Although Grandpa died before Natasha's conversion (note that Judaism does not proselytise, rather, conversion is an arduous process), she reflects upon his death as lacking in meaning compared to Jewish beliefs and traditions, and how Jews believe that cremation is a desecration of the body (154). Derrida, however, questions what it means for a large and growing number of people in the Western or developed world

at a particular time in modernity, to be given the decision—rare in the history of humanity—to choose between apparent binaries: to have their corpses buried or cremated. He goes on to qualify that the apparent choice for the individual is always determined and restricted in advance by certain structures and institutions of the state and civil society. *Ipsa facto* our supposedly sovereign choice is not ours to enact, but the decision and responsibility of the “other” (Naas, 2012, pp. 320, 323).

Considering my earlier observation that we grieve a loved one on the basis of our own worldview, not theirs, it is interesting to pose the hypothetical question: would Natasha have chosen to bury her Grandpa’s body according to her own beliefs and convictions, if the decision and responsibility had been hers to make?

Judaism has many laws pertaining to bereavement, including time-bound stages. In each stage the laws become less restrictive, following the time-limited model of grief. The first stage, *aninut*, is a time period between the death and the burial. After the funeral there is a seven-day period, *shiva*, in which the mourner is made to contemplate the loss and be completely under the care of the religious community. For thirty days after the funeral the bereaved continues to grieve, but returns to work and a daily life routine. For a full year the mourner recites a daily life-affirmation prayer. Finally, every year on the date of the death the mourner lights a candle and recites the life-affirmation prayer. The different stages reflect the belief that grief exists and should be addressed; however, the bereaved should show increasing emotional restraint over time. These periods do not only have the important aspect of a time-limited bereavement, but the laws which are included in them also show

respect for the dead (*kavod ha-met*) and console the bereaved (*nihum avelim*) (Irwin, 2010).

Holding religious beliefs and being a member of a like-minded religious community are shown to offer a level of comfort and moderate the depression associated with grief, irrespective of the degree of intensity with which the religious belief is held (Austin & Lennings, 1993). I incorporate this finding in my artefact when Natasha discusses the importance of the Jewish community and religious rituals for Jonathan's family in their grief, compared to Simona, who isolates herself in her grief (156).

However, Austin & Lennings' finding is in contrast to my own experience, as people within the church expected me to have answers and were rattled by, or off-handed with, my questions. This in effect compounded my grief.

Appropriating information: studies, methods, theory and practice relevant to my own research from within academic disciplines other than creative writing, is an example of the interdisciplinary research I employ throughout my research, a method known in the field of creative arts as Bricolage, or "bower-birding" (Stewart, 2000).

'Frayed Ends and Loose Threads'

The final chapter brings a peripeteia in the way Simona deals with her grief: by fleeing the country. It also presents a peripeteia for Simona when she meets Claudia's boyfriend, Rasheed—a displaced Muslim. It is difficult (and against conventional wisdom), but necessary for me to introduce a new character in the final chapter, as I was yet to include a character of Islamic faith dealing with primary and secondary grief. Claudia's boyfriend, Rasheed, is referred to in 'Frogmore' (as Richard), to

pique the curiosity of the reader to Claudia's love interest, so they might expect to meet him by the end of the novella. The surprise then, needed to come in the way that Simona and Rasheed meet. Their meeting also provides light relief for the reader, in an otherwise emotionally heavy chapter.

Islamic practice relating to grief and loss places great value on the acceptance of Allah's will with restraint and understanding, with an emphasis on return to functioning. Islam focuses on specific adjustment to loss and provides a complex set of beliefs and a worldview that treats loss as a normal milestone in the individual life cycle. Central to Islam is the notion that how the prophet Muhammad responded to loss, how he counselled others to respond, and what he said are worthy of emulation and point the way for believers to behave. The idea that the time of death (unless by one's own actions) is predetermined and that God has acted to set that time also carries an expectation that one accepts God's actions and will. Muslims believe that death is a step forward on the way back to God. Death frees the Muslim from the confusion and distortion of the living process and helps him or her see what is important and how. On one hand, the bereaved and society's acceptance of God's will are manifest in an emphasis on control of emotions and limited involvement in the grief response. On the other, typical behavioural expressions of lamenting and wailing convey the power of attachment and kinship ties. The basic tension between these forces resides within the Islamic response to loss (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004, pp. 149-162).

For the character of Rasheed to embody the tensions of the Islamic response to loss, I portrayed him initially appearing to Simona as functional, despite his grief. But as

time goes on she hears his prayers and laments behind his bedroom door, and questions Claudia, who explains that Rasheed sets aside time to grieve and beseech Allah for mercy, as he seeks to reconcile the death of his brother to Allah's will. The introduction of Rasheed also serves to grow Simona's character, in her response to people of religious worldviews. In 'The Apparition of Self', the family discussion around the dinner table shows that Simona has limited empathy for those who hold worldviews other than her own. In 'Frogmore', Simona's grief leads her to ask questions of her own worldview that she had never asked before:

...this discongruity, of belief from experience, felt like being ravaged by the family pet.

So young and full of the unspoken promise of life, she hadn't given death much thought before now; she hadn't had cause to: who looks for the stars when the sun's shining? (142)

To show that the accident that claimed Liberty's life spurred Simona to think about humanity—that she was disillusioned, but not completely bitter—I wrote the scene in Barney's café between Simona and Claudia. Simona's theory of ice-hockey being a metaphor for humanity is inspired by "Man and The Universe" (Pascal) and the paradoxical extremes of humanity; that we are both "the glory and the shame of the universe!" It also provided an opportunity to insert Rasheed's backstory as a shadow narrative, illustrating Simona's point by Claudia's reflection on the events that led to Rasheed's grief and displacement (171).

Midway through ‘Frayed Ends and Loose Threads’, Simona’s attitude toward people of religious worldviews softens, evident as she reflects on the character of Rasheed: *...a Muslim by any other name wouldn’t be as feared* (181).

This is a play on “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” from Act II, Scene II, of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 2000). Where Juliet argues that a name or label shouldn’t, or doesn’t change anything about the person, I seek to show that through getting to know Rasheed, Simona realises that labels we give ourselves, or that others give us, *do* change at least the perception of the person. Her final reflection on Rasheed and Islam aims to portray her growth in religious tolerance: “They shook hands. She thanked [Rasheed] again and they smiled goodbye. She wheeled her suitcase away, thinking, *this is what it means to be at peace with the person, but at war with the ideology*” (181).

I wanted the reader to reflect on Simona’s growth throughout the narrative and it seemed fitting that the many hours spent on the plane, on her way home, would provide opportunity for Simona to self-reflect. To ground her reflection in scene, Simona reads a magazine article about the ‘Eternity’ sign mounted on Sydney Harbour Bridge, causing her to reflect on how worldviews are as much about making sense of the mystery of eternity as they are about the mystery of life. Also, *The Matrix* (Wachowski) came out in 1999, so it conceivably could have been available as inflight entertainment at the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000, when Simona flies to Vancouver, via Hong Kong, and home again. It suited to focus Simona’s reflection about worldviews and religion around the movie playing on the plane, as

the theme of the movie is Truth and Lies—whether we want to take the Red Pill of Truth, or the Blue Pill of ignorance (183).

Simona's reflection portrays her new understanding that the primary function of religiousness is to buffer the individual against anxiety by providing people with attachment, structure, and hope, particularly regards to a core source of anxiety—the awareness that the self will inevitably die. The following excerpt shows that Simona's experience of grief and loss helped her to see that religion's anxiety-buffering function is derived from terror management theory—when people manage the potential anxiety stemming from their awareness of mortality by subscribing to cultural worldviews, which afford opportunities to view life as valuable and continuing on in some way after death (Soenke, Landau, & Greenberg, 2013).

[Simona's] trenchant stance towards the Divine had softened, ceding the numinous as a side effect of the blue pill, administered as palliative-care for chronic grief—and that even Science had use for Placebos. Experience had taught her about our vulnerability to a wistful yearning that *something* of our loved ones live on, and the latent hope of reuniting in the ether (183).

The final chapter also brings a dénouement to the narrative arc of Simona's grief. My challenge was to render a satisfying dénouement within the dual constraints of the word limit of the novella and the genre of Realism—where plausibility and accountability are required and grief is never truly 'resolved' (Smiley, 2007, pp. 204-228). To do this, I studied the craft of the short story. I read award winning short

stories from Iowa Writers' Workshop (Conroy, 2001), Raymond Carver's *What we talk about when we talk about love* (2003), and Alice Munro's *Too much happiness* (2010). Carver's minimalist influence on my artefact is evident in how even a few short sentences can be heavy with emotion: "Claudia and Simona lingered in their embrace. Goodbyes were gut wrenching for Simona now. They felt like Russian Roulette: you never knew which one was final" (181).

And how within a short span of words, several lives can be shattered: "Claudia thought of Rasheed's family, torn apart by the blind loyalty of extremists who knocked on their front door, expecting Rasheed to answer it, and shot his younger brother, Aashif, in the face" (172).

Munro's influence on my artefact is in adding well-chosen, specific details to bring personality, setting and events to life:

[Simona] hated home too; hated walking past Libby's room, seeing her cot and snuggle rug with the tatty satin trim, her first shoes immortalised in brass, mounted on the wall above the tall boy. She'd moved the forsaken toys from the lounge room to Libby's room, but that's all she'd done towards packing up the paraphernalia, the remnants of her daughter's life (160).

Writing Process: Reflective Practice

In planning earlier chapters, I thought of the character and worldview that the chapter would centre on, and an appropriate setting, but that was the only planning—I let the characters shape the direction of each chapter and wrote the chapters in consecutive order:

The story of the creation of a novel is also a story of the growth of the characters that create it. The creation of a novel is the coming into being of the characters that increasingly drive it. They come into being from a writer's fantasies, fed by reading and imagining. They come into being through the developments and changes they go through, through various drafts (Baranay, 2004).

However, in re-writing my second draft, I uprooted some sections and replanted them where they seemed a better fit. For example, the opening three paragraphs of the novella were positioned as the opening lines of the third chapter 'Life, Love, and Liberty', as I initially wanted to keep the tragic event a mystery for the reader, at least for a few chapters. But the final change I made to the novella was moving those opening paragraphs to the first chapter, as I decided the premise of the narrative was not 'what is the tragedy going to be?' But rather, 'how will the characters cope with their grief?'

By the final chapter, characters were already fully realised and there were certain elements that had to be included, to resolve the narrative arc of the novella, and answer my research question. I therefore reverse-engineered the structure of the final chapter, listing the scenes that needed to occur and the ideas that had to be addressed,

in order of importance. I divvied up the word count, assigning a word limit to each scene, although the order in which the scenes appear is not the order in which I wrote them. Again, I started with the essential scenes and ideas and worked backwards, figuring I would have to rob from the word count of the least important ideas to make sure the most important had sufficient.

To help ground the novella in the genre of Realism and to give the reader a sense of time, I planted some historical markers throughout the narrative. For example, in the opening page Simona says, ‘The *Summer* ’87 album could wait’, and later in the chapter there is a reference to the October stock-market crash of 1987.

After the doctor’s visit, [Len] retired. He made no mention of his diagnosis and was too proud to let it announce itself. He let them believe it was altruistic, in the wake of the October crash, pre-empting recession. He said he wanted to start building that boat he’d always dreamed of building (80).

In ‘The Apparition of Self’, Esther says it’s not a good time for Claudia to travel to Israel because the Israeli Prime Minister had just been shot by an Israeli citizen; a reference to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 (23). The reader also learns, later in the chapter, that Liberty was born on the day Princess Diana died: August 31, 1997 (99).

In choosing historical markers to orient the reader time-wise, I had to carefully do the maths on the ages of characters, to make sure they corresponded to the mention of their ages at each point in time. Simona begins by saying she is the oldest twenty-five

year old she knows and reflects back on the year 1987, when she got the home perm and was limited by her ‘thirteen-year old imagination’ to foresee any suffering worse than humiliation (77). So if 1987 was twelve years earlier, the reader can calculate that Simona’s opening reflection is placed at the end of 1999, or beginning of 2000. This corresponds with time markers in the final chapter that show a scene of Simona celebrating the turn of the millennium, and dialogue of her anticipation of the Sydney 2000 Olympics (176).

If Liberty was born in 1997, she would be two at the time of her death, which is corroborated by Gran (Esther) when she reflects on Liberty’s birth and the fact that her ‘aorta was torn in a car crash two years later’ (30). To remind the reader of Liberty’s age at the time of her death, on the lead up to Simona being informed by the police of Liberty’s death, I place a moment of reflection: ‘Now Liberty was two. Already’ (104).

Reflexivity: Conclusion

While writing the second draft of this exegesis, the twelfth anniversary of Clint’s death came and went. He died on my thirtieth birthday. I didn’t cry on my birthday this year. Usually, from the week before a latent grief rises up, when I am reminded of that awful week Clint was in hospital, slowly dying. I wondered whether this research project has helped to exhaust my primary grief by reflecting on, and writing about, the grief of loss so extensively.

The sentence in my creative artefact that sums up my position immediately after Clint’s death is a reflection on Simona’s primary grief in ‘Frogmore’:

So young and full of the unspoken promise of life, she hadn't given death much thought before now; she hadn't had cause to: who looks for the stars when the sun's shining? (142)

It is a sentence transplanted from the memoir I initially started writing and has helped in my “work of mourning” because it is a solvent for my questions about the unfairness of life. It causes me to reflect on the fact that the promise of life is unspoken because it does not exist. It never existed. I only responded in my immediate primary grief as though it did because until then I had not experienced the righteous outrage that follows a violent, unjust, premature death of a loved one.

My research project has also helped me to understand just how profoundly what we believe affects how we grieve—informing the value we place on life, and our understanding and acceptance of death—no matter the method of arriving at our beliefs.

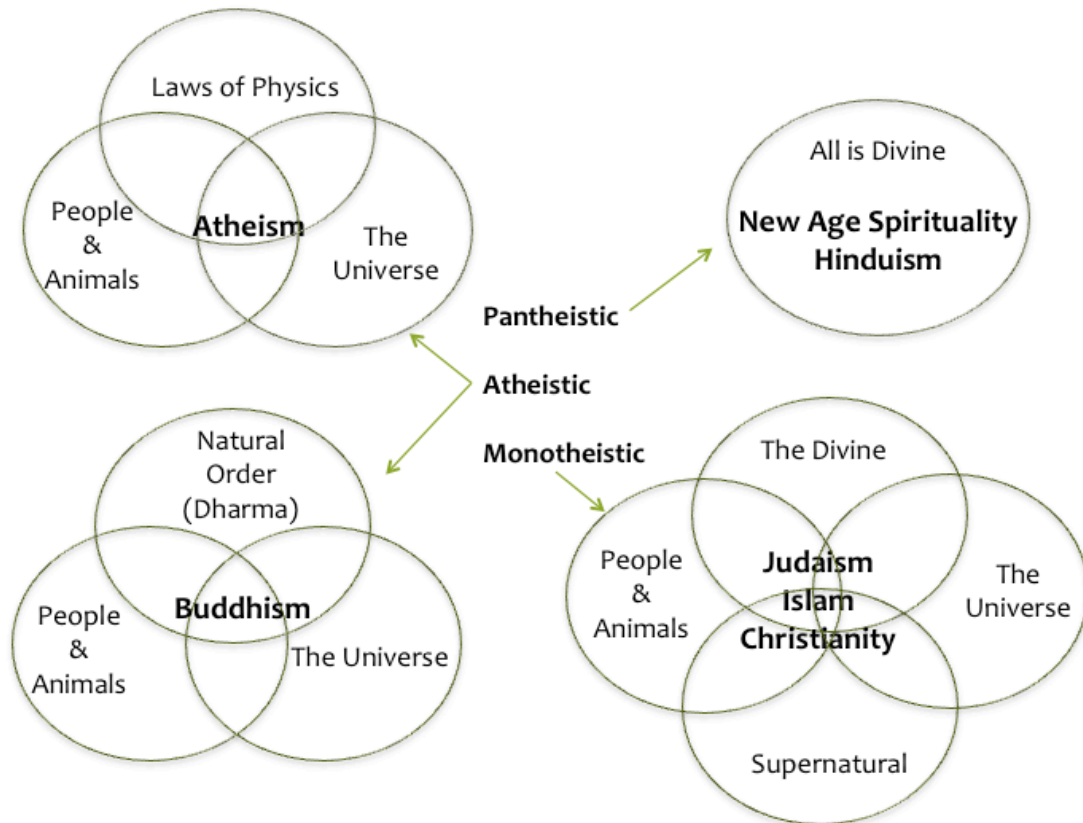
To write characters of each worldview with compassion, my approach was to find a point at which I could empathise with them, whether through a tenet of their belief, or the reason why they believe what they believe. The character I think I have rendered with the least compassion in this regard is Bob, as there is no positive attribution given as to why he holds his beliefs, only a negative rejection of religious beliefs on the whole, evidenced by his comments at the dinner table in ‘The Apparition of Self’:

‘Bloody religion! It’s the longest, ugliest sibling rivalry in history: Isaac. Ishmael. Who cares which son Abraham never sacrificed or which rock he never sacrificed him on?’ (95).

I tried to counter this harshness by showing Bob’s own compassion and empathy as he softens towards Peggy’s worldview in their acute primary grief: “Bob usually derides your amulets and talismans, but the day after your accident, he brings in a bag with your rose quartz and malachite and citrine stones and quietly places them on your bedside table” (129).

This research project has also largely resolved my secondary grief. My inquiry into worldviews led me to the brink of Atheism, as my journal entry ‘The God of Books’ (10) suggests, and ultimately to a recalibration of my Christian faith. Like Simona, this journey through primary and secondary grief has given me a more empathetic understanding of other worldviews and, by extension, the people who hold them. Although I am no closer to knowing the psychological basis for my beliefs—what portion is attributed to social “sunk costs,” sentimental attachment, or persuasion through intellectual inquiry—my consolation is that however tightly or loosely I hold my beliefs, they are no longer held in ignorance.

Appendix 1: Different paradigms of reality



Appendix 2: Flow Chart summary of each worldview's premise on suffering



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If the Sky Should Fall

A novella

For my sister—my hero.

In memory of Clint.

“People talk about how wonderful the world seems to children, and that's true enough. But children think they will grow into it and understand it, and I know very well that I will not, and would not if I had a dozen lives.”

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Simona: **The endearing perspective of youth**

I'm the oldest twenty-five year old I know. My school friends are planning a week of skiing at Thredbo, talking about guys they hope to hook up with. My uni friends are planning a weekend in the Blue Mountains: bushwalks, climbing The Three Sisters, hot chocolates by the fireplace at Lilianfels.

And I have just buried my daughter.

Of course my friends came to the funeral; promised to check in soon, to see how I'm doing, even though they know that I know we will never relate the same way again—how could we?

I might only be a third of the way through my life, so there's a lot I don't know. But this I do know: life's not spliced with neat, fair ratios of joy to grief—there's no symmetry to it. You never know where you sit on the bell curve of pain, or how many blows are left in your debit column. And I reckon suffering is relative: to what you know, to your expectations, to where you are on your life continuum.

For instance, half my life ago my knowledge of grief was as deep as the embarrassment I suffered after pleading with Mum for a home perm. What I'd imagined as my Sandra Dee-to-Sandy moment turned into months of ridicule from the mean-witted kids at school—'fluffy duck, toilet brush, two-minute noodles.' I couldn't look at Mum for weeks, I was so angry that she'd aided and abetted my humiliation.

Of course Natasha and Claudia wanted a perm too, the minute they heard me ask. It's hard to create your own identity as the middle sister of three. I begged Mum

not to let them. But Peg-o-rama said, 'If I say no I'll be henpecked all day. Besides, home perms are like chicken pox: better to get them all over and done with at once.'

So the three of us purged our money boxes. The *Summer '87* album could wait; with school photos on Monday we had to prioritise our finances. My pockets jangled with coins as I rode my ten-speed the two kilometres to the chemist. From our street in Lane Cove the buildings of North Sydney looked like Lego-land, and the clouds padding the sky over the Pacific, like wadding. I rode home with plastic bags of home perm kits slung over the handlebars, imagining the bouncy curls that would be mine in a few hours.

The Pegster laboured through three painstaking hours of combing, dividing and rolling up our hair, one girl at a time. Our playroom was half the depth and stretched the width of the house, minus the laundry. It was the perfect roller rink: cement floors, brick walls, a stereo in the corner, a mirrored wardrobe down one end, and a giant disco ball throwing glints of silver around the room. We strapped on our skates and roller-discoed to Rick Astley and Duran Duran while we waited our turn. My favourite was 'Girls on film'. I sang every word and shimmied past the mirror in my terry toweling, all-in-one shorts and boobtube, pretending I was in *Xanadu*, with my fluorescent plastic bangles clanking. *Now, I thought, I'll look the part: a roller disco dancing queen with long, shaggy curls.*

We sat on chairs in the laundry reading Mum's *Family Circle* magazines as the white goo tingled our scalps and the noxious fumes stripped our sense of smell. Mum went upstairs to set the kitchen timer and get lunch ready. After a while, Natasha let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Mum ran downstairs, 'What's wrong?'

'Take them out! Rinse it all out,' Natasha cried.

'What's happened?' Mum said.

'A roller fell out,' Natasha held up the evidence, 'with my hair still wrapped around it!'

The solution burnt through her hair and the roller plopped onto her lap, leaving stubbly tufts where her fringe used to be. It didn't occur to us that the timer was no indication of how long her solution—or mine—had been on, only Claudia's.

I tried to muffle my laughter. Natasha said, 'Stop laughing Simona—it was your idea to get a stupid perm!'

Mum ran the laundry shower. Natasha rushed under it, clothes and all.

Claudia and I raced upstairs to shower. I used our bathroom and she used Mum and Dad's ensuite.

Natasha felt better about her own disaster by turning her attention to ours. She said to me, 'You look like a little French Poodle.' And to Claudia, 'I hope you like triangles!' Claudia's lip quivered as she turned to assess the geometry of her head in the wall mirror.

Natasha said, 'Don't worry, you just need a few layers. I could do it. They'd make your hair sit flatter.'

Claudia said, 'Are you sure you can do it?'

'Positive.'

I said, 'One day sweeping the floors in a salon hardly makes you a stylist.'

Natasha rolled her eyes, 'Well it's not exactly brain surgery,' and darted upstairs, returning with mum's clunky sewing scissors. Salivating at her chance to

graduate from my Barbie collection to a live hair model, she said, ‘What if I do one of those funky under-cuts? That’ll tone down the volume too.’

Mum walked into the laundry carrying a basketful of washing. Seeing clumps of frizzy hair on the cement floor she said, ‘Where did all this hair come from? It looks like a sheep’s been shorn in here!’ She looked up to find Natasha—scissors-in-hand—and Claudia with a distinct lack of hair on her head. ‘Natasha Joy Livingston, what have you done to your sister?’

‘I was just trying to fix it; she wanted me to help.’

‘One day of work experience does not make you a hairdresser, my girl. And a fat lot of help you were! You’ve ruined the poor child’s hair; it’s been frazzled and chopped to within an inch of its life. She’s not a *Pretty Cut ‘n’ Grow* doll you know; we can’t just pull some new hair out of her head to fix this mess up.’

Natasha said, ‘You did the frazzling; I only did the chopping.’

Mum said, ‘Well I now wish I had said no to helping you ruin your hair. You’re going to look ridiculous for your school photos, the lot of you. I hope you’ve learnt to stop being so vain and start being happy with your own God-given hair.’ She tutted, ‘Just wait until your father sees you! Now clean this mess up.’ She left mumbling, ‘So that’s what Athena meant by, “Expect to face an issue with loved ones with no immediate resolution.”’

Dad came home from golf and shook his head, ‘I don’t know; you silly girls, what’d you do that for?’

Mum went from being annoyed to saying it was, ‘A short-lived, inexpensive life-lesson’. If only we didn’t have to learn it the week of our school photos. We begged Mum not to order individual shots or the sisters’ portrait Gran asked for.

Next morning we traipsed in the back door at Gran and Grandpa's for Sunday lunch, like we did most weeks. Grandpa was at the table worshipping the Sunday papers. He whipped his glasses off, 'Blimey, what do we have here?'

'Perms must be the new trend,' Gran said, unfolding the tablecloth.

Grandpa's revered for his gift of telling it like it is. But Gran says after living with that particular gift for forty-odd years, she's come to see it as an overrated quality.

Grandpa looked at me, 'What happened; were you swinging your dad's golf club outside when the storm hit last night?'

I said, 'Very funny.'

He turned to Natasha, 'Did you get robbed pet?'

'No. Why?'

'Someone stole your fringe!'

Natasha fled to the bathroom and Grandpa laughed, 'Come on chookie; take a joke.'

Gran said, 'Drop it Len.'

He said to Claudia, 'And what happened to you, possum? Did you forget to wear an ice cream container on the way to school? It looks like a maggie pecked half your hair out.'

Claudia said, 'Well the magpie's name was *Natasha* and she attacked me with mum's sewing scissors!'

Natasha reappeared from the bathroom, her hair side-swept to the right in a comb-over to hide her fringe stubble. ‘You think this looks bad, she looked like a big old shaggy willow tree before I thinned it out.’

Claudia said, ‘More like hacked it off.’

‘She may have needed a bit of pruning but you whittled her down to bare twigs; she looks like Scraggy Aggy.’

Gran kissed us each on the forehead, ‘Take no notice of your Grandpa. He’s a balding curmudgeon who’s jealous because you girls *have* hair, lots of beautiful hair.’

‘Oh phooey, we’re not raising precious princesses. If they can’t laugh at their mistakes they’ll be so miserable no one will come within cooee of them.’

Mum walked in the back door, ‘So *we’re* raising the girls, are we?’ she gestured between herself and Grandpa as she kissed him hello. ‘And here I thought *we* were raising them,’ she motioned to herself and Dad.

Dad shook Grandpa’s hand, ‘Be my guest old fella—you only said the least of what the kids at school will.’

Mum said, ‘Well, I’ve ignored their pleas to be home-schooled for the next three months.’

Gran tittered and Grandpa said, ‘Yes, but who let them make nincompoops of themselves in the first place?’

‘Mum did the perms,’ Claudia said.

‘I was taking your stance Dad: save your no for stuff that matters, remember?’

‘Hair does matter,’ I slumped into the chocolate velvet lounge, ‘that’s the whole point.’

Grandpa ushered for us to circle him like when we were kids and he’d astound us by pulling a coin from our ears. He whispered, ‘Think of this as sharing in the

suffering of loved ones. And you might as well get used to it, ‘cause if you haven’t suffered in your first thirty years, you fluked it. But don’t get too cocky; it’ll catch you in your second thirty. And if you make it to the third thirty, it’ll be nothing *but* suffering.’

I recoiled from him and my enthusiasm to grow up. I was too young to sound the depth of his words, but imagined starting down the conveyor belt of time, irresistibly drawn towards old age and suffering. Although, limited by my thirteen-year-old imagination, I couldn’t think beyond next week and could imagine nothing worse than showing up at school looking like a Fraggles. And I couldn’t decide if sharing the agony with my sisters would multiply, or divide the pain by three.

Mum said, ‘Oh Dad; they’re *teenage* girls—this is what teenage girls do.’

Grandpa said, ‘What? They’re entitled to my opinion.’

Gran said, ‘Yes dear and you always share it so magnanimously. But that’s enough circumspection for now or you’ll turn them off life before lunch. Up to the table.’

Grandpa folded his papers, ‘Huh! None taken!’

Mum helped Gran serve lunch onto the plates and I stood at the servery, ready to pass them out. Mum said, ‘You put far too much salt on the chicken; it’s not good for Dad’s blood pressure.’

‘But he likes a crispy skin.’

‘And the peas taste like bi-carb soda.’

‘It keeps them green.’

Mum said, ‘If you don’t scald the living daylights out of them, they don’t turn khaki.’

Grandpa poured the sticky sweet Maison into the good crystal for us girls and Gran, and white wine for himself and Mum and Dad. Gran asked us to hold hands while she said the affirmation, ‘Today I am practising right mindfulness with all my thoughts, words, and actions.’

Grandpa said, ‘Oh-o—it’s a sign: she’s preparing us for something burnt hiding under the gravy.’

Claudia giggled. Gran ignored him and started telling Mum about all their friends’ friends who had cancer. It seems that counting other people’s curses is a way of counting her blessings.

The family rule was whoever cooks doesn’t have to clean up, so we girls had to do the dishes. Natasha said, ‘It’s Simona’s turn. I did it last week and Claudia did it the week before.’ So I had to put my hands in the slimy water and soak the greasy baking trays. The plaque tacked to the windowsill read, ‘It begins when you sink into his arms, and ends with your arms in the sink’. I made a mental note: that would *not* be me.

The other rule was whoever makes the offer and puts the kettle on—stage one—doesn’t actually have to make the cuppas—stage two. So Grandpa offered tea, put the kettle on and went outside to climb the Longan tree. He didn’t scamper up it like last year. He seemed more ... cautious.

Longan fruit grows in clusters of little yellow eggs. Claudia says they’re like eyeballs because the flesh is white jelly and there’s a huge black seed staring back at you from the middle.

Mum came out with the tray of tea and placed it on the cement step next to Gran. Dad was lying on the hammock strung under the carport, shelling longans and eating them. Claudia, Natasha and I played poison ball. Grandpa mounted the hoop at the end of the carport, so every two minutes he'd call out, 'Mind the Crown,' meaning his Toyota.

The afternoon wore on like a pair of old jeans, the sky muting from true blue to faded denim, while we lolled in the back yard. None of us wanted to go home because it meant school tomorrow—and school photos—'A record,' Grandpa said, 'that will bite you on the bum at every school reunion from here to kingdom come.'

We kissed him goodbye. He tickled our ribs, 'Now steel yourselves. Go in there expecting taunts and teasing and take it in good spirits. If you come out laughing with them at the end of the day, the whole incident just may have been worthwhile.'

Next Sunday we skulked through the back door, world-weary. Grandpa was at his usual shrine. He looked up from the paper, took off his glasses and said, 'I hope the hairdresser paid *you*; you look like a pack of frill-necked lizards.'

Natasha moaned, 'Do we really have to go through this again?'

'What are you on about?' Grandpa said.

'She means the jokes about the hair,' I said. 'We've copped it all week at school.'

Grandpa looked at Gran and said, 'What the blazes is she on about?'

Gran said, 'They've had enough ribbing about their perms, darl.'

'Well it's the first I've seen of them.'

I looked at Claudia, who looked at Natasha, who looked at me. We thought he was having us on. But then I saw Mum studying Grandpa's bewildered eyes and Gran's worried brow and Gran mouth at Mum, 'See?'

Gran hurried to the kitchen and Mum followed. I scurried behind in the guise of setting the table. I quietly opened the cutlery drawer and slowly counted out knives and forks.

Gran cried into her apron, 'This is what I've been trying to tell you!' She turned to Mum, 'I thought it was me; I thought *my* brain was being pickled. But it's *his*.'

Mum put her hands on Gran's shoulders. Gran dabbed at tears with her apron, 'The relief of finally having witnesses to the fact that I'm not losing my marbles, was swallowed up by grief at the realisation: *he is!*'

Mum said, 'First step is to make an appointment to see the doctor. I'll come with you.'

That was the moment Mum was no longer just their daughter, but their administrator of life. A weight she had no way of measuring.

Grandpa had skimmed across the early eighties, his dividends propping up his sense of self, and his worth. He was General Manager at a large insurance firm; all Ermenegildo Zegna suits and liquid lunches. After the doctor's visit, he retired. He made no mention of his diagnosis and was too proud to let it announce itself. He let them believe it was altruistic, in the wake of the October crash, pre-empting recession. He said he wanted to start building that boat he'd always dreamed of building.

He chose the design and ordered the materials. Gran kept saying, ‘We’ve no need of Noah’s Ark in the backyard,’ but I think she was secretly pleased for the distraction it provided him, until he seemed to do more reading than building. He’d read and re-read the instructions. He’d look for the tools, or the ‘thingy,’ as he’d call them all. He’d measure and measure again. We started to fear he wasn’t up to the task he’d set himself. Six months in, he was sunk. He couldn’t tell a hammer from a saw. He drowned in a sea of instructions, unable to follow a single one.

At least fifty times over the next year he’d say, ‘What’s this, a two-dollar coin? What happened to the notes?’ Yet he could tell you—to the day—when we went from pounds to dollars. He’d sing, ‘On the 14th of February, 1966’.

I used to think it would be horrible to be Gran, with her body wearing out joint by joint. But watching Grandpa’s cognitive processes seize up cog by cog—I think that’s worse. Eventually his body shriveled up with his mind. His moods grew increasingly erratic, his behaviour increasingly unpredictable and his bodily functions increasingly untamable.

The morning Gran came out of the shower to find her husband of forty-six years—the patriarch of our family, the president of the local Lions Club, the elder-statesman of their street—had disappeared, found by a neighbour, dazed and ambling through impatient traffic on the main road in his pyjamas two hours later, both Gran and Mum tearfully conceded he needed full-time care.

He said he was lost in some lumberyard and had decided to walk home.

We dreaded our fortnightly Sunday afternoon visits with Grandpa at the nursing home. It didn’t help that the peach walls and smoked salmon trimmings were

nauseating. After a couple of years, he stopped talking. When his hallucinations started, Natasha and Claudia stopped visiting. They stayed home with Dad. Mum persisted a while longer. When she stopped, I said, ‘How can you be so heartless to stop visiting your own father?’

She said, ‘He has no knowledge of whether any of us are there—he doesn’t even know us anymore. You may have the constitution to keep visiting him, Simona, but not all of us do. And you would do well to remember that you are visiting him for your own sake, not his.’

‘And whose sake are you staying away for?’ I yelled, surprised by the intensity of my anger.

‘For the rest of the family’s,’ she quietly said. ‘Between your sisters and your Gran, I’m the family Sherpa, expected to carry everyone’s emotional baggage.’

The fact they wimped out fortified me. After all, he was no less our Grandpa. I wasn’t going to stop visiting just because *he* couldn’t remember *me*. I kept going because *I* remembered *him*.

I found it a painful degradation that Grandpa used to read the paper religiously, but now ripped it into tiny pieces and stuffed it in his mouth; that he used to reek of wit and sarcasm, but now reeked of stale urine.

I struggled to comprehend that my capable, authoritative Grandpa was diminished to a frail, confused old man, incapable of controlling the most basic human functions. And after living in a vibrant, ornate home smothered in family photos and objects of sentiment acquired over a lifetime, his tiny room felt sparse and lonely with its single bed, set of drawers and two chairs. It was depressing just being there for an hour.

One drizzly Sunday I brought in his favourite pumpkin soup Mum made for him. I spooned mouthfuls to his desiccated lips, but he didn't even try to sip soup from the spoon. It was as though he'd forgotten how to eat. I swiveled the tray out of the way and took the photo album out of my bag. I was sure his memory failed him more steadily for the simple fact there was nothing of his life or loves surrounding him in his sterile room. If memories were triggered, what did he have there to associate with family, or his seventy-odd years of life?

I opened the photo album to the holiday Gran and Grandpa took us on, to visit all the Bigs: The Big Banana, The Big Pineapple, The Big Prawn. I moved the album closer, but he pushed it away.

I said, 'Are you OK, Grandpa?'

He looked at me with his vacant eyes and said, 'Who are you?'

'Grandpa, I'm Simona.' I reached over to steady his hand.

He pulled back like he was scared and yelled, 'What do you want? Leave me alone!'

Rattled, I grabbed my things and ran down the hallway, crying; furious that the beneficent God I'd learnt about in school scripture classes would let my Grandpa end up like this. That night I challenged God, 'If you don't have the heart to fix him, at least have the decency to take him.'

Grandpa said, 'I'm as old as my tongue and a bit older than my teeth,' whenever I asked his age. It felt like I'd cheated by reading his age on the order of service at his funeral. He was seventy-five: right in the middle of his third-thirty. And I was right in the middle of my Trial HSC.

Gran and Mum consoled each other that he lived a full, senescent life. Dad put an announcement in the obituaries. I made up for missed tests by assessment.

At Grandpa's funeral Mum eulogised about his renown for calling a spade, 'a bloody shovel.' Everyone snickered. She pleaded for us to overlook the last few years and to remember him for the robust man he was before. Her past hurts seemed to have vanished: the disappointment that his speech for her 40th consisted of patting her on the behind and saying, 'When forty you become: man gets tum, woman gets bum'; and all the times she asked for help when she was growing up, and he'd say, 'You're big enough and ugly enough to work it out for yourself.'

We sat in the second row of the little chapel at Macquarie Park Cemetery, only a few feet from the shiny black casket. On it was draped an Australian flag, a slouch hat and a black and white photograph of Grandpa in uniform. In the photo, Gran was huddled under his right arm and Peggy-Sue was a toddler perched high in his left. It must have been nearly fifty years old. I asked Gran when it was taken and she said, 'More than a lifetime, and less than a moment ago'.

I sat next to Gran and held her bony, creped hand. I tried to imagine Grandpa's body lying motionless, but I could only think of death in motion. The thought of his decomposition was both compelling and repugnant. To distract myself I stared at the slouch hat, conjuring memories of all the Anzac Days I'd set my alarm at 4:25 so I could be ready for Grandpa to pick me up on his way to the dawn service. And the rowdy rum and coffee breakfasts at the RSL club afterwards, and how he would start the games of Two-Up. I loved being the only kid there. I marched for Grandpa in the city Anzac parade the last three years before he died, but I wondered if I could bring myself to do it again, now that he was gone.

Dad sat on the other side of Gran, with his arm around her. The weight of grief stooped her frail shoulders. I know she felt deep sorrow that Grandpa's life—and their shared life—had come to an end thirteen months shy of their golden wedding anniversary. His wedding ring spun around the thumb of her right hand.

Grandpa's two demands in life were to just shoot him if he ever voted Greens, and to play Frank Sinatra's *I did it my way* at his funeral. It seemed incongruous to me, even at seventeen, that a proud man's anthem was played as the curtain was drawn on a life, which, in the end, was humbled to the point of humiliation.

I wondered how much of life added up to the bits we *don't* get to do our way; or of what we wouldn't have chosen, but just try to make the most of. At the very least I had a new barometer for grief on which my distress over a bad perm a few years earlier did not even register. Experience has a way of clarifying perspective.

'The first year's the hardest,' Aunt Joyce said as she kissed Gran in the doorway of the chapel. Gran nodded and said her sadness was compounded by the vacant existence to which Grandpa sank. 'His capacity for relationship was wrenched from us all.'

A week later Gran told Mum she was relieved that the cruel taunts of disease had unleashed him; that she knew they spent a past life together and was sure they would spend another.

I didn't feel relief. I felt anger. I was angry that disease spat on Grandpa's dignity. I also felt disdain for God, if he was this nonchalant about human suffering. I vowed to put an end to it. I resolved to devote my life to finding a cure, to catching the thief of pride in human sovereignty.

Aunt Joyce was half right; the first year of missing Grandpa was the hardest. But there's something far harder than grieving the loss of a loved one who lived a

full, senescent life: grieving a loved one who hadn't. There is no consolation and I doubt the first year's the hardest. Each year surely magnifies the grief of unrequited life: of what could have, would have, should have been. We say time heals, but it merely gives us enough distance to forget the precise dimensions of our grief.

Esther: **The Apparition of Self**

Time is mist. When you're young it's dense and clouds your vision and seems settled right on top of you. The mist lifts so gradually that you don't notice until it's thin, ethereal, and then you realise that time is accelerating away from you. I find it hard to believe that Len and I were married sixty-two years ago; that it's almost twelve years since he passed. To think that my baby is old enough to be a grandmother is ridiculous; that my own granddaughters are old enough to be mothers is absurd. Surely it was only five minutes ago they traipsed through the back door with those god-awful home perms Peggy concocted?

But, it's coming up five years since Natasha married Jonathan and it must be three since Simona first brought Theo home for a family dinner. He arrived on time looking dapper in his collared shirt, and was extremely polite. Simona introduced me as Gran and Theo smiled, 'Pleasure to meet you, Gran'.

Natasha and Jonathan arrived five minutes later. They'd driven across the city from their unit in the eastern suburbs. Theo shook Jonathan's hand, 'G'day mate,' and did a subtle double-take when he noticed Jonathan's skullcap.

Natasha kissed Theo's cheek, 'We were beginning to think you were The Phantom.'

Claudia scampered downstairs after Simona made her change out of the dress she'd borrowed without asking. 'Finally!' she said, 'I haven't worked out whether Simona was embarrassed for you to meet us, or us to meet you?'

Theo smiled and put his hands in his pockets, 'I'm pretty sure I'm the suspect one.'

Peggy had gone out to the shed to get Bob when she heard the doorbell. They walked in the back sliding door and Bob said, 'Here he is, Boy Wonder!' He shook Theo's hand, 'That's what I like: a good firm grip.'

Peggy said, 'Looks like you passed the test.'

Theo kissed Peggy's cheek and laughed, 'Well, that's a relief.'

Simona said, 'Don't mind them,' and led Theo by the hand into the lounge room, where she had a plate of nibblies. No sooner had we taken a seat and Bob offered everyone a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, than Natasha turned to Simona, 'He does not have a big nose.'

Poor Theo blushed the colour of peonies in spring. He half smiled and took a sip of wine. He probably thought if he had something in his mouth he couldn't be expected to respond.

Simona sighed, 'I never said he did.'

Natasha said, 'You said it looked Greek, same thing.'

What she *had* said was: they met at the Archibald Exhibition and Theo looked like he belonged at the art gallery, with his profile smooth as a Greco-Roman sculpture.

Claudia said, 'Tell us about your work, Theo. Simona says you're in advertising?'

'I'm just the ham in the sandwich,' he said, 'either on the phone, with clients, or in meetings coming up with ways to convince people their lives will be better, if only ... that's about it.'

Bob said, 'Follow the footy, mate?' which always makes me nervous. How he can take seriously men turning up in business suits to coach a band of brutes, I'll

never know. He goes for the Balmain Tigers and whoever's playing Manly Sea Eagles.

'Absolutely,' Theo said, 'up the Eagles'.

That was the year, I remember, people started saying *absolutely*, as if it made *yes* more emphatic.

Bob said, 'Better luck next year'. Manly lost the premiership to Canterbury Bulldogs.

'Where did the Tigers place again?' Theo grinned. I don't think they made the final eight.

Peggy said, 'Where do your parents live, Theo?'

He said, 'Putney.'

Bob said, 'I can see why Jono supports the Roosters: he's from the Eastern suburbs. But why on earth would you support Manly when you're from Putney?'

Theo smiled, 'My Dad was a Brookvale boy.'

There's no arguing with family tradition, even if the logic no longer applies. But considering Jonathan's Jewish, Theo's family's Christian, and Bob thinks it's all bollocks, I thought it best to stick with football; the last thing we needed was for someone to start talking religion.

I was relieved when Simona called out, 'Dinner's ready'. It was the first time she'd cooked since she boiled a tin of condensed milk dry and the tin exploded sticky caramel everywhere, especially the ceiling, where the lid embedded, and it took her five hours to scrub the kitchen clean. Peggy banned her after that, convinced she was conducting a science experiment.

Simona started out nervous about preparing kosher food for Jonathan, but ended up nervous about Natasha. Near the end of the apricot chicken main, Natasha asked Theo if he'd discovered Simona's 'secret grody fetish?'

I sputtered my wine.

Peggy said, 'Natasha, really.'

Simona wiped her mouth with her napkin, 'Well I'm sure you'll delight in airing all my childhood fixations.'

Theo squeezed her hand, 'It can't be that bad.'

'Trust me,' Natasha said, 'it's disgusting.'

Simona cleared the plates. When she left the room Natasha whispered to Theo, 'The trinket box on Simona's tallboy has all her baby teeth in it with their ragged roots still attached. It's gross.'

Simona walked back into the dining room to collect more plates as Theo laughed, 'Freud would be pleased: I'm in love with my mother. She's kept every tooth that fell out of my head.'

Laughter lit up like spot fires; Bob with his raspy, Muttley laugh, Peggy chortling behind her napkin, and Claudia—well the girls sound like a cackle of hyenas when they get going. Natasha recoiled in disgust. And judging by her coy smile, Simona was hooked on the declaration of love.

I don't know whether she by-passed the tooth fairy business for her intrigue with life and its processes, or her disdain at being patronised with make-believe, when there's clearly so much wonder in the world as it is. She refused to even wink at the fairy as a means to the cash.

'I don't know what's worse,' Natasha laughed, 'admitting you're in love with a clone of your mother, or that you have festy teeth in your closet too?'

‘Natasha!’ Bob and Jonathan said in sync.

Peggy asked Theo his star sign. He said, ‘No idea, but I’m March 21st.’

‘Aries: Interesting.’

‘How so?’

‘Opposites attract. Simona’s Virgo: you say adventurous, she’ll say foolhardy. You say courageous, she’ll say daredevil.’

Simona said, ‘Stop prescribing my responses.’ She placed a plate of pecan pie and ice cream in front of Theo and said, ‘You know the quasi-artwork, paint-by-numbers? That’s how Peggy-Sue does life; never strikes out without checking it’s the right stroke.’

‘This looks delicious,’ Theo said, too wise or kind to rejoinder.

I offered tea and coffee and went into the kitchen to help Simona. ‘Natasha’s out of control,’ she said, as she dolloped ice cream violently into the bowls.

‘She’s just so desperate to fall pregnant, she’s against the world every month it hasn’t happened,’ I said, filling the kettle with water.

‘Then she should grow up; why make everyone else miserable?’

I said, ‘She’s the miserable one, dear. But once she’s relinquished her desire it will happen, you’ll see.’

Simona gathered a dessert in each hand and stopped short of the door, ‘She didn’t!’

Natasha had sung *the only man who could ever please me was the son of a preacher man* every time she saw Simona, since she’d cringed about Theo’s parents being churchy. And now Aretha Franklin’s version reverberated from the dining room speakers. Simona said, ‘Cow’ as she backed into the swing-door.

I had a quiet chuckle as I set the cups on their saucers.

Three girls are complicated, as triangles tend to be. I call it *The Isosceles Complex*; each girl thinking she's the odd one out: Natasha as the hard-done-by eldest, Simona with middle-child-syndrome, and Claudia scrambling to find her own way. Peggy's mistake is treating them as equilateral, overlooking their uniqueness in the interest of fairness. Whereas I think they're scalene; each as different as they are special. One thing's certain: they've vied for attention, to be hypotenuse to their father's right angle, their whole lives.

After dessert we moved to the lounge room for coffee. Bob put on Brahms' Symphony No. 3. 'Natasha plays cello in this,' he told Theo. 'It was her last concert with the Sydney Youth Orchestra.' You'd think she'd be pleased with her father's boast, but she just sighed and pursed her lips in a taut smile.

I think she hasn't forgiven Bob for her wedding day fiasco. I was meditating in the back room, trying to keep out of the way and Bob was watching the cricket on TV. Next minute Natasha was in a flap, 'My lingerie! Where's my lingerie?'

Peggy said, 'Where did you leave it?'

Natasha said, 'In a pink plastic bag on the music room floor.'

After five minutes of fluster and bluster about the place, something twigged with Bob and he walked out to the deck, rummaged through the bin and came back inside with a pink plastic bag, looking very guilty. 'This what you're after?'

Natasha said, 'Yes! Where did you find it?'

Bob said, 'Oh, I cleaned up a bit 'cause you wanted photos in the music room, and it just looked like an empty bag with a bit of tissue paper in it.'

Natasha screamed, 'Did you throw it out?'

Bob said, 'Sorry love. But it was still in the bag, it didn't touch anything.'

Natasha stormed off ranting that if anyone breathed a word about this, she would never forgive them.

Same thing happened five minutes later. Natasha yelled out, ‘Has anyone seen my stockings?’ Bob scurried out to the bin and came back with a David Jones bag. Then, ‘Has anyone seen my shoes?’ ‘Where’s my make-up?’ It went on and on. She’s lucky her father hadn’t thrown her dress out in his one and only cleaning frenzy.

Theo asked Natasha whether she still played cello. She said, ‘I teach, mainly.’ It’s a noble profession, but it saddens me that she gave away a promising orchestral career—at the grand old age of twenty-four—because teaching’s a better fit for a family. She’d rather curate regrets than clinch opportunities, our Natasha. I try to give her a bit of perspective, but unlike wise old cultures that value the wisdom of age, our young culture values nothing more than youth. If forty is considered old, at eighty-six I’m just a doddering shadow of life and my words, merely white noise. But, I admit wisdom does change through the ages; for my 21st birthday my parents had my teeth pulled out and gave me a full set of dentures. Nothing wrong with my teeth! It was just the done thing.

Theo asked Claudia her plans and what kind of employment a degree in Liberal Studies qualified her for. That’s the same question her father’s asked for three years. We still don’t know exactly what she’s studied let alone what she can do with it. Sounds like the Clayton’s degree to me; the degree you get when you’re getting a degree of no earthly use. We’d heard some possibilities over the years, but she shocked us with, ‘I’m going to Israel to work in a Kibbutz. I leave in two weeks.’

Just like that.

She said it as though she were saying, 'I'm going to put my name down with an agency for some temp work until I get a permanent job,' which would seem the sensible thing to do.

'Are you just?' Bob said. It was not exactly welcome news the week after an Israeli radical shot his own Prime Minister. I wish Bob would make a fatherly stand from time to time. But he's set on letting the girls make their own decisions and Peggy's supposed to just watch their lives unravel.

It's not often a grandmother can be objective about her offspring, but I thought Claudia was stark, raving mad! She was going on about peace and utopian societies. I blame her Year 12 English teacher, Mr Klassen. Ever since she read *The Power of One* she's had an inflated view of justice and what she can achieve in this world. If only she realised we can change nothing but ourselves.

I found myself wishing Len were here. He would have talked sense to her. He'd say, *you say centimetres, I say inches; if we can't agree on a measuring stick, we're bound to miss the mark.*

She has a good heart; she has faith in Tolerance, bless her cotton socks. It's just that, well, I'm sure there was no international relations element to her degree; or religious studies, for that matter.

'You're kidding?' Natasha said, clearly offended for Jonathan's sake. He could have relatives there, for all I know.

Claudia said, 'No, I've booked my ticket.'

I thought Peggy did well to contain her anxiety. She said, 'What exactly are you going to do in the Kibbutz?'

Claudia said, 'Work on the farm and be a peace activist.'

How she planned to activate peace when they were doing a pretty good job of de-activating it, I don't know. So that was it; that's how we learnt Claudia was skipping off to bring harmony to the Middle East with her extensive farming knowledge from growing up in suburban Sydney.

Peggy said, 'You'll be back for graduation, though?'

Claudia shrugged, 'Maybe.'

The music was building to a crescendo, compounding my sudden headache. I turned it down just as Bob said, 'Bloody religion! It's the longest, ugliest sibling rivalry in history: Isaac. Ishmael. Who cares which son Abraham never sacrificed or which rock he never sacrificed him on?'

Jonathan cleared his throat, 'I think it's a bit more complicated than that, besides, it was only a test; Yahweh provided the sacrifice himself.' Natasha linked her hands around Jonathan's arm and smiled that taut smile at her father.

Theo said, 'And Christians reckon God's own son—'

'Sorry mate,' Bob said, 'but I don't put much stock in what Christians say; they're a bunch of holier-than-thou hypocrites in my book. I'm with Esther and Bara-what's-his-face.' So now I was roped in. Bob looked at me and said, 'What did he say again?'

I was mindful not to offend Theo or his family. I couldn't look at him, I just quietly said, 'Bara Dara. And he said, "Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians – you are not like him".'

'True enough,' Theo said, 'but I think that's the point.'

Simona wriggled in her chair and rolled her eyes at Claudia, 'Each to their own. Some walk by faith. I walk by sight. Show me the proof.' This, from the girl who believes UFOs sprinkled spores to seed life on earth, mind you.

Natasha said, 'Theories aren't proof, Simona.'

'No, but at least scientists try to *disprove* their beliefs. The religious treat their faith as unquestionable.'

Bob swept the air, as if to sweep the conversation away, 'Exactly. And if they have no qualms in shooting their peace-seeking Prime Minister, there'll be Armageddon all right: it's a self-fulfilling prophecy!'

My cheeks burned with embarrassment for us all. I might agree with Bob in theory, if not in method. I turned the music up again and found myself wondering how on earth Peggy ended up married to her father. If our family was going to resemble the United Nations, Bob was going to have to improve his diplomacy skills. Right speech is just as important as right intentions. I decided it was best to stick to Bob's religion; I said, 'So, how about those Bulldogs!'

Peggy sneezed. Theo said, 'Bless you,' at the same time as Simona said, 'oh crap,' (her dark joke inferring there's no God to bless your health, therefore: '*oh crap*, you're going to die') and I wondered how small must be their plot of common ground.

We said our goodnights after a few more half-hearted mumblings about the football and Simona walked Theo to his car.

I started cleaning the kitchen with Natasha and Peggy. Like mother, like daughter: they silently crashed and banged away until Peggy turned to Natasha with her hand on her hip, 'Why were you so contrary tonight?'

'I wasn't.'

'You were moody from the minute you walked in the door.'

‘Well, how come you went all-out to impress Theo, with the ruby crystal and the country rose china and the good silver, but you never went to any special effort for Jono?’

Peggy slammed her hand on the bench, ‘*I didn’t* make the special effort for Theo, Simona did. So if there was a comparative lack of effort made for Jono, it was on your behalf.’

Natasha put her glass in the dishwasher and clomped off to get Jonathan, and Peggy said, ‘How many times have I told you the crystal doesn’t go in the dishwasher?’

Jonathan called out, ‘Thanks for dinner,’ as they slipped out the back door.

Peggy washed the glasses, wiping her tears on her sleeve. I dried the glasses and said, ‘Right effort isn’t always acknowledged, but that doesn’t diminish the intent; it’s still good karma.’

We’d only met Theo a handful of times when we spent New Year’s Day on Bob’s boat, *Hat Trick* (named for his daughters). It was a glorious day for sailing Sydney Harbour. We docked at Watsons Bay and ate lunch at Doyles.

I wasn’t suspicious at Simona dry retching when Bob de-veined a prawn, or when she declined a glass of wine; I didn’t even twig when she threw up as we rounded Clark Island on the way home. It’s Natasha who can pick a pregnant woman from a galloping horse—she’s read so much about pregnancy symptoms and spent so much energy imagining she has them. Her way of letting Simona—and the rest of us—know that she knew, was by passing Simona a napkin after she’d vomited, and saying, ‘I thought you, of all people, would understand how biology works.’

Simona wiped her mouth and said, 'Pardon?'

Natasha had herself all worked up, 'I did everything the right way round: got married, got a job, bought a place, did up the nursery: you're still at Uni, living with mum and dad, and you meet a guy who only has to hang his pants on the door and you're pregnant!'

Simona was already green around the gills but now Theo looked seedy. He scoured Simona's face for confirmation. She sighed and looked away and I realised that he hadn't known and we bore witness to their lives emulsifying. She was barely five minutes pregnant it turned out, due late August. She'd done a home test but was yet to confirm it with her doctor, let alone tell Theo.

Simona leant over the starboard rail and vomited all the way home. Theo stood by her side, rubbing her back, giving her sips of iced water. His face was like one of those lenticular prints that changed from elation to terror, depending on the angle, and whether his thoughts were on his parents, or his child, I suspect.

It wasn't the way I wanted to find out I was to be a *great*-grandmother, but poor Peggy was devastated to find out like this that she was to be a grandmother. She cried and laughed, and chastised Natasha for stealing Simona's thunder. Natasha said she thought everyone knew and they were just keeping it from her to save her feelings.

One thing is sure: lacking in right speech, right action and right intention, Natasha's little stunt didn't help her pregnancy cause. Karma keeps a tally and gives you your comeuppance, good or bad, one way or another.

August 31st came and there was still no baby, but our preoccupation with Braxton Hicks was waylaid by the shattering news of Princess Diana's death.

I was sitting on the floral settee at Peggy's, finishing off the blanket I was knitting for my first great-grandchild when Simona and Theo rushed in the sliding door and turned on the TV. They were on their way home from doing the Bondi to Coogee walk, an attempt to induce labour, when they heard the news on the radio and Simona wanted to check that I was okay.

Back in '83 I begged Peggy to give the girls the day off school so I could take them to see Princess Diana. I'd sewn them chiffon dresses with matching capes in the soft colours of sugar-coated almonds. I curled their hair and twisted velour flowers around slide combs that swept the hair off their faces. They looked like delicious little bonbonnières.

I kept the girls inside the ferry so the wind wouldn't ruin their curls, but as we cleared the bridge, they could see the Opera House unfurl like a lotus blossoming on the Harbour. We docked at Circular Quay and you could sense that Sydney was pristine, ready for the royal visit; even the sky was swept clean, the sun polished to a shine. I tied loops in a piece of red cord and told the girls to hold on for dear life as we threaded through the crowds, scuttling along like a giant centipede. We squeezed in the front, near the steps of the Opera House, and waited for hours, squinting in the sun, eating squished sandwiches and playing *I spy*.

Princess Diana finally appeared at the top of the stairs in a fairy-floss-pink dress made in, would you believe, chiffon. It hugged her legs in the autumn-kissed breeze and swished gracefully as she descended the stairs. The crowds erupted in

adulation and I felt faint when Diana made a beeline for us with her sheepish smile focused on Simona. Natasha and Claudia jiggled and squirmed with excitement, but Simona curtsied like we'd practiced and extended her hand with the posy of flowers we bought for Diana.

Diana's wide hat was tilted toward me, so I couldn't hear what she said as she accepted the flowers and touched Simona's hair. Life is but a dream. Next minute, Diana floated gently down the stream of people. I asked Simona what she'd said and all three answered, 'Fancy that: you and I are twins in our pretty pink frocks.' Of course the way home was dotted with arguments about why Simona had the pink dress and the other two were stuck with the mint and the mauve.

The bouquet was made of white roses because I'd read in *Women's Weekly* they were Diana's favourite. They were right: her boys had a wreath of white roses made for her funeral. All I could think, as I saw the sorry spectacle of the Mercedes and heard the harrowing news over and over was: *She's dead. The people's princess is dead. And we have killed her. For our appetites she was hunted. Who will wipe this blood off us?*

Simona was in the early stages of labour by four o'clock. But she, Theo and Peggy didn't leave for King George V Birth Centre until nine. Distraught about Diana and anxious about the birth; I was awake when Peggy called at 11:53pm, to say we had a girl.

Bob drove me to the hospital first thing in the morning. We walked past the magazine stand in the foyer. Diana was on the front cover of both *Woman's Day* (which comes out weekly) and *Women's Weekly* (which comes out monthly). Either

way, they were behind in the news. The *Woman's Day* cover was a photo of Diana in her white swimmers, a solitary figure sitting on the diving board of Dodi's luxury yacht. The magazine was dated September 1st. The caption read: *Diana's new life*.

There was talk of the cruel irony: that the magazines touted her new life the day after her life had so needlessly, heinously, ended. I was tempted to think like that too: to think of the end, not the beginning.

But then I saw her, my gorgeous, perfect baby girl—my great-granddaughter! She didn't look a day over, though she was two weeks late. Her eyes were iridescent opal blue. She had this serenity, this grace about her. It was one of the most joyous moments of my life, seeing my granddaughter and her baby girl commune with one another like a long awaited reunion.

And then I knew.

I realised that all those years ago, when Diana had sought Simona out in the crowd, it was as if her consciousness was seeking out its next incarnation.

I knew Simona wouldn't be open to hearing it, but I congratulated her and Theo on the birth of their beautiful girl and said, 'I think Diana's consciousness has found a new home in our little princess.'

Simona said, 'Oh, Gran—' in that tone I've heard enough to know means, *stop talking Tommyrot*.

Theo kissed his baby girl's forehead and said, 'Princess Liberty Grace; I like that.'

One way you know when a consciousness is reincarnated is that it departs the next person in the same way, and Liberty's aorta was torn in a car crash two years later. Peggy was driving her home when a drunk driver swerved into them on that sharp bend, just two minutes from home.

There are degrees of grief so acute they threaten to undo your mindfulness, unravel your understanding; entice you to concentrate on what is lost instead of what is gained. I am disciplining myself, through meditation, to achieve a right view of life and suffering. The idea of ‘self’ is so entrenched, but the hope that keeps me from despair is that I might have a deeper understanding in the next life. But then the mist will settle like a dense fog again and ... it unhinges me a little to think that enlightenment will elevate me to nothingness, so that I won’t be conscious to enjoy my hard-won understanding. A preposterous complaint, I know, when the point is there will be no more suffering.

Theo walked slowly down the aisle of his parents’ church, his arms and neck straining under the weight, his tears falling onto the rainbow of gerberas atop the small white coffin.

Peggy was still in hospital: two broken ribs, a punctured lung. I doubt she would have coped anyway, to be honest. Besides, Simona was still not ready to see her. Mothers often bear the brunt of their daughters’ anger, but I think Simona unfairly blames Peggy for the accident. Bob felt torn about whether to stay with Peggy, but he came to the funeral. He stood by Simona’s side, with his arm around her waist. Claudia had flown home just the day before. She stood on the other side of Simona and held her hand. Natasha clung to Jonathan and caressed her six-months-ripe belly. The Reverend preached, ‘Jesus said, “let the little children come unto me”.’

At Macquarie Park cemetery about twenty of us gathered around the small tear in the earth. Simona turned to me, her voice metallic, ‘Tell me Gran; what did Liberty do to deserve this?’

I touched her arm and gently said, ‘Sweet girl; she did nothing wrong and everything right. She’s been released from the cycle of life and suffering. We’re sad for ourselves, but we should be happy for her.’

Simona folded her arms and said, ‘Then what did I do?’

Life, Love and Liberty

Simona caught the five-o-one bus home from Sydney Uni, having lent her car Peggy so she could pick Liberty up from daycare. Peggy's car was being serviced. She worried the brake pads were worn; didn't want to drive Liberty in it till it was fixed. Lurching along Victoria Road in Friday night traffic, diesel fumes seeping through the windows, Simona felt nauseated. She closed her eyes against the nebulous sunset and tried to fend off a headache.

Home at 6:13pm, she found the red light flashing on the answering machine. Two messages. Peggy, from 4:27: I'll give Libby dinner and a bath before I bring her home. And Theo, from 5:09: we won the Optus account! Going to The Oaks for drinks.

Any chance to evade the witching hour of bathing and feeding a tired two-year-old was a relief. It was nice to not have to think about dinner. She poured a cup of kibble into Vashti's bowl and said, 'Hello gorgeous girl,' mussing the fur on her neck. The golden retriever sat up on her forelegs, looking for Liberty, who wrapped her arms around Vashti's neck and lay across her back each night. 'She's not home yet,' Simona said. Vashti sprawled back down on the tiles like a toothless lion. Theo bought her as a pup, a couple of years before he and Simona moved in together. Simona was four months pregnant then. Now Liberty was two. Already.

Simona stood at the stove, stirring oats, and had a fleeting thought: *I hope Theo leaves his car at work and gets a taxi home.* She plopped lumps of brown sugar into the bowl of porridge, watched it melt, and drowned it in milk. She sat at the pine table with the empty highchair next to her, slurped porridge and read the latest peer-

reviewed article on the determinants of severity of neurodegeneration in Alzheimer's disease.

She ran a bath, wondering when she'd last had one on her own. Took out the family of rubber ducks and the octopus whose tentacles turn purple if the water's too hot, and tipped a few drops of lavender oil in. She rummaged for the matches at the back of the vanity and lit the candles, even the jasmine-scented one Theo hated; not that he ever had a bath. Stewing in your own muck, he called it. She peeled her clothes off and slunk in. The scalding water licked her skin, leaving delicious goosebumps. She wet the *Dorothy the Dinosaur* washer hanging over the tap. Laid it across her chest, rested her head against the rim, and sighed. Flickering flames, rising steam; the air so sultry even the mirror was sweating. She ran her fingers along the canvas of her belly, across the faint pink lines that looked like Libby's finger painting. *Just one more way kids leave an indelible mark on their mothers*, she thought.

After ten minutes Simona felt blanched. She dried herself and slipped on the hoodie and tracky-dacks Theo called 'passion killers' when she heard, above the water gurgling down the plughole, a knock on the front door. She blew out the candles and padded downstairs in her Ugg boots to answer it. Two police officers stood at the door, preening their caps. 'Good evening,' said the senior constable, with his worn leather smile. 'We're looking to speak with Simona Livingston.'

'That's me.'

'Could we please come inside to speak with you about a car accident?'

'Why didn't he get a taxi!' she sighed.

The female constable looked at her partner, and back at Simona, ‘Do you own a Hyundai with the registration CXR520?’

Simona’s stomach plunged. She nodded. The female constable cut her eyes away, looked down. It gave Simona a sense of foreboding that their news would extinguish the stars and cause the moon to crumble. She hesitated before she opened the door and offered them a seat on the gingham lounge. She sat on the faded blue lounge opposite, clenched her teeth, and scratched at the hangnail on her thumb.

The senior constable handpicked his words, like apples at the grocer, testing their firmness, polishing them before he offered them to her. Simona inspected them, as if checking for bruises, accepted ‘injured’ and discarded ‘fatally’ because it stemmed from a word she didn’t believe in: Fatally. Fatal. Fate.

‘Which hospital?’ Simona pushed her sleeves up, kicked her Ugg boots off.

‘Royal North Shore,’ said the female constable.

‘What will she need? Pyjamas. Dorothy—’ Simona started listing the things her daughter might need as she tied the laces on her joggers, ‘Food: Tiny Teddies.’

The female constable crossed the room and sat next to Simona, angled her body towards her, ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. Simona looked at the woman, thought she saw a tear forming, so she stood up and scrambled for her backpack and her keys from the hook behind the front door, ‘Let me just grab a few things. Theo. I need to call Theo. Tell him Libby’s in hospital. And mum.’ She picked up the phone, dialled Theo’s mobile and sat down, deflated, as the phone rang out.

The female constable—Constable O’Leary—put her hand on Simona’s knee and said, ‘I know this is hard for you to hear Simona, but we need to know that you understand.’

‘Stupid, useless brick!’ Simona banged the phone down on the glass coffee table, ‘what’s the point of having a mobile if you never have it on!’

The senior constable tossed her a chalky apple, ‘Simona, do you understand that your mother has sustained internal injuries, but your daughter’s injuries were fatal?’

‘I have a headache,’ she said, staring at the phone on the coffee table, rubbing her hands across her forehead. ‘I need to take something.’ She stood up to forage for Panadol in the kitchen cupboard when the senior constable decided he had no choice but to throw her the rotten apple: ‘Simona—Liberty is dead. She died at the scene. I’m very sorry.’

Simona collapsed to the floor, bent over, heaving; knowing that from this moment on the sun would refuse to shine—there would be no day or night, only dark matter, heavy and expansive—and her world would rattle around the empty universe like a cold ball bearing.

From the moment he found out Simona was pregnant Theo was caught in a tussle of joy and terror at the prospect of fatherhood. It didn’t occur to him that she might not want to keep the baby. He fancied himself a Renaissance man; thought morals were

merely shellac and the idea of Truth, passé. In theory he was *for* a woman's right to choose and prided himself on *live and let live*, but faced with the potential of his own offspring, live and let live felt a lot like live and let die.

'My body: my choice,' she said.

He said, 'Your body. But *our* baby.'

'It's not a baby; it's a zygote.'

So went their debates.

They loved each other, though they couldn't agree on what that meant: She said, 'It's a fission of pheromones.'

He said, 'That's only limerence; love's the pure reduction you're left with when limerence has boiled over and simmered down.' Simona's pregnancy gave him a new appreciation that love was at least giving the other the freedom to make their own decisions. It gave him a fresh understanding of the memory verse he'd learnt as a boy, 'God is love.'

Theo invited Simona's dad for a round of golf at Roseville the Sunday after he found out Simona was pregnant. After three hours and seventeen holes of wrangling with himself to spit out the words he'd rehearsed, Theo teed up for the eighteenth hole—a par-5 that Bob had just shot in a double eagle, and thought: *it's now or never*. The sun was high and merciless. Theo chose a driver for the shot and positioned himself with sixty per cent of his body weight on his right leg. He said, 'I wanted to ask—'

‘Listen,’ Bob said, ‘legs wider; longer arms.’

Theo corrected his posture. ‘It’s about Simona. I. We—.’

‘Don’t swing steep like a Ferris-wheel.’

Theo flattened his stroke, ‘I know it hasn’t even been a year, but I want to—.’

‘Go shallow on the drive, son.’

Theo swung low and hard and the ball shot across the green in a graceful arc and he turned to Bob, ‘I want to ask Simona to marry me.’

Bob, hand on hip, watched the ball—purposeful and sleek, like a homing device. When it disappeared into the hole at the foot of the blue flag, he slapped Theo between the shoulder blades and shook his head, ‘Well, you’re either brave or stupid, but you’re a lucky son of a gun.’ He’d heard for years: *I’m never gonna let a man stake his claim on me with a fancy ring.*

Bags hitched to their shoulders, they trailed back to the clubhouse and Theo shouted Bob lunch of grilled snapper and chips and a couple of Crownies. He walked back to his car feeling as tall as his shadow with the afternoon sun at his back.

Next Saturday Theo surprised Simona with a gourmet picnic in a quiet corner of Centennial Park. He took an hour to work up the confidence to propose, like an accordion expanding with courage and air. Laying in the stippled shade of a Teak tree, looking up at the tie-dyed sky, he reached for the small turquoise box in his backpack and rolled to face Simona. ‘It’s a bit sooner than I’d planned, but ever since that night at the theatre—.’

She looked at the box and sighed, ‘Theo, how can I disentangle your feelings for *me*, from how much you want to keep the baby? Besides,’ she rolled away, put her hands under her head and looked at the sky, ‘I hoped you knew me well enough not to buy me a ring.’ He concertinaed in on himself like bellows collapsing, and slid the box back in his backpack.

Australia Day they picnicked at Bronte beach with Simona’s uni friends. As the afternoon sizzled on Theo and Simona braved the swell that kept lifesavers busy rescuing Japanese tourists. They jiggled across the molten sand and rinsed the salt off under the shower. Theo looked at the kiddie train on the grass, full of bored dads, knees up round their ears, their excited toddlers next to them. He looked at the mothers dutifully waving every single time the train circled past and he grabbed Simona’s hand and kissed it, tasting salt and grit, ‘Even if you decide not to keep the baby,’ he said, ‘I still want to marry you.’

She pulled her hand away and gathered her towel around herself, ‘How can I know that’s not reverse psychology? Stop pressuring me.’

It was Simona’s Gran, Esther, who convinced her to keep the baby. Being Buddhist, Esther was never in favour of ending a life, but knew better than to appeal to karma: ‘It’s DNA trying to propagate the species. You’re prime childbearing age. Women have been giving birth in the morning and going back to their fields in the afternoon, for millennia.’ This was at the heart of her dilemma, Gran knew: Simona’s proposal for her Masters had just been accepted and she didn’t want to miss out; didn’t know if there’d be another opportunity, or whether having a baby would deplete her brain cells of the capacity for scholarly research. It was her life. And she was reticent to exchange it for a domestic one of nappies and sleepless nights.

Sitting on the lounge at Theo's place in Surry Hills, with his flatmates riffing Deep Purple on their bass guitars in the next room, Simona said, 'I've been thinking; now's as good a time as any to have a baby, maybe even the best time, biologically.'

He cried on her shoulder like a little boy. 'Just a sec,' he darted to his room, returning with the turquoise box.

She shook her head, 'Doesn't mean I'm saying yes to getting married.'

'That's okay,' he extended her the box with both hands.

Her mouth was a rictus of delight as she took the infinity platinum earrings out of the box and kissed his cheek, 'I love them!' He'd never heard her say she loved something so emphatically.

It was a conversation they'd had months earlier, on the way home from seeing *The Winds of God* at the Belvoir St Theatre that inspired his gift. They were discussing the play and how free will means that we're all tangled up in the consequences of each other's choices. She'd said, 'It's depressing to think that grief can be magnified to the power of infinity, depending on x .'

He'd said, 'But if that wasn't at least a possibility, then joy couldn't be magnified to the power of infinity, either.'

She oohed and aahed over the earrings, said, 'Did you exchange the ring?'

He shook his head.

'So at the park; the box—?'

He nodded, 'For the infinite possibilities.'

They kissed: tenderly, insistently. Theo's flatmates tumbled into the room and apologised awkwardly when they found Simona and Theo writhing on the lounge, limbs entwined. She sat up and buttoned her shirt and Theo barreled over, caught them in headlocks and whooped, 'I'm gonna be a dad!'

He found a townhouse in Balmain and convinced her to move out with him. He paid the lion's share of rent—with full-time uni, she only worked about ten hours a week at the bookshop on Darling Street, though moving out of home she finally qualified for Austudy, well, enough to buy the bread and milk each week.

It was the little things that made her feel a bit more in love with him each day: bringing her a cup of tea in bed before he left for work, vacuuming every Saturday, cooking dinner most nights, running her a bath when she felt tired, driving to 7eleven at midnight to buy her the smoked almonds she craved ... and mopping the floor when they made her throw up.

It was the little things that made her feel a bit more annoyed with him too: leaving the toilet seat up, piling the dishes *in* the sink instead of stacking them next to it, leaving empty toilet rolls on the bathroom floor, hanging clothes on the line slightly askew so they dried out of shape, squeezing the toothpaste at the top instead of rolling it from the bottom.

She didn't imagine there were irksome things he put up with from her too. But he'd grown up hearing, 'Take the plank out of your own eye before you take the speck out of someone else's,' so he never said anything.

Assembling a timber cot from IKEA one Saturday when she was seven months pregnant, the fact that they were *going to have a baby(!)* morphed, for Simona, from a

vague idea to a real proposition. Followed closely by the realisation: *she* was going to have to deliver it. Holding the base steady, she sighed, ‘I wish we were seahorses.’

He raised his eyebrow, ‘Random!’

‘Then *you’d* give birth instead of me.’

‘Ahh,’ he downed tools to give her a hug. ‘You’ll be great.’ He kissed her cheek. ‘...And I’ll be there the whole time.’

‘I think I want the Pegmeister too.’

‘Really? You don’t think it’s, kind of, I dunno, private—between you and me?’

‘To be honest, I’d rather Mum there than you. No offence. It’s just, if things start getting a bit overwhelming and you start telling me what a great job I’m doing, I’m just going to think, *what the hell would you know?* I mean it’s not like you have any idea. But Mum’s actually given birth—three times—so she has a bit more of a clue.’

‘Fine,’ he said, picking up the Alan key and tightening the screw holding the wheels to the cot.

Turned out Theo was relieved to have Peggy there: she knew what to do, what to say. He was glad to be bossed by her—*get some ice, put the washer on her forehead, give her a sip of water*—although he was a bit put off when she clucked, ‘This room’s a negative energy trap. The bed shouldn’t be aligned with the window, it doesn’t allow for positive energy flow, and the lounge should never be near the door—.’

Simona’s the one who struggled with Peggy there. She was leaning into a beanbag, moaning, while Peggy rubbed her back and tried to convince her that she

should eat the placenta. ‘Humans are the only mammals who don’t. It helps to regain strength and prevent postpartum depression.’

Simona heaved, ‘Gross!’

Peggy enticed her with recipes she’d read about: ‘Fried placenta and mushroom, tomato and placenta pizza, placenta lasagne.’ Theo dry-retched and Peggy said, ‘*You* don’t have to eat it.’

Panting through clenched teeth, Simona said, ‘Did you?’

Peggy said, ‘The health benefits weren’t really understood or promoted back then.’

Simona twisted fistfuls of beanbag and curled her toes into the mat, ‘Well, you first!’

They agreed with Peggy to at least plant the placenta with a tree to commemorate their baby’s birth, deciding on White Gardenia because of its delicate petals, exquisite aroma and its precious short flowering season.

Simona was adamant about donating the cord blood for stem cell research; Theo agreed, but that’s about all they agreed on. In the month before she gave birth they had a doozy of an argument and Theo started to think it was bunkum that *all we need is love*. He’d made Simona a cup of tea, and sat on the blue lounge opposite, with his own cuppa, ready for their nightly debate about names, circumcision, and christening. When he realised he’d made five concessions in a row and she hadn’t budged, he said, ‘You’re being a stubborn bitch about absolutely everything! We’re s’posed to make these decisions *together!*’

Simona made a grand gesture of pouring her tea onto the peace lily near the kitchen, ‘Well, I’m starting to think it’d be a lot easier to do it on my own!’ She

thumped up the stairs and as he sat, finishing his tea, it occurred to him that if love never fails, then the problem must be, that we fail to love.

He trudged upstairs and found her packing. 'Don't go,' he said. 'I'm not going to beg. I just... want to say I'm sorry.'

She sighed heavily and threw her pyjama top on the bed. Hand on hip, she zeroed her eyes in on his, 'If you *ever*—!'

He shook his head and kissed her cheek, 'I won't.'

Theo fumbled with his keys in the front door, trying not to wake Simona. The kitchen light was on. A note on the bench read: *I'm at Royal North Shore. Mum and Libby had a car accident.* It looked like a splash of water had landed on top of *accident*; a starburst smudging the ink.

He careened down the back streets of Balmain, with its twists and turns and knotted intersections. At Darling Street, he had a mental blank which way was quickest to the hospital. Ducked down a block and turned right onto Victoria Road, veering right over the bridge, to Hunters Hill.

On Burns Bay Road, at the sharp bend near Ross Smith Parade, Theo saw two cars in a mangled mess on the footpath: the nose of a red Holden Commodore ploughed into the side of a white Hyundai hatchback. He was tempted to slow down and inspect the damage, but seeing how far the Commodore was implanted, his gut roiled and he floored it towards the hospital.

He double parked in the emergency drop-off zone and ran inside, asking triage for directions to Liberty Livingston-Hunter. The nurse tapped on her computer, said, 'No one under that name.'

He ran a panicked hand through his hair, 'What about Peggy Livingston?'

The nurse ushered him to the IC unit. Natasha sat outside Peggy's room, bent forward, sobbing into her hands. Jono slouched next to her, rubbing her back.

Theo burst into the room, 'Where are they?'

Natasha sat up, her gravid belly rounding out her top.

'How's Peggy?' he said, panting with adrenaline.

'Stable,' Natasha said, wiping tears on the back of her hand.

Hands on hips, Theo said, 'Where's Libby?'

Natasha shook her head and gulped back tears, barely able to say the words, 'They haven't told you?'

The young nurse in mauve scrubs walked two steps ahead, silently escorting Theo through a double door, where a flimsy scrim separated his up-to-now reality, from the melodrama that awaited once he parted the curtain and walked centre-stage: where life no longer obeyed the laws of cause and effect, reason and rationality.

He peered feebly through the split and there they were, babe in arms. A flashback to the days after Liberty's birth, when Simona cradled her endlessly and the magnetic field, that six-inch vector from mother's eyes to baby's, was one he couldn't penetrate.

Now, there was no magnetism.

Simona heard Theo's footsteps and looked up, her cobalt eyes suspended in tears. He walked over and she passed Liberty to him and he recalled the first time he held her—how it felt like he had the whole world in his hands, and how weightless it seemed.

Now, it was heavy as a millstone.

Through the blur of tears he looked at what seemed a mere replica of his daughter. On her purple pyjamas were the words *my heart belongs to Daddy*.

Simona blew her nose. 'I want to donate her organs for research.'

Theo coughed and snivelled. Said nothing. Taunted by the second hand circumnavigating the clock.

She said, 'I've already decided.'

'Give me a minute!' he said. 'Bloody hell!'

'Okay, but you need to sign here.'

'*Need to—!*' he grabbed the papers, they rumbled in his hand.

'*Something worthwhile has to—,*' her voice broke off and she blew her nose again.

He sighed, '—If you let her funeral be at mum and dad's church.'

She shook her head. No.

‘Or we put a memorial cross, with her name, at the site of the accident?’

She said, ‘Not a cross.’

Years ago, when he confessed his parents went to church, she said, ‘They’re not the door-to-door kind who think God works on commission?’

He said, ‘Nah—more the sort to kill you with kindness: death by casserole.’

She laughed, ‘God no: save us from the culinary sin of the casserole.’

But a couple of months ago she was livid with his parents. On the bus on the way home from the city, Liberty sat in her pram, singing *Jesus loves me this I know*, all the way down Victoria Road. Simona tried shushing her, but it turned into a game: the more irate and embarrassed Simona grew, the louder Liberty sang.

Simona walked in the front door and yelled, ‘Your parents have bloody brainwashed her!’

They didn’t speak on the seven-minute drive home from the wake at Simona’s parents’. She reclined her seat; arms flung across her face. When he glimpsed Liberty’s car seat in the rear vision mirror, silent tears slid down his cheeks.

He unlocked the front door and she pushed past, ran to the bathroom and vomited. He went to the kitchen and poured a double shot of Jack Daniels, fed Vashti and filled her water bowl, then plodded upstairs and shrugged his clothes on the floor, left his boxers on, and climbed into bed.

He heard the bathroom tap run, Simona brushing her teeth. She shucked her clothes off, slipped on his old grey Levi’s t-shirt and sidled in next to him.

He rolled onto his back and laid his arm under her neck, scooping her close, to rest her head on his chest. She sighed, catching her breath, having exhausted her tears. Her hair smelt faintly of Issey Miyake. He kissed her forehead. She touched his bristly cheek and he dropped his hand down, under her arm. He let his hand travel up and down her side; slip under her shirt and down her pants. He craved the comfort of her warm, soft skin; his hand came to rest on the curve of her cheek.

She pushed his arm away, flung the covers off and screamed, ‘What kind of sick bastard buries their daughter and comes home to have sex? You make me sick!’ She slammed the bedroom door behind her.

Flushed with shame, he pulled the doona over his head, and muffled sobs. He hadn’t been thinking about sex at all; he had just wanted to cling to Simona and make love to life. He thought: *this is what it feels like to be buried alive.*

Light eventually leaked into the darkness, filling the world with another day. At seven-thirty he moped out of bed and past Liberty’s room. Simona was asleep in the cot, curled up like a cat.

For two weeks, Simona hadn’t left the house; just dozed on the lounge day and night, watching *The Bold and The Beautiful*. Theo came home to take Vashti for a walk each evening, but spent his days at his parents’ cutting out rust from the 1969 VW Beetle he started doing up in his teens. It occurred to him that grief was like rust: insidious.

Simona walked to the back patio to fill Vashti’s bowl one evening and the aroma of the Gardenia in the terracotta pot caught her attention: it was flowering and

she'd nearly missed it. Side by side on the one branch, there were brown shrivelled flowers and fresh white blooms. She bent down to smell them and nearly plucked one of the flowers, but thought: *no moment in time can be held in your hand, they all wither away.*

Shipwrecked: they were fatigued and floundering, drifting apart. To her they were flotsam, with no meaning or purpose. To him they were jetsam: jettisoned for a reason, so when her sisters hauled Simona away for a week, to the family holiday house in Mollymook, he swam in search of a life jacket.

The church had been swarming with people at Liberty's funeral, but now it was an empty beehive. Theo wondered if life's major events were the honeycomb that attracted people there—an attempt to bring meaning to their lives, marking occasions as sacred and their lives momentarily above the menial. And, whether some life events might smoke some people out of it, permanently. He wasn't prepared that some circumstances could draw you back, as a place to unload.

The happy sounds of children playing outside in the preschool grounds made him feel sadder, and the church seem even emptier. It was the same preschool he and his brothers went to. Stabbed by the thought that Liberty was supposed to come here next year, he sat in the back pew, tugged the hanky out of his pocket, blew his nose and wiped at tears. He sat there looking at the stained-glass-version of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, with children and lambs at his feet; thought of all the sermons he'd heard about Jesus sharing in our sufferings. And all he could think was: *Jesus never lost a child.*

He bit his tongue and tasted blood.

He entered God's sanctuary for the satisfaction of holding him responsible. But when Reverend Joe walked in, Theo knew his interrogation would fall to him by proxy. Well, he had nominated himself as God's representative.

Reverend Joe never preached on suffering without releasing a cataract of tears. Theo had heard him tell how his family sat, stuck like Velcro to their vinyl lounges, watching the conscription lottery on TV: his younger brother's birthday was called and the dates either side of his own, and he sat there, tormented by relief that he was passed over, while his brother was led like a lamb to the slaughter. In an effort to atone, Joe signed up to go as an army chaplain. It nearly killed him, and his faith. But he had this underpinning joy—despite everything—that confounded Theo.

One of the preschool teachers must have told Joe some bloke was loitering. He strode into the church and smiled when he saw Theo. 'Good to see you, son,' he extended his hand to shake Theo's.

His eyes were so full of compassion, or pity, that Theo couldn't hold his gaze. He looked at the grey-blue carpet, 'Thanks, but ... I don't really know why I'm here.'

'Let's have a chat then,' he sat on the pew across the aisle, leant his elbows on his knees, hands spliced.

Theo felt like he was sixteen again, come to debate theology: the depravity of man, free will, God's sovereignty, predestination. He couldn't count how many sermons he'd sat through, behind Rebecca what's-her-face, fantasising about rubbing his face in her long, dark curls, for half of them. He said, 'I'm pretty sure you've said there are no accidents with God. So what: is he careless or useless?'

'Ahh,' he sighed, 'we're a tough mob to please: I reckon God can't win. It's as though we want him to spare us nothing and everything—none of the joy and all of the pain. We want our freedom; yet we want to hold God culpable for the

consequences, accuse him of negligence. Or favouritism.’ Looking off into the middle distance, caught up in his own musings, he said, ‘I wonder what we want him to save us from: the freedom he gives us? Each other? Ourselves?’

Theo was thinking he’s been spared all of the joy and none of the pain! He haemorrhaged tears. Tears he’d banked up. There was no stopping them; they bled till he was bankrupt.

He thought: *you never know the joy of changing a shit load of nappies, of rocking a screaming baby at 2.a.m. You don’t know the joy of work-a-day boredom that ends with the dinner, bath and bedtime routine. You don’t even know it’s what joy’s made of when you’re doing it, day in, day out. Only when it’s ripped from you, can you see beauty in the monotony of life and recognise it as joy.*

Reverend Joe sat and cried with Theo for maybe quarter of an hour before Theo gained control; wiping his face with the hanky all balled up in his hands, wet and useless. He couldn’t hear the kids playing outside anymore. All he could hear was the world rushing somewhere to do something, along Victoria Road. He felt like the only person on earth with nowhere to go, nothing to do and no one to go home to.

He clenched his fists and jaw; his anger fomenting not only at Liberty’s life cut short, but that the bloody drunk driver would probably only get three years for it! He looked at Joe with pleading eyes, ‘Is there any justice in this world?’

Reverend Joe smiled wearily. ‘As far as I can tell: Justice is Hell. Heaven is mercy. And this world is a pale reflection of both.’

That stung, not least because Theo knew he’d become a pale reflection of himself. He folded his arms in defense. ‘Mercy looks a lot like injustice to me.’

‘Yes,’ the Reverend sighed, ‘in my experience we call someone a *bleeding heart* like it’s an insult and declare *No Mercy!* like a mantra to be proud of. That’s the

paradox,' he rubbed his gammy knee. 'We hold God in contempt for the injustice in this world. But when he promises justice we call him vindictive, and if he offers mercy we brand him unjust.' He shook his head and sighed, 'I can see no way round it: God can't win.'

But God always wins, according to Reverend Joe. At every conundrum he'd say, 'It's the very fact that God's ways are higher and wiser than mine, that I know He exists. If He seemed to act remarkably like me; how could I tell that I was not the potter and He the clay?'

Theo would always think: His ways are not mine, either. But it was no comfort; it felt like maybe Truth had become the façade for opinion. And he could never work out whether justice was a façade for God, or whether God was a façade for ignorance. Like existence was his façade for living.

There was nothing to win, no more to be said. Theo took a deep breath, stood and shoved the hanky back in his pocket. He held out his hand and Reverend Joe stood and hugged him, then held his shoulders and looked him in the eye, 'Is there *anything* I can do?'

The kids were outside again, sixty three-to-five year-olds tearing around, laughing at nothing, at everything. Theo said, 'Can you cancel Libby's preschool enrolment for me?'

Reverend Joe nodded and Theo turned and walked down the sandstone steps and along the path, staying close to the hibiscus, to keep out of the kids' way. He walked through the iron gates at the back of the church, to his car in the council car park.

'Shit!' A parking fine: Sixty bucks! Like there's no crime in the world greater than overstaying a car park by ten minutes!

Peggy: The miracles and the fish

You're lying in starched sheets, feeling stiff and sore with two broken ribs, a fractured pelvis, some internal bleeding, and whiplash. Your room is a symphony of beeping machines in surround sound and your eyes are tired from the phosphorescent glow of light leaking into your room from the hallway. The faint smell of disinfectant turns your stomach. You haven't eaten a single meal in your four days in hospital. You feel slightly hungry, but you won't eat today, because today is your granddaughter's funeral.

You keep rewinding, playing the day of the accident over in your mind, pausing on some moments, fast forwarding others; desperate for a different ending each time. You think what a topsy-turvy world it is for a grandmother to bury her granddaughter, before she's even had to bury her own mother.

Simona asks you to pick Liberty up from daycare. You say you're happy to, but your car is being serviced. Simona drops Liberty at daycare, leaves her car at your place and catches a bus to Sydney Uni.

At three o'clock, you stand quietly at the waist-high door to the Star Room and watch Liberty. Her piggy tails are lopsided and the knees of her leggings are dirty. She has paint-stained hands. She is concentrating on stacking blocks with two friends. Miss Anita sees you and smiles, 'Look who's here, Libby!'

Liberty whizzes around and the block tower collapses. She jumps up and down on the spot, calling, 'Franma, Franma, Franma!'

You open the door and say, 'Hello possum,' but Liberty doesn't run into your open arms, she runs over to the clothesline to unpeg the finger painting she made for you.

She holds her painting by the corners and walks it over, 'For you, Franma,' her eyes incandescent with joy.

You say, 'Oh darling girl, it's gorgeous,' hesitant to ask what it is. You say, 'I love the colours. That blue is my favourite.'

She says, 'I know. Do you know what it is?'

You squint at the blobs and splashes. Miss Anita bends down behind Liberty and makes fish faces at you. You remember the new children's book you bought, how it's her favourite. You say, 'Is it the little rainbow fish?' Your eyebrows raised in hope.

'Yes!' she squeals. You wink at Miss Anita and kiss Libby's perfect nose.

You pack her bag, hang her hat on the hook and sign her out. She runs to give Miss Anita a hug goodbye. 'See you later alligator,' Miss Anita says.

Libby jumbles up the line her Grandpa taught her, 'Don't you forget your toilet paper!' You laugh. The other line Bob taught her is, 'See you soon ya big baboon,' but she already prefers toilet humour.

The painting isn't quite dry so you place it on the passenger floor, put the bag on the seat and buckle Liberty in. You turn the ignition and look at her in the rear vision mirror, 'What was your favourite thing about today?' She hooks her pointer over her bottom teeth, kicks her feet and says, 'Umm...singing!'

You say, 'Which song did you sing?'

She splays her starfish fingers, as if to throw the words at you, 'Topsy turvy!' Miss Anita taught it to all the grandparents on grandparents' day. Bob wanted to

come too, but the children could only have two grandparents each and Simona said she'd better invite Theo's mum, Lyn. You felt an mélange of pride and pity that Libby held *your* hand, not Nanny's; that she introduced you to the class, 'This is my Franma!' and said, 'and this is Nanny,' like an afterthought.

'Sing it!' Liberty says, clapping wildly.

You say, 'I'm not sure I remember all the words.'

She says, 'Yes you do!' She's caught you singing it once or twice.

'You have to sing with me,' you say, and she charges in:

If the world was topsy-turvy we'd be born when we're old

The kids would be the boss, your dad would do as he was told

The mum would be the baby and the girl would be the lady

If we lived in a topsy-turvy world

If the world was topsy-turvy we would wash in the dirt

We'd eat broccodile for breakfast, chocolate meatballs for dessert

We'd have sweets and treats for lunch and we'd never have to sleep

If we lived in a topsy turvy world

Libby giggles when she sings about the mum and dad. And it's supposed to be broccoli for breakfast, but she gets her vegetables and animals mixed up. The other one she confuses is pussycat, for capsicum.

When you get home you run a bath for Liberty. She asks if you'll hop in with her. You say, 'No, Grandma's too big for the bath.'

‘Pet, your Grandma will never get out again, if *she* gets in,’ Bob says. He kisses Libby’s cheek and chuckles to himself on his way out to his shed to work on the two-foot tall dolls’ house he’s building her for Christmas.

Liberty says, ‘Can I have toast soldiers and dipped egg for dinner?’

You say, ‘Sure can.’

You dash to Simona’s old room and get Libby’s spare pyjamas you keep there. They’re fleecy-lined and button-up from neck to shoulder. You sewed a button back on just yesterday. It popped off when Bob pulled the top over her head without unbuttoning it the other week.

The timer beeps and you ladle the egg out of the boiling water and place it in the humpty dumpty eggcup. You butter the toast and slice it into fingers. Liberty climbs up onto the stool and sits at the table. You knock the top off the egg. She dunks the soldier in and bites the yolky tip. She spits it out and says, ‘Hot!’

You say, ‘Careful, love. Blow on it first.’ So she blows on it in her way that sucks air in and out through clenched teeth. She tries it again and gobbles up all the egg-dipped toast and spoons the white out with a teaspoon. Then, as if the idea just occurs to her, even though she does the same thing every time, she says, ‘Hey Franma, can I trick Franpa?’

You slide open the back door and yell, ‘Bob, a little girl needs your help.’

Liberty turns the egg upside down and stifles a giggle, ‘Franpa can you please crack my egg for me?’

Bob says, ‘You want me to chop humpty dumpty’s head off?’

Liberty nods and smirks, ‘M-hmm.’

Bob dutifully taps at the top of the egg with a spoon until the shell caves in. He acts surprised to find the egg is empty, and shocked that Libby would trick him

and she erupts in rapturous laughter. Bob tickles her ribs, ‘You tricked me!’ And she squirms and squeals. Bob pulls her fringe off her face, kisses her forehead, and tramps back to his shed, smiling to himself.

You make a warm Milo for Libby and snuggle on the lounge together to watch *Little House on the Prairie*. She’s asleep before the show is half over. You check your watch: it’s seven. Simona was due home at six. You half want to call her and say, ‘She might as well stay the night,’ but you know Simona and Theo only like her to sleep over when they have something on, because they love to spend the weekends with her. On weekdays they feel like they just bundle her out the door in the mornings and into bed at night. Weekends are when they get the best of each other.

Bob scoops Libby up in his arms and rests her head on his shoulder and you gather up Libby’s backpack and shoes. Bob sits her in the car seat, kisses her cheek and says, ‘Bye bye schnookums’. Without opening her eyes, she yawns, ‘B-bye,’ and her head flops to the side. He leaves the straps for you to fasten, because he knows you’ll just re-do what he does, anyway.

Bob says, ‘Do you want me to follow you?’

You say, ‘No; Theo will drop me home.’ Their place is only seven minutes away.

All you remember is seeing the lights of a car swing around that sharp bend on Burns Bay Road as you turn right out of Ross Smith Parade.

Bob is by your bedside when you come to, with tubes and catheter protruding from nearly every orifice and a cannula creating a new one in your hand. When you gasp,

‘Libby! How’s Libby?’ He breaks down in a thunderous mess of mucous, and can’t catch his breath to speak.

He doesn’t have to.

Your hysterics draw nurses, who sedate you.

Natasha and Jono visit the night of the accident but you don’t see them until the next night. You get the feeling that her concern costs more than she’s prepared to pay. She has a protective hand over her belly the whole time, which makes you wonder if they will ever trust you to look after their baby. You know they will never let you drive with their child, at any age.

Your mum, Esther, visits you morning and night, and mothers you like she hasn’t done for thirty years. She encourages you to repeat the mantras, ‘Suffering is a sickness of the mind,’ and ‘the past has no power to stop you from being present’. But you don’t want to be present. And you fear your suffering will send you insane.

Bob usually derides your amulets and talismans, but the day after your accident, he brings in a bag with your rose quartz and malachite and citrine stones and quietly places them on your bedside table. He doesn’t say much, and you don’t tell him that *he* is your rock; that it’s *his* presence that brings comfort and healing.

Everyone thinks you can’t hear them when they stand outside your door and talk about you in stage whispers: the doctors, the nurses, your family. You still haven’t seen Simona, a week after the accident. Theo visits. He kisses your cheek; his tears burn your skin. Even Theo’s parents visit, although you are—mercifully—
asleep and wake to find an exquisite orchid and their card which reads: *Thinking of you, love and prayers, Grant & Lyn.*

Claudia sweeps in like tumbleweed, straight off the plane, blown about by her emotions. It’s the first time you have seen each other in three years. She wants to

cradle your shoulders and kiss your face, but you wince with pain, so she just holds your hand and gives you foot massages. She visits you in hospital every morning and Simona at home every afternoon. You think *she's a true Pisces: compassionate.*

The afternoon before Liberty's funeral, you are in a drug-induced fug, lying with your eyes closed, when you hear Simona's voice outside your door, talking with Bob and Claudia. She says, 'It's never Mum's fault! She'd blame Mercury in bloody retrograde before she'd take responsibility!'

Bob says, 'That's not how it is!'

'I know,' Simona says in a satisfied huff. 'It just *looks* like it goes backwards when it slows down.'

Bob says, 'That's not what I meant.'

Claudia says, 'Just go in and see her. Think about how *she* must feel.'

You hold your breath in anticipation.

Simona says, 'Yeah, poor mum!' Then, 'I can't!' And you hear footsteps slap against the lino floor and patter faintly away. After a couple of minutes, you slit open your eyes and peer through your lashes and see Bob and Claudia poke their heads into the room. They think you're asleep, and decide to get coffee at the cafeteria.

You cry, softly at first, then violently. You cry because Simona hasn't called you Mum since she was thirteen. It's always been The Pegmeister, Pegorama, Peggy-Sue, or behind your back, Jake-the-Peg. You don't cry with relief that she calls you Mum. You cry in despair that it means she hasn't forgiven you.

A week after you arrive home from hospital, there is a timid knock on the front door at about five-thirty Thursday evening. Your mum answers it, says, 'Oh, hello.'

The voice is female. She says, 'We don't mean to disturb. We just want to drop a meal over and see how Peggy is.'

Esther says, 'Please, come in.'

You don't care who it is; you don't want to see anyone. The only person outside of family you have seen since the accident is Janice, the clairvoyant in the arcade in Lane Cove. You don't know whether she's read the papers, or heard of the accident. You just need some assurance that your little angel is okay. Janice says, 'I have a message from your granddaughter.' You hold your breath and cover your mouth with your hanky when she says, 'Remember the rainbow fish'.

You forgot about the rainbow fish and no one else but Miss Anita and Liberty knew about it. You race home and cry to Bob, 'Where's the car?'

'It's a write-off.'

You grab your keys and handbag, 'I need to get to the car.'

'Calm down and tell me what's the matter.'

'Libby painted me a picture. It's in the car.'

'I'll go,' he says, leaving you home with Esther. He drives to the wreckers' and asks to gain access to the Hyundai, and there, crumpled up on the passenger floor is a piece of paper smothered in Libby's finger painting. You kiss the painting and kiss Bob and lay it on the kitchen table to smooth out the creases, and then you stick it to the fridge with magnets and say, 'I'm going to get it framed.'

You know Simona thinks you're cuckoo for believing in spirits. But she hasn't had your experience and she would freak out if she knew Libby had experienced them too. Saturday night, a few months ago, Theo and Simona go to his school reunion, so

Libby sleeps at your place. Bob gets up at five-thirty for golf. Next minute Libby scrambles into your bed and you both fall asleep again, holding hands. Then you feel that strange sensation of the bed pressing down around your feet and an invisible weight crawling up your body, until it presses down, heavy on your chest. Frigid with fear, you keep your eyes closed and breathe deeply. After a minute the weight lifts and you sigh with relief and wonder whether you have dreamt it. Then Libby's breathing gets shallow and fast and your tummy curdles. She says in a panicked voice, 'How did it find me again?' You open your eyes in terror but as quickly as it comes, it leaves, and you only see Liberty asleep, breathing calmly. You don't even try to explain it to anyone; no one would believe you.

You hear Esther say, 'That's very kind of you; won't you stay and share the meal with us?'

You try to manoeuvre yourself from the lounge room to the stairs across the hall, so you can creep up to your bedroom. But your mum swings the kitchen door open just as you pass in front of it and you can't help but see Theo's parents, Lyn and Grant, standing there like wise men bearing gifts, and they can't help but see you. You think *I bet there was a fourth wise man, banished for offering sloppy stew in earthenware.*

They smile meekly.

Your mum ushers you all to the dining room and leaves you there with Grant and Lyn while she goes to the back door and calls out to Bob. You excuse yourself to the kitchen to get cutlery and they place their casserole dishes on the table.

Bob washes his hands in the laundry and hesitates at the dining room door. Lyn smiles, 'We don't want to intrude.'

Bob says, 'Not at all,' and shakes Grant's hand and kisses Lyn's cheek.

Your mum says, 'We could do with some company around here,' and offers everyone a glass of wine.

You scurry about, placing cutlery and napkins, avoiding eye contact.

Everyone takes a seat: Your mum sits at the head, with Lyn to her left and you to her right. Bob and Grant sit opposite each other.

To fill the awkward silence, Bob picks up his fork and says, 'Two, four, six eight.' But before he says 'dig in, don't wait,' your mum says, 'What a good idea. Grant, would you like to say grace?'

Grant glances around the table. Your mum smiles and nods at him. Lyn places her hand in Grant's and they bow their heads. Your mum reaches for your hand and for Lyn's.

Grant closes his eyes and prays, 'Lord, we thank you that your mercies are new every morning and your steadfast love never ceases. Bind us to you and to each other in our grief. Amen.'

Your mum says, 'Thank you, Grant, that was lovely,' and stands to take the lids off the casserole dishes. A briny smell drifts towards you. 'Help yourselves,' your mum says, placing serving spoons in the dishes.

After everyone else serves their meals, Bob serves yours. In the periphery you hear your mum say, 'Oh Lyn, it's delicious,' but you are transfixed on Grant's words: *Our grief.*

Lyn smiles at you and sips her wine. You raise a fork of food to your mouth, hoping it's a more sincere show of goodwill than the limp smile you offer in return.

You close your eyes and tears defy your resolve when you recognise that your grief *is* their grief, for Liberty was their granddaughter too. With a mouthful of tepid tuna mornay and gluggy rice, you are overwhelmed by the realisation that they seem to have forgiven you for the death of their only grandchild. You wonder whether Simona will ever forgive you, and whether you can forgive yourself.

Frogmore

The driveway to the family's holiday house in Mollymook was twin ruts in the grass. As they drove in, Joni Mitchell sang 'Big yellow taxi'. Claudia switched off the radio—they needed no reminding of how life seemed to go. The hydrangea bushes along the front of the house were rampant with blue flowers that looked like old ladies' swimming caps. Sand Dune cream paint peeled off the clapboards. The afternoon sun shone silver on some parts of the tin roof, and on the rusty parts, bronze. A ceramic plaque, gold-embossed with *Frogmore* (named for the Queen's summer residence) was pinned to the front wall like a fancy brooch trying to dress up a shabby outfit.

Claudia said, 'I think the last time we were all here—.'

'Was the year I finished high school!' Natasha turned the ignition off on her new Rav4 and rubbed her belly, 'and don't remind me how long ago *that* was.'

Claudia offered to drive, said it was a wonder Natasha's feet could reach the pedals her chair was so far back to fit her belly behind the wheel. 'I'm just pregnant, I'm not an invalid,' Natasha said, though it was more that, right now, her car was her baby.

'I don't think I've been here in five years,' Claudia said.

Natasha said, 'Well you haven't been in the country for three!'

The last time Simona was here was June, for a winter getaway with Theo and Libby. Natasha glanced at Simona and wondered whether it was a clumsy move to bring her here, whether time steeped in memories might overwhelm her. 'How about we unpack and air the place and then I'll go into town for supplies,' she said, 'what do you want for dinner?'

‘Whatever. You’re the foodie.’ Claudia jiggled the key in the front door. There was no handle, just a stainless steel knocker over the keyhole and a square of opaque glass. The door scraped open and a dank smell pounced on them. Claudia pried open windows, jimmied open the back door, and vacuumed. Natasha wet a cloth, dabbed some eucalyptus oil on it from under the kitchen sink and wiped the lime green benches in the kitchen and bathroom. Gran’s housekeeping secret she calls ‘a lick and a promise’.

Simona sat on the front steps convincing herself she wanted to be here, that she needed to do her own grieving, apart from Theo. When she finally heaved herself upright, habit drew her to the room on the right. She glanced around at the Ken Done bedspread and matching curtains, a cacophony of yellows and pinks left over from the ‘80s, and thought *the things you want to die, never do*. She lay down on the bed; the springs creaked under her weight.

An hour later Natasha bowled in the front door, flustered, with two plastic bags in each hand. Claudia said, ‘Ever heard of enviro bags?’ as she grabbed them and walked to the kitchen, chastising the nation for its lack of environmental conscience. ‘Two decades behind!’ she said with the self-absolution of an ex-pat, ‘all privilege and no responsibility!’

Natasha slumped into the leatherette recliner and flipped the footrest up, ‘Give me a break! I’ve just had *the* most mortifying moment of my life!’

Claudia spun around, salivating at a little sisterly schadenfreude, ‘What happened?’

‘My stupid skirt got sucked under the wheel of the trolley. It’s so long and light, I didn’t notice and kept walking. Next thing, the elastic waist was around my

knees, and the hem was balled up around the wheel.’ Natasha put her hand to her forehead and blushed at reliving the embarrassment.

‘What did you do?’ Claudia smirked.

‘I dropped to the floor and yanked frantically at the skirt—what else? This young Spanish tourist came to my rescue—tugged at my skirt till it tore free—and there was I crouched over, pulling my top down - trying to cover my big bertha undies, grovelling, “gracias, gracias.” Ab-solutely mortified!’

‘I can imagine,’ Claudia said, with a little too much satisfaction for Natasha’s liking.

Natasha held up the tattered ends of her skirt, ‘Look at it!’

‘Looks like you were mauled by a pack of dogs.’

‘The worst bit was Fabio’s gorgeous girlfriend standing there, trying not to laugh. No! *The* worst bit was running into them every aisle ‘til I finished the shopping and then...*then*, just when I think *hurry up and let this be over*, they unpack their trolley of groceries behind me at the checkout. And I feel so awkward that I start making nervous small talk with them, “Are you enjoying Australia? How long are you visiting?” all the while cringing, *shit, shit, shit, just get me out of here!* You’re lucky I didn’t dump the trolley and run, so get off your high horse about the bloody bags!’

Claudia flopped over the arm of the lounge backwards and struggled to catch her breath for the full belly laugh.

The ruckus woke Simona from her recurring dream—nightmare—about Liberty being dragged out to sea right in front of her. She woke up sweating, her pulse racing. She used to wake up from nightmares and talk herself calm, but now there was nothing to say.

Natasha cooked a prawn risotto with cracked pepper and shaved Parmesan. ‘Smells fantastic,’ Claudia said, taking her seat. ‘You don’t have to go to so much effort though; it’s meant to be a relaxed week.’

‘I enjoy it. I’m the consummate epicurean,’ Natasha poured sparkling mineral water into their glasses.

‘Epi what?’ Claudia said.

‘You know: eat, drink and be merry—’ she stopped short, like the room ran out of air.

‘For tomorrow we die,’ Simona said, monotone.

Claudia decided they needed a spack-filler, to smooth over the cracks, ‘Anyone heard the Eurythmics’ new album?’ She slipped away to find the CD in her room, plug in the old ghetto blaster and turn the music on.

‘Theo bought a red from the Barossa the other week, when he was there for work,’ Simona said. ‘Anyone interested?’

Gran worried about Simona’s drinking, asked Natasha to keep an eye out. A splash of wine and Simona relaxed a little, until track four: ‘Beautiful child’. Natasha threw Claudia an excoriating look and Claudia rushed over to skip to the next song.

Simona turned to Claudia, ‘So, tell us about Richard?’ The wine tickled the back of her throat, ‘Oh, um ... well,’ she coughed, ‘he’s halfway through his study to be an architect. We met at the markets in Tel Aviv.’

‘...And?’ Simona said.

‘And: what?’ Claudia shrugged.

Simona rolled her eyes, ‘You’re such a stick in the mud.’ She inhaled her glass of wine and poured another.

Claudia knew Natasha was keeping the sex a secret, but said, ‘So, is it a little Claude or Claudia?’

‘Nice try,’ Natasha said.

‘I think it must be a boy; she’s *so* excited and she’s always wanted a boy,’ Simona swallowed hard, determined not to cry, and drained her second glass.

‘After all we’ve been through, we’re just thrilled to be pregnant,’ Natasha said.

Another awkward silence for Annie Lennox to fill!

‘I can’t believe it’s only six-thirty,’ Claudia looked at the clock, a peacock perched on the floral wall, complete with fibre optic tail; one of the tacky gifts Grandpa bought Gran for birthdays and Christmas, for his own amusement, after she told him she didn’t want anything, she was extinguishing her desires. ‘Why don’t we go for a wander, take in the sea breeze and earn some dessert?’

Natasha said, ‘I bought a chocolate pudding I can make when we get back.’

‘Good on you—the old Livingston faithful,’ Claudia said. The girls joked about being raised on packet self-saucing puddings. Eight minutes in the microwave, they were quick, easy, and had the right measure of warmth and flavour to qualify as comfort food (although there was no microwave here—just the original gas oven from the ‘60s).

The girls shrugged on their jackets and strolled to the lookout near the golf course.

After half an hour, Natasha stopped fostering conversation and sat on the bench seat

at the apex of the headland and rubbed her belly. The sky was a ream of shot silk throwing deep pinks and purples and the ocean was a bolt of satin quietly unravelling. Simona sat next to Natasha, rested her chin on her knees and hugged her shins.

Natasha said, ‘Doesn’t it look like a jeweller sprinkled all their diamonds out for us to admire?’

Claudia stood at the edge of the cliff with her arms folded against the breeze, ‘I always wonder what gives the zodiac its power.’

Simona thought, *that’s us: summed up in the stars!* Natasha concerned with aesthetics, Claudia conjuring up the mystical, and she—content just to marvel at the function of things: how stars support every carbon-based life form on the planet; at the three sequences that have to take place in precise order, to produce any carbon at all. True, siblings share DNA—but she saw no anecdotal proof amongst herself and her sisters.

It was not long before Simona’s thoughts returned to her daughter and the fear that mushroomed in the dark corners of her grief: that memories of Liberty would recede like the moon, moving a little farther from her grasp each year.

She just wanted to sit quietly under the stars and join-the-dots and let them connect her to the past. She thought of the camping trip to Mungo Brush, how she and Theo dragged the double blow-up mattress out of the tent in the evenings, so the three of them could snuggle together by the campfire and look up at the stars.

She was surprised to hear herself laugh.

‘What?’ Natasha smiled.

‘Oh, I just remembered Libby asking once where my freckles came from. I said the sun gave them to me and that night she asked if the sun gave the night sky its freckles too.’

Claudia laughed, ‘Clever cookie.’

Simona stopped laughing; her smile fell away, ‘Not that *you*’d know.’

A moment later Claudia said, ‘I planned to come home—for Christmas.’

No response.

‘She wouldn’t have remembered me, even if I’d come home sooner.’

‘But *you* would have remembered *her*!’ Simona wiped her tears on the cuff of her jacket.

‘When are you going back?’ Natasha said, realising Claudia might not be around to meet her baby, either.

Claudia shrugged. ‘I told Richard I’d come for a couple of months.’ It had been three weeks already.

‘Why doesn’t he come here?’ Simona said.

Claudia said, ‘It’s complicated.’

The moon looked to Simona like her mum’s salt lamp—like it emanated light from within and didn’t just reflect borrowed light. She thought about her life in the three-and-a-half years since she’d met Theo, and how complicated it had become: how she’d walked by thousands of people without consequence and yet he had walked not past her, but into her life, through her, and changed her irrevocably. Her feelings were muddled. The grief was hers, she knew that much. But she wondered about her moments of happiness and whether they had ever emanated from within, or whether she had merely borrowed Liberty’s happiness and reflected it back to the world, fooling everyone into thinking it was her own.

For the last three weeks, every cell in Simona's body screamed *why*? But she'd rather burn at the stake than denounce the universe as random (except for the laws that sustain it). Yet this incongruity, of belief from experience, felt like being ravaged by the family pet.

So young and full of the unspoken promise of life, she hadn't given death much thought before now; she hadn't had cause to: who looks for the stars when the sun's shining?

'How do you make sense of it?' she asked her sisters.

Claudia said, 'Everything happens for a reason, even if we don't understand why.'

Simona cut her off with Ockham's razor. 'Yeah, it's called cause-and-effect.' To her mind, Claudia always ignored Cause, parsed some eisegetical life lesson from Effect and called it Reason. As though Libby was killed for some higher purpose and not just because a drunk driver smashed into the car their mum was driving.

But Simona knew the world had moved beyond the certainty and simplicity of modern science, rendering cause-and-effect reductionist. We were in the post-modern era of Quantum mechanics now, with its subversive theories; where light is not particle *or* wave, it's both. Where the sub-atomic world undermines our quest for order and reason. And we're forced to face the contrarities of life: that Simona was now a mother, without a child. And *why* was the wrong question. The non-question.

Natasha said, 'Do you want to head back?' Claudia grabbed Natasha's hands and heaved her off the chair and the three of them dawdled downhill, towards the road.

Simona took it as an evasion and determined to demand a response. She turned to Natasha, 'Do you think he'll go to gaol?'

‘Probably,’ Natasha said. ‘But maybe not for as long as you’d like.’

‘He took Liberty’s *life!*’ Simona said. ‘If there was any justice, they’d throw away the key!’

‘Justice for whom?’ Claudia said, zipping her jacket against the chilled air.

‘Any gaol time for him is hardly justice for his wife and kids.’

‘Well while you’re acting as his defence lawyer, why don’t you put forward mitigating circumstances, about his brutish childhood and how it *made* him into an alcoholic, so the jury feels sorry for him and turns *him* into the victim!’

‘Calm down,’ Natasha said. ‘We’re on your side.’

‘Then you should want to see him strung up by his gonads!’

Natasha cocked her head towards Simona. ‘So let me get this straight: you reject the idea of Rosh Hashanah, of the great Day of Judgment, but *you* want to be judge and jury here and now?’

Simona huffed and strode off ahead. They walked the last five minutes in silence.

Back home Simona poured them each a glass of water and said, ‘Want to watch *Steel Magnolias?*’

It was their tradition to watch it every family holiday at Frogmore. Their dad would say, ‘Not this again!’ grab his golf clubs, and leave them to laugh and cry and repeat their favourite lines in their best Southern drawls, ‘The way she dances “it looks like two pigs fightin’ under a blanket!”’

‘If you’re up to it,’ Claudia said. She was surprised, given it was about a group of women dealing with grief and loss.

Natasha said, 'I knew I bought the salt and vinegar chips for a reason.'

Simona set up the DVD and Claudia grabbed pillows from her room, to lie on the floor. Natasha laid back in the recliner and Simona draped herself along the three-seater. They jostled the packet of chips between them, grabbing handfuls as it passed. Their laughter was more restrained than usual. Near the end, at the little boy's first birthday party after his mother died, Simona stomped out the front door, banging it behind her.

Natasha said, 'Should we see if she's OK?'

Claudia peered through the front curtain, 'She's all right. She's just pacing around the front garden.'

Claudia lay back down to keep watching the movie. A minute later they heard the scrape of metal against metal in the backyard. Natasha hurried to the kitchen window, 'Looks like she has a rake or hoe or something from the shed.'

Claudia opened the back door and ran down the stairs, 'What are you doing?'

Simona disappeared down the side of the house, headed for the front yard.

Natasha opened the front door, her hand protectively across her belly. 'What are you going to do with *that*?' she glanced sidelong from her new car to the hoe Simona wielded like a weapon.

Simona stood in front of the hydrangea bush, 'Look at that! The flowers grow in little families.' She raised the hoe, swung it with a grunt and beheaded the top of the bush, petals tumbling to the ground.

Claudia came round from the side of the house as Simona heaved a second swipe at the bush. 'Simona! Calm down. Take a breath. What's wrong?'

Simona paused, mid-swing, 'What's *wrong*?' She growled and lifted the hoe and let it rip through the flowers.

‘OK, I get it: you’re angry,’ Claudia said. ‘But you need to put that thing down before you do real damage.’

Simona sneered, ‘More damage than Mum’s already done? Or Mr-bloody-X?’ and thrust the hoe into the roots, dragging it through the dirt.

Claudia said, ‘It wasn’t Mum’s fault, Simona. It was an *accident*.’

Simona paused, hoe mid-air, ‘She didn’t *mean* for it to happen, but she’s still responsible!’ then raked the hoe through the bush again.

Natasha tried to think of how to calm Simona without confronting her. She remembered the chocolate pudding she’d bought and decided to make it, hoping by taking her attention away, Simona might run out of steam, and the waft of warm chocolate might mellow or distract her.

Claudia said, ‘Take a deep breath, Simona, and say, “I let go of my anger so I can see clearly”.’

The hoe was heavy and Simona was tired. She yelled, ‘Don’t tell me I can’t be angry!’ and struck the bush again. She dropped the hoe and started grabbing at branches, snapping them off with her hands and throwing them on the ground.

Claudia dragged the hoe out of reach and put her hand on Simona’s shoulder, ‘I know it feels like the sky has fallen Simona, I honestly do. But in reality there *is* no sky: it’s only an illusion. It’s just Raleigh scattering particles around the atmosphere making the light *appear* blue.’

Simona ripped a bunch of petals off the tree and strew them at her feet. She collapsed on the front step, ‘But death isn’t an illusion, Claudia: Dead is dead is dead.’

Natasha bellowed, 'Can I get some help with the oven?' She found the igniter in the top drawer, 'Clauds can you help?'

Claudia kissed Simona's cheek and helped her to her feet. As they walked up the front steps, Claudia said, 'You know you can't avoid Mum forever.'

Simona let the screen door slam behind her. 'Can't I?' She stood against the wall, arms folded and watched Claudia squat in front of the oven and snap the button on the igniter. A strobe of blue light clicked on and off.

Claudia reached into the oven to light the element and said, 'OK,' so Natasha pressed the igniter button on the stovetop and it clunked over and over. 'It's not working,' Claudia leaned closer.

Simona sniffed, 'I smell gas.'

Then: an almighty whoosh, like the oven sighed and gasped in one gulp. A picosecond later Claudia screamed and dropped the igniter and ploughed her face into her hands.

'What happened?' Natasha hadn't seen the lightning-fast lick and retreat of the flame.

Simona raced to the bathroom to wet a washer, 'Here; put this on your face,' she guided Claudia over to sit on a chair.

Natasha lifted the edge of the washer, 'You alright?'

Claudia groaned, 'Ouchiwawa.'

Simona said, 'Just leave it on for a few minutes to take the heat out.'

Claudia's skin squirmed and tingled with a weird prickling sensation. She lifted up the bottom of the washer and sniffed, 'I smell burnt hair.'

'Let's have a look,' Natasha peeled back the washer. Claudia opened her eyes and saw Natasha's grimace.

‘What?’ Claudia said, her face too stiff to form any kind of expression.

Simona tried to keep a straight face, ‘Let’s just say: you’re now a true ash-blonde.’

Claudia scrambled to the bathroom mirror and shrieked at the horror of her long, camel lashes burnt to stubs, her singed brows, and the ruins of her fringe.

The other two crowded around. ‘It’s not *that* bad,’ Natasha said in a way that, truth be told, she would have slapped whoever had said it to her.

‘Not that bad! I’m a skinned rabbit!’

‘Par-boiled,’ Simona snickered.

The fuse was lit. Natasha looked at Simona and they exploded with a laughter they couldn’t douse for a good few minutes.

‘Mean bitches,’ Claudia said, her bottom lip quivering. She splashed cold water on her face to disguise the tears as much as cool her skin.

To placate her, Natasha said, ‘Remember when that stupid perm burnt my fringe off? It didn’t take too long to grow; yours should be grown back before you see Richard again.’

Simona said, ‘True. Well, you may still have a bit of a benny-fringe, but that’s all right.’

A half-hearted giggle escaped through Claudia’s tears at the mention of a benny-fringe. It’s what they called the ‘trims’ their mum gave them, when she just hacked away from one ear to the other with her sewing scissors.

Natasha laughed, ‘A benny-fringe! I’d nearly forgotten about those. Mum always cut them ridiculously short, so she wouldn’t have to trim them again for months. And they were *always* crooked. I shudder to think of my primary school photos.’

Simona even made herself laugh—reluctantly—she wasn't ready to soften her anger towards her mother. Claudia gave herself over to it. Laughter abated her tears. She cashed-in her pride and discounted her vanity for the return of hearing her sisters laugh and for the pleasure of joining in with them—something they hadn't done together for too many years.

Natasha said, 'Well now we know the oven works, we might as well bake the pudding.'

Simona said, 'Yeah; no skin off your nose.'

Natasha said, 'What? No point wasting a good chocolate pudding.'

Simona found some aloe vera gel in the cupboard and it brought Claudia a cool relief when she smeared it on her face. She yearned for more effervescent moments with her sisters. 'Hey,' she said, 'how about we go to Rowan's Funland tomorrow?' They used to spend half a day there laughing at themselves, and each other, when they were kids.

Natasha said, 'Sure!'

Simona didn't mention they took Liberty there in June. She feigned a smile and said, 'OK,' touched by Claudia's attempt to bottle the laughter and carefree fun of their teen years. Though she suspected they would get there and the girls would realise it wasn't half as fun as they remembered and the fizz would dissipate, leaving them flat. Being pregnant, Natasha wouldn't even be able to ride the octopus. Not that Simona had the stomach for it anymore—she threw up in June. So they would probably just stand in front of the warped mirrors, looking at their distorted images, trying to recognise themselves and each other in their reflections, bewildered at all that had happened in their lives over the years since they had last been there.

Natasha: Seeking Shalom

Call me Ruth. “Wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d; where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.” That’s from the Torah, when Ruth, the Moabite turned from her own people, to be adopted into G-d’s holy nation. And that’s how I felt, from the first time I was invited to Jono’s parents’ place for dinner.

We met at Amos’s Bar Mitzvah. He was one of my cello students at the Jewish school where I’m a peripatetic music teacher. Amos came up to me one Monday morning after ensemble rehearsal with a glint in his eye, ‘For you, Miss.’ He thrust an envelope into my hand and scampered off to pack away his music stand. Gold-lined. It was my first invitation to a Bar Mitzvah, and my first thought was, *what do I wear?*

The service was at Emanuel Synagogue in Woollahra. You know how the prestige of a suburb is measured by how ‘leafy’ it is? Well you could hardly see the sky for the urban forest.

I felt awkward turning up on my own, not knowing the etiquette. It took all of five minutes to work out my first *faux pas*. It was October and warm enough that I wore a summer dress and sandals, yet I was the only woman with bare arms and legs. Not that anyone made me feel bad about it. It seemed like there were different expectations for Gentiles, who might not know better. Carmel, Amos’s mum, winked at me from across the synagogue and came up to kiss me afterwards.

I didn’t understand a word of Hebrew, but I enjoyed the lyrical element of the service. And Amos looked so grown-up in his suit and so serious with his skullcap on, reading from the Torah, his voice sounding like a boy in some parts, like a man in others. His parents stood to offer their blessing and pray over him, and make a public

declaration of their pride and love and hope for him. He looked like he felt seven feet tall. I suppose Mum and Dad did something similar at my 21st, except I felt more of a burden than a blessing when Dad listed all the ways in which I'd cost him over the years: braces, music lessons, driving lessons, fees for The Con, and even the party itself. Let alone a future wedding! And then he finished with, 'Just make sure you're not stingy when it comes to picking out a retirement village for your old man.'

The theme for Amos's Bar Mitzvah party was Old Hollywood. His dad, Nathaniel, was Sir Laurence Olivier in a schmick suit, with a wispy drawn-on moustache and his hair oiled back. His mum was Marilyn Monroe, in a white halter-neck dress, wig and beauty spot. I felt slightly underdone with a red feather boa around my shoulders. Amos and his parents stood at the door, welcoming their guests. Carmel said, 'Natasha, darling, so glad you could come!' Then Nathaniel's brother popped out to check on the timing of something and Carmel said, 'Jono, this is Natasha. She teaches Amos cello.' He looked like he'd just stepped off the set of a black and white movie when he took my hand and kissed it. *Ooh la la* is all I could think. Then he excused himself to organise whatever it was he was organising.

They certainly know how to mark special occasions. A few years ago, I talked to Simona and Claudia about having a party for Mum's 50th. They said ask Dad and he said, 'We're not going to bother with all that, are we?' I thought it would be nice to invite some of her friends from over the years, maybe get a caterer in and hire a band. It wouldn't have mattered if it were just at home, but no. No one could be bothered. We went out for dinner to the same Italian restaurant we've been going to our whole lives. Which was something, but nothing special. Yet for a boy's 13th and a girl's 12th birthday, their Jewish community goes all out.

The juxtaposition of service and party was mind-boggling. After the ceremony in Woollahra, the afterparty was at The Sebel on Elizabeth Bay Road (where Elton John was married—when he married a woman), in the midst of the glitz of Sydney’s gaudiest district. The bass gave the atmosphere a heartbeat. The party was alive with people who were not too self-conscious to celebrate. No irony to stifle enthusiasm. Everyone had a sheen of exuberance about them. It may have been perspiration from the *Horah*, where a crowd lifted Amos, then each of his parents up on a chair, and danced around them anti-clockwise, in concentric circles. The joy was electric. Amos was having the night of his life, being the centre of so much positive energy and goodwill and being lavished with so many gifts.

I stood on the fringes, tapping my foot and clapping along, when Jonathan swung past with that granite jaw and Colgate grin of his and linked his arm in mine, thrusting me into the crowd. He didn’t let me stop dancing all night. Not that I wanted to. He insisted on walking me to my car when the party finished around midnight. We crossed the street, to avoid walking past a huddle shooting up in the gutter. Girls brazenly worked the streets. I thought of that Cold Chisel song, ‘Cheap wine’—“on a needle she was crucified”. It made me think how ironic the place was called Kings Cross, when there seemed no place in greater need of salvation.

But with Judaism, you don’t need anyone else to save you; you can save yourself. You don’t even need to be Jewish. You just have to have a desire to honour G-d and His laws by choosing to satisfy *yetzer tov*—your moral conscience, over *yetzer ra*—your selfish desires. Easier said than done. But you’re more inclined to choose right when you live with a sense of the sacredness of life and with a hope in *Olam Ha-Ba*—the world to come.

The Sunday after Grandpa was diagnosed with Alzheimer's we visited him at home. I must have been about seventeen. Simona and Claudia were playing table tennis, Dad was drying up and Mum and Gran were making tea. I finished the washing up and went into the lounge room, and sat on the vinyl pouf at Grandpa's feet. He stared out the window at the purple jacaranda bells. I held his hand and said, 'You okay, Grandpa?'

Without even blinking, he said, 'It's coming like a steam train.'

I said, 'What's coming?'

'They just leap-frogged over each other.'

'Who did?' I said, unsure if he was lucid.

He patted my hand and said, 'The years.' He chased the tears away with his knuckle. 'When you're young you hanker after sweet, but you get a taste for bitter when you're old.'

'You're not *that* old.' I said, tracing the geography of his hand with my pointer, over the ganglion and along the blue streams flowing to his fingers.

'Ah, my Pollyanna,' he smiled. Growing up, it was my favourite movie to watch with him and Gran. His smile calcified and he looked out the window again. 'It's easy to play "the glad game" when you're young. You string up the prisms of optimism, egalitarianism, and universalism. They catch the sun and everything dances with colour and light. You see rainbows everywhere.'

He coughed his thick cough that changed the tenor of his voice. 'Then autumn tempers the light and you begin to doubt all the prisms through which you view the world. The rainbows they cast aren't so convincing. The colours fade to a kind of agnosticism—that you resist, at first.'

He squirmed in his chair, to get comfortable. ‘Blame the light, or the darkness, or the rheumatism, but you start to look through your prisms from every other angle. And with the dull light of winter, no matter how much you strain, it’s hard to see beyond cynicism, stoicism, and pessimism to find any rainbows at all.’

Gran called out, ‘You awake for tea, Len?’

He didn’t hear her. I said, ‘Do you want a cuppa, Grandpa?’

As though I woke him from his reverie, he said, ‘What’s that?’

‘Tea? Do you want tea?’

He nodded.

I called out, ‘Yes thanks Gran.’

He took his monogrammed handkerchief from his chest pocket and wiped the spittle at the corners of his mouth and folded it meticulously. ‘You eventually realise it was the brilliance of the sun shining on the proud livery of youth that made rainbows with such conviction. Take away the light, the joy, the colour, and the same prisms invert you. You end up everything you thought you weren’t.’

I squeezed his knee and shook my head, ‘You haven’t changed, Grandpa.’

‘Careful,’ he winced at the pressure on his arthritic joint. Then he stoked a chuckle.

I said, ‘What’s so funny?’

‘I found one!’ he said, ‘at least I have the small condolence of not bearing witness to my own putrefaction.’

That was all he had to look forward to. Not being aware of his degeneration. At his funeral, I felt bereft not only of his life, but of a meaningful goodbye. It seemed like we listened to the funeral director say a few hollow words and then Mum spoke, tearfully determined to redeem his life, by pointing to the good he’d done,

how useful and capable he'd been up till the last few years, at his devilish humour. Then the curtains closed and the conveyor belt carried him away to be burnt to ash.

That's it.

No sense of purpose, no hint of the eternal or the divine, no guesses at what his life meant. We wandered out of there dishevelled by grief, exchanged a few hugs and listened to condolences. 'At least he's at peace now.'

I wanted to scream, 'How would you know?'

Then, like chaff in the wind, everyone was blown their separate ways again. A few of Gran's close friends and Grandpa's cousins came to our house for the wake; just some sandwiches and slices, tea and coffee, and a few beers for the blokes. The next morning, we woke up and found that life limped on without him.

We collected his ashes from the crematorium the next weekend and drove down to their dilapidated holiday house, in Mollymook, so Gran could sprinkle them in the garden, under the hydrangeas; his favourite patch on earth. Then Gran watered it, in case the wind picked up and scattered him farther. It all felt very makeshift and lacked gravitas, to me.

Still, it was probably fitting, since Grandpa didn't anticipate the resurrection of the dead. I wonder whether even Ezekiel, with all his prophesying, could raise Grandpa up and breathe spirit back into him, without dry old bones to work with.

I don't know, maybe Truth *is* relative and we all get to choose our own adventure in death, and that was his, The End? But then, that couldn't be True, all of the time, for everyone, because that would make Truth absolute, after all. Besides, he didn't even get to choose his own adventure in life, at least for the last few years.

It took a year for me to complete my study for conversion and learn about *mitzvot*—the law. I was so nervous being questioned by the *Bet Din*—court of three rabbis—on belief and practice. It was hard for Jono’s parents to accept our engagement, mainly because of the matrilineal line of Judaism. So I was disappointed to cop it from Simona too. Once, she cooked fettuccine boscaiola and acted all innocent and ignorant as to why I didn’t eat it. At least she behaved herself at our synagogue wedding. She even danced the *Horah* around me, while my chair was in the air. And you should have seen Amos that day; two short years after his Bar Mitzvah and he really was a man, all puffed up with importance at being the reason Jono and I met.

From that happy day, we could never have projected forward to see the tragedy that would befall our family. That’s what *I* think it was, anyway: tragedy, pure and simple. Simona doesn’t, though. And the thing is, she has always rejected the idea of evil. Which she has to do for her position to be philosophically tenable, because to admit to evil is to admit to the corruption of an absolute good. And she absolutely rejects absolutes because they don’t fit with Naturalism. I think it’s Bertrand Russell she channels when she says there’s no right or wrong, just different, like blue is different from yellow.

Whatever can’t be weighed or measured, Simona dismisses as immaterial: not permitted. I say you only have to watch the evening news to gather more than enough evidence for the existence of evil. But the way she’s been going on about the drunk driver who caused the accident that took Liberty’s life—Mr *X*, she calls him—you would think he was the devil incarnate.

I guess it’s easy to say, *each to their own*, until there are dire repercussions for you or yours. She actually wants to invoke Punitive Justice now. Or maybe it’s more that the law restrains her from acting on *might is right*.

In the Jewish community, the bereaved are surrounded by love and others share in your mourning with you. After Jono's grandfather, Gideon, died last year, the family went through the stages of grief together: the *aninut*—between his death and burial. Then: *shiva*—the first week after death; a time of reflection, surrounded by the religious community. Then there was a gradual return to normal life. But every day for a year all the men in the family prayed the life-affirmation prayer and at the one-year anniversary Jono's grandmother, Naomi, lit the *Yahrzeit* candle at synagogue, to pray the *Yizkor*.

I convinced Claudia that Simona should at least have time to mourn with her sisters, so we packed her bag and asked Theo if we could whisk her away for a week. I felt sorry for him after I'd asked, because he has two brothers too; one who has been estranged for three or four years and the other who lives in a home for adults with special needs. He didn't exactly have a community to grieve with, either.

Two weeks after our week away Claudia flew back to Canada—she moved from Tel Aviv to Vancouver, with Richard, a few months ago. Simona still refuses to see Mum, six weeks after the accident. And Mum still needs care, so Dad and Gran feel torn about where to spend their time. Now I'm seven and a half months' pregnant, so I can't keep driving across the city three times a week to see if she's OK. And Theo just called tonight, to say Simona has packed her suitcase and taken off to who-knows-where! She's cut herself off from everyone.

G-d gave us to each other to share one another's burdens. Even Grandpa said life is about, 'Sharing in the sufferings of loved ones.'

Frayed Ends and Loose Threads

The phone resounded like a kookaburra's laugh, waking Claudia from her dream. She stumbled to the lounge room in the dark, her mind spinning: a call from Sydney at this hour could mean that Natasha's baby was born, or that Gran's had a fall, or Dad's taken ill. And a call from Tel Aviv could mean—anything.

'Hello?'

'Claudia?'

'Who's...Natasha—is that you?'

'Yes. Listen—.'

'Are you OK?' They interrupted each other, with the two-second international delay.

'Yeah, I'm fine.'

'Is Gran OK?'

'She's fine.'

'What about Dad?'

'Fine.'

Claudia yawned, 'Do you know what time it is?'

'Sorry. I didn't—.'

'It's 3am!'

'Simona's missing!'

'What?'

'No one knows where she is. No one's seen her for more than twenty-four hours.'

'How do you know?'

‘Theo called, said she packed her suitcase and left a note.’

‘Well, that’s not the same as going missing.’

‘But no one knows where she is!’

‘She knows where she is, and the Universe knows where she is. Take some deep breaths and calm down so you don’t elevate the baby’s cortisol. I’m sure she’ll come back once she’s taken the journey she needs to take.’

Natasha sighed, ‘I hope you’re right. But if she was coming to you, she should be there by now.’

‘If she turns up, I’ll let you know.’ Claudia hung up and sent positive vibes into the Universe for Simona, then climbed into bed, breathed deeply, and summoned sleep again.

Three weeks ago Claudia and Natasha delivered Simona home after their week at Mollymook. It felt like Natasha dropped her on the doorstep, self-righteous at having done her sisterly duty, impatient to hoon off to her own life, to await her own baby. And Claudia didn’t make it to the ‘couple of months’ she said she’d be home for. Six weeks and she was gone, back to Vancouver, for who knows how long. Meanwhile Simona had been nowhere and done nothing—even her suitcase was still spread-eagle on her bedroom floor, ransacked and abandoned.

Although; yesterday she managed to walk to the letterbox to collect the mail. An envelope arrived addressed to Liberty Livingston-Hunter: a reminder from the Department of Health that she was six months overdue for her 18-month immunisations. Measles. Mumps. Rubella. Add them to the list—that cat-o’-nine-tails Simona mentally flayed herself with—of why she was a terrible mother.

Her grief was still raw, seven weeks after Libby was killed. Yet Theo had managed to return to work. Simona was flummoxed that he could even fathom work. There was no way she could concentrate on her research. She had three months' compassionate leave. She felt like Theo was avoiding her, avoiding home. She hated home too; hated walking past Libby's room, seeing her cot and snuggle rug with the tatty satin trim, her first shoes immortalised in brass, mounted on the wall above the tallboy. She'd moved the forsaken toys from the lounge room to Libby's room, but that's all she'd done towards packing up the paraphernalia, the remnants of her daughter's life.

Simona's hair was greasy and her pyjamas pungent from three days' wear. She ambled to the bathroom to wash her face. Her reflection disgusted her. She stripped for a shower. The shock of her emaciated body in the mirror gave way to a surge of dark humour: *you too can look catwalk-ready with the six-week-grief-loss diet!*

The grout was mouldy, the tiles, slimy. She thought *if I don't do it, it doesn't get done!* She stood under the stream of hot water, eyes closed, and the thought popped into her head: it was Christmas in two days. She remembered the journal she kept in Year 12. After making a cup of tea to de-stress, she'd written: *you could always go to Ceylon and pick tea bushels.* When she told her mum her escape clause, Peggy said, 'Except it no longer exists.' Simona wrestled with Ceylon Tea existing without Ceylon, and the whole point of imperialism and wrote: *the world is mercurial.*

Picking tea was hard work when she just wanted to not have to think about anything for a while—to be mothered. She still hadn't seen her mum since the car accident; still couldn't forgive her. Gran said, 'It's easy to forgive when no harm's

done, when you could just as easily say, “doesn’t matter”. But when it *does* matter; when nothing can be put to rights ... when it costs you dearly to give it, *that’s* forgiveness.’

Maybe Simona hadn’t been required to truly forgive anyone before, but her anger wouldn’t allow her to now. It felt almost as if her mother had died in the accident too. Maybe Simona could have forgiven her, if she had.

The steam cleared her thoughts. She dried herself vigorously, pulled on her jeans and cinched her belt, to hold them up. She slipped on her green t-shirt, and trotted downstairs to the study to look for her passport. Two years left on it. She’d only used it for the cruise to Fiji Gran took everyone on for her 80th birthday, but she knew you could lose whole days on a plane. She raced upstairs, tipped her dirty clothes out of the suitcase and rummaged through cupboards and drawers for anything clean. Two pairs of undies! She checked in the laundry and found a basket of clean clothes. Theo had done some washing, at least.

She called a taxi and scribbled a note for Theo. She filled Vashti’s bowl with clean water. The taxi honked. ‘Bye-bye gorgeous girl.’ She waved to the taxi driver, ‘I’ll just be a minute.’

Hair wet and stringy, she slung her handbag across her chest, wrapped her polar fleece around her neck and whumped her suitcase—*thud, thud, thud*, down the stairs. Grabbed her keys and locked the front door. She wheeled the suitcase to the car, and the driver—with his middle-eastern accent—said, ‘where to?’

‘The international airport.’

‘Lucky you! Where are you going?’ he raised her bag into the boot and slammed it shut.

‘I have no idea!’

Theo didn't go out for Christmas drinks. He stopped at the corner shop to get a BBQ chicken for dinner on his way home. He was sick of the pity pottage the Mercy Ministries team from his parents' church dropped around every few days. Even Vashti was sick of lasagne. At the end of each week he washed the crockpots and palmed them off to his mum to deal with.

In the kitchen, he found a note scrawled by Simona. How did he guess it wasn't a love letter? She'd only ever written him two notes, and they had both left him bereft.

He poured a glass of whiskey and broke a leg off the chicken. Didn't get a plate, just flicked on the TV, slumped on the lounge, gnawed on the drumstick and had swigs of JD. At least he didn't have to hear, 'You've cut yourself off with a moat of Jack Daniels and left me to cope on my own!'

Boy's night. Finally. Free to forget. He watched *The Bill* without hearing, 'Don't those Hackney accents annoy you?' The chook was a ravaged carcass by the end of the show. *Tomorrow Never Dies* was the late night Bond movie. Teri Hatcher never looked better. He thought of her *Seinfeld* episode, where George and Jerry debate whether her boobs were fake. He washed his greasy hands, got his laptop and googled images to decide for himself. One site led to another. He didn't turn the volume down; he just gratified himself, sprawled on the lounge, and then downed another glass of liquid amber and passed out.

Next morning Theo went Christmas shopping for Simona. That night he called her parents, to talk to her. Then Natasha. Then friends. He thought maybe she'd gone away on her own. He logged onto their banking to find five hundred

dollars withdrawn two days in a row and two thousand, three hundred lumped on the Visa by Qantas.

He punched a jagged hole in the wall. His chair clattered to the tiles. He shook his hand and called Natasha, 'She's taken off overseas.'

He packed Vashti into the car and drove home to have Christmas with his parents.

Simona saw people inside their high-rise apartments; the plane flew that perilously close, to land at Hong Kong airport. Grey mountains lunged at the sky. She took a shuttle bus to Nathan Road, to her hotel. Her senses were assaulted by the noise and smells and deluge of neon signs.

She showered and brushed her teeth, then panicked because she swallowed the water. *In 24 hours, I might have giardia*, she thought: *better not waste time*.

She flipped through the tourist brochure and decided to make her way to Mongkok markets for some retail therapy and to experience the most densely populated square kilometre on earth.

Ducks roasting from their necks. Rows of lanterns strung overhead, a sea of ramshackle stalls selling every conceivable object, ahead.

CDs, bags, and watches: real fake, fake real, everywhere. A stump of a man, literally a torso, wheeled himself in front of her. He shook his hat for money with ape-like arms that propelled him on his makeshift skateboard. She had a physiological reaction and almost keeled over, dry-retching in front of him.

She threw some coins in his hat and hurried back to the bus, churning with bile that life could be so wretched, angst-ridden at whether she'd done the right thing, or violated the laws of nature.

Her tidy, hygienic apartment was a reprieve from the chaos outside. She ran a bath, poured in the jasmine-scented body wash and luxuriated in the warmth and comfort of it, wondering whether Theo would judge the Rolex she bought him immoral.

The twenty-degree days and humidity in Hong Kong seemed downright balmy compared to Vancouver. Simona arrived on Boxing Day with sandals on, in zero degrees. Within two minutes, her toes turned into little red cocktail frankfurts. From heat rash to frost bite in fourteen hours: one person's summer is another person's winter and, she realised, it's impossible to imagine the other, outside of experience.

A chain of taxis was strung along the sidewalk. She dragged her suitcase to the first one. The young driver with dark features and a warm smile said, 'Welcome to Vancouver; where may I take you today?'

'West 13th Avenue; do you know it?'

The intensity of his gaze made her slightly uncomfortable, but he smiled and said, 'I know it very well. It's a thirty minute drive.'

'I just need socks,' she said, laying her suitcase on the sidewalk to unzip it.

'You must be very cold,' he rubbed his hands together, blowing into them. He put her bag in the boot and she put her socks on in the back seat.

He cranked up the heating, 'Are you warm?' and looked at her in the rear vision mirror.

‘Getting there,’ she clicked on her seatbelt.

‘Where I come from it is very hot.’

Sometimes she wished she wasn’t compelled to make an effort with people. But Gran says the judge of character is how you treat people in the service industry, so she said, ‘This is quite a change, then.’

After a few minutes, he looked in the mirror and said, ‘How long will you be visiting Vancouver?’

She sighed, ‘Just a few weeks,’ and leant back and looked out the window. They drove in a vacuum of heavy fog. It occurred to her that this taxi driver was the only person on earth who knew where she was. She looked at his ID hanging from the mirror and saw his wily eye staring back at her. She sat up and said, ‘So where are you from, Rasheed?’

He said, ‘I am from Israel. Going to number One-one-four-o, did you say?’

She didn’t remember saying. She rustled to check the scrap of paper in her pocket, ‘Uh, yes. One-one-four-o.’

He smiled, ‘Very good. We are nearly there.’

The taxi pulled to the curb in front of a two-storey house with wood shutters and garden boxes, which, judging by the letterboxes was a block of eight apartments.

Simona handed Rasheed her Visa. He shook his head, ‘I cannot accept.’

‘It’s an Australian bank, but it should work.’

He waved his hand, ‘I cannot accept. Please. No payment necessary.’

She said, ‘Thank you. That’s very kind.’ Why was it harder to accept a kindness than to give it?

‘Not at all.’ He dragged her bag from the boot. ‘I will help with your bag,’ he said, ‘the stairs are narrow and the lift is broken.’

‘Thank you, but I can manage. Truly.’

‘I insist.’ She couldn’t decide if he was creepy, or helpful.

They walked to the door and Simona pressed the buzzer for unit 4.

‘Hello?’ said a static voice over the intercom.

‘Claudia, it’s Simona.’

‘You’re here! Natasha said you might come. I’ll be down in a sec.’

Simona glanced at the taxi driver, wishing he would just go. He smiled and looked at his feet.

Claudia opened the door and looked from the taxi driver to Simona and gave her a forced smile. They hugged, cheek-to-cheek. ‘So good to see you! Surreal that you’re here!’

Simona remembered the taxi driver. ‘Thanks very much, but I’m sure we can manage it from here.’

Claudia said, ‘So; you’ve met Richard!’

Simona looked from her sister to the smiling taxi driver and back, as though an invisible thread linked them. *We’re all strangers!* She thought. *Family is just a cluster of atoms, bound by a thread of DNA. Then we bind random atoms to the nuclear, even though they’re bonded to their own. Fissions waiting to react, families are.*

They exchanged awkward smiles and nods and Richard—Rasheed—insisted on carrying Simona’s bag up the musty stairwell, apologising that he couldn’t stay, assuring her she was welcome to stay as long as she liked. Then, more awkward smiles as he backed away down the stairs, ‘I will try not to wake you tonight.’

Simona stepped inside Claudia's apartment and counted the doors: one for the bedroom, one for the bathroom. There wasn't a room for her to stay in.

'This was a mistake. I'm sorry,' she turned to Claudia.

'Don't be silly,' Claudia said, 'I'm glad you're here! We half expected you.' She picked up an amber bottle from the sideboard and sprayed it in Simona's direction.

'What's that?' Simona scowled at the mist raining down on her.

'Space-clearing spray.' Claudia placed it next to the bowl of keys, 'We don't want negative energy to enter our sanctuary.'

'Right,' Simona said in a tetchy tone.

'The lounge is a futon, we can turn it into a bed for you,' Claudia wheeled the suitcase to her room. 'You must be famished. What do you want first: shower or food?'

'I'd love a cup of tea,' Simona dropped to the red canvas lounge. She raised her feet to the timber box that doubled as a coffee table, but the crystals and prisms in the centre made her feel like it was sacrilege to put her feet on it, so she folded them like a school girl and pulled a batik pillow to her chest.

'Natasha called a few days ago, said you were missing.'

'Huh!'

'Said everyone was worried; no one knew where you were.'

'Why does everyone *have* to know where I am every minute of my life? I left a note, for Buddha's sake.'

'Do they know where you are now?' Claudia put the mug of tea on a coaster.

'Thanks. Call them if you like.'

‘I know what you’re saying, about retaining sovereignty over your whereabouts and information, but I think, considering Natasha’s frangible state—’

‘I said call! Sorry. I’m tired. I might have a shower after all, let my tea cool down.’

Claudia grabbed a fresh towel from the linen closet—which doubled as the coat, shoes and bags closet—in the lounge room, which doubled as the hallway. Simona unzipped her suitcase, pulled out her toiletries and fresh clothes. ‘Thanks,’ she took the towel and closed the bathroom door.

Claudia took the handset into her bedroom, to call Natasha. 3:30pm in Vancouver meant 9:30am, tomorrow morning, in Sydney.

‘It’s me.’

‘Did she turn up?’

‘Yes. Just a few minutes ago; can you let everyone know she’s fine?’

‘What did she say? How long is she going to stay? We’re beside ourselves!’

‘Just tell everyone there’s no need to worry. She’s fine. And she can stay here as long as she needs to, OK?’

Natasha sighed, ‘OK.’

Simona came out of the bathroom, her towel a turban and her dirty clothes under her arm. ‘Here: I’m doing the washing tonight,’ Claudia took the clothes and dropped them in the hamper in the bathroom. Simona made herself comfy on the lounge and sipped her tea. ‘These yours?’ Claudia said. ‘They were on the sink.’

‘Yeah. Thanks.’

‘They’re pretty,’ Claudia placed the earrings on the coffee table.

‘I do love them—I guess they just have a bittersweet sentiment.’

‘Why?’ Claudia curled up on the lounge with her green tea.

‘Theo gave them to me for the *infinite joy* in our relationship. Who would have guessed we’d end up with infinite grief, instead?’

‘Show me?’ Claudia pincer-gripped an earring, angling it. ‘You’re looking at it wrong!’ She tore a strip of paper off the pad near the phone, made a half-twist and taped the ends together, then angled one end up, the other down. ‘It looks like an infinity loop. But it’s a Möbius strip.’

Simona gave her a skewed look, ‘What’s the difference?’

‘Perspective. You think you’re on a loop of infinite grief. But look,’ she put the paper in Simona’s hands and slid her pointer along the inner rim of the paper and, without losing contact, along the outer rim, back to the point on the inner rim, where she started. ‘All is one. Life is a continuum, and joy and grief aren’t opposites, they’re the same: emotion. They’re just emotions you pass through on life’s journey.’

Simona’s towel fell to her shoulders as she bent forward to pick up the earrings. She poked the pole through her lobe and raised her eyebrows, ‘*Just emotions.*’ Yawned and laid her head back and closed her eyes.

‘It’s only four. You can’t sleep; you’ll be awake at two! What you need is a brisk walk.’ Claudia cajoled Simona into drying her hair, wearing her yoga pants and North Face jacket and walking down a few blocks to False Creek, and around the waterfront at Charleson Park. Grouse Mountain dwarfed the cityscape across the harbour, ‘Maybe tomorrow you’ll see the snow—it’s half way down the mountain now.’ The peak was a hazy outline, as if wrapped in a stole of silver organza. The snow-chilled air tingled their fingers and faces, and burned their throats. Fine beads of water slicked off the stainless steel sky, making their hair and clothes dank.

‘Let’s walk up to Granville and have a tuna burger at Barney’s,’ Claudia said. Simona noticed mounds of soggy autumn leaves on the ground and lime green moss growing on the sodden bark of the maples and elms. The dark and cold shrouding in made it seem later than five. They walked up to Granville, crossed over to the monolith of Chapters, and up along the storefronts, to Barney’s. ‘Want to try a warm apple cider?’

‘Sure,’ Simona’s nose started dripping when they came inside. She wiped it on the serviette as they sat at the table by the window. The cider smelled of cinnamon. Simona took her jacket off and hung it on the back of her chair. ‘You know, Rasheed isn’t a hard name to say.’

‘What do you mean?’ Claudia sipped her cider.

‘I mean telling us it’s Richard—what’s that about—are you ashamed of him?’ The way Claudia hesitated and pursed her lips made Simona realise it wasn’t Rasheed she was ashamed of. ‘What, you didn’t think we’d approve?’

‘You were there when Dad used to yell “bloody mad Arabs” whenever news of the Middle East came on TV.’

‘He’s come a long way since then. He even eats kebabs ... and he’s civil to Jono.’

‘It’s the whole immigrant thing too; I remember a boat full of asylum seekers came ashore up near Cairns once and Grandpa said, “Good. Let the crocs get ‘em”.’

‘That was, like, twenty years ago, when racism was the modus operandi.’

‘But Dad still goes on with, “No speak-a-da-English” and I couldn’t stand the shame if he talked down about Rasheed—who’s fluent in three languages—by the way. He’s also halfway through his degree in architecture.’

‘He wouldn’t,’ Simona said, ‘don’t let that stop you from coming home.’

‘It’s not just that. We came here because Canada accepted the UN’s appeal to take five thousand extra refugees, with the option of permanent residency. And I applied for a one-year working visa. So after that,’ she shrugged, ‘we’ll see.’ She sipped her cider, ‘Basically, it would be easier for Rasheed to come to Australia if he were an endangered animal.’

The peppy waitress brought them their meals: a tuna fillet on one side of the bun, salad on the other, and chips smothered in poutine.

‘What’s *that*?’ Simona eyed the brown slop over the chips.

‘It’s a cheesy gravy. You’ll love it,’ Claudia picked up her knife and fork. Simona slapped her burger together. A game of ice hockey played on the TV behind Claudia.

One player whacked another into the shatterproof barrier and Simona winced, ‘Oooh, that’s gotta hurt.’

Claudia said, ‘It’s too violent for me, but it’s hard to avoid over here.’

After a few minutes of watching the furious action, Simona swallowed a mouthful and said, ‘It’s like ice hockey’s a metaphor for humanity being the glory and the shame of the universe.’

Claudia scooped poutine onto her chip. ‘How so?’

‘Well, it takes skill and teamwork.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You need logic—and opposable thumbs.’

‘True.’

‘And delayed gratification, for long hours of training. But they can’t just be fit and strong, they have to be self-controlled.’

Claudia laughed, ‘You make it sound like a noble pursuit.’

‘Maybe it is: it takes visionaries to design the equipment and opportunists manufacture it.’

‘And the shame?’ Claudia said.

‘Well,’ Simona ate another poutine-soaked chip and said, ‘it’s a bit stodgy for me,’ as she thought about the underbelly of humanity. ‘It inspires blind loyalty.’

Claudia thought of Rasheed’s family, torn apart by the blind loyalty of extremists who knocked on their front door, expecting Rasheed to answer it, and shot his younger brother, Aashif, in the face.

Simona wiped her mouth with her napkin, ‘And a fiendish defence of inane rules.’

The bullet was meant for Rasheed because he had not listened to their warnings that he should not, could not, love someone whose people were not ‘people of the book.’ Claudia thought; *they applied their own kind of logic, and collaborated and used opposable thumbs to pull the trigger, for the delayed gratification of paradise. Who makes the rules anyway? And what kind of visionary designs and manufactures guns?*

Simona said, ‘And the whole point is to create a battle of them versus us. Not for survival, but for power and pride, cash and adulation.’

Claudia half-laughed, ‘You make a pretty good case for saving animals over humans.’

‘It’s not hard. Oh, and you get drunk to commiserate and drunk to celebrate and the game feeds our insatiable appetite for entertainment.’

‘So why do we say we need to treat animals “humanely”?’ Claudia wiped her hands on the napkin. ‘Maybe we should call for people to be treated with animal-dignity instead?’

Simona laughed, ‘May-be.’

Either the futon was extremely comfortable, or Simona was extremely jet-lagged: when she stirred in the morning, it was already the afternoon. She found a note on the kitchen bench from Claudia:

I hope you slept well. I didn't want to wake you. I have a few classes this afternoon. Help yourself to anything. Here's a spare key in case you want to go for a walk. Rasheed's gone out to leave you in peace. I'll be home about five.

Simona showered and dressed, ate some yoghurt, and went for a wander along Granville Street for a couple of hours. She looked in shops bedecked in Christmas cheer, had coffee at Bean Around The World, and spent half an hour flicking through books at Chapters. She let herself into the apartment. Claudia was in downward dog in the middle of the lounge room and a woeful noise emanated from behind their bedroom door.

‘How was your day?’ Claudia looked up from under her armpits.

‘Pretty quiet.’

‘Theo left a message. Feel free to call him back.’

Simona plunked on the lounge and Claudia said, ‘I thought we'd try the new Indian restaurant around the corner tonight, Rangoli's. I've heard it's delicious.’

Rasheed emerged from their room a half-hour later. He and Simona exchanged awkward pleasantries again and they all wandered down the road for dinner. Over Portobello mushrooms, butter chicken and garlic naan, Simona heard about how Claudia and Rasheed met—at the markets where she manned the farm's produce stall, and he sold spices for his family's business. And how they got to know

each other—he would bring her coffee and they would talk about the architecture of Tel Aviv. And how they connected over Claudia’s visions of Moses, Muhammad and Jesus.

Simona cocked an eyebrow, ‘Visions?’

‘It started with orange orbs in my periphery, but then the Archangel Gabriel came to me in a dream, then the prophets started coming to me in visions.’

Simona tore some naan bread and said, ‘O-kay then.’

Rasheed said, ‘It is true. Claudia told me that Muhammad had come to her in a dream, on a white flying horse, and warned that I had to leave Israel. The next day, my brother was killed.’

The next couple of days Simona woke late to an empty apartment, took herself for walks till evening, and came home to a message from Theo. Thursday morning Claudia left a note and a map, encouraging Simona to ride to Stanley Park, to use the bike and helmet in the garage.

The rush of cold air on her face was exhilarating. It took half an hour to ride to the park. Easy to find, it was a nature enclave, an island between the city and the northern suburbs. A clear, cold day meant she saw snow on Mount Seymour to the north, and to the south, a giant mirror ball, which she asked about in the information building. ‘Science World’—she decided to visit the next day. Outside the information building half a dozen totem poles stood, dauntlessly telling their stories. She read about them, reflecting on the universality of human experience, yet how differently we make sense of it all.

At Science World, Simona shadowed a group of mums and toddlers as they joined in activities with balls and water, making music and light with air and movement. As their amusement grew, so did her remorse that she had never taken Liberty to The Powerhouse Museum.

A girl, about 3, with blonde curls, stood on tippy-toes, trying to aim her gun at the target, to make a light bulb come on. Her mother was nowhere in sight. ‘Hello, what’s your name?’ Simona crouched down and smiled.

‘Grace.’

‘Really? What a beautiful name. You know my little girl’s middle name was Grace. She looked a lot like you.’

Grace smiled and concentrated on aiming the gun, her tongue poking out the side of her mouth.

‘Do you need some help?’ Simona said, ‘I could lift you up and help you reach.’

‘Yes please.’

Simona stood behind Grace and lifted her up so she could point the laser to the highest target. She put her face to Grace’s hair and smelt the faint strains of talcum powder and milk. A panicked voice, ‘Gracie! Come here. Come to Mommy.’ She was sitting on the bench by the window, breastfeeding her baby. ‘Come Gracie. I have some Goldfish for you. Come and have morning tea.’

Gracie toddled over to her mother. ‘Remember I said don’t talk to strangers, honey?’

‘But *her* little girl’s name’s Gracie too.’

Simona swivelled around and the harried woman gave her the evil eye.

‘You must be freezing!’ Claudia said, when Simona walked in the door, drenched.

‘Forgot the umbrella.’ Simona peeled off her jacket and Claudia’s tuque from her head.

‘There’s a message from Theo. Your Olympic tickets arrived. You got your sixth choice: synchronised swimming.’

‘Great.’ Simona wrenched her socks off. Within two minutes she felt braised by the heating.

‘Why’d you choose it, then?’ Claudia said.

‘Who seriously thinks they’re going to get stuck with their sixth choice?’

Rasheed said, ‘Many people end up living a life they would never choose.’

The rebuke had bite. ‘I think we chose it because it was on the same night that Cathy runs the 400 metre final.’

Claudia said, ‘At least you’ll be able to soak up the energy. That reminds me; Rasheed will be working, but you and I are going to a party tomorrow night.’

‘We are? Where?’

‘Candace, who owns the studio, invited us.’

Simona had sung Prince’s *1999* since she was 10, imagining it would be the New Year’s Eve to outshine all others; the party of the century. And here she was, going to a yogi’s place to, what—meditate the new millennium in? ‘Righto,’ she said with an indolent air, because in reality she didn’t know if she was up to even that.

Simona showered and when she came back into the living room, Rasheed was in the bedroom, droning. He emerged half hour later, calmly said goodbye, and left for work.

Over turkey stew Simona said, ‘What does he do in there?’

‘Prays. Grieves. Implores Allah to show mercy to his parents.’

‘But he makes this god-awful keening and then acts like nothing’s happened.’

‘He is trying to submit to Allah’s will. There’s a time for laughter and a time for tears, and he makes time for both. That’s how he manages to get on with life.’

Claudia tried to engage Simona with talk of home. ‘Have you spoken with Theo?’

‘Nope.’

‘He’s left a few messages.’

‘Yeah; well he’s made more effort to communicate in the last week, from the other side of the world, than in the last two months, under the same roof. So he can sweat a while.’

‘I wonder whether Natasha will have a boy or a girl?’

‘Dunno.’

‘I guess if it’s a boy, they’ll have him circumcised?’

‘And I guess you’d have yours circumcised, boy or girl?’

Claudia put down her spoon, ‘That’s offensive!’

‘So you cherry pick too—like Natasha, cooking prawn risotto at Frogmore, but making a song and dance when I throw a bit of bacon in the pasta.’

‘You’re being very judgmental.’

‘And you’ve suspended your judgment entirely.’

They ate in tense quiet, Simona daring Claudia to rejoinder, Claudia waiting for Simona to recant.

Claudia cleared the bowls. In the kitchen, she closed her eyes and took some clarifying breaths. Then she brought a wooden box of amber bottles to the table.

Simona watched, bemused, as she consulted her brochure and measured doses with an eyedropper. Claudia swished around the shot glass. ‘Here you go.’

‘What’s that?’ Simona read the labels on the bottles and grabbed the brochure. She chuckled as she read aloud *Bush Iris*: for fear of death, atheism, and avarice. Awakens spirituality and acceptance of death as a transition state. *Dagger Hakea*: for resentment and bitterness towards family. Opens expression of feelings and forgiveness. *Grey Spider Flower*: for fear of supernatural. Brings faith, calm, courage. By the end, she was cackling.

‘Take it, or don’t. But you came here for my help, so you need to ask yourself why, if you’re not going to accept it.’

‘Fine.’ Simona straightened her face and swallowed the tincture. ‘But if I overdose, it’s your fault.’

‘It’s impossible to overdose. It’s self-regulating. It just raises the vibration of your energy, so you can commune with the Spirit of the Universe.’

Simona rolled her eyes, ‘Whatever.’

‘In the morning, I’d like you to come to the studio for some yoga and Reiki.’

‘Well, you’ll have to wake me.’

Simona said, ‘You have to be a contortionist,’ as she lay on her tummy and arched back in the *bow* position, to grab her feet. ‘Preposterous,’ she laughed, as she lay on her back and stretched her legs up to touch her feet to her head, in the *plough*. But she almost fell asleep in the *modified corpse*.

Claudia said, ‘Come and have some Reiki while you’re relaxed.’

Simona opened one eye, ‘What is it?’

‘A spiritual, physical, mental and emotional healing.’

Simona sighed and dragged herself up to follow Claudia into another room. She lay on the table and closed her eyes. Claudia scanned her left hand along Simona's body, hovering five inches above, working with her aura and chakras, stopping over areas that presented as needing attention. Then she started at the third eye, in the middle of Simona's forehead, placing her hands on her for two or three minutes at a time. After leaving her hands on the solar plexus for a few minutes, Claudia looked up and saw tears stream down Simona's face. Her silent tears gave way to loud sobs. 'Sorry—I don't know what's wrong with me.'

'Grief manifests in the right lung,' Claudia said, 'focusing energy there releases it. Just take some deep breaths and pass through the emotion.'

Before the New Year's Eve party, Simona called Theo, who was well into New Year's Day. Their conversation was stilted at first:

'How are you?'

'All right: you?'

'OK. You?'

'Yeah, OK.'

Then Theo rallied the courage to ask when she was coming home, and Simona fired back a volley of questions: Did they have a future together? Did they love each other for their own sakes, or only as co-parents of Liberty? Without their child to tether them, did they want to stay together? Could they?

Theo said, 'I don't want to lose you too.'

Candace's house was in the mega-suburbs, with three-storey mansions and manicured lawns. Half a dozen yoga-types were at the party. They nibbled edamame and swizzled champagne. Simona joined the Y2K bug debate, 'I reckon it's nonsense.'

Around eleven, Candace suggested they get in the backyard spa that her ex-husband built. 'There aren't enough costumes, but plenty of towels.' They stripped in the laundry and made a run for it. 'The air's freezing, but the water's a hundred degrees.'

'I hope that's Fahrenheit,' Simona laughed ... actually laughed.

'What's that in Celsius?' Claudia said.

'About thirty-eight.'

After a while, Claudia said, 'Is that snow?' They looked up and saw light flurries fall to the ground, and melt on them in the spa.

'Beautiful!' Simona said.

The snow fell heavier. After half an hour, the ground was covered. Candace said, 'Who's with me?' climbed out of the spa and ran to the tree in the middle of the yard, then back to the spa. 'It's invigorating!'

A couple of girls jumped out, and then Claudia. Simona watched, the desire to join in bubbling up till she scrambled out and dashed to the tree. She lay down in the snow and made a snow angel, and then ran back to the spa shivering and giggling, overcome with the thought, *I'm alive!*

'As long as you're sure it's time. Because you can stay as long as you want,' Claudia said as Simona zipped her suitcase and checked her passport.

'I'm sure, and thank you.'

Rasheed said, 'I'll take your bag to the car.'

Claudia and Simona lingered in their embrace. Goodbyes were gut-wrenching for Simona now. They felt like Russian Roulette: you never knew which one was final. From the taxi, she looked back and waved until she couldn't see Claudia anymore and then blotted tears with a tissue.

In the car, Rasheed said he hoped to meet her family one day. She thought, *a Muslim by any other name wouldn't be as feared.*

They shook hands. She thanked him again and they smiled goodbye. She wheeled her suitcase away, thinking, *this is what it means to be at peace with the person, but at war with the ideology.*

Simona had a window seat. A dear old lady with a walking stick was seated next to her and a businessman had the aisle seat. She felt awkward squeezing past them to go to the bathroom, but figured it was normal to need the loo a few times in fourteen hours. Simona rested her pillow against the window and tried to nap. At the twelfth hour, she christened her neighbour Mrs Catheter, because she hadn't been up once.

When the lights came on in the morning, the cabin smelled like a bakery. Simona had ordered vegetarian because Claudia said, 'Vegetarian's always better.' She took the foil off her tray to find a small bunch of grapes and a blob of cottage cheese, and salivated over Mrs Catheter's ham and cheese croissant.

They had two hours in Hong Kong, to refuel. Mrs Catheter didn't get up, so Simona angled past and offered to get her cane down, but she said, 'I won't need it, thank you dear.' When they boarded again, there she was, still nestled in her chair, wrapped in the cabin-issue blanket.

On the last leg of the flight home, Simona took the book out of her bag that Claudia had planted with a smile, ‘Just some light reading, for the plane.’ She read the back pithy, ‘Truth is not found in holy texts, it is found only within you,’ sniggered, ‘I don’t need to read your book then, do I?’ and wedged it into the mesh pouch of the seat in front. She slid the Qantas inflight magazine out and fanned through it, pausing to read about the Sydney 2000 celebrations: how Ignatius Jones created the largest light sculpture ever attempted when he had the word ‘Eternity’ mounted on the Harbour Bridge. How he was inspired by Arthur Stace—a one-time alcoholic gaolbird who couldn’t write his own name, but chalked ‘Eternity’ over the streets of Sydney, in beautiful copperplate script, half a million times in 35 years—because of a sermon he’d heard at St Barnabas Broadway, on Isaiah 57:15:

‘For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”’

Simona closed her eyes and rested her head on the itchy linen backrest. She imagined all of humanity standing on the precipice of time, grabbing at frayed ends and loose threads, trying to unravel Eternity. Noble in our quest, but puny in our attempts—just hopelessly casting and re-casting the language and concepts of time—over the thing that time exempts.

She thought of the word Eternity, shining from the Harbour Bridge, an emblem of hope and peace for the new millennium. Then she sighed, dismayed that we manage to create conflict even over what Eternity holds: whether the monotheistic heaven and hell—and which version; or the pantheistic-we’re-all-one-Brahman; or the atheistic annihilation-nirvana?

She wondered if anyone else thought it absurd that the fight over Eternity could go on forever, or until one view obliterates all others. Especially given that life began from bacteria and bacteria will end life, so there will be no one to gloat (or gloat to), anyway. There was, she thought, a skerrick of possibility that it was not merely a fight-to-be-right; and that maybe, just maybe, it was a search for Truth and condemnation of lies.

The Matrix played on the big screen at the front of the bulkhead. Simona didn't have her headphones in; she'd watched it on her flight from Hong Kong to Vancouver. She pondered whether you would have to be brave, wise, or just plain humble to swallow the red pill of Truth.

Her trenchant stance towards the Divine had softened, ceding the numinous as a side effect of the blue pill, administered as palliative-care for chronic grief—and that even Science had use for placebos. Experience had taught her about our vulnerability to a wistful yearning that *something* of our loved ones live on, and the latent hope of reuniting in the ether.

'Cabin crew prepare the plane for landing,' came the captain's voice over the loudspeakers. Simona slid the magazine back into the mesh pouch, set her chair upright and pushed the blind up. The hostess, with not a hair out of place and her still-shiny smile, came by with a large plastic bag to collect blankets. Simona folded hers and reached across to drop it in the bag. Old Mrs Catheter struggled to reach hers across, so Simona stood to help. An acrid stench of ammonia whacked her in the face and she almost dropped the blanket on the lady's lap, it was so heavy. The hostesses' cherry-red smile recoiled, as the blanket plopped into the flimsy plastic bag. Simona sat down and clenched her pelvic floor about fifty times, ruing her lack of diligence with the Kegel exercises since Libby's birth.

As the plane banked left, getting ready to land, Simona looked out the window and saw the word Eternity, in miniature, shining above the dark harbour.

Eight-thirty Wednesday night, Simona's plane touched down. Wheeling her suitcase through the exit, she could have been invisible except for people craning around her to glimpse their loved ones emerge through Customs, laughter and tears erupting around her as they reunited. Claudia was concerned that no one would be there to meet her, but Simona just wanted to slip home quietly. Walking towards the taxi rank, head down, a man in corduroy pants stepped in front of her, blocking her way. She looked up and from behind a bunch of yellow roses, Theo smiled, 'Welcome home.'

She stood there inert and mute. He kissed her cheek and said, 'I'm glad you're home,' his eyes nervous, beseeching.

'Claudia promised she wouldn't call,' she said, taking the flowers.

'She wasn't going to until your mum called to say Natasha was in labour; she thought you'd want to know and maybe drop by the hospital while we're over this way. She had her baby this morning.'

Simona dropped the flowers by her side and covered her mouth with her hand, the magnitude of shock registering on her face. The baby was three weeks early.

'If you're not up to it ...' he said, angling to get hold of the handle on her suitcase.

She audited his face, 'Are *you*?'

He shrugged and blinked back a tear at the realisation that this was the first instance she had asked where he was at with his grief.

Simona moved her hand to her forehead, as though taking her temperature.

‘Mum will be there, won’t she?’

‘I’d say so.’

She looped her arm around his, ‘Let’s decide on the way.’

Driving out of the carpark, Theo said, ‘So are we going to the hospital?’

Simona shook her head, ‘No.’

Theo pulled over near the exit. Fighting back tears, he looked at her and said, ‘We may never feel ready to see another baby, Simona: that’s grief. But we’re going to have to do it anyway: that’s life—ready or not. And every time we see a kid at the age Liberty would have been, or reach a milestone she didn’t have the chance to, we’ll be stabbed by grief all over again at what she missed—what we missed. But we have to keep living. We have one life, that’s it. And you had no choice in losing your daughter, but you do have a choice with your mother—so why compound your grief by choosing to lose her too?’

Simona looked for a tissue in the glove box and dried her tears with the dehydrated cloth from an old packet of baby wipes.

Simona hesitated at the doorway of Natasha’s room at the Royal Hospital for Women. Natasha sat on the bed, perky and fresh. Jono stood next to her, leaning against the bedhead, rubbing her back.

Theo squeezed Simona’s hand. She took a galvanising breath and felt dizzy with the syrup of jonquils and lilies. She stepped inside the room peppered with cards of congratulations and plush toys and helium balloons that announced, ‘It’s a Boy!’

‘Hi,’ she said in a thin voice. Her mouth curled up as if marionette strings tugged at the corners, ‘Congratulations.’

Natasha said, ‘You’re home!’

Peggy sat on the chair near the bed, cradling her grandson like a holy book she was unworthy to touch. She looked up at Simona from under her eyebrows.

Simona took a few tentative steps towards the bed. Natasha swung her feet to the floor, flung her arms around Simona’s neck and whispered, ‘I’m so glad you’re here. Thank you.’

Simona goaded herself to walk around the bed to her mother and nephew, but couldn’t make eye contact. She looked at the baby, whose hair was the same dark brown Liberty’s was as a newborn. She breathed deeply, to steady her emotions.

Natasha said, ‘His name is Chasdiel. Chaz for short.’

Jono said, ‘It means: “my God is gracious.”’

Simona summoned her own graciousness to bear. ‘Nice.’ She stood in front of her mother and touched the dark tuft on Chasdiel’s crown.

Gran sat on the chair next to Peggy. She reached across for Simona’s hand, ‘We’ve missed you, pet.’

Bob stood behind Peggy. He put his arm around Simona’s shoulders and kissed her forehead, ‘Good to have you home, blossom.’

Peggy stared at the fontanelle depression on the top of her grandson’s head, pulsing with life and possibilities. She couldn’t look away for fear of being spurned, or accused of negligence.

Simona remembered Claudia’s tip and touched her tongue to the roof of her mouth, to stop herself crying. She knew the tone of the room changed when she entered, and that everyone held their breaths while she was there, so she said, ‘Look

Mum; he has your chins.’ To put the others at ease at her mother’s expense was the best she could do, for now.

Peggy blurted out an inordinate laugh. Her face was a nexus of laughter and tears, creased with relief that Simona acknowledged her at all. Chasdiel’s lip quivered and he let out a warbled newborn cry. ‘Shh,’ Peggy soothed.

Natasha said, ‘He’s ready for a feed anyway, Simona can you bring him over?’

Simona turned to Natasha—stunned—and at Theo, to see if he shared her disbelief. He winked to remind her: *That’s life, ready or not*. She felt all-elbows as she bent down to collect Chaz from Peggy’s arms. He felt light as a bundle of blankets and made self-soothing sounds with pursed lips. Simona kissed his forehead and said, ‘He’s so sweet,’ as she passed him to Natasha.

Simona remembered the height of joy she felt when she first held Liberty—and the weight of grief when she kissed her goodbye. One didn’t cancel out the other; rather, they rendered each other more acute. She closed her eyes to find her equilibrium. As the emotion of the moment washed over her, she struggled through it and told herself to *breathe, just breathe*.

