The Sideways Hourglass:
Establishing the Lemniscate as a Narrative Structure
for Writing and Reading Non-Linear Stories

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary studies of narratology, two pre-theoretical ideas underlie the discourse surrounding temporality and narrative form. First, narrative theorists tend to describe non-linear structures interchangeably, with little attention to definitional distinctions between the structures as established in basic geometry. Second, narrative theorists frequently conceptualise time as a linear entity that is synonymous with Isaac Newton’s view of time. These trends, which are largely unexamined in narrative scholarship, are problematic for interrelated reasons. First, the reduction of non-linear structures to generic shapes overlooks the fact that curves and spirals are distinct figurations that do not operate synonymously when employed as narrative structures. Second, the assumption that time is linear disregards Albert Einstein’s theory of the space-time continuum, which holds that space and time are curved. Accordingly, this thesis dismantles the pre-theoretical ideas by establishing the lemniscate as a narrative structure that offers a viable alternative to linearity.

The thesis, which is practice-led, consists of two components: a 50,000 word travel memoir titled *The Rain Answered*, and a 50,000 word exegesis that accompanies the creative work. The subject of the memoir is a secret my father disclosed that he asked me to keep from my mother. The story recounts the promise I made my father and the travels I made thereafter. Set across four different countries, and spanning the past and present, the memoir employs the lemniscate as its narrative structure. The lemniscate, as a horizontal figure eight, is a curve that moves continuously forward as it moves continuously backward. This movement elicits a non-linear narrative that is characterised by a forward progression through space and a backward passage through time. In *The Rain Answered*, this movement couples
the physical motion of the body with the abstract travel of the mind. In doing so, the
lemniscate elicits a space-time continuum in which space and time are interdependent rather
than separate. The exegesis cements the connection between shape and story by transporting
the lemniscate from geometry to creative writing.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or 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.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:

Date: 31/08/14
(1) Creative Publications

Selected parts of this thesis have been published in Australian journals and newspapers, such as *Stilts*, *Swamp*, *Voiceworks*, *The Sunday Mail*, and *Wet Ink*. An excerpt from ‘Final Call’ was published in London by *Bradt Travel Guides* and *The Independent on Sunday*.

(2) Academic Publications

The early findings of this research have been published at the following locations:


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INTRODUCTION

THE START OF THE STORY
Every time I have tried to do a piece of theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements of my own experience: always in connection with processes I saw unfolding around me. It was always because I thought I identified cracks, silent tremors, and dysfunctions in things I saw, institutions I was dealing with, or my relations with others, that I set out to do a piece of work, and each time was partly a fragment of autobiography.

— So Is It Important To Think? 
Michel Foucault

In the introduction to Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit (2001), Jeanette Winterson confesses that she writes in spirals. She says, ‘A spiral narrative suits me very well and I have continued to use it and to improve upon it in The Passion and Sexing the Cherry’ (Winterson 2001, xiii). Winterson continues, ‘I really don’t see the point of reading in straight lines. We don’t think like that and we don’t live like that. Our mental processes are closer to a maze than a motorway, every turning yields another turning, not symmetrical, not obvious’ (ibid.). Winterson, who is clearly uninterested in linear narrative, is often dismissed by her critics as pretentious and isolationist. In 1992, when invited to select a novel for The Telegraph’s Book of the Year, Winterson chose her own Written on the Body (1992). A year later, she nominated herself as the greatest living writer of the time. Winterson, whose work has received mixed reviews, is often described by her contemporaries as a stylist who has nothing to say. As Julie Burchill, speaking of Winterson’s prose, explains, ‘Any sensitive and smart 14-year-old can link a daisy chain of beautiful words together; the skill comes in making
them into the shape of a story’ (1994, par. 11). Burchill resumes, ‘That’s why I can’t stand Winterson. This is not beautiful writing, despite its frantic claims to the title…It is a garish, artificial, bejewelled mechanical nightingale of a prose style’ (ibid., par. 17).

Granted, Winterson’s predilection for spiral narratives certainly reveals her infatuation with form. In *Art Objects* (1995), Winterson insists that the appraisal of a novel must be based on more than the story’s content; it must also take into consideration the weave of words. ‘Change the words,’ Winterson warns, ‘even by trying to substitute dictionary definitions, and you will change the meaning’ (ibid., 171). For the author, works of art are self-contained entities that are just as sturdy as geometric forms. While Winterson acknowledges that novels are complex structures, she maintains that the language of literature, like the language of mathematics, is precise. Similarly, the shape a story takes is not an approximate figure but a perfect harmony of form: ‘a closed balanced series of weights and measures and proportions that agree with one another and that agree as a whole’ (ibid., 93). In *A Work of My Own*, Winterson explains, ‘The question “What is your book about?” has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did’ (ibid., 165). While Winterson’s refusal to say things twice is somewhat ostentatious, her concerns raise questions about the relationship between content and form, or what a story says and how a story is told.

As a thinker whose critical tendencies are usually post-structuralist, I find Winterson’s insistence on the totality of form provoking. Her assertion that ‘when a thing is perfectly made it has no fastenings’ seems at odds with the deconstructionist act one naturally undertakes while reading (ibid., 171). As a writer, however, I am drawn to the idea of creating a unity of form: a seamless shape that integrates space and time on the same connective plane. This desire emerges from a problem of practice. The quest is not so much a
deliberate challenge to the Newtonian separation of space and time as it is a necessary venture. Whenever I write, I am pulled backward: to the past, to my childhood, to something that may have happened before I was born. While this backward trajectory is not a shortcoming, the movement is often frustrating. It is difficult, for example, to tell a story that is action-based or causal, and it is near impossible to arrange a series of events in chronological order. In fact, one of the first stories I wrote as a child was a recount of my sister’s birth: ‘On Wednesday morning at ten o’clock, my mum had a baby. It was six pound eleven and her name was Emma Michelle Cantrell. Everyone is happy because she’s a girl’. The title of the story was The Hospitable.

While my spelling has since improved, the structure of my stories remains unchanged. As a creative writer whose impulse is the autobiographical, the narratives I read and write are marked by traits that are characteristic of those childhood forays. My stories are essentially travel narratives that oscillate between the present and the past. The creative component of this thesis, The Rain Answered, is a travel memoir that contests the divorce of space and time by marrying the physical movement of the body with the abstract pull of memory. This coupling of wandering and wondering not only creates a genuine rapport between movement and memory but a natural affiliation between space and time. Space, of course, may be wandered through, while time may be wondered about. In fact, the distinction between the present, which is perceived as ‘now’, and the past, which is remembered as ‘then’, is compromised when one considers that the past is constructed by the present, in anticipation of the future. This reciprocal principle elides the distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’ by reducing both positions to relative experiences that depend on an individual’s location in space. As there is no objective distinction between spatial and temporal relations, space and time have natural symmetries that ascribe to Einstein’s model of the world. These similarities verify that while the human experience of space and time may differ, the fabric of space and
time is not entirely unlike. As George Schlesinger, speaking of the relationship between the elements, states, ‘Everyone will acknowledge that there is a certain disanalogy between space and time, but it is of a kind which cannot serve as a counterexample to the thesis that space and time are radically alike’ (1980, 11).

Like *The Hospitable, The Rain Answered* is a first-person narrative that is constructed through temporal markers and spatial frames. The story’s events are narrated in the past tense through a retrospective point of view. The narrator, who doubles as the protagonist, is a fictionalised version of me. The story that emerges delays the narrator’s forward progression through space by introducing a retrospective narrative that traces the narrator’s memories. The result of this delay is an inability to proceed without returning, an unshakable urge to revisit the past while simultaneously advancing through space. This phenomenon governs the travels that Kate, my protagonist, makes, as she wanders from the coast of County Clare to the war cemetery at Kanchanaburi. Kate’s father, who is aware of his daughter’s disposition, says to her, ‘You remember things you couldn’t possibly and you worry about things that aren’t there’. In Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980), Ruthie, too, is cast out to wander, and, under the tutelage of her transient aunt, discards linear time. ‘Memory is the sense of loss,’ Ruthie says, ‘and loss pulls us after it’ (ibid., 194). Of course, the fallibility of memory is redemptive for a travel story, since travellers tend to emphasise a continuous sense of identity while travelling by extending themselves into the past (through memory) and into the future (through imagination).

While it is not my intention to unpack the psychology of travel and attachment, it is my intention to establish the narrative structure of a story that locates space and time on a continuum. The problem that underlies this project is personal: I am trying to determine the shape of a story that no matter how far I wander always pulls me backward. The emphasis on
discernment, as the ability to discriminate, is pivotal, since writers and critics often discuss narrative structures collectively without differentiating between forms. Richard Gray and Justin Weir liken Vladimir Nabokov’s novels to mazes: infinite labyrinths of non-linear pathways that are scattered with riddles, puzzles, and word plays (Weir 2002, 73). Mazes, however, are complex arrangements that assume various forms. In simply-connected mazes, the pathways do not reconnect and there is only one solution. In multiply-connected mazes, the various passages loop around the exit. The difference in composition is crucial: if Lolita (1955) is a simple maze, then the reader will eventually find her way out. If the maze is more intricate, the reader may find herself pursuing numerous cross-references and endlessly looping. Thus, to read any Nabokov novel as a maze is useless if one does not consider what particular type of maze the narrative assumes. Is Lolita a branching maze with two options at each juncture? Or is the novel a burrowing maze with no clear entrance or exit? Even Winterson’s claim that she writes in spirals is sketchy. Are Winterson’s spirals logarithmic spirals that curve inward towards their derivative? Or are they hyperbolic spirals that begin at an infinite distance from their centre? Does the spiralling structure of Oranges resemble the shell of a snail or is it closer to the pattern of a fingerprint? These questions are important because all shapes have inherent laws that determine how they operate. Even shapes in the same family are constantly transforming. Given the multitude of shapes that may be adapted to narrative, it is important to identify the parameters of this thesis.

As a note on scope, I am not concerned with textual mazes, such as rhizomes, nor am I fussled with circular structures that oblige cyclical journeys. Creative writers and literary theorists, amongst other thinkers, have already explored the rhizome in detail since Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari first introduced the centreless system in A Thousand Plateaus (1987). Nigel Krauth, for example, has adapted the rhizome to narrative by imagining the process of writing non-linearly as the negotiation of interconnecting planes. Instead of
endorsing linearity by remaining parallel, these plateaus delineate writing by tilting together and clashing. The result, as Krauth explains, is a rhizomatic multiplicity: ‘a sort of zapping, synaptic, unstoppable, interconnected, interlayered system of planes’ (2006, 193). As the rhizome (from the Greek rhízōma, meaning ‘mass of roots’) is governed by principles of connection and heterogeneity, a rhizomatic narrative, such as a hypertext, is a non-linear structure (Webster’s II: New College Dictionary 2005, 974). At any given time, one or more of the story’s parts may attach to any other, opening up the possibility for a variety of plot threads, bridging segments, and alternative endings. Edward Packard’s children’s series, Choose Your Own Adventure (ca. 1979–1998), is a well-known example of a rhizomatic text. The books are non-linear fictions that are interactive and amendable. Readers make a series of decisions that not only determine their own passage through the story but the course of the protagonist as well. For example, a scene might close with a narrative proposition, such as, ‘If you want to stay and slay the dragon, turn to page 100. If you prefer to run away, turn back two pages’. These junctures offer readers the opportunity to move beyond linearity to points of overlap and convergence. For some, rhizomatic reading is a narrative rendering of post-modern fun and games. For others, rhizomatic stories manifest as pure exasperation between the covers, especially when authorial promises aren’t delivered in the narrative arcs. Not surprisingly, the Choose Your Own Adventure series has inspired several spin-off series, including Choose Your Own Nightmare.

The rhizome has also been criticised extensively as a non-linear structure. Perhaps the most pointed objection to the rhizome concerns its proposal of a ‘free’ nomadology that is unshackled by the abandonment of any predetermined structure. In Nationalists and Nomads (1998), Christopher Miller argues that the rhizome is not exempt from ramification even though the tuber is an anti-hierarchal system and thus a natural opposite of an arboreal structure. For Miller, the rhizome is capable of invasive movement that may impose order
and organisation as forcibly as a tree can. This reality undermines Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that the rhizome is not compatible with, or reducible to, any kind of generative model (1987, 13). The rhizome’s ability to colonise not only destroys the integrity of the structure but undermines its operation as a genuine configuration of nomadic space. As Miller explains,

We must heighten rather than diminish our capacity to understand divisions of world space, even as those divisions shift, dissolve, and reform. We must enable ourselves to think through borders without simply pretending that they don’t exist: when faced with a forest, we can’t simply declare that we don’t believe in trees. (1998, 209)

Similarly, the circle, as a traditional non-linear structure, has been widely used in postmodernist writing and problematised by literary critics, such as Guiliana Bruno and Christopher Nash. In The Unravelling of the Post-modern Mind (2001, 15), Nash explains that post-modernist writing subverts traditional virtues of storytelling by unhinging expectations about what is shared (the story’s content) and how it is told (the story’s form). Ian McEwan’s The Child in Time (1987) is a good example of a post-modern novel that disrupts Western understandings of reality by questioning linear time and contiguous space. The novel, which is set in a dystopian future, commences with the loss of a child, Kate, and concludes with the birth of Kate’s sibling. In between these temporal markers, Stephen, the novel’s protagonist and the children’s father, experiences a temporal loop in which the past, present, and future collapse into a circle. Specifically, Stephen travels back in time to observe his parents having a conversation about whether they should abort him. The event, which defies temporal logic, occurs at a country pub, when Stephen, who is passing by, glances in the pub window and sees a couple who he identifies with ‘inarticulated recognition’ (ibid., 61). The couple, who are Stephen’s parents, are significantly younger in this scene than they
are in the present narrative. Still, Stephen knows without question that the man and woman are his parents. Impossibly, at this moment, and as a result of this temporal looping, Stephen is both an unborn child and an adult. ‘He had never been here before,’ the narrator says. ‘But this certainty was confused by the knowledge that he had imagined it just like this. And he had no memory of imagining it at all’ (ibid., 58).

The circle, as an interminable figure, is a natural choice for McEwan whose treatment of time in The Child in Time is cyclical rather than linear. In Time and Narrative (1984, 3), Paul Ricoeur suggests that the circle of temporality is not a ‘vicious’ circle but a ‘healthy’ hermeneutic.1 While the circle enables non-linear movement, the shape encounters some limits when it is employed as a narrative structure. By its nature, the circle is not only perpetual but inflexible and repetitive. The beginning of a circle and its endpoint are the same destination. A child who leaves home and embarks on a circular journey will return to where he started. A pilgrim who sets out to renew her faith may return to a place of semblance. As Nash, speaking of the quest, explains, ‘The circle above all things is the sign of getting nowhere’ (2001, 16). In Atlas of Emotion (2002, 86), Bruno alters Nash’s thesis by substituting the location of nowhere with the domesticity of home. For Bruno, as for many feminist thinkers, the problem of writing in circles is the risk of reinvention: that is, restorative rather than reflective nostalgia for the past, the familial, and the fixity of home. As Bruno points out, ‘When seen as both a point of departure and destination, and when gendered female, the domus represents one’s origin: the womb from which one originates and to which one wishes to return’ (ibid.).

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1 Interestingly, hermeneutics itself takes the circle as a metaphor. The product of this circle symbology is a processual approach to inquiry that is based on circularity. In fact, hermeneutics presupposes that there always exists ‘a basic, harmonious unity’ in the parts of a work (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000, 104). In alethic hermeneutics, such as Ricoeur’s poetics, this unity is hidden in the text’s structure, but it may be uncovered and expressed through interpretation. For example, the meaning of a story may be extracted through metaphor, which is a part of the narrative as a whole.
As the circle and the rhizome have been thoroughly studied in narratology, it is time to advance the scholarship of non-linear structures that have received little to no attention in narrative theory. This project is important because the study of narrative must include non-linear structures that represent alternative conceptions of human experience, such as the experience of non-linear time. The need to acknowledge non-linearity as a lived experience is significant for writers because the temporal reality is often dismissed as a discursive device that is inconsistent with the lived experience of time. This proposition is problematic because it relegates non-linearity to an artistic choice that manipulates, and deviates from, the ‘standard’ experience of time. As a result, the validity of non-linear time is relinquished as the primacy of linear time is espoused. In other words, the pre-theoretical assumption that real time is linear discards the legitimacy of Einstein’s space-time and endorses, instead, the Newtonian view of time.

While the role that non-linearity plays in constructing experience is not yet fully understood, narratologists have long studied the role of narrative in organising and arranging experience. At present, however, there is a lack of contemporary criticism surrounding the study of non-linear stories that take the shape of curves, and, in particular, a special kind of curve known as the lemniscate. The lemniscate is a curve that consists of two symmetrical loops that meet at a central node (∞). As a horizontal figure eight, the lemniscate is the mathematical symbol for infinity. While the concept of infinity dates back to Greek philosophy, the discovery of the infinity symbol is credited to the English mathematician, John Wallis. Wallis, who was the Savilian Professor of Geometry at Oxford from 1649 to 1703, contributed to mathematics a series of symbols that are still used in the field (Grattan-Guinness 2005, 23). In *The Arithmetic of Infinitesimals* (1656, xvi), Wallis establishes the lemniscate as the shorthand for the phrase ‘[becoming] larger, and eventually…infinite’. In the introduction to his manifesto, Wallis writes, ‘I have unexpectedly come across somewhat
surprising questions concerning the measurement of figures partly bounded, partly continued to infinity’ (ibid., 7).

While there are some significant studies of the lemniscate’s geometry, there are only modest considerations of how the lemniscate operates as a narrative form. Henk Bos’s essay, *The Lemniscate of Bernoulli* (1993), provides a comprehensive argument for the lemniscate’s importance as an object of study. Bos, however, is a mathematician who approaches his subject through a historical lens. While Bos outlines the properties of the lemniscate, he focuses specifically on the problem of representing curves in seventeenth century geometry. Nonetheless, Bos’s emphasis on process raises an interesting question for writers: namely, what means or methods can be used for representing non-linear structures? The question, of course, is purposed for practitioners of mathematics, however the processual dilemmas that Bos identifies have several overlaps with the methodological dilemmas that writers experience when working with non-linear forms.

Similarly, in Eli Maor’s *e: The Story of a Number* (1994), the lemniscate is presented as a contentious subject for geometers. Maor discusses the lemniscate alongside the fraternal quarrels of James and John Bernoulli: two Swiss mathematicians who both claimed to discover the lemniscate in 1694. While the history of geometry offers insights into the lemniscate’s genesis, the science only provides clues as to how the lemniscate works as a narrative structure. In narrative theory, the lacuna is confirmed. To date, there is only one critical work that is dedicated entirely to the lemniscate: Herbert Smith’s essay, ‘The Lemniscate Topology of *Pale Fire*’ (1994). Smith, who is interested in hyperdimensional narratives, investigates the structure of the lemniscate in his exploration of the reciprocity between narrative form and narrative meaning. In his seminal work, *The Locus of Meaning* (1994), Smith recounts his marvel upon discovering that the figures of geometry may
represent a *locus* of meaning (*locus*, from the Latin derivative, meaning both ‘a physical place’ and ‘a place in a book’) (Riddle, Kerchever and Ernest 1865, 504–515). For Smith, the meaning of a text emerges from the correspondence between the story’s form and the story’s content. In multidimensional texts that resemble complex shapes, it is only through an understanding of how the text works that a reader can understand what the text says. Smith explains, ‘I began to believe, and have never given up the notion entirely, that a concept, no matter how abstract, is not really understood unless it can generate some sort of picture in the mind’ (1994b, xiii).

In his essay on narrative topology, Smith discusses how the lemniscate works as a narrative structure in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962): a novel that many critics regard as the archetext of post-modernism because of the multitude of interpretations the work elicits. Since the 1960s, there has been fierce debate surrounding the elaborate tracery of the novel’s plotline and the question of internal authorship. The disputes, which still linger some fifty years after publication, are simultaneously developed from, and exacerbated by, the novel’s complex structure. This structure has baffled critics and inevitably influenced the way the work is read. The narrative has been described loosely as a ‘spiral’ (Lee 1984, 79), a ‘hypertext’ (Wilson 2002, 173), ‘a prism of reflections’ (McCarthy 1962, par. 6), ‘a play of circular reflections’ (Alter 1975, 188), and a collection of ‘mirror images and contrastive reversals’ (Morris 2010, 329). While critics cannot seem to agree on the shape of the novel, the various structures that have been submitted share a common feature: each is a non-linear

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2 Extensive cases have been made by Shadeans and Kinboteans for the title of *Pale Fire*’s internal authorship. It is beyond the scope of this project to examine the validity of these claims, however, for the reader’s interest, the most comprehensive overview of the competing schools can be found in Brian Boyd’s *Shade and Shape in Pale Fire* (1997). While a handful of scholars opt for the fundamental undecidability of authorship (most notably, Alvin Kernan and Brian McHale), an equal number of Nabokovian scholars still oppose the proposal of single authorship (Robert Alter, Ellen Pifer and David Lodge). Interestingly, in 1997, Boyd, who is the eminent scholar of Nabokov, retracted his claim that Shade is the sole author of *Pale Fire* and proposed instead that both poem and commentary were inspired from beyond the grave by Shade’s daughter, Hazel. See *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999).
arrangement that resembles, in part or in whole, a curve: that is, a rounded or bending shape that is continuous but never linear.

In *The Locus of Meaning*, Smith extracts this regularity and identifies the curve as a lemniscate. He defines the shape generally as a ribbon and then more specifically as a continuous two-dimensional form that creates a ‘perfect’ unity (Smith 1994a, 135). As illustrated in Diagram 1, the lemniscate is a curve that turns back on itself to form a continuum. A continuum, as defined by *The Collins Dictionary*, is ‘a continuous series or whole, no part of which is perceptibly different from the adjacent parts’ (2013, par. 1). Simply, a continuum is a shape that is continuous and the same throughout. The lemniscate fits this definition, since the curve produces a constant and unchanging sequence that continues indefinitely. Certainly, one can imagine moving along the lemniscate’s path, starting at the centre and swinging left into the upper part of the curve, and around and downward, and back to the middle, then up and out to the right, and back to the centre again. Following this pattern, the lemniscate can be traced without end. As Smith points out, the curve is ‘a perfect single surface, yet multidimensional, reflecting and refracting text and texture through its continuous series of discontinuities’ (1994a, 137). For the purpose of this thesis, I define the lemniscate simply as a curve that moves continuously forward as it moves continuously backward. Since this oscillation is achieved through the interaction of the shape’s loops, the definition of the lemniscate cannot be applied to the circle, as the circle does not have a single point on its circumference that can be marked as a centre point. Thus, when the lemniscate is thought of as a closed curve, it functions as a self-reflexive shape rather than a static object (see the diagram below).
In *Self-Reflexivity in Literature* (2005), the authors suggest that the lemniscate is an apt demonstration of reflexivity because the curve is a self-referential shape that intersects its origin. While the mirror is a reflective device that is used for imitation, the lemniscate constantly inverts its own reflection by locking itself in an infinite bind. In *The Mystery of Literary Structures* (1989, 162), Leona Toker describes this union as ‘a never-ending spiral’. When viewed as the symbol for infinity, the lemniscate certainly embodies a structural peculiarity: the wish to arrest the infinite with a finite form. This paradox, which is a characteristic feature of the post-modern novel, disregards the concept of linearity by representing boundlessness within a bounded form. As Toker, speaking of the lemniscate, explains, ‘Such a spiral may continue *ad infinitum*; it may be imagined as a wedge that is stuck through the familiar material universe into the world of infinite consciousness’ (ibid., 161). Brian Boyd agrees with Toker that the lemniscate represents ‘all we cannot attain in life multiplied unimaginably’ (1999, 187).

No doubt, the absurdity of attempting to capture the infinite within a finite form might seem palpable if it weren’t for the notions that the opposite of the bounded is the unbounded and that both concepts may be captured in a single form. In Plato’s *Philebus* (ca. 429–
(Socrates quoted in Plato ca. 429–347BC, 58). For the Greeks, the infinite or the unknowable, is inseparable from the finite or the measurable, because both are intermingled and at work within each other. In Philebus, Socrates uses the comparative expressions ‘hotter’ and ‘colder’ as an example of the indeterminate. As measurable qualities without definite quantities, both ‘hotter’ and ‘colder’ exist in a limitless state of more and less. Consequently, both qualities have the capacity to exceed each other because their values are unlimited. Socrates asks Protarchus, ‘When you speak of hotter and colder, can you conceive any limit in those qualities? Does not the more and less, which dwells in their very nature, prevent their having any end?’ (ibid., 52). This idea of plurality in unity, or the one and many, is ascribed by Plato to the order of the universe, and as Socrates maintains, is ‘an everlasting quality of thought itself’ (ibid., 45). The proposition is interesting since the temporal structure of experience implies that narrative, as a way of purposing and packaging experience, may be central to cognition. The post-modernist, Gary Madison, explains, ‘Experience is meaningful, precisely because it can be recounted, and it can be recounted precisely because it has a temporal structure, which is essentially teleological’ (1990, 99).

In post-modern works of both fiction and non-fiction in which space and time are merged, I have discovered that it is common for the narrative’s structure to take the shape of a lemniscate. Janet Frame’s autobiographical novella, Towards Another Summer (2007), collapses space and time into a ‘secret spiral’ that allows the protagonist, Grace Cleave, to move back and forth between her home country of New Zealand and her adopted country of England (ibid., 219). ‘The world is flipped,’ the narrator says. ‘Boundaries were not possible, where nothing finished, shapes encircled, and there was no beginning’ (ibid., 6). As Grace migrates to London to escape the southern sun, her childhood memories intersect her travels
and impede her movement through space. ‘This is Winchley,’ Grace says. ‘This is not Oamaru. I am a migratory bird’ (ibid., 210). As the narrative progresses, the past and present meet on a continuum that resembles the lemniscate. The lemniscate, as a narrative structure, discards the laws of chronology and causality by generating a non-linear story that oscillates between Grace’s childhood and her travels as an adult. This structure blurs the boundaries between the past and present, which is a typical characteristic of a Frame narrative. In many of Frame’s fictions, particularly her autobiographical novels, the recreation of past events makes what is distant appear close and what has passed continue to pass. Mattina Brecon, the narrator of *The Carpathians* (1989, 7), acknowledges this phenomenon when she discovers the Gravity Star: a galaxy that appears to be ‘both relatively close and seven billion light years away’.

Similarly, in Michelle Dicinoski’s memoir, *Ghost Wife* (2013), the narrative assumes the shape of a lemniscate that simultaneously captures the present and the past. As Michelle travels from Brisbane to Toronto to marry her partner, Heather, she recounts the stories of invisible couples from Australia’s past. ‘To go forward,’ Michelle says, ‘I must first go back’ (ibid., 32). In Newburyport, the local architecture reminds Michelle of Queensland’s colonials and her family back home. As she wanders through town, she contemplates her upcoming wedding alongside the relationship of her grandparents. At one point, she remembers her grandfather, Gilbert, who disappeared from Brisbane’s northern suburbs in 1958. On that night, when ‘one story ended and a multitude more bubbled up’, Michelle’s narration unfolds as a curve that moves inwards towards its derivative (ibid., 33). This narrative spiralling binds the past and present into a continuum that takes the shape of the lemniscate. As the lemniscate consists of two loops that meet a central node, the narrative arcs move into each other to form a curve. This structure breaks the rules of causality and chronology by coupling physical movement through space with the backward reach of
memory. Thus, in The Belly of the World, when Michelle and Heather visit the Mapparium, ‘the colour and curve’ of the three-dimensional globe transports Michelle, at least emotionally, to the other side of the world. ‘I was in Boston,’ she says, ‘and yet I was thinking of Brisbane and Rockhampton, and my family, who were so far away and yet suddenly so close’ (ibid., 197).

The realisation, then, that the lemniscate is a popular narrative form is perplexing, since it has emerged from a gradual awareness that the lemniscate is frequently used as a narrative structure, even when the author does not refer to the novel’s shape as a lemniscate. Interestingly, neither Frame nor Dicinoski describe their novels as lemniscates, however both authors discuss their novels in terms that evoke the lemniscate’s form. Frame, for example, describes her work as a ‘whirlpool’, and even defines writing itself as the act of expressing ‘an emerging pattern and shape’ (Frame quoted in Alley 1991, 160–163). Dicinoski, too, describes her text as a circular structure that consists of ‘loops’ which double back on themselves (2010, 197). Just as Frame and Dicinoski, then, describe their novels as non-linear structures, I have noticed that it is typical of post-modernist writers who use the lemniscate to identify their novels as cyclical structures. Moreover, it is not uncommon for literary critics to read the novels as spirals. Hilary Mantel, in her review of Towards Another Summer, describes Frame’s writing as ‘always spiralling in on itself, towards the condition of myth’ (2008, par. 9). Laure Gardelle suggests that Frame’s short story, Jan Godfrey (1961), is ‘spiral-like’ because the speaker’s narration expands as the story continues (2011, 151). Even Dan Davin, one of the first scholars of Frame, expressed concern that Frame’s work would never escape ‘the closed spiral of autobiography’ (1962, 925). While writers and critics, then, embrace the non-linear form, they often describe non-linear structures collectively, and generically, as cyclical shapes, such as spirals.
This trend, which has not been questioned by narrative theorists, is problematic for creative writers because spirals and lemniscates are different shapes that do not operate synonymously when employed as narrative structures. In fact, even if the spiral and the lemniscate are reduced to basic shapes, there is an important distinction between the two. A spiral is a plane curve that is traced by a point, which winds around a fixed centre from which the point constantly recedes (Lockwood 1961, 173). Hawks, for example, will approach their prey in a logarithmic spiral to maximise the speed of diving and assume the sharpest view. The lemniscate, however, is a closed curve that is traced by a point, which moves simultaneously towards, and away from, the shape’s centre point (ibid.). The Earth, for example, will follow a lemniscatory trajectory as it rotates around the sun. Because of this fundamental difference, geometers classify the lemniscate as a sinusoidal spiral or a curve that is governed by polar co-ordinates (Rovenskii 2000, 63). The term, of course, is a misnomer, since a sinusoidal spiral is not a ‘true’ spiral in the mathematical sense. Actually, the lemniscate belongs to a family of curves known as the Cassinian ovals: hence, our definition of the lemniscate as a curve that travels continuously forward as it travels continuously backward.

This thesis, then, addresses what I regard as a lacuna in narratology. While the lemniscate has received significant consideration in geometry, its operation as a narrative structure is still widely unexamined in narrative scholarship, especially when compared to the critical attention afforded its non-linear counterparts, the circle and the rhizome. This gap in knowledge is widened by the frequent misidentification of the lemniscate as a spiral: a shape that is similar to the lemniscate but certainly not synonymous. Thus, the natural question that arises for a writer is, how does the lemniscate work? Can a writer who writes non-linearly employ the curve as a narrative form? Why is a detailed study of the lemniscate significant for creative writers? These questions are double-sided because they are geometrical, since
their answer is concerned in part with shape, and narratological, since their application requires the mergence of shape and story. Just as geometers must consider the proper setting for a mathematical problem, writers must choose the most suitable shape for a story. To do this, the writer employs a narrative structure that serves the content of the story. Then, using a method of representation, the writer shapes the story accordingly. In other words, the writer works in the proper setting.

In Winterson’s *Oranges*, as in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, that setting emerges as a lemniscate that curves back and forth. In *Pale Fire*, John Shade recalls, ‘the miracle of a lemniscate left / upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft / bicycle tires’ (Nabokov 1962, lines 137–139). Nabokov, however, nominates the spiral as the ruling image of his art. In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (2000, 211), Nabokov writes, ‘A coloured spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life’. Similarly, Winterson identifies the structure of *Oranges* as a spiral of ‘infinite movement’ (2001, xiii). In *Art Objects*, however, Winterson describes her writing as a ‘lemniscate of back and forth’ (1995, 6). The lemniscate, not the spiral, is the narrative structure of *Oranges* and *Pale Fire*, and a trademark of both a Nabokov and Winterson novel. Not only does the shape have diegetic meaning in many of the pair’s novels, but it is the overarching image for their works as a whole. ‘There are seven books,’ Winterson says, ‘and they make a whole cycle’ (2013, par. 13).

Similarly, in *The Rain Answered*, the structure of the story assumes the shape of a lemniscate that oscillates between the present and the past. In Thailand, when Kate finds out that her grandmother, Norma, has passed away, she looks back to her childhood. She remembers when her grandmother was well and the nights she came to babysit. She recounts Norma’s battle with breast cancer and her decision to undergo a double mastectomy. When
Kate sees the scars on her grandmother’s chest, she notices that the stitches form the shape of a lemniscate. Kate recalls,

Gran was standing in front of the mirror with her blouse unbuttoned. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Her chest was bruised and yellow, and both her breasts were missing. In the place where they used to be was a scar. The ribboned stitches, which were still fresh, made the shape of a figure eight.

The figure eight is the setting of *The Rain Answered* and the focus of this thesis. It is in this context of practice, and between the parameters of creative writing and geometry, that I establish the lemniscate as a narrative structure that merges space and time.

**THE ARGUMENT**

In this thesis, I argue that the lemniscate is a narrative structure that offers a viable alternative to linearity. In particular, I suggest that the lemniscate operates as a space-time continuum in which the dimensions of space and time are interdependent rather than separate. More broadly, I propose that the lemniscate constitutes a non-linear structure that organises and arranges the content of a story, and, in doing so, constitutes a narrative form.

In *Story and Discourse* (1978), the narratologist, Seymour Chatman, explains that a narrative structure consists of two parts: a form and substance of content (that is, story) and a form and substance of expression (that is, discourse). The dual constituents work together to produce what Chatman calls a semiotic narrative form, which is a narrative structure that ‘communicates meaning in its own right, over and above the paraphraseable contents of its story’ (1978, 23). In defining story content, I adopt Chatman’s model and flag two narrative
levels: first, the substance of the content (that is, the story components of the narrative, such as the events, characters, and setting), and second, the form of expression (that is, the thoughts, ideas, and emotions that the author imitates and represents in narrative). In other words, I describe the narrative content as the subject matter of a story, and I read the narrative expression as the story’s thematic matter. Naturally, the subject of a story includes the events that are purported to happen (the plot) and the existents that perform those actions (the characters and the setting). The thematic matter includes the abstract meanings of a story or the story’s main ideas. As story emerges from the combination of these elements, the content elicits a narrative structure that expresses the story and manipulates the story’s meaning.

In *The Rain Answered*, and in the various novels examined in this thesis, that structure is a lemniscate. As the lemniscate is also an ideogram: that is, a written symbol that represents a complex idea (in this case, the concept of infinity), the lemniscate doubles as a semiotic form. As a symbolic structure with its own set of codes, the lemniscate communicates meaning beyond the story’s content, and thus, the lemniscate is a narrative structure that is independently meaningful of the story that it is attached to. Because of this phenomenon, the lemniscate provides a unique opportunity for both writers and readers of non-linear narrative. For the writer, the lemniscate offers a feasible approach to structuring a non-linear story, and for the reader, the lemniscate provides a useful directive for reading a non-linear work. Accordingly, this thesis argues that the lemniscate is inextricable from, and intrinsic to, the meaning-making facility of narrative.

To support this argument, I use a qualitative methodology that includes literary theory, textual analysis, and self-reflexive practice. Comprised of a travel memoir and an exegesis, the project is a study in creative writing that is viewed and filtered through a feminist lens. As a travel writer who has the freedom of mobility and expression, I am aware that I belong to a
privileged group of ‘First World wanderers’ (Holland and Huggan 2003, 116). As a literary studies student, I am also aware that it is only at these sites of conflict that meaning is manufactured. I maintain my research authority, then, as a creative writer who is both a reader and a critic. In the midst of this triangulation, I disregard the unproductive notion that only a critic can explain a writer’s work and I adopt, instead, the triple hermeneutic of researcher, respondent, and mediator, or writer, critic, and reader. The unique opportunity granted by this three-tier positioning is not only the creation of personal theory but the intellectualisation of methodology and its wider circulation in the field. In acknowledging this position as the potentiality of practice-led research, I regard the triple hermeneutic as a position of privilege: the job includes an intimacy not afforded traditional researchers, a type of insider knowledge and status. In pursuing these abstractions, I view my practice as both a personal and professional expression of knowledge. I ground my research in my own life experiences, but I present those experiences in the most concrete manner possible by connecting my praxis to the scholarship of creative writing. In doing so, I assume the shared roles and responsibilities of both the researcher and the researched. Robyn Stewart explains, ‘Practitioners, who focus on their own practice in the exploration of ideas and experiences, create idiosyncratic theory by presenting a knowledge base that is both complementary, but different to, the more remote accounts generated by researchers studying artistic practices’ (2003, par. 3). The idea of generating idiosyncratic theory is attractive for a writer whose primary aim is to present a believable story that readers can relate to.

In this context, the methodological knots of practice raise broader questions about the legitimacy of merging the discipline of creative writing with geometry. Is it natural for a

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3 In Reflexive Methodology (2000, 144), Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg describe critical research as a ‘triple hermeneutic’. Where simple hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, and double hermeneutics the interpretation of interpreting subjects, triple hermeneutics is both the interpreted interpretation and the context behind that interpretation. Triple hermeneutics takes double hermeneutics as its base and considers, in addition, the ‘unconscious processes, ideologies, power relations, and other expressions of dominance’ that exist within knowledge (ibid.). While this ideological-political context does not have to orient the research or alter its scope, it should at least be recognised by reflexive practitioners.
writer to integrate the art of storytelling with the study of physical shapes? If so, how might this combination materialise in a research outcome that ensures uniformity and readability while still insisting on the subjective nature of experience as a valid source of knowledge? Can a creative writer use memory and imagination to bridge the gap between shape and story? These questions are resolved through the dialogical exchange that underpins my praxis. As a writer who finds story and shape inextricable, I regard the creative and critical components of this project as interdependent answers to the research question. The question, as mentioned, concerns the identification of a narrative structure that situates space and time on a continuum. In other words, what is the shape of a story that locates its spatio-temporal co-ordinates on a curve? As this dilemma emerges from a problem of practice, but as the quandary is situated firmly within the field of narratology, the question requires investigation in both a creative and critical setting. Of course, the difference between creative writing and critical thinking is nebulous for the practitioner who sees the coupling of theory and practice as organic to one’s praxis. As Deleuze, in conversation with Foucault, explains,

A theory is exactly like a box of tools...It must function. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate. We don’t revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others. (Deleuze and Foucault 1972, par. 5)

In *Intellectuals and Power* (1972), Deleuze’s focus on the nexus between theory and practice is interesting because the connection suggests that methodology is central to research rather than peripheral. In fact, Deleuze’s conception of theory-as-practice is useful for writers because the relationship between the creative and critical components of a text may contribute to its originality. As Jeri Kroll confirms, ‘The symbiosis can be innovative’ (2004, par. 10). Thus, if the creative and critical co-exist because they are inextricably connected
and mutually dependent, then practice may beget theory, and vice versa. By extension, if critical thinking is read as a creative pursuit, and if creative practice continues to qualify as credible research, then both the creative and the critical may be linked productively in a symbiotic relationship. Certainly, Deleuze’s perception of practice as ‘a set of relays from one theoretical point to another’ complements his notion of theory as ‘a relay from one practice to another’ and suggests that methodology is not fixed or static but mobile and adaptable (Deleuze and Foucault 1972, par. 5). The experience of praxis as a dialogical process highlights the need for practitioners to generate methodologies that not only provide strategies for writing but strategies for reading. Of course, if a methodology is to be of any use to a writer, then it must function, which is to say the way it operates must be visible and accessible. If a methodology is to be pragmatic, it must also reflect the nature and purpose of the research. As Deleuze points out, ‘It is strange that it was Proust, an author thought to be a pure intellectual, who said it so clearly: treat my book as a pair of glasses directed to the outside; if they don’t suit you, find another pair’ (ibid.).

In responding to Proust’s challenge, I conceive the creative and critical components of this thesis as interdependent answers to the research question. In doing so, I resist the traditional divide of theory/practice, and I assume, instead, a more dynamic view of praxis: one that merges shape and story. This dialogic allows me to capture the research as an enlivened act that appreciates the immediacy of its undertaking. The project is a living practice: an ongoing form of action-reflection in which the problems and possibilities of the lemniscate lie somewhere between the organic bonds of the story’s form and the story’s

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4 In (Re)inventing Artists’ Research (2003), Robyn Stewart argues that if arts research is to be of any value, then it must make sense to other practitioners. For Stewart, this requires arts researchers to work as theory generators as well as theory users. On a practical level, this necessitates the adoption of critical skills that aid in the expression of practice. In studio practice, for example, Stewart highlights the need for clear languages, well-structured reports, and transparent processes. To be ‘multilingual’ in this sense means to present one’s research in a language that is not only meaningful for the practitioner but for others working in the field. As Stewart explains, ‘We need to focus closely our inquiry and to represent it in ways that are personally the most meaningful, appropriate, and authentic, to portray and describe clearly what it is that we are trying to understand and represent’ (ibid., par. 23).
content. In this context, my preoccupation with linking shape and story seeks to destabilise the myth that creative process is always ephemeral, unreachable, and resistant to scholarly inquiry. In fact, even if one embraces Milech and Schilo’s Research Question Model, and views the creative and critical as independent responses to the research problem (separate only because each is conducted through the language of a different discourse: that is, academic language for the critical and abstracted for the creative), then the traditional demarcation between the arts and sciences may be compromised if the bridge that separates subjective language from scholarly language is dispersed. As Bent Flyvbjerg explains,

Here as elsewhere, the sharp separation often seen in the literature between qualitative and quantitative methods is a spurious one. The separation is an unfortunate artefact of power relations and time constraints in graduate training; it is not a logical consequence of what graduates and scholars need to know to do their studies and to do them well…More often than not, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will do the task and do it best. (2001, 196)

Certainly, in attempting to determine the shape of a story that no matter how far I wander always pulls me back, I have found it useful to merge the study of curves, which began in seventeenth century geometry, with contemporary discussions of temporality in narratology. In particular, I am interested in the methodological dilemmas that creative writers share with geometers when confronted with the challenge of how to represent non-linear forms. The most pressing of these problems, the crisis of representation, is a processual dilemma that involves memory and imagination. As I have discovered, the importance of memory cannot be undervalued in mathematics, nor can imagination, as an act of meaning-making, be relegated solely to the arts. In The Imagination in Mathematics (1857), Thomas Hill asserts that geometry and poetry are of the closest kindred because they both necessitate
creativity. Hill explains, ‘Poetry is a creation, a making, a fiction; and the mathematics have been called, by an admirer of them, the sublimest and most stupendous of fictions’ (1857, 229). The Scottish geometer, Peter Nicholson, affirms Hill’s proposition when he discusses the viability of applying geometry to the arts. In *A Popular Course of Pure and Mixed Mathematics* (1825, 436), Nicholson remarks, ‘The study of curves is perhaps one of the most delightful in the whole range of mathematical science; besides their use in the research of truths, they may be employed with advantage to works of fancy’.

No doubt, the disciplines’ shared dependency on memory and imagination reveals the need for research approaches that integrate multiple perspectives in the inquiry process. This need is imperative when one considers that the demarcation between the arts and sciences is sometimes read as a specious choice between subjective, sensitive, and contextualised understanding and cold, objective analysis. In fact, for some quantitative researchers, the progress of science still relies on the elimination of qualitative knowledge from the discipline. As Charles Mauron asserts,

> Qualitative knowledge, for its part, is incapable of evolution, because it is individual and in consequence untransmissible...it cannot be contradicted because it cannot be verified. But scientific knowledge can be refined from generation to generation; one of these processes of refining knowledge has been precisely that of eliminating as much as possible of qualitative knowledge to the point of no longer admitting it. (1976, 77)

Qualitative knowledge is based on a relativist ontology that assumes it is impossible for an individual to avoid subjectivity at an epistemological level. The qualitative researcher cannot conduct a study without affecting the context of the study, while the research simultaneously affects the researcher’s perceptions. To accept, however, that qualitative knowledge is redundant because it is subjective is problematic, especially when one considers that modern
science is primarily concerned with questions of relativity. As Mauron himself admits, ‘It seems to me difficult (and after the theory of relativity more difficult than it was before) to build up a theory of knowledge, and consequently any philosophy whatever’ (ibid., 79).

In this thesis, I embrace the relativist ontology of qualitative research, however I discard the traditional division of art and science. Instead of separating writing and geometry, I draw on story and shape to establish the lemniscate as a narrative structure. In the exegesis, I use diagrams to illustrate how the lemniscate operates as a non-linear form. In my memoir, I reveal how the lemniscate orders and arranges a travel narrative that oscillates back and forth between physical wandering and abstract wondering. I show how the properties of the lemniscate—namely, continuity, counterpoint, symmetry, simultaneity, and infinitas or boundlessness—may double as the themes of a work. I also demonstrate, in both the creative and critical components of the thesis, how the lemniscate works as a space-time continuum. Simply, I borrow the lemniscate from geometry and bring the shape to narrative. In doing so, I establish the lemniscate as a narrative structure that a writer may employ.

In Chapter 1, The Shape of the Story, I establish the lemniscate as a non-linear form. Through a detailed synopsis of the curve’s development, I trace the discovery of the lemniscate to the study of curves in seventeenth century geometry. The lemniscate, as a self-referential figure, is a shape with unique applications in the physical world. Using examples, I explain how the lemniscate exists subtly in most living organisms from plants and butterflies to the human body. This natural formation suggests that the lemniscate is not only an important symbol of polar activity but of an interdependent universe. By providing a comprehensive overview of the lemniscate’s properties, I also explain by way of illustration how the lemniscate differs from curves with similar qualities, such as the catenary and the parabola. From here, I consider the methodological dilemmas that creative writers share with
geometers when confronted with the challenge of how to represent non-linear forms. I suggest that the problem of representation is exacerbated by the pre-theoretical assumption that time is linear. I argue that conceptualising time as a linear progression is limiting for writers whose natural inclination when writing is to move in a non-linear direction. At this point, I introduce Albert Einstein’s theory of space-time. While I am not a scientist, I draw on Einstein’s idea of space-time because his model of the universe embodies the structural paradox that governs the lemniscate: that is, boundlessness within a bounded form.

In Chapter 2, Story Samples, I reveal how the lemniscate functions as a space-time continuum in a post-modern work of both fiction and non-fiction. Without seeking to limit the project with separatist generalisations, I analyse novels from both categories of literature to show that the application of the lemniscate is not restricted by genre.

In Story 1: The Sideways Hourglass, I explain how the lemniscate works as a space-time continuum in Jeanette Winterson’s semi-autobiographical novel, Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit. I argue that Winterson endows her story with a non-linear temporality that merges the past, present, and future into a uniform whole. To do this, Winterson configures the lemniscate as a space-time continuum that locates historical time and mythical time on the same connective plane. From the outset, Winterson spirals between the realist narrative of her protagonist, the young Jeanette, and the fairytale narratives that distance Jeanette from her mother. This lemniscatory trajectory disrupts the temporal laws of causality and chronology, and creates a non-linear temporality that captures Jeanette’s experience of the world. Not only does the lemniscate represent Jeanette’s movement through space and time, but the shape encapsulates both the complexity of her relationships and the structure of her narration. In The Sideways Hourglass, the focus of my analysis is how the lemniscate functions as a narrative structure that orders a story’s content.
In *Story 2: The Sleeping Eight*, I extend the parameters of the lemniscate’s application by revealing how the shape both creates and reflects a story’s themes. I apply this analysis to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. Instead of presenting space and time as separate entities, Nabokov elicits a non-linear temporality in which space and time are simultaneous experiences. This idea of synchronicity is embodied by the lemniscate since the shape operates as a space-time continuum that is governed by the properties of continuity, symmetry, and counterpoint. These qualities, which distinguish the lemniscate from other curves, double as the themes of *Pale Fire*. At a symbolic level, the figure eight is an ideogram for the novel’s contrapuntal structure. Specifically, the lemniscate represents the dialogical relationship between the novel’s mirror parts: that is, Shade’s autobiographical poem and Kinbote’s accompanying commentary. At a subtextual level, the lemniscate also functions as Nabokov’s directive for reading. While readers may certainly pursue a linear trajectory through the novel, the lemniscate provides the most useful strategy for understanding the nexus between narrative form and meaning. To support this thesis, I show how the lemniscate operates as a narrative structure that advances the story’s themes.

From here, I present my travel memoir, *The Rain Answered*. The memoir is a collection of travel stories that takes the lemniscate as its structure. Comprised of six 10,000 word chapters, the story revolves around a secret my father told me that he asked me to keep from my mother. The novel discloses the implications of the secret and the travels I made thereafter. Set across four different countries, the chapters are arranged by city: *Rump* (Brisbane), *Turkey Delight* (Killarney), *Crackers* (Brisbane), *Keeping Secrets* (New York), *The Roloffs* (Brisbane), and *Final Call* (Kanchanaburi). From the outset, my wanders are partnered with recollections of home. The result of this coupling is a non-linear narrative that moves between the memories of my childhood and my travels as an adult. The story is an attempt to retrieve the fragments of my past, while simultaneously distancing myself from my
parents. In exploring themes of loss, longing, and growing up, the story uncovers the inextricability of the past and present, and the line between friendship and love.

In Chapter 3, The Story Behind The Story, I discuss how the lemniscate functions as a space-time continuum in The Rain Answered. Specifically, I build on the argument established in Chapters 1 and 2 by extending the application of the lemniscate to a travel memoir. I argue that the lemniscate is particularly suited to a travel story that couples the physical movement of the body with the abstract travel of the mind. By pairing wandering and wondering, the lemniscate engenders a pattern of motion that is characterised by a forward progression through space and a backward passage through time. This continuum, which breaks the bonds of linearity, constitutes a travel narrative that oscillates between the present and the past. In fact, at the centre of the lemniscate is the figuration of the wanderer. Typically, the wanderer is a non-institutionalised traveller who disrupts the stabilities of fixity and stasis by undertaking a mode of travelling that is both finite and unbounded. In revealing, then, how a wanderer’s travels may assume the shape of the lemniscate, I discuss two contemporary travel memoirs that influenced my memoir: Janet Frame’s Towards Another Summer and Michelle Dicinoski’s Ghost Wife. In comparing these texts to The Rain Answered, I reflect on the genesis of my work and offer meditations on my practice.

Finally, I summarise the findings of the thesis. In The Point of the Story, I evaluate the importance of the lemniscate as a narrative structure. I review the relevance of the shape’s application for writers who are interested in non-linear narrative. To conclude, I recapitulate that the lemniscate elicits a space-time continuum that merges space and time.
CHAPTER 1
THE SHAPE OF THE STORY
Philosophy is written in this grand book—I mean the universe—which stands continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and interpret the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one is wandering about in a dark labyrinth.

—*The Assayer*
Galileo Galilei

In the *Acta Eruditorum* of May 1690, the Swiss mathematician, James Bernoulli, posed a challenge to the mathematical world: ‘To find the curve assumed by a loose string hung freely from two fixed points’ (Bernoulli quoted in Truesdell 1960, 64). The quandary, which was first considered by the Greek philosophers, raised a classical dilemma: how to find the shape of a curve. The question garnered the attention of the Greeks, who believed the secrets of the universe were coded in mathematics. The inscription over the entrance to Plato’s school read, ‘Let no one ignorant of geometry enter my door’, and on one occasion, a young Athenian with no knowledge of math at all was denied admission as a student (Ball 1960, 43). In the seventeenth century, this idea of geometry as a method of thinking was embraced by the geometers whose preoccupation with objects in motion, such as ships at sea, led to the study of curves.
During his career, James Bernoulli was fascinated with lines of infinity. In particular, he studied a family of curves known as the elastica. The line, which forms the curve of an elastic bar, was first approached by mathematicians as ‘an equilibrium of moments’ (Levien 2008, 1). In the 1690s, the focus of Bernoulli’s study was the application of Newton’s first law of motion: that is, ‘Every body perseveres in its state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed thereon’ (Newton 1687, 83). In physics, this is the theory of static equilibrium. The law, as established by Newton in his *Principia* (1687), maintains that if a body is at rest, it remains at rest, but if a body is in motion, it tends to maintain the motion. Newton’s theory yielded a second approach to the elastica, which held that the curve assumes the minimum bending energy (Levien 2008, 1). In other words, the compression forces of the elastica act in balance. As a result of this discovery, the differential equation for the elastic line was proven mathematically equivalent to the motion of a swinging pendulum. As illustrated in Diagram 2, the shape of the elastica is analogous with the shape of a tarp holding a volume of water. The elastica is also the shape of a descending parachute or a pressurised balloon (Diagram 3).
Interestingly, the curve described by Bernoulli in the *Acta* was not an elastica but a catenary (from the Latin *catena*, meaning ‘chain’) (Riddle, Kerchever and Ernest 1865, 106). Like the elastica, the catenary is a curve of minimum energy, meaning that of all the shapes a hanging curve may take, the catenary has the lowest centre of gravity and therefore the smallest potential energy. This famous discovery revealed something vital about the catenary: not only does the curve revolve around its axis, but it also supports the profound idea that in some mysterious way, the actual configurations of nature are those that minimise energy (Simmons 1992, 259). A snake, for example, will coil around itself in order to retain its body heat by reducing its surface-to-volume ratio. Similarly, light travels along a curve of the shortest optical length or the path that takes the minimum time. In proposing his problem in the *Acta*, Bernoulli assumed that the curve in question was flexible in all its parts. He also surmised that the figure had a constant thickness and a uniform density (Maor 1994, 140). Bernoulli’s challenge, which became known as the Catenary Contest, seduced mathematicians all over the world to find an equation for the curve. In fact, the riddle of the catenary was quickly deemed one of nature’s greatest mysteries. Certainly, at the time of Bernoulli’s proposal, it seemed no one, not even James himself, knew how to solve the curve.

**GALILEO**

Half a century earlier, Galileo proposed that the catenary was a parabola: a curve that consists of a single bend with two lines that expand indefinitely. This figure, which resembles a U-shape, may vary in width and steepness. As illustrated below, the curve may open upward or downward depending on whether its coefficient is positive or negative (see Diagrams 4 and 5).
Due to the shape’s unusual qualities, parabolas are used frequently in modern architecture and design. In Brisbane, the Kingsford Smith Memorial assumes the shape of a parabolic arch, which is a structure that simulates an aircraft hangar. The two arches of the Sydney Harbour Bridge are also inclined parabolas. In Melbourne, the famous Rice House is contained beneath a series of arches that resemble a tent-like encampment. The iconic arches, which are often mistaken as parabolas, are in fact flattened catenaries: that is, weighted curves with bases that are heavier than their apices (Evans, Borland and Hamann 2006, 104). According to Galileo, the catenary formed a parabolic line.

**HUYGENS**

In 1646, the Dutch mathematician, Christian Huygens, refused Galileo’s assertion that the catenary is a parabola. Certainly, to the human eye, the hanging chain resembles a parabolic curve. Both have a single low point and a vertical line of symmetry. To the casual
observer, both appear to be continuous and increasing infinitely. Huygens, however, used geometry to prove that a slack rope does not form a parabolic curve (Andriesse 2005, 374).

![Diagram of Catenary and Parabola]

**Diagram 6**

**The Catenary and the Parabola**

In the case of a simple suspension bridge, the catenary holds its own weight and thus hangs freely (imagine, if you will, a walking bridge). In the case of a suspended deck bridge, the cable holds its own weight as well as the weight of the horizontal bar, and thus, the bridge takes the shape of a parabola (for example, the Sydney Harbour Bridge). The difference between the catenary and the parabola arises from the different distribution of weight along the cables, which generates different curves. In the case of the catenary, the weight of a walking bridge is comprised only of the cable and is distributed evenly along the cable’s length. The weight of the deck bridge, however, is distributed along the cable from the weight of the deck, which hangs horizontally below (Chen 2011, 134). Upon arriving at his findings at the age of seventeen, Huygens sent his proof to the French mathematician, Marin Mersenne. At the time of correspondence, Huygens did not provide a solution to the catenary. He knew the curve was not a parabola, but he was unable to solve the equation.
Not long after Bernoulli’s problem went to print, the German mathematician, Gottfried Leibniz, replied with an admission: ‘I have thought it worthwhile, before publishing my solution, to give time also to others for exercising their skill’ (Leibniz quoted in Truesdell 1960, 65). Leibniz then qualified his promise with an exception: if a solution was not found to the problem by the end of the year, he would offer his. Huygens, on hearing news of the German’s discovery, wrote to Leibniz immediately. In his telegram, he included a cipher of his findings and requested a copy of Leibniz’s own. In closing, Huygens added, ‘Let us shorten between ourselves the term of a year that you have allowed to the geometers’ (Huygens quoted in Truesdell 1960, 65). A week later, Leibniz replied, ‘I find some relation to my calculation but also some difference’ (Leibniz quoted in Truesdell 1960, 65). Much to Huygens’s frustration, no cipher was returned.

In June of 1691, one year after Bernoulli proposed the catenary problem, the Acta printed three solutions: one by Huygens, a second by Leibniz, and a third from a surprise contender, John Bernoulli: James’s younger brother. As published, the solutions did not reveal the individual methods used by the mathematicians. While the trio arrived at the same solution, each approached the question differently. In fact, subsequent publications of working manuscripts reveal that Huygens employed infinitesimal mathematics, while Leibniz and Bernoulli applied new calculus. In an explanatory note that prefaces the solutions, the
editor of the *Acta*, Otto Mencke, provides a rationale for the order of publication. He explains,

The benevolent reader will have no trouble in remembering the problem proposed by the most enlightened Professor James Bernoulli...But in fact, the brother of the proposer, Mr. John Bernoulli, candidate in medicine and much versed in these studies, solved it and sent us his solution last December...Therefore we shall give you...the two solutions of these illustrious peers [Leibniz and Huygens] and that of Bernoulli, but in the order in which they reached our hands. (Mencke quoted in Truesdell 1960, 66)

According to Clifford Truesdell, the three solutions exhibited in the order that they were received, the mathematics of the future, present, and past: that is, the mathematics of Bernoulli, Leibniz, and Huygens (1960, 66). The discovery of the equation was considered a great triumph for calculus and the mathematicians boasted of their ingenuity. John Bernoulli was branded a young giant and treated as a peer of his superiors (ibid.). His accomplishment earned him a pass to the Paris Academy of Sciences, which cemented his reputation as one of Europe’s foremost mathematicians. While his response to the catenary problem was accurate, John published his solution without proofs. His lack of elucidation was considered unusual by some, since the younger Bernoulli tended to publish his answers with explanations and to provide, in addition, the theory (Hellman 2006, 78). John later bragged that the problem of the catenary was entirely reachable though he ceded that it robbed him of sleep for an entire night. Much to his pleasure, his brother, James, was unable to solve the equation.
In 1701, John presented his analysis of the catenary to the Paris Academy. At the same time, James published his own solution in the *Acta*. A later comparison of the two papers clearly reveals that James’s response is superior. Unfortunately, James’s moment of triumph never materialised. For reasons that remain unclear, the sealed envelope containing John’s solution was not opened by the academy until the year following James’s death (Fellmann and Fleckenstein 2008, par. 20). John, who was just as accomplished as his brother, resented James’s eminence. In 1701, John wrote to his father, ‘Am I not worthy of as much consideration as my sibling?...Don’t come to Basel and take my fame and say that you had anything to do with it’ (Bernoulli quoted in Hellman 2006, 78–79). James, who was also weary of his father, shared a tumultuous relationship with his parent. Before his death, James made a crest for himself with the motto, ‘*Invito patre sidera verso*’, meaning ‘I went against my father’s will and yet I am up there amongst the stars’ (ibid.).

The brothers, who worked on the same problems, were in fact bitter adversaries. More than once, their suspicious natures and churlish dispositions resulted in violent public feuds. After John proposed the Brachistochrone Problem to ‘the shrewdest mathematicians in the world’, James not only solved the equation but drafted three more questions modelled on the original to be solved using his own method (Bernoulli quoted in Maor 1994, 116). In the third of these problems, known as the Isoperimetrics, James formulated a complex question in which he challenged John by name. James’s attempt to discredit his brother proved somewhat successful. John’s answer to the question, while correct, was based on an incorrect derivation. That is, John solved the problem, but he failed to identify its variational character, which resulted in an incomplete solution and merciless criticism from James. According to Emil
Fellmann and Joachim Fleckenstein, ‘This was the beginning of alienation and open discord between the brothers, and also the birth of the calculus of variations’ (2008, par. 20).

Naturally, the brothers capitalised on their insistent achievements and taunted each other in print. In the index pages of the Acta, the Bernoullis engaged in a state of open antagonism, frequently belittling each other’s abilities and accusing the other of plagiarism (Guillen 1995, 75). When Mencke finally ended the brothers’ bickering, the Bernoullis exchanged insults via private correspondence. In a letter to his colleague, Pierre Rémond de Montmort, John gloats of his self-proclaimed glory and asserts his brother’s incompetence as an ‘incontestable truth’ (Bernoulli quoted in Truesdell 1960, 75). Not only does he maintain his discovery of the catenary equation, but he also claims that he alone ‘unfolded the whole mystery’ (ibid., 76). He writes,

You say that my brother proposed this problem; that is true, but does it follow that he had a solution of it then? Not at all. When he proposed this problem at my suggestion (for I was the first to think of it), neither the one nor the other of us was able to solve it...We despaired of it as insoluble. (ibid.)

In the passage that follows, John details the moment of the curve’s discovery and the events that quickly ensued. His account, though exaggerated at times, seems to support evidence that although the brothers shared mathematics, they worked independently. John continues,

The efforts of my brother were without success; for my part, I was more fortunate, for I found the skill (I say it without boasting, why should I conceal the truth?) to solve it in full...The next morning, filled with joy, I ran to my brother, who was still struggling with this Gordian knot without getting anywhere, always thinking like Galileo that the
catenary was a parabola. Stop! Stop! I say to him, don’t torture yourself anymore to try to prove the identity of the catenary with the parabola, since it is entirely false. (ibid.)

Interestingly, the brothers’ notoriety for feuding amongst themselves did not diminish over time. In September of 1694, James published an article in the *Acta* in which he described a curve known as a lemniscate. In October of the same year, John published a paper in which he, too, described the same curve. Following the successive publications of the papers, the Bernoullis had a protracted fall out over who had invented the curve. The dispute became so volatile that John, who now held a professorship at the University of Groningen, swore he would never return to Switzerland as long as his brother was still living (Maor 1994, 118). James retaliated by brandishing his own success and boasting that John was his pupil. At the time, neither of the Bernoullis were aware that the lemniscate was a special kind of Cassinian oval that had already been described by the Italian astronomer, Giovanni Cassini.

**TIME OUT**

Before we consider the lemniscate’s properties and how the shape works as a non-linear structure, it is worth pausing to reflect on the methodological problems that the early geometers share with creative writers. The most pressing of these problems, the crisis of representation, concerns the way form is legitimised in theoretical discussions. The matter is important for writers and geometers because a focus on process reveals that the representation of non-linear structures, such as curves, is a theoretical dilemma as well as a problem of practice. In fact, in the Bernoullis’ time, the problem of representation precipitated one of the most exigent questions of the day: namely, how can a geometer
represent shapes that cannot be constructed with a ruler? For creative writers, this question can be adapted to the tradition of linear narrative and its limitations as a mode of expression: namely, how can a writer structure a story that is curved?

In the seventeenth century, the crisis of representation arose from the progression of geometry, which moved from the study of lines to the study of curves. These curves, which René Descartes describes as curves of ‘increasing complexity’, presented a procedural difficulty: unlike lines, which could be constructed with a ruler, curves could not be expressed in a simple way (Descartes quoted in Grosholz 2007, 168). Consequently, a question of methodology emerged: if the study of geometry expanded to include complex curves, then how could the shapes be represented? The question was intensified by the efficacy of curves, since the figures were not only constructions but solutions to mathematical problems. As the matter of when a problem was solved was based on consensus, the geometers’ opinions concerning what constituted the appropriate representation of curves differed. As Bos explains,

The representation of curves was an informal practice, without fixed criteria of adequacy. There was, at the time, no universally accepted definition of the concept of curve on which a formally determined way of representing curves could be based (nor, apparently, was a need for such a definition felt). (1987, 1631)

For the geometers, the problem of representation was exacerbated by the discipline’s interests. At the time, the geometers were drawn to the intricacies of incommensurability and the infinite. The task of determining the number of points on a curve, for example, proved difficult, and as a result, the problem was deemed indeterminate because it admitted ‘an infinity of other problems’ (Descartes 1954, 239). In fact, the concept of infinity played an important yet troublesome role in the development of geometry. Not only did the abstract
quantity cause new mathematical problems, but it also created exceptions (and exceptions to exceptions) that discredited established theories. As Arthur Eddington complains, ‘That queer quantity “infinity” is the very mischief, and no rational physicist should have anything to do with it. Perhaps that is why mathematicians represent it by a sign like a love-knot’ (1935, 217).

In addition, the language that the mathematicians used to express their praxis amplified the problem of representation. The phraseology of the geometers reflected their conflicting ideas regarding the relationship between form and representation. Descartes, for example, decided that a curve was only acceptable to study if it was algebraic. In other words, a curve could only be admitted to geometry if it was of ‘precise and exact measurement’ (Descartes 1954, 48). In Géométrie (1954), Descartes argues that ‘Geometry should not include lines that are like strings, in that they are sometimes straight and sometimes curved, since the ratios between straight and curved lines are not known, and I believe cannot be discovered by human minds’ (ibid., 91). While most of the geometers agreed that approximate constructions, while useful in practice, were not appropriate for geometry, the belief was contentious. Geometers, like Fermat and Newton, stressed the need for ‘true’ settings, ‘proper’ procedures, and ‘genuine’ practice. As Bos, speaking of the pair, explains, ‘They use remarkable metaphors: geometry is seen as lawful territory that has to be protected...or it is seen as a person who can be offended and whose purity, one would almost say whose chastity, has to be defended’ (1987, 1635–1636).

Further, the fraternal quarrels of the Bernoulli brothers affected the development of methodological practices within the discipline. According to Alfred Hall in Philosophers at War (1980), the bitter wrangles of the two Bernoullis produced the most troublesome practice of the age, whereby a complacent mathematician who was pleased with his findings
challenged his contemporaries to produce a solution to a problem that was supposedly solved. This trend, which occupied the uncertain space between disagreement and dispute, often dissipated into a banal argument that left the original problem unresolved. As Hall points out, ‘This [practice] had once been done to great effect (and some damage to friendships) by the great Pascal and was now revived once again in the excitement and personal rivalry accompanying the early development of calculus’ (ibid., 81).

In this context of antagonism, the Bernoullis’ struggle for supremacy not only shaped individual approaches to practice but the entire tradition of geometric problem solving. The brothers’ arguments, while superfluous to a degree, reveal much about the struggle for meaning in a field that is often regarded as fixed. As Bos concedes, ‘Mathematics is an exact science, certainly, but first mathematicians have to reach some consensus about the question of what exactness means’ (1993, 11). In the late 1600s, the meaning of exactness was a matter of unanimity. As consensus is subject to change over time, the history of mathematics, like the history of literature, is rooted in the collective memory of the discipline. In fact, the history of any discipline, however volatile, belongs to the community of practitioners who pursue its questions, and in the search for answers, contribute to its canon.

In the Age of Reason, these contributions were made especially difficult by the common practices of the time. Geometry, as a mystical branch of mathematics, was shrouded in secrecy. The geometers often refrained from publishing for fear of criticism or condemnation from the Church. Others pre-empted what they foresaw as the thievery of their ‘lone, resplendent, and irreproachable’ work by refusing to collaborate (Kasner and Newman 2001, 134). There is also evidence to suggest that instead of publishing their findings in academic journals, the geometers published their incomplete workings. This practice, which emerged from a concern for the majesty of the author, did not always serve the discipline.
Discrepancies in practice not only led to theoretical disparities but to legislative debates surrounding the discipline’s aims. Descartes, for example, did not view geometry as a deductive science, nor did he regard geometry as an investigation into the properties of shapes, which is generally the conception of geometry today. Rather, Descartes venerated geometry as the art of problem solving.

In *Géométrie*, Descartes offers a methodology for practice that operates on two connective planes: first, a technical level that submits a means for solving any problem in geometry, and second, a processual level that seeks to resolve a problem that cannot be addressed via the usual methods. This twofold program, which is at the heart of Descartes’s geometry, is based on his interconnexion of algebra and geometry. In his seminal work, Descartes advocates his approach as equivalent to, and indeed even greater than, the already established ways of representing curves. In the seventeenth century, the standard methods of representation included construction recipes, defining properties, and mechanical devices. While Descartes’s approach was generally accepted by the geometers, his exclusion of transcendental curves, such as the lemniscate, was controversial (Bos 1987, 1635).

To clarify, the geometers used the term ‘transcendental’ to describe curves that could not be represented by equations. In other words, the transcendental curves could not be expressed in the language of algebra: that is, through the use of the Cartesian co-ordinates (x and y) and the basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and exponentiation) (Engelsman 1984, 18). Interestingly, the employment of the term ‘transcendental’ was also problematic, since its usage depended on the mathematician’s skill. For example, a situation could arise in which an algebraic curve was identified as transcendental because the geometer in question could not calculate an integral. As the transcendental curves did not fit Descartes’s program of geometry, he relegated the
lemniscate to the status of ‘mechanical’ and banned the curve from the science. Since Descartes’s bar also included the logarithmic spiral, some of his peers were unimpressed.\(^5\)

For Huygens, Descartes’s rejection of the lemniscate was not an expansion of the field but a restriction. Huygens argued that Descartes’s dismissal of the transcendentalists deemed his geometry defective. Similarly, the Bernoullis believed that representing curves solely by their equations was improper (Bos 1987, 1635). Other geometers agreed. In his papers, Fermat describes any approach that uses a complicated curve instead of a simple curve, where a simple curve is suffice, as a ‘considerable error’ (Fermat quoted in Bos 1987, 1635). John Bernoulli, who is almost moralistic in his writings on the subject, raises the status of Fermat’s error to a ‘sin’ (Bernoulli quoted in Bos 1987, 1639). To exacerbate the debate, the abstract dilemma of when a curve was solved remained largely unresolved by the geometers. While the Bernoullis continued to debate the question of resolution, the mathematicians’ broader questions about the aims of geometry were discarded. As Bos points out, ‘The discussions were resolved by forgetting the problems’ (1987, 1640).

No doubt, the early geometers approached the study of curves quite differently to contemporary mathematicians. Descartes’s application of algebra proved profitable for modern geometry, however his separation of curves was not widely accepted at the time. Not long after Descartes proposed the exclusion of the transcendentalists, the first rectifications of algebraic curves were found. The discovery undermined the theoretical argument that licensed Descartes’s demarcation: namely, that transcendental curves, such as the lemniscate, could not be solved. Similarly, the Bernoullis’ practice of settling problems by means of

\(^5\) As the battle for the lemniscate transpired, James Bernoulli became preoccupied with the logarithmic spiral: a special kind of equiangular curve that intersects its radial lines at the same angle. The curve, which spirals inward towards its derivative, has the unique property of self-similarity, meaning that although the spiral’s size increases, its shape remains the same. Bernoulli, who had a special reverence for the spiral, believed the figure to be a symbol of constancy in adversity. In fact, before his death in 1705, James requested that the spiral be engraved on his tombstone along with the epitaph, ‘Eadem mutata resurgo’, meaning, ‘I shall arise the same though changed’ (Maor 1994, 124).
construction soon vanished from geometry as a result of the almost universal acceptance of representing curves by their equations. In his lecture to the Congress of Dutch Mathematicians, Bos refers the lemniscate to ‘the mathematics of the past’ (1993, 102).

For all those properties of the lemniscate, all those classes to which it belongs, although perhaps of importance in former times, are now almost forgotten. This is not necessarily a matter for regret; mathematics is not a cumulative science, not a science in which one keeps and cherishes all that has once been discovered. For the mathematician, it is often just as well to shake the dust of the past off his feet and go on with his researches unencumbered. (ibid.)

While the lemniscate may be resigned in some ways to history, and while geometrical ways of thinking have since been replaced by analytical modes, it is important to remember that the study of mathematics, which is as old as time, is different to the study of the history of mathematics, which, in contrast, is a still young field. The former is admittedly not the most comfortable place for a writer, since its engagement requires some familiarity with the sciences of space and time. The latter, however, is rife with possibility for methodological playfulness, imagination, and self-reflection. This is because the history of mathematics, like the study of creative writing, is just as concerned with the development of practice as it is with technical matters.

For geometers and writers alike, memory is collective, myths are traditions, and knowledge in the profession is a question of consensus. In this space marked by uncertainty, the meaning of practice is projected to an imagined future that is extracted through an interrogation of the past. This backward passage is a valid method of discovery in narrative, since a writer may explore the interrelation of the past and present, and package that liaison into a narrative form. As a novel is limited by textual boundaries, such as a tangible endpoint,
a writer can evade the constraints of linear narrative by spiralling backward in order to move forward. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, ‘Personal narrators can turn an interpretation of and judgment about the past, however inflected by previous knowledge, into a counter-memory’ (1996, 14). In other words, creative writers who write non-linearly can renegotiate meaning-making in the present by retrieving, recreating, and reframing meaning in the past. Practice, therefore, is an amalgamation of the known and the imagined, which is to say it is an inventive blend of the remembered and the forgotten. For this reason, the future is not free or uninhibited, and the past is not disengaged. As Ernest Barker points out,

The past is not dead, as we often assume: it never dies, so long as it is remembered; and even if it is not consciously remembered, it may survive in something that still lives in our minds as an unconscious heritage...From this point of view we may think of the past as describing an orbit around the present; and we may thus regard any given period of the past—say the period of the fifth and fourth centuries before our era—as sweeping in a circle of change. (1948, 21)

It follows, then, that the study of curves has interesting implications for creative writers, since the study of writing, like the study of geometry, is not an unbroken chronology of thinking but a story of ideas: one that is riddled with contradictions and controversies as well as subjective judgments that are based on personal value. In the field of autobiography, for example, the author is usually considered the sole arbiter of what is deemed ‘true’, how it is known, and why it should be told.\(^6\) Truth, however, is a cultural product that is rooted in a complex process of authorisation. Since the ascertainment of truth is dependent on who may judge it, truth passes through a cultural process that reflects and reproduces social authority. For this reason, the autobiographer’s claim to knowledge parallels the geometer’s appeal to

\(^6\) For a comprehensive argument of the validity of autobiography as a qualitative methodology, see David Hawke’s *Autobiography as an Approach to Research of Artistic Practice* (1996). For a more general explanation of how self-narrative works as a mode of cognitive functioning, see Jerome Bruner’s *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986).
authority, which is also a subjective claim. In the case of the fabled Bernoulli brothers, the significance of the lemniscate's discovery is sometimes overlooked by historians who dwell on the obstinate behaviour of two brothers who were, by all accounts, similarly disposed. Contrary to popular reading, the question at the heart of the matter is not a question of originality nor is it a question of first invention or imitation. It is a question of methodology.

For a creative writer, one of the most interesting aspects of the study of curves concerns a methodological question: how is it possible that both James and John Bernoulli discovered the lemniscate curve? While priority is usually given to James, it seems fitting, if not telling, that the first name of the curve’s discoverer is omitted from the shape’s title. Bos is certain the brothers wrote their papers independently since neither would allow the other to use their unpublished research (1993, 103). In fact, many of the Bernoullis’ indictments of plagiarism have since been proven groundless. Thus, if we trust that the brothers did not appropriate each other’s work, then we must investigate their methodologies. A study of the variables inherent in the Bernoullis’ findings reforms the original question into a more cogent proposition: how is it possible that two practitioners, working separately and secretly, found and studied the same shape almost simultaneously? The answer is simple: the Bernoullis found the same curve because they studied the same problem with the same set of tools.

When framed between these parameters of practice and when examined from a methodological perspective, the study of curves reveals striking similarities between the methodological challenges encountered by the early geometers and the challenges facing writers of non-linear narrative. No doubt, the shared point of interest concerns the dual processes of creative thinking and critical analysis. Since both tasks rely on memory and imagination, the work of both geometers and writers is simultaneously dependent on recollection and invention. The importance of creative remembering cannot be undervalued
in geometry, nor can memory, as a narrative form, be discarded in the arts. In fact, Paul Carter’s concept of material thinking is based on this idea of creative remembering. As Carter explains, ‘If research implies finding something that was not there before, it ought to be obvious that it involves imagination. If it is claimed that what is found was always there (and merely lost), still an act of creative remembering occurs’ (2004, 7). While the role of creativity is sometimes overlooked in the sciences, much has been written in the arts about the ‘mystery’ of creativity. Critics, like Catherine Brace and Adeline Johns-Putra, still grapple with questions regarding the nature of creativity: whether it can be taught, what parts are measurable, and if it is, in fact, ineffable and unknowable. As the pair explain, the mystification of creativity simultaneously deems the phenomenon ‘worthy of analysis’ while obfuscating it as ‘ultimately incomprehensible’ (2010, 401).

Writers, too, have recognised the role of mathematical principles, such as experimentation, in creative writing. Milan Kundera and P.D. James have identified some of the quandaries that writers share with mathematicians. In *Ignorance: A Novel* (2000), Kundera maintains that memory, like time, cannot be understood without mathematical discrimination. He says, ‘The fundamental given is the ratio between the amount of time in the lived life and the amount of time from that life that is stored in memory. No one has ever tried to calculate this ratio, and in fact, there exists no technique for doing so’ (ibid., 122–123). In her autobiography, *Time to Be in Earnest* (2010), James also demonstrates mathematical sensitivity by probing the ‘limits’ of remembering. She acknowledges the fallibility of her own recollections, since memory is ‘a device for forgetting as well as remembering’ (ibid., xv). For James and Kundera, the measure of memory is similar to a mathematical estimate: an approximate notion that is close but not necessarily correct. As James explains, ‘[Memory], too, is not immutable. It rediscovers, reinvents, reorganises. Like
a passage of prose it can be revised and repunctuated. To that extent, every autobiography is a work of fiction and every work of fiction an autobiography’ (ibid.).

It is surprising, then, that more connections have not been drawn between the shared methodological problems of geometers and writers, especially since the geometers first recorded their processual dilemmas four centuries ago. This lacuna in scholarship is especially perplexing when one considers that form is not only central to a work of fiction but to the first act of imagination one undertakes as a child. As Hill points out, ‘The first lessons which nature gives in the school of life are lessons in form. The child has been in the world but a few hours, when it begins to trace the outlines of the window-sash against the sky’ (1875, 500). In *The Use of Mathesis* (1875), Hill suggests that the value of geometry is the foundation it provides for understanding space and time. This foundation, which is often overlooked because of its practical necessity, is actually at the basis of the arts. Just as a sculptor must understand the nature of space to carve a statue, and a musician the structure of time to keep a rhythm, a writer must understand space and time to form a story: to portray an image, to construct a scene, to move a character through a setting. As Hill confirms,

> In poetry, fiction, and drama, the necessity of a trained and accurate imagination is also obvious…The reader must, for the descriptive words or sentences, call up in his imagination the scene described or alluded to; and his emotion aroused from the poem will be, in large measure, directly dependent upon the vividness and accuracy with which [the poet] portrays the scene. (ibid., 504)

This idea that an appreciation of space and time is intrinsic to a writer’s ability to create narrative is confirmed by the centrality of geometry to cognition. Since it is a common phenomenon that before we learn to talk, we point at objects and images to convey our meaning, it follows that physical forms aid in our comprehension of the world. Thus, it is
only natural that a writer may use a geometric shape, such as the lemniscate, to bring that understanding to narrative. In fact, it is for this reason that we find in all forms of story, from everyday speech to textual analysis, mathematical terms, such as ‘expression’, ‘function’, ‘composition’, ‘perspective’, and ‘correlation’. The fact that language contains mathematical words has implications for writers, since these words come to discourse imbued with meaning. The idea, however, that geometry is central to cognition means that geometry, like narrative, is not only a means of recording thinking but an instrument of thought. This idea is pivotal when one considers that the ability to understand space and time is rudimentary to the development of imagination. As Hill points out, ‘Careful experiments on children have convinced us that in the ordinary mode of neglecting the study of geometry...there is an actual diminution of the power to see the truths of space, and to imagine forms’ (ibid., 501). Alfred Harwood confirms,

   It will make a great difference to the tendency of the child’s thinking for the rest of his life whether you fill the child’s mind with the idea that 1 and 1 and 1 makes 3, or whether you start with 3 and break it up into parts. Ultimately and logically, the first leads to the idea that the universe is composed of atoms. The second, the grasping of the whole before the parts, is the way of imagination and leads to the view that it is only the whole that gives meaning and existence to the parts. (Harwood quoted in Franceschelli 2003, 136)

   This overlap between shape and story is interesting for writers, since the disciplines’ shared dependency on memory and imagination may assist writers in solving problems of form. Certainly, the problems of representation that troubled the geometers are similar to the problems of representation that confront writers who work with non-linear forms. While geometric thinking might not fix sequential inconsistencies and jarring transitions, it may
assist writers with the basic questions of form. For example, is the story linear or non-linear? If the story could take a shape, what would it be? How will this shape capture the idea that the story seeks to convey? Should the narrative form reflect this experience or should it bestow a more coherent sense of order and direction? These questions are perplexing for writers, and recurrent concerns for stories that necessitate non-linear forms. It is at this point that we return to the study of curves, and in particular to the study of the lemniscate, to address a key question of this thesis: how does the lemniscate work as a non-linear structure?

THE LEMNISCATE

In 1680, while attempting to determine the orbit of Earth, Giovanni Cassini identified the properties of the lemniscate. The mysterious curve, which is often described as a ‘sacred loop’, is the classical symbol of polar activity (Blattmann 1985, 170). The figure’s peculiar shape governs the movement of celestial bodies, such as planets and stars. As Cassini discovered, the lemniscate matches the Earth’s path as it rotates around the sun. The conversion of light into darkness on the sun’s outer rim also follows the spectral map of a lemniscate. Even the analemma, which is the path the sun traces across the sky over the course of a year, assumes the lemniscatory form (Higgins 2002, 34).

The lemniscate, then, (from the Latin lemniscus, meaning ‘ribbon’) is a smooth plane curve that consists of two symmetrical loops that meet at a fulcrum (Riddle, Kerchever and Ernest 1865, 62). This central node, which is located at the figure’s origin, is a point of emergence where the loops converge. The fulcrum also doubles as a crossing point where the curve self-intersects. For this reason, it is useful to think of the lemniscate as a self-referential
curve. Because the shape intersects its radial line at an infinite number of points, the lemniscate moves around its origin to form an endless curve. Edward Smith projects the shape into three-dimensional space to explain, ‘The lemniscate rotates on its polar axis as it moves forward through space—like two hot-air balloons joined linearly at their baskets’ (2002, 414). As a consequence of this mergence, there is ongoing oscillation between the lemniscate’s sides. This oscillation is not only constant and boundless but inversely proportional. The movement of planets around the sun, for example, consists of regular oscillations back and forth. The Earth follows the right loop anti-clockwise, and the left loop clockwise, before repeating its route. As illustrated in Diagram 7, the lemniscate’s trajectory can be traced without end. The two loops move seamlessly into each other to form a continuum that is reversible. This continuous trip charts the pathway that an object may take. Since the object must always return to the fulcrum, the lemniscate is a curve that travels continuously forward as it travels continuously backward.

![Diagram 7](image)

**Diagram 7**  
**The Lemniscate Trajectory**

As evidenced in the diagram above, the lemniscate’s spatial reflexivity renders the shape a two-dimensional projection of the Möbius Strip, which is a continuous, one-sided surface that
is formed by twisting the strip around its axis and joining both the ends. Unlike the Möbius strip, whose integrity is lost when the shape is transformed into a two-sided structure, the lemniscate is a shape that survives bisection. As Steven Rosen explains,

> Upon cutting the lemniscate, the surface neither retains its integrity nor simply falls into separate pieces. Instead, the single surface is transformed into two interlocking surfaces, each of which is itself lemniscatory. The transformation brought about by this bisection is clearly the last one of any significance, since additional bisections, being bisections of lemniscates, can only produce the same results: interlocking lemniscates. (2006, 61)

When thought of as a self-reflexive shape, the lemniscate functions as a moving continuum rather than a static object. The curve, like all geometric forms, is a figure with its own inherent laws. The properties of the shape are marked by continuity, counterpoint, symmetry, simultaneity, and boundlessness. These characteristics are not unique to the lemniscate, however their amalgamation elicits a unique demonstration of internal coherence, self-replication, and transpolar flow. The combination of these traits solidifies the lemniscate as a fundamental configuration of nature. While the circle, for example, has an infinite number of symmetry planes, the circle is rarely found in the physical world. Apart from the sun and the full moon, there are few circles in nature that exist in their entirety (Butchvarov 1970, 61). The lemniscate, however, subsists in a variety of ecosystems and in the interfaces between different ecological zones. As Ross Mars explains, ‘[The lemniscate] is where the air meets the water, the forest meets the grassland, the land meets the ocean, as well as the area above and below the frost line on a hillside, and the zone around a plant root in the soil’ (2003, 10).
The lemniscate’s appearance in nature confirms that the shape is an organic structure that is central to the genesis of life. When carrots and radishes germinate, they grow in opposing directions: towards the sun in search of light and towards the earth for anchorage. The point at which the root and stem meet is a crossing point or fulcrum. At this point, the plant encounters both sun and earth influences, and there is a mergence of the organism’s tissues. Simply, what was inside the root is now on the outside of the stem, and what forms the outer layer of the root now comprises the stem’s middle. In other words, the plant’s growth follows the invisible course of a lemniscate. Even in leaves and in certain parts of flowers, there are lemniscate transversals. While these patterns are not always visible to the human eye, the lemniscate exists subtly in most living organisms. Mary Richards explains, ‘A seed certainly doesn’t look like much of anything, until you begin to see with a double eye, not only the outer husk but also the inner void of genesis’ (1996, 98). The natural formation of the lemniscate suggests that the shape is an organic structure that governs developmental processes from microscopic growth to maturation.

In Charles Ridley’s work on the evolution of consciousness, Ridley defines the lemniscate’s oscillation as ‘a fundamental motion pattern of life’ (2006, 199). He extends Mars’s study of the lemniscate by considering the shape’s application in the human body. According to Ridley, the lemniscate forms a complex hologram in the body, since the heart’s electromagnetic field emits ‘an infinite array of non-linear, multidimensional lemniscate figure eight patterns’ that constantly radiate to the periphery of the body (ibid., 189). At the centre of this activity is a fulcrum that constantly alters its position to accommodate external influences. Ridley explains, ‘The outside forces enter this flowing fulcrum through an unlimited fractal array of lemniscate loops that return from the periphery and touch the centre to provide the organism with new information that changes it’ (ibid., 199). The human brain, as a curved structure, also contains a bundle of nerves known as the lemniscus. These fibres
form an important pathway that transmits sensory information, such as sound, to the cerebral cortex (Nieuwenhuys, Voogd and van Huijzen 2008, 194). As the lemniscate, then, is marked by constancy, the movement that emanates from the inner to the outer repeats indefinitely.

Not surprisingly, given the shape’s formative power, the lemniscate is also configured in animals, such as birds and invertebrates. The anatomy of the butterfly, for example, resembles the figure eight. Due to the insect’s bilateral symmetry, the butterfly’s wings are mirror images that evoke the lemniscate’s loops. Further, the insect’s fluttering movement, like the wing sweep of a bird, creates a lemniscatory pattern of motion. This motion results in a non-linear, multidimensional manifold known as the Butterfly Effect. The theory, which was first coined by Edward Lorenz in his seminal paper, ‘Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?’ (1972), refers to the idea that in chaotic systems, a minuscule change in one place can cause a dramatic change somewhere else. For example, a butterfly that flaps its wings in the Amazon may create a small perturbation in the atmosphere that triggers a series of events that lead to a tornado in Texas. This idea that seemingly trivial occurrences have dramatic consequences supports Lorenz’s thesis that complex systems, such as the weather, follow deterministic laws. As Georg Blattmann marvels, ‘[The lemniscate] is written twice on each wing [of the butterfly] as though to confirm beyond doubt that our whole world is permeated by this wonderful law and it could almost be given the name of “Eighty-Eight”’ (1985, 169).

For biologists who believe the shapes of nature reveal patterns in the physical world, and for mathematicians who claim the rules of algebra possess validity as the rules of thought, the lemniscate serves as an important symbol of an interdependent universe. In *Finishing the Mysteries of Gods and Symbols* (2010), Buddy Page asserts that the lemniscate is an apt emblem for the structure of the cosmos. He explains how the figure eight offers a
suitable model for the flow of time, the cyclical processes of life and death, and the complex interactions of polar opposites, such as the spiritual and the physical (Page 2010, 80). As these polars intersect and interact, the transpolar flow between the opposites binds the components in space-time. This interconnection discards the notion of space and time as separate entities and reflects, instead, the dualistic nature of the universe. Page explains, ‘[The lemniscate] models an ad infinitum feedback loop between two interdependent, interactive, and tightly entangled zones of existence’ (ibid., 29).

In Wholeness and the Implicate Order (2012, 188), David Bohm identifies these orders of existence as ‘the implicate’ and ‘the explicate’. According to Bohm, the interrelated constructs create a reciprocal flow between the conceptual realm, which is a domain of rules, thought, and information (the implicate order) and the physical realm, which emanates from the hidden zone (the explicate order) (ibid.). Bohm maintains that this transpolar flow carries information about the universe in an unbroken totality or ‘holomovement’ (ibid., 191). Since holomovement is immeasurable, the concept offers a model of reality in which space and time are located on the same connective plane. Naturally, holomovement may be modelled on the lemniscate, since the shape consists of mirror counterparts that create reciprocal flow. In Finishing the Mysteries, Page likens the motion of the lemniscate to the flow of rivers and streams. As natural continuums, rivers and streams are traditional symbols for the passage of time and the boundless nature of space. Page explains, ‘The infinity symbol…when juxtaposed with the symbolism of rivers and streams (flow of time, change, deeds) tells us that our reality is both flowing and cyclic in nature’ (2010, 51). In fact, some mathematicians suggest that the relationship between space and time is governed by a continuum that is both finite and unbounded.
While Newton argued that space and time are finite and unchangeable, Einstein conceived space and time as flexible materials. In *Relativity: The Special and The General Theory* (1920), Einstein reveals that space and time are not rigid and unchanging structures but relative constructs that form a uniform whole. Einstein explains,

The world in which we live is a four-dimensional space-time continuum…for it is composed of individual events, each of which is described by four numbers, namely, three space co-ordinates $x, y, z$, and a time co-ordinate, the time value $t$...That we have not been accustomed to regard the world in this sense...is due to the fact that in physics, before the advent of the theory of relativity, time played a different and more independent role, as compared with the space co-ordinates. (1920, 55–56)

While Einstein’s theory of space and time is generally regarded as an extension of his earlier work on relativity, it was actually Einstein’s mathematics professor, Hermann Minkowski, who first proposed that space and time are amalgamated in a four-dimensional world.

In his 1908 lecture to the Meeting of Natural Scientists in Cologne, Minkowski radically altered the Western understanding of space and time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this conception was largely based on a Newtonian view of the world. Newton, who is known to posterity as the father of physics, was also a theologian. According to Newton, the universe operates on deterministic principles that obey the laws of causality. In a causal world, every event is the inevitable result of a preceding action. For example, the present is determined by the past because the past and the present are sequential. As successive moments, the past and the present can move in one direction only: forward.
Likewise, the future is an extension of the present because the movement of time is linear. The future is foreseeable because it can be predicted by recalling the activities of the past and observing the conditions of the present. Time, in Newton’s view, resembles the movement of an arrow. Like an arrow that travels forward in space, time embodies a linear progression that moves at a consistent pace and without variation. Time, therefore, is not only causal but also irreversible. As Newton states in his *Principia*, ‘Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature flows equably without regard to anything external’ (1687, 6).

Absolute space, by extension, is immutable and ‘unmovable’ (ibid.).

In 1908, Minkowski challenged Newton’s idea of space and time by suggesting that space and time are neither homogenous nor unchangeable. Instead of presenting space and time as singular entities, Minkowski maintained that there is an infinite number of spaces and times that are governed by relativistic principles. According to the theory of relativity, two observers who travel through space experience time differently (Krebs 2003, 5).

Consequently, each observer will assign his or her own spatio-temporal location to the same event. In other words, each observer has a unique frame of reference that is relative to the other’s. For example, a passenger who looks out the window of a moving train has a different frame of reference to a person who is standing on the platform. While the passenger on board sees the platform moving past the train, the person who is waiting on the platform sees the train passing by. Both observers have different locations in space and time, however the positions of both observers are correct. According to Minkowski, the interrelations between space and time create a manifold of spatio-temporal possibilities that constitute ‘the world’ (1908, 38). In a four-dimensional universe, space and time cannot be separated because they are connected by an observer. As Minkowski points out, ‘The objects of our perception are always connected to places and times. No one has noticed a place other than at a time and a time other than at a place’ (ibid.).
In his Cologne address, Minkowski fortifies the idea of four-dimensional physics when he proclaims, ‘From now onwards, space by itself and time by itself will recede completely to become mere shadows and only a type of union of the two will stand independently’ (ibid., 37). At the time of Minkowski’s lecture, Einstein was allegedly confused by Minkowski’s thesis. According to Vesselin Petkov, Einstein expressed the first documented reservation towards four-dimensional physics when he called Minkowski’s theory ‘superfluous learnedness’ (Einstein quoted in Minkowski 2012, 2). Einstein, however, soon realised that his own theory of gravity would be impossible in a three-dimensional world. In 1916, in his seminal paper on relativity, Einstein confirms that our world is four-dimensional. That is, Einstein agrees with Minkowski that the universe consists of three spatial dimensions (height, depth, and width) and a fourth dimension (time). In addition to Minkowski’s claim that space and time are interdependent, Einstein suggests that space and time form a continuum that is curved. Specifically, Einstein proposes that space and time are continually warped or curved according to the motions of energy and matter. In his landmark paper on relativity, Einstein calls this model of space and time ‘the space-time continuum’ (1916, 151).

In mathematics, the space-time continuum is a four-dimensional reality that is both finite and unbounded. This structural paradox is the same anomaly that governs the shape of the lemniscate. While Newton perceives the universe as a system that is closed, Einstein imagines the universe as a curve without boundaries. Einstein explains, ‘The great charm resulting from this consideration lies in the recognition of the fact that the universe...is finite and yet has no limits’ (1920, 109). To demonstrate his point, Einstein uses the example of individual travel across a curved surface. Hypothetically, a traveller who decides to walk around the world will follow the path of a curve. If the traveller were to follow a straight line, he would wander into space. Thus, if a traveller moves around the world in any one direction, he will eventually return to where he started. In other words, the traveller will find himself
exploring an area of finite size, but he will never meet a boundary that blocks his path nor will he reach an endpoint. The traveller, therefore, will follow a trajectory through space and time that is both finite and unbounded. This peculiarity encapsulates the structural paradox that governs the shape of the lemniscate, since the figure eight represents boundlessness within a bounded form. While it is almost effortless to imagine the Earth as a globe that one may circle, it is somewhat difficult to conceive that one’s movement through space and time may take the shape of a curve.

For Einstein, space-time curvature is possible because the space-time continuum is an elastic medium that is similar to jelly. Einstein conceives time as a fluid material that can move at variable speeds and in multiple directions. Consequently, the space-time continuum does not discriminate between the temporal categories of past, present, and future. According to Einstein, these labels are human constructs that are used to order experience. As mental relations, space and time arrange an individual’s sensory impressions and perceptions of reality. Since reality is governed by relative phenomena, space and time are not absolute entities that are independent of perception. Rather, space and time are relative quantities that are dependent on the observer who apprehends them. In fact, when one of Einstein’s friends, Michele Besso, passed away in 1955, Einstein wrote a letter of condolence to Besso’s family in which he summarised his theory of time. Einstein writes, ‘Now Besso has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion’ (Einstein quoted in Minkowski 2012, 36).

In space-time, the measure of time is always relative to the observer’s location. For this reason, there is no such thing as a unique global time that everyone agrees on. Since there is no absolute time that is true for all observers, there is no universal ‘now’ that occurs
everywhere instantaneously (Callender and Edney 2004, 60). To phrase it differently, the idea of ‘now’ implies the existence of a simultaneous event that is logically impossible if all observers are in relative motion. In this way, the temporal concept of ‘now’ operates in a similar fashion to the spatial sense of ‘here’. For example, three sisters who live in different parts of the world have relative frames of reference. On the phone, during a three-way conversation, the eldest sister might say, ‘I’m here in London,’ while the second, ‘I’m here in Brisbane,’ and the youngest, ‘I’m here in Paris.’ The sisters understand that the cities are equally ‘real’ even though they cannot see one from another. This is because London, Brisbane, and Paris all exist at different places. By this logic, Einstein’s theory of relativity is compatible with the tenseless view of time. Just as three places may exist but not in the same space, so, too, may the past, present, and future exist but not at the same time. Thus, if the past, present, and future co-exist, then the events of one’s birth, one’s reading of this sentence, and one’s death are equally real. The past, present, and future may be plotted on a continuum in the same way that cities are marked on a map. On the space-time continuum, the location of ‘now’ does not have a fixed position because the present is always relative to both the future and the past. Time, therefore, is not arranged in order of succession nor is it based on linear causation. Time is a multidirectional movement that can speed up or slow down. As Einstein explains, ‘The experience of the now means something special for man, something essentially different from the past and the future, but this important difference does not and cannot occur within physics’ (Einstein quoted in Carnap 2003, 443). For Einstein, time is a slippery concept that is ontologically suspicious: the perception of time is a subjective experience and the distinction between the tenses is an illusion.

Hence, the space-time continuum represents a four-dimensional reality that is imaginative rather than logical, and curved rather than linear. In theory, Einstein’s space-time supports the existence of alternative universes, parallel histories, and wormholes, all of which
are logically possible in Einstein’s world. As Quentin Smith, speaking of the space-time continuum, remarks, ‘If the entire material content of the universe is in a state of uniform rotation, then one can take off from the Earth in a rocket and travel into the past’ (Oaklander and Smith 1995, 199). Certainly, space-time curvature is compatible with the theory of time-travel. Einstein established the possibility of time-travel when he discovered that the flow of time depends on the motion of an observer. Since a body in motion may accelerate or decelerate, space and time are not only relative but variable as well. The only constant velocity is the speed of light. Since the speed of light is always the same, whether it is measured on Earth or from a speeding rocket, all observers who gauge the speed of light record identical measurements (Kennedy 2003, 10). For example, an observer who is standing still will measure a beam of light passing by at 300,000 kilometres per second. A rocket that is travelling through space will also measure the speed of light at 300,000 kilometres per second. The constancy of light’s velocity confirms that no matter how fast an observer is travelling, the speed of light will always be faster by 300,000 kilometres per second (ibid.). This means that something peculiar must happen in space and time if a supersonic rocket cannot gain any distance on a beam of light, regardless of the spaceship’s weight or the power of its engine.

This phenomenon led Einstein to conclude that each observer who moves through space experiences the flow of time at a different rate. The faster an observer travels, the more time dilates. For example, time moves slower for an astronaut on board a rocket than it does for a person on Earth. This effect has nothing to do with the mechanisms of a clock. Time dilation is not an optical trick that is caused by the propagation of light. The astronaut in space will not report that his clock is behaving unusually. Time dilation is a physical effect that is caused by the existence of different velocities. Einstein illustrates this idea by using a thought experiment called the Twin Paradox (ibid., 38). Einstein shows that if two clocks are
brought together and synchronised, and if one clock is moved away and then brought back, the clock that travels will lag behind the clock that stays put. Einstein considers this effect to be a natural consequence of space-time curvature. To reiterate, there is nothing mechanically wrong with the travelling clock or the clock that stays still. Rather, both clocks tick at different rates, as dictated by their locations in space-time. Since the speed of light is independent of the motion of an observer, the space-time continuum of the travelling clock warps or curves as the observer experiences time dilation (Catalano 2009, 98). Thus, if two identical twins participate in an experiment in which one twin stays at home and the other travels into space, the twins will age differently. If one twin travels near the speed of light to the closest star and back again, the time for the round trip, as measured by the twin on Earth, will be several years. For the twin on board the rocket, however, time dilates or slows down because the velocity of his or her travel is near-to-light speed. Thus, the travelling twin will return to Earth several years younger than the stationary twin because the travelling twin experiences a shorter travel duration compared to the twin on Earth. In this sense, time-travel is logically possible. Indeed, any individual who has sufficient resources to attain a rocket that can travel at a near-to-light speed may travel through time. As Einstein confirms, ‘Using faster-than-light velocities, we could telegraph into the past’ (Einstein quoted in Kennedy 2003, 67). Importantly, Einstein’s concept of the cosmos, however magical, is still based on the postulates of relativity and the idea that space and time are curved.

Interestingly, in Einstein’s later work on the history of physics, he returns to the idea that space and time are constructs of the mind. In The Evolution of Physics (1938), Einstein and his colleague, Leopold Infeld, describe space and time as subjective experiences that have no objective meaning. The pair explain,
The psychological subjective feeling of time enables us to order our impressions, to state that one event precedes another. But to connect every instant of time with a number, by the use of a clock, to regard time as a one-dimensional continuum, is already an invention. So also are the concepts of Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry, and our space understood as a three-dimensional continuum. (Einstein and Infeld 1938, 295)

Since space and time do not exist independently, Einstein concludes that space and time are the structural qualities of matter. This means that space and time are not features of the physical world but constructs that describe the world’s components, such as objects and events. In other words, space and time still correspond with physical processes, but they are also tools of thought. As Einstein makes clear, ‘Space and time are the modes by which we think, not the conditions in which we live’ (Einstein quoted in Taylor 2008, 1). This shift in thinking—from Newton’s absolutism to Einstein’s relativity—is significant for the study of temporality in narrative because narratology seems to be based on the assumption that real time is linear. In fact, the Newtonian view of time, which is a popular model for linearity, still lingers in contemporary studies of temporality and narrative.

Narrative and Non-linear Time

In The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative (2008, 17), H. Porter Abbott claims that the success of a story depends on the reader’s ability to reconstruct the story’s ‘true’ temporal order. Here, Abbott is speaking of antinomic sequencing, and, in particular, the retrogressive narrative structure of Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow (2003). The novel, which is recounted in
reverse chronological order, relates the story of a German Holocaust doctor called Odilo Unverdorben who lives his life backward from death to birth. When Odilo arrives at Auschwitz, for example, the camp is already destroyed. The crematoriums and gas chambers return the dead, and Odilo and the other Nazis ‘make a people from the weather…with gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire’ (ibid., 128). In one scene, Odilo describes how the dead bodies at Auschwitz are carried into the Sprinkleroom and gassed, only to emerge as living people. From here, the Jews are clothed and fed, and returned their precious valuables. The prisoners grow from their emaciated states into healthy individuals who leave the camp on trains that are bound for Europe. ‘The trains are endless and infernal,’ Odilo says. ‘We toasted them into the night’ (ibid., 132–141).

In The Introduction to Narrative, Abbott describes the novel’s backward representation of events as a ‘deranged’ narrative discourse (2008, 17). He likens the text to a jumbled code that one must decipher in order to understand. Granted, Amis’s treatment of time is confusing in parts, if not disorientating. Odilo himself is puzzled by the phenomenon of time moving backwards. He cannot understand why his neighbours garble or why everyone is getting younger. ‘Wait a minute,’ Odilo says. ‘Why am I walking backwards into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming or is it dawn? What is the—what is the sequence of the journey I’m on?’ (Amis 2003, 14). While reverse chronology is Odilo’s lived reality, Abbott’s emphasis on the task of reconstruction suggests that the novel’s reading obliges an act of temporal restoration. More simply, Abbott’s insistence on discovering the story’s ‘true’ order implies that the backward temporality of Odilo’s world is ‘untrue’. As Abbott points out, ‘Notice how, in reading, your mind automatically sorts out the forward motion of the story. In fact, much of the curious appeal of the writing depends on this automatic reconstruction’ (2008, 17). Abbott concludes his reading by declaring that the movement of a story should be linear. He
insists, ‘All stories, like all action, (except possibly at a subatomic level), go in one direction only—forward’ (ibid.).

From an epistemological standpoint, Abbott’s reading of *Time’s Arrow* is troubling. Not only does Abbott reinforce Newton’s view of time as a fixed entity, but his claims expose a pre-theoretical assumption that underlies the study of temporality in narratology. This assumption holds that real time—that is, the individual time of lived experience—is linear. Linear time, which is unidirectional, is based on Newton’s idea that time progresses in a casual way without any change to its direction. If linear time is synonymous with real time, then the opposite of real time is narrative time, which constitutes the duration of a story and its sequence of events. Narrative theorists, when discussing temporality, typically rely on the conceptual division of narrative time into two temporal orders. The first is story time (that is, the time that transpires within the imaginary world of the characters) and the second is discourse time (that is, the amount of time that is expended on relating the story’s events) (Chatman 1978, 62). This division, which was first proposed by Gérard Genette, posits that fictional time, which is ratified by the story’s action, comprises a uniform temporality that can be related by the story’s discourse, which is essentially the quantifiable time it takes the reader to move through the text. Since story time and discourse time are both constituents of narrative, they are often positioned in opposition to ‘real’ time. As a result, narrative theorists frequently brand narrative time as ‘unreal’ temporality: a categorisation that suggests narrative time is incompatible with the experience of time.

In *Narrative, Interrupted* (2012, 183), Jan Alber enforces this assumption when she contrasts the ‘real-world’ knowledge of time to ‘unnatural’ temporality. For Alber, unnatural time refers to events that are logically impossible. Reverse chronology, for example, is an unnatural temporality because it defies the logic of cause and effect. ‘The king died and then
the queen died of grief” is a time sequence that relies on causality to connect two narrative events: the king’s death, which causes the queen’s grief and her subsequent death. The causal arrangement of the events creates an inferential chain, where $a$ (the king’s death) causes $b$ (the queen’s grief), which results in $c$ (the queen’s death). According to Alber, the linear logic of this causation integrates the events into a believable plot (ibid., 180). If the causal order of events is reversed, then the temporality becomes unnatural: the new time sequence disrupts the conventional pattern of cause and effect, and the story’s plausibility is compromised. By this logic, Alber argues that reverse causality does not match our real-world understanding of time. Her argument is based on the assumption that time is linear: an assumption that is derived from Newton’s theory of time. As Anna Lidstone points out,

Narrative theorists assume a model of time that is linear and chronological with very little self-reflexivity surrounding where these assumptions have come from...this is part of a larger problem in terms of the way our imaginations and our institutional spaces are limited by Newtonian ways of thinking. As Jonathan Boyarin asks, ‘Why is it that our physics are now those of Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics, whereas our politics and our rhetorics still assume a world described by Newton and Descartes?’ (2007, 49)

In contrast to unnatural time, Alber posits natural time, which is linear and progressive. Natural time is synonymous with the time of lived experience, and thus, the temporal laws of linearity govern natural time. In Narrative, Interrupted, Alber argues that reality is compliant with three temporal rules. The first rule holds that the borders between the past, present, and future are impenetrable. That is, the boundaries between the temporal categories cannot be transgressed. The second rule maintains that causes always precede their effects. In other words, the events of real time are arranged in causal chains that adhere to sequential ordering.
Finally, the flow of time cannot speed up or slow down nor can the passage of time be prevented or reversed (Alber 2012, 183). According to Alber, the laws provide the foundation for natural time. When the rules are broken, they create unnatural temporalities that represent deviations from the norm. For example, Alber dismisses time-travel stories in which characters age at different speeds as ‘impossible’ plots (ibid., 174). Time dilation is reduced to a trope of science-fiction and classified with ‘games [of time]’ (ibid., 186). Even the relative nature of space and time is relegated to an ‘unnatural phenomenon’ (ibid., 182). For Alber, these absurdities are common in post-modernist narratives that transcend the real-world parameters of time. As Alber states, ‘The unnatural temporalities of post-modernism contradict our “natural” (or real-world) knowledge of time’ (ibid., 188).

The language that Alber uses to describe temporality is troublesome when one considers the values judgments embedded in her argument. By aligning unnatural time with both the magical frameworks of fantasy and the futurist projections of science-fiction, Alber suggests that non-linear time is inconsistent with the temporal dimension of ‘reality’. According to Alber, this reality is based on natural scripts that are synonymous with Newton’s view of the world. Like Newton, Alber conceives the universe as a stable system that embodies the qualities of a well-behaved machine. The machine works in accordance with the rules of causality, and is both rational and predictable. As Alber confirms,

Realism closely correlates with the use of ‘natural’ cognitive parameters which are derived from our real-world experience of time, space, and other human beings…what post-modernist narratives do is blend our actual-world encyclopaedia with our science-fiction and/or fantasy encyclopaedias by using their temporalities against the foil of otherwise perfectly realist narratives. (ibid.)
Again, Alber’s choice of language here is contentious. Not only does Alber infer that real time is logical and rational, and that narrative time, as its opposite, is illogical and irrational, but her alignment of natural time with real time essentialises time as a uniform entity. Worse, the conflation of natural time and lived experience universalises time as a homogeneity that is governed by the laws of causality and chronology. This fusion of real time and natural time is particularly troublesome when one considers that narrative time, at least in post-modern texts, rarely conforms to a linear structure.

Amis, for example, tends to write non-linear novels that are propelled by chaos and disorder rather than causality. In Amis’s memoir, *Experience* (2000), time is constructed as a non-linear medium that allows the author, in his own words, to ‘follow themes rather than merely the calendar’ (Amis quoted in Noakes and Reynolds 2003, 22). From the outset, Amis merges memories from his childhood (that is, recollections of innocence) with accounts of adulthood (that is, meditations on experience). These ruminations, which are coupled with footnotes, create a non-linear temporality that moves back and forth in time. ‘If the effect sometimes seems staccato,’ Amis warns, ‘then I can only say that that’s what it’s like on my side of the desk’ (2000, 7). Certainly, the non-linear temporality that Amis employs allows him to oscillate between the theme of experience, which is liberally dispensed, and the theme of innocence, which is terminable but restorable. In his teenage years, Amis experiences a bottomless cafard that is marked by feelings of indifference. When Amis cheats on his girlfriend, Julie, he asks her with ‘defiant innocence’ why she is upset (ibid., 81). Julie, who has just caught Amis in the bushes with another woman, breaks down. At this point in the story, Amis interrupts his younger self to make a comment that is simultaneously reflective and prophetic. He says, ‘This was one of the few occasions when I rivalled my father, whose sexual recklessness, as we shall see, often approached the psychotic’ (ibid.). ‘I’m sorry, Julie,’ Amis adds, ‘and I still owe you that letter’ (ibid.).
From the opening, Amis discards the organisational principles of causality and chronology by arranging his memoir as a continuum that parallels the life of his father, Kingsley. To do this, Amis uses the experience of fatherhood as the fulcrum of his novel. As the memoir opens, Amis employs the intercessionary figure of the father to interweave two separate moments that are connected by generational consonance. Amis’s first inclusion, which is a conversation about fame with his son, Louis, is synchronised with a conversation about killer whales between Amis, as a six-year-old, and Kingsley. The second conversation, which is extracted from Kingsley’s novel, *I Like It Here* (1958), is juxtaposed against the ordinary setting of the first, which is the family car. Both conversations explore the respective relationship between father and son, and by opening with the same proper noun—‘Dad’—highlight the interchangeability of the Amis men. ‘My wishes are your wishes,’ Amis concludes. ‘I am you and you are me’ (2000, 364). By blurring generational lines, Amis’s memoir is both a disruption of temporal conceits and a theme-based parallelism that reflects the narrative’s structure. Of course, one of the complexities of narrative is that it allows for reciprocity between form and content.

McEwan, too, eschews linear narrative in favour of temporal displacements. *Atonement* (2001) undermines the notion of time as an uninterrupted movement by constantly allowing the past to spill into the present. Briony, the story’s narrator, notices how ‘everything fitted; the terrible present fulfilled the recent past. Events she herself witnessed foretold her cousin’s calamity’ (ibid., 168). Even McEwan’s short fictions are characterised by non-linear temporalities that are linked to both the fallibility of memory and the fragmentary nature of trauma. McEwan’s first collection of short stories opens with a memory: the dream-like image of a teenage boy, washing a bedspread with his ten-year-old sister, Connie. By the end of the story, the reader learns that the opening recollection extends from the story’s resolution. At the climax of the story, the teenager rapes his sister to lose his protracted
virginity. The adolescent recalls, ‘I can see now our cramped, overlit bathroom and Connie with a towel draped round her shoulders, sitting on the edge of the bath weeping, while I filled the sink with warm water and whistled—such was my elation’ (McEwan 2006, 23). The narrator continues, ‘I can remember, I have always been able to remember, fluff from the candlewick bedspread swirling on the surface of the water’ (ibid.). As the narrative spirals backwards, space and time are synthesised into a continuum that oscillates back and forth between the narrator’s memories and the present-day narration. This continuum, which fuses the past, present, and future, is both finite and unbounded: space and time are interdependent rather than separate, story lines are merged and blurred, and non-linear time is a natural component of the protagonist’s world. As Paul Smethurst confirms,

In the post-modern novel, non-linear time is somehow incorporated into the fabric of the real rather than distanced from it, with the effect that reality is problematised rather more explicitly. In the non-linear time of post-modern novels, there may be no explanations as to how or why characters cross into different historical periods, or how time can seem to go backwards, or how a character can remember something that happened before he was born. (2000, 174)

While post-modernist writers regularly use narrative time as a medium for non-linearity, narrative theorists often describe narrative time as a ‘manipulation’ of real time. This submission, which frequently takes the narrative effect of time compression as evidence of authorial manipulation, implies that narrative time, or non-linear time, is an alteration of real time, and thus, not a form of legitimate time that correlates with the experience of time. This proposition is problematic because it relegates non-linearity to a discursive device. If non-linearity is an artistic choice, then the validity of non-linear time is relinquished as the primacy of linear time is espoused. In other words, the pre-theoretical assumption that real
time is linear discards the legitimacy of Einstein’s space-time and endorses, instead, the Newtonian view of time. Brent Slife explains,

Linear time has become so confounded with time that the two are virtually indistinguishable for many people in Western culture. Our organisation of time has been reified as “the way time is.” This means that any challenge to the status of linear time is seen as a challenge to the status of time itself. (1993, 4–5)

Indeed, for the narrative theorist, Suzanne Keen, time is a homogenous entity that relies upon the ordering principles of chronology. In *Narrative Form* (2003), Keen reinforces the Newtonian view of time when she aligns real time with chronological order. Keen explains, ‘A more common manipulation of the need to know what happened next (and why) occurs when writers present events out of their chronological order. This strategy puts a greater demand on the reader to reassemble events into their chronological order than plots that match clock time’ (ibid., 81). Like Alber, Keen assumes that real time is linear, and that narrative time, as a manipulation of real time, reorders events in a non-linear fashion. This assumption installs linear time as the ‘default’ temporality. In asserting the necessity of temporal reconstruction, Keen implies that any sequence of events can be reorganised to fit a linear model of time. In other words, if the events of a story are arranged out of their chronological order, then they must have a chronological order that precedes the alteration and constitutes the original sequence of events. If a break in this sequence results in a disorderly narration—one that necessitates an act of temporal reconstruction—then such a claim standardises chronology and exposes what narrative theorists tacitly accept as normative time.

For Keen, normative time is both causal and forward-moving. Chronological narratives are ‘tidy’ and ‘neat’, while stories that present events in a non-linear order are ‘deliberate
disarrangements’ (ibid., 104). In *Narrative Form*, Keen applies this idea to Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*. She describes the novel as an unusual experiment that places strenuous demands on the reader. These demands, which dominate the narrative, require the reader to ascertain the relationship between story time, which is reversed, and discourse time, which necessitates an inversion of events. Since the narrative moves consistently backward as the reader moves consistently forward, the complex nexus between story time and discourse time draws attention to the temporal illogic of a narrative that moves backward. For Keen, Amis’s use of anachrony signals his employment of a disorderly narrative: that is, a narrative in which story time and discourse time are incongruous rather than synchronous. While Keen insists that the term ‘disorder’ does not have negative connotations, she defines a disorderly text as the opposite of a ‘straightforward’ narrative (ibid., 100). By this definition, disorder is a breach of logic, which is analogous with the temporal rules of chronology and causality. In other words, if causal linking and chronological sequencing are indicative of normative time, then any deviation from the two represents a temporal manipulation. Keen reaffirms this idea when she suggests that authors orchestrate narrative disorder with ‘great artfulness’ (ibid.).

Predictably, Keen’s choice of language is disconcerting. Not only does she align non-chronological time with narrative disorder, but she also relegates non-linearity to a discursive device. If non-linear time only exists at the level of discourse, then it is not a form of mimesis that imitates the individual experience of time. Instead, non-linear time is a manipulation of real time at the hands of the author. Keen explains, ‘The manipulation of narrative situation is one of the most useful strategies possessed by fiction writers to elicit sympathy, to command respect, and to unleash the complicated effects that go by the name of irony’ (ibid., 32). For Keen, narrative time is incompatible with real time, and non-linear time is a discursive technique that is employed by a writer to generate effect, or in the worst-case scenario, to
flaunt one’s artifice. As Keen, speaking of William Faulkner’s short story, A Rose For Emily (1930), complains,

Why does the narrator tell the story out of order, when the corporate voice clearly has access to all but one of the events as they happened? Perhaps the original shock of comprehension experienced by the community can be passed on and shared by using anachronies that replicate their confusion—a straight-ahead telling would make it too easy for the reader to be wiser than the narrator. (2003, 106)

Granted, the story’s non-linear arrangement ensures that the ending is a surprise, however Faulkner’s use of non-linear time captures Emily’s experience of time, such as her difficulty accepting death and her denial of time’s progression. Thus, readers who attempt to rationalise the story’s non-chronological sequence may find themselves, like the old men at Emily’s funeral, ‘confusing time with its mathematical progression’ (Faulkner 1930, 238). As Gene Moore points out, ‘The “internal” chronology of a given work may or may not prove to be consistent, and may or may not be attached (consistently or inconsistently) to a variety of “external” chronologies based on [external] information’ (1992, 196).

In Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering (1993, 33), Meir Sternberg agrees with Keen that chronology is ‘the most logical and hence natural arrangement, and any deviation from it is clearly an indication of artistic purpose’. Since Einstein’s space-time verifies that non-linear time is logically possible, both Keen and Sternberg’s submission that a writer manipulates real time, when writing non-linearly, dismisses the legitimacy of space-time. This dismissal, which essentially undermines the validity of four-dimensional physics, is still prevalent in studies of temporality in narrative. In Expositional Modes, Sternberg insists that non-linear time is a discursive technique and not a form of mimesis. He says,
It is always instructive to inquire why an author has chosen to make the beginning of the sujet coincide with that of the fabula, or why he has decided to make temporal shifts, why he presents the expositional material (or parts of it) in independent solid blocks of fictive past or why he weaves it into the scenic present. (ibid.)

Sternberg’s privileging of the author’s discretion implies that a writer selects non-linearity from two or more temporalities, and, in making that selection, executes artistic license. Again, if non-linear time is a deliberate manipulation of real time, then real time is assumedly linear and non-linearity is a discursive device. If non-linear time is a narrative technique, then it is not a form of mimesis that correlates with the experience of time.

Conceptualising time as a linear entity is limiting for creative writers, especially those whose natural inclination when writing is to move backwards or in multiple directions. Reading time from a Newtonian perspective discards Einstein’s idea of time as a human construct that is perceived by the individual and subject to change. One of the most common experiences of time is psychological time or the perception of time’s passage. In this dimension of time, one’s experience of temporal durations may speed up or slow down. For example, in a stressful situation, time seems to pass rapidly because the individual’s mental workload increases, which diminishes his or her attention to the measurement of time. Conversely, in a dangerous situation, such as an impending car crash, time appears to slow down because an individual’s senses are reduced to observing the danger at hand. As a consequence of time distortion, time is not consistent from one person to another or even consistent within the same individual. Consider, for example, the following scenario.

A mother and daughter walk home from a netball game at the local park. Neither of the women is wearing a watch. Before they return home to check the clock, both mother and daughter guess the time. The mother believes it is five-thirty because the sun is
starting to set. The daughter, however, is certain it is not so late. Her brother returns home from work at five and his car is not in the driveway, so she assumes it is four-thirty. The mother and daughter argue about who is right. In the course of arguing, the pair agree on the afternoon’s events. They both accept, for example, that Tess broke her finger after Liz stepped on it. They also agree that Ari’s penalty shot was awarded after she was obstructed by the goalkeeper but before Tess was sent off. The mother and daughter also concur that when the game finished, they were the first to leave the park.

While the women agree on the sequence of events that took place that afternoon (that is, the order of time), they disagree on a shared experience of time (in this case, the passage of time). While the order of time suggests an objectivity that is independent of the individual, the experience of time suggests a subjective mergence of memory and imagination. Because of this phenomenon, Susie Vrobel argues that the perception of time depends on the individual’s retrospective judgment of how much time has passed (2011, 9). Vrobel suggests that time contracts during eventful moments and dilates during moments of monotony, hence the proverb, ‘Time flies when you’re having fun’. The perception of time duration, then, depends on the amount of content that an individual processes at a given moment and the contextual change that the individual perceives that moment to prompt. For this reason, time may be nothing more than a psychological experience. As Elliott Jacques points out,

The enigma of time is the enigma of life: it has plagued poets and philosophers from the beginnings of civilised thought. For life is lived in time. Without time there is no life. But each one lives his own time. No two men living at the same time live in the same time. Each one, living at the same moment, has his own time perspective, his own living linkage with past and future, the content of which, and the scale of which, are as
different between one person and another as are their appearances, their fingerprints, their characters, their desires, their very being. (1990, 21)

While Einstein’s theory of relativity unsettled Newton’s idea of time as an entity that is fixed, Newton’s legacy still resides in studies of narratology as a pre-theoretical assumption. This is not to suggest that narrative theorists have not deliberated extensively on the complexities of non-linear time in narrative, but rather, that in viewing narrative time as a manipulation of real time, they reinforce a uniform view of time by presenting linearity as the norm. As Lidstone observes, ‘It is common in narrative theory, as well as within the context of literary criticism more generally, to find that time is described in monolithic terms as a singular entity, and paralleled with such concepts as “real”, “natural”, “normal”, “normative”, “everyday”, “reality”, “ordinary”, and “commonality”’ (2007, 1). As these terms are rarely explained by narratologists, real time continues to be associated with the Newtonian laws of causality and chronology. Time, therefore, is still universalised as a linear entity. This generalisation negates the idea that time may be as varied as the individual who experiences it: an idea that has particular relevancy when considering the treatment of space and time in post-modernist narratives, such as Winterson’s Oranges and Nabokov’s Pale Fire.
CHAPTER 2

STORY SAMPLES
In her debut novel, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (2001), Jeanette Winterson employs the lemniscate as a space-time continuum that undermines the Newtonian model of time. Specifically, Winterson endows her story with a non-linear temporality that locates historical time and mythical time on the same connective plane. Instead of presenting time as a uniform entity that observes the laws of sequential ordering, Winterson imagines time as a lemniscate that merges space and time. This fusion, which is both finite and unbounded, captures the inextricability of the novel’s spatial and temporal co-ordinates. In *Oranges*, space is flexible rather than fixed, and time is pliant rather than immutable. This arrangement of space and time challenges the pre-theoretical assumption that underlies the study of temporality in narratology.

As established in Chapter 1, narrative theorists often conceptualise time as a linear progression that is synonymous with lived experience. By presenting non-linear time as a
natural component of the protagonist’s world, Winterson dismisses the idea that narrative
time, which is typically non-linear, is incompatible with the ‘real’ world experience of time.
Not only does the lemniscate represent Jeanette’s movement through the world, but the shape
encapsulates both the complexity of her relationships, which are marked by polarised activity,
and the structure of her narration, which oscillates between the separate domains of memory
and imagination. The story that emerges blends the dimensions of space and time into a
space-time continuum that discards the rules of causality and chronology. As Winterson
explains, ‘The past is not fixed in the way that linear time suggests. We can return. We can
pick up what we dropped. We can mend what others broke’ (2011, 58).

THE LEMNISCATE’S APPLICATION

From the outset, Winterson employs the lemniscate as the trajectory of Jeanette’s
movement through space and time. As the narrative opens, Winterson spirals between the
realist tales of her protagonist, Jeanette, and the mythical episodes that replace historical time.
This incessant looping allows the narrator to move back and forth between the mature
reflections of her adult life and the fantastic elements of her childhood. ‘I cannot recall a time
when I did not know that I was special,’ Jeanette says. ‘One of my earliest memories is me
sitting on a sheep at Easter while [my mother] told me the story of the Sacrificial Lamb. We
had it on Sundays with potato’ (Winterson 2001, 4). Straightaway, Winterson represents
Jeanette as an intermediary whose wandering disposition allows her to cross the boundary
between reality and fantasy. The two realms, which are usually separate in autobiography, are
amalgamated in Oranges by the structure of the narrative and the story’s content. Winterson
explains,
Oranges is an experimental novel: its interests are anti-linear. It offers a complicated narrative structure disguised as a simple one, it employs a very large vocabulary and a beguilingly straight-forward syntax. This means that you can read in spirals. As a spiral, the shape is fluid and allows infinite movement. But is it movement backwards or forwards? Is it height or depth? Draw several, each drifting into each and all this will be clear. (ibid., xiii)

In Oranges, the complex nexus between form and content not only undermines the distinction between fact and fiction but problematises the construction of space and time as separate entities that are isolated and intact. The subsequent collapse of space and time into a continuum of tenseless moments creates a retrospective point of view that allows Jeanette to move between her adoption as an infant, her upbringing in a small Labour mill-town, and her gradual detachment from her evangelical mother. The result of this mergence is the generation of a space-time continuum that embodies the interconnection of the past, present, and future. As Winterson says, ‘The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial’ (1989, 62).

In Genesis, the novel’s opening chapter, Winterson inscribes the first lemniscatory trajectory into the story’s fabric. As the story commences, Jeanette recounts the walks she takes with her mother around the neighbourhood in which they live. She describes the cobbled roads and winding valleys and the low rolling hills. One afternoon, while Jeanette is collecting black peas at the fairground, a gypsy woman grabs her hand and reads her palm. ‘You’ll never marry,’ the gypsy says, ‘and you’ll never be still’ (Winterson 2001, 7). The episode naturally upsets Jeanette, and she quickly returns home. Despite Jeanette’s regression through space, time continues to move forward. As Jeanette escapes, the opening scene manifests as a prophecy. Specifically, the gypsy’s warning foreshadows the development of
Jeanette’s relationship with Melanie, who is a convert at Jeanette’s church. As Jeanette reflects on the gypsy’s message, she expresses bewilderment at her mother’s heteronormative perceptions of relationships and romance. She recounts the day her mother, Louie, forbids her from buying comics at the local paper shop, which is owned by two unmarried women. The women, who are presumably lesbians (they deal in ‘unnatural passions’), appear intermittently in Jeanette’s memories. Their presence in Genesis, however, foreshadows Jeanette’s discovery of her sexuality in the second half of the novel. As the narrative unravels, the reader learns that Jeanette, as the gypsy warns, will not get married nor will she be still. ‘I ran and ran,’ Jeanette recalls. ‘I hadn’t thought about getting married’ (ibid.).

As the story resumes it spiral inwards, the lemniscate continues its oscillation back and forth. This undulation between memory and imagination configures the present as a continuous experience that allows Jeanette to access both the future and the past. In Oranges, Winterson models her temporality on the tenseless view of time. This theory, which is based on the physics of relativity, rejects the idea of the present as the most influential dimension of time. In other words, instead of asserting the primacy of the present over the future and the past, tenseless theorists maintain that all times are of equal significance because all times are equally real (Callender and Edney 2004, 37). In a tenseless world, there is no objective distinction between the past and the present, or the present and the future, because the only relations that are genuinely temporal are relations of precedence and succession. Temporal difference, therefore, can only be accounted for by the tenseless relations of ‘earlier than’, ‘later than’, or ‘simultaneous with’ (Moore 2003, 86). For example, if a scientist says that the year 2000 has passed, what he means is that the year 2000 is earlier than the moment at which he is speaking. His statement does not confirm the objective passage of time because his statement demonstrates that the flow of time is dependent on an observer. In other words, the truth of the scientist’s claim is inextricable from his own position in time. For this reason,
tenseless theorists stipulate that it is an individual’s perception of time that presupposes time’s passage. Thus, the tenseless theory denies the existence of tensed categories because tense is merely a mental impression that emanates from the subjective judgment of an individual. As illustrated in the diagram below, the tenseless model of time creates a space-time continuum that collapses the dimensions of time into a lemniscate. In this situation, temporality is only divisible into tensed categories by the sensory perceptions of an individual. In other words, the passage of time reflects one’s perspective of time rather than the nature of time itself.

In *Oranges*, Winterson employs the tenseless model of time as her protagonist’s temporality. For Jeanette, the past is retrievable and the future is partially determinate. This reality, which is fashioned by the structure of the narrative, creates a space-time continuum that assumes the shape of the lemniscate. The lemniscate, as a closed curve, is both finite and unbounded. This structural peculiarity disrupts the story’s linear progression by inscribing temporal loops into the narrative that gesture towards infinity within a finite form. The non-linear trajectory that persists through the novel elicits a tenseless universe that allows Jeanette
to simultaneously discover and recover multiple versions of herself. The gypsy’s prophecy, for example, shatters Jeanette’s illusion of personal autonomy but paradoxically offers Jeanette the chance to change her future. As Jeanette says, ‘I have a theory that every time you make an important choice, the part of you left behind continues the other life you could have had…I have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something I might have been’ (Winterson 2001, 164). The real self, then, is not just the remembered self but the self who imagines what she will become. This reality facilitates the task of self-construction through the act of self-narration. The exercise, which allows for the creation of new subjectivities, does not lead to an affirmation of the self but to an erasure of its boundaries. Jeanette acknowledges the possibility of self-negation through self-narration, when she says, ‘There’s a chance that I’m not here at all, that all the parts of me, running along the choices I did and didn’t make, for a moment brush against each other’ (ibid.).

As the self of Jeanette’s narration is fluid and unstable, the speaking subject of the present becomes interchangeable with the protagonist’s past and future selves. As a result, Jeanette fails to make temporal distinctions between ‘now’ and ‘then’, just as she struggles to mark objective divisions in space between ‘here’ and ‘there’. This inability to differentiate between the various dimensions of space and time is characteristic of the tenseless experience of time. As Eddington explains, ‘In a perfectly determinate scheme, the past and future may be regarded as lying mapped out—as much available to present exploration as the distant parts of space. Events do not happen; they are just there, and we come across them’ (2009, 46). In the scene that follows, Winterson reinforces this idea that the distinction between the tenses is arbitrary when Jeanette narrates the story of her adoption alongside the story of her mother’s conversion to the Pentecostal Church. Both stories, which are simultaneously realist and romantic, are located between the epistemological poles of the mimetic and the marvellous. As the mimetic and the marvellous are opposing modes of narrative, they operate
from counter-positions. The lemniscate functions as a narrative continuum that blends the mimetic with the marvellous through Jeanette’s oscillation between the modes.

According to Rosemary Jackson, the mimetic is a mode of discourse that aligns the reality of the fictional world with the external reality to which the text refers (1981, 33). Mimetic narratives, such as realist novels, assert an implicit claim of equivalence between the represented world (that is, the world of the fiction) and the external world (that is, the world that exists outside the text). Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a classic example of a realist novel that employs mimesis to comment on the social world of the landed gentry of Regency England.\(^7\) The marvellous, in contrast, typically represents a mythical world that is imaginary or ‘unreal’ (Jackson 1981, 34). Fairytales and folk stories are marvellous narratives because they are marked by circumstances that are inconsistent with the reader’s understanding of what is possible or logical in the ‘real’ world. In marvellous narratives, such as *Cinderella*, magic is a standard practice, happy endings are pervasive, and supernatural occurrences take place without any explanation at all.\(^8\) If the mimetic, then, is a narrative discourse that claims to imitate reality, and if the marvellous, by contrast, constructs a reality that departs from the ‘real’, Winterson situates *Oranges* on a continuum between the two. As illustrated in Diagram Nine, Jeanette’s narration merges the ordinariness of the mimetic with the extravagance of the marvellous, and, in doing so, confounds the elements of both.

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\(^7\) Through the use of mimetic techniques, such as verisimilitude, Austen invokes the reader’s sense of familiarity with her novel’s central themes: the oppression of family, the power of choice, and the importance of marrying for love. The themes, which are subject to a multitude of interpretations, are shaped primarily by the author’s commitment to plausible narrative. In fact, most of Austen’s fictions epitomise what Northrop Frye calls ‘the low mimetic mode’ (1957, 34). In this mode of discourse, the protagonist’s power or intelligence is similar to the reader’s. As a result, the protagonist is superior neither to the environment nor to the other characters. As Frye explains, ‘The hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet [or author] the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience’ (ibid.).

\(^8\) Interestingly, in marvellous narratives, the hero of the story has a similar degree of power to the hero of a romance. Unlike the protagonist of low mimesis, the champion of a romance is superior to his or her environment and to the other characters. Naturally, the hero lives in a world that is suspended above the ordinary laws of nature: a realm that allows ‘miraculous violations’ of temporal rules and spatial schemata (Frye 1957, 34).
At a structural level, the blending of the mimetic and the marvellous forms a narrative continuum that assumes the shape of the lemniscate. As the two loops move seamlessly into each other, the lemniscate blurs the distinction between fact and fiction by locating the real and the imagined on the same connective plane. This cross-pollination of the real and the imagined creates a multitude of realities that subsequently destabilises the concept of reality itself. As Winterson says,

People talk about realism—but what do they mean? They usually mean the everyday world of clocks and jobs and houses. People talk about personal experience—but what do they mean? They mean autobiography…But how real is it? I am interested in total reality—that includes the inner world as well as the outer world. It includes what we dream as well as what happens to us. (2002, par. 1)

For Winterson, reality is a product of both internal and external influences. That is, reality exists in the interplay between the inner world, which consists of an individual’s perceptions, projections, and recollections, and the outer world, which consists of more objective phenomena, such as objects and events. Elsie Norris, Jeanette’s friend, reiterates Winterson’s
view of reality when she teaches Jeanette that in order to survive she must learn to balance the cogent forces of the outside world with the desires of her heart. Elsie tells Jeanette that “‘There’s this world,’” she banged the wall graphically, “and there’s this world,” she thumped her chest. “If you want to make sense of either, you have to take notice of both” (Winterson 2001, 32). Elsie, who is the foil to Jeanette’s mother, represents the relativism Louie lacks. Elsie’s belief that reality is slippery and uncertain musters Jeanette’s courage to challenge her mother’s static understanding of truth. This truth, which is synonymous with the doctrine of the church, is undermined by Jeanette’s realisation that religion perpetuates ideals that are sometimes unattainable. Jeanette recalls, ‘The sermon was on perfection, and it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement’ (ibid., 58).

As a result of Jeanette’s detachment from both her mother and the church, the narrative forms a lemniscatory trajectory that charts Jeanette’s movement from subservience to self-autonomy. This movement collapses the notion of reality as an objective phenomenon and purports, instead, that reality is a subjective experience that is relative and unstable. For Jeanette, reality is a complex and multi-faceted concept because her knowledge of what exists in the world dictates what she understands to be ‘real’. From the outset, Jeanette’s understanding of what is logical and possible is shaped primarily by her mother. Louie, in partnership with the church, establishes the rules for normative behaviour. Consequently, Jeanette must cross the border from reality to fantasy in her attempt to reform the criteria for normalcy and reclaim her story. Not surprisingly, Jeanette’s quest, which confirms that reality is subjective, ultimately leads to the development of multiple selves. As Marie Jørgensen confirms, ‘Multiple selves in multiple realities are possible in Winterson’s universe, and time does not stop these different selves from developing because it is not so linear that it is impossible to move across it’ (2005, 41). Reality, then, which is constructed through the mimetic loop of the narrative, intertwines with the second loop of the lemniscate,
which represents the world of fantasy. Jeanette, as the narrator, is an intermediary who moves between the historical events of her autobiography (that is, the mimetic accounts of narrative) and the mythical interpretations of her life stories (that is, the marvellous accounts). This movement, which may be traced along the lemniscate, produces a non-linear narrative that blends memory and imagination into a continuum.

This continuum problematises Newton’s view of time by allowing Jeanette to oscillate between the past, which she remembers, and the future, which she invents. This fusion of the remembered and the imagined generates a non-linear temporality that aligns with Einstein’s theory of relativity. In particular, the mergence of the remembered and the imagined correlates with Einstein’s idea that space and time are mental relations that order and arrange an individual’s impressions of the world. As Winterson confirms, ‘The future and the present and the past exist only in our minds, and from a distance the borders of each shrink and fade like the borders of hostile countries seen from a floating city in the sky’ (1990, 144). In attributing the past and the future equal significance, and by affording the mimetic and the marvellous equal narrative space, Winterson places reality and fantasy on the same ontological level. In doing so, she suggests that the power of storytelling emerges from the counterpoint between the real and the imagined. This counterpoint, which supports Jeanette’s search for self-autonomy, is the fulcrum of the lemniscate and the heart of the novel.

In Genesis, Winterson uses the lemniscate to integrate Jeanette’s experience of reality and fantasy. As mentioned, one of the first stories Jeanette tells in Oranges is the tale of her mother’s religious fanaticism. In the story, Jeanette recounts Louie’s enlistment in the Glory Crusade: a small evangelical task force that is concerned with ‘converting the Heathen’ and proclaiming ‘the fate of the damned’ (Winterson 2001, 8). In the portrait Jeanette presents of her mother, she likens her parent to William Blake. Like Blake, who claimed to experience
apparitions, Louie is a fantastic character who has visionary tendencies. A fundamentalist Christian, she describes herself as ‘a missionary on the home front’ (ibid., 53). In *Genesis*, Jeanette establishes her mother’s obsession with healing miracles, charity work, and ‘the wrath of God inevitable’ (ibid., 7). She explains how her mother’s faith is inextricable from her attraction to Pastor Spratt. Pastor Spratt, who is the leader of the Glory Crusade, works as a missionary in Africa. He also resembles the Hollywood actor, Errol Flynn. ‘We have a picture of [the pastor] surrounded by black men with spears,’ Jeanette says. ‘My mother keeps it by her bed’ (ibid., 8–9). Jeanette’s story, while exaggerated at times, is a realist fiction that employs naturalist drama to create a mimetic comedy. This comedy moves towards the incorporation of the hero into society and is marked by a struggle between the protagonist (Jeanette) and the antagonist (Louie). Jeanette concludes, ‘Now and again my mother liked to tell me her conversion story; it was very romantic. I sometimes think that if Mills and Boon were at all revivalist in their policy my mother would be a star’ (ibid., 8).

At this point, Winterson employs the lemniscatory structure to shift Jeanette’s narrative from the mimetic to the marvellous. Specifically, Jeanette oscillates between the story of her mother’s conversion and the story of her own adoption. After Louie joins the Pentecostal community, she decides to adopt a child: a foundling who she can ‘build’ and ‘train’ and ‘dedicate to the Lord’ (ibid., 10). One night, while Louie is out walking, she follows a star to the local orphanage. Once there, she finds an infant in a crib. The child, who Louie raises for religious ministry, is Jeanette. The narrator, who is omniscient, recounts the story of Jeanette’s adoption with absolute authority. The narrator, referring to Louie, says, ‘She took the child away and for seven days and seven nights the child cried out, for fear and not knowing. The mother sang to the child, and stabbed the demons. She understood how jealous the Spirit is of flesh’ (ibid.). This minimal narrative, which is characteristic of the marvellous mode of discourse, distances the story in space and time by fixing a retrospective perspective.
that asserts complete knowledge of the events. In turn, this authorial certainty creates a
mythical narrative that employs the formulaic language of fairytales. Phrases such as ‘and so
it was’ and ‘for years and years to come’ are variants of the conventional ending, ‘happily
ever after’. In *Genesis*, Winterson’s employment of this phraseology generates a marvellous
tale that negates the process of its telling. As Jackson points out, ‘The effect of such narrative
is one of a passive relation to history. The reader, like the protagonist, is merely a receiver of
events which enact a preconceived pattern’ (1981, 33).

Despite the spatio-temporal distance between the stories, the mimetic and the
marvellous are unified in *Genesis* by the walk Jeanette takes with Louie. This migration
assimilates the mimetic with the marvellous through the use of semantic markers, such as the
word ‘star’. Louie, who views herself as the star of her parish, discovers Jeanette under a
shooting star that passes over the orphanage. The event, which is simultaneously realist and
fantastical, is an obvious parody of the celestial phenomenon that leads to the infant Jesus.
Jeanette explains that Louie, who suffers from genophobia, wishes to have a child without
conceiving it. Jeanette remarks that her mother is ‘very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting
there first’ (Winterson 2001, 3). Louie succeeds, of course, in emulating the Madonna when
she adopts Jeanette. ‘“This child is mine from the Lord,” Louie says’ (ibid., 10). Here, the
opening stories of *Genesis* (that is, the story of Louie’s conversion and the story of Jeanette’s
adoption) interweave seamlessly to form a creative recasting of Christ’s birth. This dramatic
reimagining presents Jeanette’s adoption as both a physical and spiritual event: a mergence
that embodies the same qualities as Louie’s religious quest. Jeanette draws a parallel between
the corporal and the sacred, when she says, ‘[My mother] always prayed standing up, because
of her knees, just as Bonaparte always gave orders from his horse because of his size’ (ibid.,
4). The two stories terminate when Jeanette and Louie reach the hill at the conclusion of their
walk. At this point, the first-person narrator relinquishes her voice and the perspective
becomes collective. Jeanette recalls, ‘We stood on the hill and my mother said, “The world is full of sin.”’ We stood on the hill and my mother said, “You can change the world.”’ (ibid., 10). Here, the non-linear trajectory that Jeanette pursues integrates the stories into a continuum. This continuum merges the domains of reality and fantasy by blending the mimetic with the marvellous. As illustrated in Diagram Ten, the mimetic and the marvellous are located at separate poles on opposing sides of the lemniscate. The motion between the poles creates a lemniscatory trajectory that allows Jeanette to oscillate between the story of her adoption and the story of her mother’s conversion to the Pentecostal Church.

![Diagram Ten: The Lemniscate as a Character’s Narrative Trajectory](image)

In *Oranges*, the result of this mergence is the generation of a space-time continuum in which space and time are interdependent rather than separate. This amalgamation discards the rules of causality and chronology by permitting the traditionally separate dimensions of space and time to co-exist. Consequently, as Jeanette makes her way through town, her travels form a non-linear trajectory that conglomerates the past, present, and future into a uniform whole. This whole, which is both finite and unbounded, creates a porthole to an infinite number of narrative possibilities, each of which exists within the novel, as a bounded form. This reality,
which is based on the structural paradox of the lemniscate, is similar to the phenomenon that
Hamlet experiences when he says that he ‘could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count
[himself] a king of infinite space’ (Shakespeare 1843, 39). Like a shell, the lemniscate
imposes boundaries on the protagonist, which can be collapsed from within. Time, for
example, is redeemable and predictable because the division between the tenses is subjective.
Reality, which is represented by the mimetic, blends into the fantastical, which is a product of
the marvellous. The mythical self and the historical self are permeable and interchangeable.
These integrations, which unfold upon the lemniscate, occur repeatedly in Oranges whenever
space and time are curved. In fact, the lemniscate of the opening chapter contains all of the
story’s events: Jeanette’s adoption, her religious and secular education, her relationship with
Melanie, Louie’s rejection of her daughter, and Jeanette’s coming out. As Jørgensen
confirms, ‘Events from the chapters to come are included in the spiral of the opening chapter.
The story line in the first chapter moves in a spiral, with Jeanette and her mother taking a
particular walk as a unifying element’ (2005, 24).

While the spiral is a sound description for the structure of Oranges, it is not the most
pertinent description of the novel’s shape. As plane curves, the spiral and the lemniscate
share some resemblances. For instance, both shapes emanate from their centre points. The
spiral of Archimedes, for example, propels from its fulcrum in successive turns that are
equally spaced. In nature, the Archimedean spiral appears in the shell of an ammonite fossil
and in the shape of a coiled snake (Kappraff 2001, 44). The reciprocal spiral, which is a spiral
that has been observed in the orbits of comets, performs an infinite number of revolutions
around its centre before it reaches its pole (Nicholson 1825, 435). Similarly, the lituus spiral,
which takes the shape of a bishop’s crosier, moves increasingly closer to its origin but never
meets the centre point (Pickover 2005, 187). Unlike the lemniscate, then, the spiral does not
intersect itself once the shape commences motion. In other words, the tracing point of a spiral
always moves progressively closer to, or further away from, the shape’s centre point. The lemniscate, in contrast, is a closed curve that moves through its fulcrum. This movement, which consists of regular trips back and forth, is not only constant but inversely proportional. The lemniscate, then, is a self-reflexive shape that turns back on itself to form a closed curve. This important difference renders the lemniscate a sinusoidal spiral: that is, a curve that is governed by polar co-ordinates rather than a single point. For this reason, the lemniscate is not a ‘true’ spiral in the mathematical sense (Lockwood 1961, 175).

In *Oranges*, the movement between the mimetic and the marvellous is not only constant, but the regular shifting between the real and the imagined is balanced by the fulcrum. On most occasions, this fulcrum is Jeanette. The fulcrum, as the focus of the narrative, is the centre point where the story loops converge. This point functions as a pivot that constantly reorients itself to balance the tension of opposites. In *Oranges*, the binary opposites that Jeanette must learn to negotiate are the past and the future, the remembered and the imagined, and the private and the public. For example, as the present-day narrator, Jeanette fuses her memories of the past with her intentions for the future. She uses language, which is her only weapon, to power multiple versions of herself. This action, which erases the distinction between fact and fiction, allows Jeanette to challenge her mother’s hegemonic standards of truth. These standards, which are legitimised primarily by maternal authority, appoint Louie as the judge of normative selfhood. As Jeanette confirms, ‘My mother had painted the white roses red and now she claimed they grew that way…For now, I had to be hard and white’ (Winterson 2001, 133–134). While Jeanette initially perceives herself in her mother’s image (she describes herself, at first, as her mother’s ‘friend’), she reconfigures her personal identity over time through the fairytales that she interweaves with the more realist accounts of narrative.
In *Joshua*, for example, when Jeanette refuses to break up with Melanie, Louie locks Jeanette in the parlour to think about her ‘sins’. While there, Jeanette hallucinates an orange demon leaning nonchalantly on the coffee table. The demon, who is a personification of Jeanette’s consciousness, informs Jeanette that if she is courageous enough to embrace her sexuality, she will have a difficult but different life. The demon says to Jeanette, ‘We’re here to keep you in one piece, if you ignore us, you’re quite likely to end up in two pieces, or lots of pieces, it’s all part of the paradox’ (ibid., 106). Naturally, Jeanette is burdened by the demon’s ultimatum. If she repents and denies her sexuality, her identity will be fragmented. However, if she pursues her lesbian desires, she will be rejected by her mother and excommunicated from the church. Her subjectivity, however, will remain intact. Inevitably, Jeanette chooses self-preservation over shelter and security: a decision that Winterson expresses through the fairytale mode. ‘If I let them take away my demons,’ Jeanette says, ‘I’ll have to give up what I’ve found’ (ibid.). Jeanette’s decision to keep her demons undermines the discursive power of Louie’s faith and consequently breaks the alliance on which their relationship is based. As Jeanette, reflecting on her childhood, says, ‘I had been brought in to join [my mother] in a tag match against the Rest of the World’ (ibid., 3).

As the novel progresses, Jeanette continues to evoke the multiplicity of selfhood by alternating between the mimetic and the marvellous. This style of narration, which shifts between history and myth, allows Winterson to use the lemniscate as a narrative structure that merges space and time. In effect, Winterson draws her readers into the story by creating a space-time continuum that not only discards spatial boundaries but temporal ordering as well. In this way, Winterson uses the lemniscate to reject Newton’s absolutism and suggest, instead, that space and time are relative constructs that form a uniform whole. In *Oranges*, as in most of Winterson’s novels, the interconnection of space and time mitigates an appreciation of their dependency, especially when one considers Einstein’s theory that the
distinction between space and time is an illusion. In fact, in Sexing the Cherry (1990), Winterson identifies seven lies that are directly problematised by the lemniscate in Oranges.

Lie 1: There is only the present and nothing to remember.

Lie 2: Time is a straight line.

Lie 3: The difference between the past and the future is that one has happened while the other has not.

Lie 4: We can only be in one place at a time.

Lie 5: Any proposition that contains the word ‘finite’ (the world, the universe, experience, ourselves…)

Lie 6: Reality as something which can be agreed upon.

Lie 7: Reality as truth. (Winterson 1990, 83)

These ideas, which concern the nature of reality, are not only tropes of Winterson’s work but post-structuralist views. In Oranges, the truths are presented through Winterson’s use of the lemniscate as a space-time continuum. As the conceptual framework for Jeanette’s reality, the space-time continuum supports the notion of reality as a subjective perception. For example, instead of accepting the idea of reality as a singular construct, Winterson embraces the idea that simultaneous realities may co-exist. This proposition, which is embedded in Einstein’s physics, is closely connected to Winterson’s model of time. For Winterson, time is a non-linear continuum that is analogous with Saint Augustine’s view of eternity. In The Confessions (2002, 222), Augustine describes eternal time as a ‘whole’ in which the dimensions of time are ‘simultaneously present’ and ‘nothing passes away’.

Winterson, too, imagines time as an orbital structure that is ‘eternally present’ (1989, 62). She
writes, ‘All time is eternally present and so all time is ours. There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming. Thus the present is made rich. Thus the present is made whole’ (ibid.). In Winterson’s world, time is reversible rather than progressive, and space is flexible rather than fixed. Events do not unravel in time or unfold in space because they already exist in their entirety as points along the lemniscate. These points, which can be accessed by the self through memory and imagination, allow for the co-existence of multiple realities. As Elsie confirms, ‘“There’s more to this world than meets the eye”’ (Winterson 2001, 32). Reality, then, as a stable construct, is undermined by the amalgamation of different spaces and times. In Oranges, this subversion is particularly significant, since Winterson, like Einstein, also suggests that the experience of space and time may be psychological. As Winterson explains,

There’s nobody on this planet…who lives in one time anyway. You’re walking down the street and at the same time you’re thinking of something that happened to you a couple of years ago and you’re wondering about something that is going to happen the day after tomorrow, and you hold these realities in your head simultaneously. It’s not a problem…[It’s] the same with the idea of progress, or our lives being this straight line. I think most of us have experienced these strange loops and curves and whirls, and we see patterns repeating over and over again in our lives. That’s not a straight line. That’s about a journey which is much more contoured—the recognition that space-time is curved, not straight, there’s nothing in this universe which is straight—which is good if you’re gay. (Winterson quoted in Francone 2005, par. 8)

For Winterson, Einstein’s space-time is truer to the human experience of space and time than Newton’s absolutism. In fact, Newton’s model of the universe, as a machine that is rigid and unchanging, is synonymous with Jeanette’s depiction of Louie. An absolutist, Louie
teaches Jeanette that the world operates on ‘simple lines’ (Winterson 2001, 26). Under her mother’s guidance, Jeanette initially believes that everything which exists in the universe can be divided into binary opposites: good and evil, friends and enemies, right and wrong. By the time Jeanette reaches puberty, however, she realises that the structure of the universe is more like ‘a string full of knots’ (ibid., 91). ‘It’s all there,’ Jeanette says, ‘but [it’s] hard to find the beginning and impossible to fathom the end’ (ibid.). For Jeanette, the space-time continuum offers a model of reality that is finite yet unbounded—unbounded in the sense that there are no boundaries that prevent Jeanette from travelling from one place to another, but finite in the sense that there are only a limited number of places she can go. This reality, which is based on the structural paradox of the space-time continuum, offers the most fitting explanation for Jeanette’s experience of the world. As Jeanette reflects, ‘Since I was born I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church. Now I was finding that even the church was sometimes confused. This was a problem’ (ibid., 26–27). As Jeanette’s understanding of the world changes, the space-time reality that she experiences is crystallised by her movement through space. This movement, which does not have a clear point of commencement or termination, is crucial to the structure of Jeanette’s narration and the shape of her travels. As Jeanette, in an attempt to understand the course of her journey, says, ‘I seemed to have run in a great circle, and met myself again on the starting line’ (ibid., 168).

In *Oranges*, this movement always unfolds between the ‘real’ world that Jeanette inhabits and the imaginary world that she creates. In *Exodus*, Jeanette recounts a series of events that are linked to her education. Instead of arranging the events chronologically, Winterson positions the scenes as points along the lemniscate. As a result, the reader moves intermittently between Jeanette’s religious upbringing, which occurs in the sanctuary of her family home, and Jeanette’s secular education, which she receives at school. This oscillation shifts between the spatial realms of the private and the public, and represents Jeanette’s
displacement as she moves from the seclusion of the domestic space into the surveillance of society. As Jeanette, who is under constant scrutiny at school, explains, ‘Some weeks passed, in which I tried to make myself as ordinary as possible. It seemed like it was working, and then we started sewing class; on Wednesdays, after toad-in-the-hole and Manchester tart’ (ibid., 38). While school is a place that is exclusive and restrictive, home is initially a space where Jeanette is accepted. This acceptance, which is granted temporarily by Louie, is conditional on Jeanette’s religious observance. At home, for example, Jeanette is rewarded with material blessings for her demonstrations of faith. When she preaches to her peers about ‘the fate of the damned’, Louie takes her to the cinema as a treat (ibid., 42). On Sundays, Jeanette listens to the World Service on the radiogram, and studies for the Bible quiz at church. Under her mother’s tutelage, she learns that ‘everything in the natural world is a symbol of the Great Struggle between good and evil’ and that sometimes ‘evil can triumph, but not for very long’ (ibid., 14–15). At school, however, Jeanette is ostracised by the school community because of her religious views. In sewing class, when Jeanette makes a needlework in black stitching with the slogan, ‘The summer is ended and we are not yet saved’, she is reprimanded by her teacher, Mrs. Virtue, for upsetting the other children. At this point, Jeanette despairs that she does not know the ‘formula’ for fitting in. She complains, ‘I didn’t understand the ground rules. The daily world was a world of Strange Notions, without form, and therefore void. I comforted myself as best I could by always rearranging their version of the facts’ (ibid., 47).

In the next breath, Jeanette observes that the tetrahedron is a three-dimensional shape that can be formed by stretching an elastic band around a series of nails. At this point, the narrative spirals into a fabula about an emperor called Tetrahedron who lives in a palace that is made entirely of elastic bands. The emperor, who is adored by his subjects, is treated regularly to imaginative offerings and expensive gifts. One of the townspeople, for example,
produces a stretch of material that is so fine ‘a change of the temperature would dissolve it’; another offers the emperor ‘stories of love and folly’ (ibid., 47–48). One day, a local woman surprises the emperor with a revolving circus that is operated by a troupe of midgets. The midgets, whose motives are ambiguous, simultaneously perform a myriad of tragedies and comedies. The narrator explains, ‘They acted them all at once, and the emperor, walking round his theatre, could see them all at once’ (ibid., 48). Tetrahedron, whose physical self is literally elastic, represents the complexity of reality as a multifaceted concept. Unlike Jeanette’s teachers, Tetrahedron understands that it is impossible to conceive of the self as a complete entity, since the process of self-making through self-narrating is always unfinished. That is, the process cannot be measured in terms of simplification and closure because the development of the self is finite (since existence is determinate) but unbounded (since the self is constituted by narrative, which offers unlimited possibilities). Unlike Mrs. Virtue, for example, the emperor has ‘the farsightedness to realise that there is a debate going on as to whether something has an absolute as well as a relative value’ (ibid., 44). Tetrahedron, who is both a person and a shape, has as many faces as Jeanette has worries, and the chapter concludes, ‘Round and round [the emperor] walked, and so learned a very valuable thing: that no emotion is the final one’ (ibid., 48).

As the reader, too, moves round and round, Winterson uses the lemniscatory motion to transport her protagonist from the ordinary domain of school life to the fabulous world of the emperor. This motion, which blends the mimetic with the marvellous, creates a magical parallel to the story of Jeanette’s childhood, which is essentially the story of her individuation. As Winterson, in the preface to Oranges, says, ‘Everyone, at some time in their life, must choose whether to stay with a ready-made world that may be safe but which is also limiting, or to push forward, often past the frontiers of commonsense, into a personal place, unknown and untried’ (ibid., xiv). For Jeanette, this personal place exists at the
interface between reality and fantasy. Reality, which is seemingly synonymous with factual accuracy, is established by the first loop of the lemniscate, while fantasy, which is imaginary, is patterned by the second. Again, this employment of the lemniscate as a narrative structure creates a space-time continuum that blurs the distinction between fact and fiction by dissolving the boundaries between historical time and mythical time, respectively. As a result of this blending, the narrative self is configured as both a historical subject and a mythical figure. This configuration broadens the parameters of self-definition by permitting the co-existence of multiple realities. As María del Mar Asensio Arostegui confirms, ‘Winterson denies autobiography its right to represent the self as single and fixed. Instead, she chooses to adopt multiple literary personae which relate to one another dialogically’ (2008, 4). Jordan, the narrator of Sexing the Cherry, expresses the same idea, when he says, ‘The inward life tells us that we are multiple not single, and that our one existence is really countless existences holding hands like those cut-out paper dolls, but unlike the dolls never coming to an end’ (Winterson 1990, 90).

In this tenseless space where the subjectivity of experience negates the existence of temporal categories, Winterson constantly oscillates back and forth between the traditionally separate realms of the real and the imagined. In eliciting and intersecting these spaces, Winterson not only disperses the temporal dichotomies of the past and the future, but she also dismantles the spatial hybridities of the private and the public. In other words, Winterson’s installation of the lemniscate as a space-time continuum allows Jeanette to connect her physical wanderings through space with her abstract wonderings through time. In Genesis, for example, it is not until Jeanette wanders through town with Louie that she begins to recall and reimagine both the story of her adoption and the story of her mother’s conversion. ‘My mother and I climbed [the hill] until the town fell away,’ Jeanette recounts. ‘And so it was that on a particular day, some time later, she followed a star until it came to settle above an
orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child’ (Winterson 2001, 10). Similarly, in *Exodus*, Jeanette’s encounter with the elastic emperor is prompted by her physical displacement at school. ‘Whatever I did [at school] made no impression,’ Jeanette concludes, and the fairytale opens, ‘The emperor was beloved by all’ (ibid., 47). The obvious implication of this coupling is that Jeanette’s movement can be literal or figurative. Winterson, of course, uses the lemniscate to map the journey that is both.

As a result, Jeanette’s perceptions of space and time are also tied to the lemniscate. In *Exodus*, Winterson uses the orange, or, more specifically, the orange peel, to evoke the shape of the lemniscate. When Jeanette becomes temporarily deaf, she is admitted to hospital for testing. Initially, Louie, along with the entire church community, believes that Jeanette is silent and unresponsive because she is in a state of rapture. When Miss Jewsbury discovers that Jeanette is not ‘full of the spirit’, as Pastor Spratt concludes, but rather, that she has adenoids, she takes Jeanette to the hospital (ibid., 24). Immediately, the doctors schedule Jeanette for an operation. On the night before her surgery, Louie brings Jeanette a bag of oranges. ‘The only fruit,’ Louie says (ibid., 29). Later, during Jeanette’s recovery, Louie continues to send oranges to Jeanette instead of visiting. Jeanette recalls, ‘My mother came to see me quite a lot in the end, but it was the busy season at church…when she couldn’t come herself she sent my father, usually with a letter and a couple of oranges’ (ibid., 29).

The orange, which is symbolically less threatening than the apple, can be read as a reversal of the heterosexual coupling that is installed in the story of Eden. Oranges appear at several points throughout the novel at moments when Jeanette feels anxious about her ‘sins’: after her exorcism, when she meets the orange demon, when she tells her mother about her distaste of men, when she lies in bed with a fever, and when she breaks up with Melanie. The fruit, while not forbidden, is associated with Jeanette’s desire for women and, by extension,
her disassociation from her mother. The orange, therefore, is an alternative to the apple, as the fruit is incompatible with heterosexual desire. Jeanette confirms this when she says, ‘To eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings’ (ibid., 120). Jeanette, however, is not so much interested in eating the oranges as she is in peeling them. ‘I tried to build an igloo out of the orange peel,’ she says, ‘but it kept falling down and even when it stood up I didn’t have an eskimo to put in it, so I had to invent a story about “How Eskimo Got Eaten”’ (ibid., 27).

Since Jeanette has no interest in preserving the oranges, it is not the orange but the orange peel that represents the novel’s structure. While the fruit, as a spherical shape, would signal a circular narrative and a cyclical journey, the orange peel, as a natural lemniscate, represents the story’s non-linear trajectory. Not only does the overall narrative take the form of a lemniscate, but each chapter assumes the shape of a sub-lemniscate by intertwining historical time with its mythical counterpart. In *Leviticus*, for example, Jeanette interlaces her work as a missionary with a fairytale about the mystery of perfection. One weekend, while Jeanette attends a religious meeting, she questions the validity of church doctrine. The pastor’s sermon, which is on perfection, triggers a kind of existential crisis in Jeanette, which eventually leads to her break with the church. Instead of offering further explanation, Winterson interjects Jeanette’s criticism with a fairytale about the impossibility of perfection. The prince in the tale announces, ‘I know now that perfection is not to be found, but to be fashioned, there is no such thing as flawlessness on this earth’ (ibid., 63).

As the chapter unfolds, it is clear that Winterson employs the lemniscate to delineate time. In each chapter, the realist narrative concludes as the fairytale opens. In *Leviticus*, the pastor closes with a proclamation that perfection was ‘the condition of man before the Fall’, and the fairytale commences, ‘Once upon a time, in the forest, lived a woman…’ (ibid., 58).
Not only does Winterson juxtapose gender stereotypes to highlight Jeanette’s unease with the pastor’s sermon, but she also presents Jeanette’s reality as a space-time continuum. This continuum, which is fluid and unstable, allows historical time and mythical time to merge. Instead of presenting real time, then, as a homogenous medium, Winterson suggests that time is inseparable from the subject who perceives it, and thus, time cannot be measured objectively. As Jeanette points out, ‘Time is a great deadener. People forget, get bored, grow old, go away…Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will’ (ibid., 91). As Leviticus concludes in the fairytale mode with a glimpse of the prince buying a dozen oranges, the story creates a lemniscate. As Winterson, speaking of Oranges, explains, ‘I wanted to go back into a notion of the past that I could reinvent so that it would work as a very elastic sort of structure but one which was not in any sense slavish or regular’ (Winterson quoted in Arostegui 2008, 333).

Given Winterson’s intentions, it is not surprising that Oranges takes the shape of a lemniscate. In fact, even Jeanette’s relationship with her mother assumes the shape of the curve. One day, while Louie is discussing her ‘Old Flames’, Jeanette notices her mother’s predilection for talking in lemniscates. Jeanette says, ‘Quite often, she’d start to tell me a story and then go on to something else in the middle, so I never found out what happened to the Earthly Paradise when it stopped being off the coast of India, and I was stuck at “six sevens are forty-two” for almost a week’ (Winterson 2001, 16). For Louie, time is a circle that is symbolised by the all-pervasive orange: the fruit that Jeanette clearly rejects and reconfigures. In the end, however, when Louie is forced to eat nothing but pineapple, she recoils from her initial beliefs and announces that ‘oranges are not the only fruit’ (ibid., 167). For Jeanette, who has known this all along, her mother’s announcement is unsurprising. After all, time in Jeanette’s world does not run on lines but on curves. In The Passion, Jordan, too, concludes that space-time is curved. He says, ‘Thinking about time is like turning the globe
round and round, recognising that all journeys exist simultaneously, that to be in one place is not to deny the existence of another’ (Winterson 1990, 89).

The lemniscate, then, is the overarching structure of Winterson’s novel. In fact, in *Oranges*, as in *The Passion* (1989) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1990), the structure of the narrative is subtly described as a curve that unwinds around its derivative. In *Sexing the Cherry*, for example, Jordan notices a woman ‘darting in a figure of eight’ (ibid., 93). Henri, the male narrator of *The Passion*, reports, ‘We rowed in a shape that seemed to be a figure of eight working back on itself’ (Winterson 1989, 113). The figure eight is the structure of *Oranges* and a trademark of a Wintersonian narrative. Not only does the shape have a distinct diegetic meaning in *Oranges*, but it is the overarching image for Winterson’s works as a whole. ‘There are seven books,’ Winterson says, ‘and they make a whole cycle’ (Winterson 2013, par. 13).

In *Oranges*, then, Winterson successfully employs the lemniscate as a non-linear narrative structure. In doing so, she undermines the pre-theoretical assumption that underlies the study of temporality in narratology: that is, that real time is linear and governed by laws of chronology and causality. Instead of presenting time as a linear sequence, Winterson imagines time as a lemniscate: a closed curve that fuses past, present, and future into an infinite bind. In this space where reality is bendable, time is reversible rather than progressive and space is flexible rather than fixed. As Winterson concludes, ‘I cross countries of history and geographies of time to arrive in a wooded valley and dig up a story. There are always stories—endless stories—but not locked into time and place’ (2002, par. 9). While *Oranges* is a well-known example of a semi-autobiographical novel that takes the shape of a lemniscate, perhaps the most sophisticated example of how the lemniscate operates in a work of fiction is Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962).
I am in a strange country
that is guarded by the 8.

—Glowing Enigmas: III
Nelly Sachs

In Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), John Shade recalls, ‘the miracle of a lemniscate left
/ upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft / bicycle tires’ (lines 137–139). The shape, which
appears frequently throughout the novel, constitutes a narrative structure that advances the
story’s themes. Primarily, the lemniscate is a symbol with referential functions that are
inextricably connected to the governing properties of the curve: namely, continuity,
counterpoint, symmetry, and transformation. These defining qualities distinguish the
lemniscate from other curves and double as the themes of the work. Second, the figure eight
is an ideogram for the contrapuntal structure of the novel and the dialogical relationship
between the mirror parts: that is, Shade’s autobiographical poem and the accompanying line-
by-line commentary by Charles Kinbote. Finally, the lemniscate functions on a subtextual
level as Nabokov’s directive for reading. While readers may certainly pursue a linear
trajectory through the novel, the lemniscate provides the most useful strategy for negotiating the nexus between form and meaning.

As mentioned, the lemniscate first appears in Canto One of *Pale Fire*. The epic, which borrows its title from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, is described by Kinbote as ‘an autobiographical, eminently Appalachian, rather old-fashioned narrative’ (ibid., 171). The poem, which is written by Shade during the last days of his life, is set in the fictitious town of New Wye, Appalachia. Ironically, given the poet’s fortuitous demise, Shade’s *magnum opus* is an attempt to understand the mystery of death and the possibility of life thereafter. Impossibly, given the requisites of the form, the poem is 999 lines long and arranged in heroic couplets. The contrapuntal structure of the poem is complemented by Nabokov’s thematic exploration of the interplay between life and art. The subtle relationship between both form and meaning is both the correlated pattern of *Pale Fire* and the novel’s central theme. As an understanding of the novel’s complex storyline is central to an understanding of the novel’s structure, it is necessary to provide an extended plot summary.

Shade, who has the deliberate manners of a methodical man, is a celebrated American poet who teaches English at Wordsmith College. He lives with his wife, Sybil, in his deceased parents’ house at the edge of Dulwich Forest. The elevated areas of the woodlands offer a curious blend of flora and fauna and, consequently, the site is an attractive walking place for Shade, who has a passion for knowing ‘the names of things’ and an unwavering attention for natural beauty (ibid., 113). The forest, however, is a hub of paranormal activity. The discerning reader will notice that the final line of *Pale Fire* does not have a rhyming counterpart. This opening joke immediately raises questions about the stability of the work and the nature of the relationship between the poet and the commentator. The significance of the gag, however, is sometimes overlooked by first time readers. As Brian Boyd recounts, ‘Once when teaching *Pale Fire* I had in my graduate class, as well as bright young students, the recently retired former head of our English Department. I began to describe the book as consisting first of “a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred and ninety-nine lines” when his white head jerked back, perplexed. Unlike the students, he had not missed the absurdity of the opening line—as if I had said that a family has nine children, all twins’ (1999, 17–18).
manifestations. Here, the Shades’ only child, Hazel, spends three nights investigating strange lights and sounds before committing suicide.

While Sybil and John grieve for the loss of their daughter, Charles Kinbote, a lonely pederast, accepts an appointment at Wordsmith College. He rents the house across from the Shades, who are unaware of Kinbote’s arrival. Importantly, Kinbote’s suburban château belongs to Judge Goldsworth: a distinguished authority on Roman law who is on his sabbatical in England. Kinbote, who describes himself as a ‘discreet companion’, meets John at a faculty lunch in which he admits to installing two ping-pong tables in his basement to entertain boys (ibid., 2). Hinting for the first time at his homosexuality, Kinbote refrains from praising Shade for fear of the conversation resorting to utter mockery. Kinbote, as the reader learns, is a zealous admirer of Shade’s poetry. He has a deep love of English verse despite his self-recrimination as ‘a miserable rhymester’ (ibid., 168). Upon his arrival in New Wye, Kinbote pursues Shade with ‘a hypnotist’s patience and a lover’s urge’, convinced as he is in his narcissistic fantasy that he is the inspiration for *Pale Fire* (ibid., 171).

Expectedly, Kinbote resents a weary Sybil who seems, in his opinion, to distract the poet from his art. In addition, Kinbote deplores the literary scholars who work alongside Shade in the English department. Kinbote is adamant that while ‘the inbreeding academic[s]’ may be institutionally closer to Shade, he is the only one who appreciates the magic of Shade’s poetry and the splendour of its genesis (ibid., 5). As the madman boasts, ‘I experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at [Shade], especially in the presence of other people, inferior people. This wonder was enhanced by my awareness of their not seeing what I saw, of their taking Shade for granted’ (ibid., 8). As the narrative progresses, Kinbote takes advantage of his proximity to the poet by spying on Shade as he works. ‘What
were you writing about last night, John?’ Kinbote asks. ‘Your study window was simply blazing’ (ibid., 151).

Sybil, who has little time for her insufferable neighbour, avoids Kinbote when possible. She refuses to pass on Kinbote’s messages when he calls and later, she deliberately excludes Kinbote from a house party she organises for John’s birthday. Shade, however, is a more sympathetic figure than Sybil. He kindly accepts his vainglorious neighbour in a gesture that is testimony to the kinship he identifies between Kinbote and his daughter. 10 On at least three occasions, Shade meets with Kinbote for a sunset ramble despite his certain knowledge that Kinbote is unwell. In fact, the megalomaniac appears to be suffering from extreme paranoia. Not only is Kinbote convinced that he and Shade share a glorious friendship, but he also believes that he is the King of Zembla: a mystical land, just north of Russia, with upland pastures, secret passages, and a now unstable government.

According to Kinbote or Charles the Beloved, the king is exiled from Zembla after the monarchy is toppled by a socialist revolution that starts in the Glass Factory. With the help of Odon, a loyal royalist, the king escapes from his enchanted castle via a hidden tunnel that leads to the Royal Theatre. From here, Kinbote scrambles over the Bera Mountains and flees the country in a powerful motorboat that has been prepared for him on the seacoast. Eventually, the fugitive arrives in America by way of parachute. Meanwhile, back in Zembla, a group of devout extremists known as the Shadows hire a gunman, Jakob Gradus, to assassinate the counterfeit king. Gradus, ‘a Jack of small trades’, slowly descends on Appalachia from distant Zembla while Shade, who is unaware of his impending doom, continues to compose his poem (ibid., 180).

10 Like Kinbote, Hazel has strange fears and fantasies. In fact, in his commentary, Kinbote claims that Hazel resembles him in ‘certain respects’ (Nabokov 1962, 118). Indeed, both characters are social loners. Where Hazel is excluded by her peers at school, Kinbote is shunned by his colleagues at Wordsmith. Further, both characters pursue romance and are publicly rejected (Hazel by the insensitive Pete Dean, and Kinbote by the homophobic Gerald Emerald).
As Kinbote’s indulgent fantasies transpire, the story reaches its sudden conclusion when Gradus arrives in New Wye and Shade, upon near completion of his manuscript, decides to join Kinbote at his rented castle for a celebratory wine. Gradus, who has been concealing a gun, withdraws the weapon and while attempting to shoot the exiled king, accidentally shoots the poet. While Shade bleeds to death on his neighbour’s lawn, Kinbote steals the poet’s manuscript and hides it in Goldsworth’s house. When Kinbote returns to the garden with nothing more than a glass of water, he finds Shade turned on his back with ‘open dead eyes directed up at the sunny evening azure’ (ibid., 170). At this point, the story takes a startling turn that disrupts the stability of the narrative. Jakob Gradus, who the police identify as Jack Grey, is in fact an escapee from a local asylum for the criminally insane. In what appears to be a case of mistaken identity, Grey confounds Shade with Judge Goldsworth: Kinbote’s learned landlord and the killer’s intended victim. A few days later, Grey slits his throat to thwart justice. The finality of the action leads Kinbote to conclude that Gradus/Grey takes his life in what can only be ‘a gesture of humanoid despair’ (ibid., 172). As Kinbote surmises, ‘[Gradus] died, not so much because having played his part in the story he saw no point in existing any longer, but because he could not live down this last crowning botch—killing the wrong person when the right one stood beside him’ (ibid.).

When Kinbote retrieves Shade’s manuscript from its hiding place, he discovers that the poem is not the romaut he imagined. *Pale Fire* does not contain any mention of his dazzling Zembla—the sunset castle or spine of mountains, the flower boys or Black Rose Paladins—‘Nothing of it was there!’ (ibid., 171). Immediately, Kinbote dismisses the police’s version of events and vows to take revenge on his adversaries by divulging the truth of the tragedy. When Sybil learns of her husband’s death, she is led to believe that Kinbote tried to save John’s life by throwing himself at the gunman. Convinced there is no recompense she can
offer her neighbour, Sybil breaks down. Kinbote seizes the opportunity to realise his fantasies and asks the widow for permission to publish *Pale Fire*. Naturally, a distressed Sybil agrees.

Predictably, the commentary that Kinbote offers is not a line-by-line analysis of Shade’s manifesto but a fanciful account of King Charles’s life and his brave escape from Zembla. Kinbote’s notes offer little guidance for reading the novel. As Robert Alter notes, ‘One hardly has to read past the second note to realise that Kinbote’s zany commentary has precious little to do with the quiet meditative themes and the domestic academic settings’ (1975, 185). Brian Boyd agrees that ‘[Kinbote] does not bother to trace sources in the original language, fails to identify natural objects, and misconstrues the mores and milieu of his poet because he is too preoccupied with his own Zembla’ (1999, 69). The shortcomings of Kinbote’s commentary are a satire on literary criticism. Nabokov knows that erudite scholarship relies on the laborious work of an active reader: one who studies the fictive world as closely as possible and ‘notices and fondles details’ (Nabokov 1980a, 1). In fact, Shade reiterates Nabokov’s own contempt for critical solipsism, when he says,

> I am also in the habit of lowering a student’s mark catastrophically if he uses ‘simple’ and ‘sincere’ in a commendatory sense; examples: ‘Shelley’s style is always very simple and good’; or ‘Yeats is always sincere.’ This is widespread, and when I hear a critic speaking of an author’s sincerity I know that either the critic or the author is a fool. (Nabokov 1962, 98)

Certainly, Nabokov foresaw the scholarly irrelevancy of his crooked commentator when in 1948, fourteen years before the publication of *Pale Fire*, he wrote, ‘The worst thing a reader can do [is identify] himself with a character in the book’ (Nabokov 1980a, 1).
In *Pale Fire*, a work that Mary McCarthy described as ‘a trap to catch reviewers’, Nabokov does not intentionally deceive his readers, but rather, rewards those inquisitive souls who investigate the mystery of the novel’s structure: its hidden mechanics and secret clues, its complex riddles and puzzles (1962, par. 1). Nabokov uses the analogy of the strategy game to explain the intention behind his work. He says, ‘It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world)’ (2000, 223). In *Pale Fire*, as in *Lolita* (1955) and even *Ada* (1969), Nabokov encourages his readers to not only consider what the text says but how the text works. That is, he asks his readers to observe how he makes his novel, as the readers, in turn, make meaning. Simply, he invites his readers to play ‘a game of worlds’ (Nabokov 1962, line 819). ‘This [is] the real point,’ Shade affirms, ‘the contrapuntal theme...not text, but texture; not the dream / but a topsy-turvical coincidence’ (ibid., lines 806–809).

Importantly, Nabokov’s installation of the lemniscate as the novel’s structure serves the story’s thematic content. At the symbolic level, the figure eight has a complex double function. Not only does the symbol advance the story’s themes, but it also represents the contrapuntal relationship between Shade’s harmonious poem and Kinbote’s hysterical commentary. The internal structure of the poem also assumes the shape of a lemniscate. In his forward, Kinbote explains that *Pale Fire* consists of four cantos: Canto One (‘with all those amusing birds and parhelia’), Canto Two (‘your favourite’), Canto Three, (‘that shocking tour de force’) and Canto Four (which is incomplete, according to Kinbote, because of a missing final line) (ibid., 1). The editor proclaims, ‘I shall even assert...that there remained to be written only one line of the poem (namely verse 1000) which would have been identical to line 1 and would have completed the symmetry of the structure’ (ibid., 2).
Herbert Smith calls this speculation the Kinbotean Conjecture (1994, 126). If the reader accepts Kinbote’s insistence that line 999 (‘Trundling an empty barrow up the lane’) is to be followed by the opening line (‘I was the shadow of waxwing slain’), then a recourse to the poem’s opening fulfils the narrative’s structural equilibrium by matching the lengths of the cantos. Specifically, the poem consists of four verses of 166, 334, 334, and 166 lines. The shorter flanks (Cantos 1 and 4) form the first and fourth narrative arcs, while the central parts (Cantos 2 and 3) comprise the second and third.

As illustrated in Diagram 11, the narrative progression of Pale Fire can be traced along a lemniscate. As the story continues, the shape integrates the novel’s parts into an interdependent body: an intricate system of ‘cells interlinked within / cells interlinked within cells’ (ibid., lines 704–705). This mise en abyme, which is a popular technique of post-modern novelists, is particularly suited to the lemniscate, since a bisection of the shape in three-dimensional space will only produce another lemniscate. The major achievement of this self-replication is the amalgamation of the novel’s themes with the novel’s structure. The synthesis that results, which is a mergence of shape and story, is instigated by the lemniscate
and, in particular, by the way the shape operates as a continuum. For the writer, the lemniscate offers a viable approach to structuring a non-linear narrative, and, for the reader, the lemniscate provides a useful directive for reading a non-linear work.

THE LEMNISCATE’S APPLICATION

In Canto One, Shade establishes the story of his life as an ongoing attempt to understand the mystery of death. The task, which he describes as an exploration into the inadmissible abyss, is a quest he accepts unwittingly in his childhood before heeding the call of poetry as an adult. Certainly, the poet’s awareness of mortality is first roused when he is a boy. Shade’s parents, both of whom are ornithologists, die when Shade is a baby: his father from a bad heart and his mother from pancreatic cancer. Orphaned, Shade is raised by his eccentric Aunt Maud: an eclectic artist who has a penchant for collecting grotesque objects and images of doom: an abandoned guitar, a human skull and, in evoking the lemniscate’s mirror symmetry, a paperweight made of convex glass that encloses a lagoon. Impressionable, no doubt, and receptive to his aunt’s proclivities, Shade becomes obsessed with the enigma of death and what exists beyond the tomb. His fixation on the afterlife is the central leitmotif of his troubled youth, which is marked by thoughts of impermanence and ontological anxiety. In his preteen years, Shade has a series of dramatic fits in which he feels the ubiquity of death. The adult Shade recalls,

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain

By feigned remoteness in the windowpane.

I had a brain, five senses (one unique);
But otherwise I was a cloutish freak.

In sleeping dreams I played with other chaps

But really envied nothing – save perhaps

The miracle of a lemniscate left

Upon wet sand by nonchalantly deft

Bicycle tires.

From the outset, Shade suspects that the calamity of death is a part of the ultimate design of life. Aptly, this mysterious arrangement, which is modelled on change and continuity, reveals itself in the lemniscate. As the lemniscate is marked by constancy, the movement that emanates from the centre to the periphery repeats indefinitely. This movement represents the endless span of infinity. Shade takes a gleam of comfort from the mysterious concept when he transforms the stress of elapsing time into the solace of eternity: ‘I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / by the false azure in the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I / lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky’ (ibid., lines 1–4). In evoking the poem’s opening image, the waxwing that flies into the glass window, Shade muses, ‘infinite foretime and / infinite aftertime: above your head / they close like giant wings, and you are dead’ (ibid., lines 122–124). Here, Shade’s observations, while sombre, conjure his hope for a life beyond death: a hope that helps ameliorate, not the fear of dying but the fear of non-existence.11 This emphasis on the solitary confinement of consciousness draws attention to the structural paradox of the lemniscate as a shape that represents boundlessness within a

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11 Shade’s concern is somewhat contradictory since he already knows the experience of non-being. As James Christian points out, ‘None of us were alive, say, two hundred years ago, but it didn’t bother us then, nor does it concern us now’ (2008, 605). Nevertheless, Shade’s apprehension about those giant wings, the time before life and the time after death, resonates with Nabokov’s metaphysical concerns in Speak, Memory (2000). In the introduction to his autobiography, Nabokov likens life to ‘a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness’ (ibid., 17). Like Shade, who maintains that he is ‘artistically caged’, Nabokov discovers that the prison of time is ‘spherical’ (ibid., 18).
bounded form. For Shade, a poet who is troubled by the trammels of time, the lemniscate is a strategic device for fusing the past, present, and future, or, more precisely, as Saint Augustine elucidates, for merging the present of things past (memory), the present of things present (experience), and the present of things future (expectation) (2002, 229). Indeed, *Pale Fire* is one relentless spiralling between Shade’s recollections of his childhood (the past present), his composition of *Pale Fire* (the present), and his obsession with death (the future present). Again, this narrative spiralling creates a space-time continuum that endorses the tenseless view of time.

In Canto One, the simultaneity of space and time is governed by the lemniscate. As a space-time continuum, the shape represents ‘cosmic synchronisation’ (Nabokov 2000, 169). Nabokov explains the concept as a state of expanded consciousness in which space and time are merged into ‘an instantaneous and transparent organism’ of which the poet is ‘the nucleus’ (ibid.). As a result of this fusion, an individual may experience space and time simultaneously. As Nabokov asserts, ‘While the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time’ (ibid.). For Nabokov, who is both a scientist and poet, the idea of cosmic synchronisation is marked by an abandonment of physicality: a gesture that instigates a liminal crossing in space and time, which is inextricably connected to the transcendental value of art. For Shade, the phenomenon is connected to his poetic consciousness and his assumption that there must exist another dimension beyond space and time. When recounting his childhood fits, Shade describes an unusual moment of consciousness in which he feels dispersed throughout the world. He explains,

I felt distributed through space and time:

One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand
Under the pebbles of a panting strand,

One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,

In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.

There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green

Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,

An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,

And all tomorrows in my funnybone.

In this verse, Shade experiences the reality of a non-linear temporality that rejects the Newtonian concept of space and time. Importantly, Shade’s experience of non-linear time is not a mere discursive technique but a natural component of Shade’s world. The temporality that surrounds him and even acts upon him affects what is possible for him to know and to imagine. In his preteen years, when he experiences convulsions, Shade creates a vision for the future that evades the logical restraints of Newton’s world. Simply, Shade breaks the chains of linear time and experiences a form of ‘timelessness’ (ibid., line 568). In Dimensions of Time (2002), the authors describe timelessness as a state of consciousness that is accessible through experience. In this dimension of time, an individual does not perceive the world as a linear and rational intelligibility but as a unity that exists beyond space and time. This experience of timelessness is first accessible to Shade through his fainting spells as a child. Later, timelessness is associated with his artistry and his composition of Pale Fire. In Canto Three, Shade muses, ‘time means succession, and succession, change: / hence timelessness is bound to disarrange / schedules of sentiment’ (Nabokov 1962, lines 567–569). Here, Shade breaks the chains of causality by inscribing temporal loops into his narrative that collapse the
past, present, and future into a continuum. These temporal loops evoke the loops of the lemniscate, since Shade’s experience of time orbits around a nucleus or a fulcrum, which in this case is the poet.

In both structural situations: that is, in both childhood and adulthood, Shade’s experience of cosmic synchronisation is associated with a liminal state of being. Of course, an individual who experiences the fluidity of time is usually engaged in a process of transition; perhaps he or she is moving house or getting married. Liminality, therefore, is intermediate but not indefinite; it is the happening of the between. As Barbara Schaetti and Sheila Ramsey perceive, ‘When a person is in liminal space, he or she is on the threshold, no longer part of the past and yet not part of the new beginning’ (2006, par. 19). For Shade, this experience of liminal space is his most persistent lived experience. As a boy, Shade experiences the delirium of fainting, that momentary swoon in which he feels the presence of death while playing with a clockwork toy. By adulthood, Shade’s peculiar fits have transformed into trance-like suspensions of poetic inspiration: mysterious moments when he finds the right words. In both scenarios, the pinnacle of consciousness is connected to artistic creation. Shade achieves a heightened state of being through play, first of all, and later through his poetry. As Boyd, speaking of Shade, explains, ‘He understands the mystery of life and death not through explicit conclusions but through a confidence in the playful and endless pattern he finds in his world and recreates in his work’ (2011, 340). In *Pale Fire*, the patterning of Shade’s world is based on Einstein’s space-time.

As the figure eight merges space and time into a continuum, Shade’s consciousness expands into a state of being where spatial locations and temporal moments are interdependent. For example, when time slows down at the speed of light, space changes shape or warps. In *Pale Fire*, Einstein’s theory of relativity has implications for Shade’s
investigation into life after death: namely, if space and time are simultaneous rather than contiguous, an individual may move out of the contained realm of one experience into the infinite expanse of another. Simply, an individual may break out of the prison of time. For Shade, the natural attraction of an afterlife is the prospect of existing in an alternative state that is finite and unbounded. As Paul Morris explains, ‘This new realm of being is characterised by the ability of consciousness, now expanded, to experience all time and space simultaneously in a single instant’ (2011, 98). In Canto Two, Shade advances this idea of perpetuity through the use of counterpoint, which is a defining property of the lemniscate.

In Canto Two, Shade emphasises the indiscriminate nature of death by presenting a mirror inversion of two literal deaths: one by chance and the other by choice. First, he recalls the death of his dear bizarre Aunt Maud at the felicitous age of eighty: a number that consists of a lemniscate and a circle or infinity and eternity. Shade remembers, ‘Maud Shade was eighty when a sudden hush / fell on her life. We saw the angry flush / and torsion of paralysis assail / her noble cheek. We moved her to Pinedale’ (Nabokov 1962, lines 196–199). Shortly before her death, Maud has a stroke that impairs her mobility and speech. Clearly affected by his aunt’s predicament, Shade associates the end of life with the deterioration of language. He tells how Maud ‘paused, and groped, and found / what seemed at first a serviceable sound, / but from adjacent cells imposters took / the place of words she needed’ (lines 203–206). Lonely and frustrated by her condition, Maud loses faculty of her mind and body, and passes away in the local sanitarium. Her death provides Shade with the narrative space to fuse his first reflections on the obscurity of dying with his familiar musings on the transience of being. He asks, ‘What moment in the gradual decay / does resurrection choose? What years? What day? / Who has the stopwatch? Who rewinds the tape? / Are some less lucky, or do all escape?’ (ibid., lines 209–212).
As the canto progresses, the reader learns that Shade’s only child, Hazel, has also passed away. Unlike Maud who demonstrates a will to live, Hazel chooses to end her life by suicide. Depressed, the young Shade drowns herself in the lake at Lochanhead after she is rejected on a date. Shade recalls,

It was a night of thaw, a night of blow,

With great excitement in the air. Black spring

Stood just around the corner, shivering

In the wet starlight and on the wet ground.

The lake lay in the mist, its ice half drowned.

A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank

500 Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank.

Difficult and morose, Hazel is represented as a social outcast who, in the months before her death, investigates psychokinesis and experiments with the occult. With her monotonous voice and expressionless eyes, she is depicted in life as the embodiment of loss. A tragic figure—‘a blurry shape’—she represents the melancholy of mortal life, and thus, she is excluded from the fairytale of youth and denied the chance to mature. As Shade despairs, ‘alas, the dingy cygnet never turned / into a wood duck’ (ibid., lines 318–319).

Interestingly, the counterpoint between Hazel’s final hours and her parents’ uneasy vigil is located halfway through Pale Fire. Hazel’s death at line 500 occurs at the fulcrum of the poem: Hazel steps into the gulping swamp and Shade withdraws from the scene; Canto Two closes and Canto Three opens. This counterpoint method is a narrative technique that blends two or more voices into a continuum. In Pale Fire, this continuum oscillates between
Shade’s narration, which is retrospective, and Hazel’s dialogue, which is reported. When the voices meet, each maintains its individuality, while simultaneously averting isolation by remaining interactive. Dmitri Nikulin explains, ‘Every voice is independent, and yet no voice is isolated or singled out...every voice is a voice among others, but every voice is also unique and irreducible to any other’ (2006, 49). The fulcrum that hosts the conversation, then, must be solid enough to hold the dialogue but flexible enough to shift between one voice and another. This is because the polyphony only exists in the counterpoint between the parts of the whole, or, more specifically, between the individual voices of the conversation.

In Canto Two, Shade’s use of counterpoint assumes the lemniscatory form. As the climatic tension unfolds, the poet weaves two story loops into the backbone of his canto. If the reader conjures an image of the lemniscate, they will recall that the figure consists of two symmetrical loops that form a single curve. In Canto Two, each of the lemniscate’s loops serve a functional role as well as a symbolic purpose. The left loop, which moves clockwise in a chronological succession, represents Shade’s recollection of the night of Hazel’s death. This story line is narrated by Shade in the first person and set in the domestic comfort of the home. In contrast, the right loop moves anti-clockwise in a non-chronological order to recount the events of Hazel’s date. This story line, which is related in the third person omniscient, is played out on the public stage of New Wye (see the diagram below).
As illustrated in Diagram 12, Shade’s employment of the lemniscate generates a space-continuum in which space and time are simultaneous. This synchronicity creates a co-reality in which both story loops constitute relative stories. As Hazel’s date recoils, she makes her way to the bus stop en route to Lochanhead. At the same time, John and Sybil settle down for the night in their parlour. Here, space and time form a continuum that defies Newton’s laws and supports, instead, Einstein’s concept of a universe that is curved. ‘It’s eight fifteen,’ Sybil says. ‘And here time forked’ (Nabokov 1962, lines 403–404). The scene unravels,

‘Are we quite sure she’s acting right?’ you asked.

‘It’s technically a blind date, of course.

Well, shall we try the preview of Remorse?’

And we allowed, in all tranquillity,

The famous film to spread its charmed marquee;

The famous face flowed in, fair and inane:

The parted lips, the swimming eyes, the grain

Of beauty on the cheek, odd gallicism,

And the soft form dissolving in the prism

Of corporate desire.

‘I think,’ she said,

‘I’ll get off here.’ ‘It’s only Lochanhead.’

‘Yes, that’s okay.’ Gripping the stang, she peered
As Hazel steps into the half-frozen lake, her parents resign from their midnight vigil. In the hours preceding Hazel’s death, John and Sybil watch a literary debate on Channel 8. Here, the ideogram of the lemniscate evokes the ouroboros, which is a mythical symbol that depicts a snake eating its own tail and forming a figure eight. This dramatic emblem, which is the basic mandala of alchemy, is one of the oldest extant representations of the renewal of life and the cyclicity of time. Like the self-devouring ouroboros that Hazel embodies, the lemniscate may be read as a symbol of the counterpoint between mortality and immortality, since the shape encloses a steady continuum that emerges from a clash of opposites. As Hazel takes her life on the cusp of ‘black spring’, Shade sees, as he switches off the television, a flash of light dwindle and die in ‘black / infinity’ (ibid., line 473–474). On cue, the narrative resumes its oscillation around the story’s fulcrum: the centre point that constantly reorients to balance the tension of opposites: in this case, life and death. Fittingly, at the end of Canto Two, Father Time arrives on the bank at Lochan Neck, which is an important inversion of Hazel’s earlier casting as Mother Time in the school pantomime.

Moreover, and of equal significance to the poem’s reversals, is Shade’s repeated inscription of the lemniscate as the ideogram of Pale Fire. As stated, the shape first appears in Shade’s recollections of his childhood dreams. In the poem’s opening, Shade recalls, ‘the miracle of a lemniscate left’ by the bicycle tires of his fellow riders (ibid., line 137). Later, while pondering the perils of reincarnation, Shade worries about the afterlife and ‘how to keep sane in spiral types of space’ (ibid., line 559). In Canto One, Shade describes Aunt Maud’s apocalyptic objects alongside the mysterious eights of the natural world: the ‘mauve rings around the moon’ (ibid., line 107), the ‘twinned iris’ (ibid., line 108), and ‘the iridule’ that reflects a rainbow after a storm (ibid., line 109). Even the rubber band on Shade’s desk
falls into the shape of an ampersand: the graphic symbol for the word ‘and’ (&) and a variation of the lemniscate.

This employment of the lemniscate as the ideogram of *Pale Fire* is intrinsic to understanding the connection between narrative form and meaning. Shade’s penchant for the figure eight is a powerful symbol of perpetuity and a clue to understanding the poem’s structure. In Canto Two, the lemniscate allows Shade to bring both of his subnarratives into harmony. In fact, if the lemniscate is bisected vertically, the internal logic of each story loop is maintained because the integrity of each narrative is preserved (see the diagram below).

As illustrated in Diagram Thirteen, the subnarratives of the lemniscate stand independently. In the clockwise loop, Shade’s fragmented recollections of Hazel are woven throughout the narrative, not in the linear order the events occur, but in the lemniscatory way the poet remembers them. This implementation of the lemniscate packages the poem as a kind of timeless whole in which memory of the past and anticipation of the future are both present in Shade’s experience of the world. In this way, Shade draws a parallel between the mysterious design of art and the mystery of mortality. Shade is adamant, for example, that through his
poetry he can discover ‘some kind / of correlated pattern in the game’ (ibid., lines 812–813). This quest to understand the finitude of mortal life is the focus of Canto Three.

In his penultimate canto, Shade uses the lemniscate’s bilateral symmetry to mirror art and mortality by considering the relationship between two kinds of deaths: the physical and the spiritual, or, more precisely, the death of the body and the death of the soul. Hence, in his wish to attest to the existence of an afterlife—to uncover some kind of ‘sense behind / the scene’—Shade links the unpredictability of death with the illusion of causality (ibid., lines 709–710). The result is a metaphysical investigation of chance and design in the aforementioned game of worlds. Kinbote, in a rare moment of lucidity, confirms, ‘The poet’s plan is to display in the very texture of his text the intricacies of the “game” in which he seeks the key to life and death’ (ibid., 131). This interplay between human mortality and artistic immortality is the contrapuntal theme of Pale Fire. Towards the end of his poem, Shade extends his application of the lemniscate to a mirror device that recreates two inverted experiences, both of which survey the possibility of communication between the living and the dead. These encounters function as turning points that may be plotted on the lemniscate, since the continuum is engaged in a constant state of flux.12

The first of these turning points is Shade’s association with the IPH: the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter, or, as Shade jokes, the ‘big if!’ (ibid., line 505). The organisation comprises a think-tank of researchers who debate the possibility of an afterlife, including its risks and returns. Oddly, the group’s concerns span quantum tunnelling to freak reincarnation, and, consequently, the lecture program includes a series of talks on esoteric

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12 These turning points are diachronic, rich in colour, and drenched in affect. As narrative tropes, they are reconstructed through the retrieval of episodic memories that typically mark a change in selfhood (Bruner 1994, 51). In Pale Fire, the turning points are exercises in clarity that assist Shade in re/figuring the leitmotif of his life. As turning points seek to make sense of experience by framing it in narrative, the tropes are both forms of thought and ways of using language for representation. See Jerome Bruner’s The Remembered Self (1994) and Carol Feldman’s Genres as Mental Models (1994).
topics, such as ‘how not to panic when you’re made a ghost’ (ibid., line 553). Shade, who joins the club as a newly wed, is invited by President McAber to speak on ‘the Worm’ (ibid., line 506). Not surprisingly, given the poet’s obsession with what looms beyond, Shade accepts a lectureship at the Institute and moves his family to a ramshackle house nearby. Galvanised by the idea that the IPH may offer some insights into the ineffable, Shade initially finds the club’s pursuits alluring. However, as membership numbers start to dwindle, the poet becomes critical of the Centre’s attempts to comprehend the illogical. When Hazel dies, Shade reflects on the futility of the organisation’s endeavours. He confesses,

The tasteless venture helped me in a way.

I learnt what to ignore in my survey

Of death’s abyss. And when we lost our child

I knew there would be nothing: no self-styled

Spirit would touch a keyboard of dry wood

To rap out her per name; no phantom would

Rise gracefully to welcome you and me

In the dark garden, near the shagbark tree.

Here, Shade rejects the Institute’s fantastical pursuits and refutes the possibility of an afterlife where he may be reunited with his daughter. Indeed, the poet is dubious about the likelihood of Hazel’s survival as a conventional ghost or ‘phantom’. This affirmation is momentous given the poet’s preoccupation with the afterlife and his previous conviction that the unknowable may be known.
The second turning point in Shade’s quest to transcend the beyond occurs almost a year and a half after Hazel’s death when Shade has a heart attack during a public lecture. After presenting a paper to the Crashaw Club, Shade has a fit and collapses. The episode, which is reminiscent of the poet’s childhood malaise, appears to be triggered by a kind of performance anxiety that Shade experiences when a member of the audience heckles him. When he wakes from his blackout, Shade is adamant that while he was unconscious, he ‘crossed the / border’ into ‘blood-black nothingness’ and saw ‘a tall white fountain’ (ibid., lines 699–707). Hopeful that the strange mirage seals the promise of something beyond death, Shade becomes obsessed with his near-death experience and, in a gesture that diffuses his previous scepticism, relays the affair to those around him. Peculiarly, Shade learns of an alleged confirmation of his vision. He reads of a woman whose heart has been ‘rubbed back to life by a prompt surgeon’s hand’ and who reports, in a colourful account of clinical death, to have glimpsed ‘a tall white fountain’ (ibid., lines 748–758). Agog, Shade drives three hundred miles west to interview one Mrs. Z about her matching apparition. Regrettably, Mrs. Z is a fervent sentimentalist who gushes over the distinguished poet and treats their meeting as a social call. Disappointed by the frivolity of the exercise, Shade decides to phone the journalist who reports Mrs. Z’s vision. The journalist has mislaid his notes, but he insists the story is accurate. ‘I have not changed her style,’ he vows, however he acknowledges there is a misprint: ‘Mountain, not fountain’ (ibid., lines 800–801). Shade, of course, is disheartened by his mistaken transformation of Mrs. Z’s fountain into a verification of the legitimacy of his own near-death experience: a conviction that emerges from a typo. ‘Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!’ Shade complains (ibid., line 803). Despite his disenchantment, the poet’s vision is left intact as he finds consolation in the accidental. He reflects,

I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint,
And stop investigating my abyss?

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*

Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;

Just this: not text, but texture, not the dream

But a topsy-turvical coincidence,

Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.

Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find

Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind

Of correlated pattern in the game.

In this pivotal verse, Shade’s identification of life’s contrapuntal theme is an important existential breakthrough that serves as a turning point in the narrative. While Shade is initially discouraged by his visit to Mrs. Z, he decides that while there is no conclusive evidence that an afterlife exists, there is at least an unseen agency at work in the world. Shade’s complex weave of shapes and themes suggests that it is the texture of an afterlife, not the text, that can be confidently inferred. As Nabokov, speaking of the dead, confirms, ‘Although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction’ (2000, 41). Boyd, too, while writing of Nabokov’s philosophy elicits Shade’s metaphysics, when he says, ‘We cannot know [that we survive death] because an existence beyond death would have to be so inconceivably different from the conditions of mortal consciousness that it is beyond our apprehension’ (2011, 63–64).
In Canto Three, the turning moments in Shade’s poem can be located on the lemniscate since the figure eight is a self-reflexive curve. Indubitably, a shape that turns back on itself is an apt structure for a work of self-reflection since every turning yields another turning. For Shade, the lemniscate provides an apt setting for his poem, which is a non-chronological account of his life-long search for meaning. His investigation is essentially a pursuit of metaphysical certainty: one that is prompted by imagination and organised by memory. In *Pale Fire*, the imprint of both these faculties is present from the beginning. At the outset, Shade recalls the image of the waxwing slain in the deceitful reflection of the windowpane and simultaneously envisions that the bird flies on in the azure sky. This coupling of memory and imagination generates the iconic image of the novel: the hapless bird that represents Shade’s persistent attempt to see beyond the continuity of life to the intangible world of death. In keeping with the lemniscatory symbols of the poem, the image of the bird that dies before mirrored glass evokes the bittersweet nature of fate. Where the bird is tricked by its reflection, Shade is mistaken for his double (Goldsworth) and killed by his opposite (Gradus). This ironic reversal, which is a distinct post-modern trope, is particularly befitting for the characters of *Pale Fire*, since their every attempt to extend beyond the self and identify with an other ends in failure, if not death. It is small wonder then that before Shade dies, he turns to his poetry in the hope that the structure of language may correspond with some sort of cosmic order. Shade concludes, ‘I feel I understand / existence, or at least a minute part / of my existence, only through my art’ (Nabokov 1962, lines 971–973).

Given the poet’s affirmation, it is not surprising that both of the defining moments in Shade’s attempt to determine what lies beyond are connected to his poetry. At the IPH, Shade discusses the meaning of his childhood memories, only to dismiss the Institute’s set of nostrums at the peak of his incessant probing, despite his desperate yearning to believe. Similarly, at the Crashaw Club, the pinnacle of Shade’s career corresponds with his collapse
into unconsciousness. Even at the line level, the irony persists. Shade, of course, is an anagram of Hades, Sybil is a near-homophone of syllable, and Gradus is Latin for degree, which is a synonym for shade. Hazel, too, expresses her own fondness for mirror-play when she reverses her words: upon her return from the haunted barn, she twists ‘pot’ into ‘top’, ‘spider’ into ‘redips’, and ‘powder’ into ‘red wop’ (ibid., lines 347–348). Even Kinbote’s imaginary Zembla is a land of reflections where sexual norms, amongst other customs, are blatantly inverted. Female beauty is a mere fantasy in a country where male homosexuality is the norm and the population is comprised of doppelgängers. As Kinbote observes, ‘All bearded Zemblans resembled one another…in fact, the name Zembla is a corruption not of the Russian zemlya, but of Semblerland, a land of reflections, of “resemblers”’ (ibid.). New Wye casts its own set of doppelgängers when Shade is mistaken for Judge Goldsworth at the moment of his death.

The result of this incessant doubling is that the lemniscate harmonises the novel’s opposites. This perfect symmetry creates a curious narrative effect. Structurally, *Pale Fire* embodies the lemniscate as a unified narrative form. Semantically, however, the story employs the lemniscate to enunciate itself in a state of irresolution. Thus, as the reader moves through the novel, she travels both inward and outward through the lemniscatory loops of progression and regression. This non-linear trajectory structures the novel as a lemniscate with an infinite array of narrative possibilities that are only limited by the reader’s desire to wander through the story. As Smith, speaking of the novel’s peculiar form, points out, ‘It is all a perfect single surface, yet multidimensional, reflecting and refracting text and texture through its continuous series of discontinuities’ (1994, 137). Because of this infinite looping, the reader of *Pale Fire* is propelled backward from the final lines of Kinbote’s index to the beginning of Shade’s poem. Thus, the reader who undertakes the novel’s lemniscatory journey also transgresses the pre-theoretical assumption that time is linear.
Perhaps the clearest example of how the lemniscate operates as a non-linear structure is the structural counterpoint between the composition of Shade’s poem and the gradual development of Kinbote’s commentary. In a complex instalment of contrapuntal rhythm, Gradus’s long journey from Zembla to New Wye is synchronised, with mechanical precision, with the progress of Shade’s poem. ‘I rhyme and roam / throughout the house,’ Shade writes in Canto Four (Nabokov lines 941–942) and Kinbote responds in his commentary, ‘and all the time, [Gradus] was coming nearer’ (ibid., 159). As the assassin approaches Appalachia, Shade nears completion of his poem. Kinbote marvels, ‘Who could have guessed that on the very day (July 7) Shade penned this lambent line (the last one on his twenty-third card), Gradus, alias Degré, had flown from Copenhagen to Paris, thus completing the second lap of his sinister journey!’ (ibid., 107). This cosmic synchronisation draws attention to the lemniscate topology of *Pale Fire* and, in particular, to the infinite succession of connections between the plot lines, which are inverted. Specifically, the narrative progression around the clockwise circle (Gradus’s arrival in New Wye) is a mirror inversion of the narrative regression around the other (Shade’s departure). In this way, the two loops of the lemniscate fuse Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary by inverting one another: the poem is presented in verse, for example, while the commentary is prose (see the diagram below).

![Diagram 14: The Lemniscate Inversion](image-url)
Given both the structural and symbolic function of the lemniscate, the reader cannot help but regard Shade’s lemniscatory habit as something more than mirage shimmer. As Alter, speaking critically of Nabokov’s penchant for the figure eight, explains,

All this is clever enough, but like any cleverness exhibited at length, it would finally be tedious if it did not tie in as tightly as it does with the serious imaginative business of the novel, the inner life of the protagonists, the existential quandaries in which they are caught, the shimmering interplay of art and life generated by the events and the language of the narrative. (1975, 190)

In Canto Four, Shade employs the lemniscate as a symbol of transformation. In doing so, he reinstates the lemniscate a narrative structure rather than a narrative gimmick. In fact, Nabokov’s own attachment to the lemniscate is not—despite the usual criticisms levelled at the stylist—a simple flaunting of artifice.13 While Nabokov’s critics have accused the novelist of being a frivolous wordsmith who has nothing to say but a marvellous way of saying it, others have praised the author’s elegant prose and complex themes. Granted, Nabokov’s predilection for parodic allusions and palindromes can be exasperating at times, however his proclivity for wordplay, like his affection for the lemniscate, is typical of the post-modern novel. As Smethurst explains, ‘Post-modern novels are clearly post-modernist because they are organised around anti-representational chronotopes that deconstruct the mimetic function through metafictional play, self-reflexivity, and so on’ (2000, 6).

In his final canto, Shade employs the lemniscate as a configuration of nature. Not only does the shape accommodate the narrative qualities of symmetry, simultaneity, and reversal,

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13 Instead of patronising readers in his Lectures on Literature (1980), Nabokov invites us to read, not with our hearts, but with our brains and spines. The generosity of this gift is Nabokov’s wish to develop us into the astute readers he believes we can become. As Emma Lieber writes, ‘My claim is that Nabokov ultimately leaves us all as solipsists and misreaders, and that it is precisely in this, oddly enough, that the depths of feeling and thought reside’ (2007, par. 6).
but the shape is embodied by the physical phenomena Shade welcomes to his poem. These incarnations materialise in the primary agents that reappear in the final canto: namely, the bird and the butterfly, or, more precisely, the waxwing that represents the continuity of life and the Red Admiral that is associated with the soul. Symbolically, both of these agents represent transformations that are subtly linked to the lemniscate. The first of these mutations is duplication, since the wings of both creatures are mirror inversions that create a lemniscatory shape. The second of these transformations is self-transcendence. After his death, Shade is affiliated with the waxwing and Hazel inhabits the Red Admiral or the *Vanessa atalanta*. Each creature, and indeed each character, undergoes a metamorphosis. In this process of transformation, each stage of antithesis becomes the thesis of the following. Shade’s death, for example, gives figurative life to Kinbote because the suspension of *Pale Fire* triggers the commencement of the madman’s annotations. The result of this incessant looping is that the novel can be read in a variety of ways. For example, if Kinbote is an exiled king who changes his name to conceal his identity, then it is equally true that he is a deranged scholar who imagines the kingdom of Zembla. By the same token, if Kinbote dresses his fictional adversaries in green because he dislikes Gerald Emerald, the young teaching assistant who wears a green jacket, then it is just as valid he dislikes the instructor because Izumrudov, a Zemblan extremist, also dresses in green.

Thus, as the poem spirals inwards towards its violent conclusion, Shade opens his canto with a series of vaunts that seem to promise some great action. He boasts, ‘Now I shall spy on beauty as none has / spied on it yet. Now I shall cry out as / none has cried out. Now I shall try what none / has tried. Now I shall do what none has done’ (Nabokov 1962, 836–

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Interestingly, Hazel’s metamorphosis from human to butterfly is constructed as a liminal processes that is similar to Shade’s experience of creativity. This experience, which is modelled on the process of gestation, is marked by growth and transformation. When Hazel dies and undergoes her dramatic metamorphosis from human to butterfly, she changes slowly but dramatically from larva to imago. In this liminal state, she is neither juvenile nor adult. Similarly, in Canto Four, Shade describes his artistic inspiration as a liminal process that is rich with ambiguity and ambivalence.
The verse, which remains in the present tense, does not uphold its promise of profundity. Immediately after making his declarations, Shade retracts his pledge to spy on beauty by returning to the mundanity of shaving. While grooming, Shade observes the playfulness hidden in the natural world and concludes that there is some mystery between the artifice of his poetry and his attempt to discover an afterlife. He cedes that his poetry, like the universe itself, is ‘richly rhymed’ and ‘fantastically planned’ (ibid., lines 969–970). Thus, as he readies himself for another day of writing, Shade looks to the world around him for the resolution of *Pale Fire*. He notices Sybil in the garden near the shagbark tree and simultaneously evokes the ghost of Hazel, whose phantom swing still sways in the shade. Finally, Shade introduces to his verse, the crimson-barred Vanessa, which is the butterfly he notices as he walks towards his death. Kinbote confirms, ‘One minute before [Shade’s] death, as we were crossing from his demesne to mine…a Red Admirable came dizzily whirling around us like a coloured flame’ (ibid., 168). The butterfly, which is a natural configuration of the lemniscate, doubles as a symbol of Hazel’s spirit. Aptly, the butterfly tugs at Shade’s sleeve as though to warn him against crossing the road. Shade concludes,

A dark Vanessa with crimson band

Wheels in the low sun, settles on the sand

And shows its ink-blue wingtips flecked with white.

And through the flowing shade and ebbing light

A man, unheedful of the butterfly –

Some neighbor’s gardener, I guess – goes by

Trundling an empty barrow up the lane.
The canto breaks off in the midst of action and the final line, which is left unrhymed, seems to indicate that the poem requires one more line to be complete. As Lawrence Lee points out, ‘We can only suppose, as Kinbote supposes, that the final line would repeat the first line, starting a new spiral’ (1976, 140).

While Boyd and Lee nominate the spiral as the symbol of Nabokov’s art, it is actually the lemniscate that is the guiding trope of Pale Fire. In fact, the lemniscate is also the narrative structure of Pnin (1957) and The Gift (1963). Fyodor, the protagonist of the latter, says, ‘There must be a single uninterrupted progression of thought. I must peel my apple in a single strip, without removing the knife’ (ibid., 212). In Pale Fire, Kinbote is unfamiliar with the lemniscate and struggles to understand its significance. In his note to line 137, he cites a dictionary definition of the shape as ‘a unicursal bicircular quartic’ (Nabokov 1962, 88). He decides that the lemniscate has no real meaning and concludes that Shade has fallen under the spell of euphony. The irony, of course, is that Kinbote’s commentary, as the antithesis of Shade’s poem, helps generate the synthesis between the novel’s parts. The new understanding that results offers a strategy for interpreting the story’s contrapuntal structure, which changes the original problem and produces a new reading.

Of course, this new reading is complicated by the ordering principles of narrative and the structural features of experience. Like Oranges, Pale Fire is a story that is packaged in a temporal form. In other words, the novel comprises a temporal configuration that is expressed through a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is not to suggest that the narrated events of the novel are arranged in a linear fashion. In fact, Kinbote’s directive for reading is wildly non-linear. He advises his reader to first consult the commentary (sequentially, the third part of the novel), while his notes direct the reader back to both the forward (the opening of Pale Fire) and the poem (the second instalment). Again, this non-linear movement generates a
story that is not circular but lemniscatory. Just as the final line of Shade’s poem returns to the opening, Kinbote’s index recourses to his forward. The reader has physically moved from one part to another and in pursuing the lemniscate arcs, now assumes a different position in space-time. While the narrative, then, continues on indefinitely, the reading of Pale Fire is an experience that must begin and end. As David Carr explains, ‘A text is no different from anything else: without time it can have no beginning, middle, and end. Its sequences are spatially arranged and some may be logically interconnected, and its pages are numerically ordered, but unless it is gone through temporally it neither begins nor ends’ (1986, 51).

No doubt, Nabokov’s installation of the lemniscate as a narrative structure is propelled by his belief that ‘we do not think continuously in words—we think also in images’ (1980a, 363). In Pale Fire, the lemniscatory structure suits the twin concerns of the novel: space and time, life and death, and the interplay of science and art. While Kinbote witnesses Shade ‘perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart’, the poet concludes that existence is the macrocosm of his poem (Nabokov 1962, 8). He decides that the combinational delight of his poem is the patterning of an afterlife that transcends his understanding. ‘And if my private universe scans right,’ Shade writes, ‘so does the verse of galaxies divine / which I suspect is an iambic line’ (ibid., lines 974–976). Of course, the poet’s proclamation of faith is undermined by his certainty that he will be alive the following day. Such a conviction is predictably uprooted in a world that is governed by lemniscates. Even Shade’s final observation before his death, his reference to the gardener trundling a barrow up the lane, is a lemniscatory reversion to the clockwork toy he plays with as a child.

In considering, then, how the lemniscate works as the structure of Pale Fire, it is evident that the lemniscate functions as a symbol, an ideogram, and a strategy for reading. Collectively, the lemniscate represents the novel’s form; it is an original and organic shape
that provides the most useful approach for negotiating the nexus between story and shape. Further, by constructing space and time as fluid materials, Shade experiences a non-linear temporality in which space and time are simultaneous experiences. This idea of synchronicity is embodied by the lemniscate, since the shape operates as a space-time continuum that is governed by the properties of continuity, symmetry, and counterpoint. These qualities, which distinguish the lemniscate from other curves, not only double as the themes of the novel, but they also reflect the novel’s contrapuntal structure. While readers may move through *Pale Fire* in a linear fashion, the lemniscate provides the most useful strategy for understanding the connection between the novel’s parts.

In *Pale Fire*, then, and in *Oranges*, both Nabokov and Winterson establish the lemniscate as a way of writing and reading non-linear narrative and, by extension, as a way of experiencing the world. Victor Burgin suggests that ‘forward movement in life is achieved through a backward movement in memory, but one that is more than a simple temporal regression’ (1996, 273). Certainly, by merging a backward passage through time with a forward progression through space, the lemniscate elicits a space-time continuum in which space and time are interdependent. This mergence, which breaks the bonds of linearity, can be read as a pairing of movement with memory. In fact, this interplay between literal movement and figurative movement is the structural foundation of my memoir, *The Rain Answered*. The work, which takes the shape of a lemniscate, reveals how the figure eight, as a narrative structure, is particularly suited to a travel story that couples wandering and wondering. While Nabokov and Winterson, then, have succeeded in creating lemniscate novels in the categories of fiction and non-fiction, the lemniscate offers a viable structure for a travel memoir that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. In addition, the lemniscate may order the story’s content *and* advance the story’s themes, while simultaneously operating as a space-time continuum that merges space and time.
THE RAIN ANSWERED
The summer I turned twenty-five, my father wrote me a letter. In the letter, he said that before he met my mother, he was engaged to a woman who he’s always been in love with. The woman, and he wouldn’t say her name, was a teacher at Townsville High. She was six months into a master’s degree when Dad called it off. I got the feeling from the way he shaped his sentences as questions he was unsure why he ended it. He said, ‘I think I got tired of waiting?’ I could have resolved the matter sooner and simply asked him about it, but the envelope was sealed with an excessive amount of tape and the letter was signed, ‘Don’t write back.’ Like that, the conversation was over. Dad wouldn’t speak of anything he wrote and the only other person who could read his writing was my mother. To complicate matters, Dad also said that my best friend, Kez, reminded him of the woman. When I asked Dad if he was in love with Kez, he wouldn’t answer.

At the time, I was still living at home in a makeshift room underneath the house. My bedroom door didn’t have a lock, so when I wanted to undress I moved the chair from my desk and propped it against the handle. Once, the chair slipped and the door opened, and Dad saw me naked.

‘Hello,’ I said.

He nodded.

Dad kept to himself mostly and we never spoke about what happened. I swapped the desk chair for a stack of bricks, and he announced his presence by coughing. I tried to forget about the letter, but he started acting strangely. First, he stayed up late at night, watching foreign films on SBS and falling asleep in his undies. Then, he stopped eating dinner and started smoking cigars. I caught him by himself under the patio, blowing smoke towards the sky. He sat in the garden with his back to the house and a can of bourbon in his hand. When
he puffed, he turned his head to the side, as if he was looking for someone. I tried to keep him company at night by sitting with him in the garden. He acknowledged me by clearing his ashtray and offering me a beer. When I thought he wanted to talk, I started conversation. Mostly, I asked for his footy tips or if he missed Gran. Usually, he just looked at me, as if he expected me to answer. After a while, the mozzies started to bite and I went to bed. Dad just sat there with his head tilted back, blowing smoke rings around the stars. I thought about those stars firing up and burning down to their cores.

Three weeks before Dad wrote to me, my grandmother, Norma, passed away from cancer. She found a lump in her breast at Wet ‘n’ Wild on the morning of her sixtieth birthday. She came out of the wave pool with her hands on her breasts and said, ‘I think I’m in trouble.’ She underwent a double mastectomy the following year and fought for another twenty, which I think made it harder in a way because everyone thought she’d always be around. Dad was her only son and in some ways, her only child. Aunt Linda said she didn’t mind; she had two daughters of her own and she couldn’t understand those women who said they loved their children equally. As long as Gran was home by dark and rested for chemo, Linda didn’t fuss. In the end, she was there for Gran in a way my father wasn’t, but I never saw my grandmother look at her the way she looked at Dad. Dad, of course, was oblivious to this or so I thought. When Gran got sick, he introduced himself to the doctors as her son. It wasn’t an unusual introduction or a special one, but it mattered to my father that they knew who he was.

Around the time Dad started smoking, he also started flirting with my best friend. Kez and I lived in Albany Creek but on different sides of the forest. We met at soccer sign-up when we were both in grade seven. The club was off the Jinker Track, beside the Bunya dump. The smell drifted across the fields, so not many kids signed up. The fees were cheaper
because of the tip and the home games were always close. Dad said you had to think about these things before you made a commitment. I asked him what things he meant and he said money and distance. He bought us socks to cover our shin pads and mouthguards to protect our teeth. After we signed our names, we chose our jerseys from the kit. Kez chose number five because she heard a girl in the line say number five was Zidane’s number, and if it wasn’t there, her season would be ruined. I picked number seven because it was the only jersey in the pile that looked big enough to fit. I wasn’t fat, but I was bigger than the other girls and it made me self-conscious. When the queue cleared, Dad shuffled through the box until he found the number nine. He held the jersey to his chest. I told him seven was my favourite number now and he said that was a surprise to him. After we had our photos taken, Dad took us into the change rooms to draw a game plan on the board. Kez was on the flank, he said, and I was in the middle.

Mostly, we just ran around the field, trying to punch each other. Eventually, the parents tired of us losing and stopped coming to our games. Dad kept coming every week, but he got pissed off when we didn’t take it seriously. I told him it was just a game and maybe I would play better if I had yellow boots, like Stacey Main. Dad laughed. Stacey was a show pony, he said, a well-trained show pony and nothing more than that. She wasn’t rough stock like the rest of us and everyone knew it. All she did was pose and preen and prance around in flashy boots. A real-life show pony, Dad said, then he lifted his chin and pretended to trot across the field. From then on, whenever I looked at Stacey, I imagined she had hooves instead of feet. I told Kez about it, and she said Stacey probably had a tail in her pants that would whip you across the face. We spent the rest of the season trying to pull down Stacey’s pants. Dad was unimpressed. In Ipswich, he called us a pair of idiots and threatened to make us walk home from the game. But then we dacked Stacey on the halfway line, just before kick off, and I saw Dad laughing in the crowd.
After a couple of seasons, we got used to Stacey and the smell from the tip and we started to train two nights a week. I thought soccer was not so bad and maybe I could make something of it. I practised juggling and slide tackling and diving in the box. Kez helped me work on my fitness by kicking the ball as far as she could and making me chase it. Sometimes, I couldn’t be bothered running, so I walked instead. When I did this, she got on the megaphone and said, ‘How badly do you want those abs?’ Usually, I would give her the finger. Some of the girls complained about the cold and the plovers that wandered over from the tip and nested near our cars. They screamed if you got too close and they screamed if you ignored them. Jacqui said she would get a stick and kill the chicks, while the mother was out hunting. Kez called Jacqui a bitch under her breath, and Jacqui heard and they stopped talking. Kez asked me what I thought of the plovers, since I was the captain, but everyone was listening and I got nervous. Most of the time, I liked the way the birds hovered above us while we trained, but sometimes they got too close and I worried they might attack us.

‘The thing that worries me about the plovers is that they might be planning something.’

Kez stared at me.

‘They don’t have facial expressions, like cats and dogs. All they have is two eyes and a beak. At least with cats and dogs, you know how they’re feeling.’

‘They’re birds,’ Kez said.

‘They look like flying rats.’

‘I’ve seen a plover kill a rat,’ Kez said. ‘The bird swooped down and stabbed it. The rat was squealing. It was like he was saying, “Fuck off! Fuck off!” The plover carried him away.’ She paused. ‘I see what you mean,’ she said.
At soccer, we began to understand each other. We learnt to move in circles across the field, so we could start again if we needed to. We learnt to switch and reverse pass and keep possession in the middle. When the opposition broke, Kez closed down the striker and I stretched out the play. When the backline was in trouble, one of us dropped to defend. We were never further than a yard apart, and when we drifted from each other, our coach, Allan, stood up in his box and yelled at us to stay together, so we did.

We started sleeping with each other around the time Dad wrote me his letter. I was up late, thinking about nothing in particular, when Kez got into bed with me and started kissing my neck. She put her hand on my chest, then on my belly, then in between my legs.

‘What are you doing?’ I said.

She kissed me. ‘I don’t know.’

I kissed her back.

‘Is this right?’ she said.

I nodded.

‘Should I stop?’

‘No.’ I pressed my fingers into her back.

At the time, Kez didn’t know if she was gay and I wasn’t sure it mattered. I trusted her and I wanted us to work, but I was still in love with my first girlfriend. Anjulee was in my grade at St. Rita’s. We sat with each other in Modern History and used the same colours in art. We were cast together in the school musical, but apart from the lines we rehearsed with each other, we hardly spoke at all. The first conversation we had outside of class was at choir practice after school. She was an alto, and I stood with the sopranos and lip-synced the
words. I was tone deaf and out of tune and I couldn’t keep the time. I joined the choir to win
the Caltex All Rounder Award. Mr. Burrell, our music teacher, was a devout Catholic. His
band, Lazarus Rising, opened at the Christian Rockfest. He wrote the songs for our winter
concert and the thanksgiving mass. On assembly, when we performed for the school, he
chose gospel hymns, like ‘Mary Said Yes!’ and ‘I Give All My Doubts To Jesus’. The one
time I felt compelled to sing, he came over with his baton and said, ‘Someone over here is
off.’ At practice, when we broke for a drink, he told us he preferred to teach girls than boys
because girls were less demanding and more exciting. He always commented on how pretty
Anjulee was and I thought he was a pervert.

One afternoon, while the choir was rehearsing, I went and sat in the soundproof booth.
The room was padded with plush cushions and there was a picnic rug on the floor. I couldn’t
hear what the choir was singing, but I could see Mr. Burrell, waving his hands through the
air. He looked ridiculous, like a frantic swimmer, and I wondered if he had a wife somewhere
or someone who would care if he drowned. I figured he probably lived alone with some kind
of reptile, maybe a small iguana. But then I remembered there was a photo of a woman above
the piano and I thought maybe his wife was a famous singer, like Sarah Brightman, or maybe
the woman wasn’t his wife at all but an ex-girlfriend he was stalking. I was about to reach a
conclusion when Anjulee came in and sat down beside me. There was paint on her dress and
a hole under her arm where the seam had burst. She was wearing a frangipani in her hair.

‘What are you in here for?’ she said. ‘No, let me guess! You got sick of miming.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

She moved her lips, pretending to sing.

‘Shut up,’ I said. ‘I’ve got tonsillitis.’
She laughed. ‘Too much kissing, I bet.’

‘I like your scrunchie,’ I said.

She touched her hair. ‘It’s not a scrunchie, thank you. I don’t wear scrunchies. It’s a frangipani.’

‘It looks like a scrunchie,’ I said.

She touched my knee. ‘I like your hairy legs.’

The silence settled over us, like a net, and time curved around us. After a while, the girls packed up their things and Mr. Burrell turned out the lights. We sat there in the half-dark until all I could see was Anjulee’s silhouette. Then, she said she had a twin brother, but he passed away when they were babies. She said it was okay because she didn’t know him, but her mum never got over it. I told her my mum was a twin as well, but her name was Mary-Anne. She was fraternal, so she couldn’t read Julie-Anne’s thoughts, but when Mum went into labour with me, Julie was admitted to hospital with stomach cramps. Mum said being a twin was the worst thing that happened to her because everyone always called her One of the Twins, and she felt like she wasn’t her own person. Plus, Julie-Anne was thinner and more outgoing and once, Mum heard a boy at school call her The Fat One. I thought if Anjulee knew these things, she might feel better about losing her brother. I told her about the day someone called from the Twin Registry, wanting to know if Mum would like to participate in a survey or donate some eggs to science. Mum said, ‘I’m not a twin anymore. My twin’s dead. Please stop calling here.’ Anjulee said that was funny, kind of, and that my family sounded interesting. I told her Mr. Burrell had the hots for her, and she said she knew that already, but he never touched her or anything.
After we graduated, I passed out on a beach at Schoolies and Anjulee stayed with me during the night. When I woke the next morning, she was curled up beside me, holding my wallet and keys. We broke up three years later because we didn’t trust each other. After we split, she moved to London to teach geography and I stayed in Brisbane to study. There was a gap between us that was widened by the distance and I didn’t know how to close it. I blocked her out with books and booze and other distractions that seemed to work. But sometimes, when I was with Kez, I thought about her and I knew that wasn’t right. In fact, I was thinking about ending things with Kez when Dad started inviting her out.

In April, we went to the Brekky Creek to celebrate Kez’s birthday. The hotel served beer off the wood and the best steaks in Brisbane. On Sundays, guests bet on the pokie machines and a band played jazz in the garden. Waiters served drinks with marinated olives and collected the cash in their pockets. Every now and then, the bouncers grabbed a man by the crook of his arm and threw him onto the street.

Whenever we visited the hotel as kids, Dad always ordered steaks. It was a tradition I didn’t understand, but it seemed to make him happy. Once, when I asked for chicken nuggets, Dad excused us from the restaurant and marched me to the car. He said he’d had enough of my shit and what was wrong with me, anyway? I said nothing was wrong; I just wanted chicken nuggets. He made me sit in the car. He said if I had a change of heart, I could come back in and order something proper. Just think about it, he said.

At the Brekkie Creek on Kez’s birthday, Mum and Dad stood in line, while Kez and I waited behind. When we reached the register, Dad ordered a garden salad instead of his usual steak with fries.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Mum said.
Dad patted his belly. ‘I’m watching my summer figure.’

Kez laughed.

Dad pointed at the cabinet of steaks. ‘You want to get the eye fillet. That’s the prime cut.’

‘Really?’ Kez said. ‘I usually get the rump.’

‘The rump?’ Dad laughed. ‘I like a good rump.’

Kez blushed.

‘Two eye fillets,’ Dad said, then he turned to Kez. ‘My shout. Kate’s a lousy date.’

After Dad paid for our meals, we found a table in the garden. The four of us sat down.

Dad rubbed his beard. ‘Happy birthday, Kezza.’

Mum chimed in. ‘Are you doing anything special, Kez? I mean, with your family?’

‘Probably not. Dad’s in Sydney and Mum’s on a weekday diet, so she won’t eat out. We might go to the Meccah Bah on Sunday.’

‘That sounds nice,’ Mum said. She unzipped her handbag. ‘I wish Bruce would take me there.’

Dad lifted the jug of water and poured himself a drink. ‘My missus is never happy.’

‘That’s not true,’ Mum said. ‘I’d just like to go to the Meccah Bah. I’d like to go somewhere nice. You know, for a change.’

Dad sat back in his chair and stretched his arms. ‘It doesn’t get better than here.’
Mum fixed her lipstick. ‘The Meccah Bah,’ she said. ‘Is that Turkish? I’d like to try some of their special cheese. You know, the fried one. What’s it called?’

‘Haloumi.’

‘Yes, haloumi,’ Mum said. ‘This woman at school always goes on about it. It’s made from goats’ milk, isn’t it? Kate, what’s haloumi made of?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I think it’s Greek.’

Dad yawned. He leant in against the table and put his hand on Kez’s knee. He kept it there for a while, where Mum couldn’t see.

‘Remember when the kids were little and we brought them here? They used to bring their crayons and write swear words on the tables.’

‘I remember,’ Dad said. He rubbed Kez’s thigh.

‘Those were the days,’ Mum said.

I stared at Kez.

‘Excuse me.’ She stood up from the table. ‘We should have a drink. It’s my birthday. We should celebrate. Who wants a beer?’

‘I’ll have a wine,’ Mum said. ‘A red.’

Dad opened his wallet. He waved a fifty through the air, then followed Kez to the bar.

‘So,’ Mum said, when they were out of sight. ‘Are you packed?’

‘We’re almost done. Kez needs an adaptor and I can’t find my passport.’

Mum shook her head. ‘You never look after your things.’
I watched her sip her water. ‘That’s not true,’ I said.

‘Well, I’m working next week. Maggie’s sick, so I’m on prep. Luke will drop you to the airport.’

I looked over Mum’s shoulder. Dad was standing at the bar with Kez. He was massaging her neck. He worked his way down her spine, towards the concave of her back. Kez lifted her head.

‘Kate,’ Mum said.

‘Mmm?’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t know. I’m anxious.’

Mum sipped her water. ‘Well, if you’re worried about your father and I, we’re fine.’

‘Are you sure?’ I said.

She frowned. ‘Why wouldn’t we be? Unless you know something I don’t.’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t know anything,’ I said.

I didn’t know why Dad wrote me the letter or what I was supposed to do with the knowledge that he settled for my mother. I was unsure why it affected me or if it even mattered. Soon, Mum sensed that Dad was distant and I was upset. She knew something was going on. Eventually, she called Doctor McCauley’s office and asked to make an appointment. She came home with a box of tissues and a script for anti-depressants. I wanted to tell her about the letter, but I worried she wouldn’t cope. I couldn’t tell her about Dad’s feelings for Kez or that Kez and I were sleeping together. I couldn’t tell Mum about any of it,
so I started to avoid her. I felt in some perplexing way that I was cheating on my mother. I told myself it wasn’t possible; I knew it was illogical. I even tried to justify Dad’s crush. I reasoned he was grieving for Gran, for a stage in his life when there was time: when Gran was well, when he was a boy, when there was more ahead than behind. Everyone had secrets, anyway, and maybe ours weren’t so bad. Maybe Dad was in love before he met Mum, before they had the three of us, before we drove down the coast at Christmas. Before, before, before. All of this could stay in the past, if the present remained unchanged. In fact, I could have destroyed the letter, as Dad requested, if it wasn’t for the fact he was married to my mum and flirting with my best friend. To complicate the situation, I was confused about my own feelings for Kez and whether I should try again with Anjulee. I couldn’t remove myself from my parents. I needed to know if they loved each other.

To work it out, I started walking every night through the forest behind our house. The further I wandered, the more my memory pulled me back and usually I finished the walk, thinking about my grandparents. My grandparents, John and Norma, met in the Botanical Gardens during the Great Depression. Before she died, Gran told me stories that changed the way I thought about love. The first was the story of how she met Gramps. Before she began, she said, ‘I want you to know one thing: your grandfather never came back from the war even though he returned home after Victory Day and watched me raise two children.’ Then, she showed me the telegram she received from the Post Master General when the Australian army withdrew from Guinea. The message said, ‘Your fiancé, John, is alive and well, but he’s a casualty of the spirit.’

When my grandparents met, Norma wasn’t interested in boys; she was obsessed instead with insects: dragonflies and damsel bugs, cherry slugs and crickets. She collected insects from the gardens and studied them at home. She wanted to be a scientist. When she met John,
he was working part-time as a cleaner in the gardens. He cupped a Monarch butterfly in the palm of his hands and carried it over to Norma. She was standing by herself in the greenhouse, reading facts from a flyer. The Monarchs, she discovered, migrate south to Mexico in winter and hibernate in the warm pine forests that circle the great volcanoes. Unlike the Satin Blues, who live for years, the Monarchs live for days.

‘It’s sad,’ Norma said, turning to John. ‘Don’t you think it’s sad? The females lay their eggs and then they die. They never meet their children. That’s the way it is, I guess. All the kids are orphans.’

‘Orphans?’

‘Yes. And do you know what they do? They fly back to the Rocky Mountains. They travel by themselves. They find the same tree their parents wintered the year before. Isn’t that amazing?’

John shrugged. ‘You’re telling the story.’ He raised his hands. ‘How do they know where to go?’

‘They inherit a flight pattern. Inside the butterfly’s brain, there’s a tracking device that records the butterfly’s movements. It’s called “The Clock Gene.” The gene remembers the travels of the butterfly’s parents and turns them into a map.’

‘So, the butterfly knows where it’s going?’

‘No. So, the butterfly knows where it’s been.’

John leant in. ‘Let’s see.’ He opened his hands. The butterfly fluttered around Norma for a while, then settled on the wall. Its wings were spotted orange and white and bordered with dark veins.
Norma looked at the insect and then at John. ‘Do you think it’s true?’ She waved her flyer. ‘Some scientists in America collected Monarchs from the coast. They released the butterflies into a room with a glass ceiling. The butterflies flew to the glass. When the scientists pulled the tarp over and blocked the light, the butterflies got confused and flew into each other. They think it’s the sun that guides them.’

‘I think they follow the food.’

Norma laughed. ‘That’s a long way to go for a feed.’

The butterfly tapped the glass.

‘She’s trying to escape,’ Norma said. ‘I think her mate’s outside.’

John looked up. ‘Maybe we should let her go. I don’t know if it’s right for these lassies to be locked in here, especially if they can remember what it was like before. I’ll set her free, if you go out with me.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I said, will you go out with me?’

Norma studied him. ‘I might be busy.’

‘When do you think you’ll know? I need to make plans.’

Norma watched the butterfly flit about. ‘Maybe tomorrow,’ she said.

The next day, my grandparents started dating. Four months later, John was drafted to the army. He lied to admissions about his age and was deployed to Guinea in the infantry. He sailed out of Darling Harbour on the *Queen Mary*. When Buna Bay was captured and the Japanese were out of Hollandia, the Australian army withdrew its troops. Some stayed back
to help clear out, while others returned home. John went north with his platoon to liberate The Philippines. A month in, he broke his toes when a fuel drum fell off the back of a truck and rolled both his feet. The breaks were clean, but the bones didn’t heal properly and he never lost his limp. ‘Dear Norma,’ he wrote in one of his letters. ‘A rough day here. It could be the weather or it could be me. Is it raining there? I want to come home.’ When my grandfather returned from the islands, he got a job at the Fourex Brewery and saved enough money for a ring. Six months later, he proposed to Gran and they married at the registry.

I thought about my grandparents a lot when I was travelling. I wondered if what they had was always enough or if they ever wanted more. When I was with Kez, there was a circle around us that kept everything in place. When I was with Anjulee, the circle turned into a spiral that wound around us both. We made plans to save money and get ahead, but somehow, we fell behind. Our friends got jobs and moved away, while we got fat and failed uni. I missed Dad’s 50th birthday because I had a fight with Anjulee in the car park, and we decided to break up. We sat there until the party ended, and Luke came out with a girl on his arm and called me a fucking bitch. Mum and Dad stopped talking, and Anjulee and I made up. In August, when we broke up for good, I tried to come out to my parents. They suspected I was gay, but they didn’t know for sure. I had a boyfriend in grade eleven; we called him G.I. Joe. He was a batons and handcuffs instructor at the PCYC down the road. He was into boxing and belt-wrestling and some sort of steroids. He spent most of his time working out at the gym and flicking his towel at other guys. We never had sex, but he kissed me once and I thought I was going to vomit. On our first date, we went to KFC and he bought me popcorn chicken. He tried to touch me under the table, but I got a fright and kicked him. He asked me if I was a lesbian, and I said, no, I just wanted to take things slow. He said he would wait for me and in the meantime, he’d grow a goatee. I stopped answering his calls. A few weeks later, he turned up at my house with a poem called Why Did Things Have To Change? In the
poem, he said he couldn’t be the man I needed him to be, so we had to break up. His mum
was waiting in the car. He started crying, so I shut the door and pretended I was too upset to
talk. I think I knew then that I’d never be with a boy. It wasn’t that I didn’t like Joe; in fact, I
liked him a lot. It was more that lack of feeling when we were together. I just wasn’t
interested at all.

With Anjulee, everything was different. As soon as we broke up, I planned to get her
back. Maybe we could meet in Paris, I thought, or stay here and see a counsellor. We could
make it work in a couple of years; it would be better when we were older. My friend, Zoe,
tried to help me out by organising date nights at The Beat. Tuesday night was bingo night,
but we called it bingay. Zoe said girls never got over someone until they met someone else,
but all the girls at The Beat were butch, and all I could think was, I had someone else and she
wasn’t butch at all. At bingay, I played for any line with a girl called Dylan, who had a crew
cut and a chain from her nose piercing to her ear. She wore cargo pants and a wife beater with
the words ‘Wife Beater’ printed on the front. When she won, she slammed her fist on the
table and told me to yank her chain. I excused myself from the table and caught a taxi home. I
lay in bed, watching the Korean news and wondering what was wrong with me. I called
Anjulee from a private number and hung up when she a
nnswered. The weight of what we lost
was unmovable, but I couldn’t walk away.

At first, I thought my grief was karma for how I treated Joe. After we broke up, I saw
him in The Body Shop, buying bath bombs with his mum. I overheard him tell the girl at the
counter that he was practising self-love. He was going through a hard time, he said, and he
needed to look after himself. The girl at the register agreed. His skin was dry and starting to
scar; she suggested an oil-free moisturiser. I left the shop as fast as I could. Joe got a new
girlfriend two weeks later and sent me an e-mail to say he was moving on for good, but if I
wanted to meet up, I should definitely call. After a while, I realised it wasn’t karma but that kind of grief that follows you around. It was as if there was an elastic band around my feet and no matter how far I wandered, it always pulled me back.

I tried to make things work at home, but I felt sick when I was there. Mum and Dad owned all the furniture and the food; even my bedroom was theirs. Dad left his letter on my desk while I slept, and now, when I woke in the morning, I worried what was there. The house began to change around me; I started to trip on the bottom step. I went to bed as early as possible and woke up in a sweat. I became aware of my breathing and the sound of drawing air. The noise filled my head and the tiny room, until the sound distorted. I knew it was time to leave when I realised it wasn’t home anymore; it was just my parents’ house. I picked up extra shifts at Big W and bought a plane ticket around the world. I wanted to go to Thailand originally, but the round-the-world deal was cheaper. I couldn’t be bothered arguing with the agent, so I asked my boss for time off work and told my parents I was going overseas for a conference on eco-criticism. Kez said she would come to Ireland, so we bought backpacks at the markets and converted all our money. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to travel together, since we were fighting all the time. Kez said it would be good to get away and that she’d only stay a while. I was anxious about flying alone, so I agreed it would be fun. Plus, after lunch at the Brekky Creek, I worried about Kez being in Brisbane alone. She dropped my sister, Emma, to soccer and I didn’t want Dad inviting her around after the game. I trusted Kez and I knew she wouldn’t do anything, but sometimes, when Dad made a fuss of her, I thought she liked the attention.

In fact, after that day at the Brekky Creek, when we got home from Kez’s lunch, Dad gave her a necklace. I came out of the shower and saw him standing there, holding up her hair.
‘There you go, darling,’ he said. ‘Nine carat gold.’

‘Thanks,’ Kez said.

Dad kissed her neck. ‘You’re welcome.’ His voice was high, like he was nervous.

‘What are you doing?’ I said.

Dad faked a yawn. ‘I’m off to bed.’

I stared at Kez. ‘What’s that?’

She touched the necklace. ‘Your dad gave it to me. He gave me a card as well.’

I opened the envelope. The card was white with two gold hearts embossed on the front.

Inside, Dad had printed a message.

To my Aries girl,

I wasn’t sure what to get you. What do you get someone who doesn’t want toys, a cruise, or a holiday for her birthday? So much for my plan to marry a younger woman. Wish you had a sister.

Bruce

I closed the card.

‘What’s wrong?’ Kez said.

‘What do you think?’

She looked away.

‘What does he mean by toys? He means sex toys, doesn’t he?’
Kez shrugged. ‘I think he’s joking.’

I got the feeling she felt sorry for him and for a while I did, too. At first, I thought it was a phase or something that would pass. But then, on the morning we left for Ireland, Dad came to the airport with a rose for Kez. He was wearing a new shirt. I decided then that he was in love with her and all I could do was try and keep them apart.
TURKEY DELIGHT
We were almost at the Cliffs of Moher when Kez got sick. She only swore when she lost her temper, so at first I thought she was annoyed at the American woman, Ida, who kept pushing her seat back to get a better view. The high moors and rugged hills rolled across the counties, and in Killarney, the green flats spread out in squares, like patchwork. Our tour guide, Marty, told us that when Johnny Cash was just a lad he flew over Ireland in a helicopter and counted forty shades of green. Marty said young Johnny was always pissed and he himself had counted more, from the fishing boats at Dingle to the shores at Donaghadee. When he finished talking, Kez stood up and crossed the aisle to where I was sitting.

‘I feel like shit,’ she said.

Ida smiled and reclined in her chair until she was almost lying flat.

‘Well, say something,’ I said.

‘It’s not Ida.’

‘The oysters? I thought they were fresh.’

‘They looked synthetic,’ Kez said.

‘Maybe you’re homesick.’

Kez peered out the window. ‘Maybe,’ she said.

Outside, the coastline meandered alongside us, as if trying to listen in. The broad beaches stretched out towards the ocean, beholding a spread of islands. Every now and then, a tortured rock popped up in the sea.

Kez touched her belly. ‘What if it’s DSP?’

‘DSP?’
‘You know, shellfish poisoning.’

‘I doubt it,’ I said.

Kez rolled her eyes. ‘You never take me seriously.’

Ida sat up in her chair. ‘You know what, girls? It was my mom who made a traveller out of me. Not so much cos of the places she went but cos of her longing to go. She used to buy maps and Lost Footsteps and plan dream journeys she couldn’t afford. She had so many excuses for not leaving home, but the main reason was my dad.’

‘That’s nice,’ Kez said.

Ida frowned.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘Kerr-Ann’s unwell.’ I turned to Kez. ‘What’s your problem?’

‘I’m sick. I’m allowed to feel upset.’

I walked down the aisle to the front of the bus. Marty was sitting behind the wheel, eating jellybeans from a jar. He was a big man with twinkling eyes and a double chin.

‘Wally,’ he said. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Can we pull over?’

‘Here? In the middle o’nowhere?’

‘Yes. Kez is sick.’

Marty glanced in his mirror. ‘Are you acting the maggot?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Are you having me on?’
‘No, she thinks it’s the oysters.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with Murphy’s, my friend.’

‘I know. Can we pull over, anyway?’ I said.

Marty turned the wheel. ‘I have to get you lot to the top, then we’ll stop.’ He flicked on his indicator and took the exit. We drove along a rocky road that gave us our first view of the cliffs.

I looked at Kez.

‘Where are we?’ she mouthed.

‘We’re almost there,’ Marty said. ‘Tell her to keep it down.’

∞

On the morning Gramps took his life, I went to Brookside with Mum and Dad. We stopped at Woolies before we visited to buy a box of Roses chocolates. The box was blue and neatly folded and tucked in at the sides. If it wasn’t for its weight or its price, the box could have offered tissues. Even the printed roses on the lid budded around a tear-shaped opening that was covered with a sheet of cellophane. The see-through plastic meant you could see the chocolates when you tipped the box to the side. The chocolates were carved into different shapes and wrapped in coloured foils: some were bite-sized logs and shells, others were cream-filled patties. There was something special about them. When we got to the checkout, Dad paid for the chocolates with a twenty and let me keep the change. Mum said gifts were
one thing, but we should have bought a card. She tossed the chocolates in her handbag and we drove to Lowson House.

Upstairs, in Gramps’s ward, we checked in at reception. Dad handed over his keys and wallet, and Mum, her nail file. When I asked Mum why we couldn’t keep it, she said, ‘In case your grandfather cuts himself.’ I was only six at the time and didn’t understand what she meant. My parents wouldn’t explain. They only let me see Gramps twice before he died.

Once, on his seventieth birthday, which he slept through, and another time, later that year, at the Anzac Day parade. The parade, which we usually watched on television, was held in King George Square. The procession started with a noisy drum that vibrated through the city. The military band played offbeat music and songs I’d never heard of. The young soldiers marched in their Aussie greens, while the diggers dragged behind. Gran wanted Gramps to attend, so he could catch up with his friends and feel like he was a part of it. I didn’t want to go, but Mum said it was important. She bought us a small Australian flag to wave as we marched.

Gramps was too frail to walk, so Dad pushed him in a wheelchair. We pinned a poppy to Gramps’s collar, but it wouldn’t sit up straight. I smiled at the crowds and waved my flag, but Gramps just stared down at his feet, like he didn’t want to be there.

Later that day, after the parade had ended, Gramps was admitted to Lowson House. A police officer, who was just off duty, found Gramps wandering along the highway, wearing his slouch hat. Apparently, he was hallucinating and calling out for Paddy. I asked Dad who Paddy was, but he wasn’t certain. He thought it was either Gramps’s dog or someone he fought with in Guinea. When Gramps came back from the war, Dad asked him about his time there. He wanted to know if Gramps killed a man, but Gramps refused to answer. At first, Dad thought the silence was only temporary. He told Gran it would pass. Gramps didn’t say much before he left, so in the beginning, no one thought his silence was unusual. Except after
a while, he stopped answering when Gran asked him a question. Then, he started jumping when the phone rang or a bird flew overhead. Eventually, he stopped eating dinner and sleeping through the night. At sundown, he wandered out of the house without a destination. Once, he wound up at the railway station at Grovely. One of the ticket inspectors found him on the overhead bridge, saluting the passing trains.

When I heard this, I asked Dad what was wrong with Gramps and he said, ‘PTSD.’ I didn’t know what PTSD was, so I researched it at the library. The Internet said it was an anxiety disorder that’s caused by trauma, such as losing all your money at the races or being kidnapped after school. The trauma affects your ability to cope and adjust to normal life. The damage PTSD causes to a person is permanent and irreparable. For this reason, trauma is different to shock. When a person is in shock, the brain sends neurons into the body that register danger. The neurons are like fireworks: after a while, they explode and fizzle out and the danger goes away. If you have PTSD, you can’t tell the difference between a dangerous situation and a safe one. Your memory stores the trauma by freezing the fireworks and burying them in the brain. As a result, your brain can’t separate ‘now and safe’ from ‘now and danger’. You keep living in the moment long after it has passed. One website said that PTSD is a complex thing to treat because it’s not always clear which traumatic event is causing the disorder. Another said it’s more of an injury than an illness.

I wanted to know more about Gramps’s injury, so I borrowed a book from the library. The book was called Memory, War, and Trauma. The first chapter was a historical perspective on combat stress. The author told the story of an Athenian soldier who fought in the Battle of Marathon in 490BC. The soldier was a brave warrior who collapsed during battle. When he was found, he was unwounded, but he couldn’t see. The doctors thought his condition was hysterical. The soldier wasn’t shot or stabbed; he had no injuries they could
detect. A few days later, the soldier’s friend recounted what happened in the field. He said the soldier became permanently blind after witnessing the death of his brother. The author said this wasn’t a conscious decision but a natural response to pain. Because of the random nature of war, many soldiers experienced the horror of death and struggled to make sense of it. In fact, one soldier was so shaken by war, he was nicknamed The Trembler. Sometimes, when I wheeled Gramps around Lowson House, his legs shook so violently I had to pull the brakes. While we waited for the tremors to end, I thought about The Trembler of Athens, shaking in his armour. Eventually, the tremors stopped and I wheeled Gramps out to the Japanese garden.

‘Hey, Pa,’ Dad said, when saw Gramps that day. It was early in the morning.

‘Hi, Gramps,’ I said. ‘We bought you some Roses.’

‘Flowers?’ Gran said, looking at Mum.

‘Chocolates.’

Dad circled the armchairs where my grandparents were sitting and parted the heavy curtains. The sunlight filtered into the room, exposing the metal furniture. Dad sat down on the stool and told Mum to flick the kettle.

‘How’s school?’ Gran said.

The kettle whistled.

Mum opened a carton of milk. ‘Tell Gran what you won.’

‘I won the Nestlé Short Story Competition for Young Writers Under Eleven.’

Mum nodded.
Gran smiled and put down her knitting. ‘What did you write about?’

‘I wrote about a toad who loses his kids and never gets them back.’

Mum interrupted. ‘She came up with the idea herself. Tubby’s a worry, isn’t he? He loses his tadpoles at Downfall Creek and has to call his wife. His wife’s a turtle, for something different. What’s the turtle’s name?’

‘MiSHELL.’

‘That’s right.’

‘She’s actually a tortoise,’ I said. ‘But I had to make her a turtle for the story because she has webbed feet.’

Dad laughed. ‘What’s the difference between a turtle and a tortoise? I doubt you even know.’

‘A turtle has flippers, but a tortoise has legs. And turtles have flatter shells.’

‘That sounds like rubbish to me.’

Gran raised her finger. ‘She’s right, you know.’ She tapped my nose. ‘You’re a clever cookie. You know who you take after, don’t you?’

‘I’m the smartest in my class.’

‘At some things,’ Dad said.

Mum poured the coffee. ‘Sugar?’

‘Not for me,’ Gran said. ‘I’m off the sweets til Monday.’

Dad looked up from his paper.
'Doctor’s orders,’ Gran said. ‘Take it up with Linda.’

‘Your blood pressure?’ Mum said.

‘My cholesterol.’

‘Aren’t they the same?’

Gramps tilted his head and moaned. There was a knitted blanket over his knees and a puzzle book on his lap. The page was open to a crossword. Each of the clues was ticked off, but none of the blocks were filled.

‘He knows the answers,’ Gran said. ‘He just can’t find the words.’

Mum handed Gran her coffee. I walked over to the window and pressed my face against the glass. Outside, the sunlight was bouncing off the road, as if the tar was a trampoline. A gumtree dipped in the middle and hollowed out, offering nesting spots for galahs. A small flock perched above us, raising their crests at passers-by.

‘How’s Percy?’ Gran said.

Mum looked at Dad. ‘He’s gone. One of the kids let him go. Bruce and I came home from Coles and the cage door was open. We left his cuttlebone out, but he didn’t come home. Kate knows nothing about it.’

I followed the birds with my finger.

‘These things happen,’ Mum said.

Dad flicked his paper. ‘Well, they certainly happen in our family, don’t they, darls?’

I watched the galahs ruffle their feathers. Gramps was like a bird, I thought. His hair was grey and plumed at the front, and his nose was more of a beak. He wore his nametag on
his chest and a woollen vest over his shirt. Gran knitted most of his outfits because she didn’t care for the Lowson gown.

‘John likes green,’ Gran said, ‘but it’s a sickly colour. It doesn’t suit him at all.’ She sipped her coffee. ‘Have you seen the slacks they want him to wear? They’re unsightly, especially in green. I can’t stand to look at them.’

Dad smiled.

‘What? I know they’re queer in here, but we don’t need to dress like leprechauns.’

Dad laughed. ‘Then why are you wearing those shoes?’

Gran looked at her slippers. The woollen booties were narrow at the front and curled up at the toe. ‘What’s wrong with them?’

‘Nothing, if you’re an elf.’

‘Leprechauns aren’t elves,’ Gran said. ‘Elves are fairies who tease children. Leprechauns are wrinkled knobby men.’

‘And wrinkled old women,’ Dad said.

Gran put down her mug. ‘You’re not too old to be slapped.’

Dad pulled a face.

‘If you think I’m kidding, come over here and I’ll show you how serious I am.’

Dad stayed where he was. Gran picked up her needles and began to knit. She moved her needles at a wild pace, as fast as her fingers allowed.

‘Gramps has been waiting for you, Katey. Go and say, hello.’
‘Wait,’ Mum said. She removed the box of chocolates from her bag and popped the lid. She read the list out loud. ‘Dairy Milk, Caramello, Strawberry Twirl, Hazelnut, Peppermint Cream.’ She handed me the box. ‘Choose one for Gramps.’

I sat down on the floor and sorted through the chocolates. The task was simple, but there were foiled wrappers of every colour and the choices overwhelmed me. I flicked through the reds and greens, but then I got stuck on the purples. Purple was my favourite colour. It was the colour of grapes and bruises and Willy Wonka’s top hat. I wondered if Gramps liked purple.

‘Just choose one,’ Dad said. ‘We haven’t got all day.’

I looked at Gran.

She nodded. ‘Why don’t you find a Turkish Delight? Those are your grandfather’s favourite.’

I shuffled through the chocolates, but the colours were starting to blur. The blues and greens extended from their edges and swirled into each other. The orange-browns splattered on the vinyl, creating an ugly colour. The room was spinning around.

‘The yellow one,’ Dad said. ‘The one with red stripes.’

I opened my mouth to speak, but the sound got stuck in my throat. My chest tightened, like someone was pressing it, and then I couldn’t swallow. I closed my eyes and counted to a hundred. When I opened them, I spotted a yellow wrapper with red stripes and hurried over to Gramps. When he saw me coming, he straightened in his chair. His eyes were bloodshot and there was a mole above his lip, just hanging there. For a second, our eyes met and he looked at me, as if to say, ‘Help.’ I removed the chocolate from its wrapper and pinched it in the
middle. The coat was dark and ridged, but the centre was made of jelly. I handed Gramps the chocolate. He didn’t wave me away or refuse the offer, but he didn’t accept it either. He just sat there with his knees together.

‘Turkey Delight,’ I said.

He groaned.

I stepped back from the chair, ‘I don’t think he likes it.’

‘Nonsense.’ Dad snatched the chocolate. He held Gramps’s chin with one hand and jarred his mouth open. Then, he pushed the tablet onto Gramps’s tongue. After a while, Gramps began to chew. He rolled his tongue over his gums and made a sucking sound.

‘There we go,’ Dad said. He wiped his hands on his shirt.

‘Any good?’ I said, but Gramps didn’t say anything. His blanket slipped off his knees and gathered around his ankles. I looked down at the woollen jumble, then I looked back at Gramps. His fly was open and his undies were bulging through the hole.

‘Kate,’ Mum said.

Gramps clenched his teeth.

‘Kate.’

Gran called me to her side. ‘Here,’ she said, clearing her lap. ‘You can help me with my knitting.’

‘What are you making?’ I said. It didn’t look like anything.

‘I’m making a scarf for Gramps.’
‘Why?’

‘To show him that I love him.’

‘Doesn’t he know?’

‘You ask a lot of questions, girlie.’ Gran passed me the bundle of wool. The wool was red and rough to touch and the fibres rubbed against each other, creating a surge of heat. I steadied the needle in my hand and looped a thread through the hole.

‘Does Gramps ever speak?’ I wanted to know.

‘Of course.’

‘Why isn’t he talking now?’

Gran undid a stitch. ‘When Gramps came back from war, he locked up all his words somewhere and no one can find the key.’

‘Not even you?’ I said.

‘Not even me.’

‘Where have you looked?’

‘Everywhere.’

‘Have you checked the pool table?’ I said.

‘The pool table?’

I nodded. ‘In the net pockets.’

Gran smiled, but her heart wasn’t in it.
‘You could try the oven,’ I said. ‘He always put things in there.’

‘Kate,’ Dad said, raising his voice. ‘Don’t upset your grandmother.’ He turned the page of his paper. ‘Not everyone wants to hear your stories.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Gran said. ‘I don’t know about you, but I love Kate’s stories. They’re almost as good as yours.’

‘Yeah, Bruce. Let her be.’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

Gran winked at me.

While we knitted, Gramps gazed out the window. The galahs screeched and danced about, while the tree reached over and swept the ground in search of something certain. One of the branches snapped in half and fell onto the footpath. Another dragged its hand through the dirt and tired, decided to rest there.

Gran bent her head to the side. ‘Trees are sensitive things. They worry about fire and frost and the breakdown of soil, but people only think of themselves.’ She nodded at the tree. ‘Even if she blooms soon, she has structural damage that can’t be repaired. She’s lost contact with her roots and forgotten how to defend herself. See those wounds on her side? None of those will heal.’

I inspected the tree. ‘She looks okay to me.’

‘She looks okay from here because the problem’s deep inside. That’s the thing. You can’t see what’s wrong because you don’t have see-through vision.’ Gran removed her cardigan. ‘The other problem’s distance. This tree has grown too close to us. If lightning strikes or a strong wind blows, we’re all in danger.’
‘What kind of danger?’ I said.

Gran put her hands on my shoulders. Something’s going to happen, I thought. Dad folded his newspaper and tucked it under his arm. He sighed and checked his watch, then he joined us at the window. We peered up at the clouds.

‘Looks like rain,’ he said. ‘It’s meant to storm this arve.’

‘We won’t get it,’ Mum said. She stirred her coffee. ‘Did you see there was a heat wave in Mount Isa yesterday? The highway in with spotted with dead kangaroos. For miles, all you could see were tufts of hair and guts. Can you imagine it? All those roos just cooking on the roadside.’ She turned to Dad. ‘They’re pests, aren’t they? I think we should fence them out.’

‘They’re not my favourite animals,’ Dad said. ‘I prefer chicks.’

Mum rolled her eyes.

I decided to speak up. ‘The tree’s sick.’

My parents stared at me.

‘What tree?’ Dad said.

I pointed out the window. The tree was bent and twisted backwards, and there were claw marks on the bark. The branches up top thinned and opened, as if to ask for food. Even the greenest leaves cowered on the road.

Dad frowned. ‘She’s not sick. She’s just out of sorts. Jesus, you talk some crap.’

Gran held my hand.

‘Fair dinkum,’ Dad said. ‘Sometimes I think you’re winding me up on purpose. I mean, what do you know about trees? Are you Don from Burke’s Backyard? I planted our jacaranda
at home as soon as we moved in. That was back in '84, before you were even born. She blooms late every spring. She always has. The winter’s never been good to her.’

‘Are those rot holes?’ Mum said. She squinted at the tree.

‘Don’t you start,’ Dad said. He tapped the glass. ‘Noel Cramer had the same problem with his banksia last year. She lost weight over winter. Apparently, this bloke came around and fed her some fancy fertiliser. The stuff fattened her up straight away. What do you reckon, darls?’

‘About a tree doctor?’ Mum said. She rubbed her eyes. ‘Maybe an undertaker would be better.’

The doctor called for Dad then, and Mum and Gran followed.

‘We’ll be back in a minute,’ Dad said. He looked at Gramps and then at me. ‘Don’t touch anything.’

‘Or what?’

‘I mean it. If I come back and you’ve broken something, you’ll be grounded for a week. You won’t be going anywhere and I’ll be taking your library card. You won’t be borrowing any more tapes or books.’

‘I’ll write my own books,’ I said.

Dad turned and walked away. When the hallway was clear, I climbed onto Gramps’s lap and tried to free his words.

‘Talk,’ I said, pinching his cheeks. ‘Talk, talk, talk.’
I wanted him to say something, so that I could talk back. I thought if Gramps spoke, if only for a minute, his words would reach across the gap and close the space between us. Gran, at least, would stop sobbing and calling late at night. Mum and Dad wouldn’t fight about the weather or the jacaranda out the back. The six of us could meet at the RSL for dinner. We would be one of those families who have to pull tables together, just so everyone can fit.

‘Come on, Gramps,’ I said.

I opened up the box of chocolates and scoffed them one by one. When my cheeks were full, I grinned and opened wide. Gramps shook his head. I thought I saw him smile then, and I took his amusement to mean I wouldn’t be in trouble. I stuffed more chocolates into my mouth and chewed until my jaw unhinged. When I opened my mouth again, the chocolate lump fell into Gramps’s coffee and made a plonking sound. The coffee splashed onto the crossword. Gramps jerked his head to the side and grabbed the puzzle book. One of the clues underlined was ‘Oath or Assurance.’ Gramps ran his finger along the words. Finally, he looked at me.

‘Promise,’ he said.

I cupped my hands under his chin and caught the word as it fell from the tip of his tongue. I waited for more to come, but the promise was all he gave me. I picked up the puzzle book and studied the crossword. The ink was wet and smudged in places and some of the clues were missing. I looked up at my grandfather: this strange man with a beak for a nose and red veins on the whites of his eyes. I wasn’t sure who he was or what we were discussing.

‘Promise,’ I said.
He arched his back and wriggled both his knees. He raised his walking stick towards
the window. He seemed to want it open. I looked at our reflection in the glass. We were both
a lighter colour. I wandered over to the sill, which was thick with dust, and tried to turn the
lock. The lock was made of solid brass and bolted to the pane. I removed the key from the
nurse’s tray and pushed it into the lock. The key turned clockwise and the lock released. I
placed my hands on the glass and pushed. The window opened, just a little, and the room
breathed out. Gramps laughed. He clapped his hands over his ears and rocked back and forth.
I pulled off my shoes and socks, and climbed onto the ledge. The wooden panel creaked
beneath me, then started to wobble slightly. I lifted my arms for balance. When I reached the
end of the plank, I looked down. In the garden, there was a cobbled path that wound around a
water bowl. Behind the bowl was a mound of dirt that was topped with a bunch of flowers. I
looked at Gramps. He was rising out of the chair. He pushed himself up as far as he could,
but his legs shook and he moaned and sank back down. I jumped off the ledge and sat down
on his feet.

A while later, Mum and Dad returned to the room with Gran. Their faces were pale
with no expression, and they looked older than before. Gran was clutching her chest, like her
heart might fall out. Dad led her gently to Gramps’s side, holding her elbow as they walked.
Mum crouched in front of me and squeezed my feet.

‘Are you ready to go?’ she said. ‘Where are your shoes?’

I pulled out my shoes from behind the curtains and turned my socks the right way out. I
put on my shoes and tied the laces in bunny loops. Mum smiled. It was funny what made her
happy.

‘Ready?’ she said.
Dad opened the bottle of scotch.

‘Are we going home?’ I said.

Dad took a swig from the bottle.

‘Yes, I’m tired, and you have school tomorrow.’

‘What about Gramps?’

‘Gramps lives here.’

‘By himself?’

‘He lives with his friends. You know that, Kate.’

‘Maybe he could live with us.’

Mum glared at me. ‘His friends are here.’

Gran was quiet. She leant over Gramps’s chair and removed a comb from her purse. She dragged it sideways through Gramps’s hair. What was left, she parted gently. When she finished, there was a line down Gramps’s head, splitting him in two.

‘We’ll watch the tennis tonight,’ Gran said. ‘That’s what we’ll do. We’ll watch the Davis Cup. The Woodies are playing. Our favourite outfit. That will cheer you up.’

Mum and Dad waited for me at the door.

I kissed Gramps’s cheek. ‘Bye, Gramps,’ I said.

He looked at me for a moment, then turned his gaze to the window. The wind howled and moved through the tree, shaking its leaves and branches. The galahs extended their wings and flew away, as if they were saying, ‘Follow.’
When we arrived at the Cliffs of Moher, Marty pulled the bus off the road and killed the engine.

‘Wally,’ he said. ‘She can puke over there.’ He pointed to an old tin hut.

‘Are we there?’ Ida hollered.

Kez and I stepped off the bus. We walked across the boggy field towards the cliff’s edge. The sea breeze rose from the waves and I could taste the salt on my lips. The air was cool and dense with rain and the cloud hung just above us. In the distance, there was a circle of caravans parked around a bonfire. The gypsies travelled in convoys around the country and camped on the side of the road. In their spare time, they mended pots and pans. The locals called them tinkers. They always married young. Before the wedding, the bride’s family offered the groom a gift—maybe land or cattle—or the ceremony wouldn’t go ahead. Sex before marriage was also forbidden. On their wedding night, the newly weds left with a chaperone who returned the next morning with the bloodstained sheet. If the sheet came back clean, the woman returned to her family in shame. Sometimes, she’d try and fool her parents by using pig’s blood to stain the sheet.

‘They’re all slappers,’ Kez said.

‘Hey.’

‘They are. They wear tank tops with jeans and hoop earrings.’

‘So?’
‘They dress like prostitutes. Haven’t you seen *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*? I saw one episode where Josie tries on her wedding dress in a car park, then rips it off in a fight with Chanessa when she finds out Chanessa’s been screwing Sean. Josie has to marry him anyway, because she’s promised to his family. It’s gypsy law. On her hen night, she walks around Belfast in her bra and undies with sequins and tassels attached to her sash, shouting, “It’s my ’en night! It’s my ’en night!” I know you think I’m a snob. It’s not their outfits that bother me. It’s their laws. The Traveller’s Code or whatever it’s called. The women are the worst, especially up north. They’re always preaching about something.’

‘Kind of like you,’ I said.

Kez bowed.

‘It’s not a compliment.’

She laughed. ‘You know, when a girl hits puberty, her parents pull her out of school to run the family home. She does all the cooking and the cleaning, and then there’s the grabbing, too. If a boy likes a girl, he can grab her, literally. He twists her arm or pulls her hair until she gives him what he wants.’

‘I know what grabbing is, but sometimes it’s consensual. Some of the girls want to be grabbed. They like the attention.’

‘Well, I think it’s sexual harassment.’

Kez tripped on a stone. I grabbed her arm.

‘So, what are you saying?’ she said.

‘I just don’t think you should judge their way.’
‘I love judging,’ Kez said.

‘I know. You judge me all the time.’

‘That’s because you’re a morally questionable person.’

‘Get stuffed,’ I said.

We walked along the cliff. The trail wound around a narrow bend towards the battered headland. The lookout faced a longer cape that was punctured with a cave. Below us, the surf crashed against the rocks, sending spray into the air. The white foam blanketed the waves and ate into the sandstone. As we climbed higher, we passed a drop.

‘Don’t jump,’ Kez said.

I looked down. A wave hit the rocks.

‘Have you heard from Dad?’

Kez paused. ‘Yeah.’

Some of the cliff face crumbled.

‘What did he say?’

She sighed. ‘You don’t want to know.’

‘Why do you respond? I mean, do you have to?’

‘What?’

‘He’s my dad.’

Kez stopped in her tracks. ‘You gave me his number.’
It was true. Mum bought Dad a mobile phone for Christmas, but apart from her, he didn’t have any contacts. At first, Dad thought the phone was a waste of money. His top-up cards only lasted thirty days. If he didn’t use the card in time, the credit expired and he had to buy more. Dad said the deal was a rip off and it was. He didn’t know how to call out or browse the net, so he never spent the money. Once he learnt to text, he started to use the phone more often. He even made up his own abbreviations, like, ‘ABC’, which meant ‘At the Bowls Club’, and ‘d/c’, which meant, ‘Don’t Care.’ He couldn’t work out how to switch the phone to silent, so when it rang, Jingle Bells played. Soon, he started to sit around, waiting for the phone to beep. When I noticed him checking for messages, I felt sorry for him, so one night, when he was fiddling with the sound, I gave him Kez’s number and the numbers of some of my other friends as well.

‘That was in the beginning,’ I said, ‘before it got weird. You know, when he came to soccer and watched us play. It was normal then. I mean, it was nice to spend time with him and I liked that you got along. But then he started sending those messages, the ones slagging Mum and making fun of her depression, and you always wrote back. Why did you do that?’

Kez was quiet. ‘I don’t know. I wanted to be a part of your family.’

‘By flirting with my dad?’

‘I wasn’t flirting,’ she said.

‘You told him you do pole dancing.’

‘It’s pole fitness.’

‘You said you were flexible and not just with your lifestyle.’

‘I was joking,’ Kez said.
I looked out at the cliffs that formed the island’s jagged outline. Marty said in the beginning, Ireland was already there, waiting for her inhabitants. We all came from the sea, he said. When he spoke, he always said ‘we’, and I felt like he was talking to me. Since I was young, I felt like I didn’t belong anywhere. I always felt out of place everywhere, even at home. On the school holidays, I sat in my room with the radio on and read my books for the following year. Most of the songs were about getting high or hooking up in a club. I switched between the popular stations, but the songs were all the same. One night, a woman called up and asked to dedicate a song to her husband who’d just passed away. The woman was older, and her voice sounded muffled, like she was far away. The DJ said he was sorry, but he didn’t take requests until after midnight; he told her to call back later. The woman said she couldn’t stay up too much longer because it was getting late where she was and she’d been trying to get through for a while. The station cut the call. The woman reminded me of someone, maybe Gran, and I felt this sense of sadness I couldn’t explain. The countdown continued, but all I could think about was this woman, waiting to hear her song.

In Ireland, the sadness was still there, but it was more hopeful than before. When we arrived in Dublin, I felt like I was returning to a place I’d never been. At customs, I got caught up in the citizens’ line and before I had a chance to hand over my passport, the officer at the checkpoint said, ‘Welcome home.’ I walked out of the airport with Kez and waited for the bus to town. Nearby, a few trolley boys dressed in orange waistcoats kicked a hacky sack around. The bean bag moved in graceful arcs that got higher on each round. One of the boys caught me watching and flashed me the peace sign. I looked up at the low clouds and felt a distant sense of familiarity. I’ve been here before, I thought.

When I told Marty how I felt, he said, ‘You’re probably a selkie.’ I asked him what a selkie was and he said it was a seal who lived in the sea but shed her skin to become human
on land. Out of water, a selkie can only survive for a short time, usually just long enough to fall in love, before she returns to sea. After that, she’s unable to see her partner for seven years. Sometimes, her lover doesn’t know she’s a selkie and wakes to find her gone.

Sometimes, her partner hides her skin, so she can never return to her seal form. I asked Marty if he’d ever seen a selkie, and he said, no, but he knew a fisherman from Galway who found himself a seal wife. The couple had three children together and were happily married for years. The woman was a faithful lover and a good mother, but she longed for her home at sea. Sometimes, when her husband was away, she went down to the beach and danced on a lonely stretch of shore. At high tide, when his trawler docked, she rushed to the wharf to greet him.

In summer, she basked in the sun on the wooden jetty behind their house. One day, her children were playing on their father’s boat when they found an old trunk below the deck. Inside the case were all kinds of treasures: ruby rings and diamond crowns. At the bottom of the chest, beneath the gold, was a leather skin. Curious, one of the girls took the skin to her mother and asked her what it was. The woman took the cloak to the wharf and, changing quickly, disappeared into the waves. When her husband discovered his wife was gone, he died of a broken heart. Marty said that after loving a selkie, the love of a mortal would never compare. I asked him how selkies were made and he said they were formed supernaturally from the souls of people who drowned.

When I told Kez the story on the cliffs, she said, ‘I know what you’re getting at, but why would you wait for someone? I mean, for seven years? That’s fucked.’

On the bus that morning, we fought about love and what it meant to both of us. For Kez, it was simple: if you loved someone, you treated them well and you certainly never hurt them. If trust was broken, or you were too different, you didn’t wait around. I disagreed. I thought if you loved someone and they hurt you, you could forgive them, in time.’
‘That’s reckless,’ Kez said now.

‘Well, it’s how I feel.’

She leant against the rail. ‘Do you ever feel like you don’t know who you are? Like all the parts of you don’t fit together and you’re somehow different from everyone else?’

‘Sometimes,’ I said.

‘Sometimes, I feel like I’ve fallen down a rabbit hole and everything’s back to front.’

‘That’s probably the drugs.’

‘You’re a dick,’ she said.

We looked to the horizon. In the distance, the sea and sky met in a silver fog. The mist made the ships difficult to see, but the lights glowed dimly, like warnings.

Kez turned around. ‘I shouldn’t have come here,’ she said.

‘What? I thought we were having fun.’

‘You’re going to break up with me, aren’t you?’

I didn’t know what to say. ‘Are we even together?’ I said.

She walked away. I followed her along the path. I didn’t know what was happening or how things got so bad. The further we travelled, the more we drifted apart, and I didn’t know what that meant. I thought about a line from Dad’s letter: ‘I’m moving on and so should you.’ Moving on from what, I thought. From the past? From Mum? I didn’t understand. When we reached the top of the cliff, Kez turned around.

‘Is it because of your dad? Because he cracked on to me. I told him to stop.’
‘I know that,’ I said. ‘I was there.’

Kez held my wrists. ‘If Anjulee loved you, she’d be here. She would have come back by now. I mean, when was the last time you heard from her? What’s she doing, Kate? She’s fucking someone else.’

‘Let me go.’

‘She’s not a selkie. She’s a gypsy. And you’re an idiot for waiting around.’

I pulled away. ‘You don’t know anything,’ I said.

Kez opened her backpack. ‘I read that book you gave me, The Perks of Being a Wallflower. There’s this part at the start where Charlie’s talking to his English teacher, Bill. Charlie’s sister, Sam, is going out with this guy who makes her mix tapes. He also hits her. Charlie wants to tell his parents, but Sam says, no. She thinks it’s her fault. I can’t remember her boyfriend’s name, but Sam says she provokes him.’

‘He doesn’t have a name,’ I said.

‘Yeah. Well, he’s a dick head. Charlie doesn’t know why she loves him, so he asks Bill. Bill says, “We accept the love we think we deserve.”’

I turned away. I’d tried to explain my feelings before, but I got the tense wrong. Most of my friends had fallen in love more than once and all of them had dated since high school. Sometimes, when we were at The Beat, Zoe bought us a round of drinks and wrote our numbers on her hand. I wasn’t worried about getting hurt, but I felt like trying again with someone else was pointless because nothing would compare. ‘I get it,’ Zoe would say. ‘One person’s missing for you and the whole world’s empty.’ Then, she’d pass me a shot. ‘The
sooner you get drunk, the sooner you get laid.’ Kez said she understood, but sometimes she got upset by what I said and I ended up apologising.

‘What was it like when you were together?’ she said.

‘Why?’

‘I want to know.’

‘It was hard, I guess. We weren’t out. We had to pretend we were friends.’

‘You could have told me,’ she said.

‘I’m not perfect, Kez. I’m not even saying it was right.’

‘Did you fight?’

‘All the time. But there were good times, too.’

‘I know that,’ she said.

I looked out at the cliffs. I thought about Anjulee. I remembered once we stayed in the city because it was her birthday the next day and we were going to Pancake Manor for breakfast. I remembered coming out of the shower, just before bed, and the city lights were reflecting off the water. She stood on my feet and we danced around the balcony. Then, her towel fell down and she was naked, but she didn’t care. She just laughed and we kept on dancing. I remembered thinking, this is it. It was the only time in my life I’ve felt like that, like I wasn’t hiding something.

‘We didn’t have secrets,’ I said. ‘When I was with her, I wasn’t anxious.’

‘And now?’
I shrugged.

‘You deserve better.’

‘I’m not saying I forgive her.’

Kez scratched her neck. Her skin was tanned and lightly freckled. I thought about Dad massaging her back.

‘How are you feeling?’ I said.

The waves came in sideways instead of head on.

‘Alright.’ She handed me her backpack. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for things to get so out of hand. Tell me how to fix things with your dad. I’ll do whatever it takes.’

‘You can’t do anything,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

I threw her bag over my shoulder. ‘It’s not your problem,’ I said.

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After my parents and I left Gramps at Lowson House, we were pulled over by a police officer, just short of the Logan exit. Dad seemed to think the Laser, or Trace, as he called her, was somewhat robust and just as forceful as her namesake, Cyclone Tracy. He sped along the highway, blaring his horn and changing lanes on a whim. Mum held onto the dashboard whenever we turned. Sometimes, Dad forgot to turn off his blinker and we drove all the way
home with it on. Mum’s handprints, which were sealed in sweat, remained on the dashboard long after we parked.

Dad wound down his window. ‘Afternoon, officer.’

The cop grunted. ‘You’ve been stopped for the purpose of a random breath test.’

Dad nodded. ‘Don’t you have anything better to do with taxpayers’ dollars?’

The officer frowned. ‘The test assesses your blood alcohol level to see if your ability to drive has been impaired by drinking. Have you had anything to drink this afternoon?’

Dad looked at Mum. ‘Just some coffee.’

‘Anything alcoholic?’

Dad shielded his eyes. ‘I have a question—’

The officer interrupted. ‘If you refuse, you’ll be charged with failing to provide.’

Dad nodded. ‘How is this test random when you always test me?’

‘Licence,’ the cop said.

Dad opened his wallet. ‘If your process for testing is truly random, then my wife and I should have an equal chance of being chosen. It’s probability law.’

‘Have you broken the law before, sir?’

‘He got a ticket last week,’ Mum said. ‘For parking in a bus zone at school.’

‘Honey,’ Dad said, touching Mum’s leg. ‘It’s a waiting zone. You can stop for two minutes if you’re picking up kids.’ He turned to the officer. ‘Women.’

I accidentally burped. ‘Beg your pardon,’ I said.
The officer looked at me. I was sitting in the back, with a stomach ache from eating too much chocolate. The taste in my mouth was sweet and sickly, and my jaw was sore from chewing. There was a pain in my chest that made it hard to sit still and harder to lie down. I tried to find a comfortable position, but when I moved, the pain got worse. I loosened the belt around my waist and undid the button of my pants.

‘Everything alright?’ the policeman said.

I was sweating badly. My shirt was damp and stuck to my skin, and my thighs were wet and sticky. ‘Everything’s alright,’ I said. ‘Nothing to see here.’

Dad smiled at me in the mirror.

‘Cute kid,’ the cop said. ‘Maybe switch on the air con. She looks a bit hot back there.’

Dad turned the dial. A breeze blew onto my face.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

Dad nodded. ‘We’re nearly home, chook.’ He turned to the officer. ‘Here.’ He removed his licence from his wallet and handed it over. In the photo, he’s wearing a tennis shirt and glasses that are too big for his face. His beard is bristly and uneven, which makes him look insane.

The officer replaced the mouthpiece on the breathalyser and secured the whistle to the bag. ‘Blow into this. Don’t stop until I say.’

Dad pursed his lips over the nozzle and blew into the tube. The machine beeped.

‘That’ll do,’ the cop said.
Dad wiped his mouth. ‘I heard this test can give a faulty reading if you’ve been eating certain foods: onions, mustard. Is that true? We just came from a barbeque at Downey Park.’

‘No, we didn’t,’ I said.

Dad tossed Mum’s handbag over the seat. The bag landed sideways on my lap. The box of *Roses* fell out. There was one chocolate left: it was a Peppermint Cream. I unwrapped the foil.

‘She’s got a memory like a fish,’ Dad said. ‘Takes after her father.’

The officer waited for the reading.

‘I’ve also heard that about twenty percent of people tested blow much higher than their real concentration. That’s one in five.’

‘You must be a mathematician,’ the officer said, not looking up.

‘Are you kidding?’ Dad said. ‘I’ve got too much personality for that.’

‘He’s an accountant,’ Mum said.

The officer shook the breathalyser. He walked around the car and copied down our plate number. Then, he checked the brake lights to make sure they were working.

‘What a wanker,’ Dad said.

‘Bruce.’

‘What?’

‘Are you trying to get arrested? I mean, have you lost your mind?’

‘Relax,’ Dad said. He glanced at me. ‘I’ve got everything under control.’
‘Like hell you do,’ Mum snapped. ‘Do you know how anxious this makes me?’

The officer opened the boot.

‘I feel sick,’ I said. ‘I think I’m going to vomit.’

‘It’s just your nerves,’ Mum said. ‘It’s just the thought of having to go to court and take the stand and recount your father’s actions.’

Dad laughed. ‘Calm down, darls.’

‘I can’t. You’ve upset me.’

My stomach knotted. My heart heaved inside my chest and for a moment, I thought it might come up. I imagined the red, leathery thing hitting the windscreen and bouncing on Dad’s lap. I swallowed the lump in my throat and focussed on my breathing. I began to count my breaths. When you think about breathing, you don’t know how to stop. You worry you might be breathing too slow or too fast, but soon you forget you’re breathing at all because something inside you takes over.

‘It’s just my nerves,’ I said.

The three of us sat in silence. Up ahead, there was an exit sign suspended from a footbridge. The sign seemed to remind Dad of something because when he saw it, he turned to me.

‘Did you open Gramps’s window?’

‘What?’

‘Did you open it?’

I nodded.
‘Did you lock it?’ Dad grabbed me. ‘Did you lock it?’

‘I can’t remember,’ I said.

Dad started the car. ‘We’re turning around.’

Mum freaked out. ‘Are you completely mad? Have you lost it altogether?’

‘My father’s gone.’

The officer appeared at the window. ‘You’re free to go.’

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‘My grandfather,’ I said.

Kez lit a cigarette. ‘You’ve never mentioned him before.’

‘I hardly knew him. He died when I was young.’

‘He was Irish?’ Marty said.

‘He was born in Killarney.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ Kez said.

We were sitting at a weathered picnic table on the cliff’s edge.

‘See that hump over there?’ Marty pointed to one of the islands. ‘That’s the home of Granny O’Malley.’

‘Who?’ Kez said.
‘Granny O’Malley.’

‘I’ve never heard of her.’

‘Cod’s wallop.’ Marty took a swig from his flask. ‘The O’Malleys were a seafaring family. The most powerful in the area. They controlled all of this coast from their home at Clew Bay. In the sixteenth century, they built a row of castles that faced the sea and taxed everyone who fished off their coast. They were tinned, you see. Grace grew up with plenty of riches: pearls and precious stones. She was the youngest of the clan and the only lassie, too. Her father was the sea captain, Owen O’Malley, or Black Oak, as my father called him. He was a pirate, you know. He killed a clan of Spaniards when he was just a lad. Grace looked up to him, the way a young one does. She was always up the swaney.’

‘What did she do?’ I said.

Kez tapped the ash off her cigarette. ‘Was she a pirate? I fucking love pirates.’

Marty put down his flask. ‘When Grace was about yay big, she climbed up these cliffs to kill the eagles that were stealing her father’s lambs. She was a tough thing, but the eagles were vicious. They peck through bone, you know. They gashed her face with their talons. She had awful scars.’

I looked up at the cliffs. I’d never seen anything like them. The giant crags jutted out from the land, as if to end the ocean. The stony walls held back the waves, creating a build-up of bubble. Up top, rocks dislocated from random spots and dropped into the ocean. The fall took several minutes.

‘Anyway,’ Marty said. ‘When Grace was nine or ten, she wanted to join her father on a trading trip to Spain. Back then, women weren’t allowed at sea, unless they were selkies.’
I looked at Kez. She turned her head to the side and blew smoke from her mouth. I wondered if she believed Marty’s stories. She was a difficult person to read. She was open to all kinds of things—veganism and techno and Bikram yoga—but she thought folktales were nonsense. I discovered how she felt in my Honours year when I read Ned Kelly for *Popular Fictions*. ‘The true history?’ she said. ‘That’s ironic, right?’ I wondered, too, about what was true, but I knew the truth could be two-sided.

‘What happened next?’ I said.

‘Grace wanted to go on that trip, alright. But her father said, nay. Her hair would catch in the ship’s ropes and cause all kinds of trouble. Grace was in bits. She got a pair of garden shears and cut off all her curls. Then, she hid in the cargo and waited. When they were too far out to turn around, she went to greet her father. She was wearing a coat and trousers. He only recognised her cos of the scars.’

The wind beat at my face.

‘When Grace’s father passed, she inherited all of his problems. Governor Bingham, the Pommy bastard, took a hard line with the O’Malleys and everyone else who was fighting. It was the Nine Years’ War and we were losing our heads. We couldn’t make an honest living.’ Marty turned his flask upside down to check it was empty. ‘Grace robbed merchant ships of their silks and spices, and forced them to pay her silver. If the captains refused, she looted their ships. She commanded her own vessel and the whole damn fleet. She was Queen of the Irish Seas.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘She was captured. Bingham ordered a new pair of gallows to be made just for her. He could have killed her—he would have—but Grace’s mother offered herself as a hostage.'
Grace was let free. She fled north with her men. While she was at sea, Bingham hanged her mother and all of her brothers and sisters. The whole lot. By now, Grace was getting old. She was a granny, already. She wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth, pleading for her land. When she didn’t hear back, she sailed up the Thames. Now, all of us Irish who went to parley with the queen ended up in the Tower o’London. But Grace left with the queen’s favour and everything she wanted. She had a way with words, you see. She told Elizabeth she wasn’t out for Britain. She was fighting for her business at sea. That’s what it means to be a pirate: to do whatever you fancy.’

‘To be free.’

Marty nodded. ‘She was a pirate and a queen.’

Kez coughed. ‘She sounds like an outlaw to me. She had the best of both worlds and the worst of neither. Who does that remind you of?’

Marty pointed at me. ‘Is she teasing you?’

‘She’s got her period,’ I said.

Kez laughed. ‘Kate thinks she’s Irish.’

‘Fuck off,’ I said.

Marty smiled. ‘Maybe you’re an O’Malley. How are you at sea?’

I shrugged. ‘I feel like I belong here.’

‘Aye. Only our rivers run free.’

‘Are you from Killarney?’ I asked.

Marty laughed. ‘Nay, I was born in the Burren. It’s a miserable old place.’
‘Like Brisbane,’ Kez said.

Marty flinched. ‘I’m not miserable. I don’t know about you two lassies, but I’m a jammy old bastard.’ He turned his cheek. ‘Look at this face.’

‘Brisbane’s not so bad,’ I said.

Marty closed his flask. ‘No where’s so bad, if you know where you’re going. You have to find that place, don’t you? Otherwise, you’ll always be longing for somewhere else. Even if you have to turn the world upside down and shake the hell out of it. See those green waves? That’s where I came from and that’s where I’m going.’

I looked out at the sea. The waves were high and choppy with white caps. The wind picked up speed and bits of leaf, while the ocean urged the waves back, towards the way they came. The entire ocean was moving. A boat bobbed up in the swell.

‘Did you see that?’ I said.

Kez zipped up her jacket. ‘See what?’

Marty smiled. ‘It’s probably my old man. He’s still out there somewhere. I reckon he’s shipwrecked by now. The banshees were wailing the night he left. Our last name’s O’Grady, you see.’

‘They cry when someone’s about to die,’ I said.

‘Aye. And they attach themselves to certain families. For the O’Neills, the banshee’s a beautiful woman: a grand little heifer with red hair and blue eyes. For us, she’s an old hag.’

‘Have you ever—’
‘I’ve never seen her,’ Marty said. ‘But I’ve heard her, just once, the night my father disappeared. I was lying awake, thinking of fixing my bike, when my dog started barking. I was wondering what was the matter. I was about to get up when I heard the cries. They weren’t human, you know. I knew someone was dying or about to die.’ He scratched beneath his chin. ‘The lads called my dad, Swaggering Dan. They came to the pub to hear his yarns. He stood on a bale of hay with his chest puffed out, like a cock. He never shuddup. His tales were as tall as those cliffs and just as dirty.’

‘And your mum?’ I said. ‘Were they in love?’

Marty smiled. ‘Any more in love and they would have killed each other.’ He shook his head. ‘When he came home drunk, she’d tell him she was leaving him for good and she’d pack up all her things. She’d get real mad and do herself up. Then, when Dad said how nice she looked, she’d calm down and bake him a spud with a bit of salt. If he was lucky, he’d get some buttermilk on the side.’

I could picture it. Marty washing the spuds for his mum, her suitcase open on the floor.

‘We didn’t have spuds for long. We started to find them all mushy and rotten. One day, we pulled up a dozen and laid them on the table. Mum cried when she cut into the first one. It was black to the heart.’ Marty laughed. ‘You shouldn’t smoke those, you know. They’ll put you in the grave.’ He pulled his hood over his head. ‘Five more minutes, then we’re off. I gotta go round up these bastards.’

I turned to Kez. ‘How’s your stomach? I’ll find you some ginger. There should be a chemist around here.’

‘I love you,’ Kez said.
‘I love you, too.’

‘I mean, I want to be together.’ She flicked her lighter.

‘You’re my best friend,’ I said.

‘Is that how you think of me?’

I tried to answer, but I didn’t know how.

Kez flicked the lighter again. The lighter sparked, but there was no flame. ‘If we make each other happy, we should be together.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ I said.

Kez frowned. ‘Why does it have to be hard?’ She held her palms to the rain. ‘It’s like you want to get hurt, so you can feel something.’

I laughed, but I was offended. ‘Maybe,’ I said.

Marty started the bus.

‘You make me happy,’ I said. ‘But if we keep having sex, if we change who we are and it doesn’t work, we’re fucked. How will we go back?’

‘Why do we have to go back? There’s nothing there.’

Ida wandered over. ‘We’re leaving,’ she said. She closed the case on her camera and nodded at the cliffs. ‘They’re certainly God’s work, aren’t they?’

Kez wiped her nose. ‘I don’t believe in God,’ she said.

Ida frowned. ‘It must be hard to live like that.’

‘Like what?’ Kez snapped.
‘With doubt.’

Kez put out her cigarette. ‘You’re born, you live, you’ll die. There’s no doubt.’

‘You don’t believe at all? How do you explain the cliffs?’

‘I don’t need God to explain the cliffs or the ocean or any of it. Everything’s the way it is because of evolution. Even love is just a chemical reaction designed to make sure our genes survive.’

Ida tried again. ‘But there are some things that defy reason. It’s audacious to assume we know enough to deny the existence of God.’

Kez shrugged. ‘I just don’t think there’s a person or a presence that watches over us. And my parents are atheists, too.’

‘You don’t need religious parents to believe in God,’ Ida said.

I thought she had a point. Kez shifted her weight. I could tell she was annoyed.

‘In Africa, there’s a worm that lives in the rivers and streams. It’s called the Loa-loa worm. Its sole purpose in life is to burrow into the membrane of a human eye and turn its host blind. That’s all it does. If I believed in God, I’d have to believe God created that worm whose only purpose in life is to turn a person blind. I can’t believe that,’ she said.

Ida sat down at the table. She seemed disappointed. ‘And what about you?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Yes, you believe in the Loa-loa worm or yes, you believe in God?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I think some things are random.’
When I got home from Ireland, Anjulee called from London. ‘I’m coming home,’ she said. She’d been away for seven years, travelling and teaching geography. In that time, we’d seen each other twice: once, on Skype, and another time, at a stop-over in Singapore. When she called, I was in bed with Kez, so I took the call on the balcony. We talked about Gran and global warming and how everyone had changed since high school. She said she was learning to drive a manual, but changing gears was difficult and she always stalled. I said she’d get the hang of it; it would just take a while. We spoke until morning. I told her I was finishing my PhD and lecturing at uni. She said she had a feeling that would happen. When I asked her what she meant, she said, ‘It means what I always thought: that you’re better off without me.’ Before we hung up, I asked about her family.

Anjulee was Fiji-Indian, but she was born in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. After her brother died, the family moved to Brisbane to start again. Her parents sold their house in Rose Bay and bought a caravan park in Manly. The park covered several acres of wild bush that stretched from the mainland to the marina. At the campsite, there was a bayside walk that led to the boat club. On weekends, residents hired jet skis, while Anjulee and her sisters managed the park. Anjulee was responsible for leasing the sites and collecting the rent, while her older sister, Sharmani, stocked the general store. Keshnee, the youngest of the three, kept the pool area clean. The work was tedious and routine, and sometimes, when Anjulee’s parents were off-site, she came online to chat. In fact, we had our first fight on MSN. It was Christmas Eve and she was working late. I wanted her to come over after work, so I could give her her Christmas present. She said she’d try and make it, but she couldn’t promise anything. I asked why and she explained that her parents had banned sleepovers in case someone in my family was a paedophile. I told her my uncle was being reintegrated, but the risk of re-offence was low. She said that wasn’t funny. I told her she should lighten up and make her own decisions, and she said I was white and I’d never understand.
Anjulee’s parents weren’t religious, but they brought her up with the idea that her life should be better than theirs. Better meant the highest level of education and marriage of equal status to an Indian doctor or engineer. It did not mean dating girls. When her mum started to suspect we had an Unnatural Friendship, she tried to keep us apart. She confiscated Anjulee’s phone and cancelled her credit card. She encouraged us to see each other on special occasions but insisted we stay the way we were: as good friends who got along well and enjoyed each other’s company. As a protest, Anjulee stopped eating. On her second night of strike, her mum cooked chapattis with sweet potato, and Anjulee gave in. I told her she had no will power and she agreed. She snuck out at night, while her parents were sleeping, and we met in the Botanical Gardens. At first, I wondered if her interest in me was just an act of defiance. We had nowhere to go and hardly any money. We weren’t out, even with our friends, and I didn’t know what that meant. Anjulee worried that when her parents found out, they’d kick her out of home. I thought mine would be too embarrassed to tell their friends.

In the Gardens, we bought sushi for dinner and walked along the river. We watched the City Cats move upstream, towards the university. The wash criss-crossed in every direction, as if uncertain where to go. At Kangaroo Point, the cliffs leered over the dirty river, daring it to rise. Anjulee said the cliffs reminded her of The Gap back home. People jumped from there all the time. She told me the story of an old man who lived by himself in a glass house on the cliff’s edge. If he noticed someone standing around, he’d invite them over for tea. He would always ask, ‘Can I help you with something?’ Over the years, he talked so many people out of jumping that the locals called him The Angel of The Gap. I asked Anjulee why she liked the story and she said because he was a businessman, really, and he sold those people life. We stayed in the Gardens until the sun came up and the first joggers appeared on the boardwalk. Around this time, Anjulee pulled her hair into a bun and counted her change.
for the bus. Before she left, we had sex in the public toilets. We chose the cleanest cubicle and tried not to touch anything. I told myself, as we made love, that we’d find our own place.

One day, while we were in the Gardens, Anjulee’s cousin, Simran, followed us to the river and took a photo of us kissing. I had one hand up Anjulee’s shirt and the other in the small of her back. Simran took something beautiful and made it ugly when she showed the photo to Anjulee’s mum. Anjulee’s mum said we were sick and what we did was immoral. She threatened to call my parents. I told Anjulee I would leave her alone until things settled down. She said I was a coward and a quitter and that if I couldn’t stay now, I should leave for good. She begged her mum to accept us, but her mum said our relationship was offensive. She told Anjulee she’d never approve of her sinful lifestyle and that if she wanted to live at home, she needed to see a psychologist. Anjulee cried. She said she couldn’t help the way she felt, but why did it matter if she was happy? Her mum ripped up the photo. Before she left, she turned to Anjulee and said, ‘I don’t want people saying my daughter’s a lesbian.’

In London, Anjulee got a job at Ramnoth College in the market town of Wisbech. She rented an apartment near the Great Bridge, which was made entirely of stone. She walked through a construction site on her way to work each morning. She said she always ate a crumpet with jam for breakfast. On weeknights, she stayed up late, grading papers and putting together her lessons. On Sundays, she caught the train to London. The heat in the carriage made her sleepy, and once, on the way to Oxford Circus, she fell asleep at Holland Park and woke up in Stratford. She sent me a postcard of a fountain. ‘I don’t know where I am,’ she said. ‘There’s a steeple for martyrs and an underground church. I think some women were burnt here.’ At the bottom of the postcard she said, ‘You’re the only one who gets me.’

At Ramnoth, she taught geography to the middle school. In the summer term, her year sevens studied natural disasters. They learnt what happens when the earth moves and the
plates collide and the seafloor starts to rise. They learnt about tectonic plates. Her students were fascinated to discover that when you look at a map of the world, the continents of South America and Africa seem to fit. Anjulee asked her students to consider that all the countries of the world were once joined together in a supercontinent that had subsequently broken apart. To test the hypothesis, the class looked at mountain ranges and rock formations, limestone caves and ice glaciers: anything that could push through the ocean’s floor. The movement was called continental drift and some scientists said it was impossible because a continent couldn’t shift. It would take a huge amount of energy just to move Australia into Asia, one scientist said. Still, Anjulee insisted the theory was correct; there was no other way to explain global migration or how we moved around the world before the invention of boats and planes. We all came from Africa, she said. At the end of term, her students asked her where was a safe place to live? ‘Nowhere’s safe,’ Anjulee said. ‘Disasters can strike anywhere at any time. If you live in the mountains, there’ll be a landslide. If you live near the ocean, there’ll be a tsunami. If you live in the city, there’ll be an earthquake and the buildings will come crashing down and you’ll be trapped alive under a pile of rubble.’ I asked her why Wisbech, and she said she had a feeling about the town. She thought she would find something there.

When she arrived home with no answers, I picked her up from the airport. Her flight was late because of the weather, so the coffee I bought went cold. When she came through customs, she was chatting with a body builder who had a spider web tattooed on his arm. He was carrying her neck pillow, and she was laughing at something he said. Her hair was in a messy braid that was effortlessly stylish and her make-up was still in place. As she made her way towards me, I started to worry about what to say. The last time I saw Anjulee, she was sitting in the transit lounge at Changi airport. I overheard her talking on the phone to someone who I assumed was her girlfriend. She was asking rhetorical questions and repeating
herself for emphasis. It was a habit of hers when flirting. I tried to walk away, but she waved and called me over. We hugged, and she held on until I let go. She said it was a surprise to see me, especially here, and I agreed that it was strange. Then, she said she was leaving for good, but her plane kept getting delayed. It occurred to me then that I’d spent a lot of time waiting for her and little time questioning why. I decided to say goodbye. Before I left, she grabbed my hand and told me she understood. As I walked away, I thought about turning back. I thought about boarding my plane and landing in Brisbane. I thought about driving back along the Gateway Motorway to graduation, to final exams, to the choir practice where it started. I thought about the past and nothing else as I left Singapore. Anjulee was the same as I remembered; it was the two of us who were different. As she wheeled her luggage over now, I started to feel the same.

‘How was your flight?’ I said.

She hugged me. ‘Long.’

‘I bet. London’s a long way from Brisbane.’

She smiled. ‘I slept most of the way.’

‘You’re lucky. I can’t sleep when I’m flying. I’m on edge the whole time.’

‘I took a Valium.’ She fixed her hair. ‘You used to love flying. Have you been waiting long?’

‘Not really,’ I lied.

We made our way to the train. Her perfume was strong, but I didn’t recognise the brand. The smell was a mixture of rose and vanilla and something else that was vaguely familiar.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Anjulee said.
‘Nothing, really. I mean, I’m thinking, but there’s nothing I’m thinking about.’

She laughed.

‘So, you had a good flight,’ I said.

She was wearing a simple black dress. The neck of her dress was down, exposing the top of her breasts.

‘Are you right?’ she said.

I blushed. I pushed her luggage up the ramp, towards the Airtrain. The train ran along a welded rail that was raised on concrete sleepers. The ticket office was a green box-like building that was so ugly it was almost beautiful.

Anjulee turned to me. ‘I missed you,’ she said.

‘It’s been a while.’

She tapped her watch. ‘This time yesterday I was in London. Can you believe it? I was unhappy, but I was there. I caught the tube to Bond Street and walked a few blocks. I went shopping at Marks & Spencer. I bought these shoes.’ She pointed at her feet. She was wearing flats with peepholes. Her toenails were painted red. ‘Oh, guess what? I went to the Marble Arch.’

‘Did you see our flag?’

‘What?’

I shook my head.

‘No, tell me.’

‘I don’t have to tell you anything. You’re a stranger.’ I handed her the coffee. ‘I don’t pick up girls at the airport.’
She took a sip. ‘You’re picking me up.’ She raised the cup. ‘This is cold.’

We waited for the train. A sign on the platform explained that the train stopped at all stations from Eagle Junction to Robina. Passengers could return if they wanted, but tickets were only valid for a day. Anjulee opened her purse and put her ticket away.

‘Can you stay for a while?’ she said. ‘I haven’t told my parents I’m home.’

‘I have to work tonight,’ I said.

She nodded.

I didn’t know if it would be different this time or if it was right to get back together. It was true we were older and more mature, but our problems hadn’t resolved themselves over time. When I told Kez I was going to see Anjulee, she said, ‘You’re only doing this for your dad.’ When I said I made my own decisions, she laughed. I sent her a message saying this was something I didn’t plan and even though she couldn’t understand, it would be nice to have her support. I waited for her reply, but she never wrote back.

Anjulee played with her hair. ‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Am I the same as you remember?’

‘Well, the moustache is new.’

She touched her lip.

‘Do you curl it?’

She slapped me. ‘Be serious.’

I shrugged. ‘Do you feel the same?’

‘I feel old. I think my bones are different.’
‘Well, I hope I look that good when I’m your age.’

‘Kate.’

‘How am I supposed to know? I haven’t seen you in years. Things have changed.’

She looked down. She was standing on the yellow line. She asked me again, ‘Do you think I’m the same?’

I thought about it. ‘In some ways, yes.’

We boarded the train. When we pulled up at Central, I asked Anjulee what she wanted to do and she said, ‘Honestly? I don’t want to live out of a suitcase anymore. I’m tired.’ We walked through the city. When we reached the end of the mall, she grabbed my hand.

‘Do you want to go to the Gardens? I’ve got clothes you can borrow and left over money. We can stay by the river. What do you say?’

‘The Gardens?’

‘I know it’s crazy. Do you think I’m crazy?’

I wheeled her bag across the road. ‘I don’t think you’re crazy,’ I said. ‘I think you’re way past that.’

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Mum had a breakdown when Emma was born and Dad dubbed this time, ‘When your mother lost the plot.’ On the morning she went into labour, Dad dropped Luke and I off at Gran’s and told us to behave or there’d be trouble. Gran lived by herself on the south side, behind the Wacol Golf Club. The course sloped over several acres and ran along the fence line. The pickets were chipped by wayward shots and the banksias were battered. The balls popped up
around the trees as frequently as mushrooms. While Mum was in hospital, Luke and I went on a treasure hunt. We crawled through the grass on our bellies and collected the golf balls. When our pockets were full, we stood on the green and took shots at each other. When Gran came out and saw us swinging, she grabbed us by our ears and made us kneel on the grit. She said, ‘If God had wanted you to kill each other, he wouldn’t have created me.’ Then she said, ‘I know why lions eat their young.’

A few days later, when we pulled up at home, Mum stayed in the car. Dad brought the baby in and plonked her on the bench. Her face was pink and all squished up, and she was wrapped in a flannel blanket.

‘This is Emma,’ he said.

I unwrapped her. Her hands and feet were peeling badly, and her belly moved up and down. The stub from her umbilical cord made a bump under her singlet. When I touched it, she clenched her fists.

Luke frowned. ‘Where’s Mummy?’

Dad hung his keys up on the hook and emptied the change out of his pockets. When the coins stopped spinning, he walked over to the fridge and peered inside. He pulled out a six-pack and set it on the table. Then, he cracked open a beer.

‘Kate’s the mummy now,’ he said.

I strapped Emma into the capsule and carried her out the door. The driveway was steep and slippery with gravel, and I nearly dropped her twice. When we reached the clearing where the car was parked, Mum was sitting in the passenger seat, with her handbag on her lap.

‘Look,’ I said. I held the baby to the glass.
Luke tapped the window. ‘Let us in.’

Mum began to cry.

She cried a lot when we were young and I never knew why. Sometimes I came home from school and she was still in bed. Other times she was sitting on the couch, watching game shows on TV. At night, she came into my room and got into bed with me. I thought she was a ghost at first because of how she dressed. She always wore a nightie with a lace collar and long puffy sleeves. The gown was made of white silk and the back of her dress was see-through. When she walked, the silk draped around her feet and it looked like she was floating. ‘Don’t be frightened,’ she’d say. ‘It’s only me.’

One morning, before school, I woke to the jingle of keys. Mum was sitting by my side, with the car keys in her hand.

‘What’s wrong?’ I said.

‘Your father won’t talk to me.’

I rubbed my eyes.

‘He thinks I’m useless. He goes to work and pays the bills. He works hard to buy us things.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘We’re meant to be a team. When I don’t work, I let him down. We were meant to go to Tasmania for our honeymoon, but I couldn’t get on the plane.’ She held her head between her hands. ‘Everything I’ve tried to do, I’ve failed at.’

‘At least you try,’ I said.

She shook her head. ‘I’m hopeless. That’s all I’ll ever be.’ She looked out the window.

‘You kids don’t need me anymore. I guess that’s a good thing.’
'What do you mean?'

She fiddled with the keys. ‘I think I should go for a drive.’

‘I’ll come, too.’

‘You can’t. You don’t have any worries.’

‘I have worries,’ I said.

‘Like what?’ Mum snapped. She bit her nails. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Let’s go for a walk. You’ll feel better if we go for a walk. You felt better last time, remember? We’ll take Rusty with us.’

I called the dog.

‘Where are we going?’ Mum said. ‘I don’t want to go far.’

I put Rusty on his lead. ‘We’ll turn around whenever you want. We won’t go past the creek.’

Mum nodded. ‘We’ll take Rusty with us. A walk will be good for the dog.’

Rusty barked.

I opened the garage.

In winter, when the sky was clear, the ranger wandered through the forest in an orange jumpsuit. He gathered tree trunks from the logging stations and tossed them into piles. When the piles got too high to stack, he removed the fuel tin from his back and topped it up with petrol. He lit the slash with a match and burnt the trees to ash. The heavy smoke filled our house and made it hard to breathe. The smell got into our sheets and pillows, and tried to smother us while we slept. In the morning, Mum washed our pyjamas and wrung them out, but the smell refused to leave.
‘It’s getting worse,’ she said.

‘The smoke?’

‘The fire.’

She pointed to the burning. The fire trail cut across the forest floor and incited all the trees. The flames licked at the yellow wattles and charred their pods and leaves. The fire burnt towards our house but stopped at the fence. In the forest, Luke and I had a tree house where we fished sometimes for turtles. Dad helped us hook the bait and float the cages, but Mum didn’t approve. In fact, when Dad took us fishing on the weekends, Mum wouldn’t cast a line. She said it wasn’t right to take things without asking. She said if you do the wrong thing and you don’t get caught, you’ll never do the right thing. When she fell pregnant with Emma, she told my aunts it was an accident. Three months later, she told Dad they must have sinned because the forest was trying to hurt her. She said whenever she left the house, the animals tried to stop her. Dad laughed. He said, ‘I’ve heard some stupid things in my life, but that takes the cake.’

I thought Mum was exaggerating, too, until I got the chicken pox. The rash spread across my chest and down along my arms. The itch broke out between my fingers and underneath my nails. When I scratched, the spots turned to sores. I stayed home from school until the scabs healed over. One morning, while Mum and I were taking a bath, a pair of bush turkeys came out of the scrub and banged on the back door. They pecked the frame and clawed the screen and made a hole in the gauze. Mum said they were furious we were inside while they were out because it somehow upset the order of things. I stood at the window and watched the birds. They beat their wings and inflated the sacs in their necks. They fanned themselves and searched each other’s feathers. After a while, they gave up on the task and
wandered back to the door. The bigger bird stood guard at the entrance, while the smaller one picked the lock.

‘What are they doing?’ Mum said.

‘I’m not sure.’

‘You can’t trust them,’ she said. ‘They’re snakes.’

‘How can a bird be a snake?’

Mum shaved her legs. ‘Can a bird bite you?’

‘Yes.’

‘And can a bird prey on you and make you feel frightened?’

‘I guess.’

‘Then a bird can be a snake.’

She passed me the bottle of calamine. ‘I’m going to tell you something.’

I squeezed the lotion onto my stomach.

‘When I was your age, I found a snake trapped under a rock. I wanted to help, so I set him free. I used a stick as a lever and pushed it under the stone. When I lifted the rock, the snake bit me on the wrist. The bite was full of venom and I fell sick. I thought I was going to die. While I was lying there, I got mad. I mean, I couldn’t understand why the snake treated me so badly. Before he got away, I asked him why he bit me.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He said, “Because I’m a snake.”’

‘Snakes don’t talk,’ I said.
Mum shook her head. ‘That’s not the point. The point is you can’t trust a snake. They’ll bite you every time.’ She moved the razor down her thigh. ‘Feel this.’ She grabbed my hand. ‘Feel how smooth my legs are.’

I touched her knee. ‘That’s really smooth,’ I said.

She smiled.

The next morning, one of the turkeys returned. It climbed onto the water tank and swooped into the sliding door. The crash when it hit the glass shook the entire house. Mum grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer and ran along the balcony. She pointed the knife at the bird, then pretended to cut her throat. When one of the windows started to crack, we took some wood from under the house and boarded up the glass. We hammered the planks into place and painted the panels black. We covered every window in the house, except for the small one above the toilet. When Dad came home and saw what we’d done, he started throwing things around. He said Mum wasn’t right in the head and it was rubbing off on me.

‘She had nothing to do with it,’ Mum said.

‘Don’t give me that. She has splinters in her hands.’

I hid under the stairs.

Dad continued shouting. ‘You’ve ruined all the windows and you’ve broken my new casing. You’ve knocked hundreds of dollars off this house. Tell me, who’s going to pay to fix the walls? You?’

Mum was quiet for a while. ‘Insurance,’ she said.

‘Insurance?’ Dad yelled. ‘Insurance doesn’t cover lunatics! And what about Kate? Have you thought about her? She already needs a check-up from the neck up. You know she’s not all there.’
I stared down at my hands. The scabs from my chicken pox were falling off, but now there was a splinter in my finger. It hurt to point, and it hurt to press down, and it stung even more when I touched it. I decided to hide the splinter from Dad in case Mum got in trouble.

Every morning, before breakfast, I drew a smiley face on the tip and used the black dot as one of the eyes. The nose always smudged off and the smile was kind of crooked. In the afternoon, when I wrote up my homework, I used the other hand. When Dad came over to check my answers, I hid my finger under the chair. When he noticed that my writing was messy, I said I was learning to be ambidextrous.

‘Ambidextrous?’ he laughed. ‘You don’t even know what that means.’

No one knew about my splinter and no one suspected anything. The pain was a nice kind of ache until my finger got infected. The tip was hot and throbbing, and a white streak ran up my arm towards my heart. I tried to squeeze the splinter out, but it travelled further down. Eventually, Dad grabbed my wrist and pinned my hand to the table. Some pus and blood came out.

Dad cursed. ‘I knew it! Your mother’s done a job on you and you’ve let her get away with it.’ He raised my hand to the light. ‘You could lose your finger, if I don’t get this out.’

He removed his tweezers from the first-aid kit and sterilised the needle. He washed my hand under the water, then numbed my finger with ice. When the tip was red from the cold, he pierced the skin with the needle. The pain rippled up my arm.

I squealed.

‘Shh,’ Dad said.

I tried to pull my arm back, but he pushed the needle deeper.
'Hold still,' he said. ‘Just hold your fucking horses.’ He poked around the cut for a while, then isolated the splinter. He lifted up a flap of skin and clamped the tweezers. ‘Got it,’ he said, drawing out the chip of wood. ‘I got the little bastard.’ He dabbed my finger with a tissue, then bandaged up the cut.

‘What have I told you about your mother?’

‘She’s mad.’

‘That’s right. She’s crackers.’

‘She’s not that bad,’ I said.

Dad stared at me.

‘Well, what’s wrong with her?’

He waved me away. ‘Get out of here.’

Later that night, as the swelling went down, I thought maybe Dad was right. Maybe Mum was crackers and that’s why she had breakdowns. If Mum was mad, and it was contagious, then I could catch it, too. This struck me as a problem. I loved Mum and I wanted it to work between us, but I had to play it cool. My parents had already accused me of being crazy once before, when the previous summer, in the middle of a sun shower, I saw Gramps in my room. He was standing behind the curtains, tapping his foot with a stick. When Dad pulled back the curtains, he was gone. Mum said jokes about Gramps weren’t funny and sent me to bed. The next morning, she called in sick at work and took me to Doctor McCauley. We talked about my nerves. He asked me if I was under any stress at home and if some days were worse than others. I had to answer the questions using a feeling scale of one to ten, with ten being ‘very scared’ and one being ‘safe.’ When I got the answers right, he nodded and said, ‘Uh huh.’ At the end of the session, he talked to Mum alone. I didn’t mind taking the
quiz; it was the car trip home that bothered me. Mum turned down the radio and took the turns too slowly. At the roundabout, she turned on the wipers, even though it wasn’t raining. When I pointed this out, she said, ‘It’s funny, you know, how we see things differently.’ I stared out the window. The wipers scraped across the glass, making an awful sound. Mum hunched over the steering wheel, with one eye closed. She is crackers, I thought.

It wasn’t until Dad wrote me his letter that I started to think otherwise. I read his letter many times and each time, I noticed something different. In one part, he said he loved us kids and all our friends, but he didn’t mention Mum. He referred to her only once when he called her a fruitcake. He said, ‘You know what she’s like.’ At first I thought he was joking, but I realised later from the things he said that he actually thought she was mad. I wondered if Mum knew. I was sure that if she did, she wouldn’t stick around. Sometimes, when Dad was flirting with Kez, Mum held her chest, as if her heart was breaking. Other times, she seemed to have no idea what was going on. When I asked her if she trusted Dad, she said, ‘Yes, one of the things I love about your father is that we don’t have any secrets.’ When I asked Dad if he loved Mum, he didn’t say anything. He threw his wallet onto the bench and walked off in a huff. At dinner, he ignored me, and in the hallway when we passed each other, he looked the other way. I thought his behaviour was immature, especially for his age. He seemed to want attention until you gave it to him, then he lost his temper. I didn’t know if my question was out of line, but I needed to know the answer. I couldn’t rest until I knew. I didn’t know if Dad understood this, or if he was anxious, too, but one night, while I was reading at my desk, he wandered in and leant against the wall.

He said, ‘You asked your question, now I’ll ask mine.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

He crossed his arms. ‘Why are you playing these games?’
‘What games?’ I said.

‘Well, why do you need to know?’

I closed my book. ‘Because it’s important to me if my parents love each other.’

He scratched his neck. ‘You want to know if I love your mother?’

‘Yes.’

‘You really want to know?’

I nodded.

He stood up straight. ‘Look up love in the dictionary,’ he snapped, then he turned and slammed the door.

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The next night, I tried to talk to Mum about Dad and whether they were happy. Mum said they were happier now than they’d ever been and they hardly fought anymore. I didn’t know if this was a good thing since my idea of being in love was fighting.

‘I think fighting’s healthy,’ I said. ‘It means your heart’s in something.’

Mum smirked. ‘That’s rubbish.’

‘It’s true. Look at Gran and Gramps. They fought all the time and everywhere. They fought at the bank. They fought in church. They even fought about fighting. Gramps said Gran was an old trout who was born under a threepenny halfpenny planet and she’d never be worth a groat. Gran said he was a lazy sod who wouldn’t work in an iron lung. He called her a git and she called him a gaffer. They mimicked each other. They repeated what the other said.’
‘That doesn’t prove anything.’

‘It does. I remember once when I was at Gran’s, she wanted to watch Judge Judy, but Gramps was watching Free Willy. He said if he could go back, he’d like to be a whale trainer. Gran said that was absurd. When Willy jumped over the wall of his aquarium, Gramps got off his chair and cheered. Gran said that ending was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever seen and it would be more realistic if Willy fell onto the wall and crushed Jesse. Gramps said Gran ruined everything with her damn pessimism, then he flicked off the TV and they went to bed. The next week, Gran took Gramps on a day trip to Sea World. She thought they had whales there. I think fighting’s bad if it’s always happening, but I think indifference is worse.’

Mum nodded. ‘If you’re talking about your father and I, you’re wrong. We’re not indifferent. We’re just different.’ She took a bite from her carrot. ‘You know what, Kate? I’ve learnt something over the years. Happiness is just deciding that what you have is enough.’

‘You don’t think that,’ I said.

‘I do.’ Mum chewed her carrot thoughtfully. ‘This tastes strange.’

I sat up on the couch. ‘Do you think Dad’s been acting differently?’

‘You mean, do I think your father’s having an affair?’

‘What?’

‘Well, isn’t that what you mean?’

‘That’s not what I said.’

Mum shifted in her chair. ‘Your father and I have been married for twenty-five years. I think I’d know if he was having it off with some floozy.’

‘How would you know?’
Mum scratched her neck. ‘Listen, Kate. I don’t know what you’re getting at, but if you have something you want to say, just say it. I’m not talking to you in riddles.’

‘I’m not talking in riddles,’ I said.

‘Then you must be very clever because I don’t understand what you’re saying.’ Mum spat the carrot into her hand. ‘You’ve come upstairs with something on your mind and it’s something I’m meant to know about. You ask questions, but you’re not interested in what I have to say because you already know the answers. That sounds like a riddle to me.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Do you know Dad messages Kez?’

Mum looked at me. ‘What does he say?’

‘All kinds of things.’

‘So what? He messages Luke and Emma. He even texts Linda. I don’t think that’s strange. What’s so strange about that?’ Mum cracked her knuckles. ‘What are you saying? That I’m sleeping with some kind of deviant?’

‘Can you stop?’ I said.

‘Well, what do you want me to say? “Yes, I’m married to a monster.”’

I took a breath. ‘Dad says we’re all a nightmare to him: you, me, Luke, and Emma. He tells Kez she’s the only one who understands him. He calls her Tiger. When he found out she strained her groin, he asked if she wanted a massage. He said he’d rub her down.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Mum said.

‘Why would I make it up?’

Mum was quiet for a while. ‘Well, why are you saying all this? I mean, what is it you want?’
‘I want you to know the truth.’

‘The truth about what?’ She drummed her fingers on the chair.

‘Forget it.’

Mum stood up. ‘I know you always see the worst in me. I know you think I can’t look after myself. You might find this hard to believe, but I’m actually okay. I’m not worried about your father, or how he’s feeling, or what he’s saying to your friends. I think our marriage is a little bit stronger than that.’ She walked across the room. ‘You know, if it wasn’t for your father, I wouldn’t be here. I know he’s not perfect. I know he’s got flaws. Do you think I don’t know that, Kate? Maybe he’s not like Bill Cosby or whoever you want him to be like, but he’s a good man. Your father would do anything for me and he looks after you kids. When you were little and you got croup, he couldn’t sleep at night. He got up every half an hour to make sure you were breathing.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.’

Mum drew the curtains. ‘Well, you’ve said this much, you may as well tell me the rest.’

‘Why? You don’t believe me.’

‘Can you blame me, Kate?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You’re a writer. You like to make up stories. It’s what you do.’

‘That’s not fair.’

She shrugged.

‘I can’t talk to you. Whatever I tell you, you’ll tell Dad. I can’t talk to Dad because he’ll tell Kez, and I can’t talk to Kez because she’s ignoring me. It’s fucked.’
‘You’re so dramatic,’ Mum said.

I bit my tongue.

Mum wiped her hands. ‘Look. Whatever you tell me is between you and me. I’m your mother. I’m not some stranger off the street. I won’t tell your father, I promise.’

I looked at her steadily. She seemed genuine, but I was nervous.

‘Are you sure?’

She nodded. ‘I’m on your side.’

‘I think Dad’s unhappy,’ I said. ‘He stays up late, playing cards and drinking, while everyone’s asleep. He comes to the club on Thursday nights and watches us train. The only time he’s happy is when Kez comes over for dinner. He always cooks extra in case she comes around. If she doesn’t call in, he’s disappointed. The other night he got so mad when she didn’t show, he kicked the door off its hinge.’

‘The cupboard door?’ Mum said. ‘I thought that fell off on its own.’ She leant back in her chair. ‘I think he misses Gran. Do you think he misses Gran?’

I shrugged.

‘Well, tell me what you think.’

‘I think he wants something more than this.’

‘Than what?’

‘Than us.’

Mum picked up her plate. ‘If that’s what you think.’ She walked over to the bench and tossed her plate in the sink. She held her hands under the water.

‘You can’t tell Dad,’ I said.
Mum cleared the plates. She washed the bowls, one by one, then stacked them in the holder. ‘I won’t say a word to your father, Kate. He’d be horrified if he knew.’

‘Knew what?’

‘How little you think of him.’

‘Whatever,’ I said.

Later that night, Dad took Mum to dinner at the pub, and Mum told Dad everything. When Dad got home, he told me to pack up my shit and get out of his house. I found an old suitcase under the stairs and tossed in all my clothes. I watched him dismantle my bed. When he finished, he walked down the hallway and took the photos of me off the wall. He replaced them with pictures of Luke and Emma. When Mum asked where the photos went, Dad said he didn’t know. I knew he’d take my talking to Mum as a betrayal of his trust, but I didn’t think he’d kick me out of home. I was beginning to think my parents were protecting each other, but I wasn’t sure from what. I couldn’t understand their relationship or what kind of love theirs was.

When I was a girl, I didn’t question how they felt. I knew my parents were different, but I was sure they loved each other. Sometimes, if Dad was lucky, he won a meat tray at the bowls club. He always brought the platter home and displayed it on the verandah. Before he started the cook up, he called Mum out to show her the mix. Once, Dad won the mega meat tray and we had a barbeque under the patio. Dad grilled the chops and fried the bacon, while Mum threw together a salad. Luke pushed Emma around the yard in a wheelbarrow, while I sat on the grass and listened to my Walkman. From where I was, I could see Mum and Dad having a serious conversation. Mum was standing with her hands on her hips, while Dad was flipping the rissoles. He was listening to Mum and watching the meat as she talked. I turned down the sound on my earphones, so I could hear what they were saying. Mum said Dani was
giving her a hard time at work, teasing her about her weight and making fun of her casual position. There was an idea that substitute teachers were second-class people, Mum said. They weren’t real teachers, at least to the kids, and they weren’t treated as members of staff. Dani reminded Mum that no one ever aspired to be a relief teacher when they were young; it was hardly a chosen profession. Mum told Dad she was thinking about quitting. She didn’t want to give up, but she felt she had no choice. She couldn’t take it anymore. Dad turned off the burner. He said he’d had enough of this Dani and who did she think she was? Probably some miserable bitch with a pole up her arse. Mum laughed. Dad removed the rissoles from the rack and wrapped them in alfoil. Then, he handed the parcel to Mum. He said, ‘Whatever you do, I’ll support you. But if you ask me, you should tell her where to go. If she gives you grief, who gives a shit? You’ve always got me.’ I turned the sound back up.

Mum said Dad was the kindest man she’d ever met, but when she wasn’t around, Dad made comments about her. He said, ‘You know your mother, maybe if she got out of bed every now and then, I wouldn’t have to go to work all the time and I could spend more time with you kids.’ On the other hand, Mum would say, ‘You know your father. He thinks he’s a martyr and we owe him a pound of flesh.’

Sometimes, I felt like I was a mouse, hiding in a cage with two rats. In fact, once, my parents were so busy nipping each other, they didn’t notice me hanging around. It was Christmas Eve and they were fighting about where to hang the lights. Dad said the lights should stay inside where the wind couldn’t damage them and the rain couldn’t rust the bulbs. He said if we hung the lights in the window, they’d light up the living room and save us the bother of going out in the heat. Mum disagreed. She said, ‘What’s the point of putting up Christmas lights if no one can see them?’ She wanted to string the lights up in our jacaranda, like she’d done the previous year. When Dad asked her how she planned to climb the tree, which had grown as tall as our house, Mum said she would use the ladder and if he wouldn’t
hold it for her, she’d find someone who would. She carried the box into the yard. She opened
the lid and untied the strings, then she checked each bulb was working. She removed the
ladder from the shed and climbed the rungs. When she reached the top, she called down to
Luke to keep the ladder steady, then she wove the lights around the branches. When she
finished, she climbed off the ladder and switched on the lights.


‘I was thinking about Batman,’ he said.

Later that night, when I stood on the balcony and watched the lights, I felt sad for no
reason. The tree was glowing from top to bottom and as I watched the lights burn steady, I
felt wonder at having even survived this far. I started to feel upset. I worried about dying, and
where we go when time stops, and how we’re all alone in the world. I could feel my heart
beating very fast. The lights flickered on and off, and I thought, they’ll all go out when I die.
I could hear my parents inside, arguing about money. Mum said she didn’t want to be here
anymore because no one helped out. Dad said we were spending too much on school fees and
groceries, and the last thing we needed were those God-damn lights chewing up the power.
Mum said it was Christmas and we should celebrate. She wanted to put up the lights; they
made her happy. Dad said it was amazing how she could take a situation and make it about
her. I just wanted them to stop. I picked up one of the pot plants and threw it over the
balcony. When Mum and Dad heard the crash, they opened the sliding door.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Dad said.

I hadn’t thought that far ahead. ‘The lights.’

‘What about them?’

‘They hurt my eyes.’
‘Then don’t look at them,’ Dad said.

I could see he was stressed. His hair was greying at the sides and the lines under his eyes were starting to bunch up. There was a nick on his chin where he’d cut himself shaving. He reminded me of Gramps.

‘Jesus, Kate. Do you think you can just be normal?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘You know, you’re my brightest child, but you don’t think straight. You see things differently than the rest of us. I’ve known that since you were little. You remember things you couldn’t possibly and you worry about things that aren’t there. Sometimes I think we got the wrong child at the hospital. I mean it, I don’t know who you take after.’

We stood side by side.

‘Once, I took you to see a film at The Regent. I can’t remember what it was called. It was about some bloke who got cancer. Leukaemia or something. He can’t play his trumpet because he’s always short of breath. When he starts chemo, he loses his hair. A few days later, you found some of your hair in the shower and brought it to me. You were hysterical. I tried to reason with you, but you wouldn’t listen. You thought you had cancer. I mean, Jesus, you were four-years-old.’ Dad took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. ‘You know, your mother worries about you. She doesn’t sleep some nights.’

‘Why does she worry?’

‘She thinks she’s given you her problems.’

I wiped the sweat off my hands. ‘I don’t have problems,’ I said. I looked at the lights. The coloured prisms were flashing red and green.

Dad put his glasses back on. ‘I think you should go in there and tell her you’re sorry.’
‘For what?’

‘For making her worry.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ I said.

‘Trust me, you’ve done enough.’

When Mum got sick after Emma was born, Gran came to live with us. She stood in front of her suitcase and introduced her bras. There was Youthful Triumphant and Radiant Woman, and her favourite, Lady Be Beautiful. She waltzed around the lounge in her smalls, saying things like, ‘Keep perky when you’re feeling murky!’ and ‘The lift never lets you down!’ She took great pride in her undergarments and even introduced herself to our neighbours as a collector of casket jewels. When she arrived after Emma’s christening, she took one look at Mum and said, ‘Mary, you need support.’ She started with the house. The stilts that held us up were buckling at the joints. The open windows sucked in smoke from the forest, and the walls, which were patterned with apples and pears, were starting to yellow. In the kitchen, cracks stretched out in the boards, like cobwebs. The kitchen table was squeezed against the window to make space for Rusty’s bed. The curtains flapped in the wind. Everything was either broken or longing for somewhere else.

When Gran moved in, she urged Dad to fix the leak in the roof, but he fell from the rafter and broke his arm. The plaster cast locked his elbow in a right angle and he sulked around the house. Gran called a handyman to repair the roof and remove the rotted wood. His name was Helpful Gary. She found him in the phone book under ‘Hire a Hubby.’ On the afternoon he was set to arrive, Gran and I stood on the verandah and looked out at the forest.
The fire from the back-burn was turning around and heading back the way it came. A strong wind pushed the smoke to the ground and it rolled towards us. The pine trees in our yard detected the smoke and dropped pinecones on the lawn. Gran said the cones were fascinating things because the scales, which spiralled around the shaft, developed before the pollen sac. I asked Gran why the pinecones did this and she said, ‘To protect the seed, of course.’ We waited together on the verandah for Gary, but he never came. ‘That wasn’t very helpful,’ Gran said.

The next morning, when Dad was at the fracture clinic, Gran decided to mend the roof herself. She stood on the deck in her denim overalls and scrubbed the panels with a broom. She filled the cracks in the roof with putty and scraped off the excess with a knife. She levelled the wood with an old sander and added a coat of gloss. While she worked, she held a hanky over her mouth to keep out the dust. When the primer was dry, she added another coat. When she was done, she called to Luke and I to return her tools to the shed. The shed kept all the things Mum didn’t want anymore but that Dad wouldn’t let her bin: tennis racquets and table legs, a fish tank, chess pawns, and something that looked like a sink. Gran joked that if Lewis Carroll was still alive, we’d have him around for tea.

‘A tea party?’ I said.

Gran nodded. ‘We have so many curious things.’

Luke grinned. ‘I’m the Cheshire cat,’ he said. ‘And Kate’s Alice.’ He turned to Gran. ‘You can be the Evil Queen.’

She clipped him over the ear.

Sometimes, I think Gran enjoyed hitting Luke because he reminded her of Dad. Once, when she was chasing Luke with a wooden spoon, I heard her say, ‘I should have done this years ago.’ Luke was only four at the time. He’d taken Gran’s scissors from her sewing kit
and cut his hair when no one was home. When Gran caught him, she made him stand in front of the mirror and look at what he’d done. His hair, which was dark and usually long, was short on top and shoulder-length at the back. Gran said he looked like an Egyptian princess. When she saw the bald spot behind his ear, she held her make-up mirror behind his head to reveal the patch of skin. Luke smiled and touched the spot twice, as if he didn’t believe it was real. When Gran saw the look on his face, she snapped the mirror shut. She asked Luke if he liked his bald spot and he said, ‘Yep, it’s just like Dad’s.’ Gran hit him again.

When Gran was with us, Dad was different. He never roused or raised his voice; he rarely even swore. He still stressed about money and traffic and a liberal government, but the fall out was never as bad. If he lost his temper, he didn’t lose his mind. Gran helped him cook and clean and finish his overdue jobs. She typed up his payment reminders and printed them in red. She encouraged his clients to pay on time or hire an attorney. At night, she stayed up late, filing his papers and dating the incoming cheques. In the morning, she ironed Dad’s shirt and pants, and polished his leather shoes. Dad said he didn’t want her to do so much, just relax and watch us kids. Gran said she appreciated his concern, but she’d do whatever she liked. She wasn’t here for a holiday and he needed to focus on his work. When Gran talked to Dad, she spoke to him in a firm instructive way, as if he was still a child. She didn’t boss him around or patronise him, but she was always to the point. When Dad was wrong, Gran interrupted him in an even tone and told him that no, that wasn’t the case. When he was rude or acting out, she told him to pull his head in. Dad didn’t answer back or interrupt and he never undermined her. He teased her constantly but in a playful way; he didn’t make fun of her. I saw from the way they interacted that they understood each other. When we watched *Hey, Hey It’s Saturday*, they laughed at the same segments. They thought Plucka Duck was an unsung star, so they voted for him at The Logies. When Eric Bana won The Best Comedy
Personality, Dad and Gran were pissed. How was a man who drank VB funnier than a man in a duck costume? The conversation always came up at dinner until the show was canned.

One night, when we were sitting at the kitchen table, Dad returned to the topic again. We usually ate in front of the TV, but when Gran was over that wasn’t allowed. Dad unscrewed the bottle of Coke and poured everyone a glass.

‘I still think Plucka should have won that trophy,’ he said.

Gran agreed. ‘Remember when he rode a dodgem car across the set and crashed into the camera?’

‘They had to cut to an ad.’

‘That was a hoot,’ Gran said.

She drained the water from the strainer and tipped the peas and carrots into a bowl. While she waited for the veggies to cool, she pulled apart the chicken. She separated the wings from the breast and severed both the legs. She discarded the skin and part of the neck along with the excess fat. She served up the stuffing with a bit of coleslaw. The four of us ate in silence. After a while, Dad put down his knife and fork, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

‘She’s not getting any better,’ he said.

Gran salted her chips. ‘She’s fine.’


Gran smiled. ‘Eat your peas.’

He mashed his greens with a fork.

‘I think it’s her meds,’ Dad said. He pushed back his plate. ‘I didn’t sign up for this.’

Gran spooned some carrots onto my plate.
‘I don’t want them,’ I said.

‘Eat.’

I sighed and slumped over the table.

‘You know what I think,’ Gran said. ‘She’s afraid of change. All she needs is a little courage.’

‘We’re all afraid of something. I’m afraid of losing this house and living on the streets with these kids. If I spent everyday in bed, no one in this family would eat.’

Gran pointed her spoon at him. ‘I don’t want to hear it. These kids have brains in their heads and fat where they need it, and until that changes, we should all be thankful. Mary will be fine, but you have to be patient and listen to what she says. I can look after her while I’m here, but you’re the only one who can do it for good.’

Dad poked around the scraps on his plate and removed a bone from his chicken. The bone was strange and shaped like the letter Y. He held it to the light.

‘What’s that?’ Luke said.

‘It’s the wishbone.’

‘What’s it for?’

‘It’s for flying,’ Gran said. ‘If a bird didn’t have this bone, she wouldn’t get off the ground.’

‘It’s also for making wishes,’ I said.

‘That’s right. In America, they pull the bone apart and whoever gets the larger half makes a wish. It’s a Thanksgiving tradition.’

‘Can we do the tradition?’ Luke said.
‘We’re not American.’

‘Please.’

Gran nodded, and Dad handed her the bone. She cleaned it with a bit of spit, then passed it to Luke and I. We pulled it apart with our pinkies. Luke drew the larger half.

‘I wish for a twin brother. Hayden has a brother called Hunter and they switch places at school.’

‘Mate,’ Dad laughed. ‘You’re not supposed to tell. It’s not gonna come true now.’

‘Yeah, mate,’ I said.

Gran patted my knee. She seemed to know how I was feeling, even when I didn’t say. Mum said she felt the same. When she finally got out of bed, she said, ‘Your grandmother knows things. Don’t ask me how, but she does.’ When I asked Mum what Gran knew, she said, ‘Everything: how many hairs are on your head, when you’re out of money. She knows what you need before you ask. She even knows your father.’

I looked at Gran. She was turning the bone around in her hand, as if it was worth something. There was a Woman’s Day on her lap. She was always reading something. She had a bookshelf full of world maps and encyclopaedias: teach yourself this, teach yourself that. She collected ancient texts and Latin classics, dictionaries, too. Sometimes, when I couldn’t sleep, she gave me a spelling test. ‘If you can spell apple, then you can spell hobble,’ she said. ‘There’s a pattern in the pairs.’

I excused myself from the table and went upstairs. I walked down the hall to Mum and Dad’s room. Mum was lying on her bed, with her back to the door. I sat down beside her.

‘You said only God knows everything,’ I said.
Mum rolled over. ‘That’s right. God and Gran.’ She examined my hands. ‘What’s that?’

I was holding my half of the bone. ‘It’s nothing,’ I said.

‘It doesn’t look like nothing.’

‘Looks aren’t everything,’ I said.

Mum touched my cheek.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Well, I had a nap,’ Mum laughed. ‘I always feel better when I’m asleep.’ She opened the box of pills next to her bed and popped two capsules into her hand. She tossed back her head and swallowed the pills. ‘Where’s your father?’

‘With Gran.’

‘That would be right.’ Mum rubbed the base of her neck. ‘What’s the time?’

‘I have to go to bed soon,’ I said. ‘Can you tell me a story?’

Mum frowned. ‘I guess. I mean, if I can think of one. I’m not much of a storyteller.’

I climbed onto Dad’s side of the bed.

Mum sat up on her arm. ‘When I was young and pregnant with you, your grandmother packed all my things into a suitcase and drove me to hospital. I wasn’t due yet, my waters hadn’t broken, but Gran insisted you were coming. It was the middle of November. You weren’t due for weeks.’

Dad stood at the door, with a tea towel over his shoulder. ‘Fruit salad with ice cream. Darls? Would you like some? My treat. What about you, chook? I bought those apricots you like.’
Mum pulled the doona over us both. ‘There was no way I was having you. Not that early. That’s what I told your grandmother when we pulled into the hospital.’

‘What did Gran say?’

‘She said, “We’ll see about that.”’

‘Then what?’

‘Then she called your father and told him you were coming.’

‘Was she right?’ I said.

Mum nodded. ‘Later that night, you were born.’
When I arrived at my hotel, the desk clerk took my passport.

‘You’re travelling alone?’ she said.

I nodded.

‘You’re our first guest in days.’

I looked around. The lobby was empty. It appeared to have been like that for some time. The hotel phone was out of order and the receiver hung from its cord. The carpet was worn and threadbare. Even the restaurant was vacant. The fire in the furnace was dying down, leaving the embers to burn themselves out. In the lounge, there were two swivel chairs, both outward-facing and abandoned. Whoever was sitting there had left in a hurry.

‘It’s our off-season,’ the clerk said. ‘First level, third room on the right.’

‘Keys?’ I said.

She handed me two. ‘You’ll have to try both. One’s for the safe.’ She called the porter, but he waved her away. ‘It’s not far. Enjoy your stay.’

Inside, the room was quiet, except for the rain against the window. The single bed was pressed against a small dresser that supported a coffee maker. At the end of the bed, there was a clothes rack on wheels and a tangle of wire coat hangers. The pink carpet matched the curtains and ceiling as well as the paper lampshade. The whole room seemed embarrassed. I dropped my bag on the floor and opened the sliding door.

I was in New York to meet a friend, a Greek man called Spyro who lived in Central Park. We’d been writing to each other for years, but we’d never met in person. He was homeless, but sometimes he slept in a shelter on Twelfth Street, which was where I sent my letters. From what I could tell, Spyro came from a wealthy family. His parents were Greek
Americans who made their fortune in Texas oil. Spyro was educated at a private school that offered scholarships to promising students. In his senior year, he topped math and Latin, and graduated as valedictorian. Over the summer, he got the girl next door pregnant, and his father, a strict Orthodox, sent him to the seminary. The week before his ordination, Spyro ran away with a wayward priest who was dismissed for personal reasons. The pair hitchhiked to the Mississippi to look for work in the shipyards. One night, on the way to Tulsa, the priest was picked up by a Mexican truckie who refused a lift to Spyro. The truckie said he was travelling with a pal who wasn’t far behind. His mate would pick up Spyro within the hour. He gave the priest his word. Spyro agreed and continued east, but his ride never came. He’d lived on the streets ever since.

We started writing to each other in my first year of uni. I found his address through the homeless shelter while writing a paper on white poverty. The minister warned that Spyro might ask for money, but he never asked for anything. In our letters, we spoke about poetry and world politics and how some days, you see lots of people on crutches, and other days, you don’t see any. I sent him photos of The Twelve Apostles, and Azaria’s jacket, and other things he’d read of Australia. He sent me sketches of people at the shelter and Sudoku puzzles I couldn’t solve. I trusted him immediately and felt as though I could tell him anything, perhaps because of the distance. I explained to him what was happening at home and he agreed that I should leave. He said there were some situations you had to persevere and others you had to quit. I could feel him listening from wherever he was, and his replies always answered my questions. After Dad kicked me out of home, I decided to visit Spyro. I didn’t know how it would go, but I was homeless, too, so I figured we had that much in common. It felt wrong to stay somewhere fancy, so I rented a room in Harlem.
Outside my flat, there was a small balcony that overlooked the courtyard. In the pool area, the chairs and tables were overturned. The cabana bar was boarded up and the spa was covered with ice. The frozen water pumps, with their long beards and pointy ears, resembled glass statues. In the street, there was a pizza joint with vinyl booths and a chequered floor. The red and green lights blinked on and off, but the message was lost in the snow. Next to the shop was an old record store with a studio upstairs. In the stone tower, a broken clock kept time. Ice piled up on the arrowheads and along the Roman numerals. Apart from the pigeons, the street was empty. The city seemed to exist beyond time. A ghost town, I thought. I returned to my room and ordered a cab. I thought about calling home.

When Dad met Mum, he was working at the tax office on Gympie Road. He caught a cab to work every morning because there weren’t any buses from home. Mum said Dad was always worried about other peoples’ business, which is why he worked in audits. He split all his days into profits and losses, and never risked money on wagers. He believed in the certainty of random testing and even accounted for it, but apart from the occasion of drink driving, he never played games of chance. He went to the casino once a year and that was to balance their books.

‘But what about when you were young?’ I said. ‘And you went to the races? You must have gambled then.’

‘The only gamble I ever took,’ he said, ‘was marrying your mother.’
Mum and Dad were married on a Sunday afternoon in a small brick church called St. Pascal’s. The church, which was attached to a school of the same name, was the one Mum attended as a girl. The ceiling sloped to a life-sized crucifix that hung above the altar. The altar was decorated with candlesticks, and vases of ferns and daisies. At the communion table, bread baskets were prepared with goblets of wine for the Eucharist. Next to the organ was a stand for the choir and a screen to hide the band from view. Father Rex, the priest who gave the service, wore white robes and a purple poncho. In his blessing, he told how Mum crawled into the confession box as a girl and fell asleep during the Prayers of the Faithful. He didn’t notice her there until his homily, when she poked her fingers through the latticework. ‘She was an unusual child,’ he said, ‘poking holes in my faith.’ The congregation laughed.

The wedding, which was organised for the same day as the NRL grand final, divided those who came. Instead of sitting with the bride or groom, guests chose either the Canterbury Bulldogs (Mum and Dad’s team) or the St. George Dragons (Uncle Laurie’s). Laurie, one of Mum’s brothers-in-law, worked in emergency services as a first-aid instructor. He taught CPR classes to first-time parents and other carers. Sometimes, he brought the dummy to family gatherings, so we could practise mouth-to-mouth. When the dummy didn’t respond, Dad and I punched its chest to stimulate the heart. Mum liked to have Uncle Laurie around in case someone choked on a high-risk food, like grapes or chewy steak. When no one was watching, he snuck a transistor radio into the service to follow the game. He couldn’t pick up a signal in church, so halfway through the ceremony, he left to check the score. When he returned, he mouthed the update to Dad, who informed his groomsmen that the doggies were down. At one point, during Mum’s vows, the radio switched on and the match commentary could be heard. ‘Holy shit!’ my uncle shouted. There was static for a minute followed by applause.
Gramps, who was the only family member missing, was in Lowson House at the time. The house, which was originally a wing of the Royal Brisbane, was turned into a psychiatric unit before he arrived. The building, with its thin glass walls and open halls, was an adult institution by law. Eventually, the consulting doctors tired of late onset problems and pushed for a juvenile program. The proposal fell through, but the facility continued to operate.

Gramps was admitted with PTSD and later diagnosed with dementia. He escaped the night before Mum and Dad’s wedding to the cliffs at Kangaroo Point. When the police found him scaling the rocks, they cuffed his wrists and drove him back to Lowson. The next morning, Gramps drew a picture of a sinking ship and wrote in perfect cursive underneath, ‘Abandon Hope.’ Gran kept the picture in a box under her bed for things she wanted to forget but couldn’t. Sometimes, I found her going through the box on a rainy day and adding or removing items.

Dad, on the other hand, didn’t want to remember anything. He tried to forget the day Gramps beat him up, and the dawn service when Gramps wet his pants. Even when Gramps’s wandering became a regular habit, Dad refused to believe he belonged in the company of P.K. Bromley or Mrs. Evans, or even Syd Parker, for that matter, who tried to hang himself with a dog chain under the house. Syd, who shared a balcony with Gramps, tried to end things twice one Christmas. First, before the judging of the colouring competition, and again, during the carols sing-along. Both times, the dog collar broke and he fell from the rafters and bruised his knees. Dad thought Syd’s depression, and depression in general, was Just Plain Hooey. He told Mum it was a way of thinking that could be easily changed. He said, ‘If five good things happen during the day and one bad thing, a sook only thinks of the bad.’ Mum was offended by his comment and said that like all things in life, until he felt it for himself, he wouldn’t understand. Dad said he couldn’t afford to mope around the house, feeling sorry for himself. He had too much work to do.
Before the wedding, he spent the week with Gramps, filling out a special request for a day pass. The doctors who considered the application said Gramps wasn’t well enough to leave. One of the physicians, who was a recent graduate, granted day release with supervision. But the other doctors, their weight much heavier, said firmly and forever, no. Mum promised Dad they’d visit Gramps before the service and take some photos in the garden. Dad hired a camera just for the occasion and Mum bought an extra film. They arrived together in the Laser, an hour before the wedding: Mum in a dress more yellow than white, and Dad in a suit too big. The driveway to Lowson was steeper than they realised and twice, my parents slipped. In their wedding video, Mum’s dress is ripped at the hem and one of her heels is broken. In the opening scene, she’s hopping around the car park with Julie, who’s laughing and waving Mum’s shoe. Dad, who’s all bones and no belly yet, is pinning a rose to his pocket. Every now and then, he elbows one of his groomsmen in the side. Gran is standing at the door with a pointing stick, telling guests where to sit.

The first time I watched the video, I thought it was incredibly boring. The second time around, I was a few years older and fascinated by my dad. He was clean-shaven and well dressed, but it was boyish charm that intrigued me and maybe Mum as well. There was something about his casual swagger that suggested he was self-assured. He was confident, but he wasn’t arrogant, and I thought that was attractive. In fact, for most of the ceremony, Dad was too busy mucking around with his mates to take himself seriously. In one scene, when his groomsman produces the rings, Dad slips one onto his finger and offers the other to his best man, Baz. Baz isn’t sure what to do, so he turns to Mum, and Dad starts humping his leg. The altar boys, who are usually mute, can’t hold back their laughter. Dad was funny, I thought. He was natural on stage. For the first time, I saw him as a person and not just my dad. I caught a glimpse of who he was before I knew him and I realised he was different. His
world was different. He still had time to travel and do what he wanted. If he changed his mind, he could turn around.

The reception, which was organised for later that evening, was held at the Enoggera Bowls Club. The waitress taped balloons to the tables and cellophane over the lights. The barman passed around plastic cups filled with peanuts and coloured popcorn. In his speech, Dad said Mum was the girl of his dreams, but in the beginning, he was sweet on Alexi Pepicelli. Lexi, who was Mum’s tennis partner, was an Italian girl with long black hair and heavy breasts. On match days, she wore tight singlets with leopard print skirts and bandanas around her neck. In competition, Mum played the net because she couldn’t hold the line, but Lex, who had an excellent serve, nicknamed herself The Swinger. Mum and Dad met over the net, during the final of the mixed singles. Lex cheered on from the side, ‘Whack him, Mary! Hard as you can. Make that fat boy run!’ Dad rushed around the court, covering all his bases, while Mum stood at the net. Half an hour later, the match was over. Mum beat Dad in straight sets. She hardly worked up a sweat. After the medal presentation, Dad invited the girls for dessert and they went to the Valley for ice cream.

‘I tried to ask The Swinger out,’ Dad said, during his speech. ‘She was a real knock out. But when we got to Wendy’s, she ordered the Belgian chocolate with hot fudge and extra cherries, while Mary just wanted to flirt.’ He turned to Mum. ‘You were a cheap date, weren’t you, darls?’ He raised his glass. ‘The rest is history.’

The guests all laughed and hooted at that, and Mum kicked Dad under the table.

‘Here’s to us,’ Dad said, proposing a toast. ‘And to the beginning of the end.’

Mum, whose face was bright red, sunk into her dress.
After they cut the cake, Mum stood on Dad’s feet and he danced her around the green. In their wedding photo, they’re standing side by side, holding matching lawn bowls. The president of the club, Billy Graham, is standing in between. On the back of the photo, in Dad’s handwriting, is the caption, ‘7-6’. Mum couldn’t remember what the numbers meant, so I asked Dad instead.

‘It was the final score,’ he said, when I showed him the photo. ‘It was a ripper of a match. A field goal came in with five minutes on the clock and the doggies stole the game.’ He turned the photo over. ‘I remember it like it was yesterday. No one could chip and chase like Turvey. He was a magic man.’

I looked at the photo closely. In the picture, my parents are so young, they could be playing dress-ups. Mum is fixing the strap on her dress and trying to balance the ball. Dad is on his tiptoes, looking past the camera. He seems to be expecting something.

‘Did you always know?’ I said.

Dad laughed. ‘Nope, it was a last minute gig.’ He handed me the photo. ‘The saints were the minor premiers. There was nothing in it. The boys struck back and I thought they had us, but their backline quit. In the end, the dogs pulled through.’

‘You look happy,’ I said. I waved the photo.

‘Bloody oath. We won by a single point.’

‘It was that close,’ I said.

Dad nodded. ‘It was a good day.’

Maybe because Mum chased him, everything was a given: they’d marry in spring, buy a house on the north side, and have a couple of kids. Dad didn’t take risks back then because
he couldn’t afford to; he just worked things out with a formula. Once, when Mum was worried about Julie’s new boyfriend, Lance, Dad considered the couple’s future by working out the compatibility of their politics. ‘Tell Julz to end it straight away,’ he said. ‘He’s a Torie and she deserves better.’ His logic seemed to annoy Mum, who didn’t believe things were always black and white. When she was unwell, she described her depression as being locked in a cage with a grey fog. When she was down, she went to church and asked God to help her out. Her God was kind and full of mercy, but he didn’t forgive easily. When Dad was at work and no one was around, Mum told me what she believed.

‘I don’t believe God’s small-minded,’ she said, when I told her I was gay. ‘I mean, it’s not what I would choose for myself, but if that’s what makes you happy.’

‘It’s not a choice,’ I said.

Mum nodded. ‘Why didn’t you tell me sooner?’

I was honest. ‘I was scared of what you’d say.’

Mum thought about it. ‘I’m not a gay basher,’ she said. She pulled her chair closer. ‘So, tell me, who’s the lucky lady? Is it Kez? Your father said you were dating, but I thought you were friends.’

‘It’s complicated,’ I said.

‘It usually is.’

‘So, you and Dad knew?’

‘We suspected. I mean, I always had a feeling. You watched a lot of Xena.’

‘Xena?’
‘You remember, the warrior princess.’ Mum raised her fist. ‘You haven’t heard the last of me, Hercules!’ She flicked her hair. ‘Kiss me, Gabrielle.’

‘Please don’t do that,’ I said.

Mum laughed.

She took the news better than I expected. She didn’t pray for my sins or blame herself; she just nodded her head and listened. Every so often, she’d ask a question, like, ‘When was that?’ or ‘How do you know?’ and ‘What about G.I. Joe?’ When I finished talking, she said she loved me anyway and I’d always be her daughter. Before our conversation ended, she asked me who else knew, and I said everyone, really, except her. She smiled, but I could see that she was hurt. Not because I was gay but because I hadn’t told her sooner. She said she felt like she’d let me down because she was my mother, and a child shouldn’t have to worry about her mother’s acceptance, unless she killed someone. I told her I wasn’t ready to come out, but I felt ashamed of myself. I thought about waking up that morning and deciding to tell her. The day itself was of no significance, but I knew why I could do it. It was because at that point in my life, if my parents didn’t want me, I knew I’d be okay. Now, Mum was upset because I hadn’t told her the truth about who I was. In a way, I’d underestimated her.

The next morning, when I came down for breakfast, Mum was sitting at the table. She’d cut out a picture of Ellen DeGeneres and Portia de Rossi, and stuck it to the fridge.

‘What’s this?’ I said.

Mum looked up from her muesli. ‘It’s Ellen and Portia. They’re lesbian lovers.’

‘I know who they are. Why are they on our fridge?’

Mum shrugged. ‘I just want you to feel at home.’
I opened the crisper drawer. ‘What happened to the strawberries?’

‘I ate them.’

‘And the yoghurt?’

‘In my belly.’

‘You realise that was my breakfast.’

Mum scooped her muesli around the bowl. ‘I was thinking you should tell Dad you’re a lesbian, but I knew you wouldn’t, so I told him for you.’ She licked the yoghurt off her spoon.

‘What did he say?’

‘He said you should do what makes you happy.’ She set her bowl on the table. ‘Can I ask you something? Do you think you were born gay? Or did we raise you that way? I mean, do you think you had a choice?’

‘It’s just the way I am,’ I said. ‘I don’t remember “choosing” to be gay. It’s not like I woke up one day and thought, “Yep, I’m gonna be gay.”’

‘Well, I’m glad you told me. Now, we can talk about it.’ Mum pushed her bowl to the side. ‘I wonder if I could be gay.’

‘What?’

‘Sometimes, when your father rolls over, I pretend I’m asleep or that I can hear a burglar. He’s like a monkey or something. He always wants a quickie.’ Mum tapped her lips with the spoon. ‘Maybe I’m a lezzie, too.’
It didn’t seem to bother Mum that I was gay. In fact, she seemed proud I’d moved from boys to girls, as if it was an upgrade. At coffee, one day, she told her friend, Benita, that I was post-heterosexual. When Benita mentioned that I wasn’t butch, Mum said that’s because I was a dipstick lesbian. A few days later, she put a rainbow sticker on the bumper of our car. I told her the sticker was unnecessary, so she bought a rainbow flag and hung it over the balcony. I explained that the rainbow was a clichéd symbol that was overused by the gay community, and she said I was pretentious and that my gay foremothers would be ashamed. She seemed to think my sexuality was something we should celebrate. She wanted to throw me a coming out party and pretend it was a house warming until everyone arrived; she thought it would be funny if I jumped out of the closet and shouted, ‘Surprise!’ Again, I told her that a party wasn’t necessary; my friends already knew I was gay and I was trying to save money. She agreed that a party was over the top, but if I changed my mind, she had an idea for a theme. I asked Mum why she was so cool with everything, and she said, ‘You can’t help who you love.’ On account of the Pope, however, and the sanctity of marriage, Mum didn’t believe there was a causal link between disputes over dinner and divorce. She rarely fought with anyone, but when she did, it was always with Dad. Sometimes, in a fit of frustration, she tried to level with reason.

‘Opposites attract,’ she said, the night after I came out. ‘Look at Ennis and Jack.’

The three of us were sitting on the couch, watching *Brokeback Mountain*. The film was Mum’s idea.

‘Actually,’ Dad said, ‘that’s a very common misconception. Take the Royals, for example.’

Mum rolled her eyes.
‘They rarely marry outside of nobility, and when they do, it’s only for money. They don’t want to sample what’s out there. They’re not interested in average Joes. They want someone of equal status and fortune. You know, Queen Victoria married her first cousin.’

‘As if,’ Mum said.

‘And your Biblical friends, Mary and Joseph. They were cousins, too. There’s lots of cousin couples because people generally settle on what’s possible. It’s called “The Matching Hypothesis.”’

‘Bruce,’ Mum said. ‘I’m not an idiot. I know there’s no such thing.’

Dad pointed at the screen. ‘Look at these two. One’s a ranch hand and the other’s a pretty boy. And look at us. When we got together, you’d just broken up with Jimmy Miles, so you were depressed all the time. You were having episodes, remember? You saw him at the airport and thought it was a sign.’

‘A sign of what?’ I said.

‘A sign we should stay together. He was richer than your father and much better looking. He was a nice boy, my Jim. He never lied to me.’

Dad smirked. ‘How do you know?’

Mum shrugged. ‘We went on a picnic once and I got a celery string caught in my teeth. I didn’t know, of course. He pointed it out.’

Dad frowned. ‘What’s so good about that? I’ve got gold in mine.’

‘You’ve got bad breath.’

Dad closed his mouth.
‘He said he’d love me forever if I told the truth. He demanded it. He said he’d only leave for one reason and that was if I lied.’ Mum looked at me. ‘Sometimes, I wonder if things would have turned out differently, if I knew then what I know now. I mean, if I could go back and change things—’

‘Well, you can’t,’ Dad said. ‘And with an arse like yours, I’m not surprised he left.’

The house was quiet.

‘You’re a bastard,’ Mum said.

Dad turned to me. ‘Did you hear that, Kate? Your mother thinks I’m a bastard.’

‘You kind of are,’ I said.

Dad laughed.

∞

I reasoned that my taxi driver, Alek, was probably Russian. His English was mixed with exotic words, and his accent was crude and heavy. On his gearbox, there was a laminated photo of Peter the Great. As we drove, the heater puffed hot air around the cab and the leather warmed my thighs. Alek scratched his neck.

‘It’s lice,’ he said. ‘I can feel them crawling. Doctor says I’ve got to use this special shampoo to try and kill them. You ever had lice?’

I nodded. ‘Once, when I was a girl. I caught them at school. My mum picked them out with a magnifying glass. The shampoo didn’t work.’
‘I’ll cut my hair, if I have to. If there’s nowhere for the devils to hide, they’ll die. You hear me, you little shits?’

I looked at Alek’s scalp. His skin was dry and flaking off, and there were sores behind his ears from scratching. His jumper, which was olive-green, was patterned with white flecks.

‘You can use kerosene,’ I said. ‘It stings, but it kills the eggs.’

‘I’ll use gasoline,’ he said.

We turned onto Park Avenue.

Outside, the snow fell steadily onto the cars in front. The street disappeared under a blanket of white and the buses passed silently with their lights on high beam. Piles of snow, just recently ploughed, turned to brown slush on the sidewalk. The slush clogged the entrances to cafés and laundromats, and got filthier as we drove. In the distance, two smokestacks, both in red and white stripes, sent billows of grey into the sky. A plane descended overhead, preparing to land nearby.

Alek turned to me. ‘Where to?’

‘Central Park. Near the museum.’

He nodded and pressed the accelerator.

‘I’m not in a hurry,’ I said.

Alek laughed. ‘We’re all in a hurry here.’ He pointed to a woman, who was crossing the street to her apartment. ‘Watch the way she walks. Busy, busy, busy. Look at those legs. She’s a friend of Old Nick’s.’

‘Who?’
We stopped at a traffic light. The red glow melted the falling snow before it reached the ground. Alek turned up the heat.

‘Old Nick, the bastard. He remembers things that happened a long time ago and when you forget, he brings them back.’ He rubbed the windscreen. ‘When bad things happen, you don’t forget.’

‘That’s true,’ I said.

‘I’ve done some bad things, but I don’t think I should be locked up.’

That’s great, I thought.

Alek turned on his headlights. ‘I’ll pull off at 76th.’

I looked out the window. The ice-rink was crowded with a team of hockey players, who chased a puck across the ice. The keenest skaters were gliding around, practising their pirouettes. In the middle of the rink, a girl began to twirl on one foot, turning faster and faster as she moved. As she neared the ice, she crouched on her skates and extended her arms. She looked like a spinning top. When her legs began to wobble, she skated over to the rail and spoke to a man in a black skivvy. To her side, a child came off the ice with a busted knee. He limped towards his mother before falling in the snow. His father picked him up and examined the cut, then gestured to the other children. The older boys finished their snowman, then kicked him over. The snowball rolled towards the skater, who was wiping her blades with a towel.

Alek adjusted his mirror. ‘Children are the worst. When we’re driving around, they forget how cold it is outside, so they want to escape. It doesn’t matter what you do or how
nice you speak. They pull at the handles and kick their legs. Sometimes, they attack themselves.’

‘They can be very creative,’ I said.

‘A child can’t be the boss,’ Alek said. He gripped the wheel. ‘When I was a boy, I was good at reading maps. I followed the boats from the Baltic and found all the fishing spots. My brother, Yuri, was jealous. He ripped up my maps and told my father I was stealing fish from the market. My father beat me. I could have stopped him if I wanted to, but I didn’t because he was the boss.’ Alek checked his mirror. ‘Now, I’m older and I live here, but I can’t escape the past.’

‘I know what you mean.’

Alek scratched his neck. ‘You start to feel crazy, eh? You start to feel really skhazshu. Maybe you see things that aren’t there.’

I nodded to keep him calm.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Kate.’

‘Katrina,’ he said, rolling the r. ‘Good name. Strong.’

‘It’s just Kate.’

He smiled and rubbed his thigh. ‘It’s getting warmer. The lake’s melting. Soon, someone will fall in, probably a woman.’ He touched himself. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Australia.’

‘Down under. What’s the weather like there?’
‘At the moment? Hot.’

‘I like hot places,’ Alek said. ‘I hope I go to Hell. My father’s there.’ He opened his glove box. ‘You know, you look like my daughter, Sasha. She lives in Volgograd. She smokes too much.’ He handed me a picture. ‘All the girls in Volgo smoke too much. They take drugs and become prostitutkas. Eventually, they go to prison. There’s work inside. They put sparkle on their eyelids and take cash from the guards. No one talks about it.’ He opened the door and spat. ‘It’s the same here.’

As we drove, the streetlights flickered on and off, illuminating the street in an orange glow. The snow ploughers were almost finished when the sidewalk was covered again. A police car, just ahead, was snowed in for the night. The subway stairs were covered with ice. A freak wind lashed out at the city, threatening to tear it apart. I opened my purse and thought about calling Kez. It was late back home, but I hadn’t heard from her in a while. Her silence usually meant she’d got tired of calling and tried someone else. Either that or something had happened with Dad. I closed the phone.

‘What did he do?’ I said.

‘Who?’

‘Your father. Why’s he in Hell?’

‘He left my mother,’ Alek said. ‘He broke her heart.’ He turned the wheel. ‘It was her fault as well.’

I nodded, but I thought it was a strange thing to say. I pointed at the photo of Sasha.

‘You must miss her.’
Alek shrugged. ‘I love my daughter, but she’s confused about things.’ He changed
gears. ‘I remember when she was a girl, I took her to see Oleg Popov the Clown. For his first
act, he charmed a snake. The snake came out of the basket and swayed his head from side to
side. He was angry, you could tell. When Sasha saw the snake, she laughed and clapped her
hands. Then, when the lights went out, she bit me. I couldn’t believe it. My lapooshka. After
all I’ve done.’

‘That must have hurt.’

Alek shrugged. ‘It was a long time ago now.’

I looked ahead. At the intersection, there was an entrance to the park. Behind the gates
was a statue of a girl raised on a stone mushroom. Her locks were made of melted gold, and
her hooped skirt, which she held her in hands, caught the falling snow. At her back, a cat
peered over her shoulder at a dormouse. The mad hatter, who could see the end approaching,
was caught mid-laugh. Below his hat, which he tipped to the rabbit, was a cobbled
thoroughfare into the park. The sign said, ‘The Children’s Gate.’

Alek sat up. ‘You want to hear a joke?’

‘Sure.’

‘Why does Alice ask so many questions?’

I shrugged.

‘Because she’s in Wonderland.’

He waited for me to laugh.

‘That’s funny,’ I said. I flicked through my purse. ‘This will do.’
'Here?’ Alek said.

‘Yeah.’

He pulled over on the side of the road. ‘You know, this park’s dangerous at night. My friend, Brezhnev, was robbed last week. Some brofka held a knife to his neck and slashed him across the cheek. Probably marked him for later.’ He pointed at the clock on the dash.

‘Some hours are worse than others. Do you know what time’s the worst?’

‘Midnight?’ I guessed. I handed him a twenty.

‘No. It’s three o’clock in the morning. The opposite time of when Jesus died on the cross. If you wake in the morning and it’s three a.m., you’re probably kaput.’

‘That’s strange,’ I said. ‘But lots of people die in the morning.’

‘Eh?’

‘It’s when your immune system is the weakest. That’s why if you get into a car crash in the early morning, your chances of survival are low.’

‘Like Princess Diana,’ Alek said.

‘That’s right.’

‘She was a bitch.’

I undid my seatbelt and got out.
When Princess Diana died, Mum sat in front of the TV and cried. It was the first day of school holidays and I’d just got my period. When I went to the toilet, there was a spot of blood in my undies. I tried to remember if someone had crushed me or kicked me between the legs. The stain stared up at me from the once white cotton and then expanded like a drop of wine. I dabbed it with some toilet paper, but that only made it worse. I checked my jeans to see if the blood had leaked through, but the denim was still blue. I thought if I stood up, the blood would gush out of me, so I just sat there and stared at the wall.

A couple of months earlier, Mum gave me a book to read called *What’s Happening to Me?* The book was illustrated with charts and calendars, and cartoon boys and girls. The author covered several topics, from wet dreams to pimples, breasts, and pubic hair. Each of the chapters began with a question, such as, ‘What’s an erection?’ or ‘Why are mine not like hers?’ I thought the questions were interesting, so I took the book to school. I read it on the bus on the way to swimming, and at lunch, while the other girls played tag. I read by myself in the quiet corner of the library, while Miss Quinlan sorted the returns.

Miss Quinlan was the librarian at St Andrew’s and one of the first teachers to work at the school. Mum said she was the one who came up with the motto, ‘Attend with a Listening Heart.’ Miss Quinlan was my only friend in grade seven, except for Pat the groundskeeper. In November, I invited them to my birthday at Skate City. They came together in Pat’s ute, with a voucher for Angus & Robertson. In the card, Miss Quinlan said books made better friends than people because unlike a lover, a book would never hurt you. She said, ‘The only difference between love and hate is that one causes the other.’ She wasn’t like other librarians. She hardly raised her voice when the boys drew rude pictures in the Bible or threw water balloons down the returns shoot. She never sent out overdue fines or banned anyone
from borrowing. She wore sarongs with gold sandals, and when her partner died, she said I should call her Jane.

‘That’s not my real name,’ she said, ‘but it’s easier.’

‘Than what?’

She drew a breath. ‘Than remembering.’

‘It’s hard to forget,’ I said. I wasn’t sure what I meant, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

‘Come with me,’ she said. ‘I want to show you something.’ She removed her glasses from around her neck and folded them into their case. Then, she unclipped the nametag from her chest and placed it on the desk.

I followed her to the office.

‘Sit down.’ She closed the window behind her desk and drew the blinds. When the room was dim, she peered through the glass at the playground. Mr. Ryan was on duty. ‘It’s just Mr. Ryan,’ she said, then she untied her dress. ‘Why don’t you come over here?’

I slid off the chair. She unclipped her bra and hung it over the lamp. Her breasts were round and firm.

‘See this?’ she said. ‘It’s a treble clef.’ She touched her breast. On the curve was a music note. The tattoo clung to her flesh. ‘My partner gave it to me. She was a musician. Every time I touch it, it reminds me of her. She was a pianist.’

I stared at her breast. It was beautiful. ‘Can I touch it?’

‘Yes.’ She closed her eyes.
I traced my finger over the g and then down around the hook. Her skin so was soft and warm against mine, I didn’t want to stop. Eventually, Jane took my hand and pressed it to her chest.

‘Remembering isn’t consoling,’ she said. ‘It’s the worst curse of all. Why do you think we can’t remember our births?’

‘Because we’re babies,’ I said.

‘No, because our births are traumas. Think about what it would be like to come out of that tiny hole.’

She picked up her bra and started to dress. ‘I hope you never fall in love.’

Most of the time, it was just Jane and I at the library, except on wet days when it rained. One lunchtime, when the school was flooding, I was sitting in the corner reading *What’s Happening to Me?* when Ruby-May found me.

‘What’s this?’ she said. She snatched the book. ‘Let’s read it together.’ She cleared her throat. ‘If you’re a boy,’ she read out loud, ‘then you have something in common with every other boy: you have a penis. When your penis gets stiff, it grows.’ Ruby closed the book. ‘Do you have a penis?’

‘I’ve never seen one.’

‘That’s cos you’re a lezzo.’

‘I’m not a lezzo. I have a boyfriend.’

‘Pat doesn’t count.’

‘It’s not Pat.’
Jane came out of her office. ‘What’s going on?’

‘We’re reading,’ Ruby said. ‘What does it look like?’

Jane picked up the book. She flicked through the pages, one by one. She didn’t read the text, but she scanned the pictures intently, as if she was hoping to find something out. When she got to the end, she flicked back to the contents. Ruby walked away.

‘You know, all the changes you’re going through are normal. They’re nothing to be ashamed of. You’re probably wondering if you’re normal. Is that right? Is that what you’re wondering?’

‘I guess.’

Jane stroked my hair.

‘What’s a period?’

‘No one’s told you?’ She looked around. ‘It’s a discharge of blood from between your legs.’

‘Blood?’

‘Well, it’s a special kind of blood. It’s more magical than the blood in your veins because it comes from your uterus.’

‘I think I’m a lezzo.’

Jane laughed. ‘Even lesbians bleed.’ She tucked her hair behind her ear. ‘You can’t stop your period, but it’s not a bad thing. Think of a caterpillar that goes into its cocoon and changes into a butterfly. You won’t die. You’re just locked into becoming something else.’

‘Why do I have to change?’
‘So, you can have a baby.’ She put her hand on my knee. ‘I remember when I was your age. It’s a confusing time for everyone.’

I sat up in my chair. ‘What do I do when I get the period?’

Jane smiled. ‘Just tell your mum. Your mum will know what to do.’

When I told Mum I was bleeding, she said, ‘For God’s sake Kate, the Princess of Wales is dead and you’re worried about a bit of blood in your knickers.’

The way she said it made me feel like it wasn’t important at all. Still, the blood was starting to clot and I was worried it might get heavier. Mum pulled some tissues from the box.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘Use these.’

I went back to the bathroom and stuffed the tissues in my undies. They crumpled when I walked and stuck out at the sides. I stood in front of the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. My skin was oily and breaking out. There was a bump on my forehead that hurt when I touched it. Something was happening to me.

When I came back to the lounge room, Mum was holding her chest. ‘She was so beautiful,’ she said.

On the screen, there was a photo of Princess Diana. In the still, she was standing in a landmine field, wearing a protective vest and facemask. There was a red cross on her chest and a smaller one on her sleeve.

Mum sobbed. ‘She did so much more than she had to. And for what? So it could all end in a Paris tunnel.’ She blew her nose. ‘There will never be anyone like her again.’
‘Like who?’ Luke said. He came into the room in a snorkelling suit and flippers. There was a plastic breathing tube in his mouth that was shaped like the letter J. He loosened the valve to try and talk, but I cut him off.

‘Don’t come near me,’ I said. ‘I’m having a period.’

He turned and waddled off. I sat on the couch next to Mum. I worried the blood might seep onto the fabric, so I unfolded one of Dad’s newspapers and spread it out beneath me. I tried to look between my legs when no one was watching.

‘What are you doing?’ Dad said.

‘Nothing.’ I closed my legs.

When the funeral started, Mum said, ‘She was only thirty-six.’ She kept saying it over and over.

When the procession reached Westminster Abbey, the guards lifted the coffin from the carriage and carried it into the church. Inside, the congregation opened their hymnbooks. The two princes, William and Harry, walked behind the coffin. When Harry tried to look away, his father nudged him forward. At the end of the service, Elton John sat down at the piano and ran his hands along the keys.

When he started singing, Dad looked up from his paper and said, ‘Not that poof.’

Mum was enraged. ‘Why would you say that?’ she snapped. ‘How can you be so insensitive?’

The camera switched to Prince Charles.

‘Don’t get me started on that Pommy bastard. I told you he didn’t love her.’
‘It doesn’t matter if he loved her or not. Those boys have lost their mother.’

‘They might get a new one, if horse face gets her way.’

Mum turned to me. ‘See what I have to put up with? Your father’s a robot. He doesn’t have feelings.’

‘I’m a robot,’ Dad said. ‘I do not understand human feelings.’ He turned to the side and bent his arm.

Mum threw a pillow at him.

Gran, however, had feelings about things, but I never told anyone. Sometimes, after she saw a bird fly in a certain direction, she said, ‘It’s going to rain tomorrow’, and usually, it did. She seemed to know Shakespeare though she didn’t read him, and French though she never travelled. She called me her petit chou chou. She knew all the songs ever written, even the war cries we made up at camp. Sometimes, when I played my flute, she stopped what she was doing and said, ‘The Moody Blues. I remember them well.’ Even when she went deaf in one ear, she heard when I cried.

‘Kate,’ she said, the day after Diana’s funeral, ‘I know it’s you.’

I was sitting on the toilet. I’d been there for a while.

‘What’s wrong?’ Gran said.

‘I’m bleeding.’

‘Can I come in?’

I slid off the toilet and unlocked the door.

‘You got your period,’ she said.
I nodded.

She pulled me into her arms. ‘Well, it’s about time.’ She held my face between her hands. ‘It’s all happening, isn’t it?’ She opened the cupboard beneath the sink and pulled out a packet of pads. ‘Always be ready, girlie. That’s our motto.’

I stared at her.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t want to change.’

‘What?’

‘Jane said when I got my period, I’d become something else, like a butterfly.’

‘Who the hell is Jane?’ Gran broke the seal on the packet. ‘Here. I’ll show you how to do it.’ She unwrapped a pad from the plastic and stretched it out in her hands. It was long and white and stuffed with cotton wool. She bent her knees and pushed the pad between her legs. ‘Like this.’

I stuck the pad in my undies. It smelt heavenly.

‘How does it feel?’ Gran said.

‘Like a nappy.’

‘Don’t worry.’ She washed her hands and dried them. ‘You can’t tell at all.’

‘Not even when I walk?’

‘Not even when you walk. You look like regular Kate to me.’

I smiled. Sometimes, I thought she was the only one who loved me.
As I walked through Central Park, I looked for Spyro. His favourite spot was a bench by the pond, where he watched the ice freeze over. When it snowed, he squatted in a packing crate at the back dock of the museum. Sometimes, he was picked up by an outreach team, but usually, he wrapped himself in an army blanket and lit a fire to keep warm. His sheltie, Diva, stayed with him at night, but in the morning, she was always gone. Spyro said she was a nervous dog, so when she left, he understood. ‘She stays out of fear,’ Spyro said. ‘Not because she’s loyal.’ They’d been together since the Brooklyn riots, when he found her in a dumpster behind Roy’s Coffee. Within a month or so, she was used to the cold and the lack of food, but the screams and shots from the city still upset her. At night, Spyro tried to calm her down with a song he made up about her called ‘You Look Like Lassie, But You’re Not.’ I didn’t expect to find him in the park, but I thought it was worth a try.

The path to the pond was covered in snow, but the hazy light from the overhead lamps made it possible to see. To the north of the pond, a jetty extended over the ice towards an island for migrating birds. In summer, children could buy turtle food from a stall and feed the red-eared sliders. The turtles were native to the area, but most of the pond dwellers were abandoned pets. At sunset, Spyro watched mothers, flustered by their children’s tears, toss the oversized turtles into the water. He wanted to report the women to the rangers, but he was wary of their motives. He’d been fined for littering on two occasions, and on another for urinating in public. He couldn’t afford to pay the tickets, so he represented himself in court and pleaded for a dismissal. The judicial officer who heard his case dropped the charges and let him off with a warning. Spyro was grateful, but he was convinced the system was against him and he worried about the future.
I knew he came to the pond to think and he knew I was in New York to visit. I’d sent him a letter a month earlier to let him know I’d be around. I wanted to meet, if only briefly, because he was someone I trusted. I decided on the plane trip over that I needed distance from my family. I was tired of keeping secrets for my parents and from myself. It was such a natural part of growing up that I started to think it was normal. It wasn’t until Spyro and I began to write that I realised it wasn’t natural to feel anxious at home. Before I left Brisbane, I started to have panic attacks when I drove around my block. At first, I thought I was having a stroke or some kind of seizure. The left side of my body turned numb and my hands went cold and clammy. I focussed on the road ahead, but the streetlights were blurry. The yellow neons floated upwards into different parts of the sky. My ears were ringing. I tried to block the sound, but the humming persisted. I really believed that I was dying. I pulled over on the side of the road and waited for my heart to stop. After a while, I realised the lights were blurry because I wasn’t wearing my glasses. When I put them on, the lines returned to the middle of the road and I started to feel better. It’s just my nerves, I thought. This is all in my head. I felt about two-feet tall.

I realised then that if I didn’t leave home, I’d be circling my block forever. Even when I decided to come out, it was a choice I made for myself. I didn’t care about Ellen and Portia, or my gay ancestors; I just wanted to tell the truth. I couldn’t wait any longer to be honest with my parents because lying was not only physically exhausting but self-extinguishing, too. Every time I lied about who I was, I felt myself shrink. I got smaller and smaller, until I was six-years-old. I told myself my bones would snap back and my hair would regrow, but I worried about the damage to my body. I knew that if I shrank for good, there wasn’t a pill I could take to make myself big again. I explained this to Spyro and he said my feelings weren’t unusual. He thought the way I felt had something to do with the weather. As the Earth warms up, he said, people will start to shrink. Drier seasons will produce smaller crops.
that generate less food. If we don’t eat as much, we’ll grow to shorter heights, have fewer babies, and be more vulnerable to disease. ‘The problem’s the heat,’ Spyro said. ‘If you put a horse in the dryer, you’ll get a schnauzer.’ I wasn’t sure what he meant.

As I walked around the pond, I thought about Gran. The second story she told me before she died was a story about waiting. She said waiting wasn’t for everyone but neither was patience. When she finished school, she worked in Berlei’s bra factory on Lutwyche Road. Her boss, Frank Hurley, was a kind man, but the war tested his temper. When Menzies began his broadcast, Frank switched the radio to loudspeaker and the announcement came over the system. Menzies said it was his melancholy duty to inform the country that Great Britain had declared war on Germany, and as a result, Australia was at war. That afternoon, all twenty of Frank’s tailors abandoned their stations and enlisted. Not long after, his most talented seamstress resigned to marry an American. Popular lines stacked up in dusty boxes and profits quickly fell. Fittings became expensive and fabrics, like silk, grew scarce. Hurley surrendered his stockings to the army when the government demanded the silk for parachutes. Before work each morning, Norma painted her legs with gravy browning and drew lines down her calves for seams. She returned her scarves and her father’s ties, but she refused to hand over her nightie. The pink slip was tight around her hips and the armpits were worn, but sewn into the fabric was a talking pig who said, ‘I’m perfect just the way I ham.’ The dress was a gift from John.

When he was deployed, Norma kept herself busy by volunteering with the Red Cross. Her girlfriend, Mavis, who also had man on the front, said they shouldn’t worry too much, that they should focus on the good times ahead. On weekends, they baked sweets for soldiers who craved sugar and sleep and other reminders of home. They included the treats, along with warm socks and soap, in care packages they sent to the camps. Their biscuits were crisp
and sealed in syrup, but their cakes never turned out as planned. The colour of the sponge rarely matched the picture on the mix and the cake top always cracked. Norma and Mavis giggled for hours at their failed creations, which they eventually collapsed in the sink. Sometimes, in a final attempt to save the cake, they added fruit ornaments and cream. When the frosting failed, they abandoned the task and ate the cake instead. Gran said that sweets were her only comfort when Gramps was gone, apart from Mavis, of course. She said, ‘Mavis and I were just like you and Kez. We were the kind of friends who stayed together, no matter what.’

When the men were off base, and the wait felt endless, Norma and Mavis caught the bus to the city. At lunch, they ordered sandwiches from a busy deli and wandered to the Gardens to eat. One day, on the way to the pavilion, they found a dead bird in the grass. The bird, a rainbow lorikeet, was green and coral red. Its body was stiff and preserved in the dirt, as if the earth didn’t want it. Its wings were intact, but its neck was chewed to the bone. Only the oesophagus, a long white tube, connected the head and body. Gran said the bird was only a baby, just fresh out of an egg. If it wasn’t for the creature’s mangled neck, it could have fallen from a nest. She assumed the cause of death was a feral cat. There were strays in the Gardens that stalked the undergrowth for mice. Sometimes, the girls saw the cats pawing the pond and chasing frigid ducks. They wrapped the bird in a handkerchief and buried it under a fig. As they covered the grave, Mavis went to say a few words, but Norma stopped her. She wasn’t superstitious, but when John was away, she didn’t speak of the dead.

She tried to talk to him about death, just once, before he left. He chased her around the house instead, tickling her, and shouting, ‘The Japs are here! Kaput!’ When she tried to approach the subject again, he pinned her down and said, ‘If death comes knocking at my door, I won’t answer.’ He said he might look through the peephole though, just to see who
was calling. Norma told him not to bother; it would only be her, coming to throttle him. Years later, when I asked Gran why she never remarried, she said, ‘Once was enough.’ She loved Gramps, but he drove her mad with his practical jokes and constant whistling as well as his talk of time travel, which he believed was possible if he could reverse the flow of time. He thought that in the future, people would take holidays into the past. Before he killed himself, he left a note for Gran in his sock drawer at Lowson House. Gran never told me what the letter said, but when she showed it to Dad, he said, ‘That God-damn son of a bitch.’ Gran put the note in the box under her bed and we never spoke about it. Sometimes, I wondered if she waited for Gramps because she knew she’d outlive him and in the end he’d be waiting for her.

As I neared the bench where I imagined Spyro sat, I noticed paw prints in the snow. The trail looped around the Ramble Shed and doubled back to the pond. The pond, which was topped with a sheet of ice, reflected the grey sky. I stood on the end of the pier and looked out at the park. The barren trees were bare of leaves and other ornaments, and their limbs created frames to view the city. On the main drive, the traffic crawled forward at a laboured pace, slowed by the falling snow. The slippery ice caused a roadblock outside the planetarium and forced the entrance to close. A car, travelling too fast, slid sideways, then stalled in a bank of snow. Eventually, the passenger got out and with the help of a stranger, pushed the car back onto the road. The traffic eased and some of the congestion cleared, but the movement was slow. The city was hibernating. I sat on the bench and watched the snow.

Gran said that during the war, Brisbane was a ghost town. At curfew, the streetlights were dimmed to confuse Japanese fighter pilots and hide the sleeping city below. The government, on Menzies’s orders, advised citizens to carry torches to hail buses and trams. Businessmen, who were walking home in the dark, left their shirt-tails out to be seen. Even
drunks, who usually passed out in the gutter, knew to sleep under the moon. Gran said the
blackouts caused more problems than the bombings up north. At night, people bumped into
each other and broke their noses. Others fell down stairs. When the curfew was enforced,
Betty Redgraves, a friend of Gran’s, was caught lighting a match in Centennial Park. Soon
after, the red glow of cigarettes was banned. More upsetting, Gran said, were the road
accidents. The blackouts kept the city safe from enemy planes, but innocent messengers were
killed crossing busy junctions at night. Eventually, the police introduced a speed limit after
dark.

I didn’t know why I thought of Gran when I travelled, but I did. I knew it wasn’t pity
that made me think of her or even regret on her behalf. She never had any desire to leave
Wacol and see the world. In fact, she preferred to stay at home. When I showed her a menu
for The Hotel of Kings, she said, ‘Why would I fly to Paris and eat snails, when I could walk
to Redcliffe and have fish and chips?’ She seemed to think travel was a waste of time, since it
only returned you to where you began. I never understood what she meant, until I left home.
When Dad kicked me out, I had nowhere to go, so my instinct was to turn around. It was hard
to accept I wasn’t welcome at home and it was harder to understand why. I didn’t want to
hurt my parents or stress them out, but I wanted to know if they loved each other. I thought I
had a right to know. I never considered that maybe it wasn’t my place to ask or their
obligation to answer. Perhaps, Dad avoided the question entirely because he didn’t want to
lie. Then again, maybe he was angry I asked because he expected me to know. I realised that
maybe I was looking back for something that wasn’t there. Or maybe the answer was so
obvious it didn’t need pursuing. There were things about our parents we weren’t supposed to
know.
As I stood to leave, I noticed a man with a sheep dog, making his way around the pond. He was carrying a rolled up newspaper, as if it was a weapon. He was dressed in a trench coat that was sleek and fitted, and tied in the middle with a bow. His dog broke free and rushed towards me, kicking up snow as he ran. I decided to stand my ground. I reasoned if the dog attacked, the man would stop him. There was no point trying to run. As the dog approached, he circled my feet and bit at the back of my boots. He was forceful but not in a threatening way; he just wanted us to play. I snapped a twig off the tree beside me and tossed it to the snow. I waited for the dog to fetch, but he barked and leapt to his feet.

‘Good doggie,’ I said. I raised my hands to show I meant no harm.

He lowered his gaze to the snow and followed the trail of prints. He wandered off, nose to the ice, on the scent of who knows what. His owner called him back, but the dog ignored him and continued along the trail.

‘She wants to be a big, mean guard dog, but she’s a wimp.’ The man laughed. ‘Her true self always comes out.’

I recognised the voice. ‘Spyro,’ I said.

He shook my hand. ‘You’re taller than I thought.’
Six months after Gramps died, I woke in the middle of the night crying because I thought I was a dwarf. Earlier that week, I watched a documentary with Mum called *Big World, Little People*. The show was about a family who couldn’t reach their doorbell or see over their kitchen bench. The Roloffs lived on a property in west Oregon. The parents, Matt and Amy, were dairy farmers who sold pumpkins in the off-season: luminas and other sorts. In the turnout paddock behind their dam, they kept a catapult for launching rotten ones. Pumpkin chucking, they called it. The catapult was mounted on wheels and modelled on a medieval trebuchet. When the weight was dropped, the arm flicked back and the orange boulder burst into the sky.

Mum and I sat on the couch, watching the Roloff children. I asked her what was wrong with them.

‘They’re extremely short,’ she said.

‘But they’ll grow?’

‘Their teeth will grow, but their bodies are stunted. They’ll be small forever, like you.’

I stared at her.

‘Teeth are curious things because they don’t stop growing, even when you’re old. If you don’t clean your teeth properly, they’ll curl up through your nose and pierce the base of your brain.’

I chewed my pen.

‘Don’t worry,’ Mum said. ‘If it happens, you’ll know.’

Gran called me to the bathroom.
It was a Friday and I was scheduled for a check-up with our dentist, Doctor Yim. Gran chose after school appointments because she thought school was a sacred place that shouldn’t be disrupted. She also thought that bad nuns became magpies in the afterlife and that you shouldn’t wear red in electrical storms because the colour attracted lightning.

‘Scrub,’ she said, ‘until there’s nothing left but shine.’ She squeezed some toothpaste onto my brush. ‘If you need fillings, it’s your father’s fault.’

When Mum was sick, Dad took us to McDonalds for breakfast. We were usually running late for school, so we went through the drive-through. Luke ordered a sausage muffin with extra cheese and I chose the pancakes with syrup. The cakes themselves were nothing special: the stack was dry around the side and soggy in the middle, but I liked the butter sachets. If we were good, Dad bought us ice cream for dessert. The soft serves came in orange cones that were patterned were wafer diamonds. Luke and I broke off the ends and sucked the ice cream from the bottom. Sometimes, when Dad wasn’t watching, we gave each other a milk moustache, but Luke always went one step further and blotted the ice cream all over my face. When we finished eating, Dad made us promise to keep McDonalds a secret. If we told anyone at school, he’d be in trouble. He might get called to the principal’s office and no one wanted that. This was something that should stay between us, he said. Luke and I agreed. Somehow, Gran found out and we started having porridge for breakfast.

I wedged the toothbrush into my mouth, while Gran sorted through the cabinet.

‘Where are the fluoride tablets? I bought a bottle last week.’ She searched the shelves.

‘They’re not lollies, you know.’

I nodded.
She rubbed her back. ‘Time’s an awful thing to waste. Time and money. Once they’re gone, that’s it. When you get to my age, you’ll see. Everything’s clearer when you’re looking back.’

I removed the shampoo from the cabinet. ‘Can I wash my hair?’

Gran nodded.

‘Can I use the special conditioner from Stefan’s?’

‘Of course. But the more you use now, the less you’ll have for later.’

I put the bottle away.

Fluoride, however, was different to shampoo and conditioner. It was a natural component of the Earth’s crust, which meant it came from many sources, like lime rock and gravel.

‘Fluoride will never run out,’ Dad said, ‘because it’s in the air and water.’

‘That’s true,’ Gran said. ‘But fluoride’s also toxic. Too much can spot your teeth.’

Dad sighed.

‘What?’ Gran said. ‘Fluoride’s one of the deadliest substances around. It’s somewhere between lead and arsenic on the toxicity scale. And I’ll tell you something else. Too much fluoride can kill your sperm. How do you feel about that?’

Dad elbowed me. ‘Lucky you don’t have a pecker.’

Gran wrote up the shopping list. ‘Now, what do we need? Pickled onions? Corned beef? Can you think of anything?’
‘Tranquilisers,’ Dad said.

‘Pardon?’

‘Fertiliser. I need some fertiliser for the garden.’

‘I’ll write it down,’ Gran said.

I didn’t tell Gran that the cause of the fluoride shortage was love. Christopher Kelly was in the fifth grade and apparently he wanted to marry me. His best man, Dean, said everything was planned for Monday. The ceremony, Chris decided, would be held in the sports shed, and afterwards, we’d honeymoon at the tuckshop. I was informed of all this via a scribbled note that Dean folded carefully into squares and hid in the case of my calculator.

‘Will you marry Chris?’ it said. ‘Please circle “Yes” or “No”’. I circled ‘Yes.’

When Monday came and the lunch bell sounded, I went and hid in the dental van. I liked Chris and I thought he’d make a good husband, but every time I thought about kissing him, I felt sick. He also had eczema on his wrists and ankles, and that made me feel sick as well. In class, he scratched himself with the coloured pencils, so I had to buy a special set and hide it in my tidy tray. When Ruby saw, she told Chris I was stashing the pencils because I wanted to be his girlfriend. Renee Zerafa said all you had to do was look at Chris, just by accident, and he thought it was love. When I saw Chris on Monday morning, he asked about the wedding.

‘Are you ready?’ he said. ‘You’ll make a beautiful bride.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. I looked over his shoulder. The dental van pulled up.

‘Are you having doubts?’

‘No!’
Chris winked at me. ‘Just follow your heart.’

‘I have to go.’

In the dental van, I learnt about dreadful things, like tooth rot and gum disease, and what happens in a cavity. Shelly, the dental nurse, said she understood my worries. Marriage was a commitment. There were a lot of factors to consider: hidden debts, pets, the question of children, cultural differences, and the problem of infidelity. Shelly had been married once already and it lasted a year. When Tom left, he took everything, including her best friend, Tania. At first, Shelly was in shock. She trusted Tania and relied on her support. Plus, Tania was into tradies and Tom was an entrepreneur. When the shock wore off, Shelly was grateful to her therapist for the fact she wasn’t bitter. She wouldn’t have been able to congratulate Tom on his sudden promotion, if she was bitter. She was ready to move on. Tom had done the same with Tania and look where he was now, sailing around the Greek Islands, without a thought for her. Shelly needed to block out Tom, so she could access her desires. She wanted to meet a solicitor because they made a lot of money.

‘Well, more than Tom,’ she said. ‘Have you ever seen a lawyer starving?’

I shook my head.

She opened my mouth. ‘It’s not like I want his yacht to crash. I mean, I’d never wish for that. But if pirates got on board and stole his stuff, that would serve him right.’ She started the drill. ‘You know, I thought we had a perfect marriage. Sure, we had our problems, but at the end of the day, we worked them out. We were more stable than Leah and Tony. Or so I thought.’ Shelly tilted her head back and laughed. ‘And the whole time, I was confiding in Tan, telling her about our renovations and how we were going. I gave her a key, so she could
let herself in, and she did. I thought she was checking the floor plans, but she was fucking my husband.’ She turned off the drill. ‘Spit.’

I leant over the bowl and rinsed.

‘Your molars are coming in. The big ones will cause you trouble. You know, your bite’s unusual. I’ve never seen anyone with teeth like yours.’

‘What’s wrong with them?’

‘Well, they aren’t in proportion to the size of your mouth. The front ones are too bucked for braces and your roots are unusually long.’ Shelly checked the back of my mouth.

‘No wisdom yet.’

After she showed me the tooth chart, she started the demonstrations. She removed a set of falsies from the bench.

‘If you don’t take your fluoride tablets, this is what will happen.’ She smashed the teeth with a hammer.

The next day, I started taking the tablets to school and eating them with lunch. After I left Chris at the altar, he told all the boys I was a frigid bitch and a whore. I didn’t understand how I could be both, so I asked Chris. He said I came to school on a special scholarship, so I should just fuck off. Bartley’s Lookout, where Chris lived, was known as Mansion Hill. The houses had marble columns and hedges in clever shapes. Even the lawns were neatly trimmed and edged around the figs. The figs were thick and dense up top and they seemed to act as sentries. They kept watch over the suburb and harboured all its treasures: the stained glass windows of St. Rita’s, the Eagle Farm Raceway. On the hill, the trees blocked out the noise and construction and added to the impression of grandeur. From Chris’s balcony, you could
see the entire city, including his family’s condo. His parents were both chemistry professors who invented a battery that recharged itself. Sometimes, they threw parties on the tennis court and invited over two hundred guests. They served caviar with creme fraiche, and ravioli with three kinds of sauces. They filled their spa with bags of ice and bottles of expensive wine.

Dad and I drove past there once, on the way home from Red Rooster. He threw his snack box out the window.

‘Poofs,’ he said.

‘Poofs,’ I repeated.

He tapped his fingers on the wheel.

‘What’s a poof?’ I said. I’d heard Dad use the word before, but he prefaced it with all kinds of adjectives, which made the meaning confusing. There were cheesy poofs, and Liberal poofs, and filthy stinking rich poofs, which seemed to be the worst.

Dad cleared his throat. ‘A poof is someone who thinks they’re better than us.’

I looked out the window. ‘Is everyone better than us?’

‘What do you think?’

I shrugged. ‘I haven’t thought about it.’

‘I’ll tell you something my old man told me. The pen’s mightier than the sword.’

‘But a sword can kill you with one swipe.’

‘Well, if your aim is to physically kill someone, then yes, the sword is stronger. But if you want to keep someone alive but make them suffer, then the pen’s your weapon. Do you understand?’
‘You’re not my dad, anymore,’ I said. ‘You’re fat.’

He gave me a high five. ‘That’s it.’

I folded my arms.

‘If someone hits you, don’t fight back. Never use your fists, no matter what. Hurt them with your words.’

‘I’ll practise tonight.’

Dad messed my hair. ‘You’re a good kid. You’re just too soft on people and in this world, you gotta be hard. That’s why I’m tough on you. So, you can make it on your own, you know, when Mum and I are gone.’

‘But you’re not going yet.’

Dad checked his watch. ‘It’s not really up to me, is it, chook?’

We drove home in silence.

That night, I decided to write a story about a boy called Chris who wets his pants on assembly. I tried to write my thoughts out straight, but the words were jumbled and the letters turned back to front. The belly of a vowel should be puffy, I thought, the backs of the consonants straight. I pressed on, longer and harder, until one of my knuckles cracked. That night, I ripped so many pages out of my book that by the end of the week, my story consisted of a title page and a drawing of Chris in a nappy. There was also a page on Chris’s parents, but Mum ripped it out straight away because the sign above their heads said, ‘Poofs.’ I hope you mean profs, she said.
Sometimes, when I didn’t feel like talking, I wandered around the playground. In summer, I followed the lady beetles to the farm across the bridge. Lady beetles were fascinating creatures because as soon as you tried to hold them, they flew off. In Ireland, when the crops were dying, the farmers prayed to the Virgin Mary, ‘Please, save our pratties’. Soon after, the little red beetles turned up in pastures all over the country. At first, the farmers were suspicious of the insects. The bugs fluttered around with ease and displayed their spots too proudly. They clumped together on the basil leaves and swarmed the sweet potatoes. There were so many beetles in the fields that the farmers declared a plague. Frightened, they sprayed their crops with arsenic, which sweetened the drinking water. Some of the peasants got sick. The beetles disappeared, but the potatoes kept rotting. The famine continued for many years. Then, one day, the beetles returned from wherever they disappeared to, and when they came back, they ate the pests—the white flies and jumping lice—and the potatoes ripened. When the farmers saw the potatoes weren’t soggy, they cut the spuds from the vines and tossed their forks into the soil. That night, the queen announced that Ireland’s prayers had finally been answered. It was a miracle, she said. The farmers all agreed. They called the tiny spotted bugs the Beetles of Our Lady, which they later shortened to Lady Beetles because it was easier to say.

‘It’s a funny name,’ Dad said, ‘because not all lady beetles are ladies.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Mum said. ‘The beetles are a symbol of faith.’

‘Righto.’

‘What? Their wings should remind you of Mary. She borrowed a red cloak from the court painter and wore it to the Last Supper. The seven spots on the beetle’s back are her seven joys and sorrows.’
‘You’re a riot,’ Dad said.

I looked at Mum. She was a quiet woman with curves Dad sometimes poked and red hair that seemed to suit her. She respected Dad and Gran as well, but once, I heard her tell Dad that Gran made her feel inadequate. Dad laughed. When Gran moved in, Mum learnt to adapt with the rest of us, but in a way, she lived in her own world. She made her own decisions and most of the time, she didn’t worry about Dad. When she was well, she trusted herself and I thought that was important. She got restless, though, when she wasn’t at work, and by the end of the week, she wanted to go somewhere. No where in particular, she said, just somewhere away from here. When we were at school, the house was lonely and the silence unsettled her. Sometimes, she spent hours under the stairs, rearranging her records and looking at photos of when we were young. She wanted to go back and slow down the past, so she could stay there longer. Still, she was patient, unless you provoked her. If you were rude to Mum, even out of jest, she didn’t have the time or temper to talk to you.

‘Drop it, Bruce,’ she said. ‘I’m not arguing theology with you.’

Dad laughed. ‘Well, how would you know what Mary wore to the Last Supper? Were you a waitress at the dinner?’

‘No,’ Mum snapped. ‘I paid attention in Christian History. My TE score was 900. I beat you.’

Dad blushed.

‘Moron.’

On the morning of my second marriage, this time to Ben Brennan, I wandered outside the gates to the fields where the beetles came from. There were so many floating around that
the sky looked soft and dotted. In a patch of dirt, near the bottlebrush, I found a beetle with broken wings. I held it in the palm of my hand and watched it flutter and stumble. What was amazing about this beetle was that it had stripes instead of spots. Mr. Ryan said that sometimes in nature the wrong animals mated. To prove his point, he showed us a slide of a pig with feathers. The lady beetle wasn’t that different. A faulty body was a broken promise, even for the smallest creature. After a while, the beetle seized up and its legs stopped flicking. Its stripes peeled back until all that remained was a red dot. I lay on the grass with the bug on my chest. At least we’re together, I thought.

Mum sensed these ruffles in my days and tried to smooth them over. When I told her about the beetle, she smiled and said, ‘He’s gone to a better place.’ At night, she tucked me into bed and told me stories about outer space. She said the moon was a scoop of cream, and the planets were bubble gums, and all the elevators were super rockets that travelled to the stars.

‘Even the ones in shops?’ I said.

‘Especially those. There’s a secret button.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know, you dill. That’s why it’s a secret.’

That afternoon, before I went to the dentist, Dad and I stopped at Chermside. We spent some time in Arcade King, trying to win the giant troll. When we ran out of coins, we made a claim at Centrelink and took the elevator to the food court. On the silver wall, next to the speakers, was a red button. It was separate from the others and cased in glass. That looks secretive, I thought. When I pressed the button, the elevator came to a stop and the engines
rumbled. One of the cables fell through the ceiling and sparked Dad’s ear. When he saw the falling embers, he started swearing and sweating under his arms.

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘We should be taking off soon.’

‘Taking off?’ he shouted. ‘What the hell is this?’ He started banging the doors.

‘This is the great glass elevator,’ I said, pressing all the buttons. Then, I said something I read in a book once. ‘It can go sideways and slantways and longways and backways—’

Before I could finish, Dad grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my side. Then, he brought his face so close to mine, I went cross-eyed.

‘When this is over, you and me are done.’ He put his hands in between the doors and tried to force them open. ‘We’re stuck. This is fucking great. Honestly, Kate. I thought you’d grown out of this.’

I picked up the phone next to the number pad and called Mum.

‘Katey-kins!’ she shouted, when she answered. ‘I’m watching the Roloffs.’

Sometimes, the Roloff kids pretended to be characters from Hollywood movies or comic strips. Other times, they restored a fairytale.

‘They’re dressed as the seven dwarves.’

The episode was the last in the season. I’d seen it once before. Jeremy was too tall for a part, so he played Snow White. He bounced around the kitchen in a yellow skirt and blouse. Zac and his sisters wore green leather hats and belts around their bellies. The kids sat around the mini-table, with bowls of pumpkin soup. The soup was thick and clotted in parts and the orange stained their mouths.
Dad snatched the phone. ‘I’m stuck in a bloody elevator. Come and get me out.’

In the car that day, on the way to the dentist, I thought maybe I was an acorn dwarf. Acorn dwarves had average-sized heads but shorter arms and legs. In the front seat, I couldn’t see over the steering wheel or out the front windscreen. I also noticed how different I was to Dad. His feet could touch the floor and control the pedals, while mine just dangled in front. When we got to the surgery, Dad checked me in at reception. He poured himself a glass of water, then sat back on the couch.

‘Don’t talk to me,’ he said.

While we waited for Doctor Yim, I studied the pictures on the wall. There was one of a woman’s mouth. Her lips were lined with giant teeth that looked like they could chew you. I tried to focus on the tongue instead.

Eventually, Doctor Yim called me. ‘Hello, Kate,’ he said.

I climbed onto the seat.

‘What flavour would you like today?’ He turned the monitor to face me. ‘Last time you were here, you had strawberry, and the time before that, cinnamon.’

‘Do you have Colgate?’

‘Colgate’s a type of toothpaste,’ he said. ‘Today, we’re going to wash your mouth with fluoride and get rid of the yucky bits.’

‘It’s called plaque,’ I said.

‘That’s right. And fluoride can come in all different flavours, just like chocolate. We also have peppermint, but it’s a special flavour, just for little people.’
I stared at him.

‘How about orange?’ he said.

While he inspected my mouth and sucked up the foam, I felt scared I’d never grow. I worried that when I was older and I got my driving licence, I’d have to sit on a phone book to see over the wheel, and when someone let me cut in front, and I smiled to say thank you, the driver would scream and crash into a pole.

‘I’m not a dwarf,’ I said.

Doctor Yim frowned.

When the check-up ended, Dad took me home and sat me on the bench. He said if I was going to be a dwarf, then I would have been one by now. And there was something about the way he said it, maybe the firmness in his voice or the way he laughed and scratched his head, that made me know he was telling the truth. Before he let me go, he asked where my worries came from.

‘Is there a little person at school?’ he said. ‘Did you see one on the bus?’

‘It was the Roloffs,’ I said.

That night, before bed, my parents had an argument.

‘You plant these ideas in her head,’ Dad said.

‘Whatever, Bruce.’

‘Well, she doesn’t plant them herself.’

‘Maybe she does,’ Mum snapped. ‘Maybe it’s her convict roots.’
‘Don’t start with that. She can’t remember what happened yesterday.’

‘She remembers everything, Bruce. The *Roses*, that bloody scotch.’

‘She remembers what you’ve told her. She’s a kid. She should be outside playing. Instead, she’s addicted to fluoride and breaking elevators.’

‘You’ll wake your mother,’ Mum said.

Dad lowered his voice. ‘Look. I think it’s good she’s got an imagination and all. She obviously gets that from you. But if she can’t tell the difference between what’s in her head and what’s real, we’re in trouble. When she grows up, she’ll have problems. That’s all I’m saying.’

‘I know what you’re saying,’ Mum said. ‘I’ve heard it before. Let me tell you something, hon. She’s never going to be anyone but herself. You can’t change that. You can’t wake up everyday thinking, “How can I make her more like me?” When she’s an adult, she’ll look back at all this, and you know what? She’ll see we did our best. She’ll also remember who she could trust and I doubt it will be you.’

Dad laughed. ‘You’ve got no idea.’

Later that night, while Dad was asleep, Mum snuck into my room and put her head on my chest. She said sometimes the ocean rises or a ship passes and when this happens, we realise we’re very small.

‘Sometimes we feel smaller than we are,’ she said.

‘Like a mouse?’

‘That’s right.’
‘I feel sorry for them.’

‘You shouldn’t. Mice are lucky devils. They can hide from their enemies easily and they can live in more places than one: barns, old slippers, even a bird’s nest. You could think of anywhere and a mouse would probably live there.’

‘An elevator?’ I said.

‘Maybe not an elevator,’ Mum said.

The next day, Dad banned us from watching Big World, Little People and we had to watch Humphrey Bear instead.

Mum was annoyed. ‘Well, this is boring,’ she said.

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After I read Dad’s letter, I started to wonder if it was a warning of sorts. I’d been with Kez for over a month, but we weren’t going out. We loved each other and she made me happy, but I wasn’t sure we were meant to be together. I wondered if we should see other people. I didn’t want to date, mainly because I didn’t know how, but I figured we should have a break. Kez said we could take a break if something was broken, but since there wasn’t a problem on her part, we may as well end it for good. I asked her why she could never stand on middle ground, and she said she wasn’t raised that way. I thought about my parents. They weren’t affectionate people, especially in public. I never saw them kiss or cuddle or even hold hands. Sometimes, I caught Dad winking at Mum when she was getting dressed. She would blush
and wave him away, and I sensed a genuine love between them. Still, their relationship was a mystery.

One year, on their wedding anniversary, Dad gave Mum a book to read called *Astrology and Us*. The first chapter was illustrated with a sketch of Saturn. The author’s theory, as it related to love, was called ‘The Orbit Effect.’

‘The more we are exposed to something,’ Mum read, ‘the more we come to like it. It’s not enough just to love someone. You also have to like them.’

Mum turned the page.

‘I loke you,’ Dad said.

‘Loke?’

‘Yes. It’s a cross between love and like.’

Dad called Mum names, like Chubs and Pudge, but he never let anyone else make fun of her. In grade eleven, I minded a chicken for biology. Mr. Lourigan stood in front of the class and gave us our instructions. We had to expose the chicken to all kinds of stimuli, like light and heat, to see how the animal reacted. ‘Now, remember,’ Mr. Lourigan said. ‘A chicken is not a pet. A chicken is a chicken.’ He handed out the birds. I called my chicken Mr. Biggles. I dressed him in a tux. I took him home and played with him. He ate dinner with us. One day, while I was at rehearsal for the musical, Mum peeped inside the box where Biggles lived. When she removed the lid, Biggles was opening and closing his mouth, as if he was choking on something. Mum thought he was dehydrated, so she filled a bowl with tap water and placed it in the box. The bowl was wide and the water was deep, and while I wasn’t there, Mr. Biggles drowned. When I came home from school and saw his body, all wet and limp, I cried. I told Mum I hated her for what she did. I called her a stupid bitch. Dad
dragged me into the bathroom by the arm and washed my mouth out with soap. He said if I ever spoke to Mum like that again, he’d belt me. Then, he marched me to the backyard where Mum was digging a hole for Biggles. Dad made me get down on my knees and apologise.

‘Say it,’ he said.

‘I’m a brat,’ I said, ‘and you shouldn’t listen to anything I say.’

Likewise, Mum always defended Dad when she thought his feelings were hurt. When Dad cut me out of the will, I asked Mum why he did that and she said the rumours I made up hurt him. When I asked her what she meant, she said, ‘Just because your father’s brash doesn’t mean he’s heartless.’ When I tried to tell her again that Dad was flirting with Kez, she said, ‘Your father’s a grown man and he can talk to whoever he wants.’ I thought her comments were flippant given the circumstances, and I wondered if deep down she was hurt.

In Dad’s letter, he compared Kez to the woman he was in love with before he met Mum. He said, ‘To top it all off, Kez did something on Friday night that was a little bit spooky. For a couple of minutes, she snuggled up in a certain way that only the girlfriend and you three kids have ever done.’ When I read this, I felt sorry for Mum. It upset me that two people could be together but feel differently. I thought about settling, for whatever reason, and I realised it wasn’t enough. I started to have doubts about Kez. I thought maybe we shouldn’t risk our friendship on a relationship that mightn’t work. Kez disagreed. She said we couldn’t end a good thing just because I was over-thinking. She said, ‘If you worry about the future, you’ll forget about now.’ So, I thought about the past.

Before I slept with Kez, she’d only been with guys, so the start of our relationship was surprising. Tim, her first boyfriend, was a bar tender at the Pineapple Hotel. He dumped Kez for a blonde called Candice who he met on night duty. She worked at Love and Rockets. Her hair was bleach-white and her lips an unnatural pink. She called herself Candy. At the time of
their break up, Kez had been housesitting for a family friend in Ashgrove. She woke one night to find Tim smoking under a streetlight. He was shirtless and talking on his phone. When he came to bed, Kez asked him who was on the line and he said, ‘I’m leaving you.’ They’d been together since the formal. When Tim asked Kez for his stuff back, she said the only thing she’d be returning was her heart. We bought a pig’s heart from the butcher’s and drove to Tim’s house.

‘You’re better off without him,’ I said. ‘And besides, his middle name’s Warren and he’s fat.’

She forced a smile. ‘He’s not that fat.’ She turned off the car. ‘It’s funny, you know. When you love someone, you can’t see past them.’

‘Literally.’

She laughed. I opened up the box. The heart was soft and flabby and covered with a layer of fat.

‘It looks like a human heart,’ I said.

Kez nodded. ‘That’s why I chose it.’

I gave her the box. She held it on her lap.

‘I know it’s not my fault,’ she said. ‘I know it’s not my fault he left, but that doesn’t make it easier.’

‘I know. He’s an arsehole.’ I touched her knee. ‘You know, one day someone will come into your life and make you realise why it didn’t work out with Tim.’

‘I hope so.’

‘It’s true. You’ll meet someone. You’re honest and loyal and you always do what’s right. Remember when we were little and we had that fight about the Hanson brothers? We
were playing that game where you have to name two people and say which one you’d rather kiss. We both said Taylor, so we got into a fight about who had the better chance of doing so. We were obsessed. You said Taylor had perfect teeth, so it was more likely he’d kiss you because I wore a retainer. That’s what you said.’

‘It was a stupid game,’ Kez said.

‘I know. But the point is, we stopped talking for a week. You told me I was selfish and delusional. I said you were up yourself. Then, one day I got to school and there was a cardboard cut-out of Taylor on my desk.’

‘With rose petals.’

‘And chocolate.’

‘And bands for your braces.’

‘I couldn’t stop laughing. I remember thinking, I should say sorry, too, but I didn’t say anything at all. Instead, I went roller-blading with Kylie and Sarah, and when they said we should invite you, I said you were busy.’

‘It seems so long ago now.’

I looked out the window. ‘If Tim wants to leave you for some girl called Candy, then it’s his loss. I’m glad you’re not together. You shouldn’t be with someone who makes you feel like shit.’

‘I know.’ Kez placed the box on the dashboard. ‘But I don’t understand how he could love me and fall in love with someone else.’

‘I don’t think it’s possible. I think you either love someone forever or you never loved them at all.’
‘Really? I think people change. Look at Tim and I. I would’ve married him if he wasn’t a bastard.’

‘He was always like that. It just took you a while to notice.’

‘What?’

‘It doesn’t matter. What I’m trying to say is, I don’t know if people can change. I mean, really change and not just say they have. You are who you are, and at the end of the day, it’s probably who you’ve always been.’

‘I’m not sure,’ Kez said.

We stared at the box with the heart.

‘The funny thing is, in the beginning, he chased after me. I mean, I wasn’t really interested. I remember at Schoolies, we stayed at The Islander and he was flatting a couple of doors down with Stone-o. They kept flashing us from their balcony, so Alice took out her camera and started taking photos. The boys were embarrassed. What is it with guys? Tim called out and asked for the film, but Alice said, no. He said he was coming over. Kate, we were twelve storeys high; he just jumped from balcony to balcony. I think my heart stopped twice. He was always doing things like that: train hopping, speeding, pretending to choke. When Schoolies finished, he kept asking me out and I kept saying, no, but that only made him more determined.’ She undid her seat belt. ‘I guess I should just get over it. Is that what you think?’

‘I don’t think you can just get over it. What is it, anyway?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The thing you’re meant to get over.’
Kez shrugged. ‘The person, I guess.’ She removed the box from the dashboard and lifted the heart. She held the organ in her hands. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Wait here.’

She got out of the car and walked across the lawn to Tim’s door. She stood back from the entrance and waited, then she looked at me. I nodded. She threw the heart at the door. The heart slid down the glass panelling, leaving a streak of blood. Kez got back in the car.

‘Do you feel better?’ I said.

‘Yep.’ She started the car.

We pulled onto the street.

As we drove, a storm rolled in from the city. The sky turned dark and thunder rolled above us. The wind blew debris across the road. Kez swerved to miss a branch.

‘How do you know if someone’s worth fighting for? I mean, what if you have feelings for someone you shouldn’t?’

‘I think it depends on the other person and whether they feel the same. Do you still love Tim?’ I asked.

Kez laughed. ‘No, I can’t love someone who I don’t respect. Sometimes, when I’m lonely, I go to call him, but then I imagine him with Candy. Whenever I miss him, I think about them having sex.’ She turned on the wipers. ‘Do you still love Anj?’

‘Yeah.’

Kez was quiet. There was a lightning flash.

‘I know you don’t understand.’

She sped up. She was going too fast for the weather and the narrow road ahead.

‘Kez.’
‘What?’

‘Slow down.’

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I better drop you home.’

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The forest behind our house was government-owned and cared for by the ranger. The ranger was a sober man who wore steel cap boots and khakis. He lived by himself in the cabin. At night, if you stood on the verandah, you could see the light from his porch in the gully. Mum said he must have been lonely down there, surrounded by all those weeds and rocks, with no one to talk to but the crickets.

‘He’s strange,’ Mum said. ‘Don’t you think?’

‘I guess.’

She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered through the window. ‘He gives me the jeebies.’

The ranger kept to himself mostly, but he dropped by when there was trouble. He drove up our driveway in the council truck, crunching pinecones under the wheels. He always parked behind the water tank. Whenever he visited, he seemed to step out of a fog, even if the day was clear. When I spoke, he looked at me steadily, as if he already decided I was lying.

‘Mornin’ kid,’ he said. ‘Dad around?’

‘He’s at work.’ I blocked the sun with my hand.
The ranger removed his hat. ‘Wind’s blowin’ in from the west. I need you to run inside and shut them windows.’

‘Which ones?’ I said.

The ranger looked up at the house. ‘All of them.’ He chewed a twig. ‘And when you come back, bring a basket. We better get them clothes off the line before the fireys get here.’

I looked up at the clothesline. My nightie hung upside down beside Luke’s Superman undies. Dad’s shorts were pegged out evenly between Gran’s bras. One of Mum’s sundresses was caught on the fence.

‘Those are ours,’ I said. ‘They’re all the clothes we’ve got.’

The ranger crouched down. ‘Your family’s real sweet,’ he said, parting my hair. ‘But this is my forest.’ He snapped the twig in half. ‘There’s a big fire coming.’

‘Is it a bad one?’ I said.

The ranger smiled. His teeth were yellow and his breath smelt rotten, like the bottom of a birdcage. There was dirt underneath his nails. He picked up my doll, gently, and ran his fingers through her hair.

‘What’s her name?’ he said.

‘Susie.’

He pulled up Susie’s skirt around her waist. ‘We don’t want Susie getting hurt now, do we?’

I shook my head.
‘That a girl,’ he said, spitting. ‘Tell your mother Bunya’s burning. She better pray for rain.’

When I told Mum what the ranger said, we got down on the balcony and prayed for rain. We asked God to stop the winds and put out the fires. Mum said, ‘You know what rain means to us.’ She set up buckets in the yard to collect the runoff from our roof. She turned off the taps when we brushed our teeth. She showered with Dad to save water. In the third week of drought, when she was certain the rains would come, she lined up pots and pans on the window, just in case. Every night, she prayed out loud with the Rosary beads against her chest. I wondered if she’d ever prayed harder.

‘Get down here,’ she said.

I knelt beside her.

‘We offer our home to you,’ Mum said. ‘But we’re asking now for rain. Send us a sign, if you can, so we know you’re listening. Kate, say something.’

‘Amen.’

We prayed again the next night, and the night after that, until finally, the rain answered. The first drops of rain fell on the car windscreen, and then the windows, and then the tin roof. The water leaked through the ceiling and drenched the carpet. The house smelt like a dump.

‘It’s happening!’ Mum said. ‘It’s finally happening!’ She shook my shoulders. ‘Go and stand guard.’

I ran inside. Sometimes when it rained, a snake would come in from the wet and curl itself around the toilet. When this happened, I stood in the bathtub with the shovel, while Mum gave directions. Once, our conversation turned to things we were scared of and I asked
her why she was frightened of snakes. She said she wasn’t sure but she thought it was a fear of wild things. When she was pregnant with Emma, Dad put a gecko in her bed and she didn’t notice until morning, when she felt something sticky on her thigh. She said she was so afraid she didn’t know what to do, so she grabbed the gecko while it was still in her pants and started squeezing it. After that, she started seeing geckos everywhere: on the roof and in the cupboards. She started to think the lizards meant something. For example, if you were about to leave home and you saw a gecko, you should think twice about going out. The first time Mum told me this, I laughed. Then, one night, while I was trying to sleep, I saw a gecko stalk a moth across the ceiling and eat the insect whole. After that, I left the geckos alone. I didn’t bother with the snakes, either.

I stood in front of the bathroom door with the shovel in my hand. I thought we couldn’t blame the snakes for wanting to come inside. First, because we brought the rain, and second, because we never locked the doors. My parents never pulled the windows shut and they rarely closed the garage. They lost the house keys the week they moved in and hadn’t replaced them since. When Gran moved in, she tried to warn my parents about the importance of home security. She said you can never be too careful when it comes to your own home. To make her point, she staged a break in, while we slept. She unplugged the microwave from the wall and carried it out the door. She stuffed her pockets with coins and magnets and whatever jewellery she could find. She even took the fruit bowl. It wasn’t until the following Saturday that Luke noticed the microwave was missing.

‘Where’s the microwave?’ he said.

I shrugged.

Gran returned the furniture.
Mum and Dad were impressed by her lesson, but still, neither could be swayed to purchase locks. On weeknights, they fell asleep in front of the TV: Dad, with the remote control on his chest, and Mum in the beanbag. On nights like this, an open house was a matter of necessity. The lounge room, due to some odd reason, was unable to pick up reception, so every night Dad ran an extension cord to the neighbours’ antenna. By the time he unfolded the ladder and connected the cables, Luke and I were sleeping. While we dreamt, the cord that tied our house to the Caseys’ reached out past the moon. In the hours before light, it became a tight rope for possums. One couple, in an attempt to impress each other, practised their flips and swings. When they clung to each other upside down, the rope began to dip in the middle and fray at the ends. The screen inside flicked black and white, and the speakers started to crackle. The possums scurried home.

One morning, before breakfast, Luke and I woke to the sound of flapping. There was a crow in the kitchen, poking around the toaster. Dad was standing at the sink in baggy briefs, dropping crumbs along the bench top. The trail ended at the toaster. Its dial was turned to high.

Luke and I looked at the browning crusts, then over at the crow.

‘What are you doing?’ I said.

‘He pecked me,’ Dad said. ‘I’m trying to electrocute the bastard.’

I put my plate on the table. ‘He’s just a bird,’ I said.

‘He’s not just a bird,’ Dad said. ‘Look at him. He’s an arsehole.’

‘He doesn’t even have a bum,’ I said.

Dad poked the toaster with a knife. ‘Don’t be a smartarse, Kate.’
‘Yeah,’ Luke mimicked. ‘Don’t be a smartarse.’

While we argued, the Caseys complained to the council about our antenna, but Mum and Dad weren’t reckless. They knew a house was a shell that cracked easily open. They just believed there was nothing to steal in ours. On the weekends, when one stayed home, the other would say simply, ‘Mind the house.’ Those who arrived uninvited found themselves in a difficult position: they could see Dad shaving or Mum undressing to shower, but shocked by the visibility of the situation, were unsure if they should enter. The situation was made more confusing by a doorbell at the entrance that Dad installed one afternoon when Mum was at the hairdresser’s. Whenever she left, Dad took out a hammer and a jar of nails, and made something he thought was useful. His favourite was the handrail.

‘Not another one?’ Mum would say.

‘You betcha.’

This is how my parents spoke to each other: Mum making comments shaped as questions and Dad proposing answers. They fought about money and the right way of doing things, but they only argued publicly at elections. Every election, someone came to our house and asked permission to nail a picture of the Labour candidate to our fence. Dad said, yes. He even chose the spot. Mum, who shared his politics, but not his preference for public statements, took the picture down.

‘It’s audacious,’ she said.

‘To support the ALP?’

‘To broadcast who we’re voting for.’

‘Noel Cramer has a Democrat in his yard.’
'He also has friends in jail.'

'So, the Tories want a tax on tampons and you’re worried about the neighbours.'

Mum folded the cardboard cut-out of Paul Keating in half and put him in the bin. Dad pulled him out again.

On Election Day, when the argument heated, Dad flew a flag on the front of our car and beeped at nearby pedestrians.

'Who was that?' Mum repeated.

'You don’t know him.'

'Who was that?' Mum said again.

'An ally.'

When the light turned red, Dad pulled up short of the break-line and fiddled with the radio. When he couldn’t get a signal, he wound down the window instead. Grinning, he indicated for the other driver to do the same.

'Off to vote?' Dad said. 'Keating?'

The driver nodded.

Dad beeped again.

In the voting booths, where they found their ballots, I imagined Mum and Dad ticked the same boxes. But at home, they sulked in separate rooms: Dad in his downstairs office and Mum in the kitchen. Dad played Space Invaders on his computer and banged the keys when he blew up the aliens. Mum, who was directly above, dropped pots and pans on the floor.
‘I’m just so clumsy today,’ she said.

Dad turned up the sound.

Luke interrupted. ‘Everyone please shut the fuck up! My daddy long legs is sleeping!’

Luke was younger than me but only by a year, so we swapped clothes all the time and shared a bunk for a while. At night, before lights out, we transformed our bed into a pirate ship. We sailed for hours on voyages that were shaped by swaying sword fights and dangerous plank walks. Our matching doonas deemed us equally worthy of captaincy and we ruled over our slaves with force. When trouble brewed underdeck, Luke climbed the mast and took sail, while I checked the sailors for scurvy. Those trips we took together were plagued by rough weather. Luke loved to look at the destroyed ships and ripped up flags; the dazed victims drifting out to sea, the deckhands grumbling at the rubble. For me, there was nothing more terrifying than the rain and I hid under the hatch til the sky cleared.

‘What are you so scared of?’ Luke said one night, when we were on course to the Caribbean.

‘Nothing,’ I lied.

‘Well, you’re not a very good pirate.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. I adjusted the ropes.

‘You shouldn’t be scared of the stingrays or the hammerheads.’

‘I’m not.’

‘The cannibals are way out there and we never go out that far.’ Luke pulled up the anchor.
‘Be careful,’ I said.

Luke flinched. ‘Don’t touch me,’ he said.

Luke and I weren’t the same, but we knew things about each other. I knew he cut the strings off Dad’s tennis racquet to make a bow and arrow. He knew I wouldn’t tell. I knew in a way I couldn’t explain that something about my brother made my parents happy. Mum laughed at all of his jokes, even if they weren’t funny. Dad called him his young bloke. They were the same, I think. Whenever we met with friends of the family, Dad pushed Luke forward. ‘Have you met my young bloke?’ he’d say. ‘He’s something.’

Once, while Luke and I were staying at Gran’s, we stole a shopping trolley from the plaza and wheeled it to her house. Luke said we should give the trolley to Gran as a gift to help her with her groceries. I thought it was a good idea. When we got to Gran’s, Luke removed the wheels from their axes and covered the grills in alfoil. He fitted an antennae to the trolley and added a light bulb to the rail.

‘What are you doing?’ I said.

‘Making a control console. Roger.’

‘Who’s Roger?’ I said.

While Gran was sleeping, Luke removed the clock from her bedroom wall and wired it to the handle. When she woke in a daze, uncertain what time it was, she saw the silver contraption.

‘What’s this?’ she said, rubbing her eyes.

Luke beamed. ‘I’ve built a time machine. I’m going back to the future.’ He passed Gran a helmet. ‘You need to bring your own weapons. I can’t guarantee your safety.’ He turned the
arms of the clock. ‘First stop, thirty-six billion years ago. Ice sheets and woolly mammoths. The glaciers of Alaska.’

Gran held onto the trolley.

‘Don’t stick your elbow out the window,’ Luke said. ‘Or it will turn into a fossil!’

Gran grabbed him by the ear. ‘What do you call this?’ She pointed at her clock.

‘I call it The Ice Age Explorer.’

I smiled. It was a good name.

Gran twisted his ear.

I was worried she might hurt him.


Gran loosened her grip. ‘You’re a devil,’ she said. ‘What are you?’

‘A dare devil.’

Later that night, when I told Mum what Luke did, she wasn’t interested. ‘Just leave it,’ she said.

‘But Mum,’ I said. ‘He lied.’

‘We all lie sometimes, Kate. I can’t count how many times I’ve caught you fibbing. Little white lies and great big ones. The sad thing is, you don’t know the difference.’

I sulked. ‘Neither do you,’ I said.
When I told Anjulee what happened at the pub, she said, ‘That’s really fucked up.’

She’d been home a month and we were lying in bed, talking in the dark.

‘Why would Mum do that?’ I said. ‘I mean, why would she tell Dad everything?’

Anjulee rolled onto her side and put her arm around my stomach. ‘Maybe she’s worried he isn’t happy. Maybe she thinks you’re right.’

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling. ‘So, she used me,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She would’ve said, “Kate thinks this”, and, “Kate thinks that.”’ No wonder I don’t trust her.’

Anjulee squeezed me tighter. ‘It must be hard for your mum. She loves your dad. She probably thinks it’s her fault he isn’t happy. Maybe she blames herself. Imagine hearing you say those things about Kez. She would have felt sick. Then, when you told her what’s happening, she had to choose between being loyal to you and being honest with him. That’s an awful position.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But she promised.’

‘You’re right, and she shouldn’t have made that promise if she couldn’t keep it. But I don’t know. They’re married. I know they’re your parents, but they’re also husband and wife. They’re meant to tell each other everything.’ She snuggled closer. ‘Look at us.’

‘What about us?’

‘I tell you everything.’

‘We’re not married.’
She laughed. ‘Maybe we will be, when it’s legal.’

‘It’s legal in Belgium,’ I said.

‘Maybe we should move to Brussels.’

‘I want to live in Ireland. Brussels is dirty. When I was there, there were people pissing in the street. You know, that’s the symbol of the city. The Manneken Pis.’

‘People piss everywhere,’ Anjulee said. She rested her hand on my breast. ‘You know, when I was travelling, I felt so homesick I couldn’t stand it. I got all your messages and I sent you postcards, but that only made it worse. I remember one day, I was in Amboise and I went to the Royal Palace. There was this busker out the front singing Torn by Natalie Imbruglia. I just broke down. I caught a bus to the hotel.’

‘I love that song.’

‘One night, I dreamt I got married to Sanjay, you know, Priya and Krishna’s son. I was wearing this big white dress, but there were shackles around my ankles, chaining me to the altar. No one could see the chains because my dress was so long. And Mum was there, and Nani, and they were laughing and clapping and spinning each other around. Before the honeymoon, I slipped away to try and call you, and tell you I love you, and that I was sorry. But—’

‘But what?’

‘But I didn’t have enough coins for the pay phone, so I couldn’t call. Then, fifty years passed and I was in Fiji with Sanjay, celebrating our golden wedding anniversary and everyone was throwing tick-e-tape at us and telling us we were the perfect couple. In the morning, my pillow was wet with tears and drool and my make-up was everywhere. I’ve never cried like that. Do you think you’re like your dad?’
‘What?’

‘Do you think you’re similar?’ She ran her fingers around my belly. ‘Sometimes I think you’re like your dad, and Kez is your mum, and I’m the other woman. You know, the one he was in love with before he met your mum.’

‘I’m not like my dad,’ I said. ‘I waited for you.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay.’

‘No, it’s not. I know I hurt you.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said again.

Anjulee pulled me closer.

I fell asleep in her arms.
Samsun said we should go to Kanchanaburi to see the stone garden. Earlier that day he learnt I was Australian and at lunch, over rice and green curry, he started calling me Skippy. He even made the clicking sound. At first I thought Skippy was just a word he heard or something he picked up. Then, I realised he must have seen the show as a boy because he believed kangaroos were smarter than they were. He seemed to think they could operate radio equipment and use the transmission to communicate with truckies. He removed the walkie-talkie from its receiver and pressed the push-to-talk button.

‘Come on, Skip,’ he said.

We drove to Chiang Mai Station.

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For years, Luke and I were afraid of the dark, though we never admitted it to anyone. We slept with the door open until Mum bought us a night light from Big W. The Fret Pet was a magic frog that glowed in the dark. The light came from the frog’s belly, and the lily pad he sat on sparkled. We called the frog Hoppy. We changed his name a few days later when we watched The Golden Globes. After that, we called him Mr. Hopkins. We loved that frog. I held him close and hugged him and watched him squat and jump. Luke caught flies from the kitchen and wrapped them up in leaves. We stroked Mr. Hopkins’s back until he croaked. We told him jokes when he was homesick.

‘What do you say to a frog who’s hitchhiking?’ Luke said. He paused for effect. ‘Hop in!’
Gran said if we played with the frog for too long we’d get warts between our fingers.

She told Luke if he kept kissing Mr. Hopkins like that, he’d break out in frog skin all over his body. I spoke to Mr. Hopkins about this and discovered it wasn’t true. He said we didn’t have enough light in our bodies to change the colour of our skin. ‘You’ll always be pink,’ he said.

When we couldn’t sleep, we stole Mum’s Discman from the glove box. We plugged the headphones into the socket and powered up the volume. I stuffed our pillows underneath the door to gag the sound.


‘Yep.’

‘Get in position.’

I stood on the top bunk.

Luke chose the CD. ‘Okay, Mr. Hopkins. This one’s for you.’

We played ‘Jeremiah was a Bullfrog’ as loudly as we could. We danced around the room, shimming, and shuffling back and forth. We sang until we collapsed on the floor and Mr. Hopkins said, ‘Yeah, I remember Jeremiah. He was a pal of mine.’

Once, while we were lying awake in bed, I asked Luke why he was afraid of the dark and he said he was scared of the Tunnel Man. The Tunnel Man scratched on the window at night, trying to get inside. He wore a sack on his back for kidnapping and when he walked, his breath floated around him in a green swirl. At night, after lights out, Luke hid under the blankets. He slept underneath so many layers that eventually he overheated. His temperature soared through the thirties and the glands in his neck swelled up. Sometimes, he woke from a
fever dream, shouting hysterical things, like, ‘He’s standing behind the curtains.’ Mum and Dad had a special name for Luke’s nightmares. They called them The Heebie Jeebies.

I wasn’t afraid of the Tunnel Man, but sometimes before sleep, I had a single terrifying thought which was, I won’t wake up in the morning. Or worse, when I wake up, my family will be gone. For a couple of months, I was so afraid of falling asleep I did everything I could to stay awake. I scaled Mum’s bookshelf for the thickest book I could find: the Bible. I started at Genesis and read through the Prophets. I finished with Ezekiel. I chose the top ten parables and interpreted their meanings. If one of the messages wasn’t clear, I wrote an amended version. I made paper chains out of coloured cardboard with a different design on each link: zigzags, spirals, isosceles triangles, the letters of the alphabet. I hung the chains from wall to wall with balls of Blu-Tack that I rolled into perfect orbs. I stencilled green islands onto the globes, so that every corner of the room was filled with a map of the world. When Dad came in and saw the Blu-Tack on the walls, he scraped off the gunk with a knife.

‘This has to stop,’ he said.

When Mum and Dad went out for dinner, Gran babysat. She didn’t let us sleep with the light on because it was a waste of electricity. She said we were too old for a night light. She confiscated Mr. Hopkins, so Luke and I no choice but to stay awake. When Gran arrived in the afternoon, we made a point about bedtime.

‘Can we stay up?’ Luke asked.

‘Yes,’ Dad said. ‘We won’t be late.’

Luke turned to Gran. ‘Dad said we could stay up.’

She nodded.
‘So, we’re staying up,’ I said.

‘Of course.’

We pulled our board games out from under the stairs and scattered them around the lounge room: Twister, Jenga, Chinese Checkers, and Monopoly to open. I chose the battleship for my pawn and Luke, the top hat. We discussed our real estate options. Luke eyed off Park Lane and Mayfair because blue was his favourite colour. I settled on the railways because they were close to all the properties. I also chose the Angel Islington because it seemed like the odd one out. We split the bank, so no could steal the money and shuffled the cards of chance. I removed the bank cards from the pile and hid them under the board. I hated paying poor tax.

After we set up the board, we prepared our cubby-house. We pulled the sheets off our bunk and put batteries in our torches. I loaded Tetris into my Game Boy and Luke brought his slingshot. Before our parents left for dinner, they kissed us both goodbye. Mum fiddled with an earring, while Dad tucked in his shirt.

‘Be good,’ he said. ‘No mucking around.’

When he reversed down the driveway, Gran stood up from the couch.

‘Bedtime,’ she said.

While Luke and I lay in bed, Gran watched the tennis. The grand slams were her favourite. When Agassi played, she pushed her recliner up to the screen, so close she could almost touch him. She recorded his aces in a little notebook she carried around. At the back of the pad, she ruled up a points table that she titled ‘Slips and Goofs’. In the column below,
she listed player mistakes and means. Forced errors were forgivable, but other kinds weren’t. Double faults were the worst.

‘You only live once,’ Gran said, ‘but you serve twice.’ There was no excuse for a tantrum. ‘Come on, Andre!’ she shouted. ‘Cut the jibba jabba!’ She threw her book at the screen.

On nights when my parents were late, Gran watched the women’s game. She thought their attitude was just as terrible and their wardrobe even worse.

‘Is that a corset?’ she said, leaning in. ‘I know she’s French, but this is Melbourne, not the Moulin Rouge.’

She made a note in her book.

Sometimes, if an outfit particularly upset her, she complained to the Women’s Tennis Association. Gran said the WTA were a group of renegades who revolutionised the game from London. The women, who were led by Billy Jean King, lobbied for equal prize money. They signed big circuit sponsors who offered broadcast deals and bonuses. When Colgate pulled their sponsorship a week before Wimbledon, the women met up secretly at the Gloucester Hotel in Kensington. Four hours later, the WTA was formed. Some of the women became so fixed on winning that when they took to Centre Court three days later, they forgot about the dress code: all whites, no stripes, and hems below the knees. Gran was a feminist; she joined the unions when the war ended, but when it came to tennis, she believed in tradition.

After she watched Mattek play in the women’s singles, Gran wrote to the WTA. In the letter, she said that Mattek’s dress wasn’t a dress but a napkin. She wrote, ‘In light, also, of Beth’s recent behaviour (cursing and spitting at courtside photographers), I recommend a
three-month suspension. Should Mattek fail to abide by the already existing code of conduct, then I trust relevant action will be taken by your directorate.’ Gran’s spelling was perfect, but her wording was wobbly, so Dad helped her with the phrasing. At the end of the letter, he added, ‘At this stage, I am thankful for small mercies. At least her napkin was white.’ Dad told Gran that humour was the most persuasive logic. If you can make someone laugh, he said, then you can sell them anything. After Gran checked the address, she sealed up the envelope and I licked the stamp. We posted the letter together at the post-office down the road.

‘Who’s winning, Gran?’ I asked one night, when Mum and Dad were out. It was near midnight when I came down the hall and Gran was sitting in front of the television.

‘Guess.’

‘The Woodies?’

‘No. The bloody Williams sisters.’

The year before, Venus and Serena wore see-through skirts in the grand final of the doubles. Their knickers were skimpy and skin-coloured and the high cut exposed their thighs. From a distance, the globes of their buttocks were smooth. In fact, the invisible lines created the illusion they weren’t wearing knickers at all. Gran hadn’t forgiven them. ‘It was like the Venus eye trap,’ she said. Gran didn’t like the sisters because she thought they were hot-heads and show offs. Their chunky jewellery was distracting and the gold hot pants they warmed up in, offensive and unflattering. After the beads incident, Gran wrote to the WTA again, calling for an international ban on hair braids. At Wimbledon that year, the Swiss super-star, Martina Hingis, was serving for game point when Serena’s extensions fell out. The white beads bounced across the court. The umpire called a drinks break while the ball
boys swept the grass. Serena sulked by herself on the sideline, making gestures at the crowd. After a while, Hingis returned to serve, but Serena, who was sore with the umpire, decided to forfeit the match. She said she couldn’t play without her pearls.

‘I don’t mind Venus,’ Gran said, ‘but Serena’s a sook.’ She lowered her glasses. ‘Why aren’t you in bed?’

‘I can’t sleep.’

‘I’ll fix you a milk with honey.’

‘We don’t have honey,’ I said.

‘Count sheep.’

‘That doesn’t work.’

‘Try chickens.’

I turned to walk away.

‘Wait,’ Gran said, raising her voice. ‘Pull up those pants.’

I looked down at my pyjamas. ‘What’s wrong with them?’

Gran nodded at the Williams sisters. ‘See those women? They’re floozies. There are too many floozies in the world. We don’t need another one.’

Later that night, while I was lying in bed, Gran turned off the tennis and walked down the hall. The match hadn’t finished yet, but Gran had closed her book and pushed up her recliner. I knew something was wrong. She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. I slipped out of bed and wandered down the hall. I traced my hands along the walls. They seemed to be thudding. My parents’ bed was empty: their quilt was neat and
tucked in, and the pillows were untouched. As I walked down the hall, the lights flickered.
Dad had been meaning to fix the fuse, but he bumped his head the week before and burnt his
hand on the bulb.

When I got to the bathroom, the door was ajar and there was a gap about the width of
my nose between the frame and the handle. I looked inside. Gran was standing in front of the
mirror with her blouse unbuttoned. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Her chest was bruised and
yellow, and both her breasts were missing. In the place where they used to be was a scar. The
ribboned stitches, which were still fresh, made the shape of a figure eight.

Gran looked at me in the reflection.

The light flicked off.

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Chiang Mai Station consisted of a single track that was buried under tatty flowers. In between
the bonsais were a series of potholes that had been dug out of the earth for toilets. Out front,
next to the ticket office, was a shop that sold deep-fried grasshoppers. The two Thai women
who managed the stall took turns painting their nails and making announcements over the
speaker. The younger of the two folded sticky rice in banana leaves. The other soaked the
packages on her tongue. The Queen of Thailand, who saw everything, watched over the
station from her mantle. The king, who rode the rails as a boy, was raised on the tallest
flagpole. His cheeks were just as pink and his sword still drawn for dragons. In the garden
below, someone had made an offering to Buddha: a bowl of baby mandarins and some turtle
shells flipped and filled with incense. In the distance, the sun had fallen behind the mountains and the sky was the colour of grape juice.

‘Come on, Skip,’ Samsun said. He raised his fists to his chest.

I boxed him back. He smiled and nudged my cheek.

‘What time’s our train?’ I said.

‘Soon.’

I undid my backpack and rested it on the ground. One of the zippers had run off its slider and I was certain that at any moment everything would fall out.

‘Smoke?’ Samsun said.

‘No, thanks.’

He laughed and turned away. ‘Farangs,’ he said, cupping the match. ‘You’re all the same.’

While he smoked, the train pulled into the station. The front carriages were stained on the side and some of the doors were missing. The windows were just wooden cut-outs. The ropes that held the carriages together were starting to fray at the ends.

‘Super train,’ Samsun said.

As we boarded, a boy in a conductor’s hat asked to see our tickets.

‘Sawadee-cup,’ he said.

‘Sawadee-cup.’
Inside, the carriage was lined with metal chairs that were locked in right angles. There was no air conditioning, just oscillating fans. The hardtop benches were bolted to the wall with slotted screws and brackets. In the walkway, babies napped on straw mats, while puppies played around them. Some of the animals had missing tails and bungled paws. Others had sparse coats and mullets for hair. One of the pups rose from his post and wandered over to my feet. He rested his chin on my bag.

Outside, the boy in the conductor’s hat stepped back from the train. ‘Kanchanaburi,’ he said, raising his whistle. ‘Final call.’

Samsun kicked off his shoes. ‘Here we go.’

I’d met Samsun that morning at the markets in Chatuchak. The market, which was raised on tarmac, was an odd assortment of things: handicrafts and livestock, pepper plants and postcards. The clothes section shelved everything from toe socks to silks, pantsuits and boots. The labyrinth of aisles was dense with crowds and the humid pockets, deep in the grasp of the market, gave the place a choking effect. The heat waves blistered curious noses and turned most away at midday. Kids made fans of palm leaves, while their grandmothers nursed headaches. Shop owners filled vats with water, offering tourists soakings with their purchases.

Like most Thais, Samsun believed the heat was a blessing. In wet season, the flood water clogged canals and halted sea travel. Rice barges were directed to the port of Bangkok and supermarkets sold out of cooking oil. Slum houses floated away with their tenants still inside. Only the sewerage stayed stagnant. Midges laid eggs in pools and stools, breeding mosquitoes and other winged insects. A rise in malaria emptied night bazaars and dinner
cruises on the Phraya were cancelled. When summer returned, the women sent prayers of thanks along the murky water: lotus-shaped lanterns and marigolds.

When I met Samsun, I was sitting by myself in Mama’s Kitchen. Mama was sixty-something and round with chubby arms. She wore a floral apron around her waist. In her kitchen, soup pots frothed over spice racks and boards of diced onion. Chickens, freshly plucked, hung vertically from the rafters, their beaks still parted in awe. Sometimes, when business was slow, Mama emerged from the steam to cut one down.

‘You like?’ she beamed. She pointed at my scraps.

‘Yes. Delicious.’

She looked over the bones. ‘You want me to wrap for you?’ She scraped the bones into a box.

When I looked up, Samsun was standing on a milk crate, selling exotic birds to breeders: bee-eaters and wagtails, spoonbills and skimmers. He was wearing cargo shorts and a Liverpool jersey. When no one was watching, he clipped the owls’ wings. Samsun sold the birds for a hundred baht or a couple of Australian dollars. Sometimes, for a little extra, he removed the cocks from their coop and dropped them in the fighting ring. The ring wasn’t a ring at all, but a blow up swimming pool. The gesture gathered a small crowd and the birds fought desperately, until one lost an eye or wing. The winning bird was shampooed and massaged, and given a certificate to commemorate the win.

Samsun called me over. ‘My customers all want Skippys,’ he said. He was sucking on a guava peel.

‘Skippys?’
He curled his hands into paws and bounced up and down.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Kangaroos.’

‘Skippys,’ he nodded.

I closed my backpack and glanced around the store. The shop was tucked away under an industrial fan, between two busy fruit stores. Samsun opened one of the cages and removed a parrot from its perch. The bird was an over-sized thing with green streaks behind its eyes. Its pupils were dark and dilated, and its eyebrows were strangely human.

‘This is Akio,’ Samsun said. He raised the bird on his arm.

The parrot cocked its head towards Samsun’s and they sang the national anthem. The parrot, who had memorised the lyrics, sounded just like Samsun when he sang. He mimicked every crack and quaver, and swayed his head from side to side. When Samsun sang out of tune, the parrot clawed the air. Samsun laughed and shook his head and continued to sing off key. The bird sidled up to his shoulder where he screeched and flapped his wings. Samsun laughed and the bird bit his ear.

‘Love bite,’ Samsun said.

He sprinkled some seeds onto his palm and offered the feed to the bird. The bird purred and waddled onto Samsun’s wrist. He pronounced his feathered chest. His breast was stern and ribbed in the middle, and his heart protruded like a golden brooch. A crowd of tourists gathered around, waving dollar notes.

The parrot eyed off their cameras. ‘One at a time people, please.’

Samsun smiled. ‘I taught him that.’
‘It’s a long way to Tipperary,’ the bird said. ‘I’ve never been to Ho Chi Minh.’

‘It’s true,’ Samsun said. ‘He hasn’t.’ He passed me the parrot. ‘You come with me to the stone garden.’

‘The stone garden?’ I said. ‘What’s that?’

‘What’s that?’ the bird repeated.

‘You don’t know?’ Samsun said.

The bird squawked.

Our train pulled out of the station.

Gran kept Gramp’s ashes in a marble urn on top of her fridge. She met him for breakfast in the morning, and said, ‘Good night, John,’ before she went to bed. She even took him down sometimes and cooked his favourite meals. He only ate certain things, especially when it came to vegetables. He liked his beans brought to a boil and his peas spread out on the plate. He preferred his potatoes mashed instead of baked. Gran, on the other hand, wasn’t a fussy eater. In fact, she rarely ate at all. But over the years, she came to eat the same food, the same way, in the same reclining chair. Mum always said you could tell a lot about a woman by what she cooked. ‘There’s something about a woman boiling eggs,’ she said. ‘You can tell she doesn’t believe in anything.’

I thought this was a strange thing to say, since eggs turned into birds. I worried when I cracked an egg that a mangled chicken would come out. There were crows nesting in the oaks
behind Gran’s house and sometimes, when it was windy, their eggs fell onto the pavement. The wooden sound when they cracked was loud and clear, like a bat hitting a ball. When the eggs broke and the yolk dried up, the black feathers and shell fragments stuck to the pebbles. Once, while Gran and I were hosing the mess, I asked her what she ate for breakfast and she said, ‘Bacon and never eggs.’ The only time I saw her with an egg of any kind was on Easter Sunday. Each year, Gran got out of bed at sunrise to plan an egg hunt for us kids. She collected the eggs in a straw basket and hid them on the golf course. The fairways behind her house rolled out past shrubs and sand pits. In the light, the fairways resembled landing strips for small propeller planes. From Gran’s house, the traps were low and hidden, but the course of play was simple. The two circles wound in on themselves, meeting at a final hole that doubled as the first. Gran said that crossing point was the most difficult of them all. ‘That’s your blind spot,’ she said.

When we arrived at Gran’s, she was standing on the green in bunny ears, waving a pocket watch back and forth.

‘You’re late,’ she said. ‘You’ll probably be late to my funeral.’

She shuffled Luke and I over to a spot of shade and handed us paper bags. The bags were stuffed with cotton wool and printed with our names. With the help of Gramps, or so she said, she managed to hide over a hundred eggs on the course.

‘The eggs could be anywhere,’ she said.


‘Don’t do that,’ Mum said.

‘He always does it,’ I said. ‘He always plays with his thing.’

‘It will fall off,’ Mum said. She looked at Dad. ‘I know a little boy who lost his willy.’
Gran frowned. ‘Why do you tell him such nonsense?’ She turned to Luke. ‘It won’t fall off. It will always be a part of you.’

That year, the bounty was particularly big and the hunt took longer than usual. Emma, who was still in nappies, was granted a head start. She crawled over to the pond and ate some dirt. Luke, who was free at last, ran across the grass, shouting orders to no one in particular: ‘Check that nest! Look under those logs! Keep your eyes open!’ I followed close behind. I was worried about the position of the sun directly above and whether the chocolates were melting. Gran chased after us with her empty basket, giving hints of hot or cold.

Eventually, Luke broke away from the two of us and snatched the eggs as soon as he spotted them. The bunnies were stunned by the sun and easy to find, but anything smaller was difficult. The eggs rolled down the hills and along the weed lines into the plastic holes. They settled in ditches and grass pockets and sunk to the bottom of the fishpond. By the time dinner came around, some of the eggs were missing. Gran said she was sorry; she couldn’t remember where she hid them all, but she was certain John would remember. She said, ‘I think I’m starting to forget things.’ Dad wiped his hands on his pants and told her not to worry. He was sure us kids had found them all, and besides, we could look again tomorrow.

‘They’ll turn up,’ Dad said.

Mum nodded. ‘They always do.’

I looked at my parents. ‘What if they’re lost?’

Mum smiled. ‘Say a prayer to Saint Anthony.’

‘To who?’

‘Saint Anthony,’ Mum said. ‘Don’t you know Saint Anthony?’

‘I’ve never heard of him.’
‘Oh, Saint Anthony’s an excellent saint. Well, they’re all good, but Anthony’s especially helpful. He’s the one you pray to when you lose something, like your keys or purse.’

‘Or your mind,’ Dad said.

‘When we were girls, we had a statue of Saint Anthony on our dresser. Your Aunt Catherine prayed to him for years. Every night before bed, she knelt before him and asked for help to find a husband. She stayed there until her calves cramped up and Pa came in and ordered her back to bed. One morning, she got angry with Anthony for not answering, so she threw the statue out the window. There was a man walking down the street and the statue hit him on the head. He saw that Anthony came from our house, so he returned him to your aunt. A couple of weeks later, your aunt was married.’

‘To the statue?’ I said.

Mum laughed. ‘No, you dill. To the man.’

‘The man was Uncle Steve?’

Mum nodded.

‘That’s rubbish,’ Dad said. ‘Cathy and Steve met at poker.’

‘Was Uncle Steve okay?’ I said. ‘When the statue hit him, did it hurt?’

‘He was fine,’ Mum said.

Dad smirked. ‘Would you be fine?’ He turned to Mum. ‘I’ll throw a statue at you and we’ll see if it hurts.’ He folded up his paper and dropped it at my feet. ‘Go and get one of the garden gnomes and we’ll throw it at your mother.’

I pretended I didn’t hear.
‘Kate,’ he said.

‘Leave me alone.’

Dad crouched in front of me. ‘Tell me,’ he said, squeezing my wrists. ‘Who do you love more? Mummy or Daddy?’

When Monday came and school was off, we spent the morning in Gran’s kitchen. Mum nursed Emma on her lap, while Dad cut up the sausages. Luke and I sat on the floor, counting out our eggs. When no one was watching, we scrunched the wrappers into silver balls and flicked them at Gran’s budgie. The budgie, Nell, was a funny thing; her face was flat and her eyes were close together. She sat on the swing inside her cage and squawked whenever we touched her.

Dad pointed his knife at the bird. ‘I hate that bloody budgie.’

‘There’s something wrong with it,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ Luke said, joining in. ‘We’re not even touching it.’

Gran walked over to the cage and opened up the door. ‘Hello, Nell,’ she said. She raised the bird on her hand. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘We didn’t do anything,’ Luke said.

Gran frowned and looked over the bird. She stroked Nell’s neck and rubbed her back, then gently spread her feathers. When the bird chirped and ducked her head, Gran held it to her breast. The bird pecked through her dress and pulled a thread from her bra.

‘What on Earth is that?’ Gran said. She removed a silver ball from Nell’s crest and rolled it between her fingers.

Luke and I laughed.
Gran flicked her hair to the side. ‘Something’s wrong with Nell and all you two can do is laugh.’


‘You’re a liar,’ Luke said. He snatched my bag of eggs. The paper bottom ripped apart and the eggs toppled out. They rolled across the kitchen floor towards Gran’s feet.

‘What’s going on?’ Dad said. He dropped his fork and knife.

‘It was an accident,’ I said.

Nell flapped her wings.

‘It’s okay,’ Gran said. ‘Nell’s stressed.’

‘Yeah,’ Luke said. ‘Nell’s depressed.’

Dad fixed his belt. ‘Clean this mess up now.’

Luke rolled the eggs into a bundle and pushed them over with the broom. We swapped the hollows for cream caramels and the crunchies for marshmallows. We tallied the trades on the tablecloth, using one of Gran’s lipsticks. When we were certain the numbers were even, we sorted our eggs into colours: shiny blues and crown golds, all the speckled pastels. We wrapped the eggs in tea towels and stored them in the fridge. We turned the eggs over on the hour, but we never found the rest. Dad seemed to forget about the search and even Luke, who filled his crisper to the brim, doubted there were more. ‘I own all the eggs in the world,’ he said. His collection was certainly more colourful than mine and his shells were still intact, but when I walked around Gran’s house at Easter, I knew some things were missing. I don’t know why it bothered me so much, the thought of all those eggs out there alone. I think I worried they’d roll off the earth and disappear forever. At night, I imagined coloured eggs floating around in outer space and bumping into each other. The vibrations when they
knocked together made me feel uneasy. Space was an empty place, with glittering lights and long black tunnels. When we studied space at school, I learnt that in the 1950s the Russians found a dog that was part husky and sent her to space on a rocket. The dog’s name was Laika and she was just a puppy. Before she left, they taught her to poo in a plastic bag and eat gel instead of rabbit. The scientist who trained her found her wandering the streets of Moscow. He said he chose a stray because she’d been through everything and besides, she had nothing left to live for. Before the launch, he took her home and let her play with his children. Dad said those Russian bastards weren’t to be trusted.

‘Especially that Gorbachev,’ he said. ‘He’s the worst of all.’

One week later, when the mission was over, a Russian official gave a press release from the Kremlin. He said that Laika died on Day Six when the power switched off and the oxygen ran out and the pup fell asleep at the wheel.

‘Actually,’ Dad said, ‘she died on launch when the landing pod exploded.’ He raised his beer. ‘Those Russian bastards.’

Sometime later, after Dad told me about Laika, I started to see streaks of colour in the sky and soon I thought the colours meant something. For example, a sparkle of pink or blue in the night meant a baby was coming. When I told Gran this, she laughed and said there were enough children in the family already.

‘But I have a feeling,’ I said.

‘You have lots of feelings. The apple doesn’t fall far.’

‘From what?’ I said.

‘It’s a saying. Like, “Every Jack has a Jill.”’
‘That’s a nursery rhyme,’ Luke said. He climbed onto the table. He raised his hands behind his head and thrust his hips. ‘Jack and Jill went up the hill to get a pail of water. Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after.’

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ I said. ‘Why would you go up a hill to find water?’

Gran agreed. ‘They weren’t the brightest of people, Jack and Jill. I mean, if you think about it, they were highly inefficient.’ She turned to Luke. ‘Get down from there before I belt you.’

He jumped off the table.

‘Do you know what bit comes next?’

I shook my head.

‘Up got Jack and home did trot as fast as he could caper to old Dame Dob who patched his nob with vinegar and brown paper.’

‘You made that up,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ Luke said. ‘You made that up, ya filthy animal.’

‘Excuse me?’ Gran said.

‘He saw it on TV,’ I said quickly. ‘He thinks he’s a gangster.’

Gran clenched the bench.

I stepped between them. ‘He doesn’t understand.’

‘Yella,’ Luke said. He raised his hand into a pistol. ‘It’s me, Snakes. Acey said you had some dough for me.’ He turned to Gran. ‘How much do ya owe me?’


‘Don’t do it,’ I said.
Luke laughed. ‘Acey’s upstairs takin’ a bath.’ He nodded at Gran. ‘I’m gonna give you to the count of ten before I pump ya full of lead.’ He began to count out loud.

‘One... Two... Ten!’ He shot Gran dead.

Gran raised her skirt. ‘Come here, you little mongrel.’

Luke ran down the hall. ‘Call 911!’

‘The police can’t help you,’ Gran said. She marched down the hallway towards our bedroom.

When she opened the door, Luke ran out from the bathroom and cut in front of her. Gran closed the door behind them. The lock clicked. The house was quiet for several minutes, except for the sound of a dripping tap. The tap, which started to leak the week before, needed a new washer. Mum said the sound was enough to drive her mad and when she couldn’t take it any longer, she got up in the middle of the night and put a pillow in the sink to mute the sound. In the morning, the tap was still dripping, but the pillow was gone.

‘Here,’ Gran said. ‘Take the washing. Make yourself useful.’ She passed me the basket of undies.

Her hands were red.

‘I would’ve killed him, if it weren’t for my bloody back.’ She rubbed her shoulder. ‘Get your brother an ice pack. I’m going to watch the tennis.’

I carried the washing down the hall.


He was lying on his bed, facing the wall. ‘No,’ he said, rubbing his thighs. ‘I can’t feel my legs.’

I passed him the ice pack.
He turned around. ‘This family’s fucked.’

I nodded. ‘Do you want to write letters?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘That’s gay.’ His legs were shaking.

‘Do you want to play Sega?’

‘No, I want to kill her.’

‘What?’

He stared at me.

I nodded. ‘Get your stuff.’

Luke pulled out his bow and arrow from underneath the bed. He removed the arrows from the plastic case and handed two to me.

‘I only need one. I’ve been practising.’ He limped over to the door.

‘It’s not really Gran’s fault,’ I said.

‘Watch this.’ He raised the bow to the side of his cheek and pulled the string. When he let go, the arrow flew across the room into the window. The dart stuck to the glass.

‘It’s not sharp enough,’ he said.

‘We can do it tomorrow.’

He reloaded the arrow. ‘I want to do it tonight.’ He opened the window and started spitting. ‘I’m spitting on her tea party,’ he said. There was a cut on his lip.

‘Does it hurt?’

He shook his head. ‘Nup.’

‘But it’s bleeding.’
‘I can’t feel anything,’ he said. He slung the bow over his shoulder and slipped the arrow into his pants. ‘Are you coming?’

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I have to stay here.’

∞

When I woke in the carriage, there were rice fields in the distance. The meadows were fenced and flooded for harvest, and the wheat stalks guarded the horizon. In the sludge, a father and son herded buffalo. The buffalo were adorned with wreaths around their horns. They ploughed the soil gently, folding up the earth. The boy ran behind with a burlap sack, collecting the fresh manure. Sometimes, the buffalo stopped to scold a muddy track or consider a river crossing. When this happened, the man pressed them on with a slap. Eventually, the animals grudged towards the river, where the women filled buckets. Sometimes, one of the buffalo stood its ground.

When breakfast arrived, Samsun stirred from sleep. ‘Cow yam,’ he said. He squeezed some lemon over the rice. When he finished the shrimp, he picked up a lime leaf and rolled it. He drew the tip to his lips and whistled.

As the train crawled further through the jungle, the carriages grazed their bellies on the barbed floor. The cars cried out, proclaiming their pain, while the pillars shook their heads. Ahead, there was a bridge with broken sleepers. The gaps between the planks widened in the middle, drawing attention to what lurked below: the thin trickle of a once deep stream, the pointed rocks. At the bank, the engine of the train nosed forward and began to choke. The
train tilted to the side. I imagined the train slipping from the track easily, like a weasel off a log.

‘Not really Super Train,’ Samsun confessed. ‘Old train from Japan.’

‘Excellent,’ I said.

As we wound up the mountain, the sun rose to greet us. The heat massaged knots out of the train’s back, leaving blisters shaped like fingerprints. The papayas, too, watched over us. Their shoulders were hunched from standing too long and their ears were full of flies. When no one was watching, they threw fruits into our carriage. One of the pawpaws rolled down the aisle. Its stem burnt, like a fuse. Ahead, there was a running waterfall.

‘Num tok,’ Samsun said.

In the leaky caves, between the pine trees, there were beehives and wild flowers. The trees stretched out, side by side, unscarred by years of solitude. They grew in each other’s shadow, but they still stood apart. From time to time, they gazed intently at each other, but their heavy arms and stubborn roots meant they’d never be acquainted.

‘Pines,’ I said, pointing at the trees.

‘Pengs,’ Samsun corrected.

Sometimes, I thought we were all just standing apart, facing each other, waiting for something to happen.
One Easter, when everyone was sleeping, Gran pulled me from bed and said, ‘Come here, I want to show you something.’ I followed her to the verandah. The metal railings were cold on my hands and the lawn was frosted over. Gran pointed out past the frail oaks to the outline of the golf course.

‘Can you see him?’ she said.

‘See what?’

She nudged me forward. ‘Look.’

When the mist lifted, I saw a golfer unwrapping an Easter egg.

‘That’s mine!’ I said. I grabbed Gran’s hand. ‘We have to get it back.’

Gran smiled. ‘We don’t have to do anything.’

I tried to lead her away, but she held onto the rail.

I started to beg.

Gran let go of my hand and put her arms around my neck.

‘Do you know I love you?’ she said.

∞

When we passed the old city, the last stop before the end of the line, Mum called from Brisbane.

‘Kate,’ she said. ‘Gran died.’
She didn’t use a euphemism, which was strange. She was always talking about friends passing away or babies falling asleep in the arms of Jesus. Once, when I learning to skate, the boy next door had a heart attack in the park and Mum, when quizzed on his whereabouts by the paramedics, said he had gone to meet his maker. Later, she told Dad he’d graduated.

‘When?’

‘After lunch.’

‘Why didn’t you call?’

‘I tried. The line was down.’

I moved the phone to my chest. I imagined Mum do the same. I saw her standing in the kitchen, with her back against the wall. On the stove, there was a pot with pasta. The water was boiling over.

‘Kate,’ she said, finally, as if she were naming me. She stressed the syllable and took back the letters, recalling the first thing she gave me. ‘Kate Elizabeth?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Gran left you her box. I haven’t opened it.’

‘When’s the funeral?’

‘Probably Friday, if we can get Father Driscoll. He’s out in the Lockyer Valley. I called the parish, but no one answered. Apparently he’s holding a vigil. It’s bad out there.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s flooding. It’s worse in Grantham, out near Julie, but the city’s been evacuated. The water’s reached the top of the motorway. Anna’s saying the worst is yet to come.’
‘I haven’t heard anything about it.’

‘The Drift Café was floating down the river. That’s ironic, don’t you think?’

‘Dad would’ve loved it.’

‘Yes. He’s been watching the clip on the news.’

‘Smoke?’ Samsun said. He flicked his lighter.

I shook my head.

‘Mum?’ I said. I pressed the phone closer.

‘I’m here.’

‘There’s a flight tonight. The red eye. But I’ll have to get back to Bangkok.’

‘Where are you?’ she said.

I looked out the window. The pines, which stepped back from the horizon, were skeletal and windswept. The rice fields were gone. In their place, there were only mud flats. As we neared two boom gates, we slowed to pass abandoned mills and the weathered remains of a factory. We were approaching another station.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘I think I’m in Kanchanaburi.’

There was a pause.

‘Kanchanaburi?’

‘Yeah. It’s in the west.’

‘I know where it is,’ Mum said. ‘Hang on.’
While I waited, Samsun picked up one of the puppies from the floor and started ticking its belly. The dog growled.

‘*Duey, duey,*’ Samsun said. He turned to me. ‘Smile.’

‘*Duey, duey,*’ I said.

Eventually, there was a clicking sound, followed by muffled conversation and Dad was on the line.

‘Don’t change your ticket,’ he said. ‘Your grandmother wanted you to travel. She wouldn’t want you to come home.’

Ahead, there was a green flat that was acre wide with rows of stones running up the hill and down again. The stones, which were more like pickets, were tall and white with scattered flowers. They were arranged in perfect lines.

I squinted at the stones. ‘Who was with her when she died?’

Dad sighed, as if he was annoyed by the question. ‘Just one of the nurses,’ he said. ‘The roads are blocked because of the floods. The hospital’s been closed for a week. Even the ferries are off.’ There was a pause. ‘I couldn’t get there.’

I closed my eyes and saw Gran, waiting for Dad to come.

‘She waited as long as she could. You know your grandmother.’

‘Did she ask for anything?’

‘Yes. She asked the nurse for a radio. She wanted something to listen to. She said, “It’s very quiet over there.” That was the last thing she said.’ Dad cleared his throat. ‘I have to go. Your mother’s calling me.’
‘Okay,’ I said.

He hung up the phone. The train slowed to a stop.

‘We’re here,’ Samsun said.

I picked up my bag.

On the platform above us, there was a sign in English. The board was worn and starting to rust, but the words were clear: ‘Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.’ The stone garden.

∞

After Gran’s cremation, which was held at Pinnaroo, the director of the crematorium sent us a bill in the mail. The fee included the coffin, the nameplate, and the use of the insertion trolley. Attached to the bill, which turned out cheaper than the quote, was a discount stamp. When Dad called the crematorium to inquire about the reduction, the girl on the line replied, ‘It only took forty-five minutes.’

‘The cremation?’ Dad said.

‘The entire process, from incineration through to cooling. It usually takes longer. Was your mother very small?’

‘Yes,’ Dad said. ‘There wasn’t much to her.’

‘The burner uses less gas. That’s why it’s cheaper.’

‘I don’t mind paying,’ Dad said.

‘We’ve charged you for the chapel. Your sister fixed that up.’
‘Linda?’

‘Yes. She came in yesterday. The new bill’s just for the body. Is there a problem with the amount?’

‘It just seems a bit cheap. It’s not much, that’s all.’

‘Well, we’re cheaper than Mount Thompson. They charge for the service over there as well as the scattering.’

‘The scattering?’

‘Of the remains.’

‘Christ. Of course.’

‘The price depends on the size of the body,’ the girl explained, ‘and the density of the bones. Kids are cheaper. Once the burner’s all warmed up, they only take a minute.’

‘That’s good to know,’ Dad said.

The girl agreed. ‘Please tell your female friends.’

‘I’ll tell my wife,’ Dad said. He hung up the phone. He folded the bill into his pocket and returned to the kitchen. He removed a mug from the cupboard and pulled out the bowl of sugar. Then, he filled the kettle and waited for the water to boil. When the kettle whistled, he said, ‘I want to put my mother’s ashes with my father’s. I think it’s the right thing to do.’

Mum looked up from her tea.

‘I’m sure that’s what she wanted,’ Dad said. ‘I mean, she never said that to me and there’s nothing in the will. She never mentioned it, but I think that’s what she wanted.’
Mum touched her wedding ring. Dad walked over to the sliding door and put his hands on the glass.

Outside, the creek was starting to rise. The surge wasn’t enough to flood the forest, but it was enough to show on the bank. The current cut its way through the neck of land and strengthened as the gully narrowed. Twigs and leaves floated downstream, spinning a little as they passed. By the time the water reached the bridge, it overlapped the planks. A whirlpool gained momentum at the bridge, sucking in dirty water and spitting it out on the ramp. The way across was fading.

‘She’s up again,’ Dad said. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if she goes.’

He pulled across the curtain and sat down at the table. He pushed his coffee to the side, then removed the plastic from the paper. Mum finished her tea and leant forward. She seemed to be reaching for something.

‘Do you have an idea for the burial?’ she said.

Dad frowned and turned the page. ‘There’s a plot in Dutton Park that belongs to the family. I’m not sure who’s buried there, but in the morning I’ll find out.’

‘Do you want me to call the caretaker?’ Mum said. ‘I can come with you to the cemetery.’

‘No,’ Dad said. ‘I want to go alone.’

‘Are you sure?’

Dad nodded. ‘I could use the drive.’

‘Okay,’ Mum said. ‘I’ll stay here. That’s probably for the best.’
The next morning, Dad called to say he just left Dutton Park and the site wasn’t an option. The sexton opened the grave, as Dad requested, and it turned out Ethel was there. When Dad got home, I asked him who Ethel was and he said, ‘She was your grandmother’s sister.’

‘I never met her,’ I said.

‘They had a falling out. Your great aunt was mad.’

‘What did she do?’ I said. I’d never heard of Ethel before and I was sure Dad was exaggerating.

‘When your grandmother was five or six, Ethel took her for a swim at the Valley Pool. She told your grandmother she didn’t need her floaties; she was going to teach her to swim. She changed her into a swimsuit and folded up her clothes. They slid into the deep end. When the life guard wasn’t watching, Ethel held her under.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not a bloody couch doctor. All I know is I can’t bury my mother with Ethel.’

Over the next couple of weeks, the matching urns stayed on my parents’ dresser. Both had out-curved handles and long necks and they seemed to speak to each other. When Mum was dusting, she turned the urns towards the window, so they both faced the sun. She left the room to empty the vacuum and when she came back, the urns were closer together.

‘Did you do that?’ she said.

‘No.’
'Kate, tell me if you did that.'

‘I didn’t,’ I said.

Mum was quiet for a while and then continued dusting. I sat on the end of her bed and looked over at my grandparents. I didn’t believe they were in there at all, until Mum opened one of the urns right under my nose and said, as some dust puffed out, ‘This is it, Kate. That’s all that’s left of us.’

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘When we die our bodies turn to dust.’

I thought about it. ‘Where do our hearts go?’

‘Our hearts are inside our bodies,’ Mum said, ‘so they turn to dust, too.’ She closed the lid on the urn. ‘Only our souls survive.’

‘Where do our souls go?’

Mum snapped. ‘Why do you ask these questions?’

I looked at the urn. ‘Is that Gran or Gramps?’

Mum shrugged. ‘Does it matter?’ she said. ‘They’re together.’

When Mum suggested we bury Gran and Gramps in the Botanical Gardens, Dad chose a spot by the river and sent a request to the council. I was busy choosing flowers and some verses from the Bible, when the council sent their reply. Dad couldn’t understand why our request was so unusual. ‘It’s not like we asked for a public memorial,’ he said.

The only explanation from the council was a copy of their waste strategy, which came in the mail three days later with directions to the tip. My aunt Linda, who was a barrister,
refused to settle for rubbish, so at quarter to four on Sunday morning we went to the gardens and waited by the jetty, while Luke dug up the earth. Before he started, he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled up both his sleeves. He lifted the spade, like Dad showed him, and brought it down at an angle. He tossed the soil over his shoulder. When the soil gathered into a mound, he knocked it down. Every now and then, he hit rock and the flint cut his legs. When this happened, he got down on his hands and knees and removed the stones.

Dad put his arm around Mum. ‘God good job,’ he said. ‘Give it one more hit.’

Luke nodded and raised the shovel. He wedged the spade into the earth and pressed down on the blade. He grunted while he worked, but he didn’t say anything. It was important to my brother that he dug the hole. He dug for a while longer until, finally, the sweat on his forehead began to show.

‘That’ll do,’ Dad said.

‘Do you think she’d be happy with that?’

Dad nodded.

I peered into the hole. The pit was deep enough to fit the urns, so we carried forward the ashes. There were nine of us all up—our family, Aunty Linda’s, and a homeless man who had happened there by chance. The man was dressed in baggy jeans and he sat on the park bench. The cuffs around his ankles rolled up to reveal army boots. His shoes were half-laced.

He said, as he licked his lips, ‘Is that an apple tree?’

‘Yes,’ Linda snapped. ‘We’re planting an apple tree.’

The man smiled and slapped his knee. ‘We’re gonna have apple pie tonight. What do you reckon, Billy Boy? Do you want some apple pie?’
We were all dressed in our pyjamas, except for my cousin, Kimberly, who wore a black silk dress. Her stockings, which were also black, gathered at her knees.

Dad studied her outfit. ‘Who are you meant to be?’

Kimberly raised her veil. ‘It’s a sign of respect.’

‘For who?’

‘Gran.’

Dad laughed. ‘Your grandmother would’ve pissed herself if she saw you in that outfit.’

‘Bruce,’ Mum said. ‘That’s inappropriate.’

Aunty Linda stepped forward. ‘Well, this is it,’ she said. ‘Bruce, Kate, would you like to say a few words?’

I looked at Dad.

After a while, Uncle Grant said, ‘Honey, I don’t think that’s necessary.’

‘What?’

‘We’ve already said our goodbyes.’

‘I know that,’ she snapped. ‘For Christ’s sake Grant, do you think I don’t know that? I’m burying my parents. I’m putting their ashes in the ground.’ She looked at him and then at Dad. ‘I think one of us should say something.’

‘Okay, honey. You’re right.’

Mum nudged Dad forward and he said, as he tossed some soil onto the urns, ‘You two be good in there.’
In the garden where I stood with Samsun, there was a plot for Australian soldiers. Skippys, Samsun said. The lawn that separated the graves was immaculate. The thin strips of grass, walkways for the living, were pruned along the edges. Death was a tidy business. The plaques told the stories of those who rested there: some brothers and fathers, a husband to Violet, most just a name and two dates. Each of the plaques was engraved with a gold crown. In the centre of the cemetery was a sitting area with a marble cross erected by the government. A gift from the Thai people. At the foot of the cross, someone had laid a bunch of lilies with a handwritten card. The script was in Thai with accents that indicated the lengths of the vowels and the rules for each character. Samsun watched me trace the symbols.

‘What does it say?’ I said. I handed him the card.

As he read, a flock of galahs flew overhead. Samsun paused to look up. The birds squawked and flocked together as they approached a dark cloud. When the last bird disappeared, Samsun looked down at the card. He hesitated for a moment, then turned the card over, as if he was reading its fortune. After a while, he closed the card and returned it to the bouquet.

‘Can’t say in English,’ he said.

‘Can you try?’

He shifted his weight. ‘How long you are here?’

‘I’m not sure. My grandmother died.’
He looked at me steadily. ‘More move, more loss.’

‘Pardon?’

‘That’s what it says.’ He then turned and walked away. ‘Come on, Skip.’

Once, when Gran was still well, we met for lunch in the city. Her favourite café was a place called Joe’s. It was tucked away on George Street, next to the marriage registry. Not many people knew about it. The menu never changed. They served coffee all day and scones with jam. Lunch was corned beef sandwiches. Cheese was extra.

‘Two of your ham and salad sangas,’ Gran said. ‘One for me and one for this one. She pushed me forward. ‘This is my grand-daughter, Kate. She just turned twelve. She’s going to be a writer.’

The waitress smiled. ‘Anything else?’

‘A strawberry milkshake,’ Gran said. She turned to me. ‘Do you still drink milkshakes? My shout.’

We chose a table by the window and sat down. Gran looked up at the sky. She caught the bus to the city, which didn’t bother her, but she worried about the weather.

‘Wretched thing plays tricks on me,’ she said. She patted her umbrella. ‘I better watch those clouds.’
She pushed the salt and pepper to the side, and arranged the silver cutlery. I tugged the tablecloth towards me and Gran pulled it back. The waitress brought her coffee.

‘How’s school?’ Gran said.

‘Good. I made debating.’

‘What speaker?’

‘First.’

‘Not third?’

‘No, I hate rebuttal.’

She smiled. ‘You know, your grandfather was a Toastmaster.’ She reached for the sugar. ‘We used to argue about all kinds of things: which way to hang the washing, how to cut kiwi fruits. I said along the lengths. He said across the middles.’ She stirred the pot. ‘You remind me of him.’

I pushed my milkshake to the side.

‘Did Gramps fight in Gallipoli?’

‘No,’ she laughed. ‘Don’t the nuns teach you history? God, your father pays them enough.’

‘We do ancient history,’ I said.

‘Well, you’ve got the wrong war.’

I tried to impress her. ‘We’re studying Ancient Greece. The Greeks started the Olympics after two brothers raced to Olympia. The race became a festival named in honour
of Zeus. The king always called a truce before the games, so that the competitors could travel there safely. Did you know the Greeks invented hula-hoops?'

‘The Greeks invented everything,’ Gran said, ‘except for pavlovas. We invented those.’ She cooled her coffee. ‘Have you ever seen kiwis on a pav? They’re always cut the same way. Lengthways. I should have told John that.’

The waitress set down the sandwiches.

Gran took a bite. ‘Your grandfather served in Thailand in a town called Kanchanaburi. He worked on the Death Railway.’ Gran chewed her sandwich thoughtfully. ‘Have you seen Bridge on the River Kwai? It’s a famous movie with William Holden. It’s based on a true story. The Japanese built a railway to supply food and weapons to their troops in Burma. Well, they didn’t build it. They used prisoners of war. Mostly British soldiers and some Australians. Some were Dutch, I think. The track ran through hard rock. The men had to cut through. Some were given picks to chip at the cliffs. Others just used their hands.’ Gran put down her sandwich and reached for the jug of milk. ‘Lots of men died out there of starvation or dysentery. Do you know what dysentery is?’

‘Yes,’ I said. I made a note to look it up.

‘A couple of years later, the railway was finished, but the Allies were advancing. The end of the war was near. One day, a Japanese commander spotted Allied planes flying over, so he sent the prisoners out onto the bridge. He told them to wave their hands. The men thought they’d be liberated.’

‘What happened?’

‘The Allies bombed the bridge.’
‘Didn’t the pilots see them?’

‘Who knows?’ Gran said. She spooned some sugar into her cup. ‘We all look the same in the distance.’

I sipped my milkshake.

‘They always said that for every plank laid on that line, a man’s life was lost. A life for every sleeper. That’s what John used to say.’

I picked at my sandwich. ‘I’m sorry about Gramps,’ I said.

Gran looked over my shoulder. I turned and followed her gaze, but when I looked around, the café was empty. She sipped her tea.

‘Gran,’ I said. ‘Did you hear me?’

I wanted her to know the truth about what happened that day at Lowson House. I wanted to be free of the past, so I could be present wherever I wanted.

Gran put her mug on the table. ‘Do you know why, after all this time, I still love your grandfather?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Neither do I.’

∞

Before she had kids, Gran wanted to be an entomologist.

‘What’s that?’ I said.
‘Someone who studies insects.’

When she lived with us, she taught me the names and ways of all the insects in our yard. She said, ‘We can learn a lot about ourselves from those who come before us.’

When I asked her what she meant, she said, ‘I’m thinking of a particular insect: one who’s stronger than us and a million-years-old.’

‘Bees?’ I guessed.

‘Ants.’

‘Ants?’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘What can we learn from ants?’

‘Resilience.’

‘But people step on them.’

‘And still, they never quit. When ants are on the trail of something, they don’t let anything get in their way. They don’t stand there with their hands on their hips and look at each other. They never shrug their shoulders. When ants meet an obstacle, they go over it or around it. They find another way.’

‘I like butterflies,’ I said.

Gran tsked. ‘Butterflies are drifters. You should think like an ant.’

‘But butterflies are my favourite,’ I said.

‘You should know better.’

Secretly, I thought they were Gran’s favourite, too.
CHAPTER 3

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

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She began to dance; it was the infinity dance of the lemniscate, a vigorous, flowing figure eight, a magical pattern I was to emulate time and again across the coming months, a dance that would eventually take me outside the circles of time.

—The Shamantic Way of the Bee
Simon Buxton

When I was a girl and I brought my first story home from school, my grandmother stuck my nonsense tale on the fridge, as all grans do, and she said, ‘Good one, girlie. Now, you’re going places’. Looking back at my six-year-old self, I am certain that at the time I did not understand what she meant. But in remembering it is clear that writing and travelling were always linked, even in the beginning when they were joined only at home. As I grew older and I began to travel and write about my travels, I realised that maps and books were essentially the same: records of lands that were real or imagined, memory markers of places and times. I began to see that all writing was travel writing, even if the journey was entirely inward through the obscure bends of the mind. I discovered, as I wandered from the coast of Ireland to the rice fields in Thailand, that the land itself was a form of story. As a writer, I could chart my movements across that land on page. When I read my travel stories, however, I noticed a strange pattern in my work; the further I wandered away from home, the further I wondered back: to my past, to the house I grew up in, to the gardens where my grandparents
met. I realised that the reason I travelled and the reason I wrote were diametrically opposed: I travelled to venture away from home, but I wrote to go back. I began to believe, like Janet Frame, that our first place always haunts us; that place shapes our sense of self, our thoughts, and our behaviour. Frame writes, ‘I cannot describe the sense of loneliness I felt when I knew I was in my place…I cried and I ran home, but my place followed me like a shadow’ (2007, 62–63). I understood, then, that a person could move back and forth, and I thought maybe a story could, too. I started to wonder about the shape such a story would take.

I discovered the lemniscate. Or, to be more precise, I discovered a definition of the lemniscate in Gaynor McGrath’s *Lemniscate* (2008). For McGrath, a lemniscate is ‘a line that travels continuously outward as it travels continuously inward’ (ibid., 13). At the time of this discovery, my knowledge of geometry was limited to isolated facts about triangles and $p=4S$: the perimeter of a square. Given my lack of experience with mathematics and my general distrust of numbers, I could not imagine how a lemniscate might look. How could a line move inward and outward, without defying logic? Certainly, given the movement described, the line could not be a line at all: a pendulum, perhaps, or a bicycle wheel, but not a regular line. I pursued the matter further: at first, to satisfy my curiosity, and then because I was writing a travel memoir and regardless of how far I wandered, the pull was always backwards to the past. It was not until I consulted my high school math book that I realised the lemniscate was a curve. To deepen my understanding of how the shape worked as a non-linear structure, I traced the study of the curve to seventeenth century geometry. Here, I learnt that the methodological concerns of the early geometers were the same problems I was struggling with as a writer: problems of form. The most pressing of these dilemmas involved the limited means of expression that were available in theory and practice for representing a curve. For me, the dilemma presented itself as the need to find a narrative shape that best
reflected the lived experience of my travels: travels that were marked by a forward progression through space and a backward passage through time.

At this point, I realised that two texts I was teaching, Winterson’s *Oranges* and Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, were lemniscate novels that embraced the non-linear form. *Oranges*, however, is a popular autobiographical fiction, while *Pale Fire* is a post-modern novel that is elaborate and complex. ‘Maddeningly complex’, to borrow a phrase from Humbert Humbert (Nabokov 1955, 12). Nonetheless, I took comfort from the idea that madness, which we often see as breakdown, can also be break-through (Laing 1967, 133). I persisted with *Pale Fire* because the novel, like *Oranges*, configures the lemniscate as a space-time continuum in which space and time are curved. Interestingly, the application of the lemniscate at the functional level is different in each text. Where Winterson uses the lemniscate to collapse the mimetic and the marvellous into a narrative continuum that orders the story’s content, Nabokov employs the curve to construct space and time as simultaneous experiences that reflect the story’s themes. Together, the texts reveal how the lemniscate works as a narrative form. This form provides a viable alternative to linearity that discards the laws of chronology and causality by generating a non-linear story that oscillates back and forth. In *Oranges*, this oscillation moves between reality and fantasy, while in *Pale Fire*, the oscillation moves between the novel’s mirror parts. The texts are natural choices for analysis because Winterson and Nabokov describe their novels as curved structures that evoke the lemniscate’s form. In the preface to *Oranges*, Winterson describes her novel as a ‘spiral narrative’ that produces ‘infinite movement…backwards and forwards’ (2001, xiii). Nabokov, too, imagines his work as a ‘spiral unwinding’ in which ‘space warps into something akin to time’ (2000, 231). The authors’ musings are important because they confirm what I suspected: that the lemniscate offers a useful method for shaping a non-linear story. In fact, despite the fact that neither Winterson nor Nabokov describe their novels explicitly as lemniscates, the pair
sufficiently define the shape to characterise a particular type of non-linear narrative: one that oscillates back and forth.

As I continued, then, to struggle with the structure of my memoir, I realised that for the lemniscate to work as a narrative form, it would have to emulate the lemniscate’s application in both *Oranges* and *Pale Fire*: that is, the shape would have to organise the story’s content and advance the story’s themes. Further, the shape would have to suit a travel story that coupled the physical movement of the body with the abstract travel of the mind. Basically, the lemniscate would have to solve my structural problems. This was a lot of pressure for a curve, so I read a collection of contemporary memoirs that combined the pull of memory with an experience of travel that was either figurative or literal: novels such as Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss* (1997), Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011), and Kristina Olsson’s *Boy, Lost* (2013). To my surprise, I found that in the subgenre of women’s travel, the lemniscate is often used as a narrative structure that allows the protagonist to wander back and forth. Interestingly, I noticed this trend is most pronounced in the travel stories of Antipodean women. In particular, Janet Frame’s autobiographical novella, *Towards Another Summer* (2007), and Michelle Dicinoski’s memoir, *Ghost Wife* (2013), were instrumental in shaping the way I conceived of the lemniscate as a narrative form.

**THE SECRET SPIRAL OF COMPOSITION**

Frame’s novella, *Towards Another Summer*, commences with a confession that immediately signals the narrator’s displacement in space and time: ‘Perhaps I’m homesick for
my own country and have not realised it’ (Frame 2007, 9). The novel, which Frame describes as ‘embarrassingly personal’, was written in the 1960s when Frame was living in London and published posthumously by The Janet Frame Literary Trust (Frame quoted in King 2000, 245). The story recounts the travels of Grace Cleave, a homesick writer who is living abroad and working on a difficult novel. Like Frame, Cleave is a New Zealand author who has left home to pursue a career in London. When Grace’s friend, Philip, invites her to spend a weekend in Relham, Grace accepts the invitation and travels north. From the outset, however, Grace’s travels are interrupted by her memories of home: the stars remind her of the Southern Cross, the dead geraniums conjure images of the flowers in bloom, and the trains resemble the sleepers that she used to catch as a girl. Importantly, Grace’s mental health is also fragile: she is hospitalised regularly for depression, she takes sleeping pills for her insomnia, and she believes that her body is incapable of adapting to the dreary English weather. Her hair, for example, which was once flame-red, is now the colour of dust. Above all, Grace struggles to escape the memory of her native land. In New Zealand, the author was deemed a ‘certified lunatic’ who was advised to quit writing and ‘sell hats for [her] salvation’ (Frame 2007, 15).

It is curious, then, that as the novel progresses, Grace retreats—first in her mind and then in her writing—to New Zealand. As her train hurtles across the snow-capped Midlands, Grace decides that for reasons she cannot comprehend, she must return home. As she nears the market town, time curves back on itself in a succession of moments that have no discernible order. Outside Grace’s window, the chimney pots turn into sheep, the snowfall is replaced with a burning sun, and the translucent landscape, which simulates the moon’s surface, is now a mountain chain. Space and time amalgamate as the past and present merge into a space-time continuum that discards the rules of causality and chronology. This continuum, which assumes the shape of a lemniscate, is similar to the phenomenon that Kate experiences when she boards her plane in Singapore. As Kate takes her seat, she is
preoccupied with thoughts of ‘turning back’. These thoughts, which manifest as a longing for the past, emerge as successive moments that are trigged by physical movement. As Kate flies home, she thinks about driving back along the Gateway Motorway ‘to graduation, to final exams, to the choir practice where it started’. The narrative regresses further in time as Kate advances through space. This structural oddity draws attention to the key question of this thesis: what is the shape of a story that oscillates back and forth? For Grace, this conundrum underlies her own attempt to separate the present from the past. In fact, when Grace arrives in Relham, she asks herself the question at the heart of the novel: ‘Why did her past life keep erupting and spilling dangerous memories over her weekend?’ (ibid., 110).

Subtextually, Frame offers her readers a clue for solving the puzzle when she alludes to the lemniscate. In the novel’s final pages, Frame dissolves the boundary between life and art in such a way that the reader learns, through close analysis, not only what the text says but how the text works. This exchange, which hints at the existence of an authorial presence, has been described by critics as ‘The Frame Function’ or ‘The Frame Effect’ (Cronin 2011; Evans 2003). For Patrick Evans, this effect is the inescapable sense that Frame’s work conceals ‘a secret, some private fact or facts, even some kind of scandal, which, if known, would make her oeuvre suddenly complete’ (2003, par. 9). The effect, which emerged, perhaps, from Frame’s desire to control the way her work is read, suggests that the relationship between form and function can be manipulated to such an extent that the novel’s structure, or how the text works, is privileged over the novel’s substance, or what the text says. For Evans, this reality creates a contract between Frame and her readers that is essentially adversarial. Evans explains,

How this worked I began to realise twenty years ago when I talked with Craigie McFie, a psychiatrist who had worked with R.H. Cawley [Frame’s psychiatrist]…According to
McFie…each night when Frame was in the Maudsley Institute…Cawley was obliged to play a game of her devising, in which she would give him a baffling sentence to unscramble—presumably something like…cryptic crossword clues—which Cawley was expected to have ‘solved’ for her each subsequent morning. (ibid., par. 10)

Certainly, in *Towards Another Summer*, Frame invites her readers to ‘solve’ the novel’s structure. In an act of authorial guidance, she refers in one scene to ‘the secret spiral’ of composition (Frame 2007, 219). The reference, of course, has a double meaning because it refers to both the novel itself (that is, Frame’s authorial composition) and the Handel Concerto that Grace listens to with Philip’s wife (that is, a musical composition). Thus, as the music gathers force and resonance, Grace feels herself change in both ‘shape’ and ‘direction’ (ibid.). The music moves her from Philip’s house on the edge of the moors to the town hall in Oamaru, where she listens to the choir sing The Messiah, as a child. This lemniscatory trajectory, the secret spiral of Frame’s composition, creates a space-time continuum in which space and time are synchronised by Grace’s inability to distinguish between the temporal positions of ‘now’ and ‘then’, and the spatial locations of ‘here’ and ‘there.’ ‘This is Winchley,’ Grace tells herself. ‘This is not Oamaru’ (ibid., 210).

Similarly, in *The Rain Answered*, the inseparability of shape and story is captured in the related dynamic between what the text says and how the text unfolds. For example, when Kate waits for her friend, Spyro, in Central Park, she recalls the story of her grandmother’s wait for her husband, John, to return home from the war. The story, which is recovered through memory, forces Kate, like Grace, to confront her homesickness, which is a double-entendre. Kate is nostalgic for home, or the idea of home, but she has also has a vested interest in leaving home because home is a place that causes her anxiety. She says,
I didn’t know why I thought of Gran when I travelled, but I did. I knew it wasn’t pity that made me think of her or even regret on her behalf. She never had any desire to leave Wacol and see the world. In fact, she preferred to stay home. When I showed her a menu for The Hotel of Kings, she said, ‘Why would I fly to Paris and eat snails, when I could walk to Redcliffe and have fish and chips?’ She seemed to think travel was a waste of time, since it returned you to where you began.

Here, Kate is perplexed by the shape of her journey, which seems to synchronise arrival and departure to the effect that she is continuously arriving at her place of departure and departing from her place of arrival. Like Grace, she cannot understand her compulsion to move backwards. She assumes she is searching for an answer to the question that accompanies her: that is, what is the nature of her parents’ relationship and do they love each other? The question, however, is never resolved and there is a sense there is no answer. Paradoxically, Kate seems to leave Brisbane to distance herself from her family, but she frequently frustrates that goal through her constant return to the past. In fact, as Spyro approaches, Kate concludes that she is looking back for something that isn’t there. As she stands to leave, however, her resignation is undermined by Spyro’s sudden arrival, which forces Kate to remain where she is. ‘I decided to stand my ground,’ she says. ‘There was no point trying to run’.

Interestingly, the lemniscate appears in this scene as a symbol that reflects one of the novel’s central themes: the cyclical nature of generational secrets and the endless orbit they repeat. This theme, which is represented by the infinite bind of the lemniscate, is also evoked by the lemniscatory patterns that Kate notices in the park, such as the paw prints in the snow. The structural paradox of the lemniscate also emerges in the various questions the novel raises. For example, where does a family secret begin and end? What happens when a child is forced to choose between keeping the trust of one parent or breaking the trust of the other?
What role do parents play in determining the kind of love that a child accepts as an adult? These questions are fixed in the narrative but unlimited by their possible responses. For Kate, the questions are exacerbated by the fact that the secret she keeps for her father binds her to him, even after he dismisses her, at least physically, from the family home. In fact, the lemniscate emerges at several points in the novel at moments when Kate is displaced, or removed from what she knows. The shape appears when Kate learns to ‘move in circles’ at soccer, when she ties her laces in ‘bunny loops’ after visiting Gramps, and when she notices that the scar on her grandmother’s chest takes the shape of ‘a figure eight’.

As Kate’s childhood memories intersect her travels, her movement through space is impeded by the abstract wonderings of her mind. Instead of gradually forgetting her past, Kate retrieves and revives her childhood while travelling through Ireland, America, and Thailand. Grace, too, recalls her past with such intensity that she is eventually suspended between New Zealand and England, and isolated from her surroundings. Instead of looking forward towards the future, the internal exile with ‘Antipodean deposit’ in her bones looks back towards her birth (ibid., 3). This constant shifting between the past and present is essential for understanding the structure of the text. In fact, as both stories progress, the protagonists’ memories both shape, and are shaped by, the lemniscatory motion. This continuum collapses quotidian perceptions of space and time, and raises questions about the nature of belonging. Belonging, of course, is a spatio-temporal construct, since we speak of belonging in a particular place or to a particular time. As Grace confesses, ‘I want to go home. But was there anywhere to go? How could you go home if you were already home? Or was home some place out of the world?’ (ibid., 86). Kate, too, is baffled by her travels and unsettled by the fact she cannot escape the past. ‘I thought about the past and nothing else,’ she says. ‘I thought about turning back’. For Kate and Grace, the past and the present meet on a space-time continuum in which the linear notions of chronology and causality are
abandoned. The lemniscate, as the shape of this continuum, generates a story in which form and meaning endlessly proliferate, and thus, the narrative continues its spiral inward. ‘The shape is peculiar,’ Grace concludes, ‘from whichever angle it is viewed it appears the same…its outer sameness conceals its inner surprise’ (ibid., 66).

Similarly, in Michelle Dicinoski’s memoir, *Ghost Wife*, the narrative elicits a space-time continuum that assumes the lemniscate form. The novel, which was published in March last year, recounts the musings of the Australian author as she travels to Canada to marry her partner, Heather. More interesting than the story’s content, however, is the narrative’s form. As Michelle makes the long journey from Brisbane to Toronto, she recalls the untold stories of same-sex couples from Australia’s past. ‘To go forward,’ Michelle says, ‘I must first go back’ (Dicinoski 2013, 32). Here, Michelle’s conviction echoes Kate’s belief that to understand herself, she must first understand her past. In *Rump*, when Kate contemplates her feelings for Kez, she struggles to detach herself from her parents and, in particular, from how she perceives their feelings for each other. Kate sees her father’s letter, for example, as a warning she must heed. She says, ‘To work things out, I started walking every night through the forest behind our house. The further I wandered, the more my memory pulled me back and usually I ended the walk, thinking about my grandparents’. Here, the lemniscate operates as a structural device that overlays Kate’s story with the stories from her past. This device allows space and time to overlap, and is comparable to the paratactic arrangement of *Ghost Wife*. As Dicinoski explains, ‘I wanted [my story and the historical stories] to seem very close together, as though time looped over itself…the division between past and present is sometimes very slight’ (2010, 197–199).

In Dicinoski’s memoir, the juxtaposition of different moments in space and time creates a space-time continuum that allows Michelle to interweave the story of her marriage with the
queer histories of lesbian couples who once lived in the cities that Michelle and Heather visit. As the two narratives are placed side by side with little explanation, they create a paratactic structure that mimetically reflects the narrator’s experience of space and time. This experience is ordered by the mirror symmetry of the lemniscate, and highlighted by Dicinoski’s refusal to impose a linear structure on her narrative. As the author explains, ‘I did not want to force a neat narrative structure on my memoir because the life that it depicted did not have one’ (ibid., 199). In *Ghost Wife*, the derailment of normative time is not unlike the shifting, unstable time that Kate experiences when she meets Anjulee in the soundproof booth at choir. ‘The silence settled over us like a net,’ Kate says, ‘and time curved around us’.

While Kate waits silently in the dark, Anjulee responds with a story. The story, which is from Anjulee’s family history, concerns her twin brother, Nikhiel, who passed away when Anjulee was a child. Here, the narrative trajectory curves inwards as the conversation shifts to Kate’s disclosure that her mum is also a twin. Kate says,

> I told Anjulee my mum was a twin as well... She was fraternal, so she couldn’t read Julie-Anne’s thoughts, but when Mum went into labour with me, Julie was admitted to hospital with stomach cramps. Mum said being a twin was the worst thing that happened to her because everyone always called her One of the Twins, and she felt like she wasn’t her own person. Plus, Julie-Anne was thinner and more outgoing and once, Mum heard a boy at school call her The Fat One.

At this point, Kate concludes her story with an attempt to justify why she shares the anecdote. She says, ‘I thought if Anjulee knew these things, she might feel better about losing her brother’. Structurally, the girls superimpose their stories onto each other in a reciprocal exchange that creates a layering of narrative voices. In other words, the pair are caught in a
temporal loop that feeds back on itself in a lemniscatory pattern of motion. As Kate observes, ‘The circle turned into a spiral that wound around us both’.

In *Ghost Wife*, this lemniscatory motion characterises the vacillating nature of Michelle and Heather’s travels. As the pair hire a rental car and drive north towards Toronto, Michelle contemplates the passage of time and how ‘sometimes when you arrive in a place, it can feel like an ending and a beginning at once’ (Dicinoski 2013, 22). At this point, the narrative recedes one hundred years to 1891. In the first of many interjections, the reader follows Lilian Cooper and her partner, Josephine Bedford, as they board a ship in Tilbury to migrate to Brisbane. The women, who are ‘utterly different’, are mirror inversions of Heather and Michelle (ibid., 23). The inclusion of Lilian and Josephine’s story is important, however, because it connects Michelle to a different space-time: one that exists in the future (that is, in Michelle’s present) as a forgotten history from Brisbane’s past. Through remembering, Michelle creates a counter-memory that contributes to queer history and enhances her visibility as a gay woman. Thus, as Michelle and Heather wander through Newburyport, the narrative telescopes on Lilian and Josephine as they explore the motley town of Brisbane. Here, the city, like the women’s history, is reconstructed through the narrator’s imaginative recollections. As Michelle, speaking of Lilian and Josephine, says,

> The two will spend their lives together in a succession of houses in inner-city Brisbane, the last overlooking the river at Kangaroo Point. They will visit the United States, and later go to Serbia to work in tent hospitals during World War 1. And when all this doing is done, they will be buried side by side in Toowong Cemetery in Brisbane’s inner west, in a plot the size and shape of a double bed. (ibid., 25)

For Michelle, this collective remembering creates a space-time continuum that allows personal time and historical time to merge. This activity, which is similar to Winterson’s
configuration of the lemniscate in *Oranges*, places the remembered self and the imagined self on the same connective plane. As a result, the story is endowed with a non-linear temporality that fuses the past, present, and future into a uniform whole. Michelle describes this phenomenon when she says, ‘I felt like a hundred younger versions of myself and a hundred older ones yet to come were all watching and saying, *Remember this!*’ (ibid., 173). Thus, as Lilian and Josephine wander through Brisbane’s inner-city, Michelle and Heather explore Newburyport. From the car, Michelle notes the colonial-style houses and red-brick diners, while Lilian, who is appointed Queensland’s first female doctor, makes house calls on her bicycle. Personal time and historical time meet on a space-time continuum in which the lemniscatory movement of the narrative transcends space and time. The structure of the novel is refigured from causal and chronological terms to a model of spatio-temporal simultaneity. As Michelle explains, ‘Time stretched out around me…I was there in Newburyport on that particular November day, but I felt that the thousands of histories housed in that place were also present’ (ibid., 47). Of course, the concept of simultaneity is a defining property of the lemniscate and a key feature, too, of Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*.

In *The Rain Answered*, temporal simultaneity is facilitated through the story’s narrative structure. In fact, non-linear time is not only a feature of the narrative but a major theme of the novel. When Kate reflects on her travels, she is acutely aware of time as a fluid material that can move in multiple directions. For example, when Kate arrives in Dublin on her first trip to Ireland, she is convinced that she has visited the city before. Her certainty, in spite of the logical impossibility of the situation, is strangely validated by the passport officer who welcomes her home. Later, Kate’s conjecture is raised again when her grandfather claims that time travel is possible; ‘he thought that in the future, people would take holidays into the past’. As Kate waits for the bus to town, she sees a hacky sack move in ‘graceful arcs’ and feels a ‘distant sense of familiarity’. The paradox of her observation (that is, the feeling that
what is distant is somehow familiar) is essentially a spatial paradox that makes the faraway seem close. Michelle experiences this phenomenon, too, when she arrives in Toronto for her wedding. She says, ‘I had come halfway around the world to marry my girlfriend…But right then, all I knew was this: I was close and far, close and far, and there was still more running to do’ (ibid., 4).

Again, the inner mechanism of the narrative—the secret lemniscate—reveals how the novel is put together and how the novel works. In a recent interview, Dicinoski discussed the shape of her memoir and how the structure changed during the writing process (see Appendix A). Initially, the author imagined her memoir as strata that consisted of different times. To bring the shape to narrative, however, Dicinoski extracted story ‘samples’ from each stratum and reassembled the fragments into a narrative. The structure that results is a non-linear form that Dicinoski cedes may be perceived as a system of interlocking lemniscates. The author explains, ‘Michelle’s story is one story loop, her maternal family history is another, her paternal family history is a third. The ghost stories are still more loops, and they are not just one loop but many’ (Dicinoski 2014, 394). Dicinoski adds, ‘Michelle’s story is perhaps the point where the stories all touch or spiral towards each other’ (ibid.). In the same way, then, that a perceptive reader may observe the Frame Effect in Towards Another Summer, it is possible to discern, at a compositional level, how Ghost Wife is put together. In fact, Dicinoski’s attention to form prompts the reader to enhance their understanding of what the story says by focussing on how the story says what it says. In other words, the reader is encouraged to look carefully at the repetitions that pattern the narrative, as well as the relations between the organisational material, such as the paragraphs and chapters. Of course, this authorial privileging of form is not without risk: at its worst, it may be exercised at the expense of content, but at its best, it may create a rich and challenging text that rewards those readers who solve the narrative structure.
In *Ghost Wife*, this structure is embodied by the lemniscate, since space and time are located on a continuum that supports the possibility of temporal simultaneity. This possibility is validated by the function of memory, since memory may invert both the spatial opposites of ‘here’ and ‘there’, and the temporal opposites of ‘now’ and ‘then’. Of course, this reversal is possible without the aid of physical travel because memory is a type of mental travel in which the past can be revisited. In fact, in both *Ghost Wife* and *The Rain Answered*, the narrative unfolds in the folds of memory. Both stories construct the past and the present, not as singular, isolated events but as points on a continuum. In both cases, the narrative that results is a travel story, but it is a travel story into the past, which, like all accounts of looking back, is a journey into the self. In erasing, then, rather than affirming the boundaries of space and time, both novels preserve the past, and challenge the genre’s popular assertion that there are no yesterdays on the road. As Kate concludes, ‘All of this could stay in the past, if the present remained unchanged’. At the end of *Ghost Wife*, Michelle, too, looks back at the pattern that reverberates through the novel: ‘the sound of the past rising up to swallow the present’ (Dicinoski 2013, 145).

**WANDERERS, GHOST WIVES, AND MIGRATING BIRDS**

While *Ghost Wife* and *Towards Another Summer* share their lemniscatory structure with *Oranges* and *Pale Fire*, the travel memoirs include an extra function that is an important component of *The Rain Answered*. In addition to configuring the lemniscate as a space-time continuum, both Frame and Dicinoski configure their protagonists as alternative subjects, or figurations, whose patterns of movement through space and time assume the lemniscate form. In feminist studies, a figuration is an embodied position that expresses an alternative mode of
being. Importantly, a figuration is not a figurative construct but a material account of living. In other words, figurations represent situated positions that are always located in space and time. The popular figurations of the nomad, the exile, and the migrant, for example, are representative of feminist attempts to express particular selfhoods in the most concrete manner possible. As forms of agency, figurations seek to challenge the dichotomous oppositions inherent in constructs of power, such as self and other, identity and difference, and the margins and the centre. In providing an alternative form of representation, a figuration patterns the self as a dynamic and ever-changing entity—what Rosi Braidotti calls ‘a political cartography’ or ‘living map’ (ibid., 3–18). As Braidotti, speaking of her nomadism, explains,

> The nomad expresses my own figuration of a situated, post-modern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular…The nomadic subject allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience. (2011, 25–26)

In *Ghost Wife* and *Towards Another Summer*, Frame and Dicinoski configure their protagonists as figurations whose movement through space and time is determined by their subjectivities. This movement evades linear modes of travelling, and evokes instead, a mobile subject who moves in multiple directions. As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, speaking of *Housekeeping*’s Ruth and Sylvie, explains, ‘They do not travel ever westward…in search of some frontier space, nor do they travel across great spaces. Rather, they circle, they drift, they wander’ (2004, 199). In *Housekeeping*, Ruth and Sylvie mark out alternative patterns of movement when travelling by wandering in a variety of directions and at varying paces. This movement, which is both intuitive and impulsive, signals a resistance to both socially imposed travel roles and patriarchal boundaries. As a result of this trespassing, the women’s
travels are infused with gendered meaning. Their wanders, and the wandering narrative that results, lacks a chronological order with a clear purpose, plot, and structure. This lack reworks canonical understandings of travel by reconceptualising ideas of departure and return, and challenging patriarchal codes that uphold ‘the male as adventurer or quester, and the female as the one who is left behind’ (ibid., 194). In Housekeeping, when Ruth sets fire to the family home, she marvels, ‘Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping’ (Robinson 1980, 179).

While the lemniscate, then, is a narrative structure that offers a viable alternative to linearity, the shape may also form a trajectory that a figuration may pursue. This function is important because it supports the idea that the lemniscate, as a narrative form, may represent a lived experience. That is, the lemniscate may operate as both a narrative structure and as a way of mapping an individual’s experience of the world. For Robinson, the figuration of the transient is the most apt construction for her protagonists. Ruth and Sylvie are drifters who are always without direction, and without a home. In their transition from domesticity to vagrancy, the women wander ‘like ghosts’ through the ‘shallow-rooted’ town of Fingerbone (ibid., 178). The pair sleep in abandoned houses, roam across the railroad bridge, and ride through the night in freight trains. They evade the burden of accountability by casting off social responsibilities to both their family and the townspeople. Ultimately, the women are vagrants; drifters whose physical wandering leads them to inhabit liminal spaces and reject linear time. As Ruth observes, ‘Sylvie had no awareness of time. For her, hours and minutes were names of trains—we were waiting for the 9:52’ (ibid., 165–166).

Similarly, in Towards Another Summer, Frame configures Grace as a migrant who must return home. The figuration, which is established from the novel’s outset, represents Grace’s mobile existence as both an exile, who is uprooted from home, and an expat, who is
culturally bereft. In this way, the figuration gives meaning to both Grace’s physical migration from the colonial margins to the Imperial centre, and to her abstract migration from the present to the past. Grace declares, ‘I’m a migratory bird,’ and then, ‘I must not remember [New Zealand]…I live in London. The Southern Cross cuts through my heart instead of the sky, and I can’t see it or walk beneath it, and I don’t care, I don’t care’ (Frame 2007, 10). Of course, Grace’s insistence that she does not miss her native land is undermined by her memories of home and her discovery that she has transformed into a migratory bird.

Migrating birds usually fly south in summer to the warmer tropics of the southern hemisphere; hence, Grace’s desire to fly ‘towards another summer’ and the title of the novel (ibid., 117). Grace’s selfhood, then, is characterised by her nomadic condition and captured fittingly by the liminal passage of the migratory bird. In fact, at several points in the story, Grace’s alienation from her surroundings reflects her sense of displacement: she feels intimidated by Philip’s wife, she is distressed by ‘the drab world’ of England and its ‘poor supply of sun’ (ibid., 116), and she has nightmares in which she cries, ‘Which world do I inhabit?’ (ibid., 21). Her inability to identify with a single place allows her to assume a mobile existence that is configured by the nomad. This figuration is not only a situated account of Grace’s self but also a metaphor for her death. As Frame herself, speaking of the ‘root crisis’ that inspired the novel, says, ‘If I don’t get back to New Zealand I’ll die, or, which is equivalent to death, my writing will get worse’ (Frame quoted in King 2000, 243).

In Ghost Wife, Michelle assumes the figuration of the transient. Specifically, Dicinoski configures her narrator as a ghost wife whose disembodied existence allows her to transcend the various cities she passes through. Michelle’s account of vagrancy, which is heightened by the invisibility of her marriage, reflects her dispossession as an Australian citizen who is denied the right to marry. As Michelle explains, ‘[Heather and I] would be flesh and blood and married, but in a marriage that was invisible to just about everyone, invisible to history,
invisible to the law’ (Dicinoski 2013, 15). The figuration of the transient legitimises Michelle’s experience of being (or not being) in the world. The position, which is marked by anonymity and detachment, creates a spatial paradox that allows Michelle to be everywhere and nowhere at once. In fact, it is Michelle’s experience of spatio-temporal simultaneity that allows her to move across space and time to meet with other ghost wives. At the end of the memoir, as Michelle and Heather prepare for their wedding, they notice a light—a natural symbol for hope—burning in the night. At the same time, Lilian Cooper and Josephine Bedford buy a house at Kangaroo Point and ‘squint blindly into their own bright futures’ (ibid., 24). In space and time, the women are ghost wives: transients whose invisibility before the law binds them over three centuries and two continents. Michelle, of course, breaks this bind when she records the queer histories from Australia’s past that have been silenced or discarded. As Dicinoski confirms,

The book isn’t only attempting to save the narrator and the other ghost stories from oblivion; it’s also an attempt by a writer in the world to save herself and the things she loves from oblivion. It’s arrogant and fruitless, but don’t all of us do this, at least a little, this wondering back while we wander (and wonder) forward? (2014, 396)

In *The Rain Answered*, Kate is configured not as a nomad or a transient but as a wanderer. Definition.

As a wanderer who disrupts the stabilities of fixity and stasis by entering into a mode of travel that is both finite and unbounded. This pattern of movement, which may be real or imagined, is open, impromptu, and marked by restlessness. As Kate says, ‘Since I was young,
I felt like I didn’t belong anywhere. I always felt out of place everywhere, even at home’. In this state of ceaseless motion, Kate is configured as a wanderer who constantly oscillates back and forth between the spatial hybridities of home and abroad, and the temporal modalities of past and present. In eliciting and intersecting these dichotomies, Kate’s travels are rhythmic and repetitive rather than linear. In drifting rather than decisively moving, the wanderer’s home is mobile (unlike the nomad who is homeless), her travels are mappable (unlike the transient whose journey is untraceable), and her plans for travel are spontaneous (unlike the tourist whose itinerary is set). The wanderer, then, is a transgressive character who strays from linear pathways towards a more colourful vista of playfulness and general misrule. As Kate says,

Sometimes, when I didn’t feel like talking, I wandered around the playground. In summer, I followed the lady beetles to the farm across the bridge. Lady beetles were fascinating creatures because as soon as you tried to hold them, they flew off. In Ireland, when the crops were dying, the farmers prayed to the Virgin Mary, ‘Please, save our pratties.’

Here, Kate’s wandering is not a curse or punishment but a welcomed interruption. This interruption, which couples moving with remembering, creates a type of allegorical travel that does not necessitate movement of the physical sense. In fact, when wandering is used metaphorically to describe an interior journey that cannot be expressed directly, it becomes synonymous with the conceptual act of wondering. For example, before Kate departs New York, Spyro says to her, ‘You’re taller than I expected’, and the next chapter commences with Kate’s memory of waking in the night, as a child, for fear she would not grow. The memory takes its cue from Spyro’s dialogue and merges with the travel narrative to create a story about childhood anxiety and the angst of feeling small. This technique is repeated.
throughout the memoir to create a wandering narrative that is structured by the lemniscate and that transforms the shape’s properties into themes, such as continuity (which is represented by the unbroken nature of the story), simultaneity (which is captured at the moment when the characters collide), and symmetry (which is produced by the alignment of Sypro’s dialogue with Kate’s memory). The obvious implication of this function is that the wandering can be literal, from physical movement, or figurative, from the pull of memory. In *The Rain Answered*, I am interested in the journey that is both.

**WANDERING: THE FINAL LINK**

In *The Rain Answered*, it is motion, or, more specifically, the motion of wandering, that merges space and time into a continuum. Motion, or the movement of bodies, is the process in which an object changes its position. As the position of an object is determined by the area of space that it occupies at a given time, the primary materialisation of space and time is the experience of motion. Whenever a body undergoes motion, the event correlates with a spatial location and a temporal moment. This correspondence, which may be abstract or physical, facilitates the mergence of space and time. Since space and time form a continuum, the process of motion embodies the characteristics that the elements share. For instance, most scientists agree that space and time are unified by three basic features: namely, continuity (that is, the idea that intervals of space and time may be divided without limit), connectivity (the notion that space and time may be joined in different ways), and dimensionality (the belief that space and time may extend in certain directions) (Davies 1977, 5–8). These properties are important components of a four-dimensional world because they confirm that space, like time, has a metric structure. This correlation is significant because if space and
time have a similar make-up, then spatial concepts may be expressed in terms of temporal relations, and vice versa. The notion of ‘extent’, for example, is comparable to the impression of ‘duration’, a ‘region’ of space is akin to a ‘period’ of time, and the spatial sense of ‘here’ is analogous with the temporal idea of ‘now’. The fact that many spatial propositions have temporal counterparts confirms that there are natural symmetries between space and time that ascribe to Einstein’s model of the world. These similarities verify that the while the human experience of space and time may differ, the fabric of space and time is not entirely unlike. As Schlesinger confirms, ‘There is a certain disanalogy between space and time, but it cannot serve as a counterexample to the thesis that space and time are radically alike’ (1980, 11).

Since space and time are linked by motion, it follows that every movement has a spatio-temporal component. More simply, all movements occur within a co-ordinate system of space and time. Since movement is one of the first experiences that a child encounters, the discourse of space and time pervades the language of everyday life. The American poet, Mary B. Campbell, suggests that the discourse of travel is central to the story of one’s origin, and, by extension, to the development of the narrative self. Campbell says, ‘After we learn “to be” and “to have” in a new language, we learn “to go”’ (1988, 2). This emphasis on movement, as an activity that is impulsive and intuitive, privileges the body as a primary sensor for the experience of space and time. For example, a woman who is fighting with her partner may explain that she needs some ‘space’. Her husband, who may be struggling to meet an impending deadline at work, will ask his boss for more ‘time’. In both situations, the experience of space and time is connected by the individual’s movement from one position to another. The woman, for example, may move from a place of anger to a state of forgiveness. Her husband may decide to work from home in order to meet his deadline. Movement, then, may be abstract or physical, but it always involves an interaction between two or more bodies. As Einstein confirms, ‘In order to describe the movement of a body, a second body is
needed to which the movement of the first is referred’ (2008, 315). The process of motion provides one of the clearest proofs that space and time are linked. As illustrated in the diagram below, motion is a natural merger for the experience of space and time.

In *The Rain Answered*, the motion of wandering merges space and time into a continuum that oscillates back and forth. This movement, which defies the laws of linearity, is just as concerned with the travel of the body as it is with the travel of the mind. As a result, Kate’s development as a character is influenced by both internal forces, such as memory and imagination, and external pressures, such as parental authority and control. As the narrative self emerges from the exchange between both domains, the internal venture and the external passage form a dialogical relationship. This relationship allows Kate to travel between the physical world, which can be mapped and plotted, and the imaginary world, which is suspended above any kind of border. The lemniscate, as the structure that sanctions this transgression, permits the real and the imagined self to meet on a space-time continuum. Thus, as Kate oscillates between home, where she feels ‘out of place’, and abroad, where she both remembers the past and imagines the future, her movement is both literal and figurative.
In the midst of this interplay, her compulsion to move, however intuitive, is mapped upon the lemniscate. Thus, as the loops of the lemniscate converge, the mental act of wondering is partnered with, and triggered by, the physical act of wandering. As illustrated in Diagram Sixteen, this coupling creates a narrative trajectory that takes the shape of the lemniscate.

In *The Rain Answered*, the pairing of wondering and wandering not only creates a genuine rapport between space and time but a natural affiliation between motion and emotion. As Bruno, speaking of her own *Atlas of Emotion*, explains, ‘The major premise of the book is that motion produces emotion, and that, correlative, emotion contains a movement…The Latin root of the word *emotion* speaks clearly about a “moving” force’ (ca. 2001, 1). As Kate wanders back and forth, the process of motion merges with the experience of motion to create a middle space where she is free to be herself. In New York, for example, Kate decides that she must distance herself from her parents in order to make her own choices as an adult. She says,

I realised then that if I didn’t leave home, I’d be circling my block forever. Even when I decided to come out, it was a choice I made for myself. I didn’t care about Ellen and
Portia, or my gay ancestors; I just wanted to tell the truth. I couldn’t wait any longer to be honest with my parents because lying was not only physically exhausting but self-extinguishing, too.

For Kate, emancipation is a two-fold problem since her freedom is dependent, first of all, on the acceptance of her sexuality, and second, on her detachment from her parents. In the end, the successful completion of these activities allows Kate to try and restory herself as an individual. For example, in *The Roloffs*, Kate insists that she is different to her father because she is patient: an assertion that seems to be confirmed when he says to her, ‘I don’t know who you take after’. Of course, Kate’s conviction is undermined by both her wandering disposition and the structure of the narrative. As the lemniscate is a self-reflexive curve, Kate’s progression through space and time must eventually spiral back on itself. Thus, even when Kate leaves home, she still cannot escape the invisible pull backwards—to Brisbane, to her childhood, to the receipt of her father’s letter. As Kate explains, ‘It was as if there was an elastic string around my feet and regardless of how far I wandered, it always pulled me back’.

Importantly, the lemniscate, as a self-reflexive curve, ensures that the various journeys Kate undertakes, whether figurative or literal, are not cyclical. An obvious danger of circular movement is the return to an unchanged place. This problem, which has particular currency in feminist scholarship, is pertinent for women’s travel, since women have been relegated, at least historically, to the domestic space. The allegorical nature of wandering, however, means that an individual may not have to leave home at all in order to wander. As Xavier de Maistre points out, ‘I have undertaken and performed a forty-two days’ journey round my bedroom. The interesting observations I have made, and the constant pleasure I have experienced all along the road, made me wish to publish my travels’ (1871, 1). As the discourse of travel has traditionally reinforced male prerogatives to wander and
female obligations to wait, it is important to recognise that circular journeys are risky expeditions for women. As Bruno explains,

Conceived as a circular structure, the metaphor of travel locks gender into a frozen, binary opposition and offers the same static view of identity...If such travel is simply conceived as a return to sameness, or nostalgia for loss of that sameness—the home of identity or the identity of home—domus, domesticity, and domestication continue to be confused and gendered feminine. (2000, 85)

Although the lemniscate is a curve, the form does not oblige the journey undertaken to be cyclical. This is because the fulcrum is a pivot that shifts when the centre is traversed. While the circle and the lemniscate assume a similar shape, both have different properties and behave in different ways. The lemniscate is less exact than the circle and more flexible; its very structure suggests transformation and reversal. While the lemniscate curves inward towards an always changing centre, the circle revolves around a centre point that is fixed. The circle, therefore, is more rigid than the lemniscate and more restrictive. Further, while the circle always returns to its point of origin, the lemniscate never ends where it began. The same event may be repeated, but its position on the space-time continuum will change. In The Rain Answered, as in Pale Fire, the reader may return to the opening chapter after finishing the last, but in pursuing a lemniscatory trajectory through the novel, the reader has altered the original text and the narrative meaning has shifted. This lack of circularity ensures that the narrative structure does not reiterate canonical understandings of arrival and departure. As Kate says,

The house began to change around me; I started to trip on the bottom step. I went to bed as early as possible and woke up in a sweat. I became aware of my breathing and the sound of drawing air. The noise filled my head and the tiny room, until the sound
distorted. I knew it was time to leave when I realised it wasn’t home anymore; it was just my parents’ house.

In this scene, Kate is kicked out of home for breaking her father’s trust. She abstains, however, from venerating the idea of home by refusing to glorify her expulsion. She says, ‘After Dad kicked me out, I decided to visit Spyro. I didn’t know how it would go, but I was homeless, too, so I figured we had that much in common’. Instead of yearning for the stasis of home, which is a place the wanderer both fears and desires, Kate spends her time wandering through the various cities that she visits. In Crackers, for example, Kate travels to the war cemetery in Kanchanaburi. Here, she meanders through the garden, observing the plots for Australian soldiers and the marble cross that the government has erected. When she finds a card with the message, ‘More move, more loss’, she is curious about the cryptic note but eventually discards it. Even when Kate’s mother calls from Brisbane, Kate remains distanced from the events unfolding at home. When the conversation ends, Kate continues to wander through the garden. This coupling of wandering and wondering creates a non-linear movement that oscillates back and forth. In fact, at the end of the novel, when Gran teaches Kate about the insects in their yard, Gran concludes her lesson with the assertion that ‘We can learn a lot about ourselves from those who come before us’. At this point, Gran tells Kate to ‘think like an ant’ because ants demonstrate resilience. ‘They never quit,’ Gran says. ‘When ants are on the trail of something, they don’t let anything get in their way’. Kate, however, insists that butterflies are her favourite. She concludes that secretly, despite her grandmother’s teaching, she still believes butterflies are Gran’s favourite, too. This final remark, of course, is a lemniscatory reversion to the butterflies that Gran observes in the Botanical Gardens the first time she meets John. The story has come, not full circle, but full lemniscate.
For the wanderer, then, space and time form a sideways hourglass—a sideways eight—that not only transcends temporal boundaries but spatial divisions as well. Therefore, reading Kate’s travels as escapism and marking her returns home as a failures to evade, risks minimising her wandering as a movement that is fleeting: as a disturbance to get out of the system or a distraction to shake off. The lemniscate defies this dilemma as the figure is guided by infinite movement within a finite form. Bound to this experience of endless movement, the lemniscate elicits a constant reshifting of spatio-temporal boundaries rather than a simple circularity of origin and return. As Kate says, ‘I decided on the plane trip over that I needed distance from my family. It wasn’t until Spyro and I began to write that I realised it wasn’t natural to feel anxious at home’. Home, at times, is an unsafe place, but in the end, it is not a place that binds her. As Kate grieves for the loss of her grandmother, she also expresses her aspirations for the future. She says, ‘I wanted [Gran] to know the truth about what happened. I wanted to be free of the past, so I could be present wherever I wanted’. In a way, her internal musings, too, assume the shape of a lemniscate. In fact, like the figure eight, Kate’s narration can be read without reaching an endpoint because tracing Kate’s movement between past and present, and present and future, is a process that gestures towards infinity within a finite form. In this way, the wish to arrest the infinite within a closed structure ensures that the spatial and temporal attachments the wanderer makes while travelling do not become desires to possess, or repossess, what has been left behind.
CONCLUSION

THE POINT OF THE STORY
Despite my tendency to wander, I will draw some final conclusions regarding the use of the lemniscate as a narrative structure. Since all shapes have internal laws that determine how they operate, it is important that writers do not generalise non-linear shapes in theoretical discussions. Spirals and lemniscates, for example, are different shapes that do not operate synonymously when employed as narrative structures. While the lemniscate certainly spirals inwards towards its derivative, the curve always intersects its fulcrum. The spiral, in contrast, does not self-intersect: instead, it moves progressively closer to, or further away from, the shape’s centre point. Thus, reading a lemniscate novel as a spiral narrative reduces the form to a generic shape that, while similar to the figure eight, is not geometrically correct. The point may seem merely terminological, but for writers who are interested in non-linear narrative, shape is an important matter.

Just as a writer must choose the most suitable genre or the most engaging topic, the struggle to find a form that best captures a lived experience is an ongoing challenge. This challenge is amplified when the experience in question does not conform to a linear form. This is because linear narrative, which is typically structured around a beginning, middle, and end, does not serve a story that defies chronological order, such as an illness narrative, which is marked by relapse, or a story of diaspora, which is chaotic and broken. The frustration, then, that writers often feel when confronted with problems of form, leads many to consider the connection between content and structure, or the what and the how. While these discussions might seem esoteric, they are significant for two important reasons: first, they reflect the writer’s struggle to find an appropriate form of representation, and second, they
raise questions about existing forms and whether they are sufficient. In this way, the search for a narrative structure that best represents a story is not unlike the search for the words that best describe that story. This investigation, which opens the way to a greater understanding of narrative, invites the reader to reflect on the nexus between form and content. For writers of non-linear stories, the search for an adequate narrative shape raises a more general philosophical problem. To an extent, the nature of non-linear time and the nature of narrative are opposed: to move in circles or spirals is to break the rules of causality and chronology, to write is to bestow a sense of order.

The lemniscate, as a narrative structure, offers writers one alternative to linear narrative. While the curve has a broad application as a form that merges space and time, it can be used specifically to structure a non-linear story that oscillates back and forth. This application offers writers new possibilities for communicating experiences that are marked by simultaneity, counterpoint, and reversal. The curve also offers a practical method for the dual task of organising a story’s content and advancing a story’s themes. In this thesis, I have examined three operations that the lemniscate may successfully perform: first, the curve can collapse the mimetic and the marvellous into a narrative continuum, as in the case of *Oranges*. Second, the shape can construct space and time as simultaneous experiences, as in *Pale Fire*. Third, the lemniscate can elicit a narrative trajectory that couples the physical movement of the body with the abstract movement of the mind, which is a key function of *Ghost Wife*, *Towards Another Summer*, and *The Rain Answered*. On the broadest level, the lemniscate can be transported from geometry to creative writing to create a space-continuum in which space and time are interdependent rather than separate. This reality is particularly exciting for writers whose natural inclination when writing is to move backwards.
Further research into narrative structures, such as the lemniscate, is important for what it can reveal about the reciprocal possibilities of form and function. It is important to recognise, then, that there are natural symmetries between the field of creative writing and the field of geometry. While art and science are sometimes thought antagonistic, writers and geometers share a methodological dilemma: namely, how to represent non-linear forms. This problem, which is essentially a problem of representation, is a processual dilemma that can only be solved with imagination. As a narrative structure is often discovered, not by following the rules but through everyday practice, the power of merging creative writing with geometry is its ability to advance understanding of how a narrative structure generates meaning. Perhaps this underexamined component of narrative is why readers often come to understand a story’s content more profoundly than a story’s structure. Certainly, I have found in my own teaching practice that questions of structure are usually second to questions of substance. Perhaps this problem is related to limits of methodology. Or perhaps it arises from a lack of self-reflexivity when it comes to assumptions about temporality and how those assumptions generate habits of thinking. If writers, then, can understand how they construct reality, perhaps we can reimagine what is possible in narrative.

In any case, more work needs to be done into how non-linear structures capture lived experience. Writers need tools for bringing those shapes to narrative, especially given the limits of a form that, at least in print, is always packaged in a temporal structure. A deeper exploration of the nexus between form and function may allow creative writers to better understand structural and thematic overlaps in narrative. On the simplest level, research of this kind may tell writers more about the relationship between shape and story. Such research may give writers a clearer understanding of how to say what they mean by providing viable methods for structuring non-linear stories. After all, to understand a thing, such as narrative,
we must first understand how it works.
APPENDIX A

STORY SUPPLEMENTS
The following transcript is reproduced verbatim from an interview that was conducted with Michelle Dicinoski on January 22nd, 2014. The purpose of the interview was two-fold: first, to develop a better understanding of the structure of *Ghost Wife* from the vantage point of the author, and second, to discuss the application of the lemniscate as a narrative form.

Kate: In your doctoral thesis, you describe the structure of *Ghost Wife* as a paratactic structure that shifts back and forth in time. If you had to describe *Ghost Wife* as a shape, what shape would it be, and why?

Michelle: The way I imagine the story’s shape and the way it takes shape in the book are two different things. In my head, I see the stories as being part of different strata made up of different times. The strata are different colours. Each historical story belongs to a different level of strata, but all of them together make up the landscape. But to tell the story on the page, I needed to take samples from each level and then reassemble these fragments into a story. The wedding journey story is the main story, so those fragments appear most often and drive the narrative forward. The other fragments appear semi-regularly, and the aim was to build them into a kind of motion of their own, but also to avoid having two stories from the same strata next to each other at any point in the story. That doesn’t really explain the shape in any conventional way, but it might help clarify how I saw the story in my head and how I tried to build it as a book.

Kate: Was the paratactic structure of *Ghost Wife* a deliberate choice that you made before starting the memoir? Or did the structure emerge naturally as the story progressed?
Michelle: I didn’t plan the structure much before writing. I knew that I wanted to weave together queer historical stories with the story of my marriage. I wanted *Ghost Wife* to bring these stories together in a narrative time and space that could lay them side by side. I didn’t expect to write so much about my family’s history; that was a surprising element of the structure. The musing voice, too, was a later addition, and its addition wasn’t natural but quite deliberate. I eventually realised—after receiving feedback from many readers—that it was important to be as clear as possible about the connections between the elements of the book. My first impulse had been to write a paratactic, disconnected book. But then I realised I needed to work harder to make those connections, at least in part because of the subject matter. The musing voice enabled me to reflect on the connections between different times and different stories, and on my own perspective on the events of the memoir.

Kate: A *lemniscate* is a curve that consists of two loops that meet at a centre point. In my reading of *Ghost Wife*, I understand the structure of the narrative to be a *lemniscate* in which Michelle’s story and her family histories intersect with the collective ghost histories that Michelle recounts. Do you think it is possible to read your work as a curve in which space and time spiral in on themselves?

Michelle: Yes, I think it’s possible to see the memoir this way, but I would not see the story as made of two loops but of many loops. To me, Michelle’s story and her family history are not just one loop. Michelle’s story is one story loop, her maternal family history is another, her paternal family history is a third. The ghost stories are still more loops, and they are not one loop but many. But Michelle’s story is perhaps the point where the stories all touch or spiral towards each other.
Kate: How do you define a ghost wife? Why was it important to configure Michelle as a ghost wife? How does this figuration aid Michelle’s movement through space and time?

Michelle: For me, there are numerous ghost wives in the book. Well, there are numerous ghosts: my maternal grandfather who disappeared, my paternal great-grandfather who was Japanese and who was not allowed to take up Australian citizenship despite living in Australia since childhood. All of these stories have a quality of ghosting. The events of my mother’s childhood made her a kind of ghost for a long time. And then there are Heather and Michelle and the other queer stories, which are also ghost stories. I think this ghosting makes the narrator determined to dig up historical stories, and also gives her an understanding of a kind of queer kinship that she needs. She needs to know who her ‘people’ are, and so she also needs a kind of queer ancestry. That’s what drives her desire and ability to imagine across time and space.

Kate: What were some difficulties that you encountered with the structure of the memoir and how did you resolve the problems?

Michelle: One difficulty was maintaining a sense of narrative motion while dipping into the other histories. I wondered: would it seem too fragmented? Would the fragmentation make it easier for the reader to stop reading and abandon the story? Was it crazy to try to tell my own story by drawing on the stories of others? Some resolution came when I realised that in fact women’s autobiography often has a kind of communal quality to it. We are often interested in telling our stories not solely as our own. We often recognise ourselves as part of a community or something beyond ourselves. I also realised that writing about what you’re fascinated by will always tell
something about character, so even though these stories might not always
seem connected, if I could accurately depict the narrator’s yearning, then that
would help the reader to understand both (1) the rationale behind including
others’ stories and (2) more about the narrator herself. Maintaining a sense of
purpose and direction was still difficult, but that also involved drawing on the
musing voice to propel things. That’s why she came last.

Kate: In *Homes*, Michelle says, ‘To go forward, I must first go back.’ Can you
talk about this compulsion to wonder back, while also wandering
forward? Was this something that was natural for you while writing?

Michelle: I am still not convinced that anything in memoir or any form of writing is
natural. But I do think writers often have preoccupations that they return to for
years, or perhaps forever. Thinking about hidden or abandoned things seems
to be one such preoccupation for me. And when we think about lost things, we
often get caught up in thinking about time. It’s all linked to death and
impermanence, I suppose. During the research and writing process, I thought a
lot about hidden histories. I thought about all these historical figures who so
fascinated me—Bill Edwards, Jerry and Ivy, Lilian Cooper and Josephine
Bedford—and I thought about how odd it would be to them if they knew
someone in the future was writing about them. And I wondered about the
future beyond me, too, the future beyond my own life. In thinking about
ghosts, the book isn’t only attempting to save the narrator and the other ghost
stories from oblivion; it’s also an attempt by a writer in the world to save
herself and the things she loves from oblivion. It’s arrogant and fruitless, but
don’t all of us do this, at least a little, this wondering back while we wander
(and wonder) forward?


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