A Bachelor's Family

A memoir of relationship and childlessness

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A memoir and exegesis submitted for the requirements of the Masters of Arts (Research).

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Keywords

Men, Memoir, Relationships, Masculinity Politics, Masculinity Therapy
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Abstract

*A Bachelor's Family* is a memoir of relationship, exploring—from a male point of view—my trajectory to a 'circumstantially childless' middle age. The thesis argues for this memoir and my concurrently written magazine column *In The Male*, to be read in the context of 'masculinity politics', specifically as a site of what Bob Connell terms 'masculinity therapy'. As a writer heretofore of fiction, the fact that I should find myself working in these forms of creative non-fiction—both attempts to discuss aspects of contemporary masculinity in the public sphere—reflects not only recent industry and reader interest in the form but, with its emphasis on the 'healing possibilities' of truthfulness and personal disclosure, embraces the essence of 'masculinity therapy'.
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:____________________________________

Date:____________________________________
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A Bachelor's Family
All these hearts reaching out towards each other.
Oh my God, oh my God,
what pain they cause.
—Goethe

They were the most moving sight there, two young people in love dancing together, blind to each other’s defects, deaf to the warnings of fate, deluding themselves that the whole course of their lives would be as smooth as the ballroom floor, unknowing actors set to play the parts of Juliet and Romeo by a director who had concealed the fact that tomb and poison were already in the script. Neither was good, each self-interested, turgid with secret aims; yet there was something sweet and touching about them both; those murky but ingenuous ambitions of theirs were obliterated by the words of jesting tenderness he was murmuring in her ear, by the scent of her hair, by the mutual clasp of those bodies destined to die.
—Giuseppe di Lampedusa, The Leopard

Have I learnt from my mistakes? Absolutely.
I’m sure I could repeat them all exactly.
—Peter Cook
Looking back there was a moment, a day, a week, when I left my youth behind and set course into the middle age I occupy today. My girlfriend, whom I'll call Fiona, was in Amsterdam and I was still in New York. We'd parted a week or so earlier. Fiona had a Round-the-World ticket back to Australia, and I’d gone to the States LA return. The plan was that she would continue the long way home, and I’d travel back to Los Angeles cross-country, get a flight and be in Sydney when she returned.

We hadn’t left Australia together. Fiona had spent several months travelling in Central America while I’d stayed in Australia holed up in the hills behind Byron Bay completing the manuscript of my first book. Before Fiona left in October we acknowledged we had to be realistic. I wasn’t due to meet her in LA until March. Foreign travel and five months apart presented a lot of possibilities for things to happen with other people, and we agreed that we might have to work through this when we were reunited. But as it happened the possibilities had grabbed the ball and run away, almost out of reach. Although Fiona had had a few little things with a couple of Europeans on the road in Central America, and then a pretty big thing with a bloke she got serious about in Mexico, they were nothing compared to my contribution. Back in Australia I’d fallen in love with a married woman, Julia.

Because she was married and because I was still with Fiona I decided to end things with Julia and meet Fiona in America as planned. Then the complications really started. Somewhere in Oregon Fiona started to feel off-colour. By the time she left New York there was no doubt she was pregnant. And we'd decided, as best we could, to have the baby. Because of the timing there was no question I was the father, but that was about the only thing that was certain. We were both 33 years old and ready to have a child but our relationship was in turmoil. We weren't even sure we wanted to stay together. We calculated we’d both be back in Sydney before Fiona was twelve weeks in case we changed our minds. We worked out the baby must have been conceived in the Jack London Hotel, Portland, Oregon—and convinced it was a boy, we called him Jack.

When Fiona reached Amsterdam the plan came unstuck. She went to a clinic and there she was told she was eleven weeks—a month more than we’d thought. Suddenly whatever had gone before was just a game. Now we were playing for real
and a decision—a final, lasting decision, not a maybe, baby—had to be made, fast. We had to decide, by trans-Atlantic telephone, whether to keep the baby, whether to hang onto Jack, or—what’s the pretty way to put it?—let him go.

Over the week as time and distance came between us the certainty we’d felt earlier evaporated. We spent hours on the phone. Long calls of tears and silence. Doubts surfaced and beached themselves in our minds. One day we were resolved, the next our confidence faltered. We both liked the idea of Jack, it was the reality we couldn’t decide about. We had no doubt he would be loved—no doubt—it was our situation which was in question. Could this baby bring us back together? And if it—he—didn’t, where would we stand then?

In the end the questions mounted to outweigh the answers. We had the option of saying no and it overwhelmed us. Fiona made the decision only she could make. She called me one last time. “I’m going to keep the appointment.” And an hour later both our lives were on a different tack forever. It was June 1989. The events of Tiannamen Square were unfolding concurrently. For me, all the tanks in China are silenced by the memory of her thin, scared voice on the phone that day.

This was the moment. I look back now and see that every other twist and turn and mistake I’ve made seem all but inevitable, as if I was blindly following a script my past had left in my hands. But I wasn’t the only person in charge of my fate that morning, and Fiona’s decision, I’m sure, could so easily have gone the other way. If I had got on a plane, stayed on the phone, done anything to convince her she didn’t need to go to the clinic that day I think I’d be a father now. One word said softly at the right time and my son would be asleep in the next room. Maybe. Or in Fiona’s house, wherever that might be compared to mine. I have no idea what would have happened to our non-marriage. But what I do know is that Jack would have been loved. I would have parented that child with every gram of childless uncertainty weighing so heavily in this heart as it enters middle age. My life would be so different it's almost too much to contemplate. Who would I be? Where would I be? What man would fatherhood have made me? Jack would be in high school. There’d be yesterday’s lunch rotting in his school bag, cricket, basketball, showdowns, compromises, love and war. All the ferocious demands and incalculable rewards of parenting. The whole catastrophe.
But I didn't get on that plane, and Fiona did have the abortion and instead, a
decade later, I find myself single, childless, alone, trying to understand, in a stunned
sort of way—more curious than regretful or angry—how my life, all the left turns,
right turns, decisions and consequences have arrived at this point.

Track backwards through the course of any life perhaps, and you will find at its
heart a moment, an event, a progression of circumstances which can be seen in
retrospect to be the utterly logical consequence of all that went before and the
catalyst for all that followed. For me these were the events with Fiona and Julia.
They were the pivot where Act One of my life became Act Two—where the
inconsequentiality of youth became the drama of adulthood. This was the train smash
in the middle of my life. From its wreckage emerged the man I am today.

I never planned the business of having a child. Rather, I grew up with the
vague assumption, like most of us I'd guess, that I’d end up in a relationship that
would lead to children. I didn’t even think much about whether I really wanted it or
not. I simply expected it would happen. But it didn’t. And Fiona’s decision on
Thursday, 15 June 1989 was the moment when that vast balloon of possibilities
inflated with the naive overconfidence of youth received the fatal puncture which
started it drifting slowly but inevitably to earth.
I met Fiona in 1979. We go back that far. We were twenty-three years old, members of the same food co-op in Glebe. I lived in one house and Fiona in another. Once a month we drove out to Flemington in the co-op Kombi before dawn, loaded it with fruit and vegies, battled back in the peak hour and spent the rest of the morning throwing grapes at each other as we sorted it all into household orders. We were always laughing. Everyone was full of laughter in those days. What was there to cry about? Even Fraser couldn’t erase the changes that Whitlam had made before him and no-one knew about East Timor yet.

It was always summer. We sat in the catspissy old brown couches on the verandahs of our terrace houses with endless mugs of tea or stubbies of Coopers and watched the days pass and had not a care in the world. We had huge, ramshackle dinners—steaming wokloads of rice and vegetables and massive pots of pasta—with flagons of take-your-chance red wine which we bought for a dollar from the discount warehouse on the corner. We baked crumbling, yeasty bread, and cut steaming slabs and trowelled on the butter and honey and that'd do us for the day. We took our tea into the backyard, and cut each other’s hair with kitchen scissors and a broken mirror. We didn't think we'd ever grow old. The future would last forever.

We drank coffee you could stand a spoon in, and didn't sleep and missed classes and took General Philosophy because it was slack and if it came to the crunch you could put in an essay about what you did last night and probably pass. We studied feminism, even the men—especially the men—and wore overalls and smoked kreteks and owned stray cats and sloppy bitzas called Eggs and Bacon and Beanise. We took acid and had marathon Bob Dylan and Grateful Dead sessions with the lights off, and we knew the words, and all the heartstopping riffs. Half of us were in bands, and everyone went to bed with everyone else at least once. We slept on mattresses on the floor with the street light outside the window sloping over bare hips and young breasts, and stared into each other's eyes with candles flickering in wine bottles beside the bed. We worked hard at our non-jealousy, talking things out around the kitchen table with the inevitable pot of tea and creased foreheads and a
packet of Drum passing between us—and thank God they hadn’t yet invented cassette recorders so those conversations couldn't be held in evidence against us now.

They were naive, guileless days. Even on the dole you could save money to go overseas. ‘Us and them’ still meant something—to wear your hair long and smoke marijuana were acts of rebellion and inclusion. Everything was new and exciting. The future was a wide open vista, another life away over the distant horizon. Twenty-five was old, thirty was unimaginable. Youth and irresponsibility was our battle cry, our badge of honour, a statement of political commitment to the new world we were convinced we were building. It didn’t arrive, of course, or if it has it doesn’t look much like we imagined. What we had in mind was something out of the Whole Earth Catalogue but it’s more like George Orwell instead. Via Microsoft and Star Wars.

And of course we did grow older, those who survived. You can tell a veteran of the 70s. Our hair has gone grey but we still dress like kids. Time has marched on and stolen the youth we clung to so desperately, and most of us haven’t got any idea what we’re meant to do next.

There were casualties, but we were too young to notice. A woman who’d passed through one of my share houses committed suicide in those years—threw herself off a cliff in the Blue Mountains—and I explained it away with the memory that she’d always seemed distant and strange. It was easier than trying to understand real pain. Perhaps youth itself is a tranquiliser. Perhaps real suffering isn’t meant to be felt so young. Or perhaps it was another curse of our generation, both blasted and blessed, that we could close our eyes to what we didn’t want to see.

I drove cabs in those days. One shift I found a Polaroid camera in the glove box and took it round to visit Fiona. The front door was open and she was coming down the stairs as I walked in. “Hey!” I said, and snapped just as her face broke open to smile. We stood together, waiting for the photo to come into focus. But it never did. It stayed blurry, a snapshot of our future already materialising in our hands.

A year or so later I noticed the photo pinned above her desk in her room. A thrill ran through me, acknowledgement, in that communal world, of something private between us. It was spontaneous and sexy, her nipples riding under her t-shirt, teeth glowing, hair short and ratty from the last backyard butchering. It captured the
swing of her hips, her youth and good health, the unfocused, carefree mood of the
times. She always said it was one of her favourite photos of herself—she even
propped it up on her desk when we moved in together six years later. Surely it meant
something, that she'd kept that photo all those years? It is still a shock to think that of
course I meant something to her—that, inundated by the obsessiveness of my own
confusion, this was obscured from view. This, after all, was a woman who travelled
with me to the start of the Great Adventure, even if we never did completely take the
plunge.

That photo—what was it, after all? A grabbed opportunity which never quite
came out.

The Fraser government brought years of hard-lipped accountancy after the Whitlam
spring. There were political campaigns and Fiona helped fight them. She made
posters and taught screenprinting and waitressed to pay the rent and was always one
of the stalwarts ready to stop for a cup of tea or a Coopers out the front. Everybody
liked Fiona, and Fiona liked almost everybody back. She was from the country. Her
smile was a country smile and her laugh gurgled from her like a spring from the heart
of the earth, as deep and thick as treacle. It was a laugh which made people look
around to see who it had come from.

She had a way of grasping my arm and shaking her head to laugh at something
I’d said or done, as if to say, “Oh, I shouldn’t be letting you get away with this.”
Thinking about it even now, years since I’ve heard it, makes me melt with longing—
with memories of less complex times before age gave everything a second—and
third, and fourth—meaning.

She had a boyfriend she’d been with for years—four, five years—which
seemed like forever in those days, but she never lived with him. He was a video artist
called Steve, with a good line in self-mocking discontent. “How’s it going?” I’d ask,
and he’d go, “Oh, ten percent above average.” In the end Fiona left him for a
Japanese guy. They were married in Japan so she could stay in his country and he
could return here. I got into the restaurant business, and Fiona and I kept in touch
through letters. In those days I used to write letters the length of short novels and
when she came back she showed me the bundle I’d sent her, tied up with ribbon,
looking just like letters from a lover. They were a lifeline for her, she said, dousing
and then rekindling the homesickness which smouldered the whole time she was
away. It was probably the first time I understood that those words which poured out
of me with such insistence and for which I felt so ungrateful could be of use to
someone else.

I ran into Steve one Sunday morning on Glebe Point Road. It was early, about
7am. I was rushing for Sunday brunch, our busiest day, with a heavy plastic shopping
bag in each hand, and he was coming out of the fruit shop, peeling a banana.

I asked how he was. But I could see he didn’t look good. He didn’t mince
words. “I’m dreadful. I’m missing Fiona so much, I...” He looked away and when he
turned back his eyes were glassy with tears. He reached up—he was shorter than
me—and gave me a scrawny sort of bearhug while I stood with the bags of shopping
pinning my hands to my sides. “Thanks for asking, mate.” And before I could
answer, he walked off. It’s lodged in my memory, that moment, as if the truth in
those days was a rare thing. The last I heard of him he was teaching multimedia
somewhere. He’s probably got a kid he doesn’t live with, and one he might, with a
couple of the women I vaguely knew back then, now henna-haired and forty-
something, who used to be screenprinters or linocutters and like him took up
teaching to pay the rent and the rent went up and the pay went up and they got used
to things that way and the rest happened as it does. A Sydney mortgage, a kid or two
and the future starts to close in fast.

After I left the restaurant the whole Alice thing happened. Do I need to say anything
about Alice? I was twenty-nine, the year of my Saturn return. I was blasted off centre
by the whole thing, the speed and intensity of it, and I needed to stop for a while find
my feet. I didn’t ever ‘recover’. Alice changed my trajectory for life. We were like
two asteroids colliding in space and reeling off on a new path forevermore. At least I
was. Perhaps you can say that of anyone you’ve really loved, really given yourself to.
At least I can. Fiona. Julia. All of them.

When it fell apart I moved to a dank little garden flat off New South Head
Road at Rushcutters Bay. I held a BBQ soon after—it was my thirtieth birthday—
and that’s when Fiona turned up again. I think my brother ran into her in the street. I
knew she was back and living with Mr Japan somewhere near the beach, but our
paths hadn’t crossed. She never even got to meet Alice. A big, bloody episode of my
life which she knew absolutely nothing of, as if—excuse the analogy—I’d survived the Holocaust and had to explain to someone afterwards what all the fuss was about.

The night didn’t go as planned. The rain came in a relentless downpour and we abandoned the BBQ and crammed ourselves instead into my two small rooms. While I tried to grill soggy sausages on the Early Kooka Fiona leant against the kitchen sink and told me her story. She looked the same—tall, thin, same laugh, same smile, same big unrestrained hug—but she was carrying pain and I tried to play the role of listener as I’d seen others listen to me. It was a one-man kitchen. I bumped into her every time I leant over to look under the grill and she laid her hand on the small of my back gently, until I was done. It was like electricity, a hot lumbar current to my kidneys—according to the Chinese, the font of all life’s energy.

Things weren’t going well with Mr Japan. He’d started something with a young woman from work and moved out, and when he tried to crawl back a month or two later Fiona decided she needed some space herself, to see what they could salvage from a distance. Consequently she was looking for somewhere to live—and someone to live with. As it happened, my building had been sold, and I had to find somewhere else too. So that night, while the garden became a pond and the cast of my past yelled into each other’s ears over the music in the other rooms, in the kitchen Fiona and I toasted ourselves with warm beer and charred sausages and decided to look for a place together.

It was the opening both of us needed, some light on the dark horizon of Sydney real estate, and by the end of the night we were beaming at each other self-consciously—and drunkenly—as if we’d just agreed to fall in love. But we knew we were on thin ice. We had to crawl closer to shore and draw up some rules of behaviour. No bedroom games, this meant of course. But that just put the matter on the agenda, and all I remember of the conversation is a lot of words being said while I studied the gap between her front teeth and imagined her naked. It was only her friends leaving, and her lift home, which saved us that night from possibly focusing the next four years into one brief incandescent night which would have left this a very different story.

We looked for a few weeks and eventually found a flat we both liked just off Bondi Road halfway down the southern spine to the beach. I put my desk in the closed-in
balcony and laid my futon on the floor of the adjoining living room. Fiona got the main bedroom with the bay windows. As in all the best houses, the kitchen was where we did our serious hanging out.

It was a good flat. If you stood on your toes you could see the ocean over the red rooftops. It was light and large and quiet, without being so silent you had to go outside to make sure you were still alive. It was only a matter of months since Alice and I wasn't ready for anyone, but Fiona kept seeing Mr Japan. When he stayed over I'd lie in bed and hear her low laugh through the wall. Forget the spring bubbling forth from the heart of the earth—by then it tingled through me as if it was her fingertips feeling their way over every inch of my hungry skin.

When Mr Japan wasn't around we might as well have been a couple. We went out together, laughed together, danced together and when we came home together threw the keys on the kitchen table, talked through the bathroom door and lounged on the sofa with mugs of tea while Rage jittered away in the corner. Only then did the first rule of house sharing takes its place. Fiona went to her bed and I went to mine. The doors clicked shut and stayed shut.

Fiona was still at the studio then—this small graphics business she was in. They did all the usual left-of-centre stuff—union work, publicity for low budget films, Aboriginal health campaigns, welfare awareness, women's issues. Anything guaranteed to burn them out and earn a pittance. Out on the balcony I was writing stories about life with Alice. The characters—there were always two, a man and a woman floundering in domestic difficulties—all had different names, but they were the same people, Alice and me. They were fiction, but all that meant was thinking up smarter retorts and finding the best place to stop, rather than carry on, as we did, right to the end.

While I throttled the typewriter out on the balcony Fiona hunched over her drawing or her sewing in the back room listening to Radio National docos about Nicaragua and Pitjantjatjara Land Rights and Latin American poster artists, about Frieda Karlo and Diego Rivera. She wanted to go to Central America, to Mexico and Guatemala, and climb to the top of Macchu Picchu and look out over the jungle with the world lost below in the mists of time. I had no interest in Central America. The thought of clinging onto the mossy steps of Macchu Picchu made the soles of my feet ache with fear. There’re two types of people in this world. Some can stand with their
toes over the edge of a thousand foot cliff and feel nothing but exhilaration. I’m in the other camp, constantly bartering with the temptation to jump, unsure that one day I won’t be overwhelmed and just do it. Fiona could have Macchu Picchu. I’d take Bondi Beach any day.

We probably got on better than most couples. We could relax together without the weight of a relationship to burden us. These were the easy days of anticipation and laughter. Closed doors and clear boundaries. I’d call Fiona at work to banter over whose turn it was to cook dinner, or tell her what had just arrived in the mail. Any excuse. There was always music playing in the background and she’d get on the phone with her giggles subsiding. “Hi there,” she’d say. She always greeted me the same way. I smiled as I waited for it. It got so that these two little words could fill my heart like a balloon. Those calls. I’d remember little things to say, just to hear her laugh. They were a shot of life in my solitary day. I felt married, I felt real.

Coming home in the evenings she fell asleep on the bus as it crawled up Oxford Street and got jolted awake as it bounced down Bondi Road. She reckoned she could smell the ginger and garlic sautéing before she even reached the corner of the flats. I’d hear her running up the stairs, then her keys jingle and see her black leather jacket loom at the frosted glass of the door and I’d be across the kitchen to open it before she had time to fit the key in the door. There we’d stand, each with a hand up at the lock, another blurry image as we faced each other, a man and a woman, a pane of glass between. “Hi there,” she’d sing and I’d pull open the door and move aside for her to enter, hoping for a kiss, a peck on the cheek, anything.

She’d dump her keys on the table, shrug her leather jacket onto the corner of the lounge and sweep towards the stove to lift the lid from the pan. "Oh, yum! This is so great this is to come home to. Warm flat, dinner, no complications. You’ve got no idea. It’s better than marriage. Better than... No, it’s not better than that.”

After my day spent alone I loved this way she breezed in and filled the flat with chatter and busyness. Fiona moved quickly. She skipped and bustled, full of energy and smiles, of country straightforwardness. Beside her, I felt dour and complicated and heavy. She seemed to carry zest with her and sprinkle it about, like leavening. After half an hour I’d feel lighter, the weight of the day passed.
I had a fantasy. I saw Fiona going back to her room in her loose cotton robe after a shower. I saw myself going to her room, knocking on the door—left ajar as an invitation—and going in. She’d turn to me, her robe falling open, exposing her inner curve of breast, her belly button, the dark of her pubic hair.

She’d watch me as I crossed the room. "Hi," I’d say. "I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

I’d walk closer. Heart thumping. Blushing to the earlobes. "I was wondering how you’d feel about..."

"Yes?"

I’d part her robe and rest my hand on her wet pubic hair. "Talking to me about this."

And she'd break into one of her smiles. "Oh, yeah. It depends on what you want to say." She'd reach forward to cup my crotch. "And who's doing the talking."

I wanted to run as hard as I could down to Mackenzie’s Point and leap off. I thought I was going to burst. Something had to happen soon.

It did. One night she laboured up the stairs, opened the door and slumped down at the table with the keys still in her hand. I put the spoon on the sink and pulled out a chair and took her hands in mine. They were icy. “Bad day?” She nodded, her eyes lowered. A tear fell and soaked into the fabric of her jeans. “Very bad day?” She nodded again and started crying and I took her in my arms. I knew, of course, what it was. What else could it be? In those days, for people like us, it could only be one thing.

Mr Japan was in the old country, so it was just the two of us. Fiona made an appointment for after work. At the clinic I announced myself to the receptionist and joined the other husbands and boyfriends in the waiting room. The men’s room. I did nothing to counter the assumption that I was one of them. I felt sanctioned, valid, a part of coupledom. And this created a sense of love and benevolent ownership—yes, ownership—over Fiona. I was husband, partner, strength and protector. I was something a man was supposed to be.

After a few minutes Fiona came out, walking slowly, looking pale and weak. I got up and put my arm around her. "Hey," I said.

She smiled, ever so wan. "Hi, there."
"You okay to walk?"

She nodded. "Just."

It was a cold winter afternoon, evening peak hour, and the traffic was thick. It'd been raining and the sky was heavy with unemptied clouds. People scurried with their collars up against the wind. Fiona was silent, staring straight ahead through the windscreen. At the top of Bondi Road I reached over and took her hand. She gripped back and forced a smile.

"I'm never going through that again. Never. For anybody."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. It was her fifth abortion. She was thirty-one. It was 1986, the middle of a bad decade for babies.

Fiona had taught me how to make miso soup, but at home she refused even this, and went straight to bed with two Panadol. I sat in the other room watching TV with the sound turned low. Outside it had stopped raining and the moon was out between the clouds. I turned the TV and the lights off and leant out the window, breathing the rich, wet air. Rain glistened on the duco of the parked cars, the nature strip glittered under the street light. The pavement had a dull sheen. I had a feeling of fullness I didn't understand, a sense of responsibility and caring. It was as if Fiona, asleep in the next room, really was my wife, and instead of disposing of a pregnancy that day she had given birth, and now, instead of being the man in the other room, I was proud head of my own sleeping household.

I went to check on her. She was curled into the bed, her mouth open slightly, saliva soaking into the pillow. I sat down beside her and moved the hair away from her eyes. She groaned and looked up, and took my hand and closed her eyes again. I smelt the sourness of her breath, and the nutty warmth of her hair. I stayed watching her as she fell back asleep. I felt words form in my mouth and my heart raced. "I love you." It was as if I were practising, seeing how it felt to hear myself say it—and I swear I felt her give my hand a small, weak clench in return.

The following day was a Saturday, and I went around and bought the papers and made toast and we propped ourselves up on her bed turning the pages and sipping tea like any Saturday morning couple. When she dozed off again I went back to the balcony and kept plugging away at Alice. In the afternoon we pulled on our Gore-texes and headed outside, battling the wind down to Mackenzie’s Point and
around the cliffs to Bronte. It was a huge, blustery day. Bondi was whitewater from headland to headland. The sea crashed onto the rocks below. We stood at the edge of the cliff watching the waves explode beneath us. I put my arm around her and we leant out into the wind—like the bowsprit on a brave little boat being tossed about on the wild seas.

Mr Japan came back and I tried to keep out of the way while they sorted it out. I couldn't hear any words, only the dampened heat in their voices. There wasn't any shouting or recriminations, just the resigned exhaustion of defeat. In the morning Fiona came into the kitchen in her Japanese dressing gown and put the kettle on and leant against me and we rocked gently in the pool of sunlight while the kettle boiled. Then, late one night, I heard Fiona’s door squeak open and footsteps creak through the kitchen to the front door. It opened and clicked closed. That was it. He didn't come back.

After that it was only a matter of time. We waited a decent period, then one weekend went down the coast, a bunch of us, to Bert’s place, an old fibro beach house his father and uncles had thrown up in the 60s. Cattle grazed on the headland behind the house. The moon rose huge and succulent over the ocean, silhouetting the dead skeleton tree on the point. Waves broke in clean lines along the beach. The distance was lost in spray. Horses were galloped along the waterline at dawn, their jockeys leaning into their necks like baby koalas clinging to their mothers. Sunset blazed over Coolangatta Mountain, and at night the surf grew louder and the ocean was black as ink. We baked potatoes and drank wine on the balcony. Everyone was holding their breath. We were a wound spring waiting to lose itself all over the room. The air was charged. We leant together like teenagers and giggled at nothing. Our friends rolled their eyes. Walking along the beach we lagged behind. I positioned myself in her path. We slipped wordlessly into each other's arms. I waited for her touch, I prayed for it and planned it. It was electric. In the morning we were first up. We took our tea onto the deck in the morning sun. Our toes tangled under the chairs. We looked away, in case our glances should cross. I’d never seen her naked, never held her skin to skin, never felt her breasts pressed to my chest. And this was all I wanted. My whole body was focused on this clear, unbearable picture. I excavated to find the right words. Words to open the door, prepare the way, smooth the path. I was a painter choosing colours, a musician hearing the next note. That night we lay
together on the same bed, cocooned in our sleeping bags. I was wide awake. My heart crashed against my ribcage. How long were we going to wait? This could go on forever. Finally she twisted round and leant into my ear. “I can’t bear this any longer. Who’s going to say it? You or me?”

Back in Bondi a week later I rolled up my futon and the second bedroom became the spare room and my room became the living room. Our friends came out of hiding and breathed a collective sigh of relief. “Thank God,” they said. “At last.”

The easy days were over. The real business was about to begin.
3. Bondi

Things were good for a while. I still had that initial excitement when Fiona came home from work—the fast slap of shoes on tiles, the key scrabbling in the lock, the door flung open. But now the greeting was full frontal, open armed, wet-lipped, and often the stove was turned off and we didn’t get back to the cooking until an hour or so later. In summer we wandered down to the beach with our towels around our necks and joined the drifters idling along the shoreline in the dusk.

We’d buy Coopers and fish and chips and eat on the grass behind the Pav in the middle of a crowd of evil-eyed seagulls. Greek kids lounged by their mean machines in the parking lot, jewellery glinting, car stereos pumping out a bass beat. Two blokes with bongos and guitar dangled their legs over the promenade wall, their bop and strum wafting through the gaps in the doof. The skateboard kids swooped and fell up and down their rink, an audience drifting towards them arm in arm, watching for a while then drifting away, carried on the soft flow, the easy movement, the carelessness of summer in Bondi. I was in love, or something that felt like it. Who wouldn't want to be in love in summer at Bondi? This was my beach, my city. This was home.

These middle years with Fiona were when I most wanted a baby. I couldn’t keep my eyes off the young blokes with small bodies strapped to their chest, or pushing strollers, or walking hand in hand with little girls with face paint and smudged dresses and grubby knees, making kiddie chat as they moved among the crowds. Or trying to keep up as their sons rampaged along the footpath with iridescent green plastic guns and black Darth Vader face helmets, hiding behind rubbish bins, shooting invisible enemies and barrelling into couples rounding out of the New Zealand Ice Creamery with their eyes down on the huge cones in their hands.

I loved the way that kids had to reach up so high to keep hold of their dad's hand. I loved everything this implied, the reliance and the responsibility of that tiny paw encased safely in the father's huge mitt. This was real life, family life, what a man was supposed to be doing at my age. I felt envious and jealous. I thought parenthood would grow me up, force me into the maturity I felt missing from my
life. I felt stranded, marooned in an unnatural extended adolescence. Somewhere I'd lost the way into adulthood—and fatherhood would be the turning point into the next thing, into the real life I ached for, some sort of manhood which other men seemed to have, but which in myself was lacking.

On the surface Fiona and I looked like the model couple. I cooked her dinner. Fiona grew herbs, or attempted to, in the sandy backyard behind the flats. We went to the movies, had friends over to tea, did yoga on the beach, and in those years before everyone had kids and other commitments, went bush whenever we could with Warren and Bert and Tim and Debbie and Karen and Sally and whoever else wanted to come along. Long weekends in the Blue Mountains, New Year camps in the Colo gorge, walking in the Snowies at Easter and back in August for the skiing—cross-country, of course. We were a tribe, and these were our rituals, our holy communion in the grand cathedral of the great outdoors.

But underneath was the emptiness. It was as if our relationship was a fantastic idea, a great concept, a good look, but the reality was something different. Something wasn’t connecting. Things never felt smooth. Instead they seemed perennially messy. The old friendliness was superceded by an endless series of small grievances, by some sort of blind struggle for survival, an entanglement of hopes and needs and frustrations and fears either clashing and reeling apart in pain and confusion or latching together in some sort of unconscious co-dependence.

We didn't know what it was. Perhaps, we thought, a baby would fix it. Perhaps that was all we were missing. Our bodies were ready and we were holding them back. Perhaps it was that simple, that normal, that easy. But we knew it wasn't that easy, that simple—or at least I did. It was something else, and any talk about a baby was illusion until that something else was attended to.

One night we were cooking dinner. It was Fiona's turn. She was cutting carrots. I was sitting at the table. She was telling me about her day.

"Why do you cut them so big?" I heard myself say.

She didn't answer.

"They don't cook properly when you cut them big."
Fiona didn’t move. She stood there, looking down at the knife and the pile of carrots garishly lit by the fluorescent bench light above. She laid the knife down and turned. "And how would you like them cut?"


What was I really trying to say? Why did I need to say anything? What was really going on?

Another time, this from nowhere: "Maybe we see too much of each other. Maybe we need to make more effort at outside lives."

Again, she stopped. Whatever she was doing—I don't remember what. Turned slowly. "Jesus, for God's sake. What are you really trying to say?"

And again I pulled back when I saw the look in her face, heard my voice drop. "Just that. I don't want us to get bored with each other."

Fiona closed her eyes and shook her head. "Darling, please. Come on."

Something had happened. Something had gone. What had replaced it? Something had been burnt off, the way wine loses its alcohol when you cook it. What was gone was anticipation, excitement, acceptance. Instead there was the opposite—the heaviness of the real, boredom, resentment, dissatisfaction. There is a line from the Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro. “In the cauldron of domestic life likes become love, dislikes become hate.” But where was the love? Where had it gone? Was it ever there? What was it anyway? Would I recognise it if it came up and yelled in my face? Instead it seemed I was perpetually looking the other way for something better, something different—something impossible.

One night we were lying in bed after making love. We had a tape playing. Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater, maybe, or the Beethoven piano sonatas—they were both on high rotation back then. Outside was a big winter storm. One of the windows, open just a fraction, rattled in the wind and I could hear the squalls of rain gusting up the street and feel spits of water on my face. Above the bed the big blue cotton wall hanging Fiona had had since Japan filled and emptied like a loose sail. I lay back playing with it, a favourite position, while the piano tinkled through the room, the massed voices sneaking in behind then suddenly bellowing at us from the end of the bed. I could feel Fiona watching me as she snuggled in under the doona.

"What are you thinking?" she said.
I rolled towards her and pulled her tight until we were as close as we could get, my top leg draped over hers, my head nestled into the crook of her shoulder.

"If we had a baby tomorrow, how old would that make it when we were fifty?"

"Sixteen. Seventeen."

I didn’t answer.

“What?” she said.

“I guess we shouldn’t leave it too late.”

She got up on her elbow and grinned, her face all shadows and texture from the streetlight outside. “Okay then. Two years. Pregnant within two years. What do you say?” I could hear the determination in her voice. She wasn’t going to let this waft away as it had before, the way I preferred it, tingling through me as anticipation and talk and dreams. It was erotic this way. It made the love rise in my gut.

I lay under her, playing with her nipple, feeling it harden to my fingers.

“Okay, two years.”

And that was that. Two years. We had an agreement. We’d have the baby in—what?—three years. She leant down and kissed me. I was excited and fearful. It could happen, it could be real. But I think even then I knew I’d never do it, that I’d find a way out. And of course it never happened, we never did. And it was she who tried to make some sort of commitment out of mere talk. Maybe this is the difference between a man and a woman. She knew her clock was ticking, while I could mouth maybes until I was eighty. Or maybe it just was the difference between her and me. And maybe—obviously—this is why she has a child now and I don’t.

“So often,” she said one night over the remains of dinner, “I feel like a non-person. You never talk to me anymore. All you do is grunt when I talk to you. You sit there as if you're waiting for me to go away, as if you're trying to smoke me out. Then you attack me as if I'm the trap you're struggling to get out of.”

I didn’t say anything.

"Can you see?" she said.

I took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh.

"What I'm thinking is that one day I'll look back on this period of my life—of our life—and it'll all make sense and we can laugh and say, 'And then X happened and everything changed.' I'm sorry, I really am. I'm as sick of this as you are. I don't
know what's happening. This isn't me, not the old me, anyway. I just wish X would bloody well hurry up and come along so we can get onto the next thing and get happy again."

I must have looked at her with such exasperation that she took me in her arms and rocked me like a mother with a child. All the time my eyes open, staring at the floor wondering how it had come to this. Wondering what X was, and when it would come.

I had no idea how to deal with it. I was confused and distressed. I felt guilty. I couldn't justify my feelings. I called them ‘negative’, gave them a label which made them a problem. They were as real as any other feelings I had towards Fiona, the other stuff, that rich comfort of love, companionship, the joy of sharing, of simply having her beside me. But how was it I that I could so loathe this woman I was supposed to love? This didn’t fit into the picture I had of relationship. She was right. I did make her my enemy, my prison guard, the cause of my unhappiness, my entrapment. If only she was different, I told myself, in this, this and this way, my life would be okay. But even as I thought this I knew this was just another delusion. I knew she was just herself and I was somebody else and for some reason I hadn’t the skills to live with the difference.

I am still floored by the intensity of these ‘negative’ feelings, no longer guilty for them, as such, but perplexed that my partners profess not to have them. I wanted to be loathed, to make my own loathing justifiable. Make it allowable, reasonable, liveable. Bring this thing down to size, just another feeling to be noted, examined, laughed away. “What irritates you about me?” I’d ask. “Tell me, please! It can’t be anything I don’t know about myself already.”

And I’d hear the list. I was loud, a social bully, a conversation fascist, full of words, all talk and no listen. I was cold. I was impenetrable. I’d close down, freeze over, go silent, withdraw. I was cruel, indecisive, domineering. I was a coward.

So what? I knew all that. I yearned to find a woman who could say to me honestly, "Of course I loathe you sometimes. Sometimes I want to strangle you with frustration. But so what? If I love you, of course I'm going to loathe you too." That'd be good. Then I’d feel good. Then I’d feel vindicated.
One morning another thing happened. We’d been having sex and my mind had gone off.

"What?" said Fiona.
I said, "I started thinking of something. Sorry."
Fiona looked me the eyes. After a moment she said, "It doesn't matter. Just help me then."

Afterwards I turned away and picked up my book. Fiona lay behind me. She moved in close and hooked her arm and leg around me.
"Tell me you love me," she said.
My eyes stopped moving. I looked past the book to her rack of clothes, her shoes jumbled together underneath.
"Just tell me," she said. "Say anything. How do you really feel about me?"
"Darling?" she said.
"I heard you," I said.
The rich aroma of our lovemaking wafted from the bed. Usually I couldn't get enough of this smell. This morning it nauseated me.
She said, "Is it that hard to answer? All I need is some reassurance."
I said, "I'm thinking about it."
She said, "Well, Jesus, if you've got to think about it..."
I said, "I think you're a much better person than me. Definitely a better person than me."
She said, "Is that all?"
I rolled over to look her in the face. "Fiona, I..." I stopped. She was searching me from eye to eye. Searching for contact. She looked desperate and scared. Then suddenly she threw back the bedclothes, jumped from the bed and stormed from the room.
"Why do I bother? Why do I even fucking bother?"
I didn't move. My gaze moved to the blue sky framed in the window. I listened to the shower running, then heard it being turned off, and the rasp of the towel rack as she wrenched off a towel.
Fiona came back in. She hadn't dried properly. Her back was still wet. She stepped into a pair of underpants then pulled clothes from coathangers. She dug her arms through their sleeves, turned to examine them in the mirror, and unbuttoned
them impatiently, wrestling them off into a pile on the windowbox. I watched her, the bedclothes pulled up under my chin. After she left I stayed there staring out the window.

When I went into the kitchen she was sitting at the table with her muesli. Her hair was still wet. She looked smart, sexy, like a young thing in the ads having an on-the-run breakfast. Except she was crying. Big tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped onto the varnished surface of the table and stayed there.

I leant in the doorway naked. "I'm sorry."

She looked at me as she chewed, her spoon hand resting on the table, shaking. The other hand was around her glass of water. She even ate her muesli soaked in water. It was a hard, spartan little meal.

"What I can't get over," she said, "is your coldness. The whole thing is so cold and loveless and empty. Why am I kidding myself with you?"

She shovelled another spoonful of muesli into her mouth, watching me as she chewed, the spoon clutched in her hand like a weapon.

"I don't need this, you know. I can live without this. I don't need your suffering. There's a whole world out there waiting to be lived and even if you don't want it, I do. To think what I've been through with you. All your shit. And I give you so much. I'm always there when you need me. But when I need some support? Where is it? All I get is a kick in the face. A cold shoulder. Worse than that. A cold nothing."

Her eyes were hard. I looked into them. I could feel the fear flushing my face. "I mean it this time. This time you're not going to slime your way back in." She pushed her chair back and went to the sink and ran water in her bowl.

I took a breath. My heart thrashed in my chest. Slime? She wanted slime? I could do slime. I could feel myself selecting words, one by one like an archer choosing arrows from his quiver, making sure each was the one to find its target.

I said, "Look, I'm sorry. I really am. I don't know what it is. If I knew I'd tell you. Maybe everyone goes through this. Maybe it's like this for all couples. Maybe it's something we just have to get through. I don't know. If I knew any one thing I'd tell you. I don't know which way to go. I don't know what to do. I feel as if I'm nailed to the ground and I can't move. But the one thing I know, the one thing I'm not doing is deceiving you. I don't know what's going on but whatever it is I'm not telling you any lies."
Her hand rested on the tap. She held her glass up to her lips. She turned and threw the water down the sink and walked out of the room.

The way I explained it at the time was that we'd never 'fallen in love' we'd simply fallen together, and that was why something was wrong. We hadn't chosen each other, we'd just found ourselves in the same flat, and then in the same bed. I said this again and again, searching for explanations, for reasons, for hope.

This was the way we lived. She had her job in the graphic design studio, I was writing my book about Alice, living on the dole, doing odd jobs, in varying states of depression and ill-ease. Fiona circled me trying to understand what was happening, what she could do to help, and what she should do for her own sake. I felt no loyalty to her, I never felt part of a couple, I resented her, felt irritated by her, often could barely stand to be in the same room as her.

Sometimes I felt the anger at my back, like a wave about to break over me—over us—pick us up, and dash us down against the sharp rocks below. I have only ever felt this intensity of anger directed against the woman whom I am supposed to love. Is this the anger with precipitates so much domestic violence? Is it an anger at the heart of all men? Is this the anger which prompts men to murder their estranged wives, even their children, and then kill themselves? Is it resentment? Frustration? Entrapment? How is it explained? And what do we do about it?

Or was this anger some specific toxic mix, mine alone?

Fiona and I only lived together for three years before Julia came into the picture. And only two of those years were as lovers. Afterwards, when people asked how long we were together, I’d say "Three, four years." But it was really only two years. Even when I was over forty it was still the longest time I had lived with anyone. I was embarrassed. I’d had more than twenty years to get my relationship act together. But I hadn't. What was wrong? What had happened?

And, of course, there was the book. While it lasts, your book is your primary relationship. When it finishes you have to find yourself again, as you do when any relationship finishes. You’re in shock. A numb void. You grieve. A living being has passed away. You have to learn, slowly, how to live without it, how to live alone all over again. Until the next one comes. At least, I did. I was. This was how it was for
me. So often Fiona would curse that really there were three of us living in that flat, her, me—and Alice.

I finished the book in June, in time to enter it in a competition for unpublished manuscripts. Suddenly, yawningly, my desk was empty. I got out a map. Alice. A town like Alice. That seemed appropriate. I’d never been there. I set off, hitching, and arrived three days later. I was away three weeks. I took photos, lots of photos. When I got back I stuck them in a collage on the wall above the kitchen table. I stood in front of them, staring. Red dirt, white smiles. Sunglasses. They were barely memories. They hadn’t happened.

It was a bad year. I stood at the window of the flat. I watched people walk down the street waiting for them to look up. They became the tops of their heads and then their backs and then they were gone. I stood in the middle of the room waiting. Waiting for anything. Pigeons waddled over the tile roof next door. My ears pricked at the sound of a bus on Bondi Road. I spent four months writing a story which I couldn't finish. I stood at the window. I had no idea what to do. The mere sight of Fiona irritated me. I sighed. I went to the beach. I came home. I sighed again.

The results of the competition were announced. Someone else won. I rang two publishers in Melbourne. One was friendly, one wasn’t. I sent the manuscript to the friendly one. They told me it'd take a while, but still, how long can a human hold his breath? One month. Two months. Three months. Many. I decided I had to get real. I enrolled in a course to be a teacher of English as a foreign language. I didn't want to be a teacher of English as a foreign language but I figured that maybe once I started I might like it.

The night before my final test lesson I was out on the balcony sweating in a pool of desk light when the phone rang. I picked it up. It was a woman in Melbourne. She introduced herself.

"Oh, hi," I said, staring down at the mess of books and papers on the desk.

"Well," she said.

"Yes?" I said.

"Well," she said. "I've got some good news for you. We like your book very much. We think it needs some work, but we'd like to publish it."

As she spoke I heard her as if I was watching this scene from above, from outside, as if I was sitting back in a comfy cinema seat watching me on a big screen
many metres away, not me but me, a movie of me with the phone at my ear, leaning forward in the pool of desk light listening to these words in voiceover. I think I knew what I was supposed to feel as the character in that scene, but instead what I remember is thinking, this must be one of the high points of her job, calling up first time authors, telling them their dream has come true. It must be good, this part. And I remember thinking, what is she doing working this late at night? I remember trying to picture her life, her home, her husband, the rings on her fingers as the receiver moved in her grip and squirmed in my ear. I remember trying to picture her in her pool of desk light.

I remember thinking all this, but I don't remember what I felt, except I must have been excited, surely. Surely that's what the character in this scene would feel. And I remember the next bit, although maybe I'm imagining this in the movie as well. I remember putting the phone down and going in to Fiona in the other room. She was sewing, hunched over the machine. Finally she looked up.

“What?” She said, her face opening. “What’s happened?”

It was May, almost a year since the book was finished. I couldn't even go out for a bottle of wine. I couldn't leave the balcony. I had twelve hours of darkness to find a way to give twenty Asian students some idea of what the second conditional pluperfect is when I had no idea myself. And suddenly, completely, I didn’t care. I punched my fist in the air, or at least in the movie that's what I would have done. I would have screamed and yelped and banged my forehead against the wall. I was a writer. I was on my way. I never wanted to be a teacher anyway. And the second conditional pluperfect? Don’t ask me. I still don’t know.
4. Drake

I didn’t want to be a teacher of English as a second language, I wanted to be a writer. The publishers wanted the book, but in my youthful brilliance I’d written the story backwards, and their experience told them that perhaps the start was better off at the beginning after all. They gave me a thousand bucks and a deadline and requested a complete rewrite. I wasn’t about to argue, and Fiona and I hatched a plan. At last I could get out of Sydney. I’d go bush and do the rewrite, she’d work for a while longer, then go travelling in Central America as she’d always wanted. When I finished the book I’d find work in Sydney, earn some money, and join her in the States. We’d travel around and end up in New York, where I had a hunch I’d find the letters Raymond Chandler had written to a young woman in Orange, NSW in the 1950s—the letters which I hoped would be the basis of my second book. This was my ‘reason’ for going, the business end of the trip.

I put the word around and a friend of Fiona's with a hut in the hills up near the Queensland border said I could go there. I rang him. He was a quiet guy and I felt loud. It was a Sunday. I sat up in bed with Fiona reading the paper beside me, shouting to this guy as if he was deaf. The hut was on a road called Mud Flat Road near a hamlet called Drake, just off the Bruxner Highway halfway between Tenterfield and Casino. Middle of nowhere, basically. And it was pretty basic. No electricity. Wood stove. Mice at night, birds in the morning. Perfect.

“Can you use a chainsaw?” he asked.

“Well, I have,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “You’ll grow to love that chainsaw. You’ll surprise yourself.”

A chainsaw! Me! Wait till this spread around Bondi. Al of the Overflow.

Fiona wasn’t too happy about it. “It's five hundred miles away! What am I supposed to do?”

I leant over and kissed her. “Buy magazines. Like I'll have to.” My mood had completely changed. After having been closed for so long the future was open. I had a contract for the book, a thousand bucks advance and an indication that someone, at least, considered me a writer. I was setting out into my new life, on my way, on top of the world. But some things weren’t that new. Always leaving, never staying. That
much hadn’t changed. In fact, nothing much had changed at all. All I was doing was shifting the scenery. I’d get in the car, wave out the window, drive away and leave whatever was really happening with Fiona behind. Solving nothing, just escaping. Always works. For a while.

It was a twelve hour drive to get there. I had enough food in the boot of the car for about a year in the Antarctic. I bounced up the rocky track from the road, wrenched the handbrake on, switched off the engine and sat there. It was Saturday afternoon. I looked at my watch. The game of footie we played in Jubilee Park down the bottom of Glebe would be about to totter off to the pub. I took in the jaunty yellow trim on the verandah, the dappled shade of the front yard, the banana palm, the dilapidated chookshed, the dead orchard, the view down through the trees, the thin afternoon twittering of the birds, and I had a cold knot of panic in my stomach. Twelve hours from Sydney and where was I? Drake. Who the hell has heard of Drake? If I wanted isolation, this was it.

But I settled in. The house relented itself to me. Room by room I raised my flag. Writers joke that they always keep the cleanest houses. Anything to put off the climb to the gallows. As I cleaned I claimed territory and my fear subsided. I scrubbed every surface. I shut off those rooms I wouldn't use and took a chair into the other rooms and sat in the middle getting used to their presence around me.

At night I sat staring at the yellow flames of the fire. As soon as I turned off the lamp and I was in bed an army of occupation moved into the kitchen. Bags rustled, bottles rattled, the washing up made sounds. Possums thumped across the roof like cattle. It was like a strange modern symphony. Something you'd hear on Radio National on Sunday night. The moon shone through the trees like black light at a Wilderness Society disco. In the morning I made porridge and coffee and took it out to the wonky homemade table on the verandah, rested my hands in my lap, closed my eyes and sighed loudly. It was a sort of grace. The sun on my face, the birds all around. I took the first sip of coffee, sprinkled soft brown sugar on the steaming porridge and did my best to think of nothing except the pleasure of this.

After breakfast I wandered up to the studio behind the house with the dregs of my second coffee. The studio was the old signal box from Kyogle Railway Station which they’d snaffled up for fifty bucks and carted up on the back of a ute and
plonked there with a verandah around it. The desk was made of old fence palings. I had to hammer the nails back in before I could start work. Once I was set up this was my morning routine. Porridge, coffee, studio. Out the window was a rocky ridge of tall box gums and bladey grass and an old sky blue EH in front of the shed with the right front fender missing. Someone had moved its back seat onto the verandah as a sofa. I sank into it and ate oranges and contemplated the tree ferns in the damp gully. Wallabies bounced away down the hillside. The wind whistled around me like surf in the trees. I sat there and did my best to think of nothing except the pleasure of this.

In the afternoons I walked. Ranged off, map and compass in hand, down among the ferns in the cool gully, along the creek at the bottom, back up along the ridge. I needed to place myself. Find out where I’d ended up. Every now and then there was a dull thud from the flatlands where a mining company had rediscovered gold.

I introduced myself to the neighbours. I was the first person who’d moved onto Mud Flat Road and gone off the dole. They shook their heads, grinning.

“Don't worry, mate. You can always go back on.”

I went for a drive. To place myself. Find out where I’d ended up. Crossed the three single lane bridges over the small brown Clarence and bounced the big old car around the bends and felt the engine tugging me faithfully up the Range. 186 red motor. The best of the best. I waved to the bloke at the tick gate. The sky burned gold in the rear vision mirror. I pulled off the highway onto Mud Flat Road and forded the two creeks and juggled over the rocks up the last steep climb to the house. I could have cried, it was so pretty. Everything felt so good. Things had finally fallen into place. I was on my way! In the east, purple night descended, the tall trees silhouetted on the high ridge in the west, the first stars already out. A sickle moon, new and sharp. Everything still and silent, waiting for night.

I sat on the front steps with a throwdown of VB. It was warm! July, and I was in shorts and t-shirt. Could life be better? I held the mouth of the bottle away from my lips and felt the cold beer running down my throat. Headlights twinkled thought the trees down on the Tabulam Flatlands. I rested my head back, looked up to the sky. First rule of writing—picture it as a long drive. At night. You can only see as far the headlights show you. You've just got to trust that they'll lead you all the way to the end. Everything still and silent, waiting.
Fiona came up to visit. She’d left work, and had been winding up affairs before she left for Central America. I’d been alone for a month. The place was a mess and I’d tamed it, made it mine, and I was impatient to show her. I couldn’t wait for her to arrive. I sat on the verandah flinching at every sound from the road, every movement on the track. Saturday afternoon again. Surf in the trees. Thin shade from the tall gums. Moving light.

When she arrived I clung to her and wouldn’t let go. I was desperate for her, demented. “Why do you have to go 500 miles away for it to get like this again?” she laughed. That beautiful bowels-of-the-earth laugh.

I raced her from room to room, displaying all I’d done, the order I’d created, the changes and discoveries I’d made. We pounded up to the studio, out to the shed, off to the outhouse, down into the gully. She was beautiful. I loved her. I regretted every torture I’d ever put her through. I wanted this one to last. I babbled with plans and excitement. Together we started on the garden, turning the soil, planning what we could plant. It was the story of my life but I was blind to it again. Talk and plans, babble and excitement. Starts and finishes, with nothing in the middle.

We headed down into the gully for an afternoon walk and went so far the moon led our way back. We cooked dinner and drank wine and sat in front of the fire watching the flames, saying nothing. We blew out the candles and moved the logs to the side of the grate and scampered to bed and clung to each other under three doonas as the mice started their shift in the listening room. We woke in the middle of the night and moved slowly together with the moonlight spilling across the floor. Whispering, sighing, sweating. In the morning the sun rose over a sea of cloud. All at sea in an ocean of birdsong. We had breakfast on the verandah. Porridge and coffee. Bower birds in the gooseberry beside the steps. In the studio I looked up to see her poking about the garden catching the sun with her shirt off. How could I be so lucky? I wanted for nothing more. My heart was full. I couldn’t believe I’d ever thought ill of her, or wanted more of her, or questioned my love for her.

But within days, within hours, in a minute, doubt crept back in. The way she came behind me without me knowing and kissed me lightly on the neck. I swung around and almost slapped her. The sound of her voice calling me to lunch drilled a hole into my brain. Her simple gestures of love provoked only loathing. What was
this? What made a sweet guy turn so mean? We were in the best of all possible worlds but it wasn’t good enough. I’d give up the world just to see her smile, but instead I needed to make her cry.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do. It’s just happens.” I said it a hundred times. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

I wanted her to defend herself. To put me in my place, to tell me where to get off, to fight back. But how could she? She didn’t even know why I was angry, what I was angry at. How could we survive this? What was this pain, this anger, this need for revenge? Where did it come from? How could I manage it? It was a cancer. I needed to acknowledge it. If I didn’t treat it early it would multiply into something larger, more unmanageable, more destructive.

After five days it was time for her to leave. I was numb with confusion. I stumbled about the house as if I’d shot myself in the foot because it moved. What did I want from her? Why did it feel so hard, so impossible, so hopeless? I loathed myself. I panicked for my loneliness, my confusion, my inability to relax, to not judge, to simply be with her, uncritically. She drove away and as soon as I knew she was back in Sydney I wound down the range into Tablulam to call her, to apologise, to relieve myself of guilt and loneliness, to feel better.

It worked.

And then I was alone again. The following morning I stood in the garden and remembered us digging in there, and sight of her pulling weeds, and the sense of future, of hope, of certainty. I looked at the rows of turned soil, and looked out into the tops of the trees which fell away down the hill and knew I’d never plant the garden. I’d leave here and look for somewhere else, as I always had before. I would never stand still long enough to see the plants grow and thrive. I’d find reasons that this place wasn’t good enough, right enough and that itch would finally become so unbearable I’d simply have to move. It was the story of my life. And I knew it off by heart. As it happened it was only a couple of months before I drove down Mud Flat Road for the last time and made the move east to the hills behind Byron.

Why was it like this? What was I scared of? What couldn’t I do? What was this fear? It’d be years before I called a stop to try to find out.
What was I doing up in that bush hut, what would I ‘finish’ down in the hills behind Byron? I was writing about Alice, about the relationship I had with her, about how it had gone wrong, about how it was doomed, about the pain and yes, the pleasure of that. I was doing what I am doing now. I was trying to understand why it seemed so hard—examining, analysing, obsessing, dissecting, discussing. I was doing in private what I couldn’t help doing in relationship. It was my identity, this need for answers, these perpetual questions, this eternal dissatisfaction. It was the weapon with which I could drive my partners away, it was my self defence, my survival. My self-destruction. And when they were gone I was free, free to regurgitate the relationship alone, chew on it again, to relive it in my mind, to replay the exquisite pleasure of upheaval. Of passion. Of romance.

Why? What drove me to this? All this flailing in the whitewater of romance. Why did I need to do it? Perhaps I didn’t want it to end. Perhaps it was too precious to let go, my identity, my toehold, my fragile grasp upon the world, the footstep I leave behind me, the only way I know I’m here. And perhaps it was my contribution as well.

I look back at my life with Fiona and find serial betrayals. What was I doing to this woman? Why did she put up with it? In 1988 I caught the bus down to Adelaide Writers Week with another woman, another writer. We both had stories in an anthology being launched that week. It was completely apparent what I had in mind with her. It must have been obvious, surely? I didn’t try to hide it. I had no hesitation in what I was doing. Life was miserable in the little flat in Bondi. I was desperate. If I had any idea how to act as one responsible half of a couple I was playing dumb. Fiona waved me goodbye with bitterness. She knew what was happening. She even carried my bag down to the car being driven by this woman’s friend. She shook this woman’s hand! She knew we were going down to Adelaide to rut like writers. I hoped, anyway. It didn’t work out that way, of course. We tried it once and didn’t try again. But still, Fiona carried my bag to the car! She shook this woman’s hand! And she knew! Was she stupid, or was she giving me ‘the space’ she sensed I needed? Whatever. I took that space and shoved her backwards out the door. I treated her miserably. I betrayed her. And it wouldn’t be the last time. But if I felt guilt I assuaged it with some other feeling, some justification that this was something I
needed to do, and once done I’d be released back into Fiona’s arms. What was she thinking? Did she understand this, when even at the time, I had no idea what was driving me, why I was doing it?

And then there was Julia. Sometime in 1987 when we were still in Bondi I was runner-up in a short story competition. The winning story was printed in a magazine some months later and through the magazine, I wrote to the author to tell her I liked it. Her name was Julia. She wrote back. I wrote back to her. We kept writing.

Julia lived on the north coast of NSW. She was married to a man called Gavin, her former schoolteacher. They met when she was 14 years old, and Gavin taught her English and History. He was ten years older than her. She told me little about him and I filled in a picture of a country chalkie and his wife, respected and active in the local community. I saw a handsome young sandy-haired athletic man who played tennis and windsurfed, with whom she was happily married. She wrote and he taught and their life ticked over smoothly in the easy heat of the north coast. I pictured some sort of paradise. The north coast, after all, was the land of permanent holiday. There was no hardship up there, only indolent, sultry, carefree fun.

If, at the time, I considered this marriage to her former schoolteacher ten years her senior in any way odd, I forget that now. What I do remember, however, is that the detail she provided of her life—a married woman, a teacher’s wife—was in contrast to the childlike person she seemed in her letters. She didn’t seem adult. Her turn of phrase was strangely formal, mannered and old-fashioned, and her syntax felt wordy and bookish, as if she had learnt English from reading it, not from real life. She seemed gawky and ill-equipped for the real world, incompetent and slightly irritating, if harmless. I recall no feelings of desire for her at that time, and no indication that she would be, for me, in any way attractive at all. If anything I remember the opposite, a sense of impatience with her immaturity. I was, after all, only a year younger than her husband.

Her letters may have revealed her to be young, but they were also intense and sensual. She was never timid on paper. With a pen in her hand she found her voice. She was confident and eloquent. Her sentences seemed to form themselves with ease, her style so unforced her letters read as if they were drafted beforehand. Any errors or changes she blotted out with black shapes. Aeroplanes. Zeppelins. Ducks.
These letters were the start of everything that later happened with Julia. If I was betraying Fiona, I chose to deny it, to ignore it. I insisted repeatedly that ‘nothing was going on’ with Julia. We were only writing letters. We’d never even met. How could anything be happening? But the truth was, although I don’t think I knew it then, I was titillated by what we were doing. I was flirting with every sentence I wrote. I was back in the realm of anticipation, of possibility, of escape from the cauldron of domestic life I found so distressing with Fiona. We’d been together just over a year.

But I wasn’t going to admit it and threaten the fun. Whatever concept of responsibility I had to Fiona did not include this. All it seemed to amount to was whatever felt convenient to me at the time. Looking back, I think the truth was that I had neither the skills or self-knowledge to participate as an equal partner in a relationship. I was as a child acting out his needs and as such any concept of responsibility was meaningless. I found it a whole lot easier to have a paper relationship than a ‘real’ one in which I had to cope with another person’s divergent needs and desires and my feelings in response to them. I was so relieved to feel the burden of my confusion with Fiona lifted I closed my eyes to the possibility that what I was doing with Julia was anything more sinister than an innocent correspondence with a woman I hadn’t met.

Some things in life could have been different. They are distinct decisions. But to make a conscious decision, you must first be conscious. What I was doing with Julia was not a decision, just as I felt I’d never really made a decision about Fiona. I wasn’t conscious. I was doing what I needed to do without thinking whether it was ‘good’ or ‘bad’. I was only keeping my nose above water, following the course of least resistance away from discomfort, confrontation—and mindfulness. One letter followed another and I ended up where I was. We exchanged letters for over a year. And then we met.

And from this I ended up where I am today.

When we started writing to each other Julia’s first book was in the pipeline with a publisher and I’d already sent mine down to Melbourne. We were both taking our first tentative steps on a long road. Like any young writers we had our heroes and, like half the male writers starting out in the 80s, mine was Raymond Carver. He was
writing the sort of domestic realism I wanted to write, in the way I wanted to write it. His essays about writing were sacred to me. They gave me hope and courage and I read them aloud to anyone who would listen. My greatest challenge in those years, while certainly trying to emulate Carver’s style, was to not too transparently plunder it—something I doubt I achieved.

I wrote him a letter once. I didn’t expect a reply, and didn’t get one. I was still in the flat with Fiona, so it must have been sometime before the middle of 1988 when I left Sydney to rewrite the Alice book. He died in August 1988, by which time I’d moved up to Drake.

Early in my correspondence with Julia I mentioned Carver. "He's my man," I said. "Have you read him?"

"Have I read him?" she replied. "I’ve sat in the same room as him."

I was supposed to be the worldly one. But with this she had resoundingly trumped me. He’d visited when she was studying creative writing at what was then the Institute of Technology in Sydney. I was aghast that this could have happened, that he could have been so close and I’d missed him. I pumped her for information. What was he like, what did he say, what did she think?

He was a tall, shambling man, she recalled, who mumbled so softly everyone in the room had to lean forward to hear. He talked informally about his life and his career as a writer. She remembered that he wrote only short stories and poems because when he was starting he had two small kids who didn’t allow him much time and he had to write things which he could finish quickly. Julia assumed that most of the class had heard of him, but she hadn’t, so she listened to him dutifully without feeling much about him. And, of course, as a young woman starting—hopefully—on a writing career it was the mentorship of women writers she yearned for, not men. The one thing she did remember clearly from that day was Helen Garner sitting at a desk up the back of the class, leaning forward like any other student, trying to scoop in whatever words she could. Garner’s presence so overawed Julia she paid little attention to Carver himself.

While I was up on Mud Flat Road I received letters from Julia in England, where she was travelling with her husband. Gavin, it had turned out, was not the vital young athlete I’d imagined, and one of his passions was the monarchy. He is the only person I have ever heard of who subscribed to the magazine *Royalty*, and in her
letters, Julia indicated she was accompanying her husband on what seemed to be, from her description, a very tedious tour through the stately homes of the old country.

One day she and Gavin were on the Yorkshire moors searching for the village of Hawath, the family home of the Bronte sisters. The moors were lost in blinding fog and rain. The car radio, Julia wrote, kept cutting out, lost in static. Gavin was driving—Gavin always drove—and she was looking dreamily out the window at the swirling mist and fog, only half paying attention. In her lap she held the pre-publication copy she’d just received of her own book. Her future, literally, was in her hands.

What was she thinking? Perhaps she was considering the Brontes, and the lives of confinement they had survived on the desolate moors. Or perhaps she was considering her own confinement. Things were not good with her husband. She was growing restless in the marriage, aware already that she wasn’t ready to settle down with her old schoolteacher in the country town of her birth, for what looked like the rest of her life. He wanted her to have children, but she knew this would mean even surer entrapment. If she had any escape route, it was through writing, and the book in her lap was, perhaps, her passport to freedom. Into this cocoon of fog and dreams the radio signal cleared just long enough for one news item to arrive clearly before it was lost again in static. The American writer Raymond Carver had died of lung cancer, aged fifty. Perhaps Gavin registered her slight gasp and glanced across. Perhaps he was concentrating too hard on his driving to notice. Either way, they drove on, the wipers slashing a faint path through the storm, and the moment passed.

That night Julia wrote to tell me the news. I clearly remember reading this letter, bringing it back unopened from the post office in Tabulam and standing on the verandah of the little hut as I held the blue airmail paper in my hands. It was afternoon, blowy and unsettled. Her letter had all but brought the weather with it. I looked out at the track down the hill through the tall cabbage gums and my stomach fell away. A bolt of shock went through me. My eyes filled with tears. I’d had no idea he was ill; it hit me as if I was receiving news of someone I actually knew.

“Your man,” she had written, “is dead.”

I had three of Carver's books with me up there in the bush—his Picador Collected Stories, my treasured UK hardcover of his selected poems, In A Marine
Whenever I left town for any length of time these books came with me and I consulted them regularly as if they were texts to a course I was studying. I decided then, as I held Julia’s letter in my hands, to dedicate my book to his memory. He was my mentor, whether he knew it or not: I had to acknowledge him. In the end, rather than a dedication, I found two lines from a poem and used them as an epigraph. That done, I looked up the words he used to offer his first book to his wife and stole them—for Fiona.

I was trying to be faithful to Fiona, but really Julia and I were going through a long courtship by letter. That we both had other partners was almost an irrelevance. We were driven by something far more powerful, and in our ignorance, irresistible. We were setting ourselves up for what would come.

Some months later when I knew I'd be going to the US, there was no question I would include some sort of pilgrimage into Carver country. I had the sacrilegious idea to sit in his chair, to glimpse the world through his window, which I knew from his later poems would look out over the Strait of Juan de Fuca, which separates Washington state from British Columbia, in Canada. I even knew what to expect: the sea mist over the Strait, the waves draining through the stones on the beach—even, according to one poem, a particular young couple who would pass, and then reappear coming back, still arm in arm. If Carver had still been alive of course I would never have considered such a thing. But he was dead, and his chair was vacant and by proximity—the seat of my pants—I was hoping that some of him might rub off on me.

Fiona and I did, in fact, visit his wife, the poet Tess Gallagher, at their home in Port Angeles, and she showed us a photo of the mail they had accumulated during a month away. They were standing in the lounge room (where we were then sitting) looking down on a pile of letters and packages which had been poured out on the rug. It was the size of a small sofa. I imagined hundreds of other young blokes like me checking their letterboxes in vain for the reply which would never arrive.

My other Raymond—Chandler—quipped, 'If you like a man’s books, take care never to meet him', and unfortunately, when through his wife I did learnt more about Carver’s life, Chandler’s advice proved fitting. From what I heard I simply didn't like
the man. But the *idea* of Carver, his myth, was too important to me to muck around with, so I tried, as noiselessly as I could, to shuffle him back onto the shelves intact. But I wasn’t successful. He was never the same again.
5. Bangalow

Fiona left Australia at the end of October, 1988. It was a Saturday, a grey, wet day. There were no other friends at the airport. Just us. A group watched from another table as I wept. I looked out the window at the runway. Rain splashed against the glass. Aviation fuel in the air. That exciting smell. All the years in Sydney I've driven friends out to the airport. Saying goodbye under the big green departure board with the letters flipping over, when they still had it. Driving out along General Holmes Drive, their backpacks in the boot, glimpsing the big 747s through the screen they put up above the fence so you wouldn't stare too hard and run off the road. The exciting smell of aviation fuel, of travel, foreign places. The slow drive home again, flushed with excitement and sadness and relief. Betsy going. Tara going. Jol going. Bill and Isobel going. Mandy going. Toby going. Driving home, pushing open the door to an empty house, taking a deep breath, fortifying myself for the loneliness.

Fiona took my photo at a table by the window in the airport cafe. I took my glasses off, but left my hat on, this little straw pork pie hat I was glued to at the time. "Smile!" she said, and I opened into a big grin, and that’s the photo she had, tears streaming down my face and rain streaming down the window behind me and all these words coming from my mouth. What the photo didn’t capture was my words, my tears speaking as she took it. "I'm scared. I'll be lonely. I'll miss you."

This was the photo Fiona carried with her all round Central America. She used to get it out, she said, when she felt lonely, and weep. Tears and smiles, the skyline of Sydney melting outside the window. Sometimes she’d get it out when she felt lonely the other way.

We hugged outside the Departure Gates. Stood there, hanging on. I wouldn’t let go. She was dry-eyed. I was doing the crying for both of us. She had an adventure, organisation, independence ahead of her. Whatever tears she had in her that day she was saving for later, when she’d really need them.

And there were other words I spilled as I clung to her before she left that day. "I’m sick of this," I blubbered. "I want all this upheaval to stop. When I get over let’s drive down to Tijuana and get married. Let’s just do it. Let’s stop all this fucking around."
What she answered to this, I don't remember.

By the time Fiona left I’d already moved from Mud Flat Road. The isolation got to me and I’d ended up in the house at Bangalow. It was in that house, in the kitchen, that I met Julia, at about 4.30 in the afternoon on the day I finished and delivered the book, 30 November 1988. One distinct era of my life was over—and this meant, of course, that another was about to begin.

The house at Bangalow was owned by friends who had separated and they needed someone in there to keep the fire insurance valid while it was on the market. Theirs was a sad but common story up there. They bought in the 70s when they were young and land was cheap. After years of scrounging and bartering and exchanging labour on their friends’ houses, they finally got theirs to move-in stage, and then one day took a look at each other and knew that whatever dreams they had before had passed away in the struggle. She made a bolt back to Sin City, and he wallowed around for a year or so, smoking too much dope, trying to understand what had happened, and eventually followed. And in due course what was left of the dream ended up in the local real estate agent’s window. Drive the winding little backroads behind Byron in those days and you’d pass dozens of these handmade timber tragedies. They were weird, hobbity little houses, unique and cute, but fundamentally impractical and invariably incomplete, with exquisite detail on the bay window in the bathroom but no floor in the lounge—that sort of thing.

Mine was such a house, with only one bedroom and one other cavernous two-storey space which did a good job of pretending to be a chapel. It had a leadlight in the north wall and a vaulted ceiling cornered with inaccessible cobwebs. The kitchen was dominated by a full-sized billiard table which had lost its baize hairpiece but still sprouted green nosehairs from the pockets along the sides. Maybe because of its history I left the house to the ghosts and spiders and lived in the studio in the garden where my friends had camped for their happy years before the house was habitable.

I’d work in the mornings with the doors flung open and when I switched off at lunchtime the hills and sky and swaying trees would be reflected in the computer screen, reminding me what was there all along while I thought I was doing something more important. The neighbour’s cattle filed in through the open gate and kept the grass down, and every morning at eleven I’d get up from the desk to shoo his
goats back through the fence before they got up on their hind legs and ate the buds off the fruit trees. Water dragons basked on the lawn, the slightest movement sending them scampering back down to the creek at the bottom of the garden. I wasn’t paying rent. All I had to do was mow the grass and keep my mouth shut when the estate agent brought people round to look at the house. It was a good life, and I knew it.

In the afternoon I’d drive down to Byron and swim along Clarke's Beach and wander back along the shoreline, the Nightcap Ranges silhouetted gold in the balmy dusk, my heart plump with contentment. I’d buy a Coopers Stout and drink it on the grass in front of the surf club with the strumming and thumping of the moon worshipers and dervish dancers wafting over from the hand-painted Kombis in the carpark. On clear nights as the moon lifted over the lighthouse on the point the whole bay was splashed silver. I reckon I could have laid down on one of those nights and drifted off into the big sleep and died a happier man than I could ever be again. But there was all this other stuff to do instead. Looking back, I was on rails leading inevitably to some set of circumstances which in hindsight are a completely logical consequence of all that went before, and a determining creator of all that came after. Those circumstances became that huge train smash in my early thirties, which feels now like a defining event of my life, both before and since. Those days and the person I was then are youthful memories, wilful naivety, reckless innocence. They are before, this is after.

Julia and I had organised that she would come to visit when I finished the book. Bangalow was only a couple of hours from Grafton and although I felt no desire for her, after a year of correspondence it seemed churlish not to meet. The day I was set to post off the manuscript seemed as good as any.

I could have posted the manuscript at Bangalow, only five minutes away, but my cassette deck was in Lismore being repaired, and I wanted to have it to play Julia my tape of the month, the new Leonard Cohen album, *I’m Your Man*. This strikes me now as one of the small, laughable details of those events, telling in itself. So I drove to Lismore, ceremoniously dropped the hefty parcel down the gullet of the red post box outside the old Post Office, collected the stereo and headed home. I had the windows down, singing along to Paul Kelly on the car cassette, thumping the outside of the door in time with the music. *I lost my shirt, I pawned my rings, I done all the
dumb things. It was mid afternoon, the hot air rushed through the car like the heat from a forge. On either side of the road the ridge fell away to green fields sprinkled with black and white Friesian cattle. The colours were intense, the light burnt with glare, the cloudless sky was white with heat. Small gullies climbed the hills, folds in the green flesh of the countryside. I was wearing my summer uniform of the time—white Bonds singlet, Mambo boardies, RayBans. Holey old Volleys. The straw pork pie hat. Equipped for anything. I leaned out the window and let out a long scream of joy. This was one of the huge days of my life, and I was right in it, as happy as a man could be. If I held any lustful anticipation for Julia's visit they've been rewritten by the unfolding of subsequent events. I was excited, but mainly, I think, because so much work had led up to this day and finally I was off the leash after months of keeping myself restrained. I intended to party, and that Julia would come partying with me.

The road dropped off the ridge and cut under the railway line and continued along the floor of the valley before the climb into Bangalow. At The Buttery I turned up Friday Hut Road. The tape had ended and all I had was the smooth purr of six cylinders pulling the big car up the hill. I wound through the trees on the ridge, past the nursery on the south side, and the new brick houses on the north, and at the bottom turned down Gittoes Lane under the arbour of overhanging camphor laurels. Simpsons' dog burst out of their gate and charged the front wheels of the car. One day I’d skittle the little bastard and everyone on the lane except the Simpsons would call round with a couple of cold long necks to thank me.

The little white Toyota was nestled up beside a tree near the corner of the verandah. She was there. I swung the old Kingswood in through the gate, flung it into Park as I cut the engine, and had the door open and the seat belt unbuckled before it’d stopped rocking.

When I reached the door of the kitchen I stopped. She was standing at the end of the old billiard table with a cup of tea under her nose. I strode towards her with my hand out.

"Julia? Hi." She managed to manoeuvre her tea onto the edge of the table before I pulled her towards me into a clumsy hug, my sunglasses, hanging around my neck, boney between us.
I pulled away and stood back to examine her. She was tall and thin. *Willowy.* That was it. *Willowy.* Not at all what I'd expected. Long white dress and thin face with a lazy eye. She appeared knock-kneed—*gawky*—and seemed, almost imperceptively, to be stepping lightly from foot to foot. A long-legged foal, fresh, new, impatient.

"You don't look like I imagined."

"No?" She raised the tea to her lips. "Then I guess we were both wrong."

From that moment when Julia and I set eyes on each other for the first time both our lives were changed forevermore. It is quite clear to me, as I try to gain perspective on my life now, that every step I had taken beforehand was leading to that moment—and every day since has been the consequence of it.

It was hot. I suggested we drive down to Byron for a swim. We talked all the way, the back road over Possum Creek and up the hill to the highway, trapped behind a herd of milkers staining the road brown. I wonder if there was any silence between us at all on that first day. Our conversation was insistent, impatient, disorganised. It was as if we had two lives to pour out and mix together before the day ended and it was all over. At Main Beach we parked the car and talked our way up Belongil Beach to the nesting ground of the little tern, fenced off at the end of the spit where the creek cut through to the beach to the sea. There we dumped our towels and turned our backs while the other changed and then headed into the sea, still talking.

Afterwards we bought gin and we headed back up the hill and sat on the verandah drinking as the sun set and Mozart’s Requiem boomed from the chapel room over our head and out over the creek to the Van Gogh camphors swaying in the evening breeze on the far hill. The gin-soaked verandah, this became in our personal history. Still talking. So much to talk about. Her life, my life, our past and plans. Both of us with first books in the pipeline. Both about to be born. The future that night inevitable, waiting to welcome us.

She talked about her marriage, her dissatisfaction, her desire to escape. I talked the talk. "You’ll just carry your troubles to the next man," I said. "Stay, see it through with him, believe me, it’s easier." I made hubristic speeches about choice and loyalty and mistakes made, lessons learnt. I told her about my trip down to Adelaide with the woman, Nikki. What I’d done. What I didn’t want to do again. I was sure of this,
drunk and certain I knew what I was doing. Keeping a distance, maintaining our distance. Her life. My life. In three months I'd be going over to meet Fiona in Los Angeles. I wasn't going to betray her again.

You must stay, of course, I said to Julia. But we won’t be sleeping in the same bed. She stood with her hand at the back of the long red vinyl sofa. She looked down and moved her weight from foot to foot. Cane toads watched at the open doors, blinking into the light. In the garden the possums upturned the bucket of compost and fought for their nightly feast. I went into the shower and came out. Julia had her sleeping bag in her hand, but seemed not to have moved. She hadn’t come all this way to sleep in separate beds.

“Okay,” I said. “Same bed, but no sex. Okay?”

She shrugged. “If that’s the way you want it.”

The next morning, moving astride me, she turned to the window. “My God, it’s dawn! Did we sleep at all?”
6. Grafton

She left in the morning and I thought, I kidded myself, that that was it. She had me out of her system and could carry on with her marriage. It’d been a one-off event, a simple release of energy for us both, something she needed and I could justify. Fiona and I had agreed that of course things might happen with other people in the months we were apart but what happened on the road would stay on the road. That’s how I thought of it. I thought it was something that had happened, and wouldn’t happen again. I really thought this. I waved Julia goodbye and stumbled back to the detritus of the night before with the honest belief that we’d never be lovers again.

But if we had any real intention of staying apart we showed absolutely no indication of acting on it. The letters resumed immediately. But now they were letters of lust and excitement and disbelief. In one post I received four letters—cards, postscripts, afterthoughts. It wasn’t the end, of course. My heart flooded, opened and received Julia like water coursing across a parched paddock.

We entered the summer of love. The December of deception and betrayal. Fiona was out of touch in Central America, but Julia and I lied to, deceived and betrayed her husband to his face. We were driven. We were irresponsible, amoral, undignified, in love. This allowed us to do anything and we did. We had no shame. I went down to visit. She had sent me a photo her husband took of her on their honeymoon and I stuck this to the dashboard and drove towards it. I shook her husband’s hand. I ate his food and drank his wine. I accepted his hospitality. I slept in his house. And as soon as he was gone in the morning we made love on her husband’s bed. He knew. He was closing his eyes. He knew she wasn't happy. The marriage—his marriage—was tottering on borrowed time. His child bride was growing up but the truth was too hard and he didn’t want to know.

We agreed to spend the night out at Diggers Camp. Just the two of us. Gavin shrugging consent, his last words to her that morning before he left for school: “I hope I see you again.” Poor bastard. He knew, of course he knew.

In our personal history this became ‘our night at Diggers’. Our night of betrayal, except it wasn't even a night, just an afternoon, undone by Gavin catching us all but red handed. Red-bummed. He got home from school with something in his eye, went
looking for the tweezers in the drawer, and they didn’t rattle against her diaphragm box as usual. He flung the drawer open and stared down at what he hadn't wanted to see. The empty space where Julia's diaphragm was meant to be. He was out at Diggers in record time. That little Toyota had no idea what hit it. Still in his school clothes, pedal to the metal. We were lying by the fire, Julia's hand on my bare bum. The look on her face as he appeared over the rise in the hill. “Oh, fuck, it’s Gavin.”

I swung around and there he was, drip-dry trousers and neat white shirt. My heart raced. I thought I'd have to fight him, and I didn't even have my pants on. While Julia hung her head and went to talk to him (“Julia, can I have a word with you, please?” The teacher in the playground. The sprung school girl.) I scrabbled into my boardies and tried to think through what was supposed to happen next. Should I tell him to fuck off, it's her choice, now leave us alone? Or should I hang back, let them sort it out? I felt loyalty towards him in a strange man to man way. I felt critical of her that she'd betrayed him. I don't think I felt guilty that I was fucking his wife. Rather, I felt guilty that I wasn't being honest, that I was lying to him.

Later, after he’d reclaimed her, strapped her in the Corona and taken her home I retraced his school shoe stomp up the beach as he searched for us. The triangular detours as he squelched up the sand and back again to check out possible hideaways. Poor bastard. I laughed. My heart was full and there was no room for his feelings. I was doing something that has been done since man began. We behaved appallingly. His feelings didn’t enter into our equation.

This is where the story hits the shoals of confusion. Who was this woman, this pigeon-toed ingenue from the wrong end of the north coast whose experience of men had been her old teacher and “a boy, and not even properly, for half a night”? What really happened between her and me? My heart opened, cranked itself wide open like an aircraft hanger. Why? What did it need that I wasn’t giving it?

It’s true to say what happened changed both our lives forever. We fell in love—I’m pretty sure I can speak for her too—head over heels, feet in the air—and the consequences blew us both into a different trajectory for good. And it’s also true to say, I think, that I won’t ever love anyone else as I loved Julia. Perhaps it was a grand romantic passion—the passion of our lives. The lesson which doesn’t have to be learnt twice. Or was it just the interlocking of concurrent needs and neuroses
which suited us both exactly? If I hadn’t found Julia, if she hadn’t found me, would we have found someone else to fit the bill?

For ten years, a decade, I tried to write this out. I understood neither the grip it has on me, or my inability to write it out, to move it through my system. But every time, for the past ten years, that I have sat at my desk it is this story which has, eventually, emerged. My need ‘to understand’ has been both my need to understand ‘love’ and my habits and patterns in the name of ‘love’. Is there any stronger drug? Is anything in the world as exquisitely unravelling? I’m much older now, and I see things differently. I no longer buy into romance. I now see romance as something different, something a whole lot less romantic.

Julia stayed the night. We made love. Our dams broke and we flooded together. It was more than physical. We connected, and although we long ago stopped making love, I know we are still connected. Somehow. Is it this I am driven to understand? How did our enmeshed neuroses become the bigger thing, more than the sum of us? Or is it merely the strength of these enmeshed neuroses which still deludes me that there might be any difference?

I knew that I was just a catalyst. I could see her situation. I knew she needed to leave this marriage and this man. I knew she would, somehow. Somehow this numbed me to the pain we were causing around us. To her husband, particularly. To Fiona, in absentia. I look back at the hundreds of pages I wrote then and find myself swept along with the story. It bubbles over with exuberant naivety. It doesn’t give a stuff. It doesn’t want to know about responsibility and other people’s feelings. It is happy to enjoy itself and ask no questions—but these are the very questions I ask myself now, over a decade later, in middle age. How could I be so irresponsible? How could I be so numb to the pain I was causing others? What was driving me in the name of ‘love’? Why was I there? What did I need from Julia? What did she give me? Would I do the same thing all over again?

My two acres of paradise had been sold and it was time to leave. Gavin was going away, visiting friends out west. I slid down the driveway in the big sleazy HQ the moment the little Toyota turned the corner and disappeared. He didn’t stand a chance. She was desperate for escape. She pulled the curtains and lowered the blinds and lay beneath me. On her husband’s bed. She wouldn’t come for a walk in the
evening in case we were seen, in case he called, which he always did. “Where were you?” he asked one evening. “It was such a lovely night. I went for a walk.” A silence breathed down the line. “But you never go for a walk.” He knew. Of course he knew.

But I’d never been happier. I was off my face. Could life be any better? We slid over each other like sea creatures, the sheets soaked with sweat. Our bodies locked together in the blackness. I stroked the hair from her forehead, her skin shining in the soft light of night. “I have to sleep,” she pleaded. “Please let me rest.” The night was rich with summer fragrance. Drifting asleep in jasmine dreams. In the morning her skin was soft and brown. My hands everywhere, smoothing the pasture of her belly, the expanse of her back, rounding her buttocks, a blind man with a smile. Clambering into her armpit, her breast soft against my cheek.

The days were end to end with perfect moments. Nothing could go wrong. We flung ourselves into the waves at Diggers Camp, wound up the mountain to the cool of Washpool, drifted back down as a huge harvest moon rose over the lowlands, punching the air as we sang. The heat itself was exciting. Would I have loved her as much if it hadn’t been hot? The humidity stopped the days in their tracks and kept the nights awake. The skies grew dark for the afternoon storm and her teeth glowed in the black light, her hair wet against her head, her ears huge. Our song that summer was *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*. ABC North Coast Radio had it on high rotation like a mantra, we sang it like a hymn. We disappeared down the aisles of the video shop and popped up humming. It filled our hearts and lifted our limbs. We locked the back door and slept in the afternoon. We watched bad videos and drank good wine. We ate little. “You take my appetite away,” she sighed. We fuelled ourselves as we needed. She lifted her breasts in the bath at midday and let them drop. “I don’t know whose they think they’re supposed to be, but they’re not mine.” We had one week. Seven days and seven nights until we stepped back into the hard light of our lives.

I timed my departure. At 9pm on Christmas Eve I edged the HQ back up the driveway with the lights off. 640 kms and ten hours to Sydney. A pack of Camel plains and a two hour snooze. She ran up the driveway behind me. I opened the door and turned to catch her as she leapt. “I don’t want you to go,” she cried. “Please don’t go. Please don’t go.” Her tears rolled down my neck, over my back. She
pushed me away. “Go. Go. Just leave. Please.” I was playing a role. I was leaving. She was staying. I was doing something that has been done since man began.

I lined the tapes along the seat beside me. Dylan. Van Morrison. Leonard Cohen. Paul Kelly. My grey-haired choir. Morning came. I felt the car drift off the asphalt onto the grass as the expressway twisted down the hill towards the Hawkesbury at Brooklyn. I grabbed the wheel and was awake before I knew I’d been asleep. Someone’s horn blaring past.

I turned off into Brooklyn and pulled in alongside the marina and watched the golden windows of a train approach across the river. Pelicans lifted themselves from the water to perch on top of the channel markers, flapping their massive wings like cumbersome nineteenth machines. A jogger slapped past. “Merry Christmas!” he said. “Yes. Isn’t it!” I grinned.

The day was blue and clean and hot already. I sat on the rocks with paper on my knees and put all this and more in a letter. “I’m crying with my mouth stretched wide,” she’d written to me at 9:10 the night before. I pulled back onto the expressway. Macca on a Sunday morning was singing Silent Night with a ten-year-old boy on the radio telephone from White Cliffs. I turned up the radio and joined in at the top of my voice. Tears rolled off my cheeks into my lap. I fronted up to my family Christmas, my heart exhausted, bruised and happy. When you’re in love you love everybody. I was smiles and hugs and sloppy kisses. And Fiona? everyone asked. Have you heard from Fiona? My face falling, mouth searching for words. No, I said quietly. No, I don’t know where she is. Doing something that has been done since man began.

Julia sent a photo her brother-in-law snapped that day at the family farm. Leaning against the buttress roots of the big fig, she stared straight into the camera, face flat with secrets. A sun dress. Brown limbs at all angles. Mona Lisa smile. “You have no idea,” she's thinking. "No idea at all."

In Sydney my brother moved in with his girlfriend and I took over his place. Outside his bedroom window a wisteria cascaded down the paling fence, the fallen petals pooling blue on the ground below. I worked as a labourer for a builder friend. The letters kept coming. I came home from work covered in plaster dust and read them
with a Coopers stout, leaning against a rock overlooking Queens Park, smog burning the sunset below me. I looked away at a plane rising through the burning sky.

I rang her up. It was after dark. “Where are you?” “I’m lying on the bed. With nothing on. Where are you? Where’s your other hand? You’re so far away. Why are you so far away? Do you want to know what I’m doing with my other hand?”

“Julia,” I said. “Julia, look.” We couldn’t continue. She was married. I was going to meet Fiona in Los Angeles. It was a wonderful thing, but we had to stop. Put it down to experience. Think ourselves lucky. Don’t worry, be happy.

It was autumn in the summer of love.

I wrote to Fiona. I told her. It seemed fair. She rang back. Don’t come over, she said. Leave me alone. Go off with her. No, I said. I’m coming. We’re not finished. She’s married. It was something that happened. My future lies with you.

She listened, sobbing back tears. "I've got to hang up," she said. "I've got to think things through."

She went off to Guatemala, incommunicado. I bought my ticket and sat on the rock at dusk. I was too exhausted to think. I was beyond thought. I constructed a rickety scaffold of wishful resolutions and tried to clamber up it. What had happened only felt so right and true because it was clandestine and exciting and dangerous. Now we both had to get on with our lives. Don’t worry, be happy.

Julia caught the train down. Gavin was visiting his parents somewhere in the suburbs. He was allowing her this last weekend, then that was it. He’d be outside at 8am on Monday morning. Strap her in, take her back to be his wife, to have his children, to carry on as if this had never happened. Doing something that has been done since man began. A rickety scaffold around his life. Looking back, this whole thing is incredible. At the time, we grabbed what we could without question.

Monday morning, 7 o’clock, we’re locked together, moving slowly, our last time. Everyone was weeping. Julia, me, the wisteria shedding blue tears out the window. Even the bed was whimpering. Julia shook her head back and forth. “I can’t believe this is the end. I can’t believe it. Don’t stop. Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

Then the phone rang. It kept ringing. “Don’t answer it,” she whispered. “Please don’t answer it.” It kept ringing. I jumped up and followed myself into the other room. “Hello?” Nothing happened. The line was crackly, a long, long distance crackle. An ocean away. “Hello?” I said again.
“Hello! It’s you, you’re there.”

“Fiona. I don’t believe it. I can’t believe it. Where are you?”

“Why are you laughing? I’m in Mexico City. What’s so funny? Why are you laughing?”

From the bedroom, silence. The sound of blue tears weeping. It was over. In an hour Julia would be gone. In a week I’d be on the other side of the world, back in Fiona’s arms.
It was her shirt I recognised first, this faux African number she’d had for years. It was her favourite shirt. She was wearing it when she left, when I last saw her. My heart started thumping, but she was turned away from me and hadn’t seen me. Then she turned, and despite everything her face broke open to smile. She was brown and thin and had her hair short in a traveller’s cut. She looked the same and she looked different.

But it was the shirt which got me. After all this time, everything that had happened, after travelling halfway around the world with my heart upended inside me, there, getting closer as I loped down the inclined walkway at LAX was this tearfully familiar thing, this shirt that always had been and always would be Fiona. It was like seeing a gum tree in Greenland. She opened her arms with a big smile, and I fell into them, burying my face in her hair, in her familiar smell, in all the comfort and safety and years and history that was Fiona. It was as if I’d been away on a long, strange trip and at last, at last, I was home. I wanted to cry, just empty myself and cry.

It was a time of re-entry, of starting over. We had to try to pick up the pieces. We talked and talked, but it was about the future, not the past. My impulse was to tell her everything, to share the excitement of the last few months, to spill my stories all over her, but of course I couldn’t, because Julia was right there in the middle of just about all of them. I’d remember something, an incident, a person, and open my mouth to let it all pour out, then feel it close—of its own accord, it seemed—when the J-word reached the tip of my tongue. And I felt the same from her, an uncharacteristic reticence, a withholding of detail when she reached the man-word in her stories.

She’d done the tumble with a couple of Europeans in Central America, just a few little things, but in Mexico she’d found herself in something more serious. I’d crash-landed back into her life with my business, with my self-obsession, and it was knocked off-centre by the reminder that her heart wasn’t all in one place either. I might have left Julia behind, made my decision, but this wasn’t the bottom line of the equation. And it wasn’t just Mr Mexico. She had distance to cover to come back to
me. There was a sort of tenderness and respect between us—the old friendship, a softness to be seeing each other again, an out-of-synch excitement—but this was underscored, on her side at least, by hurt and anger coming out in mutated ways, as if she wasn’t just angry with me, but with herself, for giving me this second chance.

“That letter about Julia,” she said. “Why did you have to tell me all that? 23 pages! It was if you thought I’d be just as excited as you. As if you wanted to rub it in. What were you thinking?”

I pulled back, as if I’d been slapped, and heard my voice, meek, chastened, like a child upbraided. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I was just trying to tell you the truth.”

She kept walking, shaking her head. “The truth. When are you going to get over that? There’s more to life, you know, than just your pissy truth.” She almost spat the word in my face.

We did our talking on the run. We walked our talk. ‘The second arsehole of the world,’ Patrick White called LA, leaving us guessing which was the first. Hollywood. Venice Beach. Silver City. Flat, sun-scorched suburbs with pretty names, backdrops to our drama du jour. We pounded those unused pavements, deep in these personal conversations like characters in a Woody Allen film—like Woody and Woody’s woman of the year—huddled together, heads down, in earnest and urgent angst, trying to sort out what always, of course, never does get sorted out. They were always going somewhere, those characters, lost in gesticulation, the scene ending before they got there. Except we were on the other side of the continent, in the city where only mugs walk.

We talked so much we were actually mugged. One night in Hollywood we turned out of the bright lights of Santa Monica Boulevard into a dim lit side street and a car slid to a stop beside us. Two kids jumped out yelling, “Give us the money! Give us the money!” I looked around, like a hick blow-in, to see who they were talking to. I didn’t have to wait long to find out. The skinny one got Fiona up against a parked car with a pen knife at her throat. The fat one stuck something hard in my kidneys and yelled in my ear. “You wanna get shot? Don’t argue. Just do it. Do it! Empty your pockets. Give me your bag.”

Fiona had been in America longer than me. She knew a bit of the language. She argued. She said no. She stood her ground, she clung to her bag. The moment I gave the fat guy all my cash they ran back to the car and sped away. Fiona and I fell
together, shaking. She had good reason, she’d had a knife against her throat. I think I knew all along it was only the kid’s finger in my back, that he didn’t have a gun—but that didn’t stop a map of Africa spreading down my trousers as we scampered back to the bright lights at the top of the street. It was my second night in America. We hired our first Rent-A-Wreck the next day and cut the walking. After that we left town as fast as we could. We got the Green Tortoise hippie bus up to San Francisco, and from there we planned to head north into the Pacific Northwest for our Raymond Carver pilgrimage. It was about nine months since he died and I had the idea to do a tour of his sacred sites. I wanted to pay my respects, and Fiona humoured me and came along quietly. I suppose she figured we might as well do our talking sitting down.

Over the next weeks I got Carver out of my system—birthplace, graveyard, home, desk, chair, wife, a few locations from the poems and stories—and we ended up in Williams, a little one-store town in southern Oregon, where we were to mind the house of a potter Fiona had met in Central America. The potter was going to Greece to look for a husband, or happiness, or something—the next instalment of the trip which had taken her to Guatemala, where Fiona and she had shared the roof of a bus crossing the border into El Salvador. The potter was in her late thirties and looked a bit like Princess Anne, which I guess was as much a part of her story as anything—and relevant to ours. If she’d looked like Marilyn Monroe it’s pretty unlikely she would have had to go to Greece, or Central America, or anywhere to search for a husband. She almost certainly wouldn’t have been on top of that bus in Guatemala and that meant we almost certainly wouldn’t have ended up there on Cedar Flat Road with her dachshund and her daggy pots and our own unfolding drama.

The potter had this on-again, off-again thing happening with a guy in town, who in that classic guy way was happy to coast along with her as long as she didn’t force the issue—as long as she didn’t try to call what they had going a relationship, let alone try to discuss it—in which case it was off. He was an amazingly infantile guy, and I don’t mean that to single him out. Look at most adults and we’re kids, babies even, trying to stay upright in big people’s shoes. Just that with him it was painfully obvious. He was a toy boy. He had a funky old BMW coupe, an old Triumph road bike, a Chevy pickup, a boat or two—he owned or tinkered at anything
that wouldn’t talk back. And Princess Anne talked back, and this was probably why she travelled. To find someone to talk to. A man. A man who might, as we do, lead to a child. She came back from Greece alone, as far as I know, and might even still live there on Cedar Flat Road with her lumps of clay and her loneliness and no man and no child, and perhaps even the absurd on again-off again thing going with the guy in town. Or perhaps she did find a man, and perhaps, just before she no longer could, she did have a child. But that’s another story, or rather, her version of the same one.

It was in Williams that Fiona realised she was pregnant. Her period was late. Her breasts were tender and swelling and nausea made the explanation all but undeniable. Anyway, she knew the signs. Fiona was almost unstoppably fertile. Her body had found its way around almost every available contraception except abstinence—and even that didn’t last long. She just had to think about a bloke, she used to joke, and six weeks later she’d have to call up the clinic. She might as well have kept their number under a magnet on the fridge.

We calculated the baby had been conceived in the Jack London Hotel in Portland, where we’d stayed on our way north. The Jack was a dive, not so much Carver as Bukowski—and no-one we asked could offer any connection with its namesake. It was about as cheap as you can get without getting killed. We stood out in the lobby with our bright backpacks and Gortexes like kindergarten kids in a line up of murderers. Men with dramatic scars and freshly bruised faces made quick use of the front door and there were always a few others slumped in front of the TV with cigarettes burning down to their fingers. Every time we went to the toilet at night one of them seemed to have moved to the corridor, where he was leaning against the wall looking down at his shoes. Our room had three different bolts down the inside of the door and none of them worked. There was never paper in the toilets, and caught unawares the first time, searching, if not panicking, I found, stuffed down behind the cistern, a pair of men’s underdaks, size XXXL and soiled. When we told the guy from Rent-A-Wreck where we were staying he shrieked like a gay hairdresser. “Oh my God, let’s go skid row!”

It drizzled the whole time we were in Portland and the grey weather seeped into our moods. It was a dismal pitstop on a longer journey. We were only there to
rent a car and continue our trip north. We worked out it was there, during a grey afternoon, as I recall, of not very much passion, that for the first and only time Fiona and I came together to create life.

There was no doubt in our minds it was a boy, so we called him Jack. Despite his unsavoury beginnings and uncertain future Jack was a happy character, and during those weeks in Princess Anne’s palace tucked in the pine-clad hills of Oregon, we had fun with him. Everything little became Jack. We made biscuits and called the little ones Jackcakes. Out the back a foal was born and we called it Jack too. In bed I cupped Fiona’s breasts in my hands and listened at her belly for the digestive gurgles which I interpreted into Jackchat.

I was excited—we both were, despite everything. Hadn’t we talked often enough about having a baby? It’d been on our minds for years. And at last, for the first time, this was the real thing. We were clucky. We were both thirty-three years old, we’d been together two years and been friends several more. For a couple our age a baby was the next thing on the agenda. Back home pregnancies were bulging out all around us. We used to lie in bed in Bondi cuddled tight in each other’s arms imagining what it’d be like, picturing ourselves as parents, joining the dots to create a cartoon of family life. It was erotic. The titillation of talk. I still find this idea of shared family life arousing, which perhaps only indicates how little, really, I know about it.

We pictured a family life of teenagers, gawky Jack and his sister, the heartstopping Juliette. All our imaginary sons were called Jack. All tall and thin like us, with dark hair and hopefully Fiona’s laugh. Jack’d be a knock-kneed computer geek who hacked into the Pentagon after school and spent the rest of his time lying on his bed playing his guitar. He and Juliette had a band, called Byron Sunrise: The First Band In The Land. That was where we lived, of course, in the hills behind Byron. Jack played guitar and Juliette sang, in the spine-tingling voice of an angel who’d fallen to earth, for some reason, in our front room. On keyboards was Jack’s schoolfriend Simon, (pronounced See-mon because his mother was a French ex-hippie called Stephanie who’d married a bloke called Brian who had a nursery up the road). He and Juliette became this hot item, the talk of Byron High. He’d come around for dinner and they’d sit there exchanging glances and suppressing snickers,
until they finally escaped to her room, where they exploded in laughter as soon as she closed the door. Then everything would go very, very quiet until one of them had the bright idea to turn the stereo on, really, obviously loud and Fiona and I would give each other knowing smiles and take our tea into the living room and close the door and cosy up on the couch for the reruns of Fawlty Towers. But of course poor old Jack would never come to terms with his best friend preferring to shag his sister than work out chord changes with him and eventually it’d cause the demise of the band, and our retirement plan as well.

Okay, that’s all made up, that’s my fantasy, not Fiona’s, but what I’m trying to say is that this was the baby which under different circumstances we should have had no second thoughts about. But by the time he did come along, for us second thoughts were just the start. Suddenly, we had more—different—talking to do. With Princess Anne’s dachshund leading the way, we took our troubles on long walks up and down the resin-scented back roads of southern Oregon, trying to work out what to do.

That we would even consider allowing Jack to join us in the real world indicated that factors operating in contradiction to common sense had the better of us. We were an ocean away from home, beached in an alien country, trying to make a decision which would form the rest of our lives. We had no material security and all the emotional stability of an afternoon soap. We had no home or jobs to go back to. Only weeks earlier we’d both been in the arms of other lovers. Our relationship, even before they came along, was so troubled it was surely only something operating way below conscious choice which kept us glued together. It seems that the two people we were then were so out of touch with their own base needs and dignity, they had no choice but to follow impulses which were more like self abuse than self respect. And into this drama Fiona and I wrote another character, Jack.

On paper, Fiona should have been my perfect partner—we could have even passed for brother and sister—but things had never been simple between us. In relationship I lived in upheaval. Always, there was my uncertainty, my discontent, the confusion of my contradictory feelings. It was the unstable, moving ground on which I tried to build the house of love. And it wasn’t just Fiona. It was Julia, and all the others on what seems now to be the long list of women I’ve thought I’ve loved,
or tried to love or been in love with who now crowd my heart, a clamouring history of failure and despair.

I understand now that my relationships with women have repeatedly amounted to strategies of self-defence rather than anything to do with real consideration or respect. I was a warrior who never learnt the language of love. Only in my most disarmed moments could I see my lovers as anything other than my inevitable oppressor. Looking back, I can see my behaviour as the best a damaged man was capable of, but that doesn’t alter the effect of my confused and abusive extremes, and I can see many reasons why Fiona should have found something less perplexing— temporarily, at least—in the arms of another man.

For a long time my compulsion was to take full responsibility for our distress. But the fact speaks for itself that despite everything that had gone down between us Fiona didn’t walk away completely. And now she was prepared to trust me again. Why? What was she doing still hanging around with a man who had just written her a 23-page letter declaring his love for another woman and, as she put it, (I’m paraphrasing here) “doing everything but drawing a diagram to the wonders of her cunt”? I’m completely prepared to admit the destructive confusion I brought to that soap opera of upheaval, but what was it that trapped her in her ongoing role?

But this is all hindsight. Whatever reflection we might have given it since, at the time the best we could do was to continue acting out on the other our accumulated confusion. I’d fallen in love with Julia, and made vulnerable by those months with her, I think I was able to appreciate that Fiona might have felt something similar for Mr Mexico. I remember her huddled in the walk-in closet of the friends’ apartment where we camped in LA, the phone pressed to her ear as she stared at her feet and whispered intensely in single syllable Spanish. “Si. Si. No. No se. No se.” I don’t remember feeling jealous, just achingly sympathetic to her pain. My heart had opened to Julia and it remained open to Fiona, to our situation, to her situation, to everything. Including—especially including—the affirmation of love and of life dividing madly away in Fiona’s womb.

What was Fiona feeling? How is it for a woman as she faces the irrefutability of a pregnancy which, to say the least, comes at an imperfect time? Is any pregnancy ever completely unwanted? Whatever a woman’s ‘better judgement’ tells her, her body is pumping mind-altering mood enhancers into every cell to prepare her for
motherhood. Picture Fiona, aged thirty-three, several terminations already behind her, ripe, ready, succulent for impregnation, her body imploring her to go the full term, give birth, suckle and nurture and mother. What must this be like, this hormone-enriched compulsion to continue? Men face challenges specific to our gender which I would guess a woman can never fully appreciate. Conversely, can a man ever appreciate the vulnerability and surrender—and strength—required in pregnancy? Most men, to different degrees, are simply numb to themselves. We are highly evolved to ignore, deny and overwhelm our feelings. It is fundamental to the job of being the men our culture asks us to be. Perhaps it is only in chronic illness or following a serious accident that a man would have to be so answerable to and responsive to his body as a woman’s asks hers to be in pregnancy. And even then the outcome and imperative is so vastly different. Without too idiotically stating the obvious, it must be in pregnancy that a man is most biologically unable to understand what it is to be a woman.

Practically, however, the reasons to give Jack a miss lined up from every side. But this didn’t provide a clear route through our confusion. As I remember it, we didn’t fight or argue. Instead, our attempts to resolve ‘the Jack matter’ repeatedly devolved to silence and resigned affection. Perhaps the years of indecision and domestic distress, not only with each other, but before each other, had simply exhausted us. Were we crazy even considering this child? Probably, but our indecision seems to indicate that we wanted that baby, despite everything. We were ready to take the risk with the imperfect reality of our situation. Whatever his inauspicious beginnings, Jack was the child we were being offered and the urge to parent meant we would provide for him as best we could.

Whatever the reasons, by the time Fiona left Oregon we had resolved—more or less—that, having written Jack into our little drama, he’d stay.

Having decided this, several options were available to us. We could have made the trip to New York to continue my search for Raymond Chandler’s letters and, almost immediately, headed home. It says even more about our situation that we didn’t. Instead, I stayed in Oregon and Fiona, propelled eastward by her Round-the-World ticket, continued on to New York alone. This adds to my confusion now. We seemed
to be taking the pregnancy, the imminent arrival of Kingpin Jack, not all that seriously.

The only explanation I have is the complete converse of our blind instinct to reproduce—at age thirty-three we were young enough for the end of our childbearing possibilities to still be out of sight over the horizon. We were yet to crest the hill and, however it happens, realise a view of our likely future. Jack, we seemed to think, wasn’t our last chance. In fact, I know this was the case. We weighed up Jack’s pros and cons as if he was a purchase. “Maybe it’s the wrong time. Maybe we should wait and...” And what? Start the game of life all over again when it suited us better? What this says about our mentality towards pregnancy and childbirth shocks me as an older man. The whole sacred, ageless business was devalued to the status of a commodity. And I find it even more alarming that I can’t say categorically I wouldn’t resort to the same logic of convenience should it suit me again in the future.

At any rate, I stayed in Oregon and Fiona continued on to New York. From there she planned to visit friends in Europe, stop over in Asia, and finally drag her weary bones and swelling belly back home—except, of course, we didn’t have a home and would have to find one. When she left we expected that we wouldn’t set eyes on each other again until Sydney six weeks or so later. But we’d done our arithmetic and we had a plan. In London she would confirm the pregnancy. By the time we both got back to Sydney she’d still be less than twelve weeks. It was cutting it fine, but the weeks apart would help us resolve our decision either way. And if we decided that Jack was best left as a brief, unrealised memory—well, we knew the number to call.

As it happened, only two weeks after Fiona left Oregon for New York I organised a flight, cadged a lift to the nearest airport and followed. I might like to think, perhaps, that I came to my senses and understood that my place then was at Fiona’s side. But it wasn’t that way, of course. I’d stayed on as Princess Anne’s caretaker thinking it would be a convenient opportunity to chill out and try to clamber off the emotional roller coaster I’d been on over the previous months. I wanted to pause, in that most soothing and therapeutic of ways, and spend some time at a desk. But as it happened the accumulation of contradictions I’d chosen to stay in Oregon and try a little better to understand rose up from the page and grabbed me by the throat. I panicked and reached out for the most immediate comfort I knew. I
called Fiona to tell her I was coming over. “Fantastic,” she said. “I feel ratshit. I need you. I really need some support.” By the time I arrived there was no doubt. She couldn’t eat in the mornings. She had a belly, a little belly. She’d even started wearing a bra. She was pregnant. Sure as babies.

We had a few days together before she moved on to London. We wandered the city feeling homesick and uncertain of our future, and finally caught the subway to the World Trade Centre, where Fiona was to get the airport bus to Newark. It was mid-afternoon on a weekday. The train was late and we were late and the bus was late and we stood on the pavement hanging onto each other and crying. It was hot and humid and Fiona was feeling sick and we were on the wrong side of the world saying goodbye yet again.

It was crazy. Terrible. We were supposed to be in some cool room with a soft breeze lifting the curtains as I rubbed her belly with essential oils and dolphin music tinkled in the background. Instead, this. Fiona heaved herself up the steps of the bus and found her window and as she disappeared into the honking traffic of lower Manhattan she turned and waved like a frightened refugee. But our final decision was made. We’d be parents sometime in the new year.
But that, of course, wasn’t the end of the story. In London Fiona found she couldn’t get into a clinic because Margaret Thatcher had closed them all down. It was only in Amsterdam that she got to see a doctor, and she was told she was eleven weeks—a month more than we’d thought. This was when the real agony started.

After Fiona left I stayed with a woman called Katrina, out in Brooklyn at Flatbush on the F line, almost all the way to Coney Island. It was from Katrina’s that the phonecalling happened. Katrina was an artist, the friend of a friend of Fiona’s, and she had her own angle on this whole business. Between them, Katrina and Princess Anne had the thirtysomething single woman story covered—one gradually, the other suddenly. Princess Anne had herself established with her daggy pots and her doggy dog and her push-me, pull-me thing with her man-boy in the resin-scented hills of southern Oregon. She did nothing fast, she was gradual on legs. Katrina, meanwhile, was the walking definition of sudden. She didn’t know the meaning of slow.

Before I met her Katrina had been married to Frank, an Episcopalian minister. For ten years they’d lived in the South Bronx, ministering to a community who were almost all intravenous drug users, crack addicts, AIDS sufferers or their families, friends and neighbours—about as far from the bucolic quiet of southern Oregon as America could get. In 'South', Katrina had seen it all. It was a war zone, and she warned me, very, very clearly not to venture there alone. For ten years she had worked alongside Frank as the preacher’s wife, the woman the women came to, the wives and mothers and daughters who had nowhere else to go. She was as integral to the community as the one-stop welfare shop. Then, without warning, as we do, Frank had gone off with some young thing and Katrina was left, very suddenly, stunned, single and thirty-six. I wandered into her life a couple of years later, holed up in Flatbush, trying to get on with her life.

Katrina was an outlaw, an outsider, an American swimming against the system. She smoked and drank and spoke her mind. She wrote free-form poetry which made no sense to me and did weird things with colour fields in her bedroom at all hours of the night. Her fridge held little else except a bottle of vodka in the freezer and her
ciggies in the door so she wouldn’t smoke so many. If she hadn’t been in New York, she probably would have been institutionalised somewhere, mad, hidden from view. The older she got the less likely it was her life would approach anything vaguely resembling a family unit.

She had three cats, one of whom was twenty-one years old and had suffered a stroke three weeks before I arrived, which left her blind. Her name was Consuela, and she was, or used to be, all white, but I called her Ray Charles all the same. The other two were like a couple out of West Side Story. The male was a stud who strutted about pissing in every corner, the female stuck her leg in the air and licked herself provocatively, one eye on any unknown man in the room. Katrina, for whom housework was never a high priority, kept their kitty litter in the hall beside the front door and the stench hit me like a hammer between the eyes every time I turned the key and entered.

Her apartment was on the ground floor of what probably used to be, about the time of the Marx Bros, an ornate middle class building. Flatbush then was solidly Jewish and fashionable. Woody Allen was brought up a couple of blocks away. But by the time I got there it was pretty rough. Cars from a private security service cruised like sharks, paid for by the local chamber of commerce and residents of the leafy side streets. And by then the area had become a northern outpost of the Caribbean. Except when Katrina and I went out together I was the only white face on the street. Everyone else was Haitian, or Dominican, beautiful people with massive lips and colourful clothes and attitude. Miles Davis said in an interview, “There's one thing white cats cain't never get—attitude.” In Flatbush I knew exactly what he meant. It was barely America—or perhaps it was completely America. The melting pot. The women were gutwrenching, the men awesome.

It was summer and music poured from every door. Fat-arsed security guards with guns in open holsters wobbled back and forth at the front of the supermarket and vendors sold shaved ice confections on the street corners. Big black women in garish sarongs squeezed plantains and picked through salted fish in the grocery store. The babies slung over their backs watched me from soft brown eyes, the little girls' plaits so tight I could see the white line down the middle of their scalp. I fell in love about twenty times every time I went round to buy milk. I was sure it was only a matter of time before I got beaten to a pulp for staring.
When I arrived I was scared to walk around at night, even one block from the subway to Katrina's apartment, but with her beside me I strolled out confidently into the cool early hours. For Katrina, who was battle-hardened from her years in South Bronx, this was the ‘burbs. I began to feel safe. Then one night there was a knife fight on our corner. The ambulance screamed up the street splashing red light through our windows. A block away old women were getting raped, youths shot, cars pillaged. A crack dealer did business in our foyer. “If you see him at it, tell him to get the fuck out,” Katrina said. “Oh yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

My relationship with Katrina was one of those opaque situations life throws at us. Culturally and socially I felt like an alien in her company, in her small American ways, her habits, attitudes, assumptions about life. Yet she opened her house and made me welcome and I don’t know how I would have coped without her support during that time. Had things been different I think she would have liked to get involved with me. But as things were it was never going to happen, so we were that tricky, always slightly unrealised thing—friends of the opposite sex. If I’d been a woman we could have hugged and kissed and slopped around however we saw fit. But because I was a man the boundaries were never quite clear. A question mark hung over us and I never felt completely at ease. This only added to the out-of-synch dischordance I seemed to live in at the time.

Katrina couldn’t believe what Fiona and I were doing. She lectured me in her gravelly smoker’s voice. “Amigo, I can’t but feel you guys are in the makings of a terrible tragedy. Just get on that big bird and go to Holland and tell her you love her. That’s all you gotta do. Finito. End of story. The rest will take care of itself. Just jump in that fucking river and start swimming. You don’t know what’s around the bend. No-one does. Don’t worry about the rent. Don’t worry about a job. Don’t worry about your careers. Stop thinking of yourselves. Think of all the people in the world who can’t have a baby. All the people who want a baby but haven’t got one. Think of the baby. Think of the amazing gift you’re being offered. So what if you don’t know if you love each other enough? What’s enough anyway? Who ever knows that? Look at yourself. You will be one great daddy. You will see that kid and suddenly your life will have meaning. Not only your life, but the whole world. That
baby will look up into your eyes and suddenly this whole fucking mess will make sense."

She said this almost in one breath, took a hard drag of her cigarette, and breathing smoke, opened her arms to me. “C’m’ere,” she said, and enfolded me in one of our unclear, question mark hugs.

But Katrina was dispensing opinion from the other side of an invisible line. She was all but sure she would never have kids and Fiona and I had yet, in our minds, to cross that frontier. The phone was in her bedroom. So, while Katrina sipped vodka and smoked and swung silently in the other room to her fave album of the time, the Fine Young Cannibals’ *She Drives Me Crazy*, which she played incessantly, driving me crazy, I sat on the edge of her bed, and stared at the lino between my feet with her phone pressed to my ear.

(At the time I was stuck on Lou Reed’s album *New York*, particularly the song *Great Adventure*. ‘You know what my good wife said to me. She said, Lou, Lou, Lou, this is the start of the great adventure.’ One day wandering around Brooklyn, I passed a corner store called the Great Adventure Grocery. I mentioned this on the phone to Fiona. She laughed, that low, melting laugh. “What did they have on the shelves? Babies?”)

Constantly, we said we loved each other. Back and forth across the Atlantic. I needed to hear her voice, to share my fears. I needed to tell her how I lay in bed that morning, my heart crashing, listening to the guys out the back dump bricks from a wheelbarrow, to the trains rumbling close by, to the woman in the apartment behind squabble with her kids, say, “What you mean, you don’ wan no Corn Flakes this mornin? What else you goan have if you doan have Corn Flakes? Caviar?”

I needed to tell her I was scared, I’d panicked, I wanted to wake up and feel her beside me and ease my fears with skin and contact and her low notes of reassurance.

“Hey,” she said. “Nothing’s changed. It’s only your mind. Write it down, send me a letter. I love you, I wish you were here, you should be here. You’re okay, I’m okay, keep breathing, relax.”

I closed my eyes, elbows on knees, smelling the soiled kitty litter and Katrina’s cigarette from the other room. A car horn, a shout, a gunshot, silence.
She called.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Terrible, I...” She cried, and I waited, the receiver hard against my ear.

Consuela mewed at the door and entered, bumping into things. The window was open for the night breeze. It stroked my cheek and reached down inside the neck of my t-shirt. On it was the exhausted silence of night in New York City.

She tried to speak.

“Don’t talk,” I said. “I love you. We’ll get through this. It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. I feel horrible. I feel heavy and bloated and sick. I’m alone. Why aren’t you here? There’s no-one to talk to. I’m really scared. I have to terminate now, or we have it. And I don’t want another abortion. All I’ve had is fucking abortions. I can’t do it again, I just can’t. I want this one to be a baby. But I don’t know if we should. I don’t know if this is the right baby to have. It’s just such a mess. Why did you fall in love with Julia? Why did she do this to us? Why can’t we just be content with each other and get on with things, have a fucking baby like everyone else and...”

I’d try to reassure her.

“Hey, shh...look, what do we save by not having it? Eighteen months, two years? We both want a baby. It’s bad now, but we’ll back home before long and get set up. We’re just scared. Lots of people have babies in worse circumstances than ours.”

“But you don’t even know if you want to stay with me. How can I do this if you don’t even know that? What sort of security is that for me? Of course I’m scared. You’ve got no idea what it’s like, being pregnant, being half pregnant like this. This isn’t some great joyous thing, it’s torture, It’s fucking torture.”

I heard myself speak, quiet, measured, purposeful. “Listen, that’ll pass. I love you. I want to stay with you. Fly home. I’ll see you there. We’ll get a flat, we’ll have the baby, we’ll love it, suddenly it’ll all make sense.”

“Him.”

“What?”

“Him. Jack.”

“Yeah, Jack. Of course.”
“What about Julia?” she said quietly. “How do you know you want to be with me, and not with her?”

“Julia’s over. We did it. We finished. It’s you now.”

She was silent. Consuela curled herself around my ankles. I touched her and she jumped. The next day she called again. I moved my feet against the lino, shifted on the bed, held my hand over my heart, felt my breath shallow, quick.

“Fuck it, let’s just do it. We’ll never be ready. Let’s have it. I say yes.”

Afterwards I went into the main room. Katrina was curled under the covers, the light from the TV reflecting in her face. I sat on the end of the bed. She glanced across.

“Only ten minutes to go. Okay?”

I nodded. I looked at the TV, then down at my feet. They were skinny and bony. I kept looking at them. They were the feet that had brought me here, carried me around for 34 years, got me into this, would carry me on, lead me to my grave. I looked up. Katrina was watching me, not the TV, holding her cigarette up near her mouth, no obvious expression on her face.

I shrugged. “Well...it looks like I’m going to be a father.”

“Hang on,” she said. She slid herself forward off the bed and took two steps forward to the TV and switched it off. She walked into the kitchen. I heard the freezer door open. My hands hung in my lap. I turned them over, examining them.

She came back. She put the bottle of vodka and two glasses down on the table. I was waiting for her to pour. I looked up. She was standing there.

“Get up.”

I stood, feeling the smile on my face.

“A father!” she threw her arms around my neck. “How about that? A fucking father!” She pulled herself away and holding onto my shoulders, planted a kiss on my lips. ”That, dude, is but definitely the right way to go.”

Then, this. Katrina knew before I did. “So, what are you doing tonight? What are you doing to celebrate?”

“Nothing. Having dinner with a friend of a friend from Australia.”

Katrina narrowed her eyes at me. “Yeah? Where?”
“Where? At her place, up in the West 70s somewhere.”
“Her place?”
“Come on, I’ve never met the woman.”
“Yeah? And what is that supposed to prove?”

I caught the subway into Manhattan in the last light of day. It'd been raining and the air was wet and heavy. Beneath Brooklyn Bridge the East River shone silver in the dusk. Barges made their slow way up and down the river. The towers of Manhattan rose jagged and dark against the grey sunset. I looked around the other people in the carriage and felt confident and happy and sure of myself. I could feel the smile on my face. At last it was settled. A father! I was going to be a father! I had a big, warm ball of love for Fiona in my heart which spread through me and radiated out into gooey love for everything and everybody around me.

And into this field of warm fuzzy love wandered the woman without a name. I knew I’d spend the night with her. I had no idea even what she looked like. I’d talked to her once on the phone. She was Jewish, I knew that much from her name and her voice. She had a good laugh and over the phone seemed relaxed and easygoing. A good sort. That was enough. I was passing into another stage of manhood and through her, with her, I would farewell the life I was leaving behind.

How can I explain this now? Another massive betrayal. On the night Fiona decided to be the mother of my child I ‘celebrated’ in the arms of another woman. Why? What was I thinking? What drove me? It was a feeling I remember from only once or twice in my life. It was a sureness, a certainty, a rare lack of self-questioning, a conviction so unfamiliar the possibility didn’t enter my mind that I could be doing the wrong thing. Is this something other men, other women, know? I had no doubt that what I was doing was for the best—for me, Fiona and the other woman, the good sort—for everything, everyone, the Universe in totality. It was preposterous, manic perhaps, bi-polar, some sort of hormonally-driven, wrong-minded, if well-intentioned megalomania.

I got off the subway at 66th Street and turned uptown. She lived way down the west end near the river. I underestimated how far it was, and how long it’d take. It started raining and as I slogged into the downpour a wave of despair washed through me. In an instant my mood plummeted. So much for certainty. And so quick!
was I doing there, in a foreign city, starting from scratch with yet another stranger, the same old questions and the same tired answers of potted, introductory biography? I wanted to be back home with Fiona, embarking on our new life, on the great adventure. I was transported back to the black brick flats off Bondi Road, half a click from the southern Pacific Ocean on the far distant other side of the world. I remembered Fiona arriving home from work on wet nights, how I’d have dinner on the stove and hear her skip up the stairs, and her key in the lock, and I’d wipe my hands and fling open the door and take her in my arms. It all rushed back to me. I could see the fog on the windows from the boiling pasta, the design in the veneer on the kitchen table, the picture rails and ceiling rosette, even the ugly brown lino on the floor. I could all but smell the rich tomato sauce. I remembered how cold her bum was when I wrestled my hand down past her belt to hold her against me, babbling with kisses and happiness to see her.

My heart lifted. It’d be like that when we started again, but different. It’d be better. We’d have a reason for things. We’d have a rudder. My heart filled with warmth and anticipation. How much at that moment I loved Fiona! Finally everything was going to be all right. Our future shone warmly, meaningfully on the horizon. I bent into the rain of Manhattan and felt a smile spread across my face. Whatever good intentions I had were out of control, a skin boat slewing about in the wild seas of fear and hope, hope and despair.

It didn’t work, of course. How do people do this, these nights of stranger-sex? Every time I've tried, it seems, it's gone belly-up, passion suffocated by lack of emotional connection. Ms Upper West Side and I were two people pumping up against each other on yet another dislocated night on the road. I talked her into letting me stay but within minutes she was weeping into my collarbone, her tears a cold awakening to our situation, short-circuiting my intent. “It’s so sad,” she wept. “It’s so sad.” And she was right. We did spend the night in each other’s arms, but that was all. So sad, so sad.

It took less than a day. My heart, still so full of unfamiliar certainty, held me in that zone of trust where I could do no wrong. I was back in some sort of infantile state of union with Fiona. It was not on the radar that she might think differently than me, be
a different person from me. I said something. I asked about dates. Could there be any
doubt? Was the baby definitely mine?

There was a silence. A fucking, great big long trans-Atlantic silence. I wanted
to reach down the line and grab back the words.

“I don’t believe you said that. After all this time, that you can still think that.”

“I was just asking. It just occurred to me.”

“Don’t you remember anything? Don’t you remember me getting my period in
LA? That’s why...”

“Why what?”

She was weeping openly. “How can you even think that? We’re talking about
having this baby, and you come out with that. I don’t believe you. I don’t believe
you.”

“Fiona...”

“No, fuck off. I’ll call you back. I don’t...”

And she hung up.

She called back the next day, came right out with it.

“I’m having the abortion. That last call...it...it was... If you’d just looked at a
calendar you would have known the dates are right. But you couldn’t even do that.
The fact you were even thinking... if there’s not even that basic trust there, what can
we hope for? We’d be crazy to have it.”

“Fiona, it was a misunderstanding. I wasn’t accusing you. It just occurred to
me. Look, if we were together none of this would have happened. We would have
sorted it out in minutes.”

I kept telling myself, she’s pregnant, she’s emotional, she’s alone over there.
This is fear and panic talking, not her. She's making herself a victim of our situation.

“Fiona?”

She sniffed up her tears. “I don’t know. I don’t know. I’ll call you back. I need
to think.”

The following morning she rang again. She was definite. “I’ve made up my
mind. There’s too many uncertainties. We have to go back and solve them. Then, if
they’re solved, if we’re still together, then we can have a baby. But this one...
pssht...this one has to go.”
Pssht. Just like that. It has to go. I felt my voice go cold. “If that’s what you want, Fiona. It’s your decision.” I hung up. Who was playing the victim now? I stayed on the edge of the bed, staring at the design in the lino between my feet. It was a simple over-and-under factory design but it seemed to me then incredibly complicated, indecipherable. It was completely beyond me. I don’t know how long I was there, thinking about everything, about this mess, about Fiona, about Bondi, the surf rolling in, about Julia, the river, the night at Digger’s, all of this, everything, when I saw Katrina standing at the door. I looked up, aware of the tears streaming down my cheeks. She came over, her shoulders hunched in that way she had, and sat down, her arm around me.

We took it down to the wire. I had the times worked out. Fiona had a booking at the clinic in Amsterdam for Wednesday morning. At our last call on Monday she was definite—the decision was made. No Jack. If I was going to try to change her mind I had to get a call through before she set off for the clinic on Wednesday morning. Or better, the previous evening Amsterdam time, say 6pm, Tuesday in New York. That day I walked the streets waiting for clarity to drop from the skies.

I wasn’t even sure I wanted to talk her out of it. I wasn’t sure of anything. In New York there were babies everywhere. The Great Adventure Grocery was doing a fast trade. In Prospect Park I sat by the lake watching a pair of swans trail a line of cygnets behind them. A family of ducks floated nearby. A little Chinese boy hooked ham on the end of a stick and held it over the water, peering hopefully. A young couple with a stroller parked beside me. Couples strolled arm in arm and smooched on the grass. A little black boy cycled round and round on a motorised plastic tricycle. His brother and a friend hit a tennis ball to each other.

A black guy in a pink shirt with gentle African dance music tinkling from his little blaster strolled by. Two black women danced beside him, one with a garishly-coloured sarong around her, the other in a sober, long grey skirt. They moved like water, graceful and serene, with smiles on their faces. He handed the blaster to one of the women, stepped over to the nearest bush, undid his belt, flopped out his whammer and urinated. No-one batted an eyelid. He zipped up and rejoined the others. A bunch of black kids wandered round trying to hawk fireworks. Three Puerto Rican guys played frisbee with a small kid in huge basketball boots. A pair of
white kids threw a football to each other. The little black kid on the motorised three-wheeler continued to go round and round. A Chinese lady limped past carrying a child’s red plastic chair.

So many kids. Families, love, romance. Parenting and childhood everywhere. Everything brought me back to Fiona and the baby.

One more call.

I was aware of relief rising through me. I didn’t want her to change her mind. But she was crying, softly, gulping little sips of air between sobs. “You know, I used to believe in your dreams. Then I realised they were only dreams. And that’s all they’d ever be.”

I stopped and listened to the long distance hum on the line. I imagined the phone line like an electric cable, going down the beach at Coney Island and into the sea and running along the ocean floor all the way to Holland. Suddenly, thinking of it like this, she was a long, long way away. I felt sobered, suddenly silenced, as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over me. I was aware of the muffled traffic noise through the window, and voices and laughter and shouting, and the sharp pungent smell of the kitty litter bringing me back to reality.

“You’ve got to believe in dreams,” I said. “What else have you got? The current account deficit?”

She chuffed, slightly. “I’ve got an appointment at an abortion clinic at nine in the morning.”

With that my own tears came down and I was blubering. “Fiona, please? Wait another day. I’ll come over. I’ll get on a plane. All it needs is one of us to be certain. That’ll tip the balance. We’ll never regret it. No matter what happens, we won’t regret it. No-one says they regret it.”

She didn’t answer.

“This is stupid. This is terrible. I’ll call you in the morning, okay?”

I put the phone down and rested my elbows on my knees and as I had a dozen times since Fiona left New York, stared at the lino between my feet. I laid my hand over my heart, feeling it pump.

*All these hearts reaching out towards each other.*

*Oh my God, oh my God, what pain they cause.*
She called one last time. "I'm going to keep the appointment."

And here I am now, all these years later, writing this.
9. Irvine

I left New York a few days later. I had a Driveaway all the way to the West Coast with a twenty-three-year-old college kid in a Honda Civic wagon. We went the long way. Five thousand miles, twelve days. Nashville. Memphis. Gracelands. The Grand Canyon. In Las Vegas I called Fiona’s brother-in-law in Irvine, CA. This was where I would stay, in Orange County, south of L.A. My arrangement with Fiona hadn’t changed. We’d meet in Sydney when we both got back. She’d keep to her ticket, I’d keep to mine. But her brother in law got on the phone and said, “Hang on, there’s someone here wants to talk to you”—and the future changed yet again.

The next day we pulled up outside the condo and a figure appeared at the balcony and called down through the eucalypts. Eucalypts. Almost home. I shaded my eyes. All I could make out was her shirt, the same old shirt. Like a gum tree in Greenland.

Again, we clung to each other, again I buried myself in her hair. To touch and smell. The reassurance of the body. If we’d had that two weeks earlier I’m pretty sure Jack would be with us now. Fiona’s brother in law and his girlfriend went off to work in the morning and we got right down to it. Every time I arrived anywhere near LA it seemed Fiona and I had to hunker down for a serious debrief. Only this time we didn’t walk. We hung around in the condo giving the woman sunning herself by the pool something for free. How did Raymond Chandler describe the women of southern California? ‘Smiles like gashes and skin like burnt oranges.’ In a cocktail dress.

The abortion had been ghastly. She told me this in New York. I’d called her that evening. She was bleeding heavily and groggy with painkillers. It’d shocked her, the worst she’d had, she said. She thought she knew the ropes, but this one was different. As if all the indecision and uncertainty had been caused by that baby, by Jack—can I even suggest this?—clinging on so tight. As if he knew he was meant to stay.

That was why she’d changed her ticket. She couldn’t face the thought of any more travel. Despite everything, because of everything, there was only one person
she wanted to see. The one person who could share, as much as he ever could, this trauma, this grief. And as soon as I saw her, it welled up in me. My body remembered it. I’d pushed it down, forced myself to get on with things, but her body, her smell, her physical presence opened the pain in me. Our baby had died. We’d killed our baby. What had we done? Her breasts were still swollen and sensitive, her waist thick, and she still wore a pad. It was far from over yet. We had both done it before, but not with each other, and it’d never felt like this. This time we knew what we’d done was wrong. Everything about this was wrong. How did we get into this? What had happened?

After the blood, the tears. For two days we clung to each other and wept.

I played a role. The man who has wronged. The guilty party. And perhaps I was. Of course I was. There was one story from New York I never told her. The guilty party. Was I? I still don’t know. Nothing I’d done was to deliberately hurt her. Perhaps there was just some set of rules I’d never learnt, about what was right and what was wrong. Perhaps this was some secret other men knew, and that’s why they’re married with kids and I’m not. Perhaps it was the secret of lying, of knowing the measure of acceptable truth.

Fiona had stayed in the condo before she met me in LA three months earlier. All her stuff was still there. She scrabbled in a bag and threw a thick, ripped envelope in my lap. I recognised my own handwriting. My heart squeezed cold. The letter again. That fucking letter.

“Can you think for a second how I might have felt getting that? Can you put yourself in my shoes for even one second?”

*Put yourself in my shoes.* The title of a Raymond Carver story. So many Raymonds so close to home. Raymond Terrace, he’d drop by soon.

“You can’t, can you? It’d been months—*months*—since I heard from you. I was so excited. I wanted to savour it. I bought a drink and went to Pershing Square so I could sit in the sun and read it. What were going to say? What have you been doing? When are you coming over? You don’t seem to have any idea that I loved you. I loved you, you bastard.

“And as soon as I opened it I felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. I wanted to be sick. I had to keep wiping my eyes so I could read. I just thought, I don’t know
what I thought. No, I do know what I thought. I thought, I knew this would happen. I knew you’d do something like this, because that’s the sort of weak, gutless shithead you are.”

She grabbed the pages out of my hands. “Dear Fiona, Darling Fiona, Please don’t be angry. I’ve got a confession to make...” She snarled the words like barbed wire. “Go on, you read it. Read it now.”

She threw the pages back in my lap and I sat before her, head bowed, a one-man audience for a soliloquy. The big scene. The climax. Feet planted, tears streaming down her cheeks, spittle flying, arms all over the place. It was time for revenge, survival, recovery.

"This whole time, it’s just been wasted. Why did you have to come over? Why did I ever agree to see you again? Why did you have to get me pregnant? Why didn't we just go ahead and have the baby? None of this would be happening if we'd just had the baby.”

I stood. The letter fell to the ground between us. I reached towards her, tried to take her in my arms. She pushed me away. “No! Don’t! Leave me alone!”

A cat picking its way around the pool stopped in its tracks and swung around with big, startled eyes. Two pm on the pebblecrete. Scaring the animals, a show for the locals. The burnt orange native in dark glasses leant on her elbow and cocked an ear.

“You don't know what it's like. You're a man, you can’t. It's fifteen years since I had that first abortion. If I'd had that baby he'd be fourteen now. And what have I got instead? I'm thirty four, I’ve had six abortions, about twenty-five shitty relationships with pissweak men who keep running off with other women, I’ve got a job I hate, a Visa bill I'll still be paying off when I'm fifty-five, one well and truly fucked holiday, and a ticket backwards to my old life with my latest fucked choice of a man who's fallen in love with some ten year old schoolgirl from fucking Grafton. How do you think I feel? I hate you. I just fucking hate you. I wish I'd never set eyes on you. And I certainly wish you'd had the decency to just leave me alone and not come over here to...to..."

She came at me with both fists. Her eyes were red, her cheeks were wet. I took my glasses off and held them behind my back and let her pummel my chest.

"...to get me pregnant again so that I...so that I..."
She collapsed into me, sobbing and wailing, choking on her tears. This was the other role. The man who is there to hold his woman. The man of no emotion. A man who knows what is and isn’t acceptable truth.

I folded her in my arms and tucked her head in under my chin and looked over it. The afternoon was washed out and lifeless. The foothills over beyond the I-5 were treeless and dusty. Only the irrigated orange trees were really green, and they had a fine coating of dust over them too. The sky was a pale heat-leached blue. The only thing which was really blue was the swimming pool which glittered and shimmered like a deadly poison. Beside it our one-woman audience was sitting up with her back to us, all ears. She wouldn’t have to go inside for the afternoon soaps today.

Two gum trees grew outside the swimming pool fence. The nearest branch was just out of reach beyond the balcony railing. I stared at the red veins of the leaves and their purple stalks and the white skin and peeling bark of the trunk. The hot, dry fragrance taunted me of home and I yearned to be there in the country I knew, to be back on the right side of the world from this country where everything seemed to have gone wrong.

I held Fiona in my arms and smelt and felt her and suddenly I knew what was right and what was wrong. And this was wrong—traipsing around this foreign country, disposing of a baby because it was convenient, causing such hurt to the woman I was supposed to love. I was sick of this. I wanted a home and someone to love in it. I wanted life to be simple, straightforward and honest. I was overwhelmed with love for Fiona. It washed through me like a wave wiping clean the sand on a beach. Tears burned my eyes and the gum trees and the orange groves and the distant dusty hills were washed away.

I leant my cheek down in Fiona’s hair and rocked her like a baby. She gulped back breaths and her gurgles subsided. Her arms were crunched against me, her elbows and wrists hard into my ribcage. I breathed the soft reassuring smell of her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I love you and I’m really, really sorry."

I kept rocking. "But I've got a suggestion. I know what we should do."

"What?" Her voice was small and prickly, like a child's.

I moved her away from me so I could look her in the eyes. So she could look at me. She leant her head down, her chin against her chest. I lifted it, and bent down to look into her eyes.
"What?" she said again.

It was 2 July, 1989. We were flying back to Australia in two days time. The next morning we rode into Irvine with Fiona’s brother in law. There it was. The Ugly Duckling caryard of broken dreams. The bloke behind the counter had a polishing rag in his hand and sweat on his lip and hardly any hair.

"Only one condition. Two conditions. One. Cross the border into Mexico and the company's liability ceases. Two. Don't under any circumstances think you can get around Rule One."

He levelled his gaze at me first, and then at Fiona. We glanced at each other, put our signatures to the contract and bumped out of the lot and up onto the freeway and headed south, straight for Mexico.

It wasn’t the only contract I agreed to, or the only one I’d break. Fiona had wiped her tears and put steel in her voice. "If we do this I want Julia right out of our lives. No letters. No phonecalls. No nothing. Agreed?"

I nodded. I was exhausted. I wanted it over too.

She gave Mr Mexico a call and took herself off giggling to the balcony, where she muttered away to him in Spanish. She got off the phone and came to me on the lounge and cuddled into me. “He thinks it’s a good idea that we get married. And if we aren’t prepared to get married, we should break up.”

I held my tongue. This Hispanic dickhead. Who the fuck was he to pronounce on whether we should or should not do fucking anything? But I held my tongue. No-one was clean in this dungeon of dirty linen and she’d made her choice.
10. Tijuana

The first man looked like an undertaker. He was small and bald and didn't smile. There was one other couple in the waiting room. They were young, probably both under twenty. They watched as we entered and stood in the doorway. They were dressed in country clothes, the sleeves and legs on the man's suit too short, the woman's yellow dress just a bit too tight, as if it had fitted several years ago and now would have to do. After a moment of staring the man, the boy, leant into the inner doorway and said something and the small bald man came out in shirtsleeves and black tie and before he could say anything I blurted, "We want to get married."

He looked from me to Fiona and back to me and without saying a word gestured to two empty chairs along the wall. He waited until we sat then said, "Please. One moment," and turned and disappeared back into the inner room.

The young couple watched us from the opposite wall. I smiled. The boy dipped his head a fraction.

"It is hot outside?"

The girl watched and said nothing.

"Hot?" I said. "Si. You bet."

"Very hot," Fiona said. "Muy caldo."

The young man nodded and smiled. His girlfriend, or wife, or sister—no, she wasn't his sister—didn't say a word. She seemed very sad. Suddenly it occurred to me that they might be there to get an abortion. Perhaps the little bald man had knitting needles out the back along with the marriage certificates and embalming fluid.

I cleared my throat. "Are you, um, here to get married? I tapped the third finger on my left hand. "Matrimonial?"

The boy smiled and shook his head. He glanced at his companion, whose gaze had not left me for a moment.

"Not divorced!"

Again the boy smiled and shook his head.

"Divorcia," he said softly to the girl. Her eyes didn't move. They were deep dark wells of sadness. My God, I thought, they are here to get an abortion.
The undertaker came back with two forms. He laid them on the desk in front of us and pushed two biros on top of them.

I looked at the forms and laughed. At the top of Fiona's, in big letters, was printed SHE. On top of mine was HE. The little man was bending over about to explain something. He stopped and looked at me gravely.

"Sorry," I said. "Excuse."


He stood and held his pen in his hand. "Yes?"

The boy and girl watched in silence.

"Um, one thing," I said. "How much?"

The small man didn't move.

"Quanta cuesta," said Fiona.

"Quanta cuesta? Cinquenta cinco dolares. Fifty-five dollars."

Fiona looked at me. "Fifty-five dollars."

I looked at Fiona and up at the man. "Sorry, we haven't got that much. We can't afford that."

The man sighed. "How much?" he said.

The young couple watched in silence. I felt myself blushing.

"Um...twenty dollars?"


He stopped laughing. "Quarente cinco. Forty-five dollars."

"Forty-five? Sorry. We can't. We haven't got it."

Fiona went to say something. I put my hand on her arm.

"Thirty dollars. That's all we've got." I smiled, and glanced at the couple in the corner. They stared back.

"No," the undertaker said, and went to gather up the forms.

Panic poured into my heart. This was our wedding day. What did I think I was doing, haggling over bananas in Bali? The man disappeared into the inner room. I looked at Fiona. "We'll try somewhere else." We stood. The young couple watched. I made as much noise as I could with the chairs. I coughed. "Adios," I said to the couple. The boy bowed slightly and smiled. By now the man should have re-emerged with another offer. Hadn’t he been to Bali? That’s how it would have been there.
I felt my feet lead me out onto the street. The man didn't run out and stop us. I had Fiona's hand in mine. The smell and noise hit me. A man swerved on the pavement to avoid crashing into us. I kept walking, leading Fiona by the hand. When the pavement cleared I slowed so she could catch up.

"You okay? You mind?"

She shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I don't mind."

It was our wedding day. What did I think I was doing?

At the next place there wasn't anyone waiting which was just as well as there wasn't room for them to wait in. Above the door was a sign *Pasaportes/ Emigrationes*. It was repeated in an arc in gaudy letters on the front window. It could have been a tattoo parlour.

Inside was one tiny room with two straight-backed chairs, a low wooden ceiling, a big railway clock on the wall and a desk which took up most of the room. On the desk was an open newspaper and a tiny portable TV, and seated behind the desk leaning over the newspaper, not looking at the TV was a man with glasses and a wide thick moustache and a safari suit on. A hanging curtain obscured a stairwell leading to a room above.

As soon as our shadows entered the room he looked up with a smile plastered on his face. In the same movement he lowered the volume on the TV and pushed it away to the edge of the desk. He closed the newspaper and without turning put it on the stairs behind him. His smile didn't change. He gestured to the two chairs, placed one hand over the other on his blotter and leant back. We stood in front of him, still holding hands. How many times had he seen this? He must have known exactly why we were there.

"How much does it cost to get married?" Fiona asked.


"Would you take thirty? We haven't got much money."

He looked from her to me and back again. He raised his hands in the air. "All right. $30. Take a seat."

Fiona glanced at me and I looked at her and gulped loudly and shrugged and we pulled the chairs back and sat down. We kept our hands together under the desk.
The lawyer opened a drawer and took out two forms, the same as the undertaker had at the other office. He turned them around and pushed SHE across the desk to Fiona and slid HE to me.

Under the glass top of the desk were several postcards at irregular angles. I twisted my head to read them. Acapulco. The Acropolis. Las Vegas. While Fiona leant forward scratching at her form I examined the room. The lawyer watched me with the smile still half across his face. The newspaper he'd been reading had a full-page ad for *Batman*.

"*Batman,*" I said, tipping my head. The lawyer looked behind him, turned back and laughed.

I leant forward to see the little TV screen.
"What's on?"

Without looking up Fiona let out a little smirk.
"Is it a film?" I asked.


"The midday movie," I said.
"Yes. Movie."

Fiona shook her head.

I took up the pen and looked at the form. We had to give our names, addresses, nationalities, father's name and mother's name. Age. Nombre pasaporte. Autographa. I looked up.

"Do you do a lot of marriages?"
The lawyer shrugged. "Not a lot. Some."
"Americans?"


He made a round gesture in front of his belly.

I nodded, smiling. "Any Australians?"

He smiled. "You Australian?"

I nodded.

"You first Australians," he said.

"Really!" I said. "First? Primero?"

"Primero," he smiled.
Fiona cleared her throat and tapped my form. I caught the lawyer's eye. We smiled together.

I reached over the desk and introduced myself.

"Jose," he said, shaking my hand.

At the bottom of the form was a space for the witness's signature. Jose watched us and when we reached it he leant over and waved his hand above the paper.

"Don't worry. I have..." he gestured up the stairs behind him.

I took this to mean he had a witness waiting upstairs. I nodded. That was what I'd heard about Mexican weddings. But so far this was a mile off my expectations. I'd imagined a little whitewashed adobe chapel with a donkey hitched to a railing out the front and a wise old smiling priest waiting in front of the altar. The chapel would have a earth floor and a couple waiting at a pew along the side wall. The couple wouldn't speak English and they'd have terrible teeth and smile as we stared lovingly into each other's eyes and took our vows and then the priest would ask the man to get up and be the witness and we'd all grin wildly at each other and after I'd hugged Fiona I'd shake hands with the priest and then shake hands with the man and the priest's hand would be soft from being a priest and the man's hand would be hard and thorny from working in the fields. Then I'd go and shake hands with his grinning wife to be, already thickening at the waist, and she'd blush and everyone would laugh and keep grinning wildly and then we'd go outside into the sunshine in the village square and everyone sitting at the tables in the shade outside the taverna would stand and clap and cheer.

I suppose I saw it in a movie somewhere.

We filled in the forms and Jose explained the procedure. After he'd performed the ceremony he would issue us with a receipt and send the forms away to the state capital and in twenty-five Mexican working days we would receive our marriage certificate in the mail. He showed us the receipt. It was cheap and shoddily printed with a blue scroll border. MARRIAGE it said in big blue letters, with the price paid in pesetas. There was a space for our names to be typed in below. It looked like something you'd win at a fairground sideshow. “Number One Bullshit Artiste, Camooweal Rodeo.” Something like that.

As he held it up I couldn't help laughing. This was probably all we'd have to remember our 'marriage' by. This couldn't be for real, could it? Surely the marriage
certificate would never arrive. Australia was a long way from Mexico. Another world, another life. Surely we’d get home and this would only be a dinner party story, another notch in the belt of our wacky, unconventional lives. Is this what I thought? Is this what I thought at the time?

Jose typed our names on the forms and cleared his throat.
"Fiona Lynette..." he said.
"Um," Fiona said. "Lynette isn't my second name. My second name is Philips."
"Philips?" Jose stared at the form.
"Family name," I said. "Familio."
"Ah, familia." He shrugged it off. "I change later. Now... excuse me. My English is not good."
"No! It's good," we chimed together.
He looked embarrassed and carried on.
"Do you Fiona Lynette Philips, being of sound mind and body, take this man, Alan Close, to be your lawfully wedded husband to cherish and care for till death you do part?"
I squeezed her hand under the table.
"I do."
She gave me a long wet look.
He swivelled and asked me the same question. "I do," I said.
Fiona giggled.
José shrugged. "Well, I now pronounce you man and wife."
We beamed at each other. Number One Bullshit Artistes, Camooweal Rodeo.
"Can I kiss the bride?" I asked. He nodded.
I leant across to kiss her. I kept kissing her. José didn't watch. He typed his name and address on an envelope and took our $30 and slipped our sideshow receipt inside the envelope. We stood up and he stood up and we shook his hand. He kept the small half smile on his face, his mouth curled up just a little under his thick moustache. I stifled another laugh. He was about five feet two inches tall.

We took photos. We look like idiot, gullible tourists. And this is us getting married in Mexico, haw haw haw. Holding the wedding certificate aloft beside a painting of the Eiffel Tower on black velvet which José happened to have on his wall. All bright
colours, florals and checks. Fiona had her sunglasses on a string around her neck. I looked like Jerry Lewis in the old days. I was even still wearing the old straw pork pie hat. I’d forgotten that hat. I wore it for years, a bit of a joke, haw haw haw. With a shock I remember where I found it—some op shop in Adelaide with Nikki the year before. Circles decreasing, no escape.

The shot I snapped of Jose at his desk—the wedding desk—shows him with sad eyes and a kind smile, a Stalin moustache, epaulettes on his safari suit and very hairy arms. He could have been propped there by Central Casting. The streetwise local taking the dosh from the idiot gringos.

In the nearest restaurant we toasted our future with beer and burritos and hurried back to see if anyone had stolen the wheels from the Ugly Duckling. A street photographer with a donkey painted in zebra stripes grabbed us and posed Fiona sidesaddle on its back, wearing a huge sombrero with ‘Kiss me’ painted under its brim. I stood at her side with my chest out. More big smiles. And this is us on the zebra, haw haw haw. A fake photo on a fake animal after a real wedding. He mounted the photo in a souvenir envelope. Underneath was written: If you don’t like this picture, blame the jack ass.

Our trip to Mexico lasted about three hours. No-one had stolen the wheels from the car. We left the country about two hours closer to divorce than we’d been when we entered it.

The following day we flew back to Australia, a married couple.
11. Lamrock

It was the first flight we’d caught together—and, as it turned out, our last. 4 July on United Airlines. “Happy Birthday, America,” the pilot said when we landed. “And welcome to Sydney, Australia.”

We crossed the coast somewhere near Wollongong in the early morning and banked in over Sydney, peering down through the windows as the red roofs and blue swimming pools grew larger beneath us. That amazing, beautiful business of returning to Sydney. The exhilaration of home, of the yearned-for familiar, dropping with a thud when we walked out into the same old, same old. The accents I hadn’t realised I’d so completely forgotten, the yellow number plates, the blue buses, the same old cars, the road signs, the billboards, the drive back into town along General Holmes Drive. The heavy, grey skies of winter in Sydney. Familiar, comfortable, claustrophobic.

I was coming home for the publication of my book. This should have been exciting. It was, briefly. For a week. For two days. A few interviews. A fifty-dollar launch. Jatz and cask wine. A desk and a pen and four people lining up for the book signing—three friends, the other, mum.

Then it was over. And it was back to business, real life.

After the distant, dry heat of Southern California, winter in Sydney was a blast of cold reality on our situation. We were married, for God’s sake! I’d married this woman who for the previous four months I wasn’t even sure I wanted to be with, who for the last two, three years I’d looked at thinking, Why doesn’t this feel better? Why am I depressed? What’s wrong with me, with this, with us, with her? Everyone says we look so good together. We could be brother and sister. We like the same things, we want the same things, she loves me, her laugh makes me melt inside. So what was wrong? Why didn’t it feel better?

I have to get out my photos. Did I love her—ever? Was I always only trying to make it feel better than it did? What was wrong that I couldn’t love her? Was I ever, really, capable of relationship—with her or anyone? I search the photos for answers. Was there ever any chance? There was hope, certainly, and fear—if they aren’t the
same thing. And there was history. There was *story*. Years packed down on years of *story*. But was there ever a chance?

I tried to rationalise the feelings. I’d made a statement of commitment. Of course it felt wrong. I was married! I was doing something I’d never done before. I’d get used to it. Something had to be done and we’d done it. I’d get used to it.

I called Julia.

“It’s you,” she said, in her surprised way.

“Here's the news,” I said.

Fiona was getting dressed in the other room. This was at my brother’s place, the day after we got back. I felt her presence, that every word I said was being weighed and tested, every nuance of voice measured for meaning. At least that’s what I thought. Perhaps Fiona didn’t even want to hear. Perhaps Fiona was letting her feet lead her through her paces, because she had no idea where they were leading either.

Imagine it! She’s been hanging around with this guy for four years, they’ve been back and forth through the wringer about twenty times, he finally escapes, she finally escapes, she climbs Macchu Picchu and meets Princess Anne on top of a bus in Guatemala, he writes to tell her he’s fallen in love with someone else, she doesn’t know if she wants to set eyes on him ever again and anyway she’s fallen in something with el hombre Mexicano, he decides she’s the one after all, barges on over and they spend an other-worldly three months traipsing across this giant theme park called America which includes the usual mugging, the required visit to the famous writer’s grave, the cheap hotels, the diners and fries and Rent-A-Wrecks and endless generic airports—and, into the bargain, a horror ride through pregnancy, trans-Atlantic indecision, a Dutch doctor who might as well done the job with secateurs and to cap it off, a last-second dash down the I-5 for a Tijuana wedding with a bloody pad between her legs and a donkey painted to look like a zebra. Was she dreaming? Was this some sort of nightmare? She’ll wake up, surely, sweating, scared, thankful none of it was real. She *married* this guy! Are you outta your mind!

But she did. And now he’s in the next room calling the girlfriend to tell her the news, their news, this little frisson of excitement lifting the ends of his sentences as if he’s remembering the last time they...
And what she didn’t know was that the last time the three of them were together in that room was his last morning with the Other Woman, when she emerged out of the jungle in Mexico City and he followed his leaking one-eyed trouser snake to the ringing phone as the Other Woman smeared him into the salt of her tears in the bedroom—where she was now standing in front of the mirror adjusting her dress.

“You got married!” Julia exclaimed in her thin, reedy voice. "Why did you get married?"

Two weeks later she was in Sydney. Fiona and I had found a flat in Bondi. It was the day we moved in. She rang my brother’s. Warren was there, and Tim, and Bert. They'd helped us with the move and we were tucking into a big spread of lunch. Fiona picked up the phone. I knew immediately who it was. From the look she shot me—exasperation, exhaustion—hatred—who else could it be?

“Yes, he's here.” She held the receiver out, eyes cold.

“Hello,” Julia said.

“Julia, hi” I looked straight into Fiona’s eyes. She rolled them and went back to making herself a sandwich. Around the table everyone was silent.

“Can I see you?” she said.

“Where are you?”

“I'm in Bronte. At Sally’s house. Are you still moving?”

“We're finished. We're just having lunch. I can't talk now. Tuesday,” I said. “Is Tuesday okay? You can come round to the new flat.”

I looked at Fiona as I spoke. She kept her eyes down. And her ears open.

Everyone had their ears open.

I hung up and Fiona said, “God, she sounds about five!”

I said, “Do you mind?”

“Mind what?”

“ Asking her round.”

“For God’s sake, why ask me!”

“It's your home as much as mine.”

She glowered at me. “No, I don't mind.”
But she did. Or she should have. And I shouldn’t have suggested it. And we shouldn’t have been married. None of this should have happened. But it did.

She looked thin and small. Smaller than I remembered. Her hair was shorter. And I could smell her. I could smell her even before I swung open the door. She smelt like vanilla, sweet, like my grandmother used to, my father’s mother, one of the unwitting grande dames of this saga. She had dark pimple scars around her chin and on her breast bone and across her shoulders. Estrogen, she said later. We stood in the hallway embracing. I was aware of the strangeness of it. Hugging my former lover in my new marital home. It didn't feel right. In fact, the wrongness of everything was becoming overwhelming. I was embracing her because I thought I should, not because I wanted to. I knew this, even then.

“You smell of vanilla,” I said. “Like my grandmother.”

“I do not smell of vanilla,” she said.

I led her through the flat. The marriage flat, she called it later. There were boxes everywhere. Our new life overflowing around us. Fiona's stuff was still in its green garbage bags from her sister's ceiling. We were subletting the flat, and that was another thing. You couldn’t make this stuff up. No-one’d believe it. When I reached Orange County there were letters from Julia. She described an almost-fling she all but had with a woodworker called Richard. Nothing happened. A grope or two, maybe. Richard lived with a woman called Eloise. She was a doctor, doing a locum up north. Between them, Eloise and Gavin made sure nothing happened between Julia and Richard. Gavin came home from school. Something. Eloise threatened Richard with a scalpel. Whatever. It didn’t register till Fiona and I called around to the flat and got chatting, that the woman we were subletting from was called Eloise. And her bloke was called Richard. A woodworker. And she was a doctor, heading back up north for another locum.

That was when the lights went on. I told Fiona when we got outside. Heading for the car, I said, “Did you make the connection?”

“What connection?”

She stopped in her tracks. “You’re kidding? I don’t believe it. I do not fucking believe it.” Her voice cracked. “Please. Please let it stop here. I don’t know if I can stand any more.”

Julia stood pigeon toed in the middle of the bedroom, leather bag over her shoulder, purple cotton shirt, black jeans.

“So, this is where Richard lived!” Wide-eyed, a little girl.
I caught her in the bathroom playing on the tiles, putting one step in front of the other. Had she grown younger, or were the scales falling from my eyes?
She spread her arms in the air.
“Your new life. The married man.”
She played with her hairband. Looking down, looking up.
“And so, do you think we'll ever... do it again?”
I looked her in the eyes. I could feel my coldness. “No. No, I don't think we will.”
She looked down, her voice very small. “That is so sad. It’s just... so sad.”
She started crying. I pulled her closer into me.
“Sorry,” she whispered.
I stroked her hair and tried again to pin down exactly what her smell did remind me of. On the lounge was a copy of *British Eccentrics*, by Edith Sitwell, with the famous Cecil Beaton portrait on the cover.
“Good old Edith,” I said.
“What?” she said.
She held me by the shoulders and looked into me.
“There's nothing, is there? It's all gone.” Her voice thin and wispy. Teartracks down her cheeks. I pushed some hair behind her ear.
I kissed her eyes.
“Sorry,” I said.
I saw her downstairs. It was late afternoon, overcast. The pavements were wet. We stood together again, the wind blustering us. There was a wedding card in the mail. I looked out over her shoulder. “I think I need to go for a run.”
She turned her face to mine. “A run. You want to go for a run.”
**Black Tuesday**, she called it later, in a letter. “You were so cold. Clutching your happy marriage card, trying to run away. I was devastated. All that there had been between us had disappeared. It was bleak and empty. But I can thank you for one thing. That day I gave up all hope on you and when I came back up north that's what made me decide to leave Gavin.”

Fiona and I were having a miserable time. We were supposed to be settling into married life, but something, someone—the past, the future—loomed over us like a puppet master. We were ungainly, jerking into the furniture, unable to find our feet. The wrong lines coming out of our mouths. She went back to work at the graphics studio, walking backwards into some sort of stability after the cyclone which had just passed through her life.

I didn’t know what was going on. Why couldn’t I be happy and love my new wife as a man is supposed to? She was a good woman. Where would I ever find a better woman? I might have fallen in love with Julia, but Fiona was inestimably a ‘better woman’. I stood in the middle of the room in our second-hand flat full of second-hand ghosts unable to make a move either way. It was as bad it had been half a kilometre up the hill, before I’d left Sydney to finish the first book, before Fiona had headed off to Central America. We'd survived the cyclone and the air had cleared but the view was still the same.

I worked briefly as a kitchenhand and dishwasher and otherwise floundered about, trying to work out how to support myself, how to pay off my Mastercard bill from the States. I trudged the length of Campbell Parade, stopping at every cafe. Everywhere, the answer was the same. “Sorry mate. Winter. Quiet time.” I rang up about a job delivering gourmet English pork pies. The woman on the phone had a plummy Oxford English accent. Suddenly she said, “How tall are you?” It was only a little van. No pork pies.

I set up my desk on the balcony. New balcony. Same old desk. Put up my photos, my favourite quotes. *Why is it so shameful to be afraid?* Helen Garner. *As for love, I’ve never found anything in that supreme happiness except turmoil, storms and despair.* Flaubert, aged 58. *Life is like a train, you go fast, you cannot distinguish between objects very clearly, and above all, you never see the engine.* Van Gogh in a letter to his brother Theo. *This life is a hospital in which each sick man is possessed*
by a desire to change beds. Baudelaire. In 1974 an interviewer asked Leonard Cohen why he thought he was so popular in Europe. “Maybe,” he said, “it’s because they can’t understand my lyrics.”

Other people’s words. I wondered how I would ever find the emotional peace to start the book I was supposed to be writing, about Raymond Chandler and the girl from Orange, when what pressed upon me was my own story—this story—this drama with Fiona and Julia. I was locked right inside it and I couldn’t work out how to break free. The only way I knew was to move it outside myself, onto the page, to write it out. But what would I write? What would it be? Some seedy little autobiographical love story with different names, something which would hurt Fiona even more? I had no right, I had no right. I was overwhelmed with story, overwhelmed with life.

I thought the journey was over. I thought by marrying Fiona I had brought the train of upheaval to a halt. I thought we could step off onto the platform of married life and wave goodbye as the train moved on down the tracks into someone’s else’s life. But I was wrong. We were still onboard, lurching this way and that, crashing into things as it sped downhill.

Fiona couldn’t stop crying. I was distant and cruel. I could barely look at her, could hardly touch her. I’d wake in the morning and find her staring at me across the pillow. I’d reach across and she’d push me away and jump up and storm across the bedroom to the bathroom.

We went to see a Marriage Guidance counsellor. After six weeks of marriage. Her rooms were above the surgery of someone called Dr Wise, down the bottom of Paddington. She was about forty, pretty, black leather skirt and gold jewellery. Wedding ring.

“And what do you hope to achieve out of today?” she asked, before succumbing to a violent attack of sneezing. “Sorry. First day of a cold.”

“We find ourselves in these cycles,” I said. “I find myself feeling unreasonably critical of Fiona and I don’t know how to deal with it and so I go silent and she senses it and we have a big blow up and...”

The counsellor turned to Fiona. “Do you agree? How do you see it?”
Fiona nodded and looked at me. “I can feel it. It’s almost hatred. It burns out from him, but he won’t say anything.”

“I don’t know what to say because I know it’s not fair. I know it’s unreasonable. That’s why I don’t know what to say.”

The counsellor raised her hand. “Fiona’s talking, please.” She turned to Fiona. “Fiona?”

“That’s all.”

The counsellor turned back to me. “Is there anything else you want to say?”

“Only that. And I don’t know what to do about it. I feel trapped. I feel paralysed.”

Around and around. All the old stuff.

The counsellor gave us homework. “Before next week I’d like you to think about what’s good in your relationship. Think about the things you wouldn’t want to change.”

Out on the street I reached for Fiona’s hand. “It feels good to talk about it, eh?”

"Yeah, I suppose. Kind of.”

It was a Tuesday. We had a booking for the following week. But in the meantime something happened. Something else.
12. Coogee

Julia broke the embargo and wrote me a card. *I've left Gavin. I'm coming down to Sydney and staying with Sally at Bronte. I've got a job in a library.*

I couldn't stop myself.

"She's left Gavin," I said over dinner. "I'd better go see her. Just to make sure she's okay. Then I'll come home. Do you mind? I think I should."

Fiona looked at me with the cold, weary eyes. "Mate, it's up to you."

I wanted her to put up a fight, but she didn't. I resented this. But she must have known by then, or stopped caring. She was powerless.

I hadn't seen Julia since the day she came to the marriage flat. I was excited. I rang her at the library and she gave me the address, a flat above a row of shops in MacPherson Street. I cycled from Bondi. It was dark. The middle of winter. I wore the leather jacket I bought on Houston Street in New York. I was nervous. I didn't trust what would happen. I didn't trust myself. But I'd been given permission. Fiona had agreed. Whatever happened was not my responsibility. I remember this logic very clearly. This voice. Well, you agreed.

Julia was dressed in an Indian cotton shirt and sawn-off jeans. Bare feet. Middle of winter. She closed the door and we stood holding onto each other for a long time. My heart was crashing. Guilt. Lust. Fear. I wanted to slip her clothes off and lie her down right there and then. I wanted to hold her buttocks off the floor and feel myself curving and hard inside her. I tried to separate, but she clung to me. I could smell her skin and her hair and taste her and feel her lips in my mouth. She had her arms draped around my neck and whimpered as I pulled her off me.

"Can't we?" she said. "Can't we?" Whimpering, whining like a little girl. "Can't we just hug? What's wrong with a hug?"

But I'd promised Fiona. No more Julia. No letters, no calls, no contact. This is what I'd agreed to. I shouldn't even have been there in the flat. This was my commitment. I was being a married man. I was trying to lead with my head, not my heart, not my groin. Trying to be adult. I crossed the room. Distance was the only way to decrease the attraction. I suppose that's what I figured. Keeping two magnets apart.
I was trying to be strong. It was up to me to be responsible because she was giving in. I loathed her for this. But what I really wanted was to care as little as her. To let go. Watch the magnets fly together.

She made gins and we sat on the couch side by side, the drinks on the coffee table in front of us. She moved closer again, draped her leg over mine.

"Come on. Just a hug?" She was drunk, pissy, insistent, her self-control, her remove dissolved in alcohol.

A year later she was drunk on whiskey one night and I remembered the smell from that day, that morning. Years later she'd blame alcohol for almost all our relationship. “We were always drunk. When weren’t we drunk?” Fortifying herself to see me.

I tried to pull away. She wasn’t wearing a bra, her breasts jouncing under their light cotton shirt. Had she thought this through? Was she trying to undermine me? How determined had she been? Like that first night in Bangalow. Okay, but no sex. Who was I kidding? I had no strength against this. No resolve. She'd laid on the bed naked, and waited. When I lay down she curled herself around me. The schoolgirl housewife who'd never had another man. She knew what she wanted. I was scared of what I wanted. This was our difference. She felt the right to what she wanted. I felt I had no right.

She sprawled beside me, the brown skin of her legs, her turned-in toes. I could see down her shirt. Her lazy eye was starting to droop from the gin. I had a very definite sense. *What you do now will determine the rest of your life.* I remember this voice very clearly. It was a binary choice. One or the other. Fiona or this. Order or anarchy. Head or heart. Either I back away, cross the room, keep my promise to Fiona, choose with my mind, keep control. Or I do the other. Follow the blood. The rushing, the urgent, the pumping. If I’d cut an artery right then it would have hit the ceiling in one great, long spurt of delirious release.

She was slumped beside me, imploring me. I had my arm around her shoulder, over the back of the sofa. My body leading me. Every nerve, every millimetre of skin, every beat of my heart. *Move away,* my head said. *Move away. Now! Move!*

I watched my hand move. So easy, so smooth. Silent as a snake. There was no resistance. She gasped, breathed out suddenly, as if deflated. It was so easy. Even her hair was familiar. Soft, different. Inside, she was wet and ready and craving. I pulled
her towards me. She scrabbled with my belt, moving against me, moaning, whimpering. We sprawled, joined at the mouth, our hands contorted inside each other’s clothes. So. It was revealed. *This was the route my life would take.* I was delirious. The artery opened. All over the ceiling, the walls. I lifted her shirt and took each hard, nubbly nipple into my mouth. The heart pumping. The head too far away.

What I remember clearly about that night, careering down Bondi Road on my pushbike afterwards, leaning into the wide curve where it becomes Campbell Parade with the cold August night burning my cheeks, drawing tears from my eyes, with the blackness of the ocean carved from the crescent of the half-lit beach below me—it wasn’t land, it wasn’t sea, it was light and dark, this and that, what I knew and what I didn’t—what I remember was the most complete exhilaration. Utter joy. That night I had crossed a line. I had been released.

All these increments of manhood. Marriage, pregnancy, betrayal. All in the wrong order. All over the place. If I was in any way symptomatic of my generation, representative of my times, it was in this disorder. This anarchy of emotions. This is the generation which threw away the rules. And left to ourselves, to our own devices, we had devolved to this. Little boats slewing about on the ocean of life. Waves crashing over us. Bailing like buggery. Trying just to stay afloat.

At least I was. This, at least, was me. Bailing like buggery. Working just to stay afloat.

Through my life I have felt so little like a man, felt so little as I suspected a man is supposed to feel. Something went wrong. The signposts were missing, or I couldn’t read them. Something. I never grew up. But that night, as excited as any ten year old to be on his bike and *fucking pissing down that hill,* I knew a bloody great signpost had appeared in front of me—this way, or that—and I’d chosen. I pictured a wheezing roomful of old geezers, whiskey-nosed old bastards like Kingsley Amis deep in leather armchairs with their paws around their fourth scotch and soda—the elders of this tribe—and for the first time in my life felt that I shared something with these men. I had that night done something that other men did. I had joined the club. I had arrived.

At last I belonged. *Tonight I have joined the world of men.*
I was roiling with relief and happiness and certainty. The future opened before me. But here’s the weird, contradictory thing. What had happened with Julia was a last act. This wasn't the start of something again, it was the end. I would take this certainty home to Fiona, to our marriage, and we would proceed emboldened, strengthened, rejuvenated. I felt no guilt. I had committed no crime. I hadn't betrayed Fiona. The doors of love had been opened in my heart, and they were open for her. I was so sure of this. And as I sped down that hill with the blackness of the ocean extended before me—the black, the white, the dark, the light—I knew I would lie to Fiona. I wouldn't tell her what had happened with Julia, if she asked I would lie. I would do this for her. I would do it for us. I had turned a corner. Julia was a bomb in my life and that night it had gone off and I’d survived. I would keep my silence, and the marriage would be saved.

Did I remember that first night in Bangalow, waving Julia farewell in the morning with the same delusion, that all we had done that night was scratch her wandering itch and reassure her of her marriage? No. Did I remember the one night woman in New York? No. My memory was five minutes old. I was blind, deaf. Bailing like buggery.

I hauled the bike over my shoulder and carried it upstairs. It wasn't late. Midnight. I opened the door to the flat and wheeled the bike inside. The light from the bedroom spread across the brown carpet of the hallway. There was no music. If there was music she was probably awake.

I could feel Julia all over me. I vibrated with her. I could taste her and smell her. I ached and throbbed. I wanted to rush in and tell Fiona everything. A twenty-three page letter in person. I wanted to share my excitement and resolve. For us. For our future. For the first time in months I felt the future open wide in front of me and Fiona was it. I had lost my doubts. My doubts were gone.

But meanwhile, I had to lie.

I tiptoed down the hallway, glancing in to the bedroom. She was lying on her side, head on the pillow, red-eyed, staring at me.

I paused. "I'll just have a shower." Her eyes didn't waver. She didn’t blink.
I stood under the water for ages, feeling it wash Julia away, washing me clean for Fiona. When I slipped into bed beside her she rolled towards me and folded herself into me. "Please," she said. "Can we? Please?"

And we did. I was so happy, so sure. I knew this was the right thing. We were at a pivotal point of transition that night, the three of us, turning on the fulcrum of sex. Fiona gripped me with her eyes clamped closed, squeezing out tears which rolled down her cheeks into the pillow. When she came she cried out in a wrenching howl, pushed me out of her and rolled away, clutching herself and weeping.

In the morning I opened my eyes and there she was across the pillow, red eyes streaming. "What have I done?" she cried. "What have I done? Why did I marry you? Why? What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me?"

I tried to hold her. "There's nothing wrong with you. We're in the middle of a bad time, that's all. It's not your fault. Last night, seeing Julia, I knew I wanted to be with you. It made up my mind. Really, believe me. I mean it."

She looked at me, grasping my eyes with hers.

"Tell me you love me," she said. "Please? Tell me you love me?"

I moved closer and held myself hard against her. "I love you," I said. "I love you. I love you." And I meant it with all my heart for the first time in years.

But this is where the story gets tricky. Over the years I’ve recounted these events dozens of times. They were so searing I thought they were scorched forever in my memory. But when I finally came to write them down something shocking happened which in a way created of them another story—or at least added a new layer of understanding.

There is, I believe, a Russian proverb, ‘No-one lies like an eyewitness.’ It was something like that. With the idea of checking if my memory was 'correct', I opened the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet and pulled out a few of the old Write-Right exercise books I used as diaries in those days. With this the truth cracked open all over again and I was face to face with the mythology I’d built up about those times. I could see in faded black and white that the years had evolved a story which my first hand account indicated was less than accurate. I had witnessed and participated in these events but what the diaries revealed was that in the intervening years my
version of events had grown its own life. My first hand account had been subsumed to the greater need of acceptable falsehood, of allowable truth which the deeper story of my life required.

This was true specifically of the months after Fiona and I returned from the States. It’s a story with clean lines. A wife, a husband, the betrayer and the betrayed, the rails buckling in the impact, sending all on board sprawling in the wreckage. But the lines weren’t so clean. The truth was something harder. I had evolved the story that what happened between Fiona, Julia and me was my fault. But in my eyes now this was no longer true. It was no longer an adequate explanation of events.

Everything was not my fault. Fiona was a free agent. I wasn’t physically or emotionally abusive to her. Julia played out the role she decided was appropriate. As the teller of the story, my confusion became the glue between us, but I wasn’t the criminal I’d made myself out to be. It wasn’t simply that ‘I couldn’t do the marriage, I couldn’t do commitment, I couldn’t do love.’ The question was not one of blame. Instead, it was something simpler and more complicated than that. It was three people, three histories, three hearts locked together in a dynamic of ignorance and compulsion, of human frailty, of consequence. I went back into the archives, I thought, to check a few dates, only to discover that I had convicted myself on false evidence.

The shock was that I hadn’t questioned this good girls, bad guy myth. The truth, my truth is something more painful. It’s a story which has evolved over the years, accumulating layers, becoming thick and encrusted like the layers of a painting, compounding in me a conviction of guilt and inadequacy and inability to love and be loved. It’s why I’ve told this story the way I have. It’s why I’ve chosen the language I have. It’s why my life has unfolded the way it has. It’s why I’m writing this book. It’s why I became a writer in the first place. It’s why I’m not a father. It’s why I’m the man I am today.

I find that Fiona had not made a clean break with Senor Mexicano. I find that she received a letter from him after we arrived back in Sydney. I find that she hadn’t discounted a future with him. If things didn’t work out with me, she said, she’d probably go and find him in Spain or wherever he was. Meeting Mr Mexico in Madrid.
She had a phonecall from the Dutch guy she spent a night with in San Francisco when I was in San Jose. Mr Dutchy, the schlong. “I’d like you to be in my bed,” he said to her on the phone. Such was my compulsion to take responsibility for events I’ve written him—and the other men Fiona spent time with in my absence—from our history books. And this was after I’d joined her in the States. Perhaps in my mind he made up for my soggy night of no sex in New York when our baby in her belly was making her puke her guts up in Amsterdam. Tit for tat. As ancient and infantile as that.

I find I recorded my own desperate speeches. “This stuff we’re going through, trying to get through behaviour patterns inside us, if we don’t do it with each other, with ourselves, we’ll just have to do it with the next person who comes along.” I must have said that, sooner or later, to every woman I’ve ever been with.

My memory told me that I knew I was in love with Julia all along, and the marriage was a mistake from day one. But in the month after our return from the States Julia’s name barely appears in my diaries. I was committed to the idea of the marriage. ‘I feel able to be more open about my feelings towards her, good and bad. And I feel more tolerant. It feels good to be united, not fighting. I enjoy being married to Fiona.’

My memory was of tears and turmoil, non-stop, relentless, until the train finally ran off the rails. But the diaries reveal affection and indecision on all sides. I’d taken full responsibility for events when really we were all just bumbling forward trying to deal with our own confusion.

Perhaps I had more ‘love’ than I was able to accommodate, than my history allowed me to feel comfortable with. (Isn’t this always true? Could there ever be too much real love, the pure stuff uncontaminated by need and fear and greed?) Of course I loved Fiona. Of course I loved Julia. Or at least I wanted to. I tried to. But the situation—their histories and mine and the confluence of the three at that point of time—made this good thing painful, difficult, bad.

My version has been that Fiona was neutral and I was the one who wavered and fell. Instead, I find that the doubt and distress was mutual. I find Fiona saying this. “What scares me is that I don’t care anymore. I don’t care if we break up. I really don’t care about you. And I want to. I want to care. I want to be passionate with the man I’m with. That’s what scares me most.”
“I’m still in two minds,” I recorded her saying. “Should I try to make it work, or just say ‘Forget it’ and get out? I don’t know.”

I find myself more honest with her than I have told myself I was. I tried to be open, tried to tell Fiona my feelings, but it was terrible. I shook with fear. And I find the familiar pattern. I was riven by feelings of criticism towards her. I felt guilty for my ‘negative’ feelings, and felt the need to suppress them. I shouldn’t feel these things. How could I stay with someone to whom I feel such things? I had no desire for her. I couldn’t understand why Fiona provoked such exaggerated response in me. Even watching her walk across a room could infuriate me. I jumped out of bed in the morning. I couldn’t bear to lie beside her. I felt my heart would burst. This wasn’t intimacy, it was agony.

Unable to accept my doubts, my critical feelings towards her, I wanted only to escape. And I tried to be honest. I admitted to Fiona my distress and my desire to run. And it was her who attacked me. Neither of us could handle my feelings.

I was years away from starting to address why I should feel this way. I read these entries again and shook my head with compassion for the damage I was carrying and my blindness to it. I was hitting the wall. Hard up against it. The wall of my past, of my childhood.

Perhaps we were too young to understand what I, at least, now believe—that feelings are mere feelings. They are not to be controlled or suppressed but need to be allowed, accommodated, managed, heard out, neutralised with compassion and acceptance. The only danger in feelings is when they become the next thing—action. It is actions which do harm. Feelings in themselves are as the air the breathe—everywhere, invisible, essential and inescapable—as much a part of us as the body we travel in.

Everyone behaved badly. It wasn’t just me. This was such a revelation. Just as I seemed to have few second thoughts about the effect of our actions on Gavin, Julia had no ability to stop herself encroaching on our marriage, or on Fiona’s feelings. “You’ve proved yourself to be untrustworthy,” Julia wrote to me after our night together at Coogee. But she had no hesitation betraying her own husband. She was prepared to stay with Gavin for the financial and emotional security he provided. I wondered whether I was staying with Fiona for the same reason. Well, not the
money. Neither of us had five cents to rub together. We were trapped in feelings. The marriage wasn’t working for either of us, not just me. Fiona was bored and unhappy and uncertain. But I was the one who acted. I was the one who had Julia to act out on.

I’d forgotten how openly I discussed with Fiona ways we might continue with each other. Perhaps I could move out and we could keep seeing each other. I could see both of them. I tried to convince myself that this might work. Fiona agreed, it might. As soon as we ceased attacking each other and acknowledged our confusion we felt close and our doubts seemed to recede—creating even more confusion.

I found the pages of the diaries peppered with first sentences for stories which rarely went further—my urgency to write ‘the story’ out, to bleed it of my life even then. ‘I’m lying in bed with my new wife, thinking, My God, what have I done!’

‘The day before we came back to Australia my girlfriend and I drove down to Tijuana and got married...’

‘I met Fiona in 1979. We go back that far... [start of next book]’

I was struck how deeply I buried ‘the story’ underneath pages and pages of detail. I had my eyes open constantly, searching for reassurance, for distraction, for the smallest hint which might help solve the puzzle of my situation. People in the street, the weather, the sea, the sunsets. In Bondi Junction I stood watching a Cockney spruiker selling gold chains from the top of a milk crate covered in black velvet. “Come closer. Move in please, ladies and gentlemen. Don’t be shy, I wasn’t when I was a girl. Put one foot in front of the other and it’s called walking. These came into Grace Brothers through the front door at midday and came out the back door at midnight. Move in please, ladies and gentlemen. Don’t be shy, I wasn’t when I was a girl.”

At the front of every new exercise book I wrote out these lines from Frank MacShane’s biography of Raymond Chandler: ‘He lay alone in the undertaker’s parlour reaping the neglect his indecision had earned him.’ Inside the back of one book I found these: ‘I hate him so much I could drown him in a teaspoon of water.’ And ‘I wouldn’t give him a job as a speedhump.’ Who said this? About whom? I have no idea.

We visited friends in the country. I woke early and leaving Fiona in bed, walked out into the mist. Everything was still, suspended. I climbed the track through
the trees. I tried to notice everything. The yellow lichen on the rocks. The leaves hanging still and wet with mist. The fallen branches. And the birds! Birds everywhere, all around me birdsong in the fog. The question went round and round in my head. “What am I going to do? What am I going to do?” I felt scared and trapped, unsure of anything. “I went mad,” I thought. That’s how I’d start it. “I went mad and wrote a book.”

Fiona couldn't stop crying. I'd visited Julia on Thursday night. Fiona and I were due for our next session with Miss Sneezy the Marriage Guidance counsellor the following Tuesday. On Sunday night I pushed myself the windswept length of Campbell Parade to visit my friend Leo up near the golf course. I sat on his floor clutching a cushion. The certainty was already seeping out of me. Leo sighed. “I don’t know mate. You’ve got a hard one there. She’s a good woman, Fiona. If you want my advice you should piss—what’s her name?—Julia off and just get on with Fiona. But...” He raised his hands in the air and creased his forehead. “But I sympathise with what you’re going through. And if I was in your situation I’d probably do exactly the same thing.” He got me to stand up and hugged me and I trudged back home with my hands deep in my empty pockets, the wind behind me propelling me like fate into the next, inexorable thing.

Fiona was crying when I got home. She twisted away from me in bed and wept louder. I tried to soothe her. I stroked her back, ran my fingers through her hair, edged close again until I could hold her and whisper in her ear and, eventually, rock her gently to sleep. When I opened my eyes in the morning she was still there across the pillow staring at me, dry-eyed, but wide, wide awake.

She jumped up and ran into the bathroom and wrenched on the shower. When she came back in she was crying again. She pulled on clothes and stalked down the hall to the kitchen, choking and gurgling on her tears. I got up and followed her. She was sitting at the table, clutching a spoon, scooping muesli into her mouth, her other hand around a glass of water. On the table beside the bowl was her tiny white contraceptive pill. Both hands shaking. Water and metal vibrating.

I stood in the doorway. “It’s going to be alright. Really. We’ll get through this. Really.”
Filling the emptiness with words. Empty words. She sat in silence, staring at me, then jumped up and was across the room pummelling me with clenched fists. I took off my glasses and stood my ground until her blows weakened and she slumped back to stand in front of me with her head bowed, weeping. She crossed the room back to the table and sat again, arms at her side, head down.

"I've got a confession to make. I know I shouldn't have done this. But I just couldn't help myself." She looked up. "I read your diary. I read your fucking diary."

I groaned and rubbed my hand across my face. "Oh, no."

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have. But I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to know what you were thinking. I had to find out what was going on in your mind."

I bowed my head, composing myself. I took a deep breath and looked up at her. Her tears had stopped. She watched me, waiting. So, okay. This was it. No escape. Get it done with. Put an end to all this. All this agony. I took a deep breath.

"Okay. But I want you to know. I honestly thought that was the end of it." I lowered my voice, convinced, I'm sure, I wasn't lying. “This is the first time I've lied to you. Ever.”

She didn’t speak. I took another breath. "The reason I didn't tell you about Julia was—well, I thought—I really believed I was getting it out of my system. I thought this would change everything. I..."

She became completely still. Her eyes widened. The look on her face—it wasn't right. In fact it was all wrong. She was supposed to be angry. This was supposed to be exactly what she expected to hear, confirming her suspicions, reassuring her of her desperation, her anger. But this was something different. This was shock, surprise—this was something she didn’t expect. Her words came out low and croaky. I had to lean forward. She cleared her throat and repeated herself.

"I didn't read anything about Julia.”

My heart was crashing. You can still get out of this. Think of something. Think. Anything. Think. But I couldn't do it. I told her everything. And with a slow, sickening lurch—gradually, and then suddenly—the train toppled off the rails once and for all.

We kept our appointment with the counsellor. We took our chairs. She looked at us with bright, clear eyes. Not a sneeze in sight.

I heard my voice. “Um, before we start. Something's happened.”
13. Clarence

I didn’t hang around. Within two weeks I’d found a place in Coogee, the old kitchen house out the back of a rundown mansion in Brook Street. Someone had built a loft bed. I could walk underneath it, climb the ladder and stand on the bed and not touch the ceiling. It was weird, the room was out of all proportion as if it’d been distorted in one of those wacky mirrors, small but insanely high. It was symptomatic of my state of mind. Nothing seemed real in that time, as if I’d left the world I knew and entered another where nothing quite made sense. I walked through my days, unable to understand what had just happened—what was still happening—in my life.

There was a croquet court out the back. I’d look up from my desk and see old men swinging these awesome hammerhead dingers between their legs while the women gasped and clapped. They all wore white, as if they were from another decade, the 1920s of *The Great Gatsby* perhaps, the age of excess before the crash. Their balls would clock together, sad, hollow knocks inside my heart.

The building had a resident black cat who curled around my ankles, sleek and beautiful, the dandruff on his coat white as snowflakes on coal. Someone had called him Desmond Tutu. Most of the other tenants were single fiftysomething men who woke at first light to do their washing in the laundry tub. I watched them through my window, moving silently about their tasks in their singlets and boxer shorts. Would that be me in twenty or thirty years time? Underpants and short-sleeved nylon shirts forever dripping on the line. They spent all day drinking down at the RSL and came back to cook mince and watch game shows and the Channel Nine news before getting an early night. Everywhere I looked I saw some threatening implication of what I’d done, as if I’d thrown my life away and was doomed to a bleak future of penance and unhappiness.

Julia had a room in a house in Clovelly but it never suited her. She was a country schoolie’s wife, not the inner-city house sharing type. She was always out of place. This stage we were going through was always going to be temporary. It wasn’t real life but some exaggerated soapie version instead. And things were already going awry. I already felt the same judgement and clustrophobia I’d had with Fiona and
we spent half our time wondering if we should ‘break up’ before we’d even started. We never quite did, preferring to settle our doubts in bed instead.

I got a job driving a van delivering flowers. It was summer in Sydney, hot and muggy, and I had to drive with all the windows open, the air in the van so ripe and fragrant I could barely breathe. One day I made four deliveries to the same flat. Each time the door opened, the woman gave a grim nod, the door closed. Downstairs a neighbour was gardening. She saw me come and go. The last time she looked up, hands still deep in the soil. “A baby,” she said. “Can you imagine? Losing a baby?”

Another day, another house, I had twelve perfect long-stemmed roses to deliver. I rang the bell and I heard a girl skip to the door. She flung it open, her face spreading wide. “Oh wow!” She called over her shoulder. “Mum, he’s sent flowers. He sent flowers!”

She opened the card, her lips forming themselves around the words. “Amour toujours. What language is that?”

"It's French," I said. "It means eternal love, love forever."

“Oh, wow.” She put the bouquet to her nose and sucked in a deep breath. A shadow crossed her face but she shrugged and her smile had reasserted itself as she closed the door. The roses were hothouse grown, denatured of fragrance, the ‘dew’ on the petals sprayed on last thing before they left the shop. They’d open that night and be stalks in the morning. Eternal love, my arse.

For a while I tried to be friends with Fiona, convinced we should ‘help each other through this difficult time’. I’d visit and sit on the floor talking to her and playing with Brian, Richard and Eloise’s cat we’d inherited with the flat. (He was called YoYo when we moved in but as soon as I got hold of him he became Brian.) Fiona tried to go along with this but we were kidding ourselves. What was there to be friends about? I’d done the runner with another woman and pretty soon Fiona made it clear she’d prefer it if my presence and our past could somehow erase all traces of itself from her life. This wasn’t possible but being the culpable party I tried to avoid her as much as I could. Parties. Galleries. Bushwalks. The beach. I tried not to be places she would be. I was scared every time I went back to Bondi. I’d hear someone behind me and swing around, heart crashing. I’d see her somewhere and she’d come
up. “I don’t want to talk to you. I'm only saying hello because we're both here. I'm still angry with you and I don't want to see you.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, okay.”

I was scared at what I’d done and kept apologising as if this might somehow allow me a way back in if I needed it later. Finally Fiona snapped. “Will you stop it? I’m sick of your guilt. It’s nauseating. It’s only making me hate you all the more.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, okay,” and managed to stop before I added, "I'm sorry."

Julia was awarded some sort of writer's grant and moved back up to her parents’ farm on the Clarence River. She’d come down to visit. I went up. She’d call me on the carphone in the van, her voice scratchy and miniscule under the dash. After a few months I stopped delivering flowers and left Sydney and moved to an empty shearer’s cottage on a distant relative’s property on the Liverpool Plains. Another weird world. The flat land made the skies huge. During storms the clouds descended in a thick black ceiling, the low sun in the west casting everything in an eerie, ominous light. Cockatoos and galahs screeched overhead. They’d land, one each, on the big yellow sunflowers carpeting the distance and sway down to husk the seeds as if they were leaning in for a drink. At dusk high towers of pink fairy floss clouds exploded over the hills and the gum trees around the house grew wings and squealed, every twig a parrot. Bats appeared from nowhere, a million unoiled bicycles blackening the sky on the way to somewhere else. When I told Julia the supposed Aboriginal name for the area she latched onto it, and my little house on the prairie became forever The Poison Plain.

I started writing my book about Raymond Chandler. But my pen led me day after day back to the urgency, the impossibility of this story. Quite enough had happened already, and I wasn’t to know, of course, that there was more to come. And every day, perhaps because of this and because I was supposed to writing something else, I stopped. Julia was going to Africa to research a book. When she came back the plan was that we’d live together. It was my dream, my fantasy. A little house on the north coast, each in our room, typing away.

In Harare she met a man and moved in with him. You’ve had other lovers, she wrote. I need to do this before we live together. It doesn’t affect what I feel for you. Please believe me. But it affected me greatly. I hated the ease with which she
justified herself. She’d been the catalyst to help me leave a relationship which perhaps I should have left years earlier. Perhaps. But had it made me happy, leaving Fiona, shifting to Camp Julia? No. It was worse. I was in love. In deep need. In pain. I’d left my marriage for what? A woman who went to Africa to shack up with another man.

And the letters kept coming. She walked in the Chimanimani Mountains, broke her boots on the volcanic rocks of the Drakenburg Range. She met women who’d known her grandmother before she went mad and escaped back to England. She met a professional mulberry picker called Memory, her hands a permanent purple, sitting under a mulberry tree with her granddaughter, called Milk. On a train she shared a compartment with a woman and her two children called Hope and Revelation. Schoolgirls skipped through puddles of purple jackaranda flowers outside her window. Black skin, blue tunics, white smiles. She sat in the beer halls, hot and confused as she watched the black women dancing. But there was a big hole in the middle of what she wrote. All her news, all these stories. Her spider writing, twisting knives in my heart. All this pain. I didn’t want it. I didn’t know what I wanted but it wasn’t this.

I went to the airport to meet her. She followed her trolley down the slope into the arrivals hall. It was another moment of distinct, binary choice. This, or that. Just tell her, "Look, I can’t stand this. It was a mistake. I’ve got to stop." But I didn’t. I watched my arms open to the next, the final chapter.

At home she called her parents. I heard her wails from the other end of the house. She came in and stood before me. “My mother’s got cancer. All through her.” She let me hug her but then turned and left the house and didn’t come back for hours, with red eyes and rips in her clothes. She flew up the next day. It was the week before Christmas. I joined her a week later. New Years Day, 1991. We would live together on her parents’ farm while they were away in Brisbane for her mother’s treatment. Our dream had come true but we lived it in the long shadow of sadness.

What Julia and her family were going through was unimaginable for me, yet to lose a parent, so it may sound cruel when I say that for me that year remains one of the most exciting, fulfilled times of my life. It was a year lived on a higher emotional plane. I didn’t have to suffer the family's pain and instead, fuelled by the emotional
octane this injected into our lives, my feelings were intensified—for Julia and in
spite of her, for the family distress and in spite of it. I’d been tragically in love
before—what a friend’s mother, watching him, described as *mooning around like a
lovesick cow*—but never in the way I felt that year in that place in that context. My
heart was full. I loved living in the country and especially up there—the humidity,
the heat, the lush, fecund greenness. Again, I wonder if half the reason Julia stayed
lodged in my heart so long—half the reason I *loved* her so much—was because of
that place, her home, the far North Coast, which for me has always been exotic, a
place of fantasy—of escape.

Her parents returned between treatments and while Julia and her father
attended to Sheila’s intimate care I played a supporting role, mainly as cook. I was
the only person Sheila had ever allowed to have unsupervised run of her kitchen and
I could see her reflected in the window at night, watching me from around the
partition in the lounge room, aware of course what this meant. A stranger in her
domain. The end of life as she knew it.

It still perplexes me that Julia’s family—her parents, her three sisters, their
husbands and children—should have opened their arms to me the way they did, and
that I should have felt so immediately comfortable in their embrace. I didn’t question
the acceptance I was being offered or the contribution I was able to make. I felt
*useful* and openly, vocally appreciated in a way I rarely have. In many ways I felt
more at ease in Julia’s family than I did in my own. They are still the nearest I have
found to a ‘second family’. This adds to my conviction that something else was
working below the surface, that I was somehow ‘meant’ to be part of that family in
some capacity, which in those days, at least, was as Julia’s boyfriend, an uncle to her
sisters’ children and another son their parents never had.

This was the first time I’d lived outside Sydney without the emotional focus of
my life remaining there and although I’m sure this was integral to my sense of
fulfilment that year there was something else. The house stood on the side of a hill
overlooking the river, the mighty Clarence. It’s a big river at that point, over half a
kilometre across, and it was a constant presence in my life. I swam morning and
night. On cold mornings the mist hung over the water and it was a brisk heart-
starting sprint up to Skink Rock and back. Other days, in summer—before I got the
writing room in town and Julia and I would wander down for a break in the middle of
the day—we’d dive deep into the cool water beneath the surface and then stroke languidly upriver talking softly and drift down again on the current. When Julia’s parents were back Peter would join me—it was part of our routine, part of his daily coping strategy—and as we swam his sighing monologue of grief would drift off across the water where it would disappear, only to return, like the morning mist, the next day.

I’ve rarely lived far from the coast and whenever I have it isn’t until my return that I’ve understood the non-specific dislocation I’ve felt has been the daily lack of this presence in my life. But my months by the Clarence made me question this. Perhaps all I really needed was somewhere, a body of water—and I don’t mean a municipal swimming pool—to throw myself into and lose this land-bound body in the other, liquid state.

And more than once, sitting on the bank watching the water eddy past, I considered the journey the river had taken from its headwaters in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range not far from Mud Flat Road—and the wild ride I’d taken with it.

I rented a flat in town where I went to write. Fifteen dollars a week plus the mowing. My landlady was a tiny woman, so small I had permanent bruises on my forehead where I forgot to duck. I’d won a grant to write the Chandler book. This was the other part of the dream come true. For the first time in my life I had no immediate money worries, no job to go to, no-one from the dole office to lie to, nothing to get in the way of writing except, of course, what was happening at home. And every day I sat down at my desk through that year of love and death this poured out in poems.

Raymond Carver, my other Raymond, described a time in his life when he ‘felt on fire’ with poems. This was such a time for me. In that year in that little room in Grafton wedged between the market gardens and the gaol the poems wouldn’t stop coming. A whole book. I’ve never had a time like it. It remains part of the excitement, the feeling of belonging I still carry with me from that time, adding no doubt to the complexity of the feelings I retained for Julia.

Peter and Sheila would spend a couple of weeks in Brisbane while Sheila received chemo and radiotherapy and then return for about the same period for her to ‘recover’. While they were away Julia and I had the farm to ourselves. We made love
and swam and cooked and climbed on top of the water tank with our beers at dusk. It was a honeymoon idyll and for me certainly, a paradise of sorts. I think both of us—it wasn’t just me—believed in our future, and while the intensity of events with Sheila bled into our relationship I think her illness also distracted us from the cracks already showing in our dream. As usual it was my stuff which filled the middle ground. I was jealous of Julia’s success as a writer and unconfident of my own ability. I had no idea how to handle my doubts and negativity which arose towards her, and like Fiona, neither did she.

Looking back I can see no way we were going to last. We were both running hard from our past lives and collided in the middle, a tangle of history and desire and dreams. We had used each other to leave unhappy relationships and the reality of that was bound to come back in our faces sooner or later. Julia was only twenty-seven years old. She had been with her former high school teacher since she left school and married him when she was twenty-one. Now she found herself back home in her parents’ house and all but married again. This wasn’t what she had intended. She had much more life to taste before she was ready—if she ever was—for this again.

And me? Although this sultry paradise by the fat blue Clarence had given me respite of sorts from the conflicts and confusion of my ‘real life’ in Sydney I couldn’t keep running forever. Sooner or later I would have to stop and examine the eternal distress which fuelled me.

But overlaying all this the reality of that year was that Julia’s mother was dying. Of all the sisters, Julia was her mother's special daughter and Julia had made Sheila the tap root of her life—stability, grounding, support and succour. And she would soon be gone. Everything else, including me—especially me—fell away in the shadow of this unimaginable wrench to her life. Perhaps, in the end, this explains more than anything else why things happened the way they did.

At one point during this period Julia suspected she was pregnant. She bought a kit from the chemist and early one morning padded up the hall to use it. Half asleep, I heard her in the toilet, the flush afterwards and the soft footsteps back. She slipped in beside me shivering, the little white wand in her hand.

She held it above the covers, and we watched it as if it might itself come alive. One blue line and it’s working. Two blue lines and you’re in the river, start swimming. Outside the birds were singing, the sun angling in through the window,
the grass gleaming with dew. It would have been a beautiful morning, I guess, to be pregnant.

One blue line appeared, clear and solid. My heart beat hard in my throat. We glanced at each other and smiled. I covered the wand with my hand and kissed her.

“Ready…mum?”

“No, don’t. Let me see.”

I moved my hand away.

June 1991. Two years since Amsterdam.

There was no second blue line. She wasn't pregnant.

Were our sighs relief or disappointment? If the second line had appeared and the pregnancy had gone according to plan with a healthy baby at the end of it, what might have this story become? I dread to think how we’d be living now if there had been two blue lines that morning. Separated, co-parenting perhaps, but maybe not even that. One of us—her or me—could well have done a runner and given up completely. I’ve never known what it is to love my own child and bearing in mind that I come from this position I’d say that one blue line that morning saved Julia and me from even more years of further distress and unhappiness.

It wasn’t long before the next thing happened. Julia went away to a women’s writing weekend. On Monday morning she climbed the steps to my room in town to make an announcement. Fidelity, we had agreed, was the bottom line of our relationship. But she told me gravely that morning, she could no longer promise me this. She wanted to have sex with women. She thought perhaps she was a lesbian.

I was only at the farm, in Grafton, because of my relationship with Julia. But I had no intention of leaving. I’d uprooted myself to be with her and as long as I could stand it there I wasn’t about to uproot myself again. I had months to go before I’d finish a draft of the Chandler book and I didn’t want to leave until I did. And it seemed unlikely her mother could hang on for much longer. A month, perhaps two. I didn’t feel it right to upset the balance we had established around her.

So I stayed. We continued our routine. I spent the day in town at my work room and came back in the afternoon for a swim with Peter. He and Julia then gave Sheila her nightly lymphatic massage in front of the TV and I’d start cooking dinner.
Peter knew, of course, but we didn’t mention anything to Sheila. Instead we moved into separate bedrooms and pretended nothing had changed.

It was almost the end. When I arrived at the farm Sheila had shown no sign of illness. She seemed perfectly healthy, with her laugh at the ready and a pumped-up determination to beat the disease. She had aphorisms stuck under magnets on the fridge and books to help her foster a positive attitude. Within weeks, however, she had lost her hair and with permanent nausea become gaunt and listless and each time she came back she had noticeably deteriorated. In June her doctor gave her the grim news. She had not responded to treatment and there was no more they could do. It was ghastly. After months of fostering her hopes with treatments which were more challenging than the cancer itself, she was cut adrift and—in different words, but with the same meaning—told to go home and get ready to die. The little car eased back up the track for the last time, Sheila crying out in pain at every bump.

After a few weeks it became clear Sheila didn’t have long to go. One of Julia’s sisters was eight months pregnant and Sheila was so distended with build-up of lymphatic fluid she was almost the same size. She was on a morphine drip but even lying flat on her back was painful so the local health service organised a special reclining bed-chair which one of the brothers-in-law, a vet, brought out to the farm propped up, like an empty throne, in the work trailer.

Finally her Brisbane doctor arranged for her to go into the local hospital to have the fluid drained. We knew this was risky. It could weaken her so much she might not recover. But her discomfort was such that the risk was taken.

It was a weekend. She lay in the hospital bed with a catheter in her abdomen draining into a container under the bed. The fluid came so fast it was spilling over the lino floor before anyone noticed. Sheila lapsed into semi-consciousness. She lost over ten litres of fluid. She could have stayed in hospital but Peter and Sheila had agreed if the end looked imminent it should happen at home. Again Peter edged up the bumpy track slower than walking pace, Sheila whimpering in the seat beside him.

Later that night, while Sheila drifted in and out of consciousness Peter spoke softly to her doctor on the phone. He put the receiver down and came over to where Julia and I were sitting with Sheila by her special chair. He took her hand. "The doctor said it might happen any time." Sheila sprang awake. "Am I going to die? Did he say I'm going to die?" Her eyes were wide with terror. But as if the effort of this
alone was too much she slumped back in unconsciousness even before we managed to reassure her.

We shifted her to bed and she lay there gasping in breath, only for it to fall immediately out again. The blood was starting to coagulate, purple and hard, along her back and in her ears. She had no flesh left. Her face was stretched tight across her skull, her skin already yellow and waxen, her hands shockingly cold. Julia’s sisters had arrived. In the evening we gathered for a meal of baked beans on toast and afterwards sat around the bed talking softly to Sheila, Peter and the daughters reiterating love and reassurance. I sat quietly, completing the circle with another man’s words, Raymond Carver’s famous last published poem.

_Late Fragment_

_And did you get what_

_you wanted from this life, even so?_

_I did._

_And what did you want?_

_To call myself beloved, to feel myself_

_beloved on the earth._

When the time came Peter copied this out and laid it with Sheila in her coffin. It went with her into the ground.

At midnight we organised shifts to sit with her through the night. I took the first shift. Julia and Peter lay down on single beds in the corners of the room. I held Sheila’s icy hand, cooing my own quiet words as best I could.

Her breath had deteriorated to a distinct death rattle. She took shallow, hopeless grabs of air only for it to fall back out, her body too weak to hold it. At about 3am with no warning one long slow breath left her—and that was it. No more. Nothing. Stillness. End of life. I whispered Julia’s name and she and Peter were up in an instant, embracing her. Julia’s sister, a nurse, half asleep in the other room. She appeared beside us and immediately set to work. She propped Sheila’s jaw closed and arranged her arms over her chest where the rigor mortis would set them.

We called the other two sisters in town and their headlights bounced up the track twenty minutes later. Again we sat in a circle, talked to Sheila and to each other, telling stories, crying and laughing. I sat in silence, holding Julia’s hand. I left the family to their grieving and went to sleep.
The funeral was held five days later. That morning a letter arrived for me by registered post. I met the postie at the gate in my ironed white shirt and dark tie and ripped the envelope open. It was my divorce papers from Fiona.

The next week I moved off the farm into my writing room in town. Julia and Peter worked their way through the house gathering up Sheila’s last physical remains, bottles of medicine and bags of clothes for the Salvos. Peter and Sheila had built this house and until this time it had existed around her. For months it had been occupied by the smell of a sick person and it was weeks more before this completely left. After that all that remained were photos, nick-nacks and memories. This was probably the hardest part for Julia and Peter. Coping with the afterlife. Sheila was gone, never to return. But I was also gone by then, living through my own petit mort, no longer part of the day-to-day life of the house and those in it.

We stayed in contact, of course. Julia’s family were almost the only friends I had in town. They tried to keep me included in family life. We had BBQs and played tennis and I went out to the farm and swam. Otherwise I kept to myself in my little room. It was an add-on flat out the back of the main house with a lino floor, a narrow bed, a sink and a single hotplate. As the weather warmed up it baked like an oven. By eleven in the morning I sat at the desk, shirtless, shoeless and sweltering, my arms blistered like sweating cheese. At night the green tree frogs which croaked away in the toilet leapt out and crossed the lino in sucky jumps.

When I was eighteen I worked at Darling Harbour when it was still the railway goods yard. One day one of the old blokes took me aside and asked how long I intended staying. A couple of months, I told him. Just long enough to get some money to go travelling. He put his hand on my shoulder. I remember it, this big, unfamiliar paw. “Careful son. That’s what I said forty-one years ago.”

He couldn’t have given a young man any better career advice and it came back with panic attached as I lay in my saggy single bed listening to the frogs and wondering how I’d ended up at this. It was the sort of life the old blokes in Coogee would have lived had they found themselves in Grafton. What had been an exciting and exotic dream had become a nightmare.

I still wanted Julia. I hoped—I don’t know what I hoped—that somehow all this would stop happening and my earlier doubts would disappear and Julia and I
could carry on with the dream. I did that classic thing of hanging around after it was over. I didn’t heed Leonard Cohen’s warning: *a man never got a woman back, not by crawling on his knees.* I was pathetic and needy and shameless.

Julia was distant and self-contained, suffering in own private world, unable to share or alleviate her grief. This was the only way she could bear it. And I battered against this wall she had erected around her wanting, needing access, something the death of her mother had made her unable to give to anyone of either sex, lover, father, sister—anybody.

Then the next, the last thing happened. A month or two after Sheila died Julia went down for a week in Sydney. When she came back I took one look and knew. She climbed the steps to the little room and this time she didn’t have to make an announcement.

“Was it a woman?” I said.

She shuffled from foot to foot. “Do you really want to know? Really? Do you?”

I couldn’t help myself. I really wanted to know. She told me. Of course it was a woman. Julia's first woman. The next stage of her life had begun.

This was the final thing. I couldn’t stay any longer. It was just too painful, too self-destructive to stay. This was when her unavailability tipped over the edge, when her needs, her choice ceased being deniable—intellectually, at least. Emotionally I think I went on wanting her for years. The heart wants what the heart wants and in my experience usually the heart is the last to hear the news that it can't necessarily get it. Of course it mattered that it was a woman. This only added to my impotence in the situation. But I don’t remember ever being really angry about this. In a way it probably made it easier. If she’d gone to another man I might have tried to win her back. I might have got an enemy in my sights and wasted a lot of energy on him. This way it was more like having to accept a death. She was gone. That was it. The *petit mort* became a real, undeniable death. I had to drag my deaf and aching heart out of there before it broke up even more. I loaded everything back into the old XY Falcon Julia and I had bought several months earlier, and headed back south to Sydney. Down the big highway yet again. Out of Camp Julia back to the world that previously I’d inhabited with Fiona.
I moved into a friend’s spare room in Balmain and got some of my old work back as a steward—an extremely casual steward—on cruise boats on Sydney Harbour. Fiona was still living in the marriage flat in Bondi. It’d been over two years since that cold Coogee night. The news reached her, of course. It was inevitable I’d see her. We were at a wedding. I heard her weeping behind me. “It’s us. I still can’t get over what we threw away.”

I went to comfort her and she let me. For a week, two weeks, we allowed a little fire to rekindle itself. Then we managed to tell our hearts the news. It was over. Forget it. Don’t do this. Too much had happened. We had to move on.
14. Sydney

‘Write your book after two weeks,’ the adage goes, ‘or wait ten years.’

But some stories you can’t tell immediately. They’re too hot to touch. You can’t even get close to them. They’re too new, unformed. You have to turn and shield yourself from the heat. Later they cool down, time passes, and you can look into the furnace for the first time. Only then can you start to see the outline of this thing which forged you, which opened the eyes you see with now. So it was with Fiona and Julia.

I didn’t write it after two weeks.

Instead I tried to get on with my life. I tried to live as a normal citizen might. I worked at not writing it or anything out, to live beyond my past by just living. I would get around this wreckage on the tracks by ignoring it. By waiting for the accretion of the years to cover it under layers of new experience, fresh memory.

The decade passed. Life got on with itself. Regimes fell, governments grew old and collapsed, new ones rose up to take their place. Friends fell in love, had babies, separated and started with someone else all over again. Fiona settled with a man and had the son she didn’t have with me. Julia found a girlfriend and built a house on the farm under the very tree where she married Gavin. I went through girlfriends like characters from novels, getting to know them, discarding them, starting again. I moved from house to house, plonked my desk in the corner of each successive bedroom, lit my incense, sat in meditation, sorted my pens, prayed. I carted my history with me in the bottom drawer of my old grey filing cabinet, a neatly ordered chronology of diaries and notebooks. I didn’t know what to do with them. I couldn’t throw them out. I hadn’t finished with them. I knew something had to be done with them. I just didn’t know what.

And as the years passed the reality of my personality asserted itself. My memories wouldn’t leave me alone. They were as insistent and unruly as children, tumbling over me, climbing up, crashing down, clambering up again, demanding my attention. I could no longer maintain what perhaps was always going to be a wishful distance between my writing life and my ‘real’ life. I had no choice, it seemed, than to pick up a pen and bleed the things which mattered to me—my questions—onto
It was my human filtration system—the writing cure that I needed to survive. I knew no other way to live, to do this thing called ‘getting on with my life’. I had no choice. I had to write something out.

So I let my pen lead me. From the diaries and notebooks I filled several boxes with papers and manuscripts. They’re an archaeology in themselves, yellowing and dogeared, dated by the addresses on the used A4 envelopes in which I shoved them. The earliest ones I wrote by hand, the rustmarks from old paperclips in their corners. Later they were typewritten or computer printed and stapled. There was a film treatment, a manuscript of poems, a play—and I tried a dozen times—a hundred times!—to write this story as ‘fiction’. And each time I stopped, often in the middle of a sentence, overwhelmed by its inherent lies, leaving me in the re-reading stranded and angry, frustrated at my lack of courage to continue, confused why I couldn’t.

In exasperation I would then set off into what I hoped would be a different story, something ‘not about myself’. But every time I tried to set up house with a bunch of strangers the same three characters reappeared. Every one of these contrived situations devolved to the same story—Fiona, Julia and a baby called Jack. Always, significantly, with the same names. These were the people I really needed to hang out with. These were the people I wasn’t finished with yet. And again, in confusion, I found myself unable to continue, leading yet again to a silent keyboard and a flutter of pages into the box under the desk.

I found a note I made at the time. What I want to do with this book is put everything I know about men and women, love and sex, and the search for meaning in the modern world in a hopefully short, hopefully funny, sad and sweet, laugh and weep, can’t-put-it-down, give-it-to-your-friends, light as a souffle, serious as a sermon, spunky little novel set in and around Sydney with memorable characters and a plot that works.

Like everything I tried to write that decade, this was my story with Fiona and Julia in thin disguise, although I didn’t know it until I sat at my desk and my pen set out on its determined, inexorable journey to unmask us. And that spunky little novel never did get written, of course. Watered with tears, fertilised by confusion, all those pages and paragraphs and incandescent opening salvos were to be the compost from which this book would eventually grow.
I could not locate the route forward. At each attempt, in each new form, I felt myself to be ‘lying’. I remember the feeling of simply being overwhelmed by my material. I didn't have the courage, I didn't have the necessary distance, I didn’t have the talent—whatever. The planets were not aligned for completion and release. I was stuck, in the grip of this stuff, shackled to it, possessed by it, unable to find the certainty to write it, unable to find the form to write it in. I wrote some newspaper and magazine articles but other than that—for years—all I could do was watch my pen move in decreasing circles until it came to a stop on the page.

This created another paradox. The longer I left it the more I felt I was forgetting the story. My memory, like a self-attending organism, was gradually erasing from my mind the history which controlled me. I became anxious that if I didn’t get the story out I would lose it forever, and at the same time if I didn’t reclaim and record it I would never release myself from its grip. The longer I didn’t write it the further it would recede into my unconscious—and the more, therefore, it would control me. Only by writing it down could I move on and reassert direction in my life.

And this led to its own story. Why I was so obsessed? As a man shouldn’t I be able to shrug off my past and just get on with things? How did other men do it? This was always the question—how did other men cope? Not only in their relationships with women, but to even have relationships with women? Was I in any way similar to other men? Perhaps I was not. Few men I knew cared to acknowledge that they found this relationship business as difficult—as impossible—as me. Perhaps these demons were mine alone. So another silence surrounded me—of shame and guilt. Not guilt for what happened—I went through that, alone, and with Fiona a hundred times—but shame for the obsessiveness with which these events ruled me. Shame at my inability to act like a man, to get on with my life.

How can I account for this now? Was it lack of courage, or something else which derailed my resolve? I wonder now if I had some semi-conscious knowledge that writing the story out might ease some immediate pain, but would not really address the condition which caused it. Perhaps such paralysis was appropriate. Perhaps any other result would have been an obscuration. The desire to contain my questions in such a package—a beginning, a middle and no loose ends, positioned comfortably outside myself—was perhaps the very question I needed to address. No
life was lived this way. No life was that clean, that clear. Perhaps my inability to answer my questions this way was essential to understanding them. Perhaps in the end, like Jack Kerouac, “I had nothing to offer but my confusion.”

The boxful of tears under my desk had presented its irrefutable evidence. All other avenues had failed. The only way I could hopefully put the events behind me, to own and understand them, was to write them not as thinly disguised fiction, but as the truth of my life. If I was going to tell this story, I had to write it as it happened. I had to be as honest as I could. Had I been able to write them out after two weeks perhaps I would have been successful in living beyond these events. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. That wasn’t me, wasn’t my fate, wasn’t to be the life I have to live out.
15. Byron

Then, at the end of the old millennium, at the start of the new, I found myself back in Byron Bay. I was thirty-three when I returned to Sydney after my summer of clandestine love with Julia, a year older when I landed back with Fiona after America, two years older still when I crawled back from Grafton after Julia went to women. I went back only because I didn’t know where else to go. It was home, and the closest place I knew to geographical comfort. All through those stunned-mullet years of the 90s, however, I knew I’d leave for good eventually. But I didn’t know how, and I had no idea where to.

Most people come to Byron for the waters. Not me. At the start of 2000 when the relationship I was in broke up—when I ended it, yet again—I left Sydney as I always knew I would. I didn’t know where I’d end up. I just knew I wanted to be north. I got in the car and this was where it led me. Back to my past.

I am exactly the demographic who has helped make Northern NSW the place it grew into through the final decades of the last century. As with so many of my 70s generation Sydney was our past, the north became our future—our choice. I was one of the naive young believers who made the Aquarius Festival at Nimbin, in the lush hills behind Byron, the turning point it was. It was my last year of school. A bunch of us drove up in a borrowed van. We were young hippies, just emerging from childhood. It was the most exciting thing. There was music and nudity and pseudo-Eastern spiritual mumbo-jumbo and a bloke called Harry Gumboot who followed the Hare Krishnas around, chanting his own Gumboot mantra, gathering grinning hordes like the pied piper, the chant becoming more insistent, more euphoric as the crowd grew behind him. If he’d known the place to lead us that crisp week in May 1973, he could have nipped the whole North Coast hippie invasion in the bud. Busloads of tourists, promised dope-smoking hippies and free love in the gutters, strolled down the main street looking scared. I broke my arm on the first day and the plaster cast meant I couldn’t go into the unisex sauna and see breasts. I was devastated.

Later that year I visited Byron for the first time. We finished our HSC and drove north in the same van. We had surfboards and marijuana and Bob Dylan and the Stones and Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead on the tape deck. We were
leaving our childhoods behind once and for all—as much as any of us ever did in the 70s. We slept up in the hills and picked gold tops in the morning and made them into omelettes and drove down into town, spewing out the back of the van into the wild fenugreek growing at the side of the road. We parked at Clarke’s carpark and spent the day running up and down the beach, laughing till our faces ached and our legs finally buckled beneath us. Then we hit the Rib Cage for teriyake burgers and banana smoothies and sat in the gutter reading Oscar Wilde to each other. *The Importance Of Being Ernest.* Perfect.

In 1988, when I was looking for somewhere to finish the Alice book it was logical I’d go north. And although I mucked around for a while in the hills on Mud Flat Road, looking back, it was inevitable I’d somehow find my way to the coast, to Bangalow, to the house where I was destined to meet Julia and set off on the journey which would lead to this conclusion.

I always loved it up north. It was the land of my holidays. The air was balmy and fragrant, the hills green, the heat exciting. It loved driving north, crawling up the highway to Hornsby, gaining speed up the expressway, leaving Hexham behind, Raymond Terrace, Karuah, winding up the old Bulahdelah bends through the huge old logging forests into Les Murray country, past the turn-off to The Tallest Tree in NSW, hitting the humidity at Taree, the day getting warmer and greener and more vibrant as you continued up the potholey old Pacific Highway through Kempsey, Coffs, South Grafton—till you finally crested the view at Hayter’s Hill and spread out below you was the hinterland of green patchwork, the railway twisting through it like lazy stitchwork, the lighthouse on the eastern most pimple of Australia and the coast stretching all the way to Queensland, and out beyond the blue Pacific laid out before you like a postcard. It was as if you’d driven and driven and finally passed into another dimension and you could park your car and stretch your limbs and take off your shirt and feel the sun breathe life into your body and let the great big sigh of dopey happiness spread across your face. You'd arrived. You could relax. You were here.

Back in the 70s you could pick up a few acres of subdivided dairy farm in the hills behind Byron for ten or twenty grand and the old-timers kept a poker face and snickered behind their hands in the pub. Twenty grand! For a paddock! Everyone was young and pumped up with dreamy idealism and a belief that they were a part of
the great wave building around the globe to crash over the existing structures and sweep in a better world. It was a time of the new. They were all in their twenties and mostly on the dole and the future was a capitalist conspiracy. City kids playing farmers. In the 80s they got their own kids and got serious and got work and every second kinesiologist and naturopath and reiki dropkick in the southern hemisphere bought their five acres in the hills and set up shop and the north coast became a New Age subdivision without the kerbing.

This was when Paul Hogan bought up there and built ‘the world’s most expensive weekender’, as he called it, the ice cream palace in the hills which almost singlehandedly kickstarted the local economy towards what it is now. Before that everyone I knew was on the dole and driving rusty little Corolla wagons but when I got back the same people—intuitive carpenters, plant-it-and-see gardeners, self-taught sparkies—were driving second hand Mercs and had new hot water systems and big decks and fancy black stereos which lit up with coloured lights like airport runways at night. They were still on the dole, that much hadn't changed, but they had new whitegoods and somehow afforded CDs and some of them even had haircuts.

After that the 90s saw the hills fill with city professionals building websites and doing Mac graphics out of their home offices, earning a hundred, two hundred grand a year. That’s what happened to the 70s. They got twenty years older with grey ponytails and bald patches and drove around in Saabs and Range Rovers with tall, skinny kids about to finish school with studs through their tongues and shorts down to their ankles.

When I arrived at the start of the new century Byron was past its best and taking a deep breath for the inevitable future. Either spreading its legs or clamping them closed, depending on your point of view. Most of the town was about two weeks old, a rash of cheap houses on expensive land clambering up into the hinterland like a dying man in search of water. Going the wrong way because he was off his face on mushies. It was a brainless self-congratulation of hip capitalists and new age idiots sprinkled with a last gasp of crusty old hippies and seriously smelly ferals in bare feet and dreadlocks—with the ever-present underworld of backpackers rubbernecking around in bouncing halter tops and Teva sandals. And the rich had come, trawling up and down Jonson Street in their BMWs with the top down, the sun they’ve paid so much to get glinting off their Amani sunnies, the only consolation
being that like the rest of us, they couldn’t get a park because the place was so crowded.

Or you could still choose to look at it the other way, and see Byron as a diverse community of forward thinkers, free spirits and committed citizens who in that old fashioned way still believe they can play their role in building a better world. It's a town of defiant courage. Entrepreneurial self-reliance. A place of permission. Grassroots activism flying in the face of the global scourge. Etc, etc. Byron aroused contradictory passions. And it’s still holiday town. When I tell people I’d ended up there they sigh wistfully and say, Half your luck. Then immediately dismiss it as a place only the fully lobotomised would ever want to live.

Whatever you thought of it, up the end of Jonson Street the beach still curved for mile after mile towards Queensland and you could walk down to The Pass at dusk and back again into that golden view of Mt Warning and the Nightcap Ranges silhouetted against the sunset and content yourself that it didn’t matter what they did a block back from the beach they hadn’t managed to ruin this. Nothing the bastards could do would bugger this up.

It was logical that I’d end up in Byron. The land of eternal holiday became a retreat. A place of healing. I was twenty minutes from where Fiona lived with her new family. Ten minutes from the house outside Bangalow where I met Julia for the first time. A couple of hours from the farm on the Clarence where Julia and her girlfriend lived happily for a while in their love shack—and when that relationship finished she went back to men and an hour or so west was the hut in the hills where she lived with her new husband. Every morning I’d walk up Belongil Beach to the fenced-in breeding grounds of the little tern where we’d gone that first evening in 1988. I started every day by walking back into my past.

I rented a self-storage shed in the Industrial Estate. 3mx5m, three tin walls, a concrete floor and one big door. A garage. I entered it tentatively. Desk, books, photos, talismans. A rug. You never know with a new room. Would it work with me, or against me? I sat in meditation. The candle guttered in the breeze. The walls pinged and sighed in the heat.

*I write a little each day, without hope and without despair,* wrote Karen Blixen late in her long life. I tried not to hope too much, or despair.
From my desk I looked out on the red rendered bum of the Adult Video shop next door. Cars and trucks edged by loaded down with household possessions. Drivers glancing in, doing a double take, driving on. A man in a self-storage shed, typing.

I called it The Deconstruction Shed. It was in this shed that I wrote this book. A man in a self-storage shed, typing.

An image has stayed in my mind. It was the morning Fiona and I arrived in Grants Pass, Oregon, on the way to Princess Anne’s pine-clad palace in the hills. The Greyhound dropped us off at 4am and we had to wait outside the depot until the office opened and we could call Anne to come and pick us up. We lay on a bench, resting our head in the other’s lap, taking turns trying to sleep. As I sat stroking Fiona’s hair I could hear the sound of water falling, intermittent but regular. I couldn’t understand where it could be coming from. What could it be, out there in the darkness beyond? A municipal fountain? A creek nearby with a small waterfall?

When day broke the question was answered. Across the road was a lumber yard with sprinklers watering down the high black stacks of logs. Spurt, splat. Spurt, splat. Spurt, splat. Leaving Fiona under the sleeping bag I went to have a look. There was a sign at the entrance to the yard. GREAT DANGER TO THE PUBLIC. DO NOT ENTER! But the gate was open and I stood at it looking in. Water from the nearest sprinkler slapped the mud at my feet, and high above arcs rose gracefully over the logs, remained stationary for a moment then disintegrated, refracting the dawn light in rainbow-coloured shards as it fell to ground.

I heard a sound behind me and turned. Fiona was standing there, her hair tousled, her eyes gluey from sleep. She had her hands tucked into the sleeves of her woollen shirt like a Japanese woman with a kimono. I opened my arm and she smiled and leant into me, kissing me once, very lightly, on the cheek. We turned back and stood for a long time without saying a word, simply watching this beautiful sight. William Carlos Williams has a line in one of his poems that travel is often most exciting because of the extreme hours we do it—dusk, dawn, in the dead of night. This was one of those times. Stranded in an alien place at an unusual hour these brief minutes were a quiet pause in the confused drama we were playing out at the time.
I noticed then that each log had a small white tag on its end and before I thought what I was doing I ran forward to snatch one up from where it had dropped in the mud. I grabbed it, ran back to Fiona and opened my hand. We exclaimed together. The white label was a bar code. Each of these virgin logs, which only a few days or weeks earlier had been a tree with its roots deep in the soil and its limbs reaching towards the sky, had become something else—lumber, a product, waiting here in silence for its future to arrive.

And what we didn’t know as we stood there arm in arm, for the moment completely and purely together, was that deep inside Fiona a part of me and a part of her was burrowing into the wall of her uterus, creating a new life which within weeks would ask of us questions we had no idea how to answer. It was a life that would walk and talk in a way we never intended. It was a life that didn’t end that brutal morning in Amsterdam although we could have had no idea of that either. Jack has lived on to create the opposite life for me. This life, of enquiry and reflection on what might have been but wasn’t to be. Looking back, reaching forward, trying to understand. A little each day, without hope and without despair.
A Bachelor's Family

Exegesis

Writing the Personal:
A comparative analysis of self-representations of masculinity in magazine columns and memoir.
Introduction

There was a café around the corner from where I used to live in Sydney. Populated with the usual mix of inner-city types—office workers, artists, academics, gays, DINKs putting as much away as they could against a Sydney mortgage until parenthood couldn't wait any longer—its clientele told the story of fin-de-siecle Sydney. We were not family types. We were single, shacked-up or still sharing—most of us, it would be fair to say, living out the extended adolescence which seems to be a hallmark of our generation.

Among the regulars was a table of men, often up to six of them. They were clean cut and well dressed, all I would guess under thirty-five, young men of the professions with shoulder-strap briefcases and trendy narrow-collared suits. They fussed in sibilant, sing-songy voices and, as I approached, examined me in the way I imagine every woman has known since she ceased being a child. They were relaxed in each other's company, laughing easily as they sipped their lattes and smeared boutique jam on their croissants. No butter, of course. No-one there used butter.

Most of the men, I would have guessed, were gay. And it was probably a good guess—after the Castro district in San Francisco those few square kilometres of Sydney supposedly had the greatest population density of homosexual men in the world. But one of these men had me intrigued. He wore a ring on his wedding finger and on some mornings had a little girl on his knee, feeding her corners of croissant, helping her with her frothed milk babychino, rubbing noses and raspberying kisses against her cheek like any proud dad. His friends knew her and she seemed to know them. They participated with her, uncles of some sort, or friends, or something. She was as much a part of their circle as he was.

But who, in relation to her, was he? Was he her father? Was he in fact heterosexual? Did he live as a family with her mother? (I never saw a woman in this group.) Or perhaps (in the legalese of the day) he was her non-custodial parent? Perhaps he and her mother were separated or divorced and co-parenting from separate residences? Or perhaps he was gay and her father—perhaps that’s why they’d separated—because he’d realised which side of the bed he wanted to lie on, and it wasn't in hers.
Or, if he wasn’t her father, perhaps he was her uncle or her mother’s close friend, someone who minded her regularly—a surrogate uncle?

Or perhaps they never had been a couple, just two friends who decided to stop waiting for Mr and Ms Right and take matters into their own hands. Perhaps, irrelevant of his sexuality, he wanted a child and organised to father one with a woman friend who might or might not have been a lesbian. And, if her mother was a lesbian, either single or living as a family with another woman and ‘their’ daughter, perhaps that man, their friend, her biological father—gay or not—minded her several nights a week and the little girl had three parents—or if he had a partner, four? Two men, two women, one child. One family—of sorts.

This man could have fitted any of these guesses. In those years, in Sydney at the end of the 20th century, it was impossible to tell. And in Sydney at the end of the 20th century, any one of those constellations could have been called a family. This was my world.

In their many permutations these blurred boundaries and fluid gender identities are pervasive through much of the contemporary West. This fluidity presents a multitude of questions about our perceptions of gender identity. Here, I wish to look again at what it means to 'be a man'. What is 'manliness' and 'masculinity'? And how—as a community and as individuals—do we represent these slippery identities? Of course, these questions are far too broad for a short exegetical essay, so specifically my interest here is how, in this period of fluid gender identity, are such identities mediated in self-reflexive (first person) accounts of masculinity—specifically in memoir and magazine columns? And, more personally, how does a writer with a background in fiction find himself examining questions of masculinity in non-fiction forms. This exegesis accompanies my memoir *A Bachelor's Family* (see pp 1-127) and a number of relevant newspaper columns. (See Appendix A.)

It is my argument here that these forms of literary production—column and memoir—both represent attempts to discuss aspects of contemporary masculinity in the public sphere, and as such are expressions of what Bob Connell in *Masculinities* calls 'masculinity politics'. This he defines as 'those mobilisations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and, with it, men's position in
gender relations.' (Connell, 1995, p205.) I will argue that both column and memoir are, more specifically within this politics, manifestations of what Connell describes as 'masculinity therapy' (Connell, 1995, p206) but shaped and delimited by the conventions of their genres.

Furthermore, when viewed as part of the trajectory of my career as a writer the works also manifest as personal expression of the contemporary politics of masculinity. As a writer heretofore of fiction, the fact that I should find myself working in creative non-fiction reflects not only recent industry and reader interest in the form but, with its emphasis on the 'healing possibilities' of truthfulness and personal disclosure, embraces the essence of 'masculinity therapy'.

I will examine these propositions by first briefly reviewing recent literature on the rise of a politically articulated masculinity as a popular idea. Particular emphasis will be given to Bob Connell's notion of 'masculinity therapy'. This, he argues in Masculinities, his analysis of contemporary masculinities, is the prevalent white, heterosexual, middle-class site of 'masculinity politics'.

Second, I will examine my experience working within this context of 'masculinity therapy', specifically as a book writer—my 'memoir of non-fatherhood' A Bachelor's Family—and as a columnist writing about men's issues in the column In The Male in the Good Weekend magazine. This paper refers to these creative works, hopefully acting as a preface or exegesis of their production, nature and role within the new masculinity politics.

Literature Review

Perhaps never before in human history has personal identity been so fluid, negotiable—or political. What it means to 'be a man' or 'be a woman' is, more than ever before, a self-determined state. Alan Peterson suggests that:

[academic study] has exposed the limitations and implications of 'identity', and many people now look forward to the emergence of new or reconceptualized models of identity that permit a wider range of sexual and personal possibilities than is implied by the sex/gender system. (Peterson, 1998, p130.)
For many people biological sex no longer determines gender—it is merely one factor in the identity we can construct for ourselves. (Even this—our biological sex—is open to change through surgery and hormone treatments.) And as feminist and queer theorists have addressed the issue of what it means to exist in the margins of mainstream society, their enquiry has opened discussion about the previously less visible question of what it means to be a man.

Questions about 'manliness' and 'masculinity' have become issues of wide discussion, not only among theorists but also in the media and mainstream community. Bob Connell, perhaps the most influential Australian theorist of masculinities, sees these questions in terms of political power. (Connell, 1995, p204.) In *Masculinities*, he sketches a history of masculinity in which he demonstrates that being a man has, through human history, been virtually a prerequisite for power: 'Public politics on almost any definition is men's politics.' (1995:204.) He asserts that due to the last two decades of feminist change 'men's position in gender relations, routinely the ground of politics, has also become the object of politics… Masculinity is made a principal theme, not taken for granted as background.' (Connell, 1995, p205.)

Alan Peterson believes that for those of us at this point in history who make up the 'mainstream'—middle class heterosexual white men (and I include myself in this group)—this introspection has created unprecedented uncertainty:

Recent economic, political and social changes including changes in the nature of work and the rise of the women's movements and the gay and lesbian movements, have affected all men, but perhaps psychologically hardest hit of all were middle class, straight white men from their late 20s through their 40s. (1998:127)

Peterson quotes Kimmel and Kaufman's study of the 'so-called men's movement' to emphasise that uncertainty around masculine identity has greatly affected this group:

For these were not only the men who inherited a prescription for manhood that included economic autonomy, public patriarchy, and the frontier safety valve but also the men who believed themselves entitled to the power that attended on the successful demonstration of masculinity. (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1994, p262 in Peterson, 1998, p127.)
For Connell these are 'the men of the metropolitan countries'. (1995:202):

More than any category of people before them [these men] collectively have the power—accumulated resources, the physical and social techniques—to shape the future. (Connell, 1995, p202–3.)

How men retain this power, or spread it around, has led to a politics of masculinity previously unthought of:

The meaning of masculinity, the variety of masculinities, the difficulties of reproducing masculinity, the nature of gender and the extent of gender inequality all come into question and are furiously debated. (Connell, 1995, p203.)

This has led to a 'masculinity politics' which Connell defines as 'those mobilisations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue and with it, men's position in gender relations.' (Connell, 1995, p205.) There are, Connell asserts, four main sites of masculinity politics: 'masculinity therapy'; 'the gun lobby: defending hegemonic masculinity'; 'gay liberation' and 'exit politics'. (Connell, 1995, p206–224.)

Broadly accepting Connell's four main sites of masculinity politics, I would argue that to be a man in the 'metropolitan countries' at this point in history is, socially and individually, to be an expression, or site, of these jostling politics. This is the theatre and these are the stages on which we play out the drama of 'manhood'. Every man has a fluid identity as defined in these categories and each of us plays a role—or several roles—in the greater social and political drama as these conflicting aspects of masculinity rub up against each other, and often divide or hybridise.

It is Connell's view, however, that 'no sooner had issues about masculinity and the male role been raised by the women's liberation movement at the end of the 1960s, than they were reinterpreted as therapeutic issues'. In this way masculinity therapy moved to centrestage and became 'the kind of masculinity politics currently most talked about, especially in the United States, focused on the healing of wounds done to heterosexual men by gender relations'. (Connell, 1995, p206.)
Masculinity therapy, Connell believes, grew from the 1970s' 'boom in groups, workshops and counsellors concerned with 'men and feminism', 'male sexuality', 'male liberation' and 'men's issues'. (Connell, 1995, p206.) 'The rationale for therapy was that men needed therapists' help in breaking out of the male role and becoming more sensitive and emotionally expressive.' (Connell, 1995, p207.)

These anxieties, in Connell's opinion, have translated into subsequent political effect. Connell believes masculinity therapy has become an essentially conservative reaction to feminist critiques of power inequities:

The main tendency of masculinity therapy is to replace a politics of reform rather than support it… Authors such as Farrell, Goldberg and Bly simply presuppose a white, heterosexual, middle-class American readership. The men addressed are those who quietly benefit from patriarchy without being militant in its defence… The self-absorption that is an important practical consequence of masculinity therapy, and the translation of social issues about men into questions of pure psychology, are both connected with the profound interest this group has in limiting the revolutionary upheaval in gender relations that was on the agenda in the early 1970s. (Connell, 1995, p210–11.)

This 'self-absorption' has led to the contemporary abundance of what Connell calls 'Books About Men'. (Connell, 1995, p51, et al.) (His tone implies a little too much distance, it seems to me, considering his own books only add to the list.) Steve Jones, writing in the United Kingdom, echoes Connell's assertion that this self-absorption is born in the United States:

Maleness is simple but manhood is infinitely complex. The condition is much discussed in the United States, where the politics of inequality that occupies the rest of the world has to a great extent been forgotten. (Jones, 2002, pxv.)

Jones' ironic tone perhaps also betrays his own fear of adding to the culture of self-absorption—what he calls 'the mountains of dismal stuff on men'. (Jones, 2002, p225.)

Although Warren Farrell and Herb Goldberg appeared in print earlier, it was American poet Robert Bly's 1990 book *Iron John* that entered the public (or media)
consciousness as the groundbreaking book about men. Easily seen as regressive romanticism, Bly's 'mytho-poetic' analysis of the position of men in contemporary society has been much lampooned. His call for men to rediscover their 'hairy man' within through drumming circles, tree-hugging, naked romps in the woods, emotional catharsis and initiation rituals was too good to be true. Tabloid commentators and constitutional sceptics had a field day—in much the same way, of course, as they did in the late 1960s depiction of bra-burning, hairy-legged women as the sum total of the women's liberation movement.

Even those who might have been predisposed to Bly felt the need to clarify his ideas. In Australia Steve Biddulph, with a background in social work and family counselling, sought to ground Bly's ideas in more practical advice. His book *Manhood*, published here in 1994, was subtitled, 'An action plan for changing men's lives'.

Bly and Biddulph's notion of the 'absent father', as it has become known, struck a chord with a generation of men who throughout the West were questioning 'traditional' masculine identities and the consequences of the fathering they received. This concern led logically enough to the question: without sufficient role modelling themselves, how could men becoming fathers know how to raise their own sons?

By the mid-1990s unprecedented rates of divorce and family separation throughout the West were creating wide community alarm about underfathered and under-achieving boys. Biddulph addressed these concerns in his subsequent book. *Raising Boys* continued his down-to-earth advice for a readership hungry for guidance, or a discipline of masculinity, in a world in which traditional landmarks had become unclear.

And of course the problem of 'what to do about boys' was not limited to Australia. By the mid-1990s exploration of masculine identities in the US had also evolved into growing concern at a systemic generational underfathering. In 1995 David Blankenhorn published *Fatherless America* and Robert Bly himself weighed in with *Sibling Society*, published in 1996.

Feminist reaction to the male search for identity as represented in such books about men was varied. Many of the older warriors from the 'grim tribes' of feminism (a
Helen Garner term, prompted by their reaction to her dissenting 1995 book The First Stone seemed wary, if not dismissive. In the media sphere, Sydney feminist academic Eva Cox, Adelaide author Susan Mitchell and columnist Susan Maushart in The Australian, for example, each continue to pass comment from what might be described as an 'unreconstructed position'.

By the start of the new century, however, the social climate for men was showing marked change. 'Stop bitching about men, says matriarch', trumpeted a 2001 front-page headline in the Sydney Morning Herald:

The novelist Doris Lessing believes men are the new silent victims in the sex war, "continually demeaned and insulted" by women without a whimper of protest. Lessing, the 81-year-old feminist icon bewailed, "the unthinking and automatic rubbing of men which is now so part of our culture that it is hardly even noticed." (Sydney Morning Herald, 15/7/2001)

While an earlier orthodoxy too readily diminished with sarcasm male response to feminist social change or dismissed it as merely seeking 'a return to the good old days', Lessing's outburst was representative of a new tolerance towards and curiosity about male experience.

Younger commentators were coming through with a new, less combative stance. Kathy Bail (1996), Virginia Trioli (1996) and Catharine Lumby (1997) gave voice to a new generation of 'lipstick feminists'. These were young, empowered women who entered adulthood assuming an equality of rights and opportunities afforded by the social and legal reforms their older sisters had had to fight hard to achieve. Part of this self-assurance was a softening of attitudes towards the male predicament: not all men are bastards after all. Instead, the argument went, we are all—men and women both—trapped inside a system which works to undermine and oppress freedom of individual expression.

American academic Susan Faludi represents this shift perhaps better than any other commentator. Her titles speak for themselves. In 1991 she published Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women; in 1997 it was Stiffed: The Betrayal of American Men.
In a 1999 interview she said:

I don't see how you can be a feminist and not think about men. One of the gross misconceptions about feminism is that it's only about women. But in order for women to live freely, men have to live freely, too. Feminism has shown us that what we think of as feminine is actually defined by cultural messages and political agendas. The same holds true for men and for what constitutes masculinity. Being a feminist opens your eyes to the ways men, like women, are imprisoned in cultural stereotypes. (Mother Jones, Sept/Oct 1999)

*In The Male*, my column in *Good Weekend* magazine is, I would argue, a direct product of this renewed openness to male views. I conceived of the column simply as a forum to address social and gender issues from a male perspective. It had become evident to me that although there appeared to be a pretty even gender mix of commentators on current affairs and many women were writing in the traditional male domain—politics, the economy and sport—I couldn't think of one man in any paper writing about 'soft' social issues—certainly not with the personal approach I had in mind.

And the men I could think of—Richard Glover in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sean Condon and Jonathon Biggins in *Good Weekend*, Jonathon Este and Brian Matthews in *The Australian Magazine*—tended to be humorists. Hugh McKay in the *SMH* and Philip Adams in *The Australian Magazine* ranged across political and social issues, but from a more detached, 'objective' perspective. I deliberately wanted to avoid both styles—they operated far too readily, in my opinion, as an easy male defence against open self-disclosure and as such diminished the possibilities of the articulation of authentic male experience. This was the opposite precisely of the hopes I held for my column.

For that matter I found it hard to think of any women doing what I hoped to do as a man. All the women columnists I could think of in the newspapers I knew well—the *SMH* and *The Australian*—were either 'serious' social commentators such as Bettina Arndt, Adele Horin and Miranda Devine in the *SMH* or Janet Albrechtson in *The Australian*, or humorists such as Susan Maushart and Emma Tom in *The Australian*. Both papers also had a resident spiritual/self help guru—Ruth Ostrow in *The*
Australian, Stephanie Dowrick in *Good Weekend*—and the astrology columns, of course, are traditionally regarded as women's business as well.

**Creative non-fiction and the flight to reality**

More or less contemporaneous with the evolution of new attitudes towards men was the industry and reader turn away from fiction towards creative non-fiction. Sales of creative non-fiction were booming, while fiction, comparatively, was not. Commentators went into print in an attempt to explain the phenomenon. Drusilla Modjeska, in a 2002 essay exploring her own recent disinterest in reading fiction quoted JG Ballard writing in 1995, that 'the balance between reality and fiction has shifted':

> Increasingly, their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass-merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-emption of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality. *(Sydney Morning Herald, 31/8/02)*

Only months later Mark Mordue appeared in the same newspaper discussing the reading public's shift from fiction to non-fiction. He wondered whether the boom in non-fiction 'suggested some missing connection, a breach in fiction's ability to commune with a public it had somehow forgotten or left behind.' *(Sydney Morning Herald: 25/1/03)*:

> Exploring why this widespread hunger for 'true stories' had taken hold at this particular time in history, James Griffin, books commentator with ABC Television, felt that whereas 'once upon a time, Australians might say: "Well, what's so special about you?" now 'something about our culture has changed. It's OK now to tell your own story.' Fiona Giles, an author and editor, felt that this trend might also be symptomatic of 'an obsession with being connected, often to special-interest communities'. *(Sydney Morning Herald, 25/1/03)*
My own experience as a writer of fiction choosing to write creative non-fiction reflects and, indeed, has contributed to this trend.

**Case Studies—'Masculinity therapy' in column (In The Male) and memoir (A Bachelor's Family)**

As I have stated, it is my view that my columns and my memoir are both expressions of 'masculinity therapy', sites of masculinity politics as described by Bob Connell, albeit delimited by the conventions of their genres. It is also my thesis that as a writer of fiction my choice to write in these forms—both creative non-fiction—is, with their inherent possibilities of 'truthfulness', a manifestation in itself of 'masculinity therapy'.

**Creative non-fiction and my flight to reality**

'You can write a whole novel with your left arm curved around the page,' wrote Helen Garner in the introduction to the published scripts of her films *The Last Days of Chez Nous* and *Two Friends*:

> You can get to the end of the first draft without having shown it to a single person or made one compromise. Even if you have to battle with an editor, the book reaches the reader pretty much as you intended it. All its mistakes and failures are yours, totally and forever, and all its little glories. When the chips are down, you are the book, and the book is you.

So why would a novelist turn her back on this marvellous freedom, this privacy and independence, and sneak into the bunfight of screenwriting? I did it for the money. That was my first reason, anyway… (Later) I found that film writing is powered by the same drives as fiction. You do it out of curiosity, and technical fascination, and the same old need to shape life's mess into a seizable story.

(Garner, 1992, p.vii–viii)

This, pretty well, sums up my situation with creative non-fiction. I started writing for newspapers for the money and later found I liked it for much the same reason I wrote 'my own stuff'—it was an attempt to satisfy 'the same old need to shape life's mess into a seizable story'. Some years later, when I found myself needing to shape some
of my life's mess into longer form, I turned not to fiction, but memoir—creative non-fiction. Both were attempts to discuss aspects of contemporary masculinity—as I lived them—in the public sphere.

At the time I wondered whether my disinterest in fiction was my business alone, or indeed reflected some contemporary inadequacy of the form. Perhaps, I thought, it might be something to do with this information-overloaded age, with our time in history. Was 'fiction' passe? Are we harder to please? Is it that we know too much about the world to accommodate the 'half-truth' of fiction? In an era of fakery—of special effects, digital imagery, Photoshop—is it that the un tarnished truth had become a rare commodity, more valuable by far than any virtual reality? Perhaps this made the choice stark. Only with confidence that what we are being offered is fantasy can we suspend disbelief, let down our guard of 'factual prejudice' and allow the other thing to take over. And on the contrary, if we are being offered 'truth’ we don't want to be confused by tricks. We need to trust that it is true. It is a rare, pure thing and if we open our hearts to it, we don’t want some smartarse puppetmaster to pop into frame and tell us we’d been fooled. But of course, I should only talk for myself. What mattered to me as I laboured under the weight of global news and disinformation was shedding skin, dismantling armour, sharing real life experience, breeching our isolation by telling the truth.

In contrast to my youthful belief in fiction I felt a contrary evangelism grip me: the only way we could 'truthfully' articulate the big picture was through the window of our own experience. And what this meant, when it came to my own writing, was sharing my story, my life experience, as honestly, as nakedly as I could: if I was going to tell anyone else’s story with any 'truth' at all I had to acknowledge my own first.

It was an inversion of the axiom, 'we must be prepared to tell all our secrets—and everyone else's as well'. Instead, we should concur that it is necessary to tell all our secrets first—in order to tell everyone else's as well. Only by telling my truth could I expect others to do the same. In this way I might learn from them and they from me—and together liberate truth from the prison of acceptable falsehood, from fiction. I had my textual antecedents lined up, of course. Quentin Crisp: 'No-one is
boring if they tell the truth.' And W.H. Auden: ‘A poet’s hope: to be prized and local like a valley cheese.’

So I wrote my book as memoir, as creative non-fiction, as truth. Encountering explanations, as described above, by Modjesta and Mordue, went some way to explaining why I made this choice. I wasn't alone, as it turned out. It also helped in my understanding that the shift in public taste to creative non-fiction can be viewed in part as a product of social changes apparent in the wake of the feminist and masculinist movements, the essence of which is being truthful to one's own experience as a tool for breaching social isolation and alienation and informing both writer and reader in their search for place and identity.

In Manhood, Steve Biddulph quotes Robert Bly:

> We gain personal authority and find our unique sense of self only when we learn to distinguish between our own story, our autobiographical truths and the official myths that have previously governed our minds, feelings and actions. This begins when we ask, "What story have I been living? What myth has captured me?" It ends only when we tell our own story and authorise our own lives… (Biddulph, 1994, p229)

**Column—In The Male**

As a literary writer, I came to newspapers through the back door. While the more conventional career path for 'wannabe' writers is to spend time as journalists while they mature as individuals and hone their craft as wordsmiths, I did things the other way round. I never trained to be a journalist, or worked as one. My publishing progression was through poetry and fiction; my first newspaper story, for *The Australian* in 1995, appeared some fifteen years after the publication of my first poem.

Spoilt, perhaps—or was it empowered?—by my background, I only ever wrote about subjects which interested me. I lived in the US through late 1995 and most of 1996, and from there I filed stories for *The Australian* on literary and cultural curiosities which took my fancy as I moved around—the historic covered bridges of Madison County in Iowa and the tourist boom created in the area by James Lee Waller's novel
of the same name; the Hemingway house in Key West, Florida; a day spent with
Kenny Kramer, inspiration for the character Cosmo Kramer in the New York sitcom
*Seinfeld*. It was on my return to Australia at the start of 1997—with the
encouragement of my female editor—that I began writing about men's issues, or
perhaps more truly, my issues—essays and articles, written always from a
personal perspective.

For *The Australian, The Australian Magazine*, and later *The Sydney Morning Herald*
and *Good Weekend* I wrote about donating sperm and eighteen years later finding out
that I was not, in fact, the father I'd always assumed myself to be; about men
struggling with identity in the wake of feminism; about my two Raymonds: Chandler
and Carver; a one-legged man trekking in Nepal; my efforts to get published as a
young poet; and attending a ten-day *Vipassana* silent meditation retreat.

Initially I did newspaper work for one reason: the income would buy time for my
'real' writing—which meant, in the mid-1990s, fiction. As I discuss later I was,
through those years, living out the repercussions of events I called 'the train smash in
the middle of my life', a period of intense relationship upheaval several years earlier.
Newspaper work became a welcome avenue to quick publication while I struggled to
make sense of these life events through fiction.

My personal story is, of course, relevant to this case study and, indeed, the 'type' of
writer I've become. I was 29 (and it was 1984) before I took myself and writing
seriously enough to intentionally try to make a career of it. Through my twenties I
held the belief, no doubt born of some sort of 1970s anti-establishment anarchism,
that to publish was to sell out. Instead, I wrote letters the length of short novels to my
friends, convinced that by limiting myself to an audience of one I was maintaining
the integrity of my creative spirit. Perhaps this helps explain why I have always been
a subjective, personal writer. What I write has never been simply *what I do*, but an
expression of myself which makes me feel more at home in the world. As time has
gone by and I have received feedback that what I write also informs the lives of my
readers I came to understand that writing is also how I feel useful. Through the late
1990s, as I continued to write and publish essays and articles addressing
contemporary social themes from my own experience, this feeling of usefulness, of
contributing, became as much a reason for doing newspaper work as the income it provided.

It was this desire to join a wider dialogue which, some years later, prompted me to seek a regular column in a national newspaper. I started pitching for a regular space at the end of 2002. I could see no-one filling the role, which was, as I have stated, my intention to address 'social and gender issues from a male perspective'. There was a gap in the market—and I wanted to be the man to fill it.

I knew I wanted to write for a quality broadsheet. Coming from Sydney I've always felt The Sydney Morning Herald to be my 'natural' paper—compared to, say, The Age had a I been a Melbournian or The Australian, had I lived elsewhere. Although I had written for both papers—and their magazines—and although from my experience as a freelance contributor and fill-in columnist in The Australian that paper would probably have given me a longer editorial rein, wider exposure (and higher pay), I felt my own cultural tastes, politics, and literary aspirations were better reflected (or approximated) in the SMH and The Age. And while The Australian, as editorial flagship in this country of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, seems to be reflecting its company's shift towards more conservative opinions, Fairfax, publisher of the SMH and The Age, is about as liberal as the mainstream press in Australia gets.

Good Weekend goes out as a free colour supplement to both the Saturday SMH and The Age. It contains local investigative journalism, buy-ins from quality overseas magazines such as The New Yorker and regular columns on popular culture and lifestyle. Good Weekend was an integral part of my weekend as a newspaper reader. Had I articulated a wish list for the place my column might appear, Good Weekend would probably have been at the top. Although its readership is concentrated in NSW and Victoria (while The Australian is read in all corners of the country) it was where I knew I felt most at home.

As it happened my timing was right. For the previous two years Stephanie Dowrick's column had alternated fortnightly with the reflections of Melbourne psychotherapist Peter O'Connor. His column, however, stopped appearing at the end of 2002 and early in 2003 the editor agreed that In The Male should be its replacement. We would
kick off with an essay I was already writing and the column would continue
fortnightly thereafter.

This first essay, titled *This Bachelor's Life* (see Appendix A pp….) set the tone for *In
The Male*. Subtitled by the editors, 'Why do some people find it so easy to be in a
couple and others struggle with this thing called love?', in it I explored my past as a
'serial bachelor'. No subsequent column generated as much feedback. And over the
months, when I continued to write with honest enquiry about my own experience and
observations—what I called my 'personal' columns—I found reader response positive
and supportive. At least more positive than when I wrote outside my own experience
in what I called, alternatively, my 'impersonal' columns. These tended to generate
more hostile reader feedback. This only further cemented my belief in the hunger for
and importance of personal story as a healing agent in others' lives—the foundation
stone, of course, of 'masculinity therapy'.

In the personal columns I shared some of the intimate themes of my life: finding
myself in middle age the 'father' of abortions and miscarriages rather than of a live-
birth child; about my last day with my father before he suddenly died; about my
experience as a member of a men's group; my feelings about a former girlfriend
choosing to have a baby alone; my annual 'blokes' bushwalk in the Snowy Mountains
and about my experience as a teenage bulimic.

The 'impersonal' columns ranged across topics which stirred my interest: several
times about aspects of relationship; men's emotions and our tendency to isolate
ourselves; how men show their love; the consequences of the breakup of long
marriages; work, sport, Viagra, owner-building, domestic violence, the lack of male
teachers in primary schools and the major political parties' policies about men's
issues. I attempted to analyse how the systemic vilification of men—typified by such
unmindful comments as 'all men are bastards' and 'all the decent men are married or
gay'—became so accepted and invisible in our culture; I discussed the toxic contract
of emotional co-dependency so common—and unquestioned—in many relationships;
and I looked at two sides of a Sydney murder—the dead woman's husband and the
convicted killer—as an instance of two men trapped in different aspects of the male
story.
This unresolved split between 'personal' and 'impersonal' became, in essence, the drama of the column's future. During our initial discussions, the editor of Good Weekend expressed concern that on the evidence of the work I'd previously done for Good Weekend 'they' weren't sure of my ability to write about anything but myself. It was a concern I shared. I wanted to range across topics I felt relevant to other men, but I knew my strength lay in exploration of my own experience and personal responses to wider social issues. This, as I have said, seemed to be what gave my work the 'truthfulness' readers responded to. How was I, therefore, to write on topics about which I had no direct personal experience? I think this question was never really resolved and was, in the end, the column's undoing. I never felt trusted enough to really trust myself. And I think the editors were never really convinced that an openly subjective column—my voice and my experience—was what they wanted for the magazine.

In his book On Writing Stephen King commented that the first draft of a book, intended for the author's eyes only, is written 'with the door closed'. (King, 2000, p167) This is his version of the 'left arm curved around the page'. In subsequent drafts, because a book is to be read, not just written, the writer must fling the door open and invite the reader into his consciousness. For me, this was a significant difference between the writing of the column and the memoir. While the column was written very much with the door open, I beavered away at the memoir with the door closed—'with my left arm curved around the page'. It was something I needed to write for myself. Although I hoped it would some day contribute to public discourse on masculinities (and indeed, become one of Connell's woeful 'books about men') the act of writing it out—for myself—was what mattered most.

Working for the magazine, 'with the door was always open' meant in part being aware that I was primarily writing to satisfy an editor and by her assessment, the readership of the magazine. As my editor had no hesitation rejecting columns which she thought 'didn't work', I felt myself too often looking over my shoulder. On more than one occasion I redrafted several times, at each draft pushing that door a little more open. What does she want? What does she think they want? How can I satisfy this and still say what I want? I felt myself on permanent probation—censored and censoring myself in the process.
As the months passed, however, and I became more comfortable with the brief of the column and my grasp of the 740-word format, I felt I'd earned my editors' trust in both my voice and my writing ability. But it seemed I never did earn that trust. The column lasted less than twelve months. In the end, having rejected three columns in a row (all of which I felt passed muster), and with a new woman in the editor's chair, the deputy passed on the news that they'd decided the gig had reached the end of the line.

I must be clear that this was their decision, not mine. I never felt my editor adequately explained what I wasn't giving her in my copy that she wanted. I think, really, it came down to not providing, in voice or content, the version of 'manhood' she felt the magazine's readers—and indeed, she herself—was comfortable with. 'Stop going on about the crisis in masculinity,' she said with exasperation at the end. This, perhaps, at last made clear our divergence. She wanted something more lightweight, more like the other columnists I was determined not to emulate. To exaggerate it, perhaps, she wanted her man to be telling jokes, not telling his truth.

Did the column succeed? On one measure, obviously not. Had it been successful I presume it would still be appearing. Perhaps, given the necessary exigencies of mass media, that is the final measure. Sales up, advertisers happy. During its short life, however, personal and reader feedback reassured me that the column satisfied—in some, at least—their hunger for the male voice, the absence of which spurred me to attempt it in the first place.

Readers often disagreed with my opinions (even my experience!) but this didn't mean the column wasn't doing its job. I think, in fact, it indicated the opposite. The national media still suffers from a lack of male voices in my subject area. This absence leaves male opinion and experience untold and, because of this, women's views are still too often assumed to represent men as well. For a male voice to challenge this orthodoxy would of course jar on some people—reminiscent, perhaps, of the early days of feminism when the mere presence of a woman's voice outraged many conservative men.

And by my measure did it succeed? Some weeks more than others, is the obvious answer, and this inconsistency by my reckoning was a measure of its truthful voice. I
was always proud to be doing it. To simply exist, flaws and all, as a male voice where there had not been one before was success enough. And by this measure, in itself its very existence was 'masculinity therapy' in action.

If, at the start, I was warned against being too personal—and wary of it myself—by the end I think I wasn't being personal enough. In the effort to satisfy a wider brief I'd drifted away from the personal truthfulness which gave my writing its stamp. I'd stopped using the 'I' pronoun and had wandered into the quicksand of the inclusive 'we'. I hated this. I felt pontificatory, like some loudmouthed shock jock or right wing columnist. I didn't like it in others and despaired that I'd succumbed to it myself. Although it was not in so many words my agenda for the column to exist as a site of 'masculinity therapy', that it did indeed manifest as such was, perhaps, its very demise.

**Memoir—A Bachelor's Family**

The text this exegesis accompanies is a book-length excerpt of a work of the same name which will attempt to answer the question, 'How did I get to my age without having kids?' While other sections of the book discuss the dynamics of my specific family story and relationship history, and elsewhere explore wider, generational reasons which might account for the childless trajectory of my life, in this section I address 'the train smash in the middle of my life'. This was a period of relationship upheaval in my mid-thirties which I see now as a watershed in my past. It was the point at which my one real chance to be a father—Fiona's pregnancy—became instead her subsequent abortion and my ongoing journey of childlessness.

It could be said that all writing is therapy of some sort—but memoir especially so. To write about one's life is to go right back to basics—only by recording myself do I know I exist. *I write, therefore I am.* From the outset *A Bachelor's Family* was at its core an act of 'masculinity therapy', written almost in the spirit of defiance to record my own experience as a non-father. Indeed, in response to the heightened contemporary awareness of active and passionate fathering, it was a spur in itself that the lives of men *without* children can only be expressed in negative terms—*non*-fatherhood, *not* a father, *non*-parent, does *not* have children, is *childless*. Apart from the drive to record my own story, my motivation was to give voice to those of us
whose lives, in this primal linguistic sense, do not exist. And as with the column, this was also a matter of giving voice where none existed, making up for an absence, of filling a gap in the market. In a concrete literary sense, *A Bachelor's Family* is an act of masculinity politics.

That said, I would like to discuss briefly how this came about. As a member of what could be called the first feminist generation and a 'man of the metropolitan countries' I am a walking example of the belief system that upholds the therapeutic value of self-disclosure and deep honouring of personal experience. In this respect I would suggest that my impulse to write *A Bachelor's Family* as a work of creative non-fiction was not so much intellectual as holistic: an act of some sort of morphic resonance which I did not drive, but which operated *through* me. It wasn't a conscious choice, it was an irresistible drive. I embodied certain social and intellectual beliefs—and a literary trend—which emerged through me as the decision to write *A Bachelor's Family* not as fiction but as creative non-fiction.

As I have discussed earlier, I arrived at this point in my career as a writer primarily of fiction and the decision—finally—to shape this splodge of 'life's mess' into creative non-fiction was not straightforward. I could, after all, have changed the names and blurred a few identifying characteristics, and on the cover trumpeted the same book as a novel. But something stopped me doing that. It seemed dishonest and would, I feared, work against my motivation in writing the book. This amounted to some sort of moral and therapeutic necessity to tell the truth. It was about accepting a more 'truthful' version of who I am, and what I have done, who I have hurt and what has hurt me: about not evading responsibility. Instead of manipulating ‘the truth’ to tell a more convenient story, it was about digging for something deeper which confronted convenience. It was about acknowledging a history of anger and sadness, of grief and betrayal and loss. It was something akin to making a fearless and unflinching moral inventory of my life: the famous *Fifth Step* of the Twelve Step addiction programs. Either I should acknowledge these events as my truth or not write them at all.

My earlier 'relationship book' *The Romance of the Season* was published as 'fiction', but it was pretty much 'the truth' as I remembered it—even if as time passed that self-serving organism, memory, has taken ownership and I find it hard to recall what
I invented and what was 'true'. I didn't want to do this again. I didn’t want to blur 'the truth'. In the interest of 'self-authorisation' I wanted to expose it with as much unambiguous veracity as I could. Calling something fiction if a story was essentially autobiographical seemed to me dishonest, especially to those other people who were dragged—far from willingly, in my experience—onto the page. This seemed to be the most responsible course to the others involved—and the most healing option for me. It would be the only way to do the job properly.

In the process of coming to this decision I not only questioned whether what I was writing should be 'fiction', but found myself almost unable to read fiction as well. I no longer sought it out, as I had, to inform my own life. I no longer trusted it. I didn’t believe it as I once had, or believe in it. ‘Make it truer than true,’ Hemingway wrote. ‘Art is a lie with which we tell the truth,’ said Picasso. But instead of ‘truth’, I started to see fiction as cowardice and self-denial. I lost patience with novels. I turned their pages, despairing for that thrilling germ of honest disclosure, for ‘the spark which ignites and connects’. I didn’t want contrivance. That was mere cleverness. I had no time for the mask of plot or narrative or style. If a novel seemed autobiographical, why didn’t the writer just tell the real story? If it felt invented, why bother?

And even humour, such an accepted sweetener for unpalatable truth, seemed like a lie. I could only see it, also, as a mask—a survival mechanism which hides pain behind laughter. ‘The man who laughs has not yet been told the truth,’ wrote Bertold Brecht. Jokes were easy. Jokes were cheap. Jokes merely buried unbearable truth under even more layers of denial. As a person and a writer, I’d spent my life easing pain with laughter. And this was where it had brought me.

As he neared the end of his life, Raymond Carver quoted Robert Lowell with the rhetorical question: ‘Yet why not tell what really happened?’ For me this became an accusation—indeed a demand. I felt my impatience, my shrill exasperation—like a weary cop leaning over some small time crim in an interview room. Look, why not just tell us what actually happened? Why not just tell us the truth?

So, to my best intentions, this is what I did.

Earlier, I attempted to answer the rhetorical question, Did the column 'work'? The best answer to this seemed to be that as entertainment, in the end it did not (or it
would continue to appear), but as a site of 'masculinity therapy' it did. Asking the same question of *A Bachelor's Family*, I would conclude that the answer is much the same. As *entertainment*, I think the self-absorption of the manuscript got the better of it: toppling it over into self-indulgence. I find myself with impatient repulsion for the story-teller—the man who at the time was 'me'. There could, of course, be a simple reason for this. Perhaps, as was my hope, the writing has done its job—simply by holding the pen and letting it pour out I have shed the 'old me' onto the page and it is the 'new me' who looks back with distaste. Perhaps my 'self-absorption' was necessary, remedial, efficacious—and looking back, I was unable to write anything else at the time anyway. Until this was written, in the form it was written, I could not move on to anything else. In this respect, as a site of 'masculinity therapy', it can be viewed as most successful, not only for me as the writer, but also, for the right reader, as a text of potential healing and growth.

(And, despite my perhaps harsh view of its shortcomings, at the time of writing the book does look set to find a publisher.)

**Conclusion: How do column and memoir contribute to the development of a masculinist politics?**

Helen Garner, contemplating *Some Questions about Sex and Power* in The First Stone writes:

> before people make pronouncements on what sexual behaviour society should tolerate…they ought to make the clearest possible statement of their sexual experience, what they have learnt from it, and how it colours their attitudes… How would it change the way we talk about sex and power, if we had the self-awareness and the honesty to acknowledge psychological states as such, instead of passing them off as pure intellectual beliefs? (Garner, 1995, p151)

The need to self-identify, I have found, is rarely an overt concern among the theorists of masculinity. Repeatedly in my reading I hungered for autobiographical information to help me locate what might be a writer's biases. Back-cover bios tend to extend no further than the writer's place of employment and a list of publications; it is unusual to find anything personal or truly revealing. Instead I found myself
attempting to read between the lines—to decipher style and content—to work out why a writer should be writing as s/he was.

To my reading, Bob Connell does himself no service in this regard. His tone suffers for the intellectual distance he maintains from each of the schools of 'masculinity politics' he identifies, and this has the effect—for me—of diminishing the intellectual rigour he seems to be so confidently asserting. To gain my respect as a reader, the need to self-identify is crucial. Not dissimilar to my drift away from the personal voice in my column, intellectual distance, I believe, runs the danger of toppling over into pontification.

In Connell's assessment the proponents of 'masculinity therapy' are 'white, heterosexual, middle-class (and) American'. (Connell, 1995, p210–211) As a comparable Australian man this is the demographic with which I self-identify, and it is sobering to feel myself so readily described—a strange mixture of liberation and confinement. While I feel internally conflicted as aspects of my makeup do battle to win supremacy in how I define myself as 'a man'—and this is a constantly evolving and shifting process—when I attempt to stand outside myself (and it is always only an attempt) it is apparent that the drama of my life unfolds more than anywhere else in the consulting room of 'masculinity therapy'. And, in the attempt again to stand outside myself and my work, I would have to say that it is onto Jones' 'mountains of dismal stuff on men' that I lug both my memoir and magazine column—each, in different ways, my own earnest literature of self-absorption.

The healing possibilities of truthfulness and personal disclosure, however, form the essence of 'masculinity therapy'. 'Writing the personal', I now understand, has become a cornerstone to my own self-awareness and growth. 'Masculinity therapy', as I have said, is not just about informing the reader, it is about healing the writer. As seems to be the case for many other men, I would say that articulating my feelings and circumstances is a crucial first step to healthy individuation and self-responsibility—and this in itself evolves into social benefit. As global power brokers, for the men of the metropolitan countries 'fixing' ourselves is fundamental to fixing the world. Such sentiments no doubt only further place my writing inside Connell's representation of 'masculinity therapy'—and articulate its contribution to masculinity politics.
Appendix A
Essay and a selection of columns from Good Weekend magazine.

Essay: This Bachelor's Life
Good Weekend 7/6/03

One day, pottering alone in my father's study a year or so after he died, trying to work out what, in this rich archaeology of a life, should be jettisoned and what kept, I came across a guest list he'd made for my mother's 70th birthday about six years earlier. The names proceeded down the page two by two like a list of couples boarding the Ark. Then, about half way down, my name appeared. As usual it was alone, solitary, an aberration, a disfigured limb in this neat weave of couples.

I remember this moment very clearly. Perhaps my defences were down, my heart open. The smell of the room alone overwhelmed and confused me with history and loss. I held the page in my hand. There in undeniable black and white was the reality of my life. My mind scrabbled back. Who was I with then? Who was the girlfriend du jour that week, that year? I remembered, and remembered on to the next woman, and the next. I felt literally winded with a great thump of shame and failure. What was wrong with me that I couldn't hold a relationship together like we're supposed to? When would I grow up and get married like everyone else? When would I join the respectable world of couples?

Every life has its story. Mine, so far, is one of childlessness and on a measure of longevity at least, relationship ‘failure’. It wasn't that I couldn't commit—I'd committed time and time again—it was rather that as much as I tried, staying together was not a language I ever learnt. I was well versed in the business of starting and ending. It was the middle which had me stumped. Taking stock as I entered my forties several years ago, I could find less than five years of co-habitation behind me. The conclusion I came to was that I simply didn't have the skills for or comfort with whatever it took to successfully participate in an ongoing two-way love relationship.

"How did you go bankrupt?" " Ernest Hemingway has a character ask in The Sun Also Rises. "Gradually," is the answer, "and then suddenly." As I looked back on my life I understood that in an era of serial monogamy gradually, and then suddenly,
I had instead made of myself a serial bachelor, forever leaving, never staying, unavailable, it seemed, to this condition called intimacy.

And I started asking myself why.

*Bachelor. Spinster.* You don't hear the words used much these days. Even if there will always be those of us who 'can't make peace with the language of love'—as Leonard Cohen put it—since this generation dismantled the rules of marriage the words seem all but irrelevant.

One day I asked a woman friend, fifty-something and single, how she felt about being called a spinster. She reeled back as if I'd hit her. "Oh, I hate that word. That word is so unfair. I might be single, but I'm not a *spinster.*"

She's right. It's a harsh, almost cruel way to describe someone now. In my mind a spinster is an elderly woman who sits at home knitting for the church fete, a woman who has probably never felt a man's skin against hers for even one night. She is certainly not one of these forty or fifty-something vibrant and energetic single women who seem so numerous in my life.

Perhaps in this generation *bachelors* and *spinsters* no longer exist. Instead we are simply *single men and women,* although I would say that the word *bachelor* continues to hold currency—if only in the breathy exigencies of the women's magazines. In this world a bachelor might be single but he continues to exude possibility which a spinster does not. The term retains a certain swaggering braggadocio. It implies freedom. A man is a bachelor until he is snared.

I put the question to a single forty-something male friend—how did he feel about the bachelor word—and his lips curled into a smile which in the wrong hands could have been called *sleazy.* "Yeah, I guess that's what I am, aren't I?" He might not want to be single—in fact, I know he doesn't—but the bachelor label certainly didn't seem to imply any impediment to changing this. Bachelorhood can be cured, to be a spinster is terminal.

Whatever we call ourselves the reality is that we're single and most of don't want to be. If this is the case how do we explain our lives?

Statistically not many of us these days will couple up for life. Instead most of us will have several long relationships and be single between them. While there are periods—after a break-up, say—when we might choose to be single, no-one I know
sees themselves living this way for good. Most of us hold hopes for a long-term partner and in this respect I'd say the times have conspired against us.

In many ways the experiment this generation has conducted in the world of relationships has faltered, if not failed. Divorce rates, the epidemic of single mums, non-custodial fathers walking away from their parental responsibilities, boys without dads, loneliness, isolation, waiting rooms of IVF clinics full of forty-something women in their last desperate attempts at late-life pregnancy—the list is long.

But this is only the big picture, the canvas on which we paint our personal story. Within this there are perfectly good reasons why each of us is single and until we take responsibility for those reasons we'll stay that way. 'There is no reality,' wrote Herman Hesse, 'but the one contained within.' As individuals it is our responsibility to understand how our history has created us. Until we do we are doomed to repeat that history again and again.

Literature and philosophy is brimming with cautionary advice to this effect. Plato: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' Lao Tzu: 'He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.' And of course there's a Russian proverb to fit the bill. 'Stare too hard at the past and you're blind in one eye. But ignore it completely and you're blind in both.'

(Perhaps having heard his fill of Russian proverbs, the comedian Peter Cook had his own version. 'Have I learnt from my mistakes? Absolutely. I'm sure I could repeat them all exactly.')</n
It's about three years since I left my last big relationship. It was part of a complete change in my life. I was forty-four. I left Sydney, left my job, settled in the country. I was intentionally going into a period of retreat and reflection while I tried to better understand how relationship for me had become so threatening, a state to be cautious of, to protect myself against. I was sick of repeating myself with women. I wanted to learn how to do this thing called love.

In many cultures one does not choose a life partner. Instead, he or she is arranged by those considered wiser in such matters—and there is no indication such marriages are any less successful than the ones we leave in increasing numbers in the West.

I'd say that in itself our Western concept of choice is somewhat of a myth. I didn’t consciously choose to be single and childless at this age, but then neither do I
think I was capable of steering my life any other way. 'When an inner situation is not made conscious it appears outside as ‘fate’, wrote Jung. I don't think of my situation as 'fate', but I do think I arrived at this point for perfectly good (if not desirable or healthy) reasons. It wasn't chance, and it wasn't choice. It was, rather, the other thing—through lack of self-awareness, no choice.

Only by building awareness, by travelling back into the story that made me would I enable choice, give myself the option of change.

Without wishing to diminish the challenges they face, it seems to me that people with backgrounds of extreme abuse and alienation at least have an explanation for the difficulties they might later find in adult relationships. But I come from a statistically average middle class family, with no abusive extremes I am aware of. I'm not an alcoholic or a junkie, I don't gamble, I manage pretty well to keep my head above water in the day-to-day demands this society makes of me. This makes my situation all the more confusing. How do I explain my life?

My parents, I know, loved and cared for me as best they knew how. But just as I can list the 'positive' attributes they handed down to me it is also true that every child inherits collateral damage from his or her family of origin and I am no different. This collateral damage becomes the business of a life. It is the raw material we are given to learn from and grow through. Acknowledging this business, understanding it, accepting it, is fundamental to moving beyond it.

Acknowledging this 'family business' has uncapped the deep reservoir of anger I have towards my mother. It's taken years—decades—to understand and immobilise this anger. Its virulence still shocks me, rising like bile when I feel myself unjustly judged or accused. It creates this feeling. It is a paranoia, a neurotic distortion of what is actual and real. And it is an anger I understood I pass down into all my relationships—especially with those women to whom I entrust my heart. It is history repeating itself.

My mother is an elderly woman now, and I am a middle-aged man. Whatever passed between us in my childhood is long over, but I believe it remains the formative story of my life. It is a story of a mother who could not be wrong and a father who was never right. It is a story of an angry woman and an overwhelmed man. It is the story of small boy and two parents playing out a drama he would
duplicate for the rest of his life. It is the story, I believe, which made me the bachelor I am.

My father never knew how to stand up to my mother, and her anger became all the more pronounced as he tried to laugh off the humiliation he received at her hands. I was anything but blind to this. Rather, I registered the nuances of their behaviour like a geiger counter. And despite my efforts to be conscious of the assumptions this left me with, this was the only model of relationship I had. Entering adult relationships myself I was inextricably trapped between the terror of ending up as my father and the need for a woman to play the role of my mother. This was what I duplicated time and time again. This was what I set up in hope and ran from in fear. My relationships with women ever since have been confused self-fulfilling prophecies of inadequacy and shame riven with unconscious strategies of self-defence and revenge.

And gradually I gained understanding that rather than being a passive bystander, my father was just as responsible as my mother for the collateral damage visited on the small child who grew up into me. Typical of his generation, my father could only express his love in practical ways. In death, perhaps, it has been comforting to romanticise his qualities, while the truth, sadly, is that he was also the classic absent father—even if he was as much the product of his own upbringing as I am of mine.

I know my mother will not want to see this in print. I don't want to shame her or blame her—and I acknowledge the prospect of hurting her by making my family story public. And of course it's not the truth. It's my story only, my experience of family life. My two brothers would tell a different story, and my parents, of course, their own.

And how do I explain that both my brothers have married (or not married) and had children? Is it that their childhood enabled them to do something I can't, or that mine freed me to do something they wish they could?

I believe there is concrete social value beyond the personal emancipation made possible by exploring one's family story. My parents were only acting out the business accumulated through their own upbringing. Theirs was a generation formed by massive social trauma outside themselves—the Depression, the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War.
War and the psychological aftermath of the Great War which filtered down into every family of the time.

Our generation, instead, was born into the luxury of the peace our parents fought to give us. And this carries its own responsibilities. As individuals our parents had little chance to achieve the self-realisation we regard as our right. Seen in the sweep of generational change I believe it is our obligation to reflect upon and question the family legacies we have inherited, to know ourselves, to bring into consciousness the hidden compulsions our history has handed down to us. Only in this way will we relieve our children and their children of their inevitability. This is the freedom we can hand on to them.

My life has moved on. I'm closer now to fifty than forty and whatever I felt before about being single has matured into something far less painful, more self-accepting. I seem to have passed through that period of needing to have answers about how my life has evolved the way it has. In its place, in a nervous, tentative way I feel unshackled from my past.

And it is no coincidence, I'm sure, that having passed through this period of reflection I've found myself ready to enter relationship again. And what I'm doing now feels very different, even if old habits continue to grab at my heels with familiar feelings of shame and self-doubt. But having aired so many unconscious assumptions which have kept me split off from myself and separate from others, I feel a new optimism and self-confidence. As the years accumulate behind me I feel more able to realise my potential, to be more useful and self-aware and more capable of simply being happy—something I rate as a not insignificant achievement.

I would say that these recent years have been a process of shedding fear—of feeling more able to love and be loved—and with this new confidence I've drawn a line under this first half of my life and I'm ready to move on. I'm ready to try this thing called ongoing relationship. I want to have a bash at it. I want to taste that depth of intimacy which only comes over time. Day by day, one step after the other, I'm ready to stay and not leave.

As the months pass in this new relationship I realise how respectful I've become of it. I'm not desperate. I'm not rushing. I can wait. I'm taking care, easing myself into physical and emotional intimacy with an unfamiliar and exciting mindfulness. It's as if I'm losing my virginity all over again.
Farewell to Fatherhood

In The Male 14/6/03

There was a moment, a day, a week, when I left my youth behind and set course into the middle age I occupy today. My girlfriend, who I'll call Fiona, was in Amsterdam, pregnant, while I was still in New York where she'd left me a week earlier. We were travelling on different airline tickets—hers was Round-the-World, mine LA return. We'd decided to have the baby but figured we'd both be back in Sydney before she was twelve weeks in case we changed our minds.

In Amsterdam our plan came unstuck. At a clinic Fiona was told she was eleven weeks, a month more than we’d thought. Suddenly whatever had gone before was just a game. Now we were playing for real and we had to decide, by trans-Atlantic telephone, whether to keep the baby or—what’s the pretty way to put it?—let it go.

We were both thirty-three years old and ready to have a child but our relationship was in disarray. In the months we'd spent apart since Fiona left Australia we'd both started things—and tried to end them—with other people. Could this baby bring us back together? And if it didn’t, where would we stand then? It was a terrible thing. We were trying to make a choice whether to bring a life into the world.

I was staying in Brooklyn with an artist friend called Katarina. She lectured me in her gravely smoker's voice, adamant we were "in the makings of a terrible tragedy".

"Amigo, just get on that big bird and go over and tell her you love her. That’s all you gotta do. Finito. End of story. The rest will take care of itself. Just jump in that fucking river and start swimming. You don’t know what’s around the bend. No-one does. Don’t worry about the rent. Don’t worry about a job. Don’t worry about your careers. Stop thinking of yourselves. Think of all the people in the world who can’t have a baby. Think of all the people who want a baby but haven’t got one. Think of the baby. Think of the amazing gift you’re being offered. So what if you don’t know if you love each other enough? What’s enough anyway? Who ever knows that? Look at yourself. You will be one great daddy. You will see that kid and suddenly your life will have meaning. Not only your life, but the whole world. That
baby will look up into your eyes and suddenly this whole fucking mess will make sense.”

It was a speech made from the other side of an invisible line. For us the future stretched out of sight over a distant horizon. Of course we could 'let this one go' and if we wanted have a baby later on. But Katarina was thirty-nine, single and childless. Those few, vital years older, she knew better.

But over the week, as time and distance came between us, any certainty we’d felt earlier evaporated. One day we were resolved, the next our confidence faltered. In the end we had the option of saying no and it overwhelmed us. Fiona called me one last time. “I’m going to keep the appointment.”

An hour later both our lives were on a different tack forever. It was June 1989. The events of Tiannamen Square were unfolding concurrently. For me, all the tanks in China are silenced by the memory of her thin, scared voice on the phone that day.

Fiona did go on to have a child, a boy, a few years later, but this remains as close as I've (knowingly) come to fatherhood.

Perhaps growing older really only comes down to the task of swallowing indigestible conundrums—and this is mine. Ours is a generation blessed—and cursed—with unparalleled choice over our lives. Has this choice made me a happier or wiser man? I can't see how. I remember that week the almost unbearable obligation I felt to make the right decision for my future. And I remember my relief when in the end Fiona took the choice out of my hands.

And I remember this. During that time in New York I met up with an Australian friend whose girlfriend was also pregnant. She was sure she wanted the baby—he was sure he didn't. He'd be a terrible father, he said. He was too selfish, too busy with other things. I remember his certainty, quite in contrast to my lack of it. In the end, against his wishes, his girlfriend had the baby and this man is now a proud and utterly devoted father. The moment he set eyes on his son the whole thing—this whole fucking mess—all made sense. He is one great daddy.

While The Billy Boils
In The Male 14/6/03

On a Saturday morning in July 1997 I collected my father from the nursing home where he went to give my mother respite from his Alzheimer’s and we drove up into
Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, on the northern edge of Sydney. It was a dark, brooding day of low black clouds and, looking back, an ominous stillness. We drove all the way to the end of the road at West Head, where I wanted to share with him again the magnificent view across to Barrenjoey, up past Lion Island to Patonga and Brisbane Waters, and south to the multi-million-dollar real estate of Pittwater. It was a view he first showed us as kids, 35, 40 years earlier.

We got out of the car and I led him, shuffling painfully on his two sticks, to sit on a low bench in front of the view. In the past all this, the fresh air, the huge blue view, the simple pleasure of being outdoors, would have excited him like a child. His face would have opened, he would have beamed as he encouraged us, his less than appreciative family, to share his joy. Now the tables were turned and it was me trying to get him to share my pleasure, my thrill. I could hear the edge in my voice. "Look at it, Dad! Isn't it fantastic!"

He gave a wan smile but I knew his heart wasn't in it. He was a week past 81, old and frail. Watching him that day, bent forward, peering bifocally about, I remember thinking just how old, how frail—and, with a stab of fear, what that must soon mean for him, and of course for me. I think I hungered that day for a last, impossible feel of the omnipresent comfort that was the father of my childhood. But it wasn’t there. The years had done their slow inexorable work and instead of him looking after me it was my role now to look after him. While I blathered on in wonder Dad searched around behind us, interested only in finding somewhere to have a pee.

We drove a little further and I pulled off the road into a clearing, and while he leaned himself against a tree to urinate, I did what I was determined that day to do—even if it was illegal—make a little fire, and boil a billy for tea.

Only later—after everything happened—did it occur to me why this was so important to me. This simple business—arranging twigs, striking a match, sitting quietly while the flames licked around the base of my old black billy, listening to the currawongs report to each other our presence, hearing the water rise to the boil, throwing in the tea, simply being there, soaking in the green peace of the trees and fresh air—is the closest thing I have to a religious ritual. Air, fire, water—it is elemental. It sustains me, I still return to it—and it is something I learnt at my father’s knee.
While I put together our bread rolls—the other essential part of the process—I tried to explain my gratitude for this simple, but resonant pleasure he’d passed onto me. He brushed this off, as he always did when I tried to say this sort of thing, the discomfort visible on his face. Ours is a family not given to outward displays of appreciation and while Dad had many fine qualities, what this generation might call ‘ease with intimacy’ was not one of them. With his plate teetering on his knees, he chose instead to point out a branch of green leaves in case the fire decided to get cute on us. Then, after a few minutes quiet chewing he broke out in one of his old-time grins. “Well, isn’t this good! Where did you learn this, young fella?”

This was the last time I saw him alive. Six days later, sitting down to lunch at the hostel he lurched and fell, dead from a massive heart attack.

He died on 1 August 1997. When I still lived in Sydney I tried to get up to West Head each year to remember him and that last precious day when we were granted the farewell we didn’t consciously know we’d need. It was, in the best language we were able to share, a final passing down of traditional family business. It'd be easy to say that every time I boil a billy I think of him. I don't, of course. But I know in some ancient, inscrutable way Dad will always be hovering over me holding the match that lights the fire.

*The Man from Uncle*

*In The Male 6/9/03*

My young friend Dom is thirteen. His parents separated when he was five. When he was seven his dad fell off a balcony and was left a quadriplegic. He died three years ago.

Dom is part of a growing sector of the community—children growing up without their fathers. In Australia 23% of all families have only one resident parent. In Byron Shire in northern NSW where we live, it is double this—47%. In nine out of ten cases this parent is the mother. During his last years of primary school Dom could count only five kids in his class of 25 who lived in intact families.

Many boys in Dom's situation live almost completely in a world of women and children. Their mothers are single, their teacher is likely to be a woman, they often have no men 'naturally present' in their lives. In extreme cases the only men they see are strangers.
But Dom is one of the lucky ones. He has a friend, Neil, who is part of a local organization called Uncle. Similar to YWCA's Big Sister, Big Brother program, Uncle sets up mentoring relationships between men and boys without active fathers, mostly sons of single mothers who have minimal or no contact with their dads. Dom is unusual in that his father has died.

Neil is a short, intense man, a can-do guy who juggles several occupations at once. After years of working as an actor he now writes sketch comedy and designs websites while studying social work and volunteering with local youth organizations. With no children of his own he is keen to use that energy to help others. He is the perfect counterfoil for Dom, who is lively but sensitive and cautious. As Dom's mother puts it, "With Neil running ahead, Dom wants to follow."

Neil and Dom started going out four years ago. They see each other most weekends and talk on the phone every few days. They go surfing, play soccer, go to movies—or just hang out, watch sport on TV, talk, drive around, visit friends. Now Dom is in high school Neil helps with homework one night each week.

Keen to downplay any formality in their relationship both describe each other simply as 'a friend'. When asked what he gets out of their friendship, Dom doesn't hesitate. "I get to do all that stuff I can't do with Mum." For his part Neil says, "It's simple. I'm getting a mate who happens to be 30 years younger than me."

Dom's mum, who says she was always "acutely aware" she could never be both father and mother to Dom, is unequivocal. "Neil is a gift from the gods, an absolute blessing." Of Uncle, she says, "I think it's fantastic—for Dom, but also for me."

The project was started in 1996 by a local man who worked in gaols and boys detention centres, where he observed that most inmates had received either poor fathering or no fathering at all. Studies from around the world back this up. On measures ranging from anti-social and violent behaviour to drug use, incarceration and suicide, such boys too often simply self-destruct. And it's not just boys. Stark statistics from the US find that girls from fatherless families are more likely to become teenage mothers, boys are more likely to get in trouble with the police. Without questioning the mothering they receive, the belief is that lack of good adult male role models limit both boys and girls from building good self-esteem and a sense of appropriate social and personal boundaries.
Uncle's aim is to combat this problem on a local level. After initially surviving solely on volunteer help it now receives federal government funding and was recently given a grant to seed similar programs in surrounding communities. 'The men from Uncle' are well-known around Byron Bay, running activities for the boys and regular carwashes and raffles which see locals reaching into their own pockets to help support a program which they know is badly needed and has proved its worth. Inspired by Uncle, two years ago a local woman set up Auntie to organise mentoring relationships between girls and 'aunts'.

Uncle is a grassroots initiative made good. Neil and Dom are a regular sight around town talking and laughing as they zip from place to place in Neil's Mini Moke. They're the picture of a local system that works, a small success story in the face of a global problem. Raising a child takes a village. Nurturing a boy into responsible manhood needs an entire community willing to play a role in building a better world than the one we've got.

Snowy Mountains High
In The Male 8/11/03
For over 20 years a group of us have gone walking in the Snowy Mountains at autumn. What started as a youthful escapade of under-prepared exuberance has become an annual pilgrimage, a crucial event on the tribal calendar.

Getting out in the bush is always worth the effort, even if it pisses down and you're soaked and freezing. But this yearly traipse into the high country has accumulated a mythology and significance that makes it more than just a few days away. Mountains bring us closer to God. The clean air and silence, peaks lined up into the green-blue distance, the night full of stars and waking up to the world below lost in cloud—it's rejuvenating, sustaining, spiritual.

We're not big macho bushwalkers, all hairy legs and up at dawn to bag 20kms before breakfast. We're slackers. Being there is what matters, not rushing somewhere else. And we're gourmet walkers. None of that freeze-dried shit for us, no tiny one-man cans of baked beans or single serve instant oats. We mark our territory from the energy bar kids. Laksa, risotto, basmati stir fry for dinners, sourdough breads, cheeses, smoked meats, semi-dried tomatoes and tapenades for lunch, real coffee for
breakfast, wine at night—in truth, of course it's really only a long, smoke-cured progressive meal with a few sleeps along the way.

We always take wine, and although the wine wankers this year insisted on decanting bottles into recycled plastic PET bottles, for my money the old two litre casks would have been fine. A bristly slurp from a chipped enamel mug as we stretch out around the campfire after a day on the track and any old red taste like Grange. It's one of the great pleasures of the bush. Not to mention Cointreau or Drambuie dispensed in throat-scalding squirts from recycled saline squeeze bottles to warm the cockles as the sun goes down.

The very fact we've been doing this for so many years has become reason in itself to keep going. We used to be young and gung-ho. Now we're flabby, balding and middle-aged. The conversation ambles along, steeped in anecdote and shared memories and like diggers remembering the good old days, the almost ritualistic recounting of the hardships and highlights of earlier trips. Maintaining this thread of continuity, to share this history, to gain identity from it in otherwise diverging lives is its own reward. It gives meaning to growing older.

This year there were eleven of us, all men, old friends and new. Although women have come in the past, in the last couple of years this has been a blokes-only trip. Not because we discourage women, but because it seems we can't encourage them enough. This adds another quality to the trip. Not that anything particularly tree-huggy happens. But without women to impress or please or care for we face the challenge: left alone, who are we?

My experience is that we get silly—and we get serious. We let ourselves be more boyish, and also do what men have always done in more sanctioned, sacred men's spaces—we drop into our own version of 'men's business'—albeit a halting, middle class, untutored version. We reach inside for some deeper, fuller meaning to our lives. We expose ourselves, just a little, just as much as we feel safe, and explore what life is really like for us. We talk in a way many of us never do. By the last night we were almost ready, even, to talk about sex.

For some, with young kids and full-on careers, this is the only walk all year, a specifically male reminder of the time before family and work responsibilities consumed their lives. It brings a sweet sadness of remembered youth, forgotten freedoms and the more lasting rewards of middle-age.
This year was particularly poignant. The January bushfires which roared down into Canberra also destroyed large tracts of Kosciuszko National Park. Although we organised our walk through unburnt territory we looked out across mountains bare and blackened for many kms. The fragile alpine heath and hardy little snowgums will take generations to regrow. I'll never see the Snowies as I did when I first went down. And that's alright. Everything changes. It's part of life. It's why we go on these trips—to remind ourselves of something bigger, more meaningful, more resonant to bring back into the business of our daily lives.

Measuring Up

In The Male 6/12/03

I was up talking to a demolition cowboy on the Coast. I wanted 500m of hardwood flooring. And a heap of 5x2 for the joists, if he had it. Some 6x3 for the bearers would have been good, but I didn't hold out much hope.

He had three young blokes in bare chests and hard hats sledgehammering a 1970s strip mall to smithereens. A one-legged dozer driver grunted rubbish into piles behind them, his prosthetic leg propped up in the cabin beside him. He went at that rubble like it was the guy who lost him the leg. Didn't smile once. I wanted to know the details, of course, but discretion got the better of me.

The cowboy wanted the timber offsite by dusk. Said too much was disappearing overnight. My plan was to see what he had, shop around, cruise back when I'd thought about it. He gave me a look. Mate. Do me a favour. I'm not K-Mart. Do you want it or not?

He had it all worked out. There was a hire place down the road. Duck in, get myself a car trailer, have the dozer sling the whole floor on in one go. By the time I got it home and came back they'd have the 5x2 out. So what if it's full of nails? That's what angle grinders are for. Have it clean in no time. Piss in the hand. No worries.

He gave me another look. You got cash, yeah? It's gotta be cash.

My heart was pumping, racing hard with excitement and fear—the excitement of getting these typewriter hands dirty in the world of real men, the fear that I wouldn't size up. They say you're not a maan unless you build your own house at least once in your life. Well, I'm only doing a granny flat out the back. And it's not like I'm building it—I'm owner—building. But I'm in the zone, right?
It's about deciphering a language the real men speak. Men who drive utes with ladders on top and locked boxes full of power tools on the back and sink ice cold schooners after work in their King Gees and crusty Blundies and the sleeves ripped out of their flanellette shirts. Men who talk about 'fivebetwo' instead of 125x50 and act like you're a moron if you don't know what t&g, 85mm k.d. is. (Tongue and groove, 85mm, kiln dried.) Men who have an egg'n'bacon roll for smoko and two pies for lunch and have never touched a computer in their lives. Men who are about as far from being metro-bloody-sexual as the species can get.

The whole thing's revealed itself as a Survivor-style test of masculinity. One challenge after another. And this is part of it. Dealing with demolition jocks with mobile phones and no fixed address who see you coming and will try and sell you bent nails and broken glass if they reckon they've got a chance.

I looked at the timber, looked at him, felt the heat of the sun on my face. I was way out of my depth. What do I know about used timber? What if I get the whole lot home and find out it's all shit? And where would I get an angle grinder? What is an angle grinder? Aren't they what hitmen use in crime novels to mince up dead bodies?

And this car trailer—what if I have to reverse it? What if I lose control on the way and collect another car and—Jesus, I could kill someone! I could kill myself!

I was having a moment, a very un-masculine moment. Then I got a hold of myself. Bugger it, other blokes do this all the time. Shit, women do it. Stop being a pussy. You can do it too.

So I did. Got it all home, t&g, fivebetwo, the lot—and about a month of de-nailing in the bargain. So this is what it feels like to be a real man. Aching hands, sore back, ringing ears. The satisfaction of honest labour, of using muscles I didn't know existed. Of sweat. The thrill of not sitting at a desk.

And thank God my girlfriend just happened to own an angle grinder. Not that she's getting a go. Nup, this is men's work. She wouldn't understand. But I will let her cut the sleeves out of my flanellette shirt.

*Please Sirs, We Want Some More*

*In The Male 28/2/04*

In the midst of the almost relentless bad news from the battlefield of public education, at the start of the school year a few weeks ago a couple of good news
stories hit the front pages—an 18-year-old from western Sydney who had enrolled to study primary teaching at uni, and a 25-year-old accountant who had chosen to leave the corporate world to teach economics in the NSW state secondary system. They made the news for one reason—they are men.

The shortage of male teachers is a problem throughout the West—particularly so for primary-age children. According to NSW Education Department figures only 17% of teachers in NSW primary schools are men. In the Catholic system it's even worse—only 8.5%. US estimates are that nationwide only 9% of elementary school teachers are men. Figures are similar for the UK and across Europe. About 250 NSW state primary schools have no male teachers at all.

Educators, politicians, parents—even the kids, when someone remembers to ask them—all agree that this is not healthy and that both boys and girls benefit from a better balance of male and female teachers. Somehow we have to attract men back to teaching. This requires not only concrete, practical measures but a core re-evaluation of what matters to us as a society.

More men go into secondary teaching—the proportion is still only about 30%—and the explanation for this is that men, outcome-focused by nature, tend to enter the profession to 'teach the subject', while women have a more general desire to nurture and develop children.

Perhaps this reveals exactly where we are going wrong. We probably all agree—in theory—that teaching our children well is not only 'laying the foundation for the nation's future', as a recent report put it, but also the only hope we have of ever really building a better world. And yet as a nation—indeed, as a culture—we are betraying our children, and our hopes, on a deep, systemic level.

John Howard's recent outrageous attacks on public education and the ever-increasing amounts his government gives to private schools declare clearly enough his interests and biases. But as a society the status we give teaching and the disrepair of our public school system reveals the uncomfortable reality not just of our attitude to education, but the lip service we pay to the true care and nurture of our children.

The main reasons men don't go into teaching, and drop out at twice the rate of women, are the comparatively low salaries—and this perception that teaching is 'women's work'. This betrays much not only about our idea of masculinity but also our values as a society, particularly the respect and worth we show our children.
As a culture we have created the expectation that the education of our children, particularly our young children, is women's work. This is not to say, of course, that women don't do the job well. But inherent in this is the unpalatable truth that teaching has become a second-class occupation.

Unfortunately, as usual, it comes down to money. The best way to get more men into teaching, as one principal put it to me, is to get more men into teaching. If we valued teachers more—and what they do—we would pay them more, and if they were better paid more men would enter and stay in the profession.

A chicken-and-egg logic operates here. In this society the 'real' work is done by men. If teaching was 'real' work—men's work—it would be better paid. And better pay would indicate the status and respect we give it—it would be work worthy of men. 'Women's work' is that which is left over, work that is not so important, second-class, such as teaching.

Compare this, for instance, to a bunch of office tower cowboys sitting in front of computer screens earning vast salaries for shuffling numbers around the globe in a 'money market' which produces nothing tangible except wealth for a few and therefore poverty for many.

If this is real work and raising and nurturing our kids, inculcating the values on which the future will be built, is less important then basically we've got it way wrong. And until we rethink such obscene inequities our children—and the future—will pay the price.

Talking Point

In The Male 28/2/04

You may remember the terrible incident in western Sydney late last year when an estranged father sexually assaulted his ex-wife, then knifed to death their two children and her father before killing himself. For a few days it was all across the news, the most recent version of this tragic story.

And perhaps by the time you read this the first of this year's tragedies will have splattered across our screens. Another estranged father exploding in violence, killing his kids—and often his ex-wife—and then himself.

Why does this happen? What can we do to stop it?
Only a minority of men are violent. We can't legislate this violence away. But we can educate violent men to express their feelings in non-violent ways—to communicate with words, not fists or weapons. To talk.

I believe it comes down to a simple equation. Most women know how to talk and unload their pent-up feelings in ways that many men don't. Men are more violent than women. This stark contrast tells the story. If men could learn to talk more, they wouldn't kill.

Men resort to violence far more than women. This includes self-harm—four in five suicides are men. And studies find the 'high risk' two-year period after separation to be the most dangerous time in a man's life—for himself and his loved ones. Relationship breakdown is believed to be the greatest precipitating factor in male suicide; crime statistics also show this to be by far the most prevalent motive for men killing ex-partners and children.

The self-destructive ethos of traditional masculinity is itself responsible for many deaths and suicides. Gagged and bound by generations of emotional inheritance which requires us precisely not to talk—to act like a man, not display our feelings, not get emotional—many men are trapped in a silence which women cannot imagine. This also means he is often dependent on his partner in a uniquely male way—she is the funnel into which he pours all his emotional needs and expression. Often she is the only person he really talks to. And when he loses this lifeline he literally explodes.

Some men find it easier to open up than others. Some reach out to find support with a friend, a counsellor or doctor. The weekly men's group I attend is intentionally 'open' so men can walk in off the street and in a safe, non-threatening space practise—and often learn—this most crucial survival skill—talking.

Many agencies now offer help for men. Mensline (1300 78 99 78) provides nationwide 24 hour phone counselling for men in distress. Independent groups such as Dads In Distress and the Lone Fathers Association offer specific support for men after separation and many local men's and family health organisations have established anti-violence programs aimed at giving men the skills to overcome both emotional and physical violence.

'Hurt people hurt people' is the key to understanding aggression. Look inside any angry man, experience shows, and you'll find a terrified, overwhelmed little boy.
Many anti-violence workers will attest that probably all the men who go through their programs were victims of abuse as children. These men are not merely repeating behaviour modelled by their father (or sometimes their mother) but were often so damaged they have no core sense of self to rely on when facing a real or perceived challenge from their partner. Terrified—unconsciously—of suffering the same annihilation they did as kids, they defend themselves with a classic 'fight or flight' response.

The Anti-Violence Project in Lismore, northern NSW runs a 15-week course aiming to free men from this unconscious bind. By exploring the triggers which prompt their violence they become more self-aware. In group meetings they learn to talk through their feelings and recognise the damage their violence causes. AVP also offers support to partners of abusive men. Through counselling and group work they gain the skills to reject violent behaviour outright—and this is often the start in breaking their own co-dependent patterns which traps them in destructive relationships.

It all comes back to talk.

Perhaps you have a friend, a relative, a colleague, a man recently separated and in distress, in more danger than is visible of becoming the next grainy photo on the evening news. Talk to him, listen to him. You could be saving his life and his loved ones as well.
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