Riding waves: representing women’s relational autonomy in the short story cycle

Helena Kadmos

Bachelor of Arts
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Graduate Certificate in Professional Writing
Master of English and Creative Arts

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as
its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree
at any tertiary education institution.

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Helena Kadmos
Dedication

To Annette Johnson

1962–2014

The most relational person I have ever known.
Abstract

The short story cycle is a collection of independent yet interrelated stories. This thesis is interested in the potential of the short story cycle form to tell stories about women’s ordinary lives and, within such stories, to explore the importance to women of continuing relationships of interdependence and care. This discussion is grounded in feminist critical discourses of relational autonomy.

It rests on the claim that the short story cycle is a particularly productive form for writers interested in stories exploring the complexity of apparently mundane moments in women’s relational lives and imagining how particular relationships transform women over the longer course of their lives.

The thesis is the product of a practice- and theory-based approach to research. The first part comprises an original work of fiction, which tells five, interconnected stories about individual women from three generations of one family in Australia, spanning the period between the 1980s and the 2010s. The stories focus on moments that linger, where action is limited, and where change is often nuanced or even imperceptible. The work consciously draws on structural and thematic elements of the short story cycle form uncovered through research into short story cycle theory and existing cycles written about women.
The dissertation comprising the second part of the thesis reflects on the distinguishing features of the short story cycle, its diverse rendering in North America, and its critical treatment by key theorists, highlighting how this mode of storytelling helps make salient women’s relational lives. This thesis also aims to increase awareness of the form in Australian literary scholarship. Therefore, the dissertation offers a close reading of one contemporary Australian short story cycle, *Purple Threads*, by Jeanine Leane, in order to demonstrate the imaginative significance and effects produced in an Aboriginal inflection of the form.
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Part One

Fiction
Five seeds

A short story cycle
With every root I prized up there was a return, as if I was kin to its secret lesson. The touch got stronger as I worked through the grassy afternoon. Uncurling from me like a seed out of the blackness where I was lost, the touch spread. The spiked leaves full of bitter mother’s milk. A buried root. A nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither. A globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible.

Louise Erdrich.

Pilgrim statue

1987

Connie tried to pinpoint exactly where Perth changed, where the leafy, affluent suburbs in the west gave way to the drier ones in the north-east where she lived. Green parkland skirting the river ended abruptly at the CBD, where she changed buses, and the closer she got to home, the more real everything seemed to her. Around the teachers college, where she spent her weekdays, little felt accessible. White sailing boats, like toys from a strange and foreign country, bobbed along the river, clustering at the yacht club. On her occasional solitary walks along the foreshore, she steered clear of the white barricaded driveway at the club entrance, where remnant bunting from the previous summer’s America’s Cup challenge flapped in the breeze. On her return to the college, passing through the university, she’d notice, too, how every inch of the earth was covered by something else: grassy verges between the footpaths and square kerbsides, paving or bitumen, mulched garden beds nursing ferns or ivy, ponds and pebbles. Cultivated cushioning for the stately buildings and houses around the river, Kings Park, the university and even the more modern teachers college. And the trees—dense, glossy canopies that reminded her of the zoo, nothing like the prickly banksias and dull paisley-leafed eucalypts she’d played under as a child, running madly through the bush with Seb on her heels.
In her neighbourhood, the streetscape dropped closer to the horizon. Grey sand lay bare between fractured footpaths and sloping kerbs. Some house blocks, like her mother’s, were neat, tidy squares of mostly lawn and compact brick houses. But more often, unkempt yards of wheat-coloured weeds fronted drab bungalows squatting under the shade of the straggly gums. In those places, her suburb cracked and revealed its foundations to be other than sturdy and grand.

She stepped into this stubbornly forlorn suburb at the stop outside the church. The bus pulled away, its backside tattooed with the gold initials MTT. Inviting yet claustrophobic smells of Burmese and Indian curries met her. She kept her head down as she passed the presbytery, hoping not to attract Father Dolan’s attention. He often watched the street from his office window and might, if he saw her, call out to ask how her studies were going. On the same grounds she passed her old primary school, its steel slide and set of swings resting at this dusky hour. How long ago her time there seemed; how differently she felt about everything now.

Her text books bulged through the yellow canvas bag slung over her shoulder. Her thongs scuffed the dirt, powdering her feet as far as the ankles, covering chipped, pink nail polish with an ash-coloured film. She’d need to redo her toes before Mick came for her. Bolstered by the thought, she flipped her permed, gold-tipped hair behind her and skipped several metres. She hadn’t gone dancing in weeks, restrained by a heavy mid-term workload and a deep-seated sense that she was needed at home. She had a mass of work to do this weekend too, including a presentation to prepare for Monday, but she wasn’t going to miss out this time. Mick wouldn’t dance
and she didn’t care; she was even glad that he didn’t try and insinuate himself into the tight circle of girls who swayed and shouted to each other over their handbags piled at their feet. So long as she got a couple of hours to let loose in the dark, smoky, beer-soaked pub, she didn’t care what Mick wanted to do afterwards.

She blushed, thinking what that might be. Next week would be their six-month anniversary. Even though Connie hadn’t had a real boyfriend before, when she met Mick at Mandy’s sister’s birthday party, she sensed a connection to the spunky carpenter straight away. Even so, she hadn’t allowed herself to believe he’d go for her. His dark brown, squinting eyes were framed by the longest lashes she’d ever seen on a guy. And his body—lean and muscular, and surprisingly alluring in grungy jeans and flannelette shirt—made her acutely aware of how immature her own body seemed, tense with inexperience. They’d hung out together several times since with the group; she never expected more. Then he asked her out on her own. They went to the drive-in and nearly made it all the way through Some kind of wonderful before he touched her arm, which was almost too much in itself. She trembled when he pressed her head against his chest, but his heartbeat was steady. When he tilted her face and kissed her, her eyes closed and she delighted in the synchronicity of the girl in the film getting her boy at the same time. From then on, Mick’s two-door Ford Escort became their own, private place, and not many evenings out together didn’t end with it parked somewhere they could be alone.

She pulled a strand of her hair into her mouth. Engrossed in her thoughts, she didn’t hear the car speed up behind her. When a shrill whistle
and oooh, baby! flew from the open window, she stopped so abruptly she kicked her toe on a protruding slab in the footpath. Blood oozed between her toes and frustration burned inside. Why wasn’t she quick enough to respond as Mandy would’ve, giving the finger and shouting dickhead to the car, which mounted the kerb as it took the corner, jolting its load of raucous young men? There was too much of her mother ingrained in her for that sort of behaviour, too many layers she’d have to shed in time.

On a round wooden table beside the couch stood a statue of Mary, as tall as a small child. A candle flickered at its feet; beside that a tiny ceramic vase with a freshly-picked yellow rose-bud. As Connie sat on the couch putting the second coat of polish on her toe nails, taking care around the tender stubbed toe, her mother came through the front door, carrying a foil-covered tray. Being Friday, she looked more tired than usual, having stayed at the television station longer to stock the pies and sausage rolls that would be needed for the staff who worked over the weekend. Yet she noticed straight away that Connie had attended to the temporary shrine and nodded approvingly.

At first glance, Rita appeared tall, but it was just that she was broad shouldered. She blamed that on her Croatian blood—peasant stock. So too the high cheek bones and wide jaw which made her cheeks hollow in the centres. Her long, thick brown hair was just beginning to grey along the parting. She wore it tied back. A cardigan partly covered the With You Perth slogan on her work T-shirt. She dropped her handbag to the floor and held out the tray. The smell of warm pastry wafted towards Connie.
‘Pies?’

‘Cheesy ones. At least that’s something.’

Connie waited for the complaint about the pre-made food Rita had to serve at the canteen.

‘The day they let me cook real food in there, Ćevapi, or my stuffed paprika …’

‘My favourite, hey.’

‘Yes, precious, you know good food. Well, that’s the day Mr Handsome’s going to beg me to run away with him.’

Rita had her own names for each of the station’s celebrities. The news anchor man was The Captain; the weather girl, Miss Sunshine. But for many years she’d nurtured an innocent flame—privately of course, because he was married—for her favourite, the game-show host.

Connie was three when her father died, leaving Rita, who’d only been in Australia four years, alone to look after two children. Connie had one or two memories of her father. She had a small Polaroid photograph of him holding her as a baby, framed on the wall in her bedroom. The paint around it had peeled where she’d sticky-taped school certificates over the years, as close to him as she could get. Eclipsing the tiny picture now was an acrylic painting that had been her final Year Twelve assignment. It was of a man’s face, half hidden by a silvery, moon-like shadow. Attached to the bottom of the canvas was the Art award she’d received for the third year in a row.

Whereas her father’s presence was intangible and fleeting, her mother’s smell, sound and touch were as familiar to Connie as her own. Whether at the station earning what she needed to support her family, or at home, it
seemed that all Rita did was work: cooking or cleaning or washing or gardening. The increased income that had come with her promotion to canteen manager five years ago eased the intensity of Rita’s efforts somewhat. But sometimes, such as when she bemoaned the canteen menu, Connie sensed her mother’s fatigue, and a lingering gulf that still existed between her and other people—work colleagues, even her fellow parishioners. When Connie heard this in Rita’s voice, her mother sounded fragile to her, and it made her feel guilty. But when she left school and started college, she encountered her own feelings of dislocation. Eating her lunch under a Moreton Bay Fig, for instance, she’d feel no connection whatsoever with the more expensively dressed students who walked confidently past her. Such moments filled her with love for her mother.

Rita kicked off her shoes and, as she disappeared into the kitchen, called behind her, ‘You going out?’

‘Mick’s picking me up at eight.’

What Rita said next was lost in the opening of cupboard doors, but Connie knew the tone was disapproving. Her mother hoped she’d meet someone at college, another student teacher. But in eighteen months Connie had made only a few friends, none of them potential dates. And then Mick. He had plans for himself: hoped to run his own business one day. He was honest and he treated her well. It was beyond Connie to understand why her mother clicked her tongue under her breath when his name came up. Why she refused to answer the door when he was expected. While she applied the final dabs to the nail polish, Connie listened to Rita pottering in the kitchen, putting their dinner together. Sounds that were habitual, predictable, but
didn’t include the chatter, laughs or squabbling that Connie remembered filling dinner time when she was younger, before Seb left home. She wondered how the life she shared with her mother had become so quiet, reduced to incomplete conversations between them.

She stretched out her feet. The hint of glitter in the gold paint shimmered. Rita brought two plates into the room, passed one to Connie and took hers to her recliner chair. She’d added salad and a generous dollop of pickled eggplant to the plate. Connie was suddenly ravenous.

‘Do you want the TV on, mum?’

Rita, cutting her food, shook her head.

‘Not time. As soon as we’re done we’ll do the devotion. Our last night, you know?’

How could her mother think she’d need reminding? For as long as Connie could remember they’d offered their home twice a year to host the Pilgrim Statue that passed from one house to another to ensure perpetual devotion to Mary and to ask for her intercession in the world, at least in their small corner of it. The week before it arrived, Rita instigated a cleaning blitz throughout the entire house, scrubbing windows and walls, vacuuming under beds and behind wardrobes, dusting the tops of doorframes. The children were not spared the urgency of getting the house ready for the Blessed Virgin, but now, with Seb in Melbourne, Connie helped with the preparations alone.

When she was a child, Connie liked to sit at the foot of the statue, her eyes wandering over the pale skin of Mary’s small exposed face, down the ceramic blue and white folds in her dress and cloak, to the very bottom
where rigid plastic flowers protruded from a gap between her toes.

Crouched low, in the centre of the inverted V formed by Mary’s outstretched arms, she’d try to place herself in the path of Mary’s lowered eyes, but the Virgin’s gaze always eluded her. Seb, who had no patience for the nightly prayers, sat back on his haunches out of their mother’s sight, and drew his face into a stupidly pious expression which horrified his younger sister. Observing the routine and rhythm of the rosary in those days had infused Connie with pride at her own endurance and respect. With eyes closed to block out Seb’s distracting ways, the words that left her lips were carefully articulated: *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*

Then, more than a year ago Seb had announced suddenly that he was leaving. He moved east without any indication when he’d come back. But rather than his absence relieving them of his unfaithful indifference, the space it opened exposed something else. In recent months, Connie had come to suspect that their private, intimate ritual with the statue might be dull and tiresome; not even normal. Not everyone in the parish, she realised, volunteered their home. Connie had never had to articulate her feelings about Mary’s visits to anyone else before, in the same way she didn’t need to describe how it felt to eat or sleep. So she hadn’t known how to tell Mick that this week involved even more obligations than usual. And she’d already decided to wait outside the house for him when he called for her at eight. It was after seven already. The full rosary would take twenty minutes, and she still had to change her clothes and do her make-up. She’d have to hurry so
that she wouldn’t have to explain Mary to anyone. With half the pie still on her plate, she rose from the couch.

Rita paused in her chewing, held her knife in the air, and through her half-clenched jaws, said, ‘Eat it all, hey? You too skinny.’

It was nearly midnight when they pulled into the technical school’s car park and stopped at the far end, away from the streetlights. Connie’s ears rang. There must have been a thousand people crammed into the pub, going wild as the band pumped out covers of INXS, The Angels and the Oils. Connie couldn’t remember when she’d danced so hard, for so long. Her body tingled with the after-effects of strenuous activity. Her hair hung in sweaty strips. Her arm pits were moist and for a moment she feared she might smell bad.

‘That was great.’ She rested her head against the seat and looked past the pair of fluffy stuffed dice that hung from the rear-vision mirror, to the freckled night sky.

‘Yeah, it was.’ Mick leant across and lifted the lever to drop her seat back. He dropped his own too, and they turned to face each other. Mick’s normally bright blue eyes appeared dull in the dark, but they narrowed as they fixed on Connie. ‘You were a babe on the dance floor tonight.’ He parted her open shirt and traced the neckline of the tank top underneath, teasing the bra strap when he reached her shoulder. She shivered, slipped one hand behind his ears and drew between her fingers a length of his long hair. Something niggled at the back of her mind. She toyed with bringing it up, and then blurted it out.
‘You and Mandy had a lot to talk about.’

‘So?’

‘Well?’

‘Well, what?’

She tugged on his hair.

‘Ow! Are you jealous?’

‘Curious.’

He pulled her hand away and clasped it in his own.

‘She’d heard that Matt was moving out and asked if I was looking for a housemate. You know, the rent and stuff.’

‘Are you going to take her in?’

‘I dunno. I’m not sure I want to keep the place.’

He seemed hesitant, searching for something.

‘I’ve done it now, Connie thought. I’ve turned him off.

‘I’m thinking of nicking off for a while myself,’ he said. Connie tensed.

He held her arms gently. ‘Listen, babe. My apprenticeship’s finished. I’m fully-fledged. Matt reckons there’s work for chippies all over the country. I’ve been thinking, I’ve got enough savings …’

‘No, Mick!’

‘Let me finish. How many times have you told me you hate your course? That you never wanted to be a teacher?’

That was true. Towards the end of school, Connie had thought that she might study art. She’d gathered the courage to raise it with her mother, but had been vague, lacking information about where and how she could do it. She’d hardly sounded sure, and it hadn’t been difficult for Rita to remind
her that going to teachers college, which Rita had long touted, made the most sense. Art might be a fun hobby, but teaching would be a proper career.

‘I can’t quit now.’ Even Connie sensed the doubt in her voice, so she added, ‘I have to finish.’

‘Why? We could drive to Melbourne first. You wanna see your brother, don’t you? Then on to Sydney. Matt will already be there, says he’ll keep an eye out for some casual work. Head up the Gold Coast, even further, over to Darwin. I dunno.’ He flopped back into his seat and thumped a clenched fist on the dashboard. ‘Anywhere but here.’

*But here?* Here, right now, felt wonderful to Connie. She’d barely thought past their coming half-anniversary. Now, instead of thinking about how he planned to surprise her, she wondered if he even realised it was ahead of them. A minute ago she’d felt warm and satisfied, yet he was restless and wired. She manoeuvred onto her knees and, holding the seat behind his head, tried to squeeze into the space between the steering wheel and his lap. Her hair fell forward, brushing his face. He hitched the side lever, the seat shot backwards and Connie slid down, straddling his thighs. She felt him harden inside his jeans. Sulkily, she played with his elbows, avoiding the look in his eye which, even in the darkness, she could tell was fiery. He stroked her sides, slipped his hands under her top and cupped her breasts. It tickled and she giggled. His mouth found a nipple through the fabric and closed on it. Connie’s insides fluttered. She pulled back.

‘You’re crazy, you know?’

‘About you, yes.’
He nuzzled her breasts again and she gently pushed his head away.

‘If I leave my course now, I won’t get any credit for the year.’

‘But if you don’t want it anyway …’ She stopped him with a finger to his lips.

‘I never said that. Besides, I can’t let mum down.’

Grasping Connie tighter, he drew her closer.

‘It’s your life, babe.’

Their mouths met. Connie gripped the collar of his polo shirt. He pulled her top out of the frilled waist of her baggy jeans. The two of them were wedged in so tight it felt impossible they could be any closer. He whispered into her hair.

‘Stay at my place tonight. Just this once.’

Connie shook her head. She stabbed him in the chest, trying to make light of the suggestion.

‘Mum’d have a fit. And then she’d never let me anywhere near you again.’

‘For Christ’s sake. I’m sick of scrabbling around in the fucking car.’

Still so new to this, the exquisiteness of Mick’s longing, and the delicate surprise at her response to it, she shyly lifted her top to just below her bra.

‘Sick of me?’ She drew the top higher. ‘Sick of this?’

He reached for her again. He tugged on the zip of her jeans and she rose to meet him. She winced when his hands pressed into her groin. The campus doctor had said it took some women longer to settle on the pill than others. The discomfort she felt, apparently, wasn’t unusual. But she wanted so much to do everything right for Mick, it scared her sometimes. That, and the
fear that, whereas he’d become someone she couldn’t imagine being without, she might not be enough for him.

Slouched over her open textbooks on the dining table, Connie doodled on a blank page, making long, loopy designs that evolved into a winding road. White tulle billowed in the window and through it, came sounds of Rita weeding her garden. A few seconds earlier she’d stood up and told Connie through the curtain that she wouldn’t come inside to make lunch until Mr D’Souza, who was late, had left with Mary. Connie half-heartedly turned the page of her notebook and smoothed out the new blank pages.

She’d been assigned to a group presentation task with two other girls, Taylor and Cass. They’d told Connie they’d been friends since high school, and had always known they wanted to be teachers. Both had long, light brown hair. They wore the same style of loose-fit jeans and carried their files in similar tote bags. At times, Connie found herself peering at them, noting the finer distinctions between them.

Together the three of them had to plan and deliver a forty-minute Social Studies lesson. Their peers would be the class, guinea pigs on which to test their teaching skills. They had to bring the group to a shared understanding of Australian Identity. The three of them met over lunch to brainstorm ideas. What came immediately to Connie’s mind were hands: the small, soft palms of primary school children, linked for ring-a-rosy, reaching out in a game of chasey. Her mother’s lightly freckled hands, wrapping sandwiches or stuffing sausage rolls into brown paper bags, fingering rosary beads, gripped around a broom handle. And Mick’s sturdy fingers, measuring a long piece
of wood, running it under a circular saw, and afterwards, washed and holding her. Tentatively, she suggested that each student be given a paper cut-out hand, on which they could draw or write various things people did with them—working, caring, building. Strung up together, all the hands would represent their collective identities. Cass had said that of course every idea was valid at this stage, but Taylor said that it was a really sweet notion but not academic enough for a secondary school class.

‘We want top marks for this Connie—let’s lift our game, hey?’

Cass produced a text book she’d found in the college resource centre with a chapter called “The Australian People”. Taylor offered to write up a comprehension quiz based on its content. Connie couldn’t see how to build on their idea, but Taylor said she’d have to do something to share the mark. She suggested that, once she and Cass had taken the class through the written task, Connie could have the last ten minutes to summarize the quiz responses into an all-encompassing statement articulating what it meant to be Australian. While Connie usually did well in her written assignments, the few opportunities she’d had to stand in front of a class had exposed her uneasiness about taking centre stage. She fretted over it now, at the table. She couldn’t pick up the pen to begin underlining key phrases in the chapter, which she found dry and hard to focus on. She drummed her fingers on the table top and ran them through her hair.

A car swept into the driveway. Connie listened to Mr D’Souza’s deep, musical voice as Rita led him past the window to the front door. Through the opening to the lounge room, she watched as he nudged Mary out of the position she’d held for the past week and laid her in a wooden box filled
with straw, made especially for transporting her from one house to another. Mr D’Souza recounted parish news to Rita as he worked. Then, in a casual motion that struck Connie as too familiar, he hoisted the box under his arm. Although Rita remained by the open front door and had put down neither her gardening hat nor her secateurs, he seemed in no hurry to leave. He spied Connie at the table in the next room and his face lit up. He slouched against the doorframe between the rooms, his right hip protruding outwards to support the box. His head rocked as he spoke, his smile caused his black moustache to twitch.

‘Working hard, hey?’

Connie fiddled with her pen.

‘Trying to.’

‘I’m sure you are. Making your mum proud?’

Connie only nodded, not wanting to encourage further conversation. But Mr D’Souza raised his eyebrows in a knowing way.

‘What about boys, then? Anybody special?’

Connie blushed. Mr D’Souza seemed delighted and winked at Rita, as though expecting to be congratulated on his astuteness.

‘Maybe I’m onto something?’

The blades on Rita’s secateurs snapped.

‘That box must be heavy, Rick. I help you get it to the car.’ She held the screen door wide open. ‘It is unlocked?’

Mr D’Souza chuckled. As he followed Rita out of the house, Connie’s insides uncoiled, even as she could hear the string of innuendos and laughter he kept up. But Connie saw, through the curtains, that Rita was having none
of it. She opened the car door herself, let Mr D’Souza slide the box onto the back seat, and promptly shut it. Mary’s chauffer leant against the car bonnet and folded his arms across his chest, but was forced on his toes again by Rita’s pointed thank you, farewell, and retreat up the path to her garden beds. Only the broad daylight prevented Connie from flying out the door as the car drove away and grasping her mother gratefully around the waist.

The phone rang from the kitchen, drawing her attention from the window. When she answered it, Mick’s voice flooded her with sweet memories of the night before. It took her a few seconds to catch up with the reason he’d called.

‘It’s the usual crowd, plus a few of Matt’s work mates. A last minute send-off.’

_A party? Tonight?_

‘I don’t know. I’ve got a mountain of work.’

‘C’mon. Everyone will be here. I wanna see you.’

‘You saw me last night!’

It wasn’t just the presentation, or the readings for her other three units as well. Connie didn’t like leaving her mother alone two nights in a row. But she kept that to herself. Mick tried a different tack.

‘What if I told you Mandy’s coming to talk about the house?’

Connie’s hand closed firmly around the receiver. She straightened against the wall.

‘I’d say have fun, yeah?’

‘So there’s _no_ convincing you?’

He sounded forlorn. She mellowed.
‘I’m sorry.’

There was no way she could get out, but she reasoned to herself that if she finished her work early and spent the evening watching TV with Rita, she could see Mick after church the next day. They could drive up to Yanchep and take a boat out on the lake. Before she could suggest this, he threw her off-guard.

‘I told Mandy she can have the house.’

‘You mean, Matt’s room?’

‘No, the whole house. I’ve decided. I’m going.’

Connie’s body went suddenly cold, and then tingled as her mother brushed past her. She watched Rita drop her gloves onto the benchtop, wash her hands at the sink, shake them dry, and look enquiringly at her. Connie edged around the doorway into the hall, pulling the coiled phone line as far as it would reach. She cupped the mouthpiece and hissed into it.

‘When?’

There was a long silence before he answered.

‘Soon. I just have to organise a couple of things first. Matt says there’ll be a job in Sydney at the end of the month. I’d be a mug not to take it.’

‘What about us?’

‘I want you to come with me.’

Rita poked her head into the hallway.

‘Everything ’right?’

Connie scowled and waved her away. She squeezed her eyes shut to hold back tears, but couldn’t control the tremor in her voice.

‘I guess that’s it, then.’
'I wanted to talk about it tonight.'

‘Talk about it? There’s no point is there?’

‘Course there is. What about tomorrow? I’ll pick you up.’

‘No, Mick. No, you can’t. I’ll be working. I’ve a presentation to give on Monday.’

‘Baby…?’

‘Don’t baby me! Don’t …’

‘Well, when can I see you?’

‘I don’t know.’ She dropped her voice even lower. ‘I don’t care.’

She followed the cord back into the kitchen, but Mick’s voice pleaded softly in the air around her. Seeing Rita’s sidelong glance, she picked the receiver up again.

‘What?’

‘What time is your presentation?’

She wanted to say, what the fuck do you care? But her mother’s proximity censored her.

‘Three.’ She put the phone back on its cradle as firmly as she dared.

‘No good?’ her mother asked.

‘Please, mum.’

‘Is that boy pressuring you? Anything you should tell me?’

Connie felt like her insides were being strangled. There was nowhere to go in the kitchen. Her mother seemed to fill every corner of it, block each exit. Connie remained flat against the wall, scanning the floor, unable to look Rita in the eye, fervently hoping her mother had nothing else to say.

When Rita moved closer to her, Connie’s heart quickened.
‘I’m not sure about this boy, Connie.’

When Rita touched her elbow, Connie stiffened.

‘I know that kind, what they after …’

Both Connie’s arms flew outwards, flinging her mother’s hand away.

‘What kind, mum? What bloody kind?’ She didn’t need a mirror to show her how fiercely her eyes burned.

Rita, equally defiant, retaliated: ‘You know what I mean. You want me get Father Dolan over here to explain it?’

Rita’s threat seemed absurd to Connie, yet it stung. For a moment verbal barbs flew back and forth as her mother stalled her, rapidly firing out warnings and arguments Connie sensed she’d bottled up for months. Connie wasn’t sure who she was angriest with; who she felt the need to protect. Justifications in Mick’s defence poured out of her. And the longer she fought, the more she felt stuck in the kitchen between her mother and the wall. Their voices rose, climbing over each other. Rita’s made it to the top.

‘He not good enough for you. Don’t you see? You worth more, my love!’

Connie crumpled into tearful sobs, and ran from the kitchen to escape the implications of her mother’s words, the reality of her own doubts. And above all, her confusion about what her mother’s disapproval meant; the terrifying prospect of having to choose between the two people who mattered to her the most.
Monday dragged slowly, with classes back to back. Connie met Taylor and Cass after lunch. They sat on the grass under a towering plane tree, surrounded by raked piles of bronze leaves, and ran through the lesson together. Taylor was bossier than usual, even correcting Cass at one point. She asked Connie if she’d prepared a statement in case the plenary didn’t produce the responses they hoped for. Connie hadn’t, but she lied and hoped Taylor wouldn’t push for details. She didn’t tell the girls that in truth she’d moped and cried all Sunday afternoon, kept her distance from her mother, and refused to go to the phone when Rita came in to her room, twice, to tell her that boy was on the line. The problem of leading and consolidating a brainstorming session hadn’t seemed so urgent, after all.

She knew the rest of the class would do their best, genuinely trying to help the girls get a high mark. But as desks filled at three o’clock, and pens and exercise books came out of bags, Connie’s throat tightened. The lecturer entered the room and took a seat at the back. He was a tall, thin man, whose head seemed too small for his body. He nodded to Taylor to indicate that she should take charge. He folded a piece of paper over a clipboard and clicked his pen.

From the start, Connie felt out of sync with the other two. Taylor and Cass fell into tandem. They paced the room and when they spoke, their voices snapped with authority. Unable to find a way into their banter, Connie kept to the side, clasp ing one elbow behind her back, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She smiled if a student looked her way.

Once the task was set, the room went quiet. Their classmates cooperated by studying their handouts and writing answers in notebooks. Taylor and
Cass strolled between desks and bobbed down occasionally to enquire if a student understood the questions. Taylor raised her eyes at Connie, encouraging her to do the same. Connie edged closer to the desk nearest her, and asked meekly if the young man sitting there needed any help.

When the time allocated for the activity ran out, Cass told everyone to put their pens down and give Connie their full attention. Connie had forgotten to check the room when she came in. She fumbled around the teacher’s desk now, looking for chalk. She pulled each drawer out in turn, checked under loose paper, behind the metre ruler. The gulf she created filled with restless fidgeting. Taylor cut across it.

‘Okay. So think about how you’d describe Australians. And when you’re ready, call your ideas out to Connie. Whatever comes to mind. Don’t be shy. There are no wrong answers.’

Spotting a solid white end under the duster, Connie grabbed the chalk. Responses flew out immediately—*cheerful, cheeky, hard-working, larrikin, loyal, a mate*. Someone called out *Bob Hawke*, which triggered a mix of cheers and booing and for a second Connie wasn’t sure if she was supposed to write the prime minister’s name up. Other phrases made her stall too, such as *blonde, suntanned* and *sporty*, but she wrote them up anyway. For several minutes she scratched away on the board, scouring for similarities and overlaps as Taylor had told her to do, until the answers slowed down. There were at least twenty words and phrases on the board.

Connie waited, and when nothing new was offered, she tried to think about bringing the responses together. Having no idea where to start, her initial attempt to explain the next step was awkward and unconvincing, even
to her. Seeing Taylor sneak a look at the lecturer, Connie spun away from
the thirty pairs of eyes, to face the less terrifying view of the blackboard and
her own familiar handwriting. Filling time, and hoping to appear purposeful
while she waited for inspiration to strike, she began to draw circles around
each phrase, repeating the word out loud as she did. The size of the phrase
determined the size of the circle, but each was symmetrical. She knew she
shouldn’t keep her back to the class for this long, but her hand seemed fixed
to the curved lines that poured onto the board. When she’d finished, she
looked back at the class and, without understanding it completely herself,
said in a quivering voice that it followed that all the statements could be
linked together. Then, drawing straight lines from the centre of one circle to
the next, she joined each phrase into one unbroken chain. The images of
linked hands came back to her, and something else hovered timidly in her
mind too.

The chalk almost fell from Connie’s grasp when Taylor, moving to the
font of the class, interrupted again.

‘Thanks, Connie. We’ve only a minute left. Could someone suggest a
statement that encapsulates what we have here?’

Clutching the chalk, Connie drifted to the side of the blackboard. Taylor
directed questions at specific students, looking determined to obtain the
outcome she wanted. Other voices grew dim to Connie. She wished she
could disappear like Jeannie from the TV show, with a blink of her eyes.
She didn’t dare look at their lecturer but focused on the board instead, and
from that oblique angle a pattern formed by her circles and chains blurred
into shape. As if lifting off the blackboard into the air, Connie saw the
circles in groups of ten, with longer chains between each group. It was only in her mind, she was certain, that the circles appeared like beads, like her own crystal blue rosary that she’d put away in a drawer until Mary came again. But she felt stripped in front of the class anyway, naked from the topmost curl on the crown of her head to her bruised toe, capped with a square of shimmering gold paint. In horror she searched the room, expecting to be met with scorn. But she didn’t find it. By and large, eyes were on Taylor, who picked responses from the class as effortlessly as a seasoned farmwife plucking chickens.

In that instant, Connie could think of only one person who’d understand the logic in her design, who wouldn’t seem a hundred miles away if she stood beside her now. The initial sting of tears threatened the fragile composure she struggled to maintain in those final minutes of the class. She disguised them by ruffling her mass of curls, cupping her face in her hands and closing her eyes on the class, beyond caring how that might look. In the warmth and darkness behind her eyes, she longed for both Mick and her mother. Hands swam into her mind again, fanning like petals, gripping tools, cupping her face, pressed in prayer. Hands, more than one pair, that took hers and led her out the door.
Boat harbour

Before she left home on the last day of term, Emma told her mother that after school she’d be going to the shopping centre with some of the other kids.

Connie, dressed for work, packed sandwiches for both their lunches. She looked pleased.

‘Be home for tea, okay?’

Emma hesitated, wanting to cross the kitchen and put her arms around her mother’s shoulders to protect her, at least warn her that she was wasting bread.

Her mother had seemed so relieved when she’d been invited to Emma’s last session with the school counsellor, to share the burden of her youngest daughter’s problems with someone else, even appearing excited as she mouthed to Emma—she’s so young!—while the counsellor shut the door. She’d looked nervous when speaking to the counsellor, crossing and uncrossing her plump legs, waving her hands towards Emma, as though pointing out a messily wrapped package—what would you do with this? At the end of the meeting the counsellor’s bright, lipsticked smile had brought the matter to a close, after she’d encouraged Emma to be more accepting of her peers, not so stand-offish.

‘Everyone’s carrying around their own insecurities, you know. Maybe if you went a little easier on them, you’d make some friends. Wouldn’t that be nice?’
Emma had shoved her hands into the gap between her thighs. She’d let her mid-length, jet-black hair fall in front of her eyes, and nodded to show she accepted the wisdom of the counsellor’s advice. Her mum, whose hands had been still for a while, seemed spent. Emma hated herself for doing that to her. But in truth, she’d given up on the idea of friends. Throughout primary school her efforts had left her bewildered, exhausted and with few birthday party invitations to show for them. Now, three years into high school, there were no signs that her social life would improve. What Emma wanted these days was to be left alone. Away from her confusing, conflicting, scrabbling peers. Out of their crazy fucked-up zone altogether. This is why she lied to her mother. She had no intention of going to the shops. Couldn’t think of anything more brainless than sauntering in a snickering pack past garishly coloured chain stores with the other kids. When the school bus pulled into the train station, she transferred to the bus destined for the boat harbour.

When she got there, she didn’t head to the blue water slides and jungle gym, or the calm, sheltered beach where little kids played with plastic toys and, Emma suspected, pissed in the fuel-licked water. She avoided the boardwalk through the food and souvenir shops, surfie boutiques, and old people gathered around alfresco tables overlooking the moored boats for sale. She adjusted her backpack, pulled her grey hoodie over her head, zipped it in front of her school polo shirt, and tucked her hands into the front pocket with her MP3 player. When she flicked the switch and Avril Lavigne’s voice poured into her head at the start of ‘Fall to Pieces’, Emma’s knees loosened and her heels, in red Converse shoes, began to lift. Picking
up a rhythm that matched the guitar riffs thrumming through the ear phones, she skirted the rows of red-peaked roofs, packed side-by-side like hotels on a Monopoly board, and cut through the car park to the sea wall.

A barrier of limestone boulders separated the quay from the beach. Emma glimpsed the ocean over it. Occasionally the sea spat in her face. At the end of the car park, a grove of dusty she-oaks shivered. A sandy path continued behind the underwater aquarium. Bigger boulders increased the height of the wall. Emma couldn’t see the sea anymore. It felt like she’d shrunk.

Beyond the moorings where the path stopped dead, a further hundred metres of smaller rocks, tossed on top of each other, completed the point. This was a catchment for loose rubbish—plastic plates, paper bags, soft drink cans. A rusty metal sign warned of strong winds and waves, and loose footings. Emma hadn’t ventured far along the rocky outcrop yet, needing the security of the soft path nearby. She stepped gingerly to the nearest foothold. She paused the music mid-song, lowered her hoodie and stepped up.

Sometimes the wind hit her full in the face, but today it brushed her skin only lightly and lifted the hair off her neck. The spring warmth had at last peaked but still she felt chilled. She made for the nearest broad rock and hunched down, bringing her feet in from the sides that sloped into deep, eerie crevices where she imagined dangers lurking: broken glass, rusty fishing hooks, crabs with sharp appendages. Even just below her at the water’s edge, where the wave-lapped rocks were dark green and shiny, a piece of moss moved sideways and she saw it was a living creature. She
took in the colours around her—different shades of blue, khaki green, foamy white, sandy yellow—and other people, spread at discrete intervals along the wall. Some fished with hand reels or rods. Others just looked out to sea. Did they see what she did? Facing west, you could ignore the beach, the houses and apartments along the highway, the people at your back. Ahead, the navy water chopped restlessly, like she felt inside. A pink, smoky haze over the horizon hid Rottnest Island; not even its matchstick of a lighthouse could be seen.

Her narrowed eyes scoured the ocean, but if anything menacing was out there, she couldn’t see it. It eased her mind to know she wasn’t completely alone. If something did happen—if she slipped on the dark, slimy surfaces, was pulled into a crack between the rocks, or had a sudden, uncontrollable urge to plunge into the watery blackness—there’d be witnesses. Not that anyone could save her if the darkest thing of all happened. She hugged her knees tightly. Jerky videos she’d watched on the Internet replayed in her mind. The steady, relentless push of brown, soapy seawater swirling into Thai resorts last Boxing Day, forcing wary locals and unbelieving tourists off their feet; people washing past, clinging to branches and sinking car bodies. Emma’s school principal had been in Phuket at the time. In front of the whole school at Assembly, he’d told them how the worst part had been flying home on a plane filled with grief. Emma watched the videos to see if she could’ve spotted clues of the approaching tsunami. If all those people had been taken by surprise, what chance would she have had?

Shyly, she pressed her hands together, prayer-like as her grandmother had taught her, and touched her lips to them. Her fingernails were flecked
with black polish that she’d missed scraping off with the point of her compass during maths class. Her stomach rumbled and she tried not to think about the sandwich she’d thrown in the bin, visualising instead the pink muscles in her abdomen lengthening, tightening, and flattening. Breathing into her belly, she switched the music on in the middle of ‘Take Me Away’. She’d sit the next half hour out with her cosmic sister. Being alone with Avril made up for all the hours she spent wandering in social limbo amongst people who didn’t get her; who, she knew, didn’t like what they saw. Here, she could recede into the songs and let the music throb inside her, blue as the sea. She leant into the raw notes, felt the strained pleading in the lyrics work away at a knot deep within.

In that pure, blissful state on the rocks, an hour later she’d listened to the whole of Under My Skin. But the high it had given her didn’t last. Passing a vending machine on the way back, she’d given in to the gnawing in her stomach and bought a Mars Bar. She’d eaten it carefully, nibbling the outer chocolate layer, and licking the mousse as slowly as possible. Its salty-sweetness had been heavenly. But she fretted about it now, imagining the sugar forming into fat deposits inside her. Waiting at the bus stop, she stepped rapidly on her toes and flung her hands to the side to burn some of the calories. Agitating her body by the side of the road, she saw colours that, once seen, she couldn’t later un-see, no matter how hard she tried. An approaching car wouldn’t have ordinarily caught her eye—white, gear-laden, like thousands of other trade vehicles—except for the large, blue lettering on its side: Ward Constructions. Her father’s ute. Instinctively
she’d thrust a hand out to get his attention when she saw a woman in the front passenger seat. Long, blonde hair and her father’s non-steering arm, tanned and muscular, resting along the back of her seat. In the second the car passed by, Emma heard the woman call his name shrilly, and laugh— *Mick!*—while he looked over his shoulder and changed into the left lane. Emma’s eyes locked with his. Then he was gone, down the road, taking a left turn into the quay. She felt panicky, unsure why, yet certain she didn’t want to be there when he drove behind her en route to the car park. Then, by luck, she was saved by a change of colours. First green as the Transperth bus drove up to the stop. A loud swish pulled the doors open. And then, as she stepped into the bus’s cool interior, everything seemed black to her. Her heart beating a thousand times a minute, she saw that it was happening again. Not even Avril could save her from this.

The kitchen lights had never been bright enough, but the room felt even gloomier that evening as Emma, sitting at the table, pleaded with her mother to take her, if not that evening, first thing in the morning, to her grandmother’s house.

‘I’ve already called Baka. She said it’s okay with her.’

Connie, chopping vegetables for stir fry and intermittently sipping from a glass of red wine, seemed miffed. Her knife fell amongst a pile of baby carrots. One nuggety brown end flew into the air and dropped to the floor.

‘You told me last holidays that you didn’t like going there anymore, that it wasn’t fun without Stacy. I promised I’d explain that to mum. How d’you think this makes me look?’
‘I don’t mind going that much,’ Emma sulked. And less audibly, while her knees shook under the table, ‘I just wanna get out.’

Her mother heard her, and there it was again—that hurt look in her eyes. Emma knew why. Connie had begun working as a teacher’s aide when Stacy and Emma were still in primary school—excitable little girls who’d rush to their mother’s side when they saw her in the playground. In the years she continued working at the school without them, Connie had sometimes teasingly lamented not seeing their adoring faces anymore, and her expectations of how they’d spend time together during holidays still grew towards the end of each term.

‘But I’ve been telling you, for weeks,’ Connie said, ‘how much I was looking forward to this break. We talked about the museum, and watching all three discs of Anne of Green Gables.’

But Emma was resolved. The urge to be somewhere else was unrelenting.

‘There’ll be time for all that.’ She looked down at her hands. ‘I might only stay a few days.’

Emma hadn’t thought ahead, didn’t know when she’d come back. She knew she wouldn’t last at her grandmother’s for long. She was rescued from dwelling on the dilemma of what she’d do after Baka’s when, like a gusty wind, her older sister slid open the back door. Her school bag hit the floor; she dragged a chair from the table. She snatched a stick of celery from the chopping board and, between munching, said to Emma, ‘Hiya, long-face. What’s it this time?’
Even as their mother half-heartedly reprimanded Stacy, Emma reacted, kicking under the table, hitting only a wooden leg. The wine bottle teetered and Stacy, chuckling, steadied it. She seemed so bright and unfathomable to Emma. Where Emma was dark-haired and brown eyed, Stacy was lighter, her eyes green. Emma twisted the pocket of her hoodie into a knot to combat the pangs in her stomach; Stacy’s school leavers jacket flopped open revealing a roll of fat under her polo shirt. She reached for another piece of carrot. In Emma’s imagination, her sister wasn’t quick enough; the knife sliced downwards and the chopping board went red.

Stacy stole their mother’s ear with her own matters, smothering Emma’s concerns under a blanket of bubbling enthusiasm. It was often like this, as though Stacy’s entire day had to be offloaded and unpacked, spread out for everyone to see, admire, or gasp at. And now, with only months to go until she finished school for good, everything, it seemed to Emma, centred around Stacy.

‘None of the questions were familiar, so a bunch of us went to complain to the principal that our teacher hadn’t taught us properly … but the fuckwit said … sorry Connie, but he really is … it was up to us to know the text book!’

Emma hated that Stacy had started using their parents’ first names. And yet, like a fireball, Stacy continued to engulf them, explaining how, in protest, she’d convened an emergency study session after school at her friend Kayla’s house. Pausing mid-sentence to pick up more food, she finally registered her father’s absence.

‘Where’s Mick?’
Emma had wondered where her dad was, too. However, something about her mother’s face had prevented her from bringing it up. She watched her closely now, noticed the neat, blonde highlights in her short hair, the modestly applied make-up, the comfortable style of pants and skivvy that she wore to school, the single strand of brown and orange beads. Was her mother concerned about their father, and trying to hide it? Connie paused in her chopping, wiped her hand against her brow.

‘He’ll be home soon. He had a few things to do after work.’

Stacy mumbled into her raised glass, ‘That’s not like him, is it?’

Was it only in Emma’s mind that her sister looked meaningfully at her, setting off colours that blurred furiously, clouding her memory of what she’d seen that afternoon? White, green and black plaited together, intensifying a muddy feeling that came over her. She should tell her parents that she was feeling anxious again; she was supposed to try and prevent it overwhelming her. But she didn’t want to see him, couldn’t face her father until the swirling visions settled and made more sense.

The wok gave off a loud, smoky hiss as Connie dropped everything into the hot oil at once. Emma pictured the food glossy with oil, the marbled lines in the chunks of meat, and felt queasy.

‘I’m not feeling well, mum. Can I go to bed?’

Connie, tossing vegetables, paused and rested the egg-slice against the wok’s metal rim, appearing to consider something.

‘Sure.’ She delved into the wok again. ‘As soon as you’ve eaten.’

‘But I ate while I was out.’

Connie raised her eyebrows.
‘I swear,’ Emma insisted. She was glad then for the Mars Bar, which meant she hadn’t lied this time. Even so, she felt sprung. Stacy swung one leg over the other and looked in the opposite direction, as if to suppress something she wanted to say. *Go on,* thought Emma. *Get it out. I dare you!* But Stacy seemed resigned, as did their mother, whose face loosened. Emma leapt out of her chair and put her arms around her mother’s waist, rested her head against her body. Connie drew her back from the stove. The starchy smell of rice bubbling in the cooker bothered Emma, but her mother’s hand found her cheek, and Emma stayed where she was.

Half an hour later, she was in her bedroom, under the covers. Her lights were out but a yellow strip of light came from the hallway through a gap where her shoe held the door slightly open. At fifteen, Emma still couldn’t shut a door completely between herself and other people, nor could she turn her back on the room. She lay facing it, the quilt bunched at her neck, keeping her warm. She scanned the room, checking shadows under her desk, behind the wardrobe. The volume on the MP3 player was low, not because anyone else might hear it, but in her room at night, the sound from the speakers sharpened. She willed the lyrics to fill that darkened cave, sensing it would be hours before she’d fall asleep. Under the covers she fondled a small, porcelain statue of an old-fashioned girl that she’d taken from her mother’s dressing table. The cool, smooth folds in the glazing comforted her.

At some point she became aware of a deeper note penetrating the muffled conversation from the kitchen. She pulled the phones from her ears.
and tuned her hearing toward the hallway, and when she was certain her father was home, she trembled with longing that he’d come to see her, and fear that he might.

When he did, his shadow flickered ahead of him, so she was prepared for the rounded silhouette at the doorway. He wasn’t tall, but stockily built, with muscular, generous arms. Emma had squealed breathlessly in his bear hugs a zillion times. But the thought of one now felt threatening, as though it would suffocate her. When he spoke, her breath became shallow.

‘You awake, love?’ And when she didn’t answer, ‘Emma?’

Aware of the hammering from the ear phones, she drew them silently under the covers.

It seemed a long time that they held their positions like that: her father waiting, she unmoving. She heard a long, deep sigh. When her father wasn’t there anymore, the space where he’d been seemed a negative, hazy image of him. She closed her eyes to erase it.

In the morning, she stayed in bed and listened to their home waking, unfolding and expanding with life. She heard her father showering, making breakfast, murmuring to her mother. She waited until the sound of his ute’s engine throttled and evened out, until the rumble faded and she knew that he was safely away.

They turned into her grandmother’s street, where her mother and Uncle Seb had lived as children. In a row of sandy verges, busted up wheelie bins and piles of household junk ready for the council verge collection, Rita’s property was conspicuously optimistic, refusing to bend to the company it
kept—a small, red-brick bungalow on an iridescently green square hemmed in by diligently maintained rose bushes, pruned and starting to erupt with spring flourish. Emma tramped over thick blades of buffalo grass to the small, concrete porch.

Rita, wearing elasticised jeans and a red and white striped shirt, held the door open for them. Her long hair, mostly grey, was in a bun, but some loose strands framed her face. Connie entered first, and, passing her mother, offered her cheek for a kiss. Alongside Rita, Connie seemed smaller than she actually was. Yet the similarities between them were obvious too. A narrowing of the eyes, a slender nose, a certain way of holding their chins high when faced with a challenge. Emma leant into her grandmother’s firm embrace.

‘Hello, Baka.’

‘Precious.’

The house had been the same for as long as Emma could remember. In the hall, hung a large, framed picture of Jesus sitting on a rock in front of a vine-covered archway. Rosy-faced children, like the ones in Ladybird picture books, danced around him. On the way to the kitchen were two other pictures—both of the Madonna and child—either side of a framed photograph of Rita at her retirement party at the television station where she’d worked for nearly thirty years.

Emma went straight to the room she and Stacy used. It had been their mother’s when she’d lived there, redecorated when the girls began staying for sleepovers. Pale blue walls, and two single beds covered by white, synthetic, ruffled bedspreads. A picture hung above each bed. They made a
pair—two girls in gingham dresses. The room felt lopsided without Stacy. As Emma dropped her bag onto her sister’s bed, she felt too large for the room.

She tested the spring in the mattress. The one advantage about staying at Rita’s on her own (now that Stacy felt she was too old for sleepovers) was taking over Stacy’s bed. The mattress was firmer, the cover brighter, the pillow plumper. Emma knew this was true without needing anyone else to confirm it. She lifted Stacy’s pillow onto her lap. A sharp pain stabbed the back of her eyes. She covered them with the pillow to smother the sequence that came frequently now: white, green, then black. She focused her memory to recall the details behind the blurred colours. Had the woman’s hair been blonde? Was her father’s arm across the seat? Had he even seen her? Concentrating like that made her feel weightless, as if suspended far above the real world, unable to make out what she saw below. She came back to earth when Rita called through the house, ‘Coming, sweetheart?’

When Emma walked into the kitchen she sensed a bubble around her mother and grandmother burst, as though she’d chased a secret entity from the room. She slipped into place at the small pine table. The kitchen cupboards, painted yellow, reminded her of the buoys at the harbour.

The table was laid with mugs, plates and forks, a pot of plunger coffee, and Rita’s semolina cake, golden and plump, resting on a wide platter. When Rita cut into it and lifted a piece onto a plate, her speckled hand trembled. The slice, dense with syrup, pointed towards Emma.

‘None for me, Baka.’

‘What you mean? I made it especially for you!’
‘I just had breakfast.’ She caught Connie’s eye. ‘Not long ago, anyway.’

‘Psht! A bit of cake never did any harm.’

The same old conversation. Emma waited for Connie to weigh in too, but her mother surprised her, shaking her head at Rita as she said, ‘It’s alright, mum.’

Emma didn’t believe, for one moment, that it really was okay. She saw the furrow in her mother’s brow, the pleasure of eating possibly lost for her. Connie maintained an indifferent tone, but her jaw shifted sideways as she lifted her coffee and said, ‘She shouldn’t eat just to please someone else, you know?’

By the way Baka scowled and broke her own piece into large, gooey mouthfuls, Emma wondered if her mother had hit a nerve that ran deeper than Emma could know.

Three at the table, they were a pie with a quarter missing. Stacy would have accepted the cake eagerly, her plate poised in the air even as Rita sliced it. She’d have asked for extra syrup, scraped her spoon across the platter to collect more, Emma thought, just to show her up. Her sister’s empty chair exposed Emma even now—one whole side of her dangled over a cliff or the rocky point at the harbour, exposed to the silent waves that could surge without warning.

When it was time for her mother to leave, Emma hugged her longer than usual and mumbled into her ear.

‘Mummy?’

Connie kissed the top of Emma’s head.

“I’ll see you on Tuesday.’
Still they hesitated, each reluctant to be the first to pull away. When Emma and Stacy were younger, Connie would say, *be good for Baka*, as she left them behind. When they became teenagers, her instructions became more specific, directing them to a particular task. Today it was: ‘Be sure to do the dishes for Baka.’

Rita followed Connie to the car where, Emma knew, they’d talk for a while in that strained, unyielding manner that was theirs alone. There was no point watching from the door.

Rita’s knife was an old, heavy instrument. It felt sturdy in Emma’s hands, and the weight of it guided the blade into the cake. She pushed the piece away from the block. Syrup pooled into the space it made. She worked quickly, breaking up morsels and shoving them into her mouth. The first fell into a gnawing, grumbling emptiness. She worked purposefully, to the very last crumb. Then she lifted the plate and licked it, in even strokes from the centre outwards, steering it around as she went, feeling it leave a sticky trail on her cheek. She washed all the plates, cups and forks, emptied the coffee grains into the bin and washed the plunger. She put the remainder of the cake into a Tupperware container, cut into pieces and moved apart to disguise the missing piece. She closed the lid, releasing excess air in a tiny puff.

On Sunday afternoon, Emma joined her grandmother in the garden, hoping to make up for not going to church with her that morning. She hadn’t been able to admit to Baka how keenly she’d felt Stacy’s absence even while nestled in her sister’s sheets. Nor describe how the thought of getting
out of bed had exacerbated the swirling, dizzying colours in her mind. How lying still for as long as possible seemed the only way to settle the uneasiness that ebbed and flowed. But Baka had a load of mulch that needed to be spread. Though still strong at her age, her grandmother looked vulnerable next to the wheelbarrow, her legs bowed to the level of the composting wood chips. Emma, in her jeans, Avril Lavigne Bonez Tour T-shirt and an old pair of sandshoes she’d found in the laundry, felt more prepared for the task. She took up the shovel and Rita straightened, pushed one fist into the small of her back, and waved the other hand at the wheelbarrow.

‘Make sure you fill to top, won’t you?’

Emma struggled to balance the load as she pushed it over the lawn, dumping small piles of the steaming mulch wherever Rita directed her to. The work formed a rhythm: the scrape of the shovel under the mulch pile, the squeaking barrow, the soft thud of each deposit. Though thin, her arms felt strong as she moved the load from pile to barrow, not faltering, not spilling its contents. She felt immensely satisfied—whenever she saw her grandmother wobble slightly to stand or sit back on her knees and take a deep breath—that she was being useful. The pleasure it aroused surprised her and distracted her from the colours, and from thinking about food.

The mulch pile dwindled quickly with the two of them working together. When Emma tipped the last barrow-load onto the grass she fell on to her knees beside Rita and thrust her hands into the moist, crumbly compost, comforted by the warmth that enveloped them. She followed Rita’s actions,
pushing the mulch towards the gnarled trunk of a rose bush, but swiftly pulled back when a prick sent a sting like an electric current through her.

‘Ow!’

Rita scooped up Emma’s hand and brushed the dirt away with light, quick strokes. Ignoring the dusty film that remained, she brought the hand to her lips, and kissed it.

‘Just a thorn. You’ll survive, my love.’

Emma scrubbed the spot in more rapid, desperate movements. She brought the pricked finger to her eyes but she, too, could see that it was nothing at all. Yet something hurt a great deal. Large tears overshot her eyelids.

‘Precious. Come here,’ Rita laughed, and patted the grass at her side for Emma to come closer. ‘What a baby.’ She folded Emma to her, crumpling the picture of Avril’s face on the T-shirt. She rubbed Emma’s arm vigorously.

Clasped against Rita’s shoulder, Emma felt her chest expand, threatening to burst. Her breathing grew rapid, her tears freer. Looking down at the mulched bed, she was struck by the green shoots against rich, black compost. There it was again. Green. Swoosh. Black.

All of a sudden, she shivered. She clutched her grandmother, felt her stiffen and her back-rubbing slow to more tentative strokes.

‘What is wrong, my darling?’

Emma’s mind flicked speedily through painful memories, hitting on a fear she didn’t even know the source of. She pushed herself onto her heels, wiped her nose with the back of her dirty hand, and sniffed.
‘Why don’t you like dad, Baka?’

Rita dropped her hands into her lap and for several drawn-out seconds stared at Emma.

‘What a thing to say.’

‘It’s … alright. I d-don’t mind,’ Emma stammered, hoping nevertheless that it wasn’t true.

Rita seemed to consider the question. She rubbed her knees, leaving skid marks on her old pants. After a couple of false starts, which faltered in incoherent murmurs, she said, calmly and simply, ‘They were so young. And your mother. She was going to be a teacher.’

She sounded wistful, her face looked melancholic, and Emma at once regretted having accused her, even after her grandmother attempted to be cheerful.

‘But then Stacy was on the way and, well … granddaughters. I can’t imagine it any other way now.’ Her eyes locked on Emma’s, checking that she accepted what she’d told her. She took her gloves off and handed them to Emma.

‘Put these on. I’m tougher than you.’

The gloves were rough and warm with Rita’s sweat, but Emma worked her hands into them.

‘Your father is good. He works hard. Got it?’

Emma thought she did. She wanted to. But when Rita leant forward and lifted mulch with her bare hands, the colours came back to Emma and suddenly, through fresh sobs, she was telling Rita all about them, and more. Staring into Rita’s blank face, Emma couldn’t tell if any of it made sense,
but the relief of saying the colours out loud was great. By the time she’d finished, her tears had disappeared, her chest had ceased heaving and the swirling insider her had settled. She felt a little silly. She wondered if she’d overreacted. She gave Rita a weak smile. Rita carefully dropped the soil she’d held all the while, around the base of the plant, and dug back from the stem to create a well.

‘You must give the plant room to breathe,’ she said. ‘Not smother it. Otherwise it will rot.’

Then she pulled Emma towards her again and held her tight.

Emma never knew what she’d triggered in Rita’s mind that Sunday, and maybe she shouldn’t have been so surprised or felt as betrayed as she did when, waiting on the bed on Tuesday afternoon with her bag packed and the earphones neatly coiled for the trip home, a wave hit. Rita came in, square-shouldered, with both hands behind her back, and told Emma that her father was there to take her home. *In the middle of the day? When he should be at work?* Emma sprung off the mattress.

‘What happened to mum?’

Rita lifted her hands skywards.

‘What do I know of these things? I’m just grandmother.’

Emma’s stomach fluttered in quick bursts.

‘You *told* them!’
She yanked her backpack over her shoulder and pushed past Rita, who tried to hold her back.

‘Precious!’

Emma went down the hall ahead of her, slapping her palm on the wall.

‘You told them what I said.’

Sunlight dazzled off the ute’s white bonnet—parked across the verge instead of in Rita’s driveway. Her father leant against it, still in his work clothes, arms folded across his chest. Emma was transported back to a particularly trying day when she was in Year One. She’d come out of class, despondent, to find her dad waiting for her in the pick-up zone, just like he was now, instead of her mother. The surprise of it had stopped her in her tracks. Stacy, a confident year four, thumped past, knocking Emma’s shoulder with her school bag. Emma remembered Stacy’s arm waving rapidly like a windscreen wiper. Then her dad was standing over her, scooping her into his arms so that her bottom rested in the crook of his elbow. He planted loud kisses on her neck and carried her to the car. But this day wasn’t in any way the same. He’d been full of fatherliness then, his hair dark, thick and curly. Now he appeared withdrawn; his hair a greying buzz-cut. He didn’t leave the car to meet her, his arms remained closed, and his smile seemed as cautious as she felt. She approached with a clenched stomach.

‘Hello, darlin’, ’ he said.

Emma acknowledged him with a flick of her head, went round the back of the car to the passenger seat, hugged her bag to her lap, and wound the window down. Rita’s hand curled over the ledge, her knuckles white. When
she popped her head through the opening to kiss her goodbye, Emma sensed she was seeking her forgiveness. She whispered into her ear, ‘How could you, Baka?’

‘Oh, shush,’ Rita replied. Her hand stiffened and withdrew.

While the car idled, Emma rested her chin where Rita’s hand had been, scanning once more the rich brown deposits under the roses, the emerald lawn. Her father swung the car into a u-turn and waved out the window. Emma watched Rita wave back at them until they turned out of her street.

They drove in silence to the main road. Emma sat close to the door, eyes ahead, aware that her father’s often flicked towards her. His hand fidgeted on the gear stick. Her palms were slick with sweat. She pictured home and her room, and the longing to be near her mother increased with the speed of her pulse.

When they entered the freeway northwards and her father spoke, he seemed relieved at the sound of his own voice.

‘I know what. How about we stop for ice cream?’

‘The boat harbour?’ Emma spat back.

Did she imagine the prickly current that shot through the car; that her father’s shoulders lifted as he shifted in his seat? He didn’t respond, but he passed the freeway exit to their home and didn’t turn off until they reached the road to the sea. Neither spoke again, as though resigned to whatever awaited them there.

Her father parked away from other cars and Emma was glad for the openness around her. Nearby, sea gulls pecked the bitumen where a bucket of chips had spilt. As the cab settled into silence, Emma felt the gaping hole
between her and her father diminish, and she tensed to maintain it. Her knees bent towards the door, her hand on the handle. The scent of his aftershave, which she normally enjoyed, seemed too strong. She dropped the window to release it and salt and oil fumes entered, along with the splashing sounds of waterside play. He pulled the keys out of the ignition. They rang like bells.

‘I was here with a client on Friday afternoon,’ he said. Seconds oozed between them like hours. ‘You were here too, weren’t you love?’

‘You know I was!’

His hand reached her shoulder and Emma reacted, opening the door so violently she almost fell out of the car, not noticing her MP3 player drop out of her pocket and disappear under the chassis. She tripped over her shoes while trying to right herself and when she did, she ran from her father’s cry—*Emma!*—and sprinted towards the sea wall. Her hoodie flew back from her head. The wind was forceful this time, and even behind the wall she felt its resistance as she ran into it. She didn’t stop to check if the heavier tread coming behind her was her father, knowing that even if it was, she’d make distance between them in no time. She ran all the way to the sandy path where the she-oaks roared mightily. She kicked up sandy clouds in her wake. When she came to the end of the path she sprang onto the rocks without care, stepping from boulder to boulder, slipping only once on a crushed Fanta can and leaping away from a flash of silver in time to miss a dead, bloated fish.

She made it all the way to the end of the point. Any further and she’d be in the sea, which swirled black below her. She rocked on her heels, nearly
losing balance. She squatted, nothing broad enough out there to sit on. Her
eyes squinted against the wind. Her nostrils filled with it, her ears roared
with it. There was salt on her tongue. She guessed he’d be upon her soon,
and reached into her pocket. Now, more than ever, she needed Avril. The
player wasn’t there. Her hands started to shake.

‘No. No!’

She fumbled for something to hold on to. Her hand settled on a loose
object, almost flat, rough along the edge. Later, she couldn’t recall how she
thought to do it. She clenched the stone and dragged it across the fleshy pad
under her opposite thumb. The full, bursting feeling inside her split with
relief. The cut was a thin, red line, but seconds later it thickened, running
down a channel in her palm. When it began to sting, Emma welcomed the
pain.

A voice, resonating with fear, grew louder and less muffled. Emma
hugged her hands to herself, the stone encased like a seed. Her father rose
up behind her. When he dropped to the rocks at her back she could hear a
desperate tremor in his breath. His arms gathered her to him. Her hand
throbbed and she felt lighter than at any time since Friday. She let her head
fall to the side and saw her father’s shadows meld with hers on the rocks,
not solid and black, but one large grey muddled form.

‘Do you love us, dad?’ she called into the wind.

‘Oh Lord,’ he croaked close to her ear. ‘You three are all the world to
me.’

It seemed, then, that he sobbed. His coarse chin scraped her neck. It may
have been wet. It wasn’t cold now that he was there, squeezing her tight. In
spite of the wind, she could see that it was a clearer day than the last time; Rottnest formed a giant crocodile on the horizon.

‘You’re making a fuss about nothing,’ her father said, cupping her head under his chin. ‘You worry too much, sweetheart.’

Sinking deeper into his embrace, Emma sighed, exhausted by her own anxious tendencies. Had she made more of it than she’d needed to, like the school counsellor said? She sensed how much easier it would be to see things the way other people did. The sting in her palm persisted, and something tight and solid slipped out of her.

She pressed her hand onto the rock at her side and when she lifted it, some blood stayed behind. She imagined it seeping into the pores of the limestone, like the syrup in Rita’s cake. It was a brooding mark, yet the red against the white took her breath away. Better, she thought. Black was such an unyielding colour.

Below her father’s line of sight, Emma squeezed the wound and let it ooze afresh. Red spreads, she thought to herself. She looked at the unpredictable ocean that surrounded her father and her, and noticed how the further away it went from them, the more even the water seemed.

It moves forward.

She peeked into the small cave her hands made, where the blood had smudged to a thin veil.

It can be washed away too.

It needn’t leave a trace.
It seemed to Connie that she hadn’t left the couch in days. She’d taken to the twenty-four-hour news channel. The male and female presenters seemed to get along so well it calmed Connie to watch them. She felt she was participating in the world just by reading the headlines scrolling along the bottom of the screen. It didn’t seem to matter that she was still in her pyjamas. That her breakfast plate, littered with crumbs, sat on the coffee table in front of her, beside the small porcelain lady she picked up often, still in two pieces. She pulled the blanket in tighter and the fibres of the brown faux-fur tickled her lips.

When the third half-hourly news bulletin began, she got up to make another tea. The kitchen, an extension of the living room, was tiny but uncluttered. Stacy even kept her toaster in a cupboard, but Connie left it beside the stove, even after the bread ran out. She slouched against the sink and filled the kettle. The space was so small that with only a step back she bumped against a table only big enough for two. Her daughter Stacy’s unit was the rear of two apartments created in an old inner-city terrace house. The unit’s interior had been refurbished in a slick, modern style. The beige walls, slate-coloured benchtops, glass-bowled kettle, and stainless steel stand with matching coffee mugs accused Connie somehow. Of what, she wasn’t sure. Initially, she hadn’t left the unit because venturing outside had seemed beyond her. But as the days passed, she wondered if she lingered on Stacy’s couch to absorb something besides the news. An ornament here,
another there; a choice of framed print; the colour of the towels in the
bathroom. She was coming to know the woman who’d left Perth more than
a year earlier. When Stacy took up the job here in Sydney, Connie
convinced herself it was a temporary move. She hadn’t ever really
considered that either of her daughters might one day live far from her.
Now, the physical reality of Stacy’s home exposed the arrogance of that
assumption. What had she expected to find—a bed-sit and Stacy’s clothes in
a backpack? And the knowledge that it had been her own need that had
compelled her to finally visit her daughter shamed her. It was easier to
blame Mick, adding that to the other resentments she piled against him.
A glass sliding door led from the kitchen to a small courtyard which was
still in shade. She peered through the glass at the three by four metres of
grey slabs. Stacy had proudly shown off this outdoor space, pointing out the
bonus balcony off her upstairs bedroom. The unit at the front of the house
had no garden at all and just two small windows, one on each floor. Connie
could see that Stacy was better off, but she wasn’t impressed. What she saw
through the glass bore no resemblance to her notion of a back yard. A
wooden bench the only outdoor furniture, a fig-like plant in a large glazed
pot to one side of it. On the other side, an old outdoor toilet now housed a
washing machine, a coil of rope, and a basket of pegs. But it wasn’t just the
size and bareness of the yard that seemed strange to Connie. It was its
position in relation to the other terrace houses on all three sides, so many of
them crammed against each other, turning the courtyard into an open box.
The glass doors and kitchen wall of the unit made one side. One of the
neighbouring fences was made of overlapping pine planks; the side with the
“laundry” was rendered brick, painted purple. Just visible on the neighbours’ side was a long steel cable crammed tight with washing on wire coat-hangers. It squeaked throughout the day as someone swapped the hangers around. The rear wall of the courtyard was actually the brick foundation of the terrace house behind Stacy’s. It was taller than Connie. Fingers of fishbone fern sprouted from cracks in the mortar. At the top, planks of wood formed a crude fence across a large deck that Connie had glimpsed from Stacy’s bedroom. The branches of a lemon tree protruded through the fence slats and one or two yellow fruit hung over Stacy’s side. From down where Connie stood, the tree appeared to grow in mid-air. She sometimes heard a child’s voice—crying, or suddenly laughing—from up there.

Her back garden at home in Perth had a lawn of buffalo grass, Mick’s workshop, a full-sized clothes-line and an above-ground pool. Mick had built a patio along the length of the house, covering an eight-seater glass and aluminium outdoor setting and several shelves of potted ferns and fuchsias. To one side was a bricked-in barbecue that he’d also made. The yard was separated from the neighbours’ by panels of corrugated Super Six, hidden by grevilleas, hibiscus and bottlebrush. A private retreat.

Here, Connie felt overshadowed by the patchwork of brick and render, chimneys, washing lines, TV aerials and tree branches. Sometimes she could hear taps being turned on and off, even voices through the walls. The proximity of other people’s private lives unnerved her. When she’d told Stacy this, her daughter had laughed, replying she loved this about the inner city, that being so close to other people felt authentic, like she was really
living. This had made Connie wonder what Stacy thought she and her dad did. But then, her own assumptions about their life together had been violently shattered in recent days. She couldn’t help but wonder if everyone they knew saw them differently to how they’d seen themselves. That thought, and the recollection of Mick’s handiwork around the house, made her unbearably sad. She knew his efforts said loads about his love for them, but all that seemed thin and meaningless now.

Just as the kettle boiled, Connie saw the branches of the lemon tree tremble and a shadow move behind them. A woman’s voice called out. Connie stepped back from the door, hoping she hadn’t been seen. She poured water onto the tea bag with shaking fingers. She was cold. She went upstairs for her cardigan. The bedroom took up the whole of the second floor and, like much of the unit, everything in it was brown—a dark coverlet, camel cushions, beige curtains. The colours, and the heavy curtains she kept drawn across the doors and the balcony, accentuated the dull feeling inside her.

Coming down the stairs, she heard her phone’s ringtone. On the coffee table it flashed brightly. Although she knew it would be Mick, when she got closer and saw the screen shot of his face her breath caught in her throat. She watched the upward lines of his sheepish smile, and felt the scorn that formed on her face. When the phone went silent and dark again, her frown eased too.

She sank back onto the couch, the tea on the benchtop forgotten. On the TV were scenes of a riot—people and police—in some other place. The specifics were irrelevant; she recognised the anger in the protesters’ faces.
She couldn’t forget the sight of her own hand, only days before, clawing Mick’s cheek while she yelled, *you fucking bastard!* And him, aghast as blood trickled to his lips, stumbling backwards against the dressing table, knocking the small porcelain lady onto the floor, breaking it. Neither could she forget the sound of her own exhausted breath hissing into the silence of the big empty house. And then just snippets of Stacy’s voice down the phone, insisting that she fly to Sydney and stay at her place for the three weeks she’d be in Bali with girlfriends from Perth. That alone had made sense. *Get out. Get out.* Now that she was here it felt an awful situation, her daughter looking out for her. But it had happened so quickly. She hadn’t even told Emma the truth, just spun a story about taking a break. A family habit, to avoid upsetting their youngest daughter where at all possible. But her mother? Had Rita bought the lie too? What had she made of Connie’s sudden departure?

Connie hunched down into the cushions, cradling the two porcelain pieces. Mick had bought the figurine as a gift when Stacy was born. Maybe he thought she’d like to collect that kind of thing, but she hadn’t been moved by it, too preoccupied with her newborn baby. For a couple of years he’d given her others for birthday presents—a shepherd, a milkmaid, a plump, smiling child—but they never left their boxes, and he must have eventually cottoned on that he was on the wrong track, because they stopped coming and he never asked her about the others. But the lady had stayed on the dressing table, and the dainty figure had eventually grown on Connie. For twenty-three years, its gentle gaze had looked steadily at her while she dressed. And now it was severed in half across its lavender skirt. It hadn’t
seemed right to leave it behind. Under the delicately turned bonnet, the smooth, shiny face still smiled sweetly.

She pulled the blanket higher. The synthetic smell of the fibres soothed her. Connie recalled her last image of Mick through the rear window of the taxi on the night she left. Almost unrecognisable in that crumpled pose, he’d lifted his hands to his eyes. It frightened her to remember how triumphant she’d felt. It was the knowledge she could feel that way about him that made answering his calls impossible, not just that he’d slept with someone else.

She’d had her suspicions once before, years earlier, but she hadn’t seen this coming. She’d anticipated the anger and hurt, but never the awful feeling she had now when she imagined herself standing alone in a room with him. On the couch, clutching the blanket to her, she wanted to hide what she feared had become loathsome to her husband—her broad, dimpled thighs, and the rolls of fat around her middle. Though wrung out by the amount of crying she’d done in the past week, tears swelled nevertheless. It wasn’t the shame of Mick’s affair that had carried her to the airport and across the country for the first time in her life. It was something else. And it scared her.

By the next afternoon, she’d accepted that she had to go out of the flat. The milk was all gone, and there were no more packets of instant noodles or cereal. She tried to imagine the process she’d need to go through to restock the kitchen. She slipped on her shoes and her feet squirmed at the tight feeling after so many days in just socks. When she zipped her jeans, she wondered for a second if her fingers fit more easily under the band. But all
she’d done since she’d arrived was lie about. Around her were several days’ worth of unwashed cups and scrunched up tissues, and her tracksuit pants lay on the floor. But she had to focus on the shopping for now. The thought of braving the city beyond the unit demanded a level of concentration she struggled to muster.

She opened the shared door and steel gate to the street. After staying indoors, the feeling of air moving past, even with the gritty smells off the road, was bracing. But her earlier sense of dislocation as she’d looked through the windows of the taxi from the airport was just as strong. The houses had no driveways between them, so cars were parked along the street, only steps away from the front doors. Paperbark trees grew along the footpaths, giving the street a leafy and cool appearance. Their branches had been allowed to grow close to the power lines, unlike the box trees on her street that the council pruned severely. The road was narrow and steeply sloped, so the five-storey apartment block on the opposite side seemed to lift off the ground as it went up the street.

Stacy had left directions to the supermarket. Across a park to the main road. It felt weird to walk rather than drive to do the shopping. The park, the size of a couple of blocks, was dwarfed by a wall of high-rises behind it. Though she sensed its grandeur should thrill her, she found it discomfiting and kept her eyes down until she turned the corner into a narrow street. The entrance to the shopping arcade was on the corner of a dual carriageway where cars, buses and trucks confronted her all at once. Unable to take everything in, her mind snatched what it could: Sushi-bar, Gloria Jean’s, a bottle shop, a clearance clothing store, more apartment blocks on the other
side of the road and behind them another span of tall buildings that she again evaded by ducking into the mall.

The supermarket was small, nothing like her nearest shopping centre with Coles and Woolies. She wandered slowly around the aisles, not immediately recognising the items she needed. She picked up toothpaste, and lingered for a while in front of the boxes of hair colour. She rubbed her fingers along her parting as if she could measure the regrowth. It was too long, she knew that much, but she didn’t have it in her to fix it now. When she reached a small selection of hardware, she remembered the broken figurine and grabbed a tube of Tarzan’s Grip. She bought too much food, forgetting that she didn’t have a car and would have to carry it back to the unit. The heavy bags banged against her calves.

She stopped to rest on a bench back in the park, which was neatly ringed by young plane and eucalyptus trees. It seemed more like a garden, nothing like the reserve near her home that had two playing fields, where she and the girls used to take the dog after school. Yet the park was well used. A young couple stretched out on the grass in the full sun with their eyes closed and their arms entwined. A middle-aged woman in a dark blue tracksuit performed Tai Chi in the shade, her knees bent, her arms extended to the front, then the side and behind, accompanied by harsh outward breaths. Two younger women in shiny, tight sports gear that revealed their midriffs clasped each other’s arms and dropped into deep squats, arching their backs. A few small unleashed dogs sniffed about the trees. Their owners followed behind, carrying small yellow plastic bags.
Near her, a boy about three years old, with long, curly hair so golden it almost sparkled in the sun, rode a plastic motorbike over a bitumen square. His sandalled feet pushed him along, lifting now and then for a second or two of free rolling. His eyes widened in amazement. When he stamped his feet on the ground to stop, he looked back at a woman who was texting on a mobile phone, who’d missed his thrilling ride. She seemed in her early twenties, and had blonde hair tied back in a ponytail revealing a dark layer underneath. She wore a pink singlet top and high-cut denim shorts, sitting low on her hips, just covering her bottom. She didn’t appear to be paying much attention to the boy, but when he rolled close by, nearly running into Connie’s bags, she snapped.

‘Back it up, Banjo!’

The boy looked at Connie crossly, as if the reprimand had been her doing. For a moment, Connie, who was used to ducking out of the way of daredevil riders in the schoolyard, wanted to say, it’s okay, but his mother didn’t make eye contact with her. The woman scooped up the bike in one arm and took the boy’s hand. As they crossed the road, he looked behind once. Connie managed a smile.

Having got out of the unit at last, she wasn’t in a hurry to return. The traffic beyond the park churned constantly, like surf on a beach hidden by sand dunes. She sought the familiar in her surroundings: the smell of grass warming in the sun; the presence of other people. But when she looked past the trees to the wall of overlapping buildings, her chest tightened and she felt hemmed in again, as though she was still on the couch in Stacy’s unit. So many walls. The buildings with balconies had bits and pieces, like doll’s
house furniture, dotted amongst them—tiny black barbecue hoods, outdoor chairs, potted greenery, clothes racks with washing on them. Small, separate lives spilling into the open. Large apartment blocks were beginning to show up in Perth too, but not on this scale. Connie was more used to the low line of the houses in her northern suburb and the huge domed sky above it. Office blocks with dark glass walls were in amongst the apartments too, together creating an impenetrable façade, like a span of sheer cliffs. Stacy had said the harbour was only a twenty-minute walk through the city. You have to see the Bridge and the Opera House. But Connie wasn’t sure. The buildings seemed to go forever, and the streets in front of her disappeared below them into unknown crevices. The whole thing seemed weighty, as if it could all come down in a minute. And if the way through those concrete and glass mountains was not clear, how difficult would the return home be? In the vastness of this city she felt insignificant, and at that moment the park was exotic enough for her. The effort of getting that far no mean feat.

She had time. As she’d expected, her school principal hadn’t pressed her when she’d asked him for immediate leave. And Sandra, who she’d assisted in kindy for ten years, had joked that all assistants were the same anyway. Connie knew she didn’t mean that, but nevertheless, she’d been unable to tell her friend what was really going on. She couldn’t look her in the eye and tell her that Mick had strayed. She couldn’t face the pity. The steps she’d taken to leave were a blur now, yet she couldn’t help remembering how much easier it had been to let go than she’d have imagined. When she thought of her work now, what came to her was a repetitive routine of
support that enabled other people’s creativity to flourish, both the children’s and Sandra’s. It formed an underwhelming résumé after so many years.

When she got back to the unit and unpacked the shopping onto the table and around the sink, she looked at it helplessly. Where would she put it all? She shoved as many tins, jars and packages as she could into the small cupboard above the sink. The rest went in the fridge with the milk, butter and cheese. She found a bowl and put the apples and bananas in it. They’d go bad if she didn’t eat them soon.

Her fingers stroked a light film of sweat on her chest. It had taken her a few days to realise that this mildly oppressive stickiness was normal here. Through the glass door, she could see a strip of cloudy sky. She pulled the door back, and sounds that had been muffled by the glass sharpened: the distant squeal of breaking traffic, the child babbling from the house behind, the squeak of the steel wire next door as it bounced up and down while the coat hangers were lifted on or taken off. The pungent smell of barbecued meat reached her as smoke fingered its way through the leaves of the lemon tree. A woman murmured something to the child, and then a man’s voice barked, ‘Get him away from ’ere. It’s hot for chrissake.’

The combined coarseness and concern in those words lured Connie across the courtyard. She pressed herself against the laundry door where she’d be least likely to be seen. Peeling paint crumbled behind her fingers. When she looked up, the spaces between the wooden slats of the fence above her widened, allowing her glimpses of a body behind the lemon tree. The meat sizzled, a barbecue tool caught the light, and between the leaves the deep blue curlicues of a tattoo came into view. The sight of that forearm
made her skin go cold and hot at once, reminding her of Mick. She’d always
loved the feel of his arms around her, and his work-roughened hands,
fringed in tight curls of dark hair, that felt like sandpaper in her own. But
she imagined them now, no longer young, travelling over another woman’s
firmer body. A supplier’s administrative assistant. Is that what Mick had
told her? Nausea threatened. Her hand flew to her throat. Something
scratched her cheek: a strand of fern, the herringbone pattern of its leaves
bent outwards into the air. Smoke tickled her nostrils. A cough sounded
from above. Then plastic wheels bumped over the deck, and stopped
suddenly.

‘Fucken hell! Sheree!’

A slap. A pause. An indignant wail. The child’s pain felt close and a tear
surprised Connie in the corner of her eye. The lemon tree rustled above her
head. Through the leaves, a pair of eyes stared down at her, bright green,
like shiny beads, fringed by golden curls. Her wet eyes looked back. The
sizzling had stopped and she sensed the man was no longer there. It was just
her and the boy, looking at each other like a secret uncovered. It lasted only
seconds before the woman called: ‘Banjo!’

Recalling the boy in the park, Connie made an effort to smile again, but
if he recognised her she couldn’t tell. He melted back through the leaves.
When her phone rang inside the house, it broke the moment. It was Mick
again. She hadn’t answered one of his calls, even though he rang at least
twice every day. The phone’s upbeat tune mocked the impasse between
them. She held the phone, and his face, close to hers. Her thumb moved
over the screen and rested above the green bar. The music stopped and the
screen went black. At that moment she and Mick were standing at opposite ends of a virtual line. She tried to picture him. Had he taken himself off somewhere private to call her? How did his face look as the call went unanswered? She felt cruel. But nothing could have made her speak to him.

The call had shifted something and she moved restlessly around the unit. She went to the back door but couldn’t go outside again. Like a cubist painting, the terrace rooftops made an irregular frame around darkening cauliflower clouds. She pulled the glass and it thudded along the rail, shutting her inside. She turned on the TV and flicked channels through reruns of old sitcoms and game shows. They were an apt distraction for people alone at that time of day—filled with taped audience laughter or inane talk, not to be taken seriously. She sank into the cushions, a buffer against a restlessness larger than her. Beyond the unit, the city simmered into Friday night.

At some point—how long she’d been watching TV she didn’t know—she became aware of a relentless rhythm. *Boom, boom, boom.* Somewhere, music had started. Outside, dusk had fallen and red and mauve reflected off the smudgy sky. The music bounced off all sides of the courtyard at once, its origin impossible to tell. She tried upstairs. She stepped onto the balcony and felt, just as she had the first time, thrust into the open. The music shot up in volume. There were no signs of activity in the other backyards. The wire clothesline was empty and still. No rustling behind the lemon tree. The doors behind it were closed, but the faint sounds of life with small children could still be heard: a parent coaxing, a child resisting, the parent trying again, in a higher, tighter tone.
She edged to the balustrade and the location of the party became clearer. The upper levels of the apartment block across the road were visible. Two floors from the top, people crammed a tiny balcony. Inside, the lights were off, but red beams criss-crossed the dark and illuminated the tops of people’s heads. The music pulsed beneath the chatter, absorbing the sounds of the halting traffic in the distance, and the “cha-ching” on the TV game show downstairs. The clouds had amounted to nothing, dissipating in wisps. Savoury smells infused the air.

Had it only been a week ago that she’d called Mick and asked him to pick up Thai on his way home from work? But that was the night, she remembered, when he’d come home empty-handed, and didn’t answer her when she asked him where the food was. He’d sat on the couch without getting a beer first, and cried—choking, red-faced sobs. It had scared her, but she’d let him be, as if he was behind a glass wall that she couldn’t get past. Eventually, he got some words out. He couldn’t take it any longer. He loved her too much to lie to her.

And then her life splintered into a thousand barbed pieces. Even now, her hands gripping the balustrade felt their sting.

A light flicked off and the house behind the lemon tree went dark, but the bright colours from a large TV screen flashed between the leaves. Through the fast-changing scenes and sound of metal and tyres, she recognised the speed and rush, the roll and tumble, of a car chase. Laughter followed, dulled by the barriers between the family and her. The boy’s higher pitched giggle erupted too. There was nothing for her out there, but
inside, the bedroom walls closed around her. She shut only the fly screen, wanting to feel connected to the lives beyond the unit.

It felt wrong to be alone in a bedroom. It was too early for bed, but the sound of the TV was no longer appealing. She’d seen some wine under Stacy’s sink and went downstairs for it. She pulled out a bottle of cab sav, but would’ve taken anything. The television harped on in chirpy chatter. She shut it off. Her body’s imprint still dented the cushions on the lounge, and a glimpse of the porcelain lady showed under the edge of the blanket. She found both pieces and carried them, with the wine and a glass, upstairs.

Under lamplight, the brown shades in the room dulled even deeper. A breeze moved the bottom of the half-drawn curtain into the room and sucked it back again. The adrenaline-fuelled soundtrack of the movie across the yard mingled with the music from the flat over the road. She unscrewed the wine. Its glug as it poured over the lip was reassuring.

She drank two glasses sitting on the edge of the bed and, enjoying how it warmed her, she wondered how she’d gone without wine until now. She shuffled back onto the mattress and sat cross-legged, lifting the porcelain out of the way. She turned the bottom piece over and felt the rounded edges of the base, where she could still make out Made in China. She brushed over the small, pink cheeks of the figurine that hadn’t changed in all those years. Her hand went to the creases in her own cheek.

Crossing to the wall mirror, she turned her face from side to side to catch the light. Small creases fanned out from her eyes, and deeper lines ran from her cheeks to her jaw. Her palm smoothed them upwards, spreading her
fingers over her nose and into her hairline where grey roots pushed against the red.

Looking so closely at herself made her tired and fuzzy. Or was it the wine? She thought about changing into her nightie but it seemed too much effort. Her clothes were still in her suitcase, even though Stacy had cleared two drawers for her. She pulled out one empty drawer, and the next. The third was filled with underwear scattered over neatly folded T-shirts. Between lacy knickers, a red box protruded. She pulled from it a small, plastic, bulging square. She felt like a schoolgirl as she inspected the condom packet. That Stacy had it didn’t surprise her. She herself had two babies by the same age. But her daughter’s apparent assertiveness did humble her. When she and Mick had first started going out, they’d never questioned that she’d take the pill. All those hundreds of little pink dots which had made her feel unwell and bloated much of the time. Squeezing the plastic and feeling the rolled rubber circle, a new fear formed inside her. What had Mick and his lover used? Had he been prepared to lessen his so-called pleasure for someone else?

She poured another wine and crawled back into bed. That last Friday night, when it all came out, she hadn’t been able to listen to the details. Now she wanted to hear it all again. How long had the affair been going on? What had they done? Did he mean it when he said it was over? Unexpectedly, the wine sharpened her mind. She delved further back, looking for earlier clues that something was wrong with their marriage. What had she ignored that he may have hoped she’d see?
She pressed her fingers against her eyes and one memory emerged clearer than the rest. Several weeks earlier, they’d been watching a late-night documentary on young people and mental health. Connie usually found that kind of show too serious when all she wanted to do was relax. She was complaining to Mick that she’d been asked to take on the literacy evaluations. *When did Sandra think she’d fit those in, on top of everything else she was expected to do?* But she sensed Mick wasn’t listening to her and really was paying attention to the TV. She felt a little put out, but knew there was another reason she was keen to avoid a programme about depressed and suicidal teenagers. How could Mick stand it? Still, she reminded herself that although they’d had a difficult time with Emma, their daughter had been alright for a long while now. Then Mick said, as if reading her mind, that people weren’t always themselves when pushed to the brink. He got up quickly. She thought he’d gone for another beer, but he didn’t come back. In the next ad break she went looking for him, and from the hallway saw him sitting on the side of their bed. Just looking at the floor. The space around him seemed cordoned off. She slipped back into the lounge room, pretending she hadn’t seen anything. Now, that scene took on new meaning. As she finished the wine, tears ran over her lip onto the glass rim.

A fourth glass emptied the bottle. She struggled to finish it. Acid burned in her stomach, forcing a large belch. She knocked the glass over, trying to put it back on the table. She couldn’t tell if the movie across the fence had ended, but the party music thumped on, and eventually she gave in to it and
let the pulsing drive her into a restless sleep, between periods of thinking about Mick and about nothing at all.

At some point she turned the lamp off and, perhaps hours later, realised that the music had stopped and she’d been lying awake listening to its absence. The people in the cluster of terrace homes had settled, but the night didn’t feel peaceful. Something else interfered with the quiet. Through the screen door, filtered moonlight shone off the neighbours’ tin roof and she heard men’s voices, soft and guttural. Her eyes widened to the dark. Was someone on the balcony outside the door? She braced against the possibility, reminding herself that the panelled fences and brick foundation surrounding the courtyard couldn’t be scaled easily. She heard wood creaking, glass chink, a scuffle and a muffled laugh. She couldn’t make out more than a word here and there, but the snickering tone of male banter laced with alcohol was unmistakable. It seemed too intimate, as if whoever was out there was talking about sex, in that low tone that accompanied dirty talk. Their proximity to her was unbearable, but she didn’t dare leave the bed to shut the door and risk drawing attention as it ran over the guide rail. She regretted not answering Mick’s call earlier. She didn’t know what she’d have said to him, but she wouldn’t have minded hearing him say all over again how sorry he was. Then that thought came over her again, the one that was so appalling she couldn’t bear to entertain it. That Mick might be useless to her now. A paper cut-out of a man. Insubstantial.

She thought of the family on the other side of the courtyard. She wanted to be there, asleep in a single bed in the same room with their child, knowing that nearby someone was watching out for her. Her hand came
back under the covers and travelled under her T-shirt, cradling one breast as
Mick often did. She lay as still as she could and willed herself to shut the
men’s voices out completely, but their talk boiled in the air around her. So
too did the fear that had forced her out of Perth—that she might never
forgive Mick, and might never be able to go back home. Her wretched
sobbing drowned out the voices outside the room and inside her head.

With the curtains open, Connie’s eyelids felt the kiss of Sydney morning
light. Her body was ironed out, as if she hadn’t moved for years. When she
did get up, she was drawn to the slab of sunshine spread across the wooden
floor of the balcony. The quiet activity of Saturday morning had begun. A
vacuum cleaner droned in one home, and a washing machine churned in
another. Washing hung on lines, high and low in various backyards. The
wire squeaked next door as it was wound higher, lifting its jam-packed load
of wet clothing on wire hangers. A slender, brown arm reached up to adjust
a shirt that wasn’t hung straight. Three houses away, a woman squatted on
her balcony, filling a pot with soil.

Connie looked over the balustrade to the weedless courtyard below. It
seemed cold and small. But at her elevated position, a gentle breeze blew
down the corridor of back yards, playing with the trees that seemed too
large for the spaces allowed them. A tabby cat tiptoed across a fence two
yards away. Next door, the remnants of the gathering she’d overheard in the
night were visible. A ladder, propped against the wall of the house. Several
empty, brown long-necks scattered over the tin roof. Nothing broken. Her remaining thread of anxiety was instantly diffused by a sheepish nod from a bearded young man who watched her through a window below, where he stood in front of a kitchen sink full of suds and dishes. She nodded back.

Her tongue was thick in her dry mouth. The desperation she’d felt the night before was still at the back of her mind, but had lost its bite. She was comforted by the signs of people looking after their homes. She wanted to be part of it. She gathered up her dirty clothes and pillowslips and the pants off the floor and carried them all to the washing machine in the old toilet.

Thin whines from the boy behind the tree floated down to her. Once the washing was on, she collected all the used cups and filled the sink with hot water, swept crumpled tissues into the bin, straightened the cushions on the couch and carried the pillows back upstairs. She lingered on these household tasks, whiling away the wash cycle. Even with her days of neglect, the work of cleaning up after just herself wasn’t a burden.

She strung the rope between two hooks that protruded from opposite corners of the courtyard. It filled quickly with her pants and tops and she left the underwear aside. Half an hour later, she went back, re-pegging the washing to rotate items in the sun. The constant movement of the steel wire next door began to make sense. Children’s voices engaged in play came from that yard, and the boy in the house behind the tree cried again. Connie remembered how some days, when her girls were little, it seemed like they cried all day long. His mother’s impatient voice carried over the top. Instinctively, Connie looked up into the branches of the tree and the boy
was there again. This time, his eyes were wet. He’d come back, maybe to check if his secret was still there. It didn’t feel right to turn her back on him.

‘Hello.’

Another face appeared behind his, ducking under the branches to find the most open space between the wooden slats. The same blonde hair, dark underneath, that Connie had seen in the park. Though youthful, the woman’s complexion was dull and spotty. She seemed tense as she glanced around the courtyard.

‘Sorry about this,’ she said.

Connie knew she meant the boy.

‘It’s fine. He’s actually very sweet.’

‘Has Stacy moved?’

‘No. She’s away. I’m her mum. Connie.’

‘Cool. I’m Sheree.’ She ruffled the boy’s curls. ‘This is Banjo.’

Connie guessed the woman didn’t remember her from the park, but the boy did, she was sure.

‘Hello, Banjo.’

Sheree hunched behind her son as if wanting to rest. Connie’s work-talk, used to meeting young mothers as she was, kicked in.

‘Is he your only one?’

‘Christ, yeah. One’s enough.’ But as she said this, she brushed her hand over the boy’s head again more gently, perhaps proudly. He fingered a wide, glossy leaf, as though he’d accepted the adult order of things, that Connie wasn’t his special person anymore. Connie sensed it would be rude if she broke away first. Sheree, seeming in no hurry, pointed to the washing line.
'You won’t get much sun ’til afternoon. Do the smalls first and keep the bigger stuff for then.’

‘Thanks for the tip.’ Connie adjusted some pegs to make space for her two bras.

‘Stacy’s lucky, you know, having a yard and that balcony up there.’

‘I’m beginning to realise.’

Sheree jerked her head behind her.

‘This is all we’ve got. Still, it’s something. We knew it would be like this when we came in.’

‘In?’

‘We’re westies.’ Connie’s confusion must have shown because Sheree rephrased it. ‘From western Sydney. Commonly known as the shit-hole of the city. It’s not that bad, but it’s a packed lunch and a snooze away from anything real. Here’s close to everything. Fox Studios is even nearby. Not that I’ve ever seen a celebrity. We don’t get out much, with this little one. Trent prefers to stay home when he’s here—a DVD, a few beers. Still,’ she added, pulling Banjo in tighter, ‘I wanted better for my kid than I’d had.’

‘It’s the opposite in Perth,’ Connie said. ‘The western suburbs, I mean. Top real estate there.’

For a beat, that idea sat with each woman. They smiled and shook their heads. Banjo was bored by the grown-ups’ talk. He wrapped his arms around Sheree’s neck. She hugged him tighter and, ducking her head under a branch to stand up again, said though the leaves: ‘Stacy comes over for coffee sometimes. Just come by, if ever ya want.’
The offer struck Connie with gratitude and terror. Having a cuppa with someone seemed an inviting alternative to staying cooped up in the unit, yet she didn’t know if she could be with someone in that way, with all that had happened hanging about her like the washing, droopy and wet. Banjo struggled to get down. Sheree called out, ‘Here we go again,’ but Connie perceived a sharp edge in her voice as she retreated into the house.

Banjo’s fresh protests merged with other sounds: the washing line creaking up and down and a woman’s voice speaking a language Connie couldn’t understand, so that Connie felt a world away from her side of the wall. A drill bored about two doors down. The smells and sounds of frying fat came from the side where the men had been last night. She felt as close as if she was standing right alongside all these people. Their activity dogged her, even when she went inside and shut the doors, where there was nothing left for her to do. She wondered, for the first time, how she’d last the two more weeks until Stacy returned. A throb started in her right temple and she shut her eyes to focus on it. Banjo’s crying dulled and she imagined Sheree taking the boy deeper into the house, perhaps afraid of how her neighbours might judge her. Then the crying seemed to escalate again. Connie realised it was a siren in the distance. It threatened to trigger a full-blown headache.

She reached for the figurine pieces and rubbed her fingers across the ceramic grains of the cut edges as if her fingers, like sandpaper, could smooth all the roughness away. After a few minutes, she felt less tightly wound. She wondered how it worked in places where people lived crowded together. Maybe you learnt not to think about hanging your underwear within view of your neighbours, or barbecuing your meat metres from
someone else’s kitchen table, or telling off your kids within hearing of everyone around you. Perhaps it was a decision, every time, to make the best of things.

After that morning, as if resigned to it, Connie sat outside more often, reading, or doing nothing at all. Sometimes Banjo watched her, but although she smiled and tried to coax him, he rarely spoke to her. Occasionally Sheree poked her head through the branches and the two women exchanged a few words—Connie commenting on the muggy weather and Sheree telling her to come back in January to find out what humidity really was. Connie didn’t see Sheree’s man again, although she knew he was there every evening, barbecuing meat on the deck while she was inside seeing to her own meal. Sometimes she heard him call out to Sheree, or tell the boy to scoot. One night she dreamt that Mick had this man’s blue, swirling tattoos. They snaked over her body and her legs and arms grew tattoos on them too, and everything was a blur of skin and ink.

Mick called every day, and she always let it ring out, wondering at her daring to test the limits of his patience. But not answering had become habitual. There was no doubt in her mind that what she’d left behind would be waiting for her when she went home. In the meantime, the distance and silence worked gently on the tightly wound feeling inside her. Apart from a few friends who’d easily been put off with an “out-of-town” text, no one else called her. She phoned Emma every few days. Her excuses for why she hadn’t been sightseeing yet sounded lame, but if Emma was worried, she didn’t say. Neither did Emma ask her if she wanted to speak to Mick. But Connie did ask after her mother.
‘How’s Baka?’ And as she listened to Emma’s reply, Connie felt as though her mother was listening in too, and would somehow understand Connie’s silence, and trust she’d get in touch, eventually.

In the shower, she smoothed her hands across her belly and was prepared to believe that yes, she did feel less there. She wasn’t eating much and somehow, possibly to avoid the fears that plagued her waking hours, when she went to bed at night she slept deeply. She felt lighter than she had in years. It was a promising thought, and she dared to hope that it might continue. Sometimes she let slip into her mind the image of facing Mick this way—straighter and slimmer. But then she’d stop, sparing herself the next thoughts: would he notice? Would he care? Still, it gave her the impetus to get out of the unit more often—never far, but enough to get a sense of the neighbourhood. She knew the convenience store, the tiny black Irish-style pub crammed onto one corner, and the trendy café on the next with a cluster of mismatched chairs on the sloping footpath. She went across the park to the shops, and sometimes sat for a while on the way back. She came to recognise individual sounds in the traffic—trains pulling in and out of Central Station a few blocks away, buses changing gears, the zippy motors of cars designed for city driving. The multi-storied buildings still seemed unyielding, even with the sky above blue and shining with hope. She knew that the harbour would be lovely to see—the scalloped water, the coat-hanger bridge and the white Opera House sails.

Then, one day, while sitting in the park, her phone rang and, dazzled by the sun shining through the leaves of the plane trees, she found herself reaching through the fog that came over her at such times. Her fingers
hesitated, then tapped clumsily over the screen. *I’m okay. But I need more time.* She sent it. Seconds later his reply chimed. *Whatever you say, sweetheart. But come home to me.* And with that she believed she’d nursed a thread that wouldn’t break completely, a lifeline that might guide her home when she needed it.

Towards the end of her second week, having returned from walking all the way to Centennial Park and back, Connie lay on the couch reading a PD James novel she’d found in the unit. The glass door stood open and sounds floated towards her on the breeze, forcing her attention from the page. Sheree’s voice rose commandingly, and Banjo’s stubbornly shouted back, *No!* Then a squeal, so loud it could’ve been right outside the door, forced Connie onto her feet and out the door. In strained pleading, Sheree cried:

‘Give it to me. *Now!*’

The branches rustled. From the foot of the wall Connie saw Banjo pressed against the tree, his cheek stinging red, his arms gripping something large and blue. Sheree’s footsteps sounded close. His face screwed tightly.

‘Mine!’ he said.

‘It’s *not* yours, you little …!’

Banjo pressed against the wooden panels. The grubby tip of his sandshoe appeared over the ledge. Connie’s fingers reached upwards and pressed onto the canvas upper, feeling for his toes. She tried to appear unhurried.

‘Look how strong you are, holding that.’ Banjo’s lips twitched and he looked shyly from her to the object he held. A large curl dropped across his eye. She wanted to see what he’d do next, but Sheree let out a long,
impatient sigh. So Connie added, quicker than she’d have liked, ‘Give it back to mummy, hey? And show me how big your muscles are.’

He pursed his lips and looked from his mother to Connie and clutched the object tighter. Connie worried about thorns. Sheree lunged forward and for a second there was a flurry of arms and leaves.

The drop couldn’t have been more than a couple of feet from Banjo’s arms. A thud and crack and over the top of the foundation, something toppled past Connie. Sheree cried out, ‘You bloody shit of a kid!’

The tree sprang away from the fence as Banjo leapt from his mother’s reach and ran inside. Connie heard a muffled sob, then the torn knee of Sheree’s jeans appeared where Banjo’s shoe had just been as she bent to scrape up whatever had broken. Connie picked up the chunk that had fallen at her feet—crockery that was white on the inside and blue on the outer. She pushed it under the base of the tree.

‘Here’s one.’

Sheree looked through the gap, her face strained, her lips taut.

‘Ta.’

Connie sensed the sob held deep inside Sheree’s throat and felt the young mother’s hopelessness as keenly as if it was her own.

‘In big pieces, or dust?’

Sheree looked blankly at Connie, who tried again.

‘I’ve got some glue. Is it fixable?’

‘It might be. I suppose.’
Sheree’s house had been renovated. The walls were cream, though scuffed in parts. The light-coloured floorboards gleamed the length of the long hallway from the front door. Dust collected near the walls. The back of the house was open-plan, with a living room and a modern kitchen that looked a bit IKEA-ish, with a rack over the sink for dishes and white cubed shelves on the wall. In the living room were two white couches, the fabric grubby, a white lacquered coffee table between them. The pieces of the broken vase lay on it, alongside a scattering of magazines and a packet of cigarettes. Connie fished the glue out of her pocket and dropped it there too. The room was light and airy, but to Connie it seemed cheap and fast. She’d noticed this in Perth, flipping through the new homes lift-out in the Saturday paper, how new home buyers were promised everything at once: a particular and complete look. It wasn’t like that when she and Mick bought their house. You accepted, then, that homes took time to make. Bit by bit, with time and money, so that one room didn’t necessarily match another by the time you’d finished them all.

Banjo scooted around the room on his plastic motorcycle, eyeing Connie carefully, maybe unsure of her loyalties now. Sheree leaned over the sink to fill the kettle, causing her bum and the top of a red tattooed rose to lift slightly out of her jeans. Connie looked from the couches to the kitchen table, unsure where to sit. Sheree waved her hands towards the room-width bi-folding glass doors that framed an oiled sunlit deck. There was the lemon tree growing out of a wide planter box, its branches winding outwards from the trunk like an exotic dancer, and the shiny silver barbecue glinting in the sun. Connie went straight to the tree and saw that it wasn’t easy to get close
to it like Banjo did. Apprehensive about thorns, she poked her head carefully between the branches to see Stacy’s courtyard below. It looked further down than she’d expected and from up there, in the full sun, it appeared a darkened pit.

‘It’s pretty out here,’ she said as she turned around, almost bumping Sheree, who’d slipped out of the house with two steaming mugs with teabag tags hanging from them.

‘It’s a start.’ Sheree pulled in her chin as she looked around the little space, as if to check her pride.

Connie’s hands closed around her mug. For a second, she admired Sheree’s youthfulness, in spite of the tiredness that showed. Yet even with the age difference between them, the lines forming on her own face and the grey strands in her hair, the extra flesh around her middle and the blouse she wore to cover it, she felt a connection with Sheree. The memory of long hours in the house, just watching, waiting to be needed. Children underfoot, the blessed relief of adult company and the comforting ritual of making tea. But when she thought of her daughter’s career-driven ambitions and unhurried attitude to marriage and family, she wondered what brought Stacy to Sheree’s place.

Banjo rolled through the doors, parking himself between the two women. There was no talk, and for a moment it was just the sun and the tea, and the clamminess that was already spreading underneath Connie’s clothes. Sheree seemed to weigh something up, how much to share with this new neighbour, perhaps. Connie let the silence be, and eventually Sheree broke it.
‘We’re up to our necks a bit.’ She rubbed her finger around the top of the mug. ‘It stretched us, getting this place. Which is why Trent’s working away.’

‘Mining?’

‘Yup. WA. You can’t beat the money in it.’

Connie had heard this many times. At drop-off time, the school mums often looked worn out, but there was a strained quality to the FIFO-widows that set them apart from other women. She could spot the changes in the children too, the weeks dad was home or away. It seemed a hard way to get ahead. But they’d talk up the money and how quickly they were going to pay the house off. Some couples got side-tracked with bigger televisions and new cars and holidays in Asia, and never understood why they weren’t getting ahead. Then the two years they’d agreed to do this became three, and then four. Marriages sometimes caved in under the pressures. She wondered how Sheree, Banjo and Trent managed and felt an unexpected desire to protect this small family somehow.

‘WA’s a long way from here. He must be gone for a while.’

‘Four weeks. He left a few days ago. It’s always hard at first, ya know?’

Connie wasn’t sure she did. When the girls were little, Mick would leave early in the morning, especially in summer, like all labourers. But he’d come in the back door at five. He’d shower in the laundry and they’d sit down as a family for tea. He’d help bath the girls, lifting their small bodies tenderly out of the water with his coarse hands. He’d kiss them goodnight and then he and Connie would watch TV together, going over their days. When she thought of it now, it seemed it was mostly her doing the talking.
Would Mick have preferred to watch the show in quiet, working his way through his tinnies? He let her speak anyway, and she hungrily bent his ear. He *had* been there for her. It seemed to her now, standing beside Sheree, that Trent’s long absences were onerous exchanges for a small house and pretty deck close to the city. And yet an ache, still too deep to ease, tugged inside her, its pull reaching the corners of her mouth.

Banjo rolled backwards, looking over his shoulder at his wheels as they slid past Connie’s shoe. She realised she’d missed most of what Sheree had told her about the house. But she caught her placing her hand on Banjo’s fine hair, and saying in a conciliatory tone: ‘That vase wasn’t so special, really.’

‘Are you sure? I brought the glue.’

‘Just something cheap from Spotlight. I could get another one if I wanted to.’

Things weren’t always so easily replaced, Connie knew. Even unextraordinary things. Their price didn’t always equate with their value.

Surprised by the warmth she felt towards this girl who wasn’t her own daughter, Connie resisted the urge to touch her arm. In her mind formed the thought: *it’s going to be Emma I’ll stand with like this one day*. The idea spread like wings inside her.

Speaking into her cup, almost shyly, Sheree said, ‘Thanks for coming over. It helps to pass the time when Trent’s away.’

Is that what Stacy did? Keep this young woman company?

Connie had been on her own now for the longest time in her life. A month ago she’d have said she couldn’t have done it. And though nothing
had been resolved yet, she was less repulsed, she had to admit, by the
prospect of talking it through.

Perhaps unsure how to read Connie’s silence, Sheree ventured again.
‘If there’s anything I can do for you while you’re here, just let me
know.’

A simple idea came immediately to Connie’s mind, as if she had been
waiting for just such an offer.

It was another bright morning with a postcard sky and a mild sticky heat.
Sheree walked with long strides and Connie, alongside the stroller, was
pleased to find she could keep up. That she wasn’t forced to confront the
high-rises was another surprise. Sheree led her in a different direction, down
a quiet avenue of jacarandas that were in full bloom. Petals carpeted the
road, concealing the curbing. The stroller wheels ambled over their
sponginess. Banjo hung over the side watching them.

At the bottom of the street, Sheree left the footpath and carried on up a
steep, grassy slope. The climb caused Connie to puff, but Sheree leant into
the gradient and pushed the stroller upwards. At the top, shady rows of
Moreton Bay Figs stretched their branches across the road. The temperature
dropped under the trees and Connie would have happily stayed where she
was after the steep climb. How right these trees seem here, she thought. But
Sheree pushed the stroller along to where a small crowd gathered. She tried
to get Banjo to see the possum hiding high in its branches. He strained in the
opposite direction towards a tourist bus that drove slowly by.
When they set off again, he lay against the stroller’s backrest, one finger in his mouth, accepting the limited view allowed him under the shade cover. It was unusual to see him so content. They passed the art gallery. With pillars at its entrance, it appeared a more imposing building than the Perth gallery, the only comparison Connie could make. Where the road forked in two, Sheree took the downhill path. As they sank deeper, the vegetation became wilder and scrubbier. Water showed between the bushes, and Connie’s initial impression was a disappointing hotch-potch of jetties and boats. The view cleared to expose a narrow, scalloped body of grey water, oil tankers and warships docked on its far side. It could have been Fremantle.

Maybe the whole outing was going to be a letdown, but at least the openness of the water in front of her was welcome after so long in the tight confines of Stacy’s neighbourhood. The air prickled with birdsong. Slabs of rock, covered in moss, poked out of the earth. Tufts of spiky grass sprouted in between. A blue, balled-up sleeping bag hid in one clump. On a rock next to it was a pair of boots. They reached a public swimming pool that jutted from the bank into the channel. Connie peeked through a window to the poolside and wondered at swimming laps in such close proximity to ocean-going ships.

Soon the path disappeared sharply around a point where the narrow channel they’d followed joined a vast expanse of open water. Water lapped over rocks, tossing a weedy, putrid smell into the air. Yachts sailed past a small island fortress in the middle of the harbour. As they walked out from the protective bank, the wind blew straight into their faces. Connie felt
chilled, as much by the anticipation of what she’d find around the corner as
by the sudden force of air. Rounding the bend, behind stately fig trees, the
bridge crept into view, startlingly light in the distance. The sight of it settled
over Connie like a soft blanket, calming rather than surprising her. She
hurried ahead of the stroller until she could see the whole of the bridge.

Like a steel rainbow, it arched across the harbour to the other side, and
disappeared behind the Opera House. A green and gold ferry moved over
the water in front of it like a toy tugboat, its bow lifting, pushing white spray
to either side. The road across the bridge crawled with tiny vehicles. The
House was bigger than she’d expected, a giant flower with vanilla-coloured
petals. Behind it clumped the CBD, that imposing mass of buildings that
had daunted Connie. At this distance, she felt quite safe from it. The entire
scene was perfect. Everything that came to her to describe it had been said
by others, but what she felt inside couldn’t be articulated. She didn’t want to
try. It wasn’t words that usually came to her when she felt deeply about
something. It was pictures, and colours, and shapes. *What I’d give for some
paper.*

‘Beautiful,’ she said, when she heard Sheree behind her.

‘I guess it is.’

Tourists snapped photos. Banjo struggled against his seatbelt, calling,
‘Out, mummy.’ When Sheree unbuckled the straps, he slid off the seat and
fell onto the grass, laughing, then sprung up and raced around in circles.
Sheree pulled her phone out of her back pocket, checked it, thumbed the
screen rapidly.
Connie squinted against the light dazzling off the water, but the rest of her body felt as if it was expanding. She wanted to sit on the grass and look at the view for a very long time, and watch the stream of people walk around the park into the Botanic Gardens, but she couldn’t presume such a luxury while Sheree and Banjo were with her. When she looked away her chest constricted again, like shutting an overfilled suitcase.

‘There’s something else I wanna show you,’ Sheree said.

Checking that Banjo kept up with her, she lifted the empty stroller over the grass to where people stood in front of a medium-sized rock face. Connie felt Banjo grasp the bottom of her shirt. She took his hand for the first time and felt his warmth. They were as keen as each other to see what everyone was looking at. A broad, stone bench had been carved out of the sandstone rock. People took turns having their photograph taken on it. The seat was grey and smooth from many bodies pressing against it over the years, Connie guessed. The upward-facing surfaces behind it were lightly mossed, and engraved with a dedication in large, blackened writing. As Connie read it, Sheree leant in and whispered, ‘Mrs. Macquarie’s chair. Her old man, the governor, had it made for her, two hundred years ago or something.’

_The work of a man’s hands_, thought Connie. She didn’t need to hear or see any more to understand the sentiment of the gift. How some men showed their love. Even when they stuffed other things up, their handiwork was built to last. Imagining Mick out here alone, chiselling the rock himself, stirred a tender resignation in her that was, in a small way, a relief from the deep hatred she’d felt for the past three weeks.
Banjo let go of Connie’s hand and leant against his mother. She hoisted him onto her hip and he struggled to get down again immediately. As soon as he was free, he scooted between their legs and Sheree ran after him.

‘Come ’ere you little bugger!’

It was suddenly too much for Connie, sharing all this with Sheree who was, in the end, a stranger. She wanted to talk to someone who’d indulge her, about the harbour and the bridge and so many other things. She took hold of the stroller and, slipping behind the tourists, waited for Sheree, not envying her having to attend to a small child’s needs. Maybe she’d come back here with Stacy before she left Sydney, or brave the city route on her own.

Banjo wiped his tired eyes and helped himself into his seat. Sheree kissed him on the forehead before taking the handle.

‘Oh. I meant to return the glue you left at my place.’

Connie fell in beside the stroller.

‘That’s okay. I don’t need it.’

In recent days, while clearing and getting the house ready for Stacy’s return, it had dawned on Connie that just because the porcelain lady had endured all those years wasn’t reason enough to preserve it now, that even glued back together she would never be the same. She went ahead while Sheree lifted the stroller back on to the path. The view from the point had aroused feelings that needed to be purged. Her days here were drawing to an end. She wasn’t the same person who’d arrived three weeks earlier. That frightened, bitter, tightly wound woman. On the banks of the harbour, she didn’t feel hard at all, just profoundly sad. Still, there suddenly seemed a lot
to do. She wanted the unit to look lovely for Stacy, and to replenish the fridge and pantry cupboard. There were other matters to deal with before she left Sydney, which would involve conversations with her school principal, with Emma and her mother. The idea of cranking herself up again, after being shut-down for so long, stirred mixed feelings inside her. Yet she’d resigned herself to the inevitable. She’d call Mick, too. She didn’t have her phone with her now. It would be on the table in Stacy’s unit where she’d left it.
Stacy clenched toast and Vegemite between her teeth, pulled her hair back into a ponytail and stooped to refresh her Facebook page. She kept clear of the glass doors as she manoeuvred around the tiny kitchen. She could hear Banjo, the little boy who lived in the terrace house behind hers, already out playing on the deck overlooking her courtyard. If he saw her he’d call her to play with him, which she’d tolerate on any other morning. But nothing was going to prevent her from beating Rupin into the office today. She’d just enough time to run through her news feed.

She’d been in Sydney for almost two years, yet she still craved regular contact with Perth. Of her four hundred or so Facebook friends, it was her old school and university mates’ posts she scanned for. Josh had held a party on Saturday night. He’d posted photos of people dressed in gothi
gear. The Curtin girls had been clubbing in Northbridge. Teagan boasted about being so pissed she’d puked into Izzy’s handbag in the taxi on the way home. Stacy typed: gross grrl!! She scrolled past the posts of local contacts. There were pages of work-related organisations and businesses that she’d liked, so she could keep tabs on their latest news. But the bond she felt with most people she’d met through PR networks here were less personal and her responses to their feeds more restrained: a like, a smiley face, sometimes a frown.

Her last bite of toast dropped crumbs onto the keyboard and as she brushed them off, the page refreshed. A string of posts appeared from her
younger sister, Emma: random shares and status updates. That meant she’d been awake in the early hours, Perth time, which didn’t alarm Stacy. Communication, in any form, meant Emma was feeling up. During her down periods, she could go quiet for several days. There was also a post from Connie Ward. Her mum had taken some convincing to try Facebook in the first place. Stacy hoped it would alleviate her loneliness following her separation from Stacy’s father seven months ago. To Stacy’s relief, Connie’s increased Facebook activity suggested she was enjoying social networking, and her phone calls to Stacy, which at one point happened several times a day, had dropped down to only one. Today, Connie had liked a picture Emma had shared: a photo of a gorilla, with a glossy, snarling face, nursing a snow-white kitten. The caption read: *Keep your f#%*ing paws off!* To encourage both Connie and Emma, Stacy liked the picture too.

She checked the time on the bottom of the screen. She needed to get going but couldn’t shut down without checking one page in particular, as she’d found herself doing often these days. Unlike many older people she knew, this man had a long list of friends. Two hundred and four. Not being one of them, Stacy couldn’t see his news feed, but she enjoyed looking at his cover photo. Unlike the professional head and shoulders picture of him on Linkedin, this one was more personal, outdoors somewhere, with his two small boys leaning over his shoulders. It was intimate, fatherly. His grey eyes drew Stacy closer to the screen until the kids blurred out of sight, as did the woman’s hand which extended inwards from the edge of the photo. Stacy moved the cursor over his *add friend* button and left it there, her
finger above the track pad. But she couldn’t bring herself to press it. She shut the computer down.

She buttoned her navy jacket and flicked crumbs off the collar of her pale blue shirt. She readjusted her black tights and skirt. A bit of powder on her cheeks and a swipe of eyeliner under her eyes.

Hers was a quiet, shady street of terraced houses, but once she crossed the small park at the end of the road, she was engulfed in an oily brew of petrol fumes, cigarette smoke and cooked breakfasts, and the visual kaleidoscope of signage, rubber, steel and glass on throbbing Oxford Street. More people passed its faded shopfronts and graffitied walls in one day than she’d have seen in a year in the uninspiring maze of brick-and-tile houses set back from the road in the northern Perth suburb where she’d grown up.

She walked fast in her flat shoes, past a designer clothing store, bookshop, massage parlour, strip club, and Gloria Jean’s. She was more relaxed, now, about the seediness of these inner city streets, although at times it still rattled her. Like the sign above the service window of a corner bottle shop that read: *Lick her here.* When she’d first spotted it, several weeks ago, she’d frozen. Appalled, she’d looked around for affirmation from other passers-by. But the only person who’d appeared to notice her unease was the man behind the counter. Old, balding, with olive skin and thick, grey eyebrows, he’d grinned at her through grubby teeth. Now, she lowered her eyes as she neared the corner, and didn’t look around again properly until she’d crossed the intersection into Hyde Park. Leafless branches laced across a grey, cloud-swept sky. Wind whipped her calves,
lifting small, dry leaves into the air. One hooked on her jacket, and, a
second later, loosened and twirled away.

At the traffic lights, she skipped across Elizabeth Street and nudged her
way between pedestrians up the few remaining blocks, steeling herself to
the delectable smells of fresh pastries and the Asian lunch bars displaying
bain-maries already loaded with stir-fry. Crossing an intersection, she
passed under the Monorail and through revolving glass doors into the pink
marble-tiled foyer of the office building which housed Bloom and Penny on
the fifth floor.

The office was still in darkness. She moved from room to room, turning
on lights and opening thin, grey Venetian blinds. At her desk, she pulled the
blind up and checked the street below, alert to the grind of a cornering
carriage as it shuddered along the track into view. She’d heard talk that the
Monorail, which was as old as she was, might be dismantled in the near
future. Just like her parents’ marriage, its purpose now deemed redundant.
She’d miss its comforting tremble signalling fifteen-minute slots in her
working day. She shivered—although it wasn’t cold inside—and let the
blind drop. She couldn’t drag her parents’ mess up today, when so much
was riding on how she performed this week. Cathy, the senior consultant,
was on her honeymoon, and that meant responsibilities that wouldn’t
ordinarily be handed to juniors might well be given to Stacy and Rupin.

Stacy had experience. Her first job after uni had been with a small
children’s charity in Perth, and after eighteen months she’d been ready for a
greater challenge. She applied for several jobs at home and interstate, but
hadn’t expected to land one straight away. When Ros Penny called to offer
her this job in Sydney, Stacy had been unable to control her excitement as she gushed her thanks into the phone. Then everything happened quickly. Moving out of home to Sydney had been easier than she’d thought it would be. At first, the pace in the bigger city excited her. She’d lie awake at night, mulling over clients’ names, projects and new ideas. But at some point, things had slowed. She’d wondered if she’d just grown used to everything, learnt to keep on top of things. Or had she gone as far as she could, coming up against a wall that wasn’t going to yield in the foreseeable future?

And then, three months ago, Rupin joined the team. Their new “acquisition”, in Jeremy Bloom’s words. Much was made by the directors of the Monash graduate’s first-class Honours degree, particularly by Jeremy, who seemed to relish having another man in the office. Someone to talk to about rugby; an ally in a field of women. Melanie made a fuss about his trendy, tight-fitting suits, dusky cinnamon skin, rich brown eyes and long eyelashes. She said he was like a Bollywood movie star. Within days, he was on easy terms with everyone. Leaning over Melanie’s desk at reception, he’d share a joke that would have them both giggling in a way that Stacy felt excluded her. It had taken her months to feel truly comfortable with the directors and seniors, and though she was friendly to Melanie, she couldn’t let go of a suspicion that the younger intern judged her to be wanting. Was it her shabbier clothes, perhaps? Her uninspiring social life? Bewildered, Stacy normally tried to ignore it. But Rupin’s arrival had reignited something inside her, a flicker of ambition she’d allowed to dim. She wanted to remind Ros and Jeremy, and herself, that she hadn’t yet shown them all she was capable of.
Within twenty minutes, the others arrived and gathered for the work-in-progress meeting. They sat on the deep, soft-cushioned couches in an open space at the heart of the office. A large, rectangular glass-topped table in the centre held a vase of cream silk irises, a few hard copies of Bloom and Penny’s latest newsletter, and wooden coasters carrying miniature prints of abstract art. Everyone settled and waited for Ros to bring up items on her laptop.

Ros’s surname, Penny, conjured a daintiness that was at odds with Stacy’s impression of her boss. Stacy thought she might be as old as sixty, though she always looked smart. Her hair, which had been allowed to grey, was cut in a neat, asymmetrical bob. She wore pantsuits and low-heeled court shoes, bright beads and big, colourful earrings, like the red and gold hoops she wore today. Her make-up seemed just right for a woman her age, hiding all the blemishes without being too obvious.

Ros’s husband was a retired academic. He didn’t accompany Ros to any functions, and Stacy had never met him, but she imagined him as old and stuffy. They had a son working in finance in New York, but Stacy had trouble recognising anything motherly in Ros. Nothing soft or compromising, unlike her own mum who seemed to yield at the slightest touch. Ros had a way of looking at Stacy which made her uncomfortable sometimes. Her small, hazel eyes would dart to Stacy unexpectedly, as though wanting something from her. If Stacy had to name it, she’d have said sisterly solidarity, perhaps? Something old-fashioned like that.

Stacy felt awkward around Jeremy for different reasons. More than a decade younger than Ros—his dark hair only grey at the temples—he was
more casual with the team than his partner, but Stacy knew that he had his finger on the pulse of things just as much. Like Ros, he’d worked as a journalist before a long stint as a speech-writer for a state politician. It was politics that he and Ros had in common, and why they’d formed a partnership. But where as Ros’s intensity made Stacy brace herself sometimes, Jeremy’s easy manner left her floundering on the sidelines of a tighter circle that seemed to knit Jeremy, Melanie, sometimes Cathy, and now Rupin together.

Appearing to embrace that circle now, Jeremy—in a dark grey suit and peach, open-neck shirt—sank into the cushions and stretched his arms along the top of the couch. Across the table he winked at Stacy, with the same grey eyes she’d stared at on her lap-top screen that morning. She cringed at the memory of checking him out online. But it had become a habit she couldn’t shake. Not a crush exactly. A search for something else, though she wasn’t sure what.

If anyone was to see through her it would be Melanie, who was often free with the details of her own latest crushes, and savvier, Stacy thought, than anyone else in the office gave her credit for. So Stacy avoided eye contact with her when the whole team was together like this. Dressed in a short, light skirt and black, long-sleeve top, Melanie sat beside Jeremy. An inch closer to the edge of the couch and she’d fall off. Her heels were so high they thrust her thighs upwards and the notebook she’d type the minutes into teetered on her bony kneecaps. Her blue-painted fingernails pecked like tiny birds across the keyboard. Her blond-streaked hair fell frequently in front of her face, and she tossed her head back to clear her view.
Ros opened the meeting, speaking quickly to no one in particular. She expected people to be listening and they usually were. Rupin’s hand swept across his iPad. Jeremy rolled his head from side to side as if easing a crick in his neck. His arm disappeared behind Melanie. Melanie stopped typing and Stacy knew she’d missed something.

‘Are you following?’ Ros said.

Stacy tried to recall Ros’s item—something about a nursing home—but Rupin took the cue.

‘This is the incident where a guy in an old people’s home was throttled by another resident, right? The attack bruised him badly, didn’t it?’

‘Unfortunately for our client, Southside Homes, yes,’ said Jeremy. ‘And the police were involved.’

‘But no charges were laid,’ Ros added. ‘The perpetrator is quite demented. Nevertheless, the press picked it up, and Southside’s CEO, Mark Collard, called me last night.’

‘Cathy would have a media strategy worked out with him, wouldn’t she?’ asked Jeremy.

‘She does. But Mark’s got an interview on community radio tomorrow morning and he wants our help.’

Rupin jumped in with restrained eagerness.

‘I’ll give it a go.’

‘Thanks, Rupin. But this one’s for Stacy.’

Stacy didn’t miss the pass this time. This was exactly the kind of opportunity she’d hoped Cathy’s absence would create.

‘Of course. A research brief?’
‘That’s right. This is damage control, so we have to go all out with the best story we can about Southside Homes.’

‘Local, community-focused …’ Stacy began, but Rupin cut across her.

‘Dementia care’s the core issue, isn’t it? The increase in psychosis cases in aged care, and lack of specialised nursing training to deal with it.’

Stacy appealed directly to Ros.

‘Federal budget?’

‘Good points, both of you. Stacy, check recent press releases, the allocation to aged care, and where the money’s going. Also, the looming baby-boomer crisis, and what Aged and Community Services have to say about it. But we mainly want to push Southside’s “unique” approach.’

‘Euthanasia?’ Jeremy quipped. Rupin guffawed and Melanie exaggeratedly groaned and shook her head. Jeremy turned his palms upward and shrugged. Ros let the laughter run its course before continuing.

‘Gardens. And involving residents in their design and care. Southside have been working on this for some time, through all four homes. Cathy’s done a bit on this, so I’ll email her folder to you Stacy—some background stuff—see what you can do with it.’

‘Right. When does he want it by?’

‘Mark should have it by close of business today. But I want to see it by four. I’ve a meeting this afternoon. I’ll come back here to proof and send it before I go home. And Stacy, they’re not our biggest client, but Cathy is very committed to them.’

‘I get it. Thanks, Ros.’
Ros moved onto other portfolios and tasks were allocated. She kept discussion tight and brought the meeting to a close. The thrill of new challenges and ideas rose in Stacy as she stood to leave. But Ros announced over the chatter of the dispersing group: ‘I nearly forgot. The annual Women in Business Cancer-Care Breakfast is tomorrow. Cathy’s ticket’s available. Gillard’s the invited speaker. Stacy? Are you free?’ Then, as if an after-thought: ‘Or you, Melanie?’

Stacy’s heart skipped at the mention of the prime minister’s name, thrilled by the prospect of hearing one of her idols in person. But in the same moment, Rupin tapped her on the shoulder.

‘I’m happy to help with the report … I did some work with a nursing home on placement.’

Before she could respond to either of them, Stacy felt a tweak behind her knee. Twisting to look, she caught Jeremy pulling a dried leaf from her tights and Ros narrowing her eyes at them both. Stacy pulled her leg away. A thread of nylon snapped.

‘Oops,’ said Jeremy. He ground the leaf between his fingers and caught the crumbs in his palm.

Stacy bent to rub her calf, as though it was sore. The look in Ros’s eyes troubled her, but by now Ros was addressing Melanie.

‘You’ll meet some useful contacts Mel, so bring your address book. And the food’s good too.’

Being pestered by Rupin, distracted by Jeremy and pipped by Melanie was too much for Stacy. To be caught off-guard a second time was inexcusable, and not at all how she’d imagined the week starting out.
Horrified at the teary sensation that threatened, she tried to hide it by tidying the newsletters and coasters on the table. Ros went to her office, Melanie to reception. Rupin followed Jeremy down the hall. The Rabbitohs had won their game at the weekend, and the two men talked over each other, recounting players’ tactics. Still fuming, Stacy tried to settle at her own desk, determined to reconnect with her resolve to make an impression this week, in spite of a heaviness in the pit of her stomach.

Within minutes Cathy’s files arrived in her inbox via Ros: existing publicity material for Southside Homes, a media release about the previous year’s open day, and a PDF from the US on a pilot landscape project designed to engage Alzheimer’s sufferers.

Stacy had to communicate the cutting-edge practices implemented in Southside’s homes, snippets that Mark Collard would try to get on air. Allowing for the radio presenter’s introduction and summary at each end of the segment, Mark would be lucky to get three or four points across. Those points had to be just right.

Stacy dipped in and out of Southside’s website. On the home page, a slide-show of photographs changed behind the organisation’s logo. The pictures of silver-haired men and women, all white-skinned, some with nurses by their sides, were taken outdoors in sunlight near plants and flowers. Every person was smiling, as though a joke had been shared. In one, an old man in a wheelchair was positioned near a raised garden bed, with a small spade across his lap.

The brightness of the graphics made Stacy uneasy, as though the light was actually hiding something. It occurred to her that this might be her life
one day, but the reality seemed too far away to take seriously. She couldn’t
even visualise her parents being as old as these people. Her father, whom
she hadn’t spoken to in months, seemed to be growing perversely younger.
He’d started all over again, living with a woman Stacy had never met. It was
Emma who’d called Stacy late one night, many months ago, to tell her that
their father’s girlfriend was pregnant. They’d both wept into their phones,
having calculated that the baby must have been conceived before their
parents’ split. It was due any day. Stacy hadn’t been able to call her father,
not just from loyalty to her mother, but because there seemed no clear
pathway back to the man she knew. He seemed absent to her now; a stranger
had taken his place.

Her feelings towards her mum were clearer, although she wasn’t exactly
proud of them. She couldn’t help but wonder what her father had looked for
in someone else, or if there was a mysterious failing on her mother’s part
that had eventually turned him away. And she’d been told, so often, how
like her mother she was. Their features were alike, their temperament the
same. But there were things about her mother that Stacy didn’t like. A
passivity, a way of missing what was going on around her sometimes. If she
thought about it too much, Stacy worried that she might be flawed in a
similar way. That’s what the pictures of the old people brought to mind.
Imperfection. Decay. But she couldn’t allow such fears to bring her down.
She delved deeper into the documents at hand to keep troubling thoughts at
bay.

Ros checked Stacy’s progress before she left in the early afternoon. She
suggested looking at another nursing chain’s annual report to help her set
Southside apart. After Ros left, Stacy wished Jeremy would pass by her desk too. He stayed in his office, only coming out twice to give instructions to Melanie. By mid-afternoon she was close to finishing, but also starving. It wouldn’t hurt to get away from the desk for a while.

The Japanese tearoom on the street below had only a few containers of sushi left. She bought a combo pack, which she ate as she walked down the crowded footpath. The wind had settled, but afternoon shadows cast a cool gloom over the street. Even with the car fumes and dust, the air seemed fresher outside, but Stacy grew uneasy about her work left on her open computer, with Rupin nearby. She binned the plastic box with the last piece of sushi still in it.

Rupin walked out of Ros’s office as Stacy came past reception, wearing a look of unhurried complacency, hands in his pockets, one shiny black, pointed shoe stepping smartly ahead of the other. Melanie was right. Rupin was good looking. But Stacy couldn’t get past a caginess she detected in him, something in the way his eyes flicked about the room when he spoke.

‘I wondered where you’d gone,’ he said, uneasily. ‘I found something you may be interested in. A local government report. It’s there if you want it.’

‘On Ros’s desk?’

‘Check your inbox.’ Clicking the fingers of both hands, almost nervously, he slid onto his seat and pushed the ear buds from an iPod into his ears.

The document was there. She reasoned that collaboration was the crux of their business, but Rupin’s interference jarred with her. She scanned it and
noted smugly that it didn’t add anything to what she’d already found. She was sure she’d nailed the brief. It was clean, clear, punchy. She checked the time. Three forty-five. She emailed it to Ros.

She felt elated and looked around, half-expecting to see the others cheering on. But Rupin was involved with his own work. His head jerked from side to side in time with music only he could hear. Jeremy leant over the reception desk again, his back towards Stacy, hiding Melanie from view. She thought about joining them, but he pulled away from the desk, throwing a line behind him that only Melanie heard, responding with a tiny squeal. Even while hating that kind of girlishness, Stacy felt a pang of envy that Melanie could switch between that and the serious, hard-working, ambitious persona that had grabbed the opportunity offered by Ros that morning.

Jeremy stopped as he passed Stacy’s desk.

‘How d’you go with Southside?’

‘Done. I just sent it to Ros.’

‘Good girl.’ He swung around and stepped backwards a few paces, pointing his index fingers towards her like pistols. ‘That’s my star.’

Stacy blushed, sensing that Jeremy’s praise lacked something. Outside his office door, he turned again, hitting his hand to his forehead.

‘I meant to tell you. Ros said she may be late, and not to wait for her if she isn’t here by five.’

Stacy’s anticipation of Ros’s praise faltered and didn’t lift again as the hour passed and Ros didn’t show. It wasn’t unusual for the work day to merge into evening when there was an after-hours event to attend. But as far
as she knew, Ros had nothing like that scheduled today. Jeremy came out of his office with his briefcase at five fifteen.

‘Get outta here,’ he told them all, with a grandiose wave. With most of the websites still open and files to save and send to Cathy’s email, it took Stacy longer to shut down. Jeremy left, with Melanie on his heels, but Rupin waited for Stacy. In spite of herself, she was grateful. She was also impatient to catch up with the others, but as she and Rupin left the building, a sharp wind blew past, making her hesitate. In that brief second, she saw Jeremy and Melanie disappear into the alley-way to the underground car park. She knew that Rupin had seen them too. Neither said anything about it, but their goodbye had the stiffness of an awkward parting. They walked in opposite directions, Stacy grasping her handbag to her chest. Her phone rang and she yanked it from the bag. It was her mother. Not bloody now. She switched it to silent, braced herself against the whipping breeze, and headed home.

The image of Melanie slipping behind the brick wall with Jeremy stayed with Stacy. She’d stepped up and met a challenge today, and felt robbed of attention that should have been hers. Sullenly, she only managed a toasted sandwich for her tea. She wiped the sandwich press and put it away, and afterwards, sat on the couch picking at her toe-nails, half-watching the muted TV, and listening to her new Boy and Bear CD. She drank two passionfruit Vodka Cruisers, and let her mind wander with the music. Her laptop, open on the couch beside her, pinged whenever a Facebook notification came in. She intermittently commented on posts and chatted
with friends, but her own modest post about meeting a deadline at work hadn’t grabbed more than a couple of likes. And without Ros’s feedback to mull over, her sense of accomplishment soon waned.

Ordinarily, when she felt lonely like this, she’d phone her neighbour, who was better than no company at all. If Banjo had gone to bed, she’d offer to take some kind of drink over. They’d mix their own cocktails and stay up late talking. But Sheree’s husband was home from the mines this week. Apart from not wanting to intrude, Stacy didn’t have a lot of time for Trent. She thought he was a dick.

It would still be early in Perth. She tried to call Emma a couple of times, but her sister didn’t answer. If Stacy wasn’t careful to turn her phone off when she went to bed, Emma would wake her up in the early hours of the morning calling her back. Their mother would be at home, preparing her own tea. Stacy should call her back, after all. But if she turned to her mum now, feeling like she did, she’d have no right to push Connie back when she sought her out for sympathy, company. And Stacy was trying to avoid that.

She opened a third Cruiser instead, let the fizzy liquid pool in her mouth until it flattened and warmed. When it was finished, she rubbed her hands over her face and eyes until her skin tingled. She updated her status—off to bed my homeslices xx 😊. Yawning and scanning for any final, juicy titbits, she saw a post from Rupin: gotta love the rabbitohs. Having no interest in rugby, she would have scrolled past it, but the first name in an oppressive string of comments caught her eye: Jeremy Bloom. A panicky feeling rose inside her, the sense of being left behind. How long had he and Rupin been Facebook friends? She clicked on Jeremy’s thumbnail and when his page
loaded, clicked his friends list. Scanning it quickly, she found it. Melanie’s name too, and the sight of her familiar thumbnail picture, half obscured in darkness, sent a jolt through Stacy. This time she didn’t hesitate. She pounded on the track pad, sending the cursor across the screen to the add friend button, which she clicked as soon as it got there.

Stacy sat on the edge of the bed in her underwear and black tights—her knees touching—holding her shoes in her hands. She’d slept badly, and at one point had lain awake for a long time thinking less about work and more about her parents. She’d dwelled on how her mother must be feeling with the baby so close now, and cried both for her mother’s suffering and for her own longing to meet her new sibling. To feel like a family again.

Her shoes felt heavy in her hands; the soles thick. It may have been the tiredness that felt almost bitter, but it seemed to her that her shoes, along with everything else about her, had failed. How were they helping her impress her bosses? What could she learn from Melanie who, at that moment, was drinking the coffee and chatting up the contacts that should have been Stacy’s? Disgusted, she tossed the shoes back into the bottom of her wardrobe and took out the highest-heeled pair she had—black with tiny bows at the toe. She yanked the thick tights off and stepped into the shoes. Kicking her dressing gown out of the way of the mirror, she assessed herself in the glass. Her stomach formed a stubborn, annoying bulge. Her breasts
were small unglamorous bumps in her beige bra. She craved to feel lighter, fresher, to own that particular brand of ease that girls like Melanie had.

She pushed her usual work shirts to one side of her wardrobe and fished out a pretty, cream blouse that she rarely wore. She left the top two buttons undone, though the blazer drew the blouse opening closer anyway. She tried not to worry about the time and took longer than usual with her make-up, applying foundation and lipstick, though she lost her nerve when she saw how bright it was and dabbed it with a tissue to lighten it. Instead of tying her hair back, she pushed it forward, parted it with her fingers and ruffled it back again. It was boring brown, not blond, but in that moment, it crowned a figure in the mirror who she hoped looked more self-assured.

The morning was still, blue and cold, and without the tights, goose bumps popped over her skin. She tried to walk fast to warm up, but the heels made it difficult. Still, she reached the office early again, in time to stream the Southside interview through her computer.

It took all of six and a half minutes, but Mark Collard got in the points she’d highlighted for him. Stacy clenched her fist triumphantly, willing her success to boost her mood. Maybe she could hope that a senior position would be offered to her one day. But another uneasiness persisted. She checked her emails and logged into Facebook. The notification of Jeremy’s acceptance was waiting for her. Her rash action, which had also weighed on her mind throughout the night, was irrevocable and she felt exposed, as if the new shoes and the prettier blouse were all there was to her. Still, there was nothing she could do now but get stuck into the work piled in her inbox.
If Rupin noticed anything different about her when he arrived, it didn’t show. He seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts. Strangely, Stacy couldn’t muster the ill-feelings towards him that had dogged her for weeks. She had more than two years’ experience on him, after all, and her inability to hold on to that said more about her, she knew, than him.

Jeremy arrived and called a meeting. When Stacy sat down, her legs, propped up by the heels, felt alien to her, but she couldn’t position them any differently. She was self-conscious about the friend request too, as though it swelled in the space between them. But Jeremy’s face didn’t reveal any sign that it was of consequence to him. Rupin, however, was unusually quiet. He sat back and bit the nail of one finger. Stacy hadn’t noticed him doing that before.

‘Ros and Melanie are at the charity breakfast,’ Jeremy reminded them.

‘I don’t expect them back for another hour or so.’

‘Just the three of us,’ Rupin said, lifting one eyebrow. Then, almost bitterly, ‘How cosy.’

‘And Mark’s interview went really well this morning,’ Jeremy continued. ‘Nod to Stacy for that.’

This was more like it, almost a relief. How grateful Stacy felt towards Jeremy at that moment.

As was customary, they ran through the interview, trying to guess at possible conclusions, favourable and otherwise, which different listeners might have drawn from it. Rupin thawed as the discussion continued, contributing, Stacy admitted to herself, perceptive observations. The day’s tasks were allocated, all carry-over work.
After Jeremy disappeared into his office and she and Rupin returned to their own desks, Stacy found that every attempt to focus on her work faltered. After the Southside job and Jeremy’s approval, the tasks in front of her weren’t interesting enough to penetrate the stupor from her sleepless night. And she wasn’t ready to let the previous job go, either. Without Ros to discuss it with, she wondered if she could prod anything more out of Jeremy, some idea of other opportunities she might reasonably expect. She leafed through her in-tray for something plausible to seek his advice on, and pulled out the draft of a publicity brochure she had to edit.

She stopped at his open office door. The extra inches of heel altered her view of the room.

‘Jeremy, can you spare a minute to check this copy?’

He fell back in his chair and spread his arms across the desk. His eyes wandered from her head to her toes.

‘You look very nice today, Stacy.’

‘Oh.’ No more suitable reply came to her, but her stomach fluttered uneasily. She patted the collar of her blouse, instinctively closing the opening. She approached the desk and held the leaflet out to Jeremy. He tapped the space beside him.

‘Here might be easier.’

She edged around so they were both facing the door. Her heart thumped at being so close to Jeremy, although standing next to him, she felt too tall in the heels. She buckled her knees and accidentally pushed a framed photo out of place on the desk. A man, woman and two children, in white T-shirts and jeans, in front of a dappled grey back-drop. In the second it took her to
register that this was Jeremy’s family, she allowed herself to imagine it could have been hers. She pointed to the text.

‘Here, and here. I’m not sure about the grammar.’

‘That’s not usually a problem for you, is it?’

‘Sometimes. I don’t know this stuff, like you and Ros do.’

He took to it with a pencil, striking a couple of words out, inserting another.

‘You can’t leave this sentence like that,’ he said.

She wanted to ask why, but the question caught in her throat. Jeremy talked about clauses and active voice, but his hand had begun doing something that seemed at odds with his words, so that what he said became lost on her. It was possible that he was just drawing her closer, like a father would, and she hadn’t felt that from anyone in a very long time. It seemed childish not to yield to it. But what had started as a solid, firm pressure behind her knee, travelled upwards, reaching under her skirt. Stacy began to panic. She realised that she should have pulled back at his first touch, but now wasn’t sure she could, if it would be polite. Her chest grew tighter, her breathing more rapid. Feeling very small, she fought back tears. Her face burned. She lowered it; her hair fell further to the front. The fingers of one hand curled around the edge of the paper, folding the corner into a triangle. The other clutchet the back of her skirt. His hand continued proprietorially, while he talked about split infinitives. His voice was steady, as though attempting to calm her, but his breath had a raspy edge to it that Stacy hadn’t heard before. This wasn’t anything like she’d imagined being with Jeremy would be.
Then someone coughed, breaking the tension. The hand on the back of her thigh stopped. Its fingers touched hers through the fabric of her skirt.

Shaking, Stacy raised her eyes to see Rupin in the doorway, his face anguished. She imagined the three of them from a distance, a tableau. That Rupin didn’t look away, that Jeremy’s hand didn’t recede, repulsed her. Her eyes shut tightly to block them both out. She was transported to the crowded intersection on Oxford Street, under the bottle shop sign. Her father walked towards her with a striking woman on his arm. They passed without acknowledging her. Then her mother flashed in her mind, looking up from watering her pot plants, and the horror on her face made Stacy feel dirty. She pictured Jeremy’s hand on her leg as gnarled and wasted, like the old people’s on the Southside website, and it was ugly to her.

When she opened her eyes, she stared pleadingly at Rupin. He returned a suffering look, and understanding thudded inside her constricted chest. She saw now that these past months she’d been looking at Rupin from all the wrong angles, and missed something vital. The way he’d seek Jeremy out, initiate conversations with him and appear eager for his opinions. The fragile desperation she saw in him now was so raw it accentuated her own helplessness.

In barely a whisper, he stammered, ‘I … I just needed, I just wanted …’

The pressure on her leg lightened to a sickeningly friendly rub, and Jeremy’s hand reappeared on the table. Stacy felt cold, and began to shake again.

‘Just give us a minute, will you mate?’ Jeremy said coolly.

Stacy backed around the desk, leaving the copy where it was.
‘It’s fine. I’m done. Thank you, Jeremy.’

‘Stacy!’ He sounded flustered at last. And his eyes had a look of panic in them. ‘Hang on.’

She squeezed between Rupin and the door, not daring to look up as she passed. She was going to throw up. Swaying unsteadily on her heels, she gripped her belly and rushed out to the landing. She was still pressing the elevator button when it opened and Melanie and Ros stepped out. Ros looked tired but pleased, and Melanie babbled enthusiastically.

‘That was awesome, Ros. Personally, I could take or leave the PM, but the women at our table—fantastic!’

Stepping aside to let them pass, Stacy felt her legs wobble. She closed her eyes. Melanie reached out to support her.

‘Are you okay?’

Ros edged between them. When Stacy didn’t respond, she nodded to Melanie to go inside.

‘Those blokes won’t even have thought to turn the answering machine off without you there.’ At Melanie’s hesitation, Ros added more firmly, ‘We’ll talk later. Right now, I need you to go.’

Opening her eyes, Stacy caught Melanie’s raised eyebrow as she turned away. When the elevator began to close, she pushed the button to stop it.

‘Whoa,’ said Ros. ‘Wait a bit.’

Stacy pressed her palms into the cool solidness of the wall behind her. The tears she’d held back now flowed. Ros looked at her closely, taking in her shoes and her loose hair. She appeared concerned. She glanced to the office doors and back again. Tentatively, and more gently than Stacy would
have thought possible, she pushed the hair back from Stacy’s face. Stacy flinched.

‘What happened?’ Ros asked.

Stacy froze.

‘Were … were you happy with the research paper?’ She sniffed.

‘I was. Eventually.’

Stacy wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

‘Was there something wrong with it? I thought the interview went well.’

‘It wasn’t attached, Stacy.’

Ros’s words seemed surreal. Stacy struggled to take them in.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘My meeting went later than expected, so I tried to access the brief on the laptop. Your email was there, but not the attachment. I called straight away, but you’d already left.’

‘Oh my god, Ros. I was here until after five, I promise … I’m sorry …’

‘It’s okay. I came back and got it off your computer. I arranged to meet Mark at the Palace, and after a couple of drinks—my shout, of course—he was pretty happy. We went through the points you’d put together. It was good work.’ Ros pressed for the elevator to come back up. ‘But we need to talk.’

‘I just feel a little funny today. I don’t know why.’

‘I think you do, Stacy.’ And then, with more urgency. ‘And I need you to tell me.’

Stacy shook her head from side to side.

‘I can’t. I can’t.’
Ros held up her hands, placatingly.

‘Alright. Maybe now isn’t the right time. But I don’t want you to come back.’

A guttural cry escaped from Stacy. Unsure if Ros meant the stuffed-up email, or what had passed between her and Jeremy—*but how could she possibly know*?—or both, she cried:

‘Please, Ros. It won’t happen again.’

Ros pressed Stacy’s hands between her own and ducked to catch her eye.

‘Stacy,’ she said, ‘I mean, not today.’ As if struggling to maintain her composure too, she added, ‘But listen. The woman I want back in this office tomorrow morning is the one who works her butt off like no one else. The one Cathy and I have our eyes on.’

Stacy tried to take in what Ros was saying. She nodded.

‘There are a lot of pricks out there, even in our game. But you can’t let them drag you off course. I’m watching, Stacy. And I’ll listen, when you’re ready to talk.’

Sure now that Ros knew something, Stacy sobbed again. Ros held the elevator door and Stacy backed inside, grateful for the warmth of the panelled interior.

Ros’s final words, as she’d let go of the door, replayed in Stacy’s mind several times as she walked dumbly home, under the shadow of the Monorail, through town, across Hyde Park and along Oxford Street, past the bottle shop sign—where she stopped to glare into the face of the man behind the counter.
There are going to be changes at Bloom and Penny. Things Cathy and I have spoken about.

Her feet ached in the stupid, bowed shoes. And she was so tired. She couldn’t let herself think about what Ros meant right now. But when she reached her unit and pushed her key into the front door, she was startled by the sight of her own hand. Her skin was smooth and unlined. Not a wrinkle, not a blemish.
She’d been shuffling around in there for a couple of hours and still had nothing to show for it. But the night terrors had homed in on her just before midnight and by four in the morning, after several fitful hours dozing and waking, she’d grimaced back at the dark, thinking, you’re not giving in, are you? She was going to regret it later, she knew. Looking at the photos in years to come, there she’d be, eyes sagging like slices of canned peach. The sky had paled to a baby-wool yellow and honeyeaters chatted from grevilleas growing outside the wall, yet inside, Connie felt trapped under the studio’s fluorescent light.

Studio. How pretentious that sounded. Certainly not something she’d say around the arts centre where she’d been taking classes for the past twelve months. It took nerve showing up each week, cringing at seeing her own story mirrored in the other middle-aged women who had recently discovered their inner artist or poet.

Clearing the last of her ex-husband’s things out of the workshop had been her daughter, Stacy’s idea. When had that begun? That she’d started obeying her children? At Stacy’s insistence, she’d hired a tradesman to remove the fittings that once held Mick’s carpentry tools and paraphernalia. She’d had the cement floor tiled in terracotta squares and the ceiling and walls Gyprocked and painted white to create a bright room. Yet the studio
hadn’t remained pristine for long, quickly becoming a reflection of a
dreamy, playful and untidy side of her that she delighted in. Not the neat,
colour-to-the-edges kind of person she’d been all the years she’d worked as
an education assistant. Nor the organised, fold-the-washing-at-the-line sort
of mother who’d raised her two girls. Or the punctual, never-miss-a-week
daughter who visited her mother every Sunday afternoon. The studio was a
mess. Brushes of many shapes and sizes, tubes of gouache, pastel stick
stubs, rags, jars of blackened water, drawing and painting books.

Now, next to the art materials, was strewn memorabilia, turfed out of
plastic and cardboard storage boxes. Some trinkets, notebooks, letters and
postcards were decades old. It was no wonder she couldn’t find the one
thing she’d left her bed for. Her mind had played tricks throughout the
night, stalling her search at the sight of the simplest thing: a colour sample,
the beginnings of a collage, a scribbled note. The sight of a few thin pencil
lines on an A4 piece of paper had forced her to dwell on old memories for
half an hour.

Her shoulders drooped under the disappointment of having let herself
tire. Her lower back throbbed in its usual spot and her temples felt warm,
signs of an imminent headache. The pursuit of this one nostalgic indulgence
had robbed her of her senses. She could see now how stupid she’d been,
how easily distracted by Mick’s visit the night before. She’d instinctively
kept their meeting secret. She hadn’t been honest with William. With his
easy kindness, William was the first man she’d responded to since Mick.
And yet she’d fobbed him off, telling him that she wanted to spend the
evening alone. She’d encouraged the girls to leave earlier than planned too,
for their final sisterly fling—cocktails and tapas in Fremantle; a night-walk along the beach—vigorously insistent that she didn’t mind being left behind. She’d spent an absurd hour getting ready to be seen by Mick, trying for just the right look, to show him she’d not languished since his departure. In truth, the settlement following their divorce, and the redundancy payment she’d taken from the Education Department, were both dwindling, and she still hadn’t figured out what kind of a job could replace her work as an education assistant. Yet there were other distractions more appealing than thinking about the need to retrain or upskill. Such as the glossy Jackson’s Drawing Supplies catalogue under the materials and books in front of her, and the very long receipt of her last purchases there.

She pressed her palms against her cheeks, releasing a long, loud sigh. What a waste of time. She lifted the sleeves of her kimono out of the way and drew the flotsam of her life into piles in front of her. She’d have to sort them back into their storage boxes another time. She trod between stacks of variously-sized canvasses, held the wooden door open for a moment, scanning the shelves for a missed hiding place, before turning off the light and closing the door regretfully behind her.

In the house on the other side of the dewy lawn, her girls slept. It moved Connie to know they were both under her roof again, however briefly and regardless of the fact that by this evening they’d never be her girls in quite the same way again. Stacy had flown in from Sydney only two days before. Emma, seeing her older sister in the house again, had decided to sleep over too, leaving Leo alone at their shared community house in the hills. Connie thought it a beautiful idea. She’d fussed over the spare beds—smoothing
quilts and fluffing old pillows, cooking favourite dishes that went uneaten, and walking around in a quiet daze, hardly believing her luck. She hoped they slept deeply and securely now.

She was relieved that they’d not crossed paths with their father last night, too. When they’d fallen through the front door around ten-thirty, arms round each other, Connie had been sitting rigid and alone on the couch, staring into a darkened room. Emma had murmured, *a bit glum*, and slapped her hand at the light switch, throwing light on the tension that Connie had struggled to conceal by forcing a smile and opening her arms to her girls.

They’d remained together for a long while, Emma stretched across the couch with her head on her mother’s lap. Her feet, released from their Doc Martens, rested in Stacy’s hands as she sat at the other end. Connie brushed her fingers lightly over Emma’s deep-red cropped hair. Silver and ruby studs in Emma’s ears and a diamante in her nose gleamed. Her face glowed too.

The three of them reminisced over the past, shared family memories and talked about love. They skirted around the edges of the most painful times. Yet Emma cried. Not uncomfortable sobs, but gentle tears at the awkward, troubled teenager she’d once been. Stacy quivered on the verge of tears too, but as was her way, she repressed them, and massaged her sister’s toes tenderly. Stacy was a career woman, in a new PR firm now, and at times she intimidated Connie. But here at home, with her long brown hair tied back and a thin gold chain her only jewellery, Connie saw she was just the same old Stacy.
Connie knew that Stacy carried her own wounds from all the attention Emma had sucked from the family over the years with her depressive episodes and sensitivity. It had taken love to strengthen Emma, a different kind of love to that which Connie, Mick and Stacy had for her. Enough love, at least, to have emboldened her to create a life of her own. Stacy, on the other hand, with none of Emma’s obvious limitations, was still single. Connie’s relationship with her firstborn made it difficult to discuss such matters directly, but she hoped that Stacy would one day know the joy of that kind of intimacy, too.

Connie dipped lower into the couch and embraced Emma’s head and shoulders as her daughter cried. She whispered, *it’s alright*, while smiling her love at Stacy, too. Emma’s tears flowed over her mother’s hands. She replied, in a stilted whisper, that she didn’t *regret* the past, she *mourned* it. She was afraid that everything was about to change, forever. Connie stroked Emma’s wide, smooth forehead and assured her, as brightly as she could, that life didn’t work that way. But inside she knew that was a bare-faced lie, that marriage invoked ruptures and formed new bridges in unexpected ways. Connie hadn’t understood that when she married Mick when she was barely twenty years of age and three months pregnant. Her mother had overseen the ceremony in the church with a gaze that Connie had assumed was fierce disapproval. She wondered now if it had been grief for lost hopes for her daughter.

These memories played in Connie’s mind again as she stood in the kitchen’s dawning light. The tick of the clock in the entrance rattled her. Except for two used wine glasses on the sink, the kitchen and benchtops
were bare, cleared of all personal household items, in readiness for the
caterers later in the day. She felt numb from the effort that had produced
such tidiness and perfection from one end of the house to the other. In the
fog that came with lack of sleep, she couldn’t muster anything like that
energy now. And yet she knew this had to be a perfect day. It was vital that
she show both the girls that when it really mattered, they could count on her,
especially after all they’d been through in recent years with their parents’
break-up and divorce—her daughters, she was ashamed to remember,
rallying to help her. All the more distressing, now, to feel captive to a whole
new set of troubling feelings aroused by seeing Mick the night before.

Connie rinsed the wine glasses, put them back in the overhead cupboard
and wiped over the sink again, removing every drop of water. She checked
the bin had been emptied, saw the fresh plastic liner in there and closed the
lid on it. It occurred to her that there’d be breakfast yet, a new mess made to
clear away. She wondered if eating would be worth it. Not wanting to make
too much noise while the girls slept, she wondered what exactly to do next.

She’d felt uncertain of herself like this the night before too, opening the
door to Mick for the first time in twelve months. Having settled on a new
pair of jeans, a white blouse open at the neck and long red beads that
dangled between her breasts, she decided the effect was flattering for a
woman her age. The way Mick’s eyes darted over her, she concluded that
she was right. He appeared no different at all. Dressed as he always had
when not working—a clean, short-sleeve shirt and the same Big W brand of
blue jeans. If anything, he was a little stockier. His hair still short, though
greyer. He looked neat—shy. He followed her to the kitchen and waited to
be invited to sit at the table he’d crafted himself from salvaged pine. She
glimpsed him appreciating his work, running his palms along the expertly
rounded edge. She made him coffee. They asked questions of each other
politely and offered simple details of their lives, easing into conversation,
attempting new grooves, their old familiar ones now scratched beyond
repair.

He wanted to go over final details for the wedding. There wasn’t much
to say, with everything already done, and not a lot that directly involved
him. But Connie understood his need to know. Emma and Leo had
announced, at the outset, that they would walk together between their guests
to the marriage celebrant, united as one, before and after. Mick hadn’t made
a fuss of the eradication of his “giving away” role. Connie wondered if he
ever would comment on his daughters’ lives again, or whether he felt he’d
forfeited that right. But he’d contributed more, financially, than she’d asked
him to. Not that she expected him to be tight, but he had other expenses
now. Remembering that, and sensing him trying to do the right thing, she
tried to be gracious, and worked to suppress a festering distrust that she felt
in his presence now. She reminded herself that he, of all people, knew
Emma as well as she did; had suffered alongside her through Emma’s most
difficult times. It was only fair that he was assured, too, how well their
daughter was at the moment.

‘You know our girl,’ she’d said, feeling absurdly shy at the intimacy this
suggested. ‘She insisted on doing it all herself.’
Connie told him how the venue for the ceremony had been booked well in advance, the caterers contracted—the owners of the organic cafe where Leo worked—and the buffet menu finalised.

‘It’s a little out there,’ Connie warned Mick. ‘Vegetarian paella, vegan salads and bio-dynamic breads. Oh, and …’ she paused for effect, lifting her coffee with both hands, ‘a raw … chocolate … wedding cake.’

Mick gave a long, low whistle as he shook his head. But then Connie explained how she’d met Emma during her lunch break at the native plant nursery where she worked. The café Leo worked at was adjacent, and Emma had introduced her mother to the chef, a muscular, tattooed woman. They’d sampled the cake together. It had been rich and gooey, smothered in white icing, and, Connie assured Mick, fantastic.

Since getting off the plane, Stacy had worked like a dynamo too. Connie took Mick out the back to show him what Stacy had done. She switched on the patio lights and it transformed enchantingly, with strings of fairy lights and red paper lanterns hanging from the beams. Mick went up close to see how the lights were attached, looked wistfully at the secure ties, and said, ‘You should’ve called me. I’d have done that.’

Guilt, anger and old grievances shot momentarily through Connie. Of course, she should have invited him to help. It ripped her, too, to see him look out of place in their home, like he didn’t belong. But that wasn’t her fault. She shrugged off her pity, hid her warming face. She didn’t mention that William had helped with the most difficult tasks, using the ladder to reach the highest beams, showing Stacy how to use the drill.
When Mick slid the door open to let Connie back into the house, she was aware of being closer to him, physically, than she’d been in years, and she felt the poignancy of it. She suggested opening a bottle of wine for old time’s sake. He readily accepted.

She brought out a bottle of Jacob’s Creek Shiraz, which had always been a standby for them, and he opened it while she got the glasses. The bottle rested on the table, breathing between them.

‘I have to tell you about the dress,’ she said, though it nearly undid her. ‘You can guess that Emma was never going to do it the traditional way,’ she added, catching a sob in her throat.

Mick supported himself on both arms, and looked away, as if respecting her privacy. Connie noted how the hair below his wrists curled tightly. She wondered if it still did the same in that space between his shoulder blades. She poured the wine, and recounted the day Emma had brought her wedding dress back from an op-shop. She’d been scouring for weeks, refusing Connie’s offers to visit boutiques together, insistent that she wouldn’t find what she was looking for in those kinds of places. She’d made Connie sit down, then tremulously lifted a re-used plastic Jeans West bag to the table. Connie told Mick that she’d been afraid of what might come out of it. Mick shut one eye, wincing.

‘C’mon. Out with it.’

‘Actually, Mick, it’s incredible.’

Connie saw the dress on Emma as she described it. Vanilla-coloured, lacy, elegant. Short—just above Emma’s knees—and full and flowing, with a rounded neckline and long, loose sleeves in transparent fabric. She didn’t
need to explain to Mick what the sleeves would disguise. Emma’s scars, though faded now, nevertheless bore witness to a different time in her life that they all preferred not to dwell on.

‘You’ll cry when you see her in it. She looks like an angel.’

‘She is an angel,’ Mick blurted out, stopping his mouth with his fist, his eyes shut tight.

That image of Mick’s face disappeared. Connie was back in the kitchen, in the early morning, immobile yet wired. Was the lack of sleep muddling her brain? Or had the rest of Mick’s visit played out as she recalled? And was it guilt she felt again, as she thought of seeing William today, their relationship still so new and tentative? She crossed and uncrossed her arms, spread them along the kitchen counter and leant forward. Her kimono fell open.

‘No,’ she said aloud.

Her marriage had been her most important relationship for more than half her life. How she negotiated its aftermath was no one’s business but hers. She wouldn’t accept that it was guilt that nudged her. It had to be something else. She squinted, trying to bring into the clearest possible focus those last moments with Mick.

The wedding talk exhausted, the bottle empty, Connie had expected him to leave. But he lingered; she didn’t know why. His fingers tapped the tabletop. She sensed his knee shaking underneath. To end the silence, she returned to the girls, using her only trump card to hold him longer, while hating herself for wanting to. Then he slid his hand across the table until his thumb touched hers. She didn’t retract—although she knew it was foolish
not too. A feeling of terrible waste settled over her. Their eyes followed the
delicate play of their fingers until, like a gasp, Connie broke first. Pulling
her hand back, patting the table, she declared they’d both better get some
sleep. She had thought that was it. But at the door between the ordinary
suburban home they’d created together and the dark, moonless street
outside, he moved closer and she offered him her cheek. Instead, he clasped
the back of her neck and kissed her lips. It was familiar, even kind and
companionable. It didn’t last long. Connie tried to move tenderly when she
drew his hand away. Their fingers stayed together until he stepped onto the
porch, seeming reluctant to let her go.

After he’d gone, Connie could only move slowly. She changed into her
nightie, put on her kimono, brushed her teeth. She went from room to room
turning off lights. She sat on the couch in the darkness. When the girls came
home from their evening out, she did her best to listen to their stories and
comfort Emma. Eventually she packed them off to bed and tried to sleep
herself. She dozed fretfully until she recognised an idea that had formed in
her mind. The image that begged notice. The small frailty of its presence.
She sensed she wouldn’t sleep until she found it, understood what it had to
show her. It was the worst time of all for this to come back to her. Maybe a
woman like her had no choice about such things.

A breeze lazily lifted sand off the deserted beach, which had a soft glow
at that time of day. Behind it, plantings of native grey grasses separated the
beach from green lawn. A high limestone retaining wall supported the car park. Limestone steps descended from there into a concrete circle in the lawn on which the guests gathered. Not many suits and ties, Connie noticed. Emma and Leo’s friends weren’t the black tie sort of crowd. Loose pants, even shorts; printed short-sleeve shirts and brightly coloured caftans. A few beards, the odd hat, plenty of dark sunglasses. Just as well. Squinting into the sun, low over the boat harbour to the north, Connie could tell that glare was going to be a problem. But this was how Emma wanted it. That she and Leo’s exchange of vows be witnessed by the setting sun, their transformation from single to wedded couple alongside the transition from day to night. And then a party, with plenty of food and lots of dancing, at her childhood home.

Connie hadn’t felt certain when Emma shared her plans with her, but as she stood facing the sea now, she was reassured that the evening would unfold as Emma visualized it. If everyone arrived on time, she thought, noting the sun had already dropped closer to the furthest point of the sea wall beside the harbour. The wedding celebrant, in a flowing blue and green dress that seemed perfect for a beach wedding, appeared at ease in the casual location. She’d set up a portable microphone and speaker system at the top of the circle so that the couple would have the sea as their back-drop. Beside it, she thumbed the pages of a black display book on a metal music stand, clipping a peg to hold the book open.

Connie had dosed up on strong coffee throughout the day. Her skin crawled with caffeine now. But at least she’d been able to stay on top of things. She’d helped the caterers carry plates and dishes from their van, to
where Stacy had cleared space under the patio for the caterer’s large *paellera*. She’d fielded last minute phone calls from people checking details, offering assistance—on the *wedding day*?—and a few regretful apologies. She’d even managed twenty minutes lying on her bed while Stacy and Emma closed themselves in their bedroom to work on Emma’s hair and make-up. For just a while, no one seemed to need her, but the worry about missing something important, or the caffeine coursing in her veins, or the muffled sounds of the girls giggling and running back and forth to the bathroom, had kept her only on the brink of sleep. Every so often, too, her mind wandered to the studio where the remnants of her night-time excavation lay. Earlier, she’d snatched a few moments to look in other parts of the house: storage boxes under her bed, in the linen cupboard and the spare room. But what she’d found were mostly the girls’ things, not her own.

At last, late afternoon arrived, and the heightened excitement in the house injected Connie with little bursts of energy for the final preparations. She’d found her outfit in an inexpensive boutique at the Westfield shopping centre: a beige linen pantsuit with white trim at the collar and cuffs, cream buttons down the long shirt, and wide openings at the ankles. Ideal for this time of year, especially with the warm March they were having. Connie had finally accepted that she’d never be truly slim, but she felt easier about that these days. When she’d tried on the suit in the shop, twisting sideways in the cramped cubicle, she’d wondered what William would think when he saw her in it. Now, as she waited at the beach with her hands clasped behind her back, drawing a wide circle on the ground with her cream sandal, she
was annoyed to discover that her mind dwelled on the impression she might make on Mick, too.

Where was everyone? The girls, Leo and his best man Harry, were expected any minute. Harry had been running a rag over the bonnet of his Suzuki mini jeep when Connie left the house an hour ago. But the others? Had she been wise to trust Sebastian, for instance? She’d been overjoyed when he said he’d come back to Perth for the wedding, and that she was to leave their mother to him the whole time he was here. She’d seen it as some indication that he understood the impact of his absence, bar brief visits every couple of years, for nearly three decades. And recognition that he’d given to his younger sister, without consultation, the lifelong role of faithful daughter. So far, he’d kept his promise. In the four days since he’d arrived, Connie had heard from her mother only once. But where were Seb and Rita now?

And William. Had Connie pushed things too quickly? When he’d opened the wedding invitation he’d appeared pleased, but cautious as well.

‘Are you sure?’ he’d asked. ‘Don’t you want to enjoy this family day without me to bother about?’

His intuitive concern was one of the things Connie found so refreshing. It encouraged a marvellous sense of security.

‘You’re the only person in my life that I feel absolutely no need to worry about,’ she’d said. ‘I can’t tell you what a relief that is.’

Connie didn’t feel as free now. Her stomach knotted, and not from exhaustion alone. Her eyes scanned the thickening crowd without alighting on any one person, and swept back to the glimmering horizon, where the sea
sparkled in a million places. It was so enticing on the surface, its strange wonders so very different below.

And then, a voice that instantly filled her with warmth and despair called back her attention. Making her way down the steps was her mother, loudly instructing her son, in her resilient Croatian accent, on the necessary way to support her weakened hip on the stairs. Seb, large like their mother and looking every bit the Melbourne businessman in stone-coloured chinos and a striped shirt, shifted his attention from her elbow to her shoulder to her back, whilst also managing her handbag and a fold-out chair. Connie met them at the base of the steps. Rita’s outfit revealed the status she accorded the non-church wedding. She wore long black synthetic pants, a pink blouse, and an open black zip-up jacket. Connie had never matched up to her mother, physically and in other ways, but Rita had become smaller with age. In these years, at last, Connie felt the two of them growing more alike. When they were close enough, Rita bent forward. Connie offered her mother each cheek in turn, winking at Seb as Rita’s kisses landed softly on them.

‘I won’t last in this cold,’ Rita muttered. ‘Still, you wouldn’t have a church.’ She lifted her chin towards the celebrant.

‘It wasn’t up to me, mum.’ *Here we go again,* Connie thought as she helped her mother to the front. Rita would’ve imagined a white wedding officiated by Father Abimbola, her Nigerian parish priest. Rita adored him because he visited her often and sometimes said the rosary with her. Connie would hear it for sure, now or during the reception, her mother’s old tirade that Connie had deprived her daughters of their rightful Catholic heritage.
Seb seemed typically unaware of the potential minefield. Having opened Rita’s chair and situated it right in front of the celebrant, he’d moved to the back of the crowd, taken out his mobile and carried on a conversation until Connie’s glare caught his eye. He hurriedly ended the call, pocketed his phone, and rejoined them.

‘Just taking care of business,’ he laughed. Then he too kissed Connie.

‘But I’m all yours now. And yours, mum. How’re you feeling, sis?’

‘Oh, you know. Mixed. Wonderful.’

Connie wished, now, she’d asked Emma to let her arrive with the wedding party. To not be the one in situ as each guest arrived, succumbing to her usual feelings of responsibility when she wanted to experience this occasion unconstrained.

William appeared in the car park. He strode easily down the steps, in light grey pants and an open-neck shirt, one hand in his pocket, hair neatly trimmed. As he neared, Connie was surprised, all over again, at the novelty of a tall, thin lover, appealing in a very different way to Mick’s hardened labourer’s body. Lightly embracing William, pulling away before he kissed her, Connie sensed the absence of excited fancy that usually lit her when she saw him. He must have noticed it too. But he went behind her and extended a hand to Seb, and then Rita.

‘You must be Connie’s mum. I’m very pleased to meet you.’

Rita glanced at Connie, pursed her lips, and smiled sweetly at William. His dues paid, he edged against Connie again.
‘You look absolutely beautiful,’ he whispered. His proximity exposed her in a way she wasn’t sure she felt ready for. When he took her hand, she wormed it out of his and he looked confused.

‘It’s been a long day,’ she tried, by way of explanation, then exclaimed, ‘Where the bloody hell is he? Emma’s father, I mean.’

As William’s eyes wandered over the crowd, Leo’s parents appeared suddenly in front of Connie, and she had a role to perform: introductions, pleasantries. The two mothers showed each other the tissues they’d tucked into their bags.

Excitement bubbled through the crowd and hands flew to shield eyes as they looked towards the car park where the blue jeep, bedecked in white ribbons, had just entered. Leo waved madly out of the car window. Connie’s hand went to her throat to catch the sob that leapt inside. She couldn’t have articulated what it meant to her that Emma had Leo.

All four of the wedding party spilled out of the jeep at once. Leo and Harry in mismatched ensembles of light-coloured pants, waistcoats and jackets they’d put together from op-shop finds and loans from friends. Leo rushed to Emma’s side and exaggeratedly bowed, causing their friends to whoop with delight, then led her to the top of the steps. Stacy appeared at Emma’s other side, taking Harry’s offered arm. She wore an aqua mini dress with matching slippers. A few white rose buds peeked out of her hair, complementing the crown of buds on Emma’s head. She handed Emma her bouquet—long strands of ivy and more white roses, which set off the lace dress perfectly. Connie guessed how much it meant to Rita that her skilful
gardening was on show today, adorning her granddaughters. She put her hand on her mother’s shoulder and squeezed.

‘The flowers are gorgeous, mum.’

Rita patted Connie’s hand and nodded silently.

A second later and the couple would have begun their procession. Instead, a shiny black SUV wheeled off West Coast Drive, audibly hit a kerb coming into the car park, and swung into a bay beside the jeep.

Connie’s heart pounded with the memory of a body behind hers as she entered the house last night, a hand reaching across the table, a questionable kiss. But she was profoundly relieved that Mick was not going to miss this moment.

Leo and the girls stepped back and watched, along with everyone below, the SUV’s front doors fling open simultaneously. Mick, an awkward-looking figure in formal black, jumped out of the driver’s seat and disappeared behind the rear door. Stacy left the wedding party to offer a hand to the passenger in the front. Having released his son from his car-seat, Mick set the boy down and went round the car to take over from Stacy. A familiar sensation churned inside Connie as she watched Mick help his wife out of the car—feet first, and then her swollen belly. In a black, above-the-knee maternity dress, her thick dark hair loose around her shoulders, Rosie looked as glamorous as she had in Connie’s nightmares. And so young too: closer in age to her adult step-daughters, than to her husband. Mick cocked his arm for her, but Rosie steadied herself, fluffed her hair and walked ahead of him.
Catching up, Mick shook his head apologetically at Emma before awkwardly pulling her towards him. But Emma impatiently waved him down the stairs. Rosie moved unhurriedly down, one step at a time. Mick kept a hand on her back, and tried to pick up Benjamin. The boy squirmed out of his father’s reach.

‘No, no, no,’ he cried.

One of the guests gallantly rushed to the steps and offered his hand to Rosie, who let herself be led to a chair set apart at the front, on the opposite side of the circle to Connie. Rita leant her forearms onto her knees—spread wide apart—looked across the circle at Rosie, and grunted. When Rosie caught Connie’s eye and they acknowledged one another, Connie felt relieved. There was nothing to stall the ceremony now. Whatever had passed between her and Mick last night, Connie reasoned, must be sidelined now.

The four young people regrouped at the top of the stairs; the wedding celebrant stepped into place at the head of the circle. Emma nodded to her friend, Candice, who waited with an iPod dock in her hands, its speakers cradled in the palms of two men either side of her. The three looked conspiratorially at each other before Candice switched on the player. Connie was surprised to find the sound so loud and clear outdoors. After a few beats of fingers clicking, a deep female voice began to sing and, recognising the song, several guests cheered approval. People started to sway, some mouthed the lyrics, nodded their heads. As the wedding party began their descent, Connie caught on too. She knew this song by the New Zealand teenager that Emma—who’d always taken to her latest idol with a passion—
raved about. The lyrics made no sense to Connie—they seemed to be about royalty—but the tune was catchy and the girl’s voice haunting.

The wedding party drew closer and William squeezed her hand. More alive with each step the girls took towards her, she felt magnanimous, and slid an arm into William’s. Emma beamed, carried along on the music. Connie felt herself responding, swaying with the chorus. She reached for her mother again, rubbed her back reassuringly. Then, for a second, Emma and Stacy were right in front of her. Emma turned to her mother and her eyes were brimming with tears. *It will be alright*, Connie mouthed to her daughter. And her mind completed the thought, like a prayer, *you’ll be enough, my darling*. As Emma passed, Connie wept and instinctively glanced towards Mick, wanting to unite them as a family for that instant, but the space beside Rosie was empty. She heard Mick’s flustered voice on the breeze.

‘Benjamin! *Now!*’

On the darkening, mauve beach, Mick bent double. He scooped his son off the sand, lifted him high, tossed and then caught him. Benjamin’s protests punctuated the celebrant’s opening address. Ignoring his cries, Mick drew the little boy under his arm and struggled with him, kicking the whole time, over the sand.

Dispassionately, Connie looked on. She recognised Mick’s personal distress signals: the way he rubbed the back of his hand across his brow, clenched his jaw. She almost went to help him before checking herself. It wasn’t her job, anymore. A firm weight rested on her shoulder. She turned
to it, expecting it to be William, but it was Sebastian. He raised an eye at the beach, and shrugged. He was looking out for her.

When Mick reached the circle again, he was red-faced. He put Benjamin in Rosie’s open arms. *All wild Italian curls, like his mother*, Connie thought. Yet he has Emma’s flashing eyes, too. Mick tried to readjust his jacket, ran a finger under his collar. As if sensing her watching, he looked up, but the expression on his face revealed nothing of the warmth they’d shared the night before. If anything, he seemed defiant, daring her mockery, perhaps her pity? He touched the back of Rosie’s chair, smiled at her when she looked up at him in response, and planted a gentle—and what seemed a clearly pointed—kiss on her hair.

Connie recoiled, taking a step back so that Mick was obscured behind other guests. Her eyes were moist. But the ceremony was unfolding, oblivious to her dramas—a friend of Emma’s was reading a poem. It would be over too quickly. Connie struggled to reconnect with it. And then, there was Emma, saying her vows. Her face, even in the darkening twilight, glowed. The sun was right where it was meant to be, just behind the couple. Clouds slashed its copper disc; its light narrowed to a diamond-studded funnel across the water.

‘I should paint this,’ Connie said quietly to herself, but William pulled her in tighter.

‘You should.’

She wondered how Mick was handling the emotion of it all, yet didn’t dare eye him again. And then a new revelation formed in her mind. There was no one whose needs lay a greater claim on her at this moment than
Emma. Even as she thought this, Benjamin called out again, prompting the whispered, urgent negotiations between his parents that come with that stage of life.

The celebrant took Emma and Leo’s hands in her own. She recited a verse they’d chosen and placed their hands on each other’s. Leo held Emma’s ring high in the air before slipping it onto her thin finger. Emma lifted Leo’s ring daintily, and as she pushed it onto his finger, it came to Connie, with crystal clarity, where she’d find what she’d been looking for the night before.

That photo from her own wedding day had been her secret. Not one of the staged pictures, but a candid shot. It could easily have been thrown out. Fortunately, it was Connie who picked up the photos from the developer three weeks after the wedding, right after her ultrasound appointment. She planned to surprise Mick that evening, with the wedding shots and the small, square, grainy image of the little one whom they knew nothing about, and could scarcely comprehend. While waiting for Mick to come home to their small, rented townhouse, just a few streets away from her mum’s house, she made one of Rita’s traditional dishes: a casserole of lamb, potatoes, eggplant and rosemary. While it was cooking, she leant against the kitchen counter and thumbed through the pictures, reasonably decent—considering they hadn’t been able to afford a professional photographer—bar one. In amongst the group photos was a badly focused picture of the two of them leaving through the church doors. Connie, ahead of Mick, was a white blur. But Mick’s face was in focus, and it appeared animated, almost trembling, as he watched her from behind, with love. Connie gasped when
she first saw it, as though she’d stumbled upon something she wasn’t supposed to see. She separated the photograph and kept it for herself, never showing it to Mick—whom she feared might think he looked too sissy—or anyone else. But she brought it out often over the years of their marriage, and held it close, tracing Mick’s image with her fingers. That tender look in his eyes had come to her last night, and she’d wanted to share the photo with Emma and Stacy, to assure them that at one time their parents had been very dear to each other.

As she watched the rings change hands now, she recalled that on the day Mick had told her, in a numb, expressionless tone, how he’d fucked things up completely, how a baby on the way changed things—that he had to do right by Rosie—she’d taken her wedding ring off. She held the gold band for several minutes before putting it in the envelope with the precious photograph. Then, instead of returning the envelope to her top drawer, where she’d always kept it, she took it with her to visit her mother. After cake and coffee—during which she kept to herself, for a little longer, Mick’s ghastly announcements about Rosie—she asked Rita for the small box which held the only mementoes Connie had of her father. A pair of stainless steel cufflinks, a clipping of the newspaper announcement he’d composed when Connie was born, a card he’d made for her second birthday, and a few other ordinary items. Without her mother seeing, she slipped the envelope inside it. It must have been the fallout amongst family and friends when news of Mick and her separation broke that caused Connie to forget this. It seemed very clear to her now.
And then, too soon, it seemed, the ceremony was nearly over. Beaming, the celebrant drew the newlyweds to either side of her, and lifted their hands up high, presenting the new couple. For a moment Connie was deflated, and she understood her mother’s disdain. There was something to be said, after all, for the weightiness of a church wedding, for the space it held. Yet this small gathering by the sea had its own cohesiveness, and spurred by the celebrant, it erupted with joy. Egged on by their friends, Leo leant Emma backwards into a dramatic embrace, bumping against Stacy who, squealing with delight, held the bouquets out of the way. Leo kissed Emma passionately. Guests thronged around the two.

The sun dropped at last, only its rays visible. The beach was empty and grey, but lights had sprung up along the quay. Connie realised she felt ready for a party. Her responsibilities were over from here—the arrangements for the rest of the night in other people’s hands and, unlike Mick, her days of curtailed socialising were long past. She looked around for William. He’d drifted away with Rita on his arm, listening intently to what she was telling him. When Connie caught his eyes he raised them heavenwards. She hoped her grateful smile to him made up for her cool greeting earlier. Other things that might need to be said could wait. Connie had little idea, yet, where they were heading as a couple. She had some thinking to do first about what she wanted for herself.

It could have been exhaustion that flooded her then, relaxing her tight muscles, weakening her knees. But it felt like profound gratitude. To be where she was, in the middle of her life, wondering what might come next. She felt humbled too, when she realised that she could still be thrown by a
kiss, unsettled by love. And awestruck, that everywhere she looked, she saw people who truly mattered.
Part Two

Dissertation
1

Introduction

Relatedness is not, as our tradition teaches, the antithesis of autonomy, but a literal precondition of autonomy, and interdependence a constant companion of autonomy. Jennifer Nedelsky, 1989, 12.

I don’t see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time. Alice Munro, in Hernáez Lerena, 1996, 20.

This thesis is interested in the potential of the short story cycle to tell stories about women’s ordinary lives, and to explore, within such stories, the complexity of apparently mundane moments where insight occurs and personal growth follows. Short story cycle is one of many terms in circulation, and the one that I have settled on, to refer to collections of independent stories that are linked in some ways.¹ These connecting devices may include one or more of the following: common characters, focalisation, setting, repeated events, motifs or themes. This discussion rests on the claim that the short story cycle is a particularly productive form for writers interested in stories about women’s experiences of the everyday, and the ways that these experiences transform women—emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, socially—over the longer course of their lives. Central to the

¹ As this thesis will show, theorists have different opinions about the distinctiveness of the form and about whether sub-genres can be identified within it. Therefore, it should not be assumed that all the terms in circulation refer to the same overarching notion of the form. Nevertheless, the reader will find the following terms used in work cited throughout: linked stories, composite novel, novel-in-stories, short story sequence, short story composite.
experiences of women’s lives that I claim are represented so richly by this form is the importance to women of their continuing relationships of interdependence and care. It is therefore grounded in feminist critical discourses of relational autonomy, which claim that a subject’s capacity to find her ‘own law’ or shape her own life, can develop only in the context of relations with others that nurture that capacity (Nedelsky, 1989, 11).

This thesis does not support regressive views that women’s biological capacities as child-bearers define them solely as mothers and homemakers. In contemporary, western societies women live out myriad life experiences in paid and unpaid work, as spouses and partners and parents, as single or separated, as childless, as factory workers and shop-assistants and political and business leaders, entrepreneurs and artists. However, this discussion asserts that many women in the west at different stages of their lives, whether or not they engage in paid work outside the home, will probably spend large amounts of their time in the private, domestic sphere as home makers or caregivers involved in the emotional and physical care of others, and that these experiences should not be overlooked. Feminist scholar Andrea O’Reilly claims that ‘it is in this everyday space that much of [a woman’s] learning takes place and quietly turns into wisdom and self-understanding’ (Abbey and O’Reilly, 1998, 21). In this dissertation I argue that since the advent of second-wave feminism many writers, such as Alice Munro (1977), Gloria Naylor (1983), Louise Erdrich (1985) and Elizabeth Strout (2008), have turned to the short story cycle to explore some of the more mundane experiences of women’s lives and that very often these
narratives resonate with ideas proposed by feminist discourses, typically associated with third-wave feminism, around intersectionality and relational autonomy. These short story cycles abound with representations of women whose lives are affected by a matrix of multiple subjectivities, including race, class and sexuality, and whose identities are shaped by webs of interdependent relationships. The individual stories explore the daily experiences of single women, mothers and wives, elderly, lesbian or bisexual women, Indigenous and migrant women.

The popularity of this form for writers interested in these experiences may be because readers’ conventional expectations of the novel—for dramatic momentum, for instance—privilege stories that are climactic, and that may thus overlook the drama of the everyday. The short story cycle by comparison, as a compilation of independent yet interrelated stories, usually focuses on smaller narrative arcs, and in doing so may offer unique possibilities for articulating many women’s experiences of their daily lives. This is not to say, of course, that women’s ordinary lives have been entirely ignored by writers of the novel. During the course of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Drabble, and Helen Garner, for instance, have

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The “wave” model is one used to describe periods of increased interest in feminist theory and political action in the west, most prominently in the United States. Not all feminists agree on the temporal, generational or theoretical borders between one wave and the next; however, it is generally recognised that the third wave, following the intense political activity of feminists in the 1960s and 70s, is characterised by a critique of second-wave feminism for its lack of recognition of differences between women. Third-wave feminisms are interested in how individual identities are constructed, and emphasise differences on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion and nationality, and polyvocality, or the importance of making room for a diverse range of voices and experiences (see, for example, Sanders, 2004). As R. Claire Snyder puts it: ‘third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition’ (2008, np).
created characters who struggle with the conflicting demands of motherhood and domesticity, and other personal needs for emotional or intellectual fulfilment. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that the unique structure of the short story cycle is particularly suitable for exploring this terrain. And yet the short story cycle is not widely recognised or understood as a unique form in its own right. Therefore, a brief introduction, ahead of a more detailed literature review in Chapter Two, is provided here to orient readers to the distinctiveness of the form.

**The short story cycle**

This thesis will show that, while a popular form amongst writers, understanding of the uniqueness of the short story cycle, and its recognition as a distinct literary genre, is not universal, and that even amongst short story cycle theorists there are different ideas about the characteristics and range of texts that should be included in attempts to define it. To support the arguments raised in this thesis therefore, I draw on Susan Garland Mann’s simple assertion that a cycle is defined by the simultaneous independence and interdependence of the stories that comprise it (1989, 15). Thus, while each individual story in a cycle can be read independently of the others, the placing of each story within the collected whole enables the cycle to achieve a deeper and richer meaning than the singular story can achieve. In other words, the stories achieve their potential when read in the context of the stories with which they are connected, just as our individual identities become meaningful in terms of the relationships with which they are

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involved. The themes of the cycle are more fully realised, and the reading experience more satisfying, when the stories are read as a cycle.

Although the short story cycle boasts a literary heritage that has roots in antiquity and has evolved from narrative traditions in many parts of the world, critical study of the form has been sporadic, occupying what Kathryn Matheny calls a ‘shadowy position in contemporary criticism’ (2012, 1).

Many short story cycles are marketed and read as novels, or as collections of short stories, or praised as works with a new and unique structure. For instance on the back cover of Alice Munro’s *The beggar maid* (originally published in 1977), reviewer John Gardner is quoted as saying: ‘Whether … [this book] is a collection of stories or a new kind of novel I’m not quite sure, but whatever it is, it’s wonderful’ (Munro, 1991). One of the reasons for the paucity of critical attention could be the strong position the realist novel enjoys as the most conventional and popular form of narrative fiction, and the resulting emphasis on extended narratives that privilege stories about the linear trajectory of an individual character. Combining the ideas of several critics (including Wallace Gray and Ian Watt), literary scholar Sandra Zagarell argues that readers and critics have come to ‘equate novels with stories about individuals … [and] also to expect that such stories will always be about growth or decline and to identify all serious literary narrative with the novel’ (2007, 455). I argue that such expectations do not readily accommodate the mundane aspects of women’s ordinary lives. Yet

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4 Limited representations of women in fiction were of key interest to many critics writing at the height of second-wave feminism. For instance, of the master plots that dominate western literary traditions, Joanna Russ claims that ‘they are tales for heroes, not heroines’
when writers do turn to alternative narrative forms, readers, as we have seen with Munro’s reviewer, are sometimes unsure about what to make of the result. This is not entirely surprising, as there are overlaps between the short story cycle and other examples of what might be called experimental novels. It can be argued that, in general, attempts to create strict classifications around genres can be difficult to achieve. Zagarell suggests that genres ‘stand behind individual works of literature but do not govern them’, or that ‘works participate in genres rather than belong to them’ (2007, 453). And Matheny remarks that ‘encompassing numerous formal strategies and narrative approaches, [the short story cycle] does not lend itself to easy explanation, not even in a critical environment that all but dogmatizes multiplicity and ambiguity’ (2012, 2). Nevertheless, one outcome of the short story cycle’s lack of mainstream recognition is that readers may be unprepared to fully appreciate how the form functions. As Zagarell claims: ‘fictions about modes of life that are collective, continuous, and undramatic … are puzzling … readers either assume the work has no story, often delegating it to the supposedly inferior category of the sketch, or impose familiar but inappropriate notions of linear plotting on it’ (2007, 455–6).

Matheny draws a similar conclusion: ‘misunderstanding of the short story composite forces us to read these works within a context and a set of reader expectations they have not sought to conform to or adopt’ (2012, 8).

(1972, 4). She also argues ‘that of all the possible actions people can do in fiction, very few can be done by women’ (1972, 5). And she laments the dearth of active roles for women in fiction: ‘what myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist? Very few’ (1972, 7).
Readers, therefore, are generally familiar with the way the conventional realist novel works. They know, for instance, that, generally speaking, chapters should be read in the order they are presented so that the overall story makes sense. They expect that a central character or small range of characters will feature throughout the novel, and that a drama involving those characters will unfold, reach a narrative climax, and be resolved by the end of the book. They certainly expect all the questions the novel has raised to be answered by the last page. The short story cycle works differently. It is usually possible to read the stories in any order, and still to have a sense of the themes, ideas and significance produced by the cycle as a whole. Narrative threads are often left unresolved between stories; questions may remain unanswered; various characters may take the stage and some will disappear for good, or reappear in a different story. The overall drama of the cycle may be more muted, the action typically occurring on a smaller plane than in most conventional novels. These features ensure that meaning is to be gained through the reader’s attention to different cues, such as the connections to be made between what is said and left unsaid. Through familiarity with the form and how it functions in unique ways, readers of short story cycles, Margot Kelley claims, therefore come to an understanding ‘that identity is constituted through relations with other subjects, and is continually negotiated and renegotiated, making identity itself a somewhat evanescent phenomenon’ (1995, 306).

This thesis will show that these features of the form suitably accommodate storytelling about women’s experiences of their ordinary lives, the
importance of the relationships that sometimes encumber them but that they
commit to sustain and nurture, and the personal transformations that
nonetheless emerge through these experiences. This is because both the
structure and the capacity of the form to explore various dimensions of, or
perspectives on, a given theme resonate with the nature of relational identity
itself, which is understood not in terms of linear development, but through a
complex of sometimes discontinuous, fragmented encounters with others
and by means of temporally diverse threads. The following section explores
the concept of relational identity and its suitability to theorise the way that
women’s lives are so often represented in short story cycles.

Relational autonomy

Feminism’s reconceptualising of the philosophical concept of autonomy
brings to the fore the kinds of experiences that are central to this discussion
of representations of women’s lives in the short story cycle. Philosopher
John Christman explains that:

To be autonomous is to be one’s own person, to be directed by
considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not
simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can
somehow be considered one’s authentic self (2011).\(^5\)

For many feminists, the core idea of autonomous choice has value as a
means of understanding gender oppression, but how it has been
conventionally perceived is regarded with suspicion, seeming to promote a
notion of the individual as self-sufficient and atomistic, abstracted from the

\(^5\) Individual autonomy is central to Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, and is a
fundamental principle of John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian liberalism (Christman, 2011).

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social relations in which actual agents are embedded. For instance Jennifer
Nedelsky remarks:

Feminists are centrally concerned with freeing women to shape our own lives, to define who we (each) are, rather than accepting the definition given to us by others (men and male dominated society, in particular). Feminists therefore need a language of freedom with which to express the value underlying this concern. But that language must also be true to the equally important feminist precept that any good theorizing will start with people in their social context. And the notion of social context must take seriously its constitutive quality; social context cannot simply mean that individuals will, of course, encounter one another. It means, rather, that there are no human beings in the absence of relations with others. We take our being in part from those relations (1989, 8–9).

Philosopher Natalie Stoljar further claims that the atomistic conception of autonomy seems hostile to many women’s experiences arising from relationships of interdependence, caring and responsibility, and remarks that if autonomy is somehow conceived as inimical to being a woman—because, for example, being a women involves valuing social relationships of care whereas being autonomous devalues such relationships—one denies women, in particular, the social and political advantages associated with the label “autonomous” (2014 np).

Feminist theorists have thus sought to reconceptualise the notion of autonomy, to rescue its emancipatory potential from the restrictively gendered ideal of the “self-made man”. While different theorists recast autonomy in different ways, in general, relational autonomy is seen as an umbrella term for a range of perspectives based on a shared belief that agents are socially situated in identities formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex intersection of social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000, 4).
Philosopher Marilyn Friedman puts the case for relational autonomy in the following way:

Autonomy is no longer thought to require someone to be a social atom, that is, radically socially unencumbered, defined merely by the capacity to choose, or to be able to exercise reason prior to any of her contingent ends or social engagements. It is now well recognized that our reflective capacities and our very identities are always partly constituted by communal traditions and norms that we cannot put entirely into question without at the same time voiding our very capacities to reflect (2000, 41).

Similarly, this thesis supports the view that women come to a greater sense of who they are within the context of their relationships. As Nira Yuval-Davis puts it, ‘identities are individual and collective narratives that answer the question “who am /are I/ we?”’ (2006, 197; italics added).

To represent these notions of relational identity in literature, then, requires less emphasis on the individual trajectory of an autonomous person, and a greater focus on the web of relationships and shared experiences that shape identities and foster personal growth and collective fulfilment. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that the narrative form of the short story cycle structurally and thematically represents, and in doing so privileges, these ideas about women’s identity and capacity for agency, and therefore effectively articulates some experiences that are central to many women’s lives. Of course relationality and relational autonomy are not conditions exclusive to women. Scholar Paul John Eakin cautions that readings of ‘relational identity through the lens of gender, with the relational coded as feminine and the autonomous as masculine’ risk that such readings will perpetuate the patriarchal binaries they seek to resist (1999, 51).
Nonetheless, in terms of the cycles which I both reflect on and write, as a reader and creative writer, it is women’s relational experiences that are most commonly reflected in this form, evidenced by the high number of women writers using it. For instance, writing about novels-in-stories, which she recognises as a sub-genre of the short story cycle, Kelley claims that during the 1980s, ‘about 75 percent of the current writers are women, often women who live in positions of double marginality as members of visible minorities or as lesbians’ (1995, 296). This thesis therefore explores the function of the short story cycle within this prescribed space of mostly women writers, writing mostly about women’s lives.

**Map of critical discussion**

No one account can encapsulate the diversity of women’s experiences. The overriding emphasis of this thesis, however, is on ways in which the short story cycle articulates the relational drama integrated into the mundane and everyday. The fiction comprising the first part of the thesis seeks to mobilise this theory by telling some stories, connected in several ways, about individual women from different generations of one family. The stories articulate some experiences of white, middle-class, suburban women and linger in specific times and places, where action is limited and where the changes in the characters’ relational lives are often nuanced or imperceptible. In this second part of the thesis, the dissertation demonstrates some of the greater diversity represented through the short story cycle in the west following the height of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. It aims to assess claims about the short story cycle and stories about women by
making explicit the features of the form, and showing how these features make storytelling about women’s relational lives possible. These ideas will be argued through a careful study of the features of the short story cycle and examples of these features working in several texts. The study will culminate in a close reading of one contemporary Australian short story cycle that explores rural Australian Aboriginal family life in the 1960s, thus demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of the form.

The research is underpinned by the following primary question: what possibilities does the short story cycle offer writers interested in telling stories about women? Thus, while some understanding of the short story cycle is useful for helping readers and critics recognise it as a distinct form, this thesis does not strive to raise awareness of the form for its own sake, but for its capacity to reflect on the interests of women through varied representations of their relational lives. Therefore, Chapter Two provides a selective overview of short story cycle theory and criticism in order to identify key themes motivating the study of this form to date, and to strengthen links between research undertaken in the United States and Australia.

Chapter Three examines more closely the ways in which the short story cycle offers opportunities to represent in fiction how women find meaning and experience a sense of relational autonomy in the daily moments of their ordinary lives. It draws on the feminist notion of “the wave” as a metaphor to describe the cycle’s ability to represent personal transformation as
relational processes of return and revisioning. This chapter explores how the cycle can represent alternative experiences of time that may be more suitable for articulating women’s experiences as social subjects involved in caring relationships with others, particularly where that work is centred in the home. Other key features of the cycle are explored, including the mosaic narrative structure of the cycle, its focus on minor narrative arcs, its suitability to accommodate narrative silences, and the longer story within the cycle. These features are illustrated with specific examples drawn from existing short story cycles about women, chosen for their diversity and capacity to provide a snapshot of the development of this field for the articulation of women’s experiences.

Having established the features of the short story cycle pertinent to this study of women’s relational lives, Chapters Four and Five draw on these features through a detailed study of Purple threads by Wiradjuri writer and scholar Jeanine Leane (2011).\(^6\) As a cycle of stories about three generations of Aboriginal women and girls, Purple threads show these women responding to often oppressive social and historical conditions by drawing strength from their relationships to their country and traditional culture, to each other, other family members and neighbours. Like the interdependent stories that comprise the cycle, these women are enriched and obtain greater

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\(^6\) Purple threads won the David Unaipon Award in 2010 for a manuscript by an unpublished Indigenous writer and has since been shortlisted for both the 2012 Commonwealth Book Prize and the 2012 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Indigenous Writing. The Wiradjuri people have inhabited modern-day New South Wales, Australia for at least 40,000 years. Their country extends from the Great Dividing Range in the east, and is bordered by the Macquarie, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers. Consequently, the Wiradjuri are also known as the people of the three rivers (Wiradjuri Condobolin Corporation, 2014).
fulfilment even while sometimes encumbered by the people they feel responsible for and indebted to through relationships of care and protection. The text, therefore, reinforces the idea of relational autonomy as Friedman describes it, that the values and responsibilities of interdependence should be seen as a cultural ideal because they ‘make relationships and communities worthwhile’ providing, for instance, ‘vital sources of care for the most vulnerable members of our society’ (2000, 47). Chapter Four contextualises *Purple threads* within other discourses around Indigenous literature, including the rich heritage of Aboriginal women’s life-writing, and explores how this cycle reflects relatively new developments in this field from auto/biographical to more overtly fictive forms. This chapter also explores the notion of *Purple threads* as a community narrative, which represents the experiences of a community more broadly. Chapter Five examines closely how the features of the short story cycle work in *Purple threads* to articulate these women’s ordinary experiences, spiritually, emotionally, socially and intellectually, by drawing on specific examples from the text that depict these women as relational subjects.

The Conclusion draws on one short story cycle, which sits within an otherwise unconnected collection of stories, to pull together the claims made in this thesis about the form’s suitability to represent women’s relational lives. As another more recent cycle, ‘William and Clare’ by Amy Bloom also highlights some of the developments in the creative field since the publication of the earlier cycles used in this thesis, which emerged during and shortly after the height of second-wave feminism in the west. From this
perspective, the Conclusion also outlines some questions to motivate further research in the field.

A note on “knowing”—acknowledging my speaking position

As this thesis emerges out of the disciplines of English and creative writing, the writing of short story cycles about women is as central to this investigation as the reading of them. This is evidenced by the fiction component of the thesis, but also by the core interest motivating this dissertation. As a writer, I am interested in what other writers have achieved using the short story cycle. During the course of this research project I conducted two interviews with Leane to explore her intentions when writing *Purple threads*, and her experiences of using the short story cycle form. Leane’s own thoughts are woven through the chapters on her book, illuminating various aspects of this research with reflections on her own critical and creative practice. Details of the procedures and methods used to conduct, analyse and incorporate material from the interviews can be found in the Appendix.

As a Euro-Australian researcher, I am aware that my engagement with a text by an Indigenous author is inextricably linked to a historically problematic relationship between researchers and the researched. As non-Indigenous scholar Linda Westphalen acknowledges, ‘historically, research into First Nations discourses, knowledges, experiences and histories has tended to have been at the expense of, rather than of benefit to, First Nations peoples’ (2012, 60). Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson claims that this is
because the dominant regime of academic knowledge is shaped by whiteness, and is therefore ‘culturally and racially biased, socially situated and partial’ (2004, 88), as ‘whiteness opens up and forecloses certain ways of reading the Indigenous Other because racial codes are always present in whatever we do and think’ (2006, 255). The importance of these claims cannot be denied, although, as non-Indigenous scholar Anne Brewster remarks, the significance of whiteness ‘as a category against which (racial) difference is measured’ is often invisible to white people (2005, np). I acknowledge that my whiteness shapes my reading and research, even without being able to fully comprehend the full implications of this. As whiteness is only one factor of my identity that loops itself in and around many others, such as my sex, gender, class and sexual orientation, the actual impact of my whiteness on my research is difficult to determine. Indigenous scholar and activist, Marcia Langton, illustrates the likewise unreasonableness of assuming the impact of Indigeneity on one’s speaking position. While arguing for self-representations by Aboriginal people in all forms of cultural expression, she cautions that, it is a ‘naive belief that Aboriginal people will make “better” representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives “greater” understanding’ (1993, 27). She describes this as another form of universalising Aboriginal people, ‘without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference, and so on’ (1993, 27).

I accept that, as an individual situated in a specific social, historical context, my reading is partial, situated and contingent. I wish to avoid, however,

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7 Brewster’s comment forms part of an analysis of the poem ‘Feelings’ by Lisa Belllear, which describes an encounter between an Indigenous woman and a white female academic.
what feminist researcher Denise deCaires Narain describes as an anxiety on the part of western feminist scholarship to engage with the texts of postcolonial/Third World women for fear of “getting it wrong”, resulting, she claims, in a situation where, ‘the “familiar” cultures of the West remain the most frequent focus of feminist enquiry’ (2004, 242). Much of the focus of short story cycle scholarship is the literature of white, middle class, North America. This thesis seeks to disrupt that trend by widening the scope to include the Australian context, where the form is being picked up by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers. I listen, therefore, to the experiences of researchers before me. These include David Hollinsworth, for instance, who suggests that we ‘create alliances and negotiate collaborations across our partial identifications’ (1995, 97). Brewster proposes that for whiteness to move beyond a ‘trope of domination’ (2005, np) it must ‘be constantly attentive to the persistent and ongoing reconfiguration of white power’ (2005, np). And Westphalen claims that analysing one’s speaking position is an ongoing process that ‘begins with the researcher listening and reflecting on their position as a member of an audience, and continues indefinitely’ (2012, 64), and who also recommends continuing alliances between academics and authors (2012, 71). I acknowledge and appreciate, therefore, the interest that Jeanine Leane, as scholar and author of Purple threads, has taken in my research, and am grateful for the conversations we have had that have helped enrich my understanding of her book in particular and the short story cycle in general.
Critical appraisal of the short story cycle has developed sporadically, is primarily focused on Anglo-American literature and traditionally concerned with determining the form’s distinctiveness in comparison to other developments in contemporary narrative literature. More recent scholarship, however, broadens the scope to examine how the form is being used to articulate the experiences of people from other ethnic backgrounds, and how the form is specifically shaped by gender. This chapter aims to situate this Australian creative/critical investigation into the short story cycle and the articulation of women’s everyday relational lives in fiction, within the critical field of the form.

Critics have debated and continue to debate the most appropriate term to describe the short story cycle. It is worth noting that in a lecture on the short story cycle, author and teacher of creative writing, KL Cook, remarks that confusion surrounding the name reflects the form’s vitality and energy (Cook, 2007). This thesis does not seek to engage with that discussion; however, as this dissertation continues, my preference for short story cycle, the earliest of the terms formally assigned to the form, and the reasons for this, become clear. Nevertheless, to represent faithfully the extent to which naming is a central theme in this field, where possible I use the term that
each author uses as I engage with their work. The following literature review covers three main areas of research: established key texts, contemporary scholarship, and the creative and critical field in Australia.

**Key texts**

Forrest L Ingram’s *Representative short story cycles of the twentieth century: studies in a literary genre* (1971) is widely regarded as the first systematic attempt to define the form. Ingram produces what he describes as ‘an inclusive rather than an exclusive definition’ of the short story cycle (1971, 15). He skips earlier versions of the form to focus on the twentieth century where he believes the central dynamic of the cycle—‘the devices by which the “many” become components of the pattern of the “one”’—is more subtle, leading him to settle on a cycle as ‘a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts’ (1971,19; italics in original). Ingram also distinguishes between cycles originally designed as such by the author, those made up of previously written or published stories that were later collected or arranged into a series by an editor or editor-author, and those that were completed, through the addition of subsequent stories to existing ones, to form a complete cycle. Ingram’s claims have received some criticism on the basis that they over-emphasise authorial intention and the response of readers (Kennedy, 1995, ix; Nagel, 2001, 11); nevertheless, his work is foundational and is often cited in subsequent research in this field, including by most of the critics mentioned below.
Susan Garland Mann’s *The short story cycle: a genre companion and reference guide* (1989), takes a more historical approach than Ingram’s study, claiming that ‘as long as stories have been told, there have been storytellers who combined tales to create larger effects’ (1989, 1). Mann provides an overview of the form’s development from ancient oral traditions originally composed as sung stories passed from one generation to the next, giving *The odyssey* (circa 800 BCE) and *The Iliad* (760–710 BCE) as examples, through to developments in the twentieth century. Mann categorises short story cycles from that century into sub-genres, including collections of stories about the maturation of a central character in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, and the artist in the *künstlerroman*, and cycles unified by theme, such as *Dubliners*, by James Joyce (1914), which explores the sense of alienation and isolation many early twentieth-century characters are represented as experiencing in modernist fiction (1989, 1–11).\(^8\) Mann concludes her overview by asserting that the ‘one essential characteristic of the short story cycle [is that] the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated’ (1989, 15). This creates a necessary tension, she claims, in the way the cycle is read, because the reader has the choice of either reading an individual story independently of the rest, thereby ignoring its context in the overall book, or intentionally to see what it contributes to the rest of the work (1989, 18). Her comments on this necessary tension are

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\(^8\) *Bildungsroman* is a German term that refers to a novel that follows the development of the central protagonist from childhood or adolescence to adulthood (Baldick, 2008, 35). *Künstlerroman* is a term that refers to a novel whose central character is an artist of any kind (Baldick, 2008, 180).
worth quoting in full because they form a succinct description of the formal structure and narrative impact of the short story cycle:

While difficult to describe, this tension … is one of the chief pleasures that readers of cycles experience. They enjoy experiencing the world of the short story and the novel simultaneously. Despite their familiarity with the books, readers continue to appreciate the fact that Ike McCaslin exists beyond the boundaries of ‘The Bear,’ that Virgie returns revitalized in the final story in The Golden Apples, and that Joyce allows imagery to develop, often ironically, through the apparently separate lives of characters as diverse as Eveline, Lenehen, and Gabriel Conroy. I do not think the case is overstated if I say that readers enjoy reveling in the necessarily restricted form of a single story and then discovering that they can, as they continue to read, transcend these boundaries (1989, 19).9

I concur, from my own reading, that this tension is a pleasure offered to readers of the short story cycle not available in the same way to other narrative forms, and that the mode of reader participation in the process of meaning-making is particularly satisfying. For example, the connections between characters and stories in Jennifer Egan’s A visit from the goon squad (2010) are at times so difficult to trace that the discovery of those connections is immensely rewarding to readers, evidenced by the fan base surrounding the text and Internet sites dedicated to mapping these myriad network of characters, events and themes (for example, see Gillian 2012; Dobbert 2014; Petty, year unspecified).

Authors of The composite novel (1995), Maggie Dunn and Anne Morris wade into the debate about the name of the form, suggesting that composite novel more aptly describes the nature of the short story cycle. They claim

9 Mann is referring to three short story cycles here. ‘The Bear’ (one of the seven interrelated stories) in William Faulkner’s Go down, Moses (1942/1996), Eudora Welty’s The golden apples (1947), and James Joyce’s Dubliners (1914/1967).
that the term cycle implies cyclical motion and return to the beginning, thereby precluding the possibility of the kind of linear development that is found in a novel and which they believe is also to be found in some composite novels (1995, 5). Typically, the term composite novel was used to refer to books written by multiple authors, but Dunn and Morris apply it to a single text by one author that comprises several of what they call ‘text pieces’ (1995, 7), thereby casting a wider net than Mann to include in the category books (such as Gertrude Stein’s Tender buttons (1914/2000)), containing text pieces that cannot be called short stories—fragments, single sentences, photographs, lyrics and drawings. These individual text pieces, if given a title of their own, they argue, are designed to be autonomous and are therefore complete (1995, 8–9).

The degree of narrative linearity is not a primary concern for me when I think about what makes this form so effective in articulating women’s ordinary lives. In the next chapter I explore in more depth the relational aspects of individual identities and their stories that are conjured for me by the term cycle, strengthening my own preference for the phrase, short story cycle. However, like Dunn and Morris, J Gerald Kennedy, editor of a collection of essays entitled Modern American short story sequences: composite fictions and fictive communities (1995), is also preoccupied with narrative linearity, championing his preferred term “sequence” because it emphasises the progressive unfolding and cumulative effects of the individual stories comprising the form (1995, vii). He sees some short story cycles, such as Amy Tan’s The joy luck club (1989)—a collection
configured from previously published short stories—as examples of the experimental novel which ‘has for about seventy-five years been veering toward the story sequence as a decentered mode of narrative representation’ (1995, x). Kennedy is therefore less inclined than Mann, for instance, to draw sharp distinctions between the story sequence and the novel, seeing far greater similarities between the formation and function of both forms. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the story sequence proliferated in the twentieth century, and considers the interests of contemporary writers and readers that may be aptly addressed by the form:

A remarkable new generation of American fiction writers now seems poised to carry the sequence into the next millennium, adapting it to the jarring incongruities of postmodernism and the developing implications of chaos theory. The urgent need to make sense of contemporary culture and its violent preoccupations compels us to attend more closely as readers and critics to the fragmented images of twentieth-century life glimpsed in momentary clarity in the short story sequence (1995, xiv).

The survey thus far shows that the discussion of the short story cycle form mainly emanates from the United States and is heavily focused on texts by American authors. Rolf Lundén even argues that the form is ‘specifically American’ (1995, 294), ‘a literary version of [the] conjunction of unifying and discontinuous energies … characterized as yet another expression of the coexistence of unity and diversity, fusion and fragmentation, held to be so frequent in American culture’ (1995, 291). James Nagel’s book, The

10 Kennedy’s reference to chaos theory is interesting. The definition of chaos theory in the Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy—‘that the smallest of changes in a system can result in very large differences in that system’s behaviour’ (Robert Bishop 2009) adds weight to claims put forward in this thesis that the short story cycle reflects the experiences of human subjects situated within interconnecting and often unavoidable relationships that shape personal and collective identifies.
contemporary American short-story cycle: the ethnic resonance of genre (2001), while still limiting the scope of the field to American texts, in other ways departs from previous studies concerned with identifying the uniqueness of the form, to examine how it is being used to explore issues of ethnicity and identity. For the purposes of this research which takes into account women’s social situation and focuses on a text by an Aboriginal writer, Nagel’s findings warrant greater consideration.

Like previous scholars, Nagel concurs that the central idea of linked short narratives predates the formal western novel, a concept which matured in the eighteenth century, and the short story, which evolved as distinct from the tale or sketch in the nineteenth century (2001, 3). Further, he adds that, as a more ancient and fundamental narrative unit, the story is more closely linked to oral traditions than the extended narrative line of the novel, and is therefore particularly cross-cultural (2001, 3–4). In spite of this heritage, however, Nagel believes there exists a remarkable stubbornness amongst scholars to recognise the short story cycle’s uniqueness: what he describes as an ‘obdurate critical innocence of this legacy’ (2001, 8). For instance, in response to reviews of Ernest Hemingway’s short story cycle In our time (1924), and William Faulkner’s Knight’s gambit (1949), which treat the structure of these texts with ‘surprise’ as though they are newly invented, Nagel says:

What was ‘peculiar’ was not the notion of a volume of stories with unifying characters and themes but the fact that such eminent commentators on the current state of modern letters should have been
oblivious to the important role that the short-story cycle had recently assumed (2001, 1).\textsuperscript{11}

From this position Nagel moves quickly to his central premise that developments in the short story cycle from the late nineteenth century saw the form become popular amongst male and female writers and across ethnic groups. Thus, by the last decades of the twentieth century the form had come to be associated with difference and diversity, and writers were using the cycle to explore issues around ethnicity and cultural identity, reflecting the multiculturalism of the United States (2001, 2–8). Nagel claims:

One of the most fascinating aspects of the contemporary fictional cycle is that writers from a wide variety of ethnic groups have used the form for the depiction of the central conflicts of characters from their own race or nationality. As ‘American’ narratives, these stories often involve the process of immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, assimilation, identity formation, and the complexities of formulating a sense of self that incorporates the old world and the new, the central traditions of the country of origin integrated into, or in conflict with, the values of the country of choice (2001, 15).

In the remaining chapters of his book Nagel examines several American short story cycles, all examples of the form’s contribution to a growing Indigenous and multi–ethnic canon in the United States. They include Louise Erdrich’s \textit{Love medicine} (1984), Jamaica Kincaid’s \textit{Annie John} (1985), Susan Minot’s \textit{Monkeys} (1986), Amy Tan’s \textit{The joy luck club} (1989), Julia Alvarez’s \textit{How the Garcia girls lost their accents} (1991), Sandra Cisneros’s \textit{The house on Mango Street} (1991), Tim O’Brien’s \textit{The

\textsuperscript{11} Although the two reviews were published twenty-five years apart, both Hemingway’s critic, Edmund Wilson, and Faulkner’s, Malcolm Cowley, propose the respective author had invented a new style of writing (Nagel, 2001, 1). Their comments suggest that indeed, little was being done during the intervening years to foster greater awareness of the tradition of the short story cycle.
things they carried (1990) and Robert Olen Butler’s A good scent from a strange mountain (1992). While these texts share a focus on characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds and explore issues of race and identity, class and culture, a further point of interest is that most of these cycles are written by women exploring the experiences of ordinary women and girls. Further, these cycles emphasise relational identity as the central protagonists negotiate many relationships that impact on them variously.

The next section shows that further research into how the form is being used, and the impact it is making, particularly in relation to questions of gender, has more recently emerged in PhD scholarship. I look at some of these projects and critical attention given to the form in Australia as a foundation to the textual study of Leane’s Purple threads.

Further critical studies: the Unites States and Australia

The central argument of Karen Weekes’ doctoral thesis, ‘Creating a self: identity in contemporary women’s short story cycles’ (2000) is that the form is particularly useful for reflecting the dramatic fracturing of the self. Both men and women experience themselves pulled in myriad directions, and this is an important feature of literature in general in the postmodern era (Weekes, 2000, 1). Nevertheless, Weekes claims that women experience this fragmentation in gender-specific ways that highlight the difficulties, explored in Chapter One, for women whose lived experiences contradict traditional notions of autonomy:
The situation for women is exacerbated by outdated sociological imperatives that are rarely practical or even desirable in the 1960s and beyond. These expectations of docility and relative passivity are in opposition to drives towards autonomy, so girls develop an internal conflict as they mature and explore their opportunities. To be assertive and ambitious, they must eschew the stereotypical traits of their gender, a choice not required of males (2000, 1).

Further, Weekes draws on Sue Llewelyn and Kate Osborne to argue that women struggle with the conflicting demands of their own needs, and those of others with whom they are involved in relationships of interdependence and care, and that ‘the resultant conflicts and guilt no matter what decision contemporary females make, has become central to their lives’ (Weekes, 2000, 4). Many short story cycles by contemporary women writers (such as Lorrie Moore’s *Anagrams* (1986)), Weekes claims, explore these conflicting tensions, through individual stories unified by a central female protagonist that explore her experiences in a variety of roles. Weekes remarks:

> The short story cycle allows the author to emphasize different aspects of a central character’s personality or present various formative experiences that gain resonance by their juxtaposition with each other, eventually presenting a three dimensional portrait (2000, 16).

This portrait, she goes on to explain, shows the character struggling to develop a distinct concept of herself, trying ‘to balance an increasing number of demands while also attempting to avoid being engulfed by guilt and feelings of failure both in terms of gender and culture’ (2000, 17).

Rachel Lister is also interested in the short story cycle and matters of gender representation in the form. Her doctoral thesis, ‘Open destinies: modern American women and the short story cycle’ (2005), examines how women writers from the United States (including Eudora Welty and Grace Paley)
have used the form to represent and question gender identity. In subsequently published research she claims that the plurality and openness of the form, challenging boundaries and opening up possibilities for new beginnings and new identities, create environments where female characters typically thrive, yet where male characters are often immobilised, finding ‘themselves stranded with nowhere to go’ (2007, para 29). Through both of these works, aspects of identity resonate with the relational self. The subject relates differently to various others in different situations and contexts, and different aspects of identity become salient. Thus, women’s practised experiences encourage them to embrace relational connections. By doing so, they forge autonomous identities within the social context in which they are embedded, in the very processes of engaging with the relationships they have inherited or embraced, rather than in abstraction from these.12

In Australia, the creative production of the form appears to be well ahead of any sustained critical evaluation. For example, Frank Moorhouse published several collections of linked stories subtitled ‘a discontinuous narrative’, including _Futility and other animals_ (1969), _The Americans, baby_ (1972) and _The electrical experience_ (1974). In discussing these and other works

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12 As I complete this research project I notice a proliferation of theses concerned with the short story cycle produced in recent years. Predominantly the output of MFA programmes in the United States and Canada, they cover a wide range of subject matter, including the intersectionality of gender, race and class (Thomas, 2013); the experiences of Filipino migrants (Luib, 2013) and women’s lives (Vong, 2013 and Dorland Perry, 2014). Interestingly, Jennifer Smith proposes that the proliferation of short story cycles in the United States is evidence of the influence of the MFA program on contemporary literature, claiming that: “the workshop setting may indeed be an ideal forum for producing and honing the cycle … [because] in fiction-writing workshops the short story is the preferred form, due to the reasonable possibility of producing, workshopping, and revising a story. Further, the repetition of workshops across semesters may well induce or encourage writers to return to a character, setting, or theme as they move toward a collection, novel, or cycle” (2012, np).
by the author, Brian Kiernan implies that the interlinking of the characters and themes, whereby ‘the effect is that … [the stories] imply an elusive pattern of interaction, one in which connections are not made as they would be in a traditional novel’ (1981, 75), is unique, claiming that Moorhouse made the form his ‘distinctive … means of structuring his fictions’ (1981, 74). Several years later, however, Gay Raines claims that Moorhouses’s linked story collections ‘have continued the “journey of the [short story cycle] form”’ (1990, 432), and have ‘a “closed” aspect which suggests that it is more accurate to describe them as developments of the short story cycle rather than as “discontinuous narratives”’ (1990, 426). In another example, Thea Astley’s *It’s raining in Mango: pictures from the family album* (originally 1989), which tells the story of four generations of the Laffey family in far north Queensland, is frequently referred to as a novel, although it is actually a set of distinct stories (see, for example, Lever, 2004, 17, and Barnes, 2012). And more recently, Tim Winton’s *The turning* (2004), is described on the paperback version’s cover as seventeen overlapping stories, with no further suggestion that this feature makes the text other than a collection of short stories. Nonetheless, *The turning* can easily be viewed as a short story cycle, linked by the common setting of the fictionalised town Angelus, themes of voyage and return, the importance of place in developing identity, and several characters who appear and reappear in different stories. In one article on Winton’s text, scholar Stephen Torre details the effect of the interconnectedness of the independent stories, without reference to the short story cycle form. He claims that
to enhance the authenticity of his study of turning, Winton employs complex narrative strategies. The theoretical model most appropriate to a hermeneutic of Winton’s structured series of stories is Wolfgang Iser’s reader response work … In *The turning* reading involves responses not only to the individual stories, the ‘within’ the story response, but also to the framing structure which emerges in the interaction of individual stories with each other. Not only the ‘blanks’, as Iser calls them, *within* the stories, but also the blanks *between* the stories, in the structure built out of the interaction of seventeen stories, determine reader participation in the text (2009, 282).

Wolfgang Iser’s notion of blanks, as Torre uses it here, is echoed in Chapter Three of this thesis when recognised characteristics of short story cycle are explored for their potential to represent women’s relational lives. In this thesis, these blanks are referred to as silences that typically resound throughout cycles, leaving readers to make connections between unresolved threads and draw conclusions, where possible.

This lack of sustained attention to the short story cycle in established literary scholarship in Australia may indicate that there is little precedence here for discussing the form as a distinct genre worthy of critical examination. Nevertheless, this trend may now be disrupted as a result of

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14 In November 2011 I made some enquiries, via email, to find out how the Australian Literature Resource was categorising short story cycles. I learnt that the database was not specifically using that term as a distinct genre at that time. Books that I would have classified as short story cycles could be found indirectly, for instance, through the search term “sequence” in conjunction with “short story”. Since my initial enquiry, AustLit has begun using “short story cycle” as a search term in its own right. Further, following my interview with Leane, Black Words, a community of Indigenous writers, storytellers, academics and researchers that works in partnership with the Australian Literature Resource, hosted during 2013 a resource map on the AustLit database called “Short story cycles: Aboriginal perspectives on Australia in the twentieth century”. The map listed, along with *Purple threads*, the following short story cycles by Indigenous writers: *Swallow the air*, (2006) by Tara June Winch, *Me, Antman and Fleabag*, (2006) by Gayle Kennedy, and *Every secret thing*, (2009) by Marie Munkara.
the work of some postgraduate research undertaken in Australian universities. For instance, Kenneth Chan produced a creative writing doctoral thesis entitled ‘Chinese history books and other stories’ (2005), which examines how the discourses of the dominant culture in America and Australia have framed Chineseness. Chan’s thesis includes a fictional cycle of nine linked stories about a Chinese family who have migrated to Sydney. These stories explore the function of memory in the creation of family narratives, asking the question: who holds the “truth” in a family? Of his purpose in writing the fiction in this form Chan says:

> Composing a linked cycle of stories has given me the opportunity to extend the short story form, especially by giving me scope to expand the lives of the characters beyond a single story. The lives of the characters can take on greater complexity since they confront challenges at different stages of their lives from different perspectives (2005, iv).

Further in the creative component of the thesis, the fictional narrator says:

> These are family stories and I have assigned myself the task of recording things as they have been recounted to me but the task is elusive and nothing has a solid core, a central, hard patina that I can grasp and feel and say, with a degree of satisfaction, that is how it was or must have been (2005, Part II, 6).

In a novel, a writer can convey this same sense of the fragmentary recollections inherent in family history, but the short story cycle itself reinforces, by means of its structure, such patterns of return, the going over again in one’s mind of the same events, and the relational processes by which family knowledge is collectively constructed.
Victoria Kuttainen also conducted doctoral research into the short story cycle and settler fictions in Australia, Canada and the USA, later published as *Unsettling stories: settler postcolonialism and the short story composite* (2010). Kuttainen argues that the form, by virtue of its own structure of discontinuous stories that share unstable borders, is well-suited to expressing the ‘lingering anxieties about boundary management’ (2010, 5) which is a feature of settler societies where Indigenous groups and other marginalised communities remain sidelined by the dominant narratives of the nation, particularly those that focus on an expression of a national identity and voice (2010, 3). The book examines several short story cycles organised around tropes of the family, the small town, home, history and trauma. In the last of these, Winton’s *The turning* is drawn on as an exemplary text that invokes ‘the forms of trauma testimony such as fragmentation, dislocation, repetition, and belatedness in recycling historical material from the national past for the purposes of fiction’ (2010, 17). In discussing Olga Masters’s *A long time dying* (1985), Kuttainen’s comments resonate with my own interest in the potential of the short story cycle to articulate women’s experiences of the mundane. She remarks that by focusing myopically on small, isolated details and fragments of story, the micro-narratives of Masters’s homely tales assemble, as if by pointillism, a picture of home as an idyll-in-miniature, a lost paradise that nurtures the myth of a separate female domain uncorrupted by metropolitan values and politics (2010, 15).

While this thesis in no way seeks to emulate romanticised, gender-restrictive views of home life or homemaking, it is interested in women’s ambivalent

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15 I suggest that the current and previous Australian federal governments’ handling of the arrival of asylum seekers by boat to the continent indicates that as a nation we are still grappling with, as Kuttainen puts it, “boundary trouble” (2010, 1).
experiences of the mundane and the relationships they sustain in these spaces.

These examples of recent scholarly attention to the short story cycle suggest to me that critical appreciation of the form is growing. This is occurring alongside the form’s popularity amongst a number of contemporary fiction writers. *Purple threads* is only one example within an expanding field of short story cycles by Australian writers, which includes Gretchen Shirm’s *Having cried wolf* (2010a) and Jess Huon’s *The dark wet* (2011). Interestingly, Shirm acknowledges the influence of other ‘interwoven story collections,’ including *The turning*, on her writing (Shirm, 2010b). Also, in a review of *The dark wet*, writer and lecturer Kalinda Ashton notes that ‘linked short stories or “novels in stories” … have a stronger place in American publishing … [but are] experiencing a revival in Australia’ (2012, 20).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a selective overview of short story cycle scholarship in the past forty years. It has highlighted the key concerns of this field—the naming of the form and determination of its core features—established that interest in the form is strongest in the United States, but that more recently attention is growing in Australia amongst researchers and

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16 Ashton’s article appears in *The weekend Australian review* opposite my own review of *Purple threads* (Kadmos, 2012). At the time of writing the review, while still in the early stages of my research, finding scant precedence for the use of the term short story cycle in Australian forums and having a restricted word limit for the review, I admit that I too settled on the descriptor linked stories rather than risk using a term that might confuse the readership.
writers of fiction. It has also shown that this newer research is interested in how the form functions in specific ways—to explore relations of gender and/or ethnicity and the impacts of colonialism, for instance. These points about the short story cycle lay the foundation for this project’s concern with the potential of the form to represent women’s transformations through the experiences of their daily lives as individuals situated in specific social and historical contexts, connected through webs of relationships that demand from them obligations and responsibilities. In the next chapter, I suggest that the feminist notion of “the wave” is a helpful concept when considering the imaginative ways in which the short story cycle represents these aspects of women’s lives, and look closely at other features of the form that support these ends.
3

Telling women’s stories through the short story cycle

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how the short story cycle can be used to tell stories about women’s ordinary lives by representing relational aspects of women’s intersectional identities, and how women come to a greater sense of who they are within the context of relationships—some enduring, others not—over time. This chapter, which looks more closely at how the short story cycle achieves this, proposes that the feminist notion of the wave resonates with the processes of personal transformation often found in short story cycles about women. As previously explained, Susan Garland Mann claims that the only defining feature of the form is the simultaneous independence and interrelatedness of the stories within the cycle. This chapter highlights other characteristics, seen variously across the range of short story cycles, which arise from this basic structure. These include the ways that time and temporality may function differently in a cycle; the mosaic narrative structure of the form; the way the cycle accommodates narrative silences and resists narrative closure; and the function of the longer story within the cycle. The claims made in this chapter are illustrated with examples drawn from a selection of cycles. Many women writers in the west have used the form for telling women’s stories, including the writers mentioned in the previous two chapters and others. Cycles by Alice Munro, Gloria Naylor and Elizabeth Strout are
drawn on in this chapter to explore how the cycle can privilege storytelling about women and the relationships that make their lives meaningful.

The short story cycle and “the wave”

As mentioned in Chapter One, developments in feminist thinking throughout the 1980s and 1990s—commonly referred to as the third wave of feminism—are important for this discussion of the representation of women’s lives in the short story cycle. As we will see, not all feminists agree with the justification for wave terminology to describe the history of feminism and changes in feminist thought, but this thesis posits that the wave functions well as a metaphor for the way the short story cycle represents relationality and personal transformation in women’s lives. A closer inspection of the language used by feminist scholars in reference to the wave helps to illuminate the metaphorical possibilities of the term.

Lise Shapiro Sanders claims that third wave feminists ‘see their work as founded on second wave principles, yet distinguished by certain cultural and political differences’ (2004, 51). Yet almost a decade earlier, Gina Dent remarked that the generational language implied by the notion of waves ‘hides other differences within it—national trajectories, sexual orientation, professional status, etc.’ (1995, 70). Feminist theorist Elaine Showalter is cautious about wave terminology for a different reason, arguing that ‘a wave suggests movement,’ yet that the specific issues and strong leadership that are capable of inspiring unity and collective action, thereby justifying the categorisation of a wave, do not exist at present in contemporary western
society (in Gillis and Munford, 2004, 60–3). Susan Archer Mann and Douglas Huffman also caution that the tendency to focus on common themes unifying each wave can obscure the diversity of competing feminisms that exist, and, echoing Showalter, claim that ‘the wave metaphor only makes sense when it is used to describe mass-based movements that ebb and flow, rise and decline, and crest in some concrete, historical accomplishments or defeats’ (2005, 58). Nevertheless, Archer Mann accepts that whether or not ‘this oceanography of feminist waves is even useful … the third wave has become the banner under which many women identify their new brand of feminism’ (2013, 56).  

While feminists disagree over the appropriateness of wave terminology to describe changes in feminist theory and action, the wave, imbued with descriptors such as diversity, ebb and flow, crest, movement and action, can be an apt metaphor for how women’s identities transform through the accumulation of minor experiences over time, represented so well in the short story cycle. This is because its unique structural design of collected, and connected, individual short stories de-emphasises the importance of  

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17 One exponent of wave terminology is self-proclaimed third-wave feminist Naomi Wolf. Wolf indicates that she is quite happy to acknowledge the existence of not only third-, but even fourth-wave feminists and so on (Wolf, 2008). I see this potential proliferation of categories of feminists as one problem of the generational framework, encouraging an ongoing rebuttal of the previous generation’s claims and achievements, and a belief that not only is it possible, but desirable, for contemporary feminists to distinguish themselves and the direction of their work, from earlier feminists. Of this potentially divisive pattern Susan Faludi, well-known for her seminal book, Backlash: the undeclared war against American women (1991) asks: ‘but to what end? To create a tabula rasa, where the past is no longer usable and one can become or unbecome anything? Where everything is relative, indeterminate, and a “choice” as valid as any other choice? In other words, the weightless, ahistorical realm of the commercial, a realm that promises its inhabitant a perpetual nursery where no one has to grow up’ (2010, 42).
linearity in the text, privileging instead the interweaving, spiralling, cyclical processes of relationality.

Nagel, for instance, draws on the historical meaning of cycle, as a collection of verse or narratives that centre on an outstanding event or character (2001, 1–2) to claim that ‘in most [short story cycles], “sequentiality” is the least important aspect of the groupings of stories within a volume. The relationships among stories in a short-story cycle is far more complex than the simple following of one another in sequence’ (2001, 12). In this sense, the cycle is not a complete or enclosed circle, but comprises patterns of return and revision. Development in the short story cycle often occurs through forward and returning movements that rest not necessarily in the place of origin, but slightly to the side. Jennifer Smith describes the movement in these terms:

> These volumes are not cyclical in the sense that they always begin and end in the same ways or that they go through symmetrical stages. … rather, short-story cycles engage recursive, or cyclical, elements. A more accurate metaphor might be that of the helix, as the stories circle without exact repetition. The linking structures serve as axes around which the stories curve (2011, 2–3).

This image of the spiralling helix reflects graphically aspects of women’s experiences of mundane, ordinary life. The appearance of repetitiveness in daily life may hide subtle transformations that women nevertheless experience as they journey through the longer course of their lives. The image of a wave resonates with both Nagel’s notion of cycle and Smith’s helix, while at the same time accommodating the diversity of women’s experiences that is a crucial tenet of contemporary feminism. Lister claims
that the form actually ‘privileges plurality and openness. It contests boundaries and enacts the possibility of multiple beginnings and renewable identities’ (2007, para 1). This plurality and renewable potential is found in the “oceanography” of human experience: a constantly shifting, never-repeating movement of waves. At times this movement can be powerful, almost dangerous, at others gentle and soothing. There is also, at the point of impact when each wave hits the sand, some backwash, or *backlash*, where the force of the water’s reach is lessened and some reabsorption occurs. In this return there is a re-visioning, partly fuelled by the wave that is now spent, and the new water that follows, from which something new is created.

By incorporating both return and renewal (repetitions and connections that occur throughout the cycle in independent contexts) into its narrative structure, the short story cycle can privilege the connections which women may value over the courses of their lives, to their pasts, and presents—both the events that occur and the relationships they encounter—as they move forward into their futures. The form embraces the enriching aspects of relational interdependence. Ingram describes this in terms that resonate with the image of the individual wave subsumed into the wider sea, and the principles of relational autonomy: ‘Every story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole’ (1971, 19). In this way the form lends itself to bringing together stories of dramatic weight and those with more subtle significance,
the minutiae of the everyday. As Weekes claims, the structure of contemporary women’s short story cycles ‘replicates the complex structure of women’s identities: it reflects attempts to connect these fragments in a meaningful way, to create a fulfilling and unified self’ (2003, 96). Further, she says that:

Rather than a linear progress toward autonomy and independence, females’ identities are continually re-formed, allowing women to fluctuate between stages of development in response to the demands of relationships and maternal nurturing (2003, 98).

Such potential of the short story cycle make it an exciting form to work with and a rich repository for the diverse expressions of women’s lives.

**Domestic, private time in the short story cycle**

**Feminism and domesticity**

The focus on the mundane and the importance of relationships in women’s lives is not an attempt to return to outdated notions that restrict women’s aspirations and opportunities to domesticity and the family. It would be futile to ignore that, for decades now, experiences in the public domain and paid work have been vitally important to many women’s sense of autonomy and identity. Nevertheless, while embracing the principle that women’s experiences—biologically, socially, emotionally—are not universal, I still contend that, for the most part, women share some experiences that are defined by their gendered identities. In western societies, many women will spend some part of their lives in domestic spheres performing unpaid

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18 As short story cycle writer Joyce Carol Oates remarks: “Though I don’t believe that there is a distinctly “female” sensibility, I know, of course, that there has been a female fate” (in Lister, 2007, para 3).
tasks as homemakers or as carers of young children, the sick or elderly. In these spaces, an individual subject’s relation to time may be experienced differently to the way it is experienced in the world of paid work, where tasks are typically tied to economic productivity. Through techniques that accommodate alternative representations of the passage of time, the short story cycle emphasises relational rather than individual experiences of the world. John Gerlach describes how the cycle works in this way:

In a story cycle … character begins to dissolve into theme; people are not as important as the forces which move them. Time begins to become cyclical, not linear, no longer under the sway of the strong force of sequential plot and individual character, aspects that are so important to our sense of the novel. The novel would seem to stem from the Romantic and post-Romantic conception of the individual, while the story cycle harks back to those older conceptions of man as an actor in a cosmic drama (1992, 58).

This section draws on feminist discussions about domestic work, and the ideas of sociologist Barbara Adam and other theorists of gender and time to argue that the short story cycle opens spaces where the transformations enabled by mundane experiences can be more fully appreciated.

Throughout the twentieth century some feminists had difficulty theorising the role of the housewife and the homemaker in any positive light. For French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, whose description of domestic work in post-war Europe in The second sex (1949/2010) is bleak and appalling, the work of home making and child care was entirely oppressive to women, locking them into an existence that enabled men and children to experience “transcendence” or the expression of their individual subjectivity. By
comparison, women’s work, while necessary for sustaining life, represented the temporal stagnation of immanence. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young summarises de Beauvoir’s attitude thus:

The temporality of immanence is cyclical, repetitive. As the movement of life it moves in species time unpunctuated by events of individual meaning. The cycles go around, from spring to summer to fall to winter, from birth to death and birth to death. Beauvoir describes the activity of housework as living out this cyclical time, a time with no future and no goals (1997, 148).

Feminist responses towards women’s domestic work continued to be conflicting throughout the twentieth century and are still debated today. During the height of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, some versions of second-wave feminism presented domesticity as an existence that women had to leave behind in order to become emancipated.¹⁹ However, not all feminist scholars agree with this view, and some encourage new ways of thinking about domestic work as it is experienced by both women and men that counter de Beauvoir’s negative reading of the repetitive, cyclical patterns inherent in the private, domestic sphere. For example, Young, while conceding it is important not to romanticise the activities of housework and home making (1997, 154), asks, ‘is it possible to retain an idea of home as supporting the individual subjectivity of the person, where the subject is understood as fluid, partial, shifting, and in relations of reciprocal support with others?’ (1997, 141). Linda Barclay directly counters assumptions that domestic work and caring are

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¹⁹ Betty Friedan is known for her critique of the housewife, whom she portrays as an unhappy, unfulfilled person, in her classic text, The feminine mystique (1963). And Ann Oakley, in Housewife (1976), claimed that ‘housework … is work directly opposed to the possibility of human self-actualization’ (1974, 222, in Johnson and Lloyd, 2004, 7–8).
counterproductive to personal autonomy by reframing autonomy within a relational context:

Traditionally, women’s lives have been devoted to the care of others, and if anything the problem has been to find a space for the expression and pursuit of one’s own interests. The relationship of a parent to child, the traditional conception of what it is to be a wife, or caring for a frail and aging parent can hardly be characterized as a form of cooperation for the efficacious pursuit of self-interest. Feminist theory has contributed to the development of alternative theory, which focuses moral concern more on the qualities and activities appropriate to care of others than on legitimizing individual rights as the means for protecting individuals from one another. They have argued that as we are in fact selves characterized as much by our capacity for care and concern for others as by our self-interest, we need moral and political theories that are shaped according to this fact (2000, 59).

Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd raise similar concerns, arguing that feminist theories must continue to address inequalities around perceptions of and reward for work undertaken in and outside the home, by men and women, without perpetuating a narrative that alienates women from their own lived experiences:

Gender is recognised as just one determinant of identity and feminists have many different affiliations. But it is also clear that the tensions for women between achievement and domesticity have not been resolved by a story that calls on women to leave their ‘home selves’ behind. As a biographical solution to what are fundamental systematic contradictions and tensions between the way home life and work life are organised in contemporary society, this narrative no longer works and we need to find other ways to understand and face the dilemmas involved (2004, 15).

The argument presented in this thesis supports a similarly flexible view of domesticity, which encompasses different experiences based on class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, and asserts that personal, intellectual or spiritual transformation is as readily available to individuals in their private, unpaid
roles, as it is to people engaged in more public or socially, politically and economically influential pursuits. Further, it claims that time in the domestic sphere may be experienced as less ordered and more susceptible to the unpredictability of relationships of obligation and dependence. The short story cycle, liberated from the restraints of overarching plot development and a cumulative sequence of causes and effects, may thus suitably convey time passing in the ordinary moments of people’s lives.

**Time**

Feminist scholarship has dealt extensively with how notions of time have been used to control communities, establish privilege and marginalise and undervalue experiences that operate outside of the parameters of official, acceptable, measured time. For instance, Rita Felski claims that feminist thinking about time can be shaped around four forms: redemption, regression, repetition and rupture, all patterns which ‘reach beyond the empty, mechanical measure of clock time’ (2002, 21). Her thoughts on time as repetition are particularly relevant for this discussion about the short story cycle:

*Anthropologists often stress the importance of ritual in the non-Western experience of time. Here, repetition is valued as a treasured link to an imagined community of ancestors that transcends historical time. In modernity, by contrast, repetition is often the enemy. It is viewed with distrust, or even with horror. It is a sign of dull compulsion, grey routine, the oppressive regimen of natural or man-made cycles. It threatens the existential dream of authentic self-creation by yoking the self to a preordained pattern (2002, 25).*

Sociologist and time studies scholar Barbara Adam remarks that machine-time, a human creation,
sits uneasily with the lived times of everyday life, the reproductive, sustaining and caring work that is primarily the domain of women across the world, and the processes of nature that are transformed by the temporal imposition and colonization (2006, 119).

Of course, women are not the only people in society who dwell on the margins of clock-time. Adam argues that:

While clock-time dominates the world of work and the global economy, the great majority of the world’s people function in the shadows of the time economy of money. Children and the elderly, the unemployed, carers the world over and subsistence farmers of the majority world inhabit the shadowlands of un- and undervalued time. Women dwell there in unequal numbers. Their time does not register on the radar of commodified time. Their work is not accorded value in the capitalist scheme of things. Rather, it is rendered invisible. As ‘unproductive’ work it is relegated to the shadow of capitalist production, beyond reach and concern (2006, 124).

Alison Bartlett, on the experience of maternal time, claims that ‘western cultures have inherited and interiorized an understanding of time as linear, incremental and developmental, which values climactic events, dates and heroes of history while erasing the quotidian and those who do the work of the everyday’ (2010, 121). Further, Bartlett claims, “normal time” signifies time in paid work, whereby motherhood is positioned as a temporary aside from this productive use of time. This idea is reinforced by the concept of the term “maternity leave”, which implies that maternal time is ‘liminal, temporary and transitory’ (2010, 127).20 Fiction writer and scholar Julienne van Loon found this to be the case in her own experience. She claims that as an adult she had accepted that her ‘days were organised by a model based  

20 Indeed, a common phrase used by mothers engaged with the full-time care of their children is that they are “out of the workforce”. This phrase reinforces the notion of being temporarily non-productive. And yet Bartlett asserts that maternal work can be productive in its own way. Of the early years following the birth of a baby, she says: ‘The blur of babydaze, I want to argue, signals an encounter with the real that can be potentially productive in ways that are not available to the focused, progressive, outcomes-based trajectory of “normal” rational calendar workdays’ (2010, 121).
on plans, objectives, outcomes’ which provided ‘structure and a sense of purpose’ (2011, np). However, following the birth of her baby, ‘one of the biggest adjustments [she] had to make [was] to arrive at a new understanding of time, one measured only by the fragile, mutable pattern of basic human needs: sleep, food, warmth, contact’ (2011, np).

As a cyclical narrative form, the short story cycle actively resists the dominance of linear time (and its associations with progress) as the only, acceptable determinant of successful development. By paying closer attention to smaller moments in the unremarkable and sometimes repetitive activities of everyday life, fragments of experience and isolated themes, while still telling a larger story or grappling with broader themes as a whole, the stories reveal the longer-term outcomes of the events explored as the cycle unfolds. In this way, far from representing the stagnation of cyclical motion as articulated in de Beauvoir’s vision, the short story cycle can portray time in relation to a character’s narrative as irregular, provisional, and relational. These representations of time readily accommodate lapses in the narrative action of the stories, resist climactic moments, and are inextricably linked to other structural features of the short story cycle that make it suitable for exploring women’s lives, such as its mosaic narrative structure and the focus on minor narrative arcs.21

21 According to Elizabeth Fallaize de Beauvoir herself used the short story cycle form to write about women—The woman destroyed (1967) and When things of the spirit come first (1979). Of the three female characters in the first of these books, Fallaize says: ‘Taken separately, the sources of their errors may appear individual; taken together, however, the ways in which these three women use words to build myths about their roles as wives and mothers, to conceal from themselves the passage of time, to cover over the difficulties that they have in relating to their bodies, becomes an insistent pattern—an indication of a common “situation” as women’ (1988, 171–2).
Mosaic narrative structure—the focus on smaller moments in time: *The beggar maid* and *Olive Kitteridge*

The work of novelist and creative writing teacher Madison Smartt Bell on narrative design in western fiction provides some further insights into how the short story cycle’s structure of independent yet interrelated stories sets itself apart from longer, continuous narratives, and supports storytelling about women’s relational lives. His comments are not directed towards the short story cycle as such, but they are useful for this discussion by highlighting how the form emphasises relationality in cycles about women.

Drawing on the Freytag triangle (the classic graphic representation of conventional story progression, connecting the three points between exposition, climax and resolution, so that the vertical axis represents plot, and the horizontal axis, time), Bell argues that the form of linear narrative design conveyed by the triangle dominates thinking about narrative structure. He admits that all stories bear some relationship to this structure, although not necessarily in the neat way the triangle promises, which supposes that the plot is the primary structural element in the story, and that the events in the story will be told in chronological order. Hence, the triangle represents the progress of events over time, and thus describes a process of *motion* (1997, 29). This holds true for narratives that are bound by time and sequence. The narrative follows a sequence of causes and effects, much like, Bell says, a row of falling dominoes. The reader is held

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22 Freytag’s triangle, or pyramid, was developed by German writer and critic, Gustav Freytag, and introduced in his book, *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863) (Buzzard and Lepan, 2014, 62).
to attention by the suspenseful anticipation (however slight) of ‘what’s gonna happen?’ (1997, 30). While there are numerous variations on linear design, narratives based on this form will, at some level, be future oriented, pointing the direction to some ultimate, if only provisional, outcome.

But not all narratives follow this model. To illustrate what he describes as modular narrative design, Bell likens the writer to a mosaicist, who is concerned with assembling the final work out of smaller, component parts (1997, 213). Therefore, while linear design is a process of movement, modular design is a process of assembly. In this approach, the writer handles the raw material in a more fragmentary way. While some linear narratives may make significant jumps across time and place, in modular designed narratives, such as many short story cycles, these transitions are sometimes more radical. As well as shifting temporal and geographical locations, modular narratives may be characterised by disruptions to the storyline, including changes in point of view from one central character to another, or differences in voice and tone. Bell claims that this non-linear structure may be ‘an attractive way to show relationships between events or people or motifs or themes which are not generated by sequences of cause and effect’ and that therefore, the form is often inseparable from the very meaning of the text (1997, 216).

Echoing Bell’s notion of mosaic narrative design, scholar María Jesús Hernáez Lerena claims that Alice Munro’s short story cycle, The beggar maid, is less bound by the novelistic requirements of continuity and cause–
effect relationships, with linear chronology less important as a means to achieve coherence (1996, 11). She remarks: ‘Continuity is not chronological but thematic: there is not a description of the process of the character’s fate, but a juxtaposition of moments that may produce several effects: incongruence, surprise, irony’ (1996, 19). The stories in Munro’s text do piece together the overall trajectory of the main protagonist, Rose—from poor girl in country Canada living with her father and stepmother Flo, through university education, marriage and eventual divorce, motherhood and career as an actress. However, rather than articulating these events in the form of a conventional linear narrative—where the specific set of events narrated are bound by a sequence of causes and effects that move logically toward a particular outcome, often representing a defining experience for the principal character—the stories in *The beggar maid* are not offered to the reader with the same sense of predictability or certainty. While this particular collection of tales is told about Rose, the reader senses that as many other stories from Rose’s life could have been drawn together to explore similar themes. Not every story in this text takes place in a single period in Rose’s life. Some stories jump back and forth over several years in order to illustrate an idea being developed in the story at hand. Through this process, characters who are central to one story, may disappear in another, may even have died, and yet reappear in a later story to illustrate a different idea (Hernáez Lerena, 1996, 14). In this way, Hernáez Lerena claims that the events ‘are put together around an idea or relational scheme, which
prevents their dispersal along a chronological line so as to exploit their capacity of analogy and contrast’ (1996, 18).

For example, the final story in the cycle, ‘Who do you think you are’, opens with: ‘There were some things Rose and her brother Brian could safely talk about, without running aground on principles or statements of position, and one of them was Milton Homer’ (Munro, 1991, 193), a young man from their hometown, Hanratty, whom the locals describe as being “not all there” (197). The story immediately flashes back to an incident that, the reader is advised, occurred ‘long ago, before their father died and before Brian went to school’ (193). Rose recounts the visit by Milton, culminating in a mocking send-up of his manner, and unexpectedly the reader is made aware that the “present” tense of the story is well ahead of these recollections, that Rose and Brian are actually sharing this story with Brian’s wife, Phoebe: “Now that’s enough. That’s enough, Rose,” said Brian, but he laughed. He could put up with Rose’s theatrics when they were about Hanratty’ (195). The remainder of the story has Rose recalling, in present tense, other stories about Milton Homer as his life intersects with hers over many years, creating an immediacy to the these encounters. Yet the reader is reminded that Rose is remembering these events from the temporal distance of the narrative present when Phoebe is again brought

23 In her larger argument Hernáez Lerena draws on Jonathan Culler’s ideas on the function of the apostrophe in rhetoric—a pause or breach in the communicator’s flow to address a second audience, idea or thing (1996, 11)—to claim that the apostrophe mirrors the treatment of characters in the short story cycle. She says: ‘In the stories of The Beggar Maid certain members of a community are held in a steady light temporarily; they are performers of a situation that will cease to exist in the next story … to a very great extent, characters are treated apostrophically’ (1996, 14; italics in original).
abruptly into the picture: “The village idiot,” said Phoebe, trying to comprehend these things, with her inexhaustible unappreciated politeness, and both Rose and Brian said that they had never heard him described that way’ (197). Rose’s final recollection of Milton Homer is a more recent one, articulated during a conversation with another old neighbour during a return to Hanratty. This other man, Ralph Gillespie, resists Rose’s attempts to draw him into her exaggerated reminiscing on the eccentricities of their poor, country home and its inhabitants, causing Rose to realise that her life-long tendency to talk about her home in this way has disguised a ‘peculiar shame which she carried around with her’ (209). Brought once again to the narrative present, the reader is told:

But when Rose remembered this unsatisfactory conversation [with Ralph Gillespie] she seemed to recall a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness, though certainly no words of that kind had been spoken … for these reasons Rose did not explain anything further about Ralph Gillespie to Brian and Phoebe when she recalled Milton [Homer] (209–10).

These flashes into Rose’s past resist chronological order because the idea or relational scheme they are brought together to explore is the focus of this particular story, and is crystallised in this final reflection. Here, Rose reconsiders a life-long tendency to disparage, and thus distance herself from, a childhood she fears is incompatible with the life she tries to forge for herself as an adult.

Illustrating Bell’s claim that the form is often inseparable from the meaning of the text, *The beggar maid*, through the many isolated incidents narrated in this and the other nine stories, conveys the idea that a subject’s story is a
mosaic of innumerable small experiences, interconnected with other people, that shape identity and develop ideas and beliefs about a subject, others and the world, and through which autonomous decisions are made. Munro herself remarks: ‘I want to write the story that will zero in and give you intense, but not connected, moments of experience’ (in Hernández Lerena, 1996, 9) because ‘I don’t see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time’ (in Hernández Lerena, 1996, 20).

The short story cycle’s capacity to accommodate these smaller moments in life, and to show how these experiences might subtly transform individuals, and their connection to others, over the long course of their lives, may make the form particularly effective for representing the experiences of older women who, according to some scholars, are underrepresented in narrative fiction. Australian writer and scholar Lyz Byrski, who has written several best-selling novels featuring older women, explains that she began writing fiction because she couldn’t find stories that reflected the diversity of ageing women’s lives:

I searched the shelves of libraries and bookshops which were packed with women’s popular fiction only to discover that women over fifty featured only as peripheral characters, usually negative and stereotypical; bossy, interfering mothers-in-law, nosey neighbours, crotchety spinsters, pathetic empty nesters, or feeble and demented burdens, hampering the lives of the really important people; men, younger women and children. Where, I wondered, were the stories of older, ageing and old women as central characters with interesting lives? (2010, 3)\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{24}\) Byrski draws on the work of Marilyn Poole and Susan Feldman (1999) and Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich (1983), who claim that feminism has ignored the issues of ageing for older women. Byrski’s novels include *Gang of four* (2005), *In the company of*
While Byrski sought to redress this imbalance through the novel, American writer Elizabeth Strout chose the short story cycle form to create a multifaceted story about a middle aged woman. *Olive Kitteridge* (2008) comprises thirteen stories which situate the central character within the web of relationships generated by her community on the coast of Maine in New England. While the title of the book flags that Olive—a maths teacher who is married to the town pharmacist, Henry, and has one son, Christopher—is the primary character in the book, she is not necessarily the focus in all of the stories. The first story, ‘Pharmacy’, concerns Henry and his innocent infatuation with one of his shop assistants and most of the action occurs at the pharmacy, yet Olive is referred to on numerous occasions throughout and the reader receives an early introduction to this complex woman through statements such as: ‘she had a darkness that seemed to stand beside her like an acquaintance that would not go away’ (Strout, 2008, 6); and ‘the possibility of Olive’s dying and leaving him alone gives [Henry] glimpses of horror he can’t abide’ (17). In one story Olive and Henry make only a fleeting appearance as they dine in the restaurant where the story’s protagonist, Angie, plays piano, yet in many other stories Olive takes a more central role in the dramas of her own or her neighbours’ lives, ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. She attends her son’s wedding even though she disapproves of his choice of bride; she counsels a young woman with anorexia nervosa; she lends a hand at the funeral of the husband of an

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25 *Olive Kitteridge* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2009.
ex-pupil of hers; and she and Henry are left shaken after being taken hostage in a hold-up at the local hospital. Variously, in many separate incidents, Olive emerges through her interactions with others—her relationships as a wife, mother, teacher, neighbour, and friend—as strong-willed, forthright, bossy, loyal, loving and kind. Reviewer, Susan Guaccero, puts it this way: ‘The author … reveals [Olive] to us in parts and evokes the sense of multiple self-states that unite to form her continuity and coherence over time … as she navigates the complex relational matrix of human experience’ (2010, 412).

The story ‘Security’ explores how complex the processes of negotiating often disparate needs and desires in relationships can be, processes that are often emotionally fraught when the subjects involved share a parent–child bond. Olive, now widowed and long retired, is visiting her son and his new wife and stepchildren in New York. Olive is pained by the distance—physical and emotional—that exists between her and Christopher, yet remains puzzled as to its cause. She is determined that this visit will reconnect them somehow, and is therefore pleased when a simple family walk they have all taken around the neighbourhood appears to have gone well. However, back in her basement bedroom in Christopher’s flat, Olive

26 Scholar Mary Laga’s assessment of Olive Kitteridge aligns with Byrski’s criticisms of representations of older women in fiction. Laga remarks: ‘[Strout] portrays Olive in a very denigrating fashion, in sharp contrast to her affable aging husband, Henry. In fact, this book shows a flagrant gender bias that privileges aging men and opts for a mostly unsympathetic characterization of older women, as shown in the difference of affability, parenting skills and even sexual prowess between aging males and females’ (2011, 1972). However, while I accept that many of the representations of Olive resemble Byrski’s list of stereotypes of older women, Olive is nevertheless a complex character of emotional depth, whom I found myself drawn to, in spite of her disagreeable, unflattering qualities. Further, she is the central character of this cycle.
sees a stain on her blouse from ice cream she must have dribbled while out walking. The ‘happiness inside her [because] she was with her son’ (220) is instantly shattered by the terrifying realities that she is growing old, and that the dynamics of her relationship with her son and the level of dependence is changing. She realises she is becoming dependent on people whose love for her is not something she can be confident of:

A small feeling of distress took hold. They had seen this and not told her. She had become the old lady her Aunt Ora had been … her son should have pointed this out the minute it happened, as she would have to him … did they think she was just one more baby they were carting around? (226)

 Sadly, Olive’s stubborn sensitivity destroys any pleasure she had previously had in the visit. The next morning Christopher finds her sitting in the backyard with her packed suitcase at her feet, refusing to respond to his suggestion that something must have happened to trigger her resolve to leave earlier than planned. Christopher’s prodding and Olive’s hurt fuel them both until they are embroiled in a bitter argument, each bringing forth deep-seated resentments it is apparent have been bottled up for years. Nothing is resolved: ‘Everything became blurry, not just her eyes. She said things, with more and more fury—and Christopher answered, calmly, still washing kitchen things calmly’ (230).

The beggar maid and Olive Kitteridge employ mosaic narrative structures to knit together a range of stories across time, drawing on many characters to explore different relationships that shape the lives of two complex women. In relation to The beggar maid, Hernáez Lerena remarks that ‘there is no way to know how a woman has found herself in old age, how she has
become another woman, instead we are witnesses of the various—however disparate—manifestations of an individual’s personality’ (1996, 19). The observation can be equally applied to *Olive Kitteridge*, and the poignant image of Olive, feeling humiliated and afraid when she sees the ice cream stain in the mirror. The short story cycle’s ability to articulate the seemingly mundane can be a powerful technique for storytelling about women as they transform over the longer course of their lives. So too can its capacity to disrupt the notion that the impact of any event can be immediately determined, acknowledging instead that it may often take time for the fuller implications of a subjects’ experiences and decisions to be revealed, if at all. How the short story cycle resists narrative closure is examined in the next section.

**Resisting narrative closure: *The women of Brewster Place***

Philosopher Noel Carroll claims that narrative closure, which ‘yields a feeling of completeness’ (2007, 2), while not present in all narratives (such as soap operas or national histories), is an important, and expected, aspect of very many narratives that are ‘created for aesthetic consumption’ (2007, 15). The text creates a series of questions for the reader, who is thereby motivated to continue reading, and is not satisfied until those questions are answered. Carroll contends, therefore, that ‘narrative closure is the result of a narrative structure’s answering of all the pressing questions it has stirred in the audience’ (2007, 15).
The short story cycle, however, due to its concentration on smaller, sometimes discontinuous events, will inevitably contain gaps between the stories of these individual moments. The expectation too, that each independent story will stand on its own, means that not every strand introduced in one story will necessarily be followed up in the next. Readers of the form, therefore, learn to be prepared for the possibility that not all their questions will be answered by the end of the text. Scholar Karen Castellucci Cox puts it this way:

"Where the traditional reader is conditioned to discover through careful reading the cause of any given event or detail, the story cycle reader may never be satisfied on particular points. How some event came about or how another will be resolved rarely takes central importance as the story cycle manipulates and magnifies the capricious natures and radically shifting perspectives of whole communities of characters. Such a wide-ranging lens necessarily catches fragments rather than whole pictures, bringing into focus the critical interests of one character briefly only to move on to another character while the earlier focus fades (1998, 155)."

Through this approach, the complexity and transformative potential of relationships and relational identities is thus reinforced. This is illustrated in Gloria Naylor’s *The women of Brewster Place* (1983), which comprises seven stories about different women who live, at some time or other, in a dilapidated apartment block in an unnamed city in the United States: ‘Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home’ (Naylor, 1983, 4). Residents include an older, motherly figure, Mattie Michael, young, idealistic Kiswana Browne who rejects her affluent upbringing to live at Brewster Place where she believes she can affect social
change, and a lesbian couple, Theresa and Lorraine. Each story focuses on one of these residents, although other characters appear as their lives intersect with the main character of interest. Nevertheless, once a character’s “story” concludes, the reader may have no access to a fuller account of that woman’s experiences. For example, in ‘The two’, Theresa and Lorraine are the main characters, and the story explores their relationship and their separate and shared struggles to deal with the inevitable prejudice they encounter as lesbian women. Lorraine is portrayed as more sensitive than Theresa, her self-confidence more vulnerable to the judgements of others. The story reaches a horrific conclusion when Lorraine determines to overcome her anxieties by attending a party on her own. On her way home, she is gang-raped by a group of youths and in her traumatised and confused state she lashes out and kills her friend Ben, the elderly caretaker. The reader is left with this hopeless image:

Lorraine screamed and clawed at the motions that were running and shouting from every direction in the universe. A tall, yellow woman in a bloody green and black dress, scraping at the air, crying, ‘Please. Please’ (173).

In the following, and final story, ‘The block party’, all the central characters from the stories thus far are brought together, actually or imaginatively, in a final dream-like scene, where they toil side by side to tear down the brick wall that separates Brewster Place from the rest of the city: ‘Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels … the bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place’(186). The scene restores some agency, if
only temporarily, to the women who have each suffered from the various and compounded effects of being women, black and poor. And yet the scene refuses to resolve some crucial narrative strands. For instance: what happened to Lorraine? Had the rape left her so mentally scarred that she was institutionalised? Or was she arrested and charged over Ben’s death? Did hers and Theresa’s rocky relationship survive the dual tragedies? Were the rapists brought to justice?

Silences likes these, around characters or events, are commonplace in the short story cycle. Hernáez Lerena claims that the cycle reader is not frustrated by such gaps, or by the details that are not provided about characters that disappear or consequences that are pre-empted but never revealed. Rather, she remarks that ‘the reader is somehow reassured that continuity persists is spite of the gap; there has not been any breach in coherence because he recognizes that this restricted selection of very few elements from a lifespan reveals the direction of a voice, the workings of the narrator’s mind’ (1996, 19). The writer of the cycle does, however, need to compensate for disrupting a reader’s expectations that all the threads will be tied up, which can certainly be a motivator for the reader of conventional, longer narratives. This is often accomplished through the writer forging tantalising connections between the stories—whether by means of an event referred to in more than one tale, a character that reappears, a motif shared, or a theme reinforced—which, when encountered by the reader, bring about satisfaction of a different kind. Meaning-making is thus achieved through the connections readers forge in this process. In this way too, the short story
cycle reinforces the notion that individuals achieve personal and shared ends with others through relationships of dependency and care.

Drawing on psychoanalytic principles, Guaccero reinforces the idea that the narrative gaps in the short story cycle are spaces where the characters’ identities form. Of *Olive Kitteridge*, she remarks that, ‘Strout is able to “stand in the spaces” with her characters and portray them as one self while being many’ (2010, 414). As this thesis has been arguing, the mundane—incorporating alternative experiences of time, smaller dramas, and spaces between these experiences where little appears to be happening—can be powerfully transformative. The presence of silences around individual stories can be particularly significant when it comes to representing women’s lives, a theme explored more fully in Chapter Five in the discussion of *Purple threads*.

**The longer story: The beggar maid**

A feature that does not necessarily arise in critical discussion about the short story cycle and can in no way be described as a defining feature of the form, but that I have found present in many cycles nonetheless, is the longer short story. Very often there is, within a cycle, one story that is considerably longer than the others. Within this longer story it seems as though the author is grappling with a particularly complex or pivotal issue that needs to be fully explored, and I argue that the short story cycle provides spaces for stories such as these that might otherwise, due to their length and the competitive restraints around publishing, struggle to reach a readership. In
my own short story cycle, ‘Five seeds’, the longer story, “Lemon tree”, depicts the central character, Connie, dealing with a crisis that threatens the foundations of her life as she knows it, and her very identity as a wife and mother. Paralysed physically and emotionally, Connie needs time at this crossroads to contemplate the challenges she faces, and to reflect on how she wants to respond. In this particularly undramatic story, the reader is invited to “hold the space” for Connie, and to be watchful for the subtle transformations that unfold, as ordinary characters perform the daily rituals that are part of home and community.

In The women of Brewster Place the longer story is ‘Mattie Michael’, which establishes that character as the primary figure whose presence is felt from the start of the cycle to its dramatic conclusion. Winton’s title story, ‘The turning’, at the heart of his cycle, tells the story of Raelene, a young mother who, during a brief friendship with a middle-class newcomer to the town, allows herself to imagine and test alternative realities and relationships for herself and her children beyond the narrow experiences prescribed by her class, educational and economic status, and the terror imposed on her by her abusive husband, Max. Olive Kitteridge takes in two stories of considerable length, ‘Starving’, and ‘Security’ which has already been shown to be thematically significant in the context of Olive’s personal journey.

Munro’s The beggar maid also has two long stories, ‘The beggar maid’, and the even longer ‘Mischief’. The latter, which explores Rose’s sexual identity, jumps back and forth over many years, tracing Rose’s relationships
with her close friend Jocelyn and Jocelyn’s husband, Clifford, with whom
Rose falls in love and has a brief intimacy. Their relationship is only
sexually consummated once, however, and that is many years after their
affair. The progress of Rose and Clifford’s relationship is intertwined with
Rose’s feelings about her marriage and motherhood and the acute sense of
class inferiority that she is unable to shake off throughout her life, factors
that cause her to spend much of her life adrift from the security that a strong
sense of place—be it a physical home or emotionally fulfilling
relationship—can provide. These issues are at the core of Rose’s story, and
it is fitting, therefore, that they are explored in a story of this depth and
breadth. When Rose finally sleeps with Clifford, it is in a different context
to one she ever imagined as a young woman in love. Late one evening, after
several drinks, Rose is drawn into a sexual encounter with both Jocelyn and
Clifford. The next day she is confronted by a barrage of emotions as she
reflects on the experience, yet her conclusions show that she has reached a
point where she understands the importance of continuity and of sustaining
some relationships. She accepts that some relationships should be preserved,
however imperfect they are, because they form part of the history of a
person’s life:

She was angry at Clifford and Jocelyn. She felt that they had made a
fool of her, cheated her, shown her a glaring lack, that otherwise she
would not have been aware of. She resolved never to see them again
and to write them a letter in which she would comment on their
selfishness, obtuseness, and moral degeneracy. By the time she had
the letter written to her own satisfaction, in her head, she was back in
the country again and had calmed down. She decided not to write it.
Sometime later she decided to go on being friends with Clifford and
Jocelyn, because she needed such friends occasionally, at that stage
of her life (Munro, 1991, 136).
Full appreciation of the place that Rose arrives at by the end of this story, and the awareness she has gained, is achieved by seeing her relationships with Clifford and Jocelyn over the full span of the years they have shared thus far, through their years as young parents, into middle age. Rose achieves autonomy in the actions she takes and the decisions she makes through encounters with these two people, at times regular and enmeshed, and at others sporadic and distant, over many years. The longer story required to explore the impacts of these relationships on Rose may have been difficult to achieve outside of a short story cycle. The cycle accommodates the longer story, and highlights the contribution that it makes to the themes being developed throughout.

**Conclusion**

The re-visioning possibilities conjured by the metaphor of the wave, representations of time and the mosaic narrative structure of the short story cycle, its emphasis on disparate events and its tolerance for narrative gaps and silences, and the incidental feature of the longer story within the cycle are all characteristics of the form that make it suitable for articulating women’s relational lives. Many writers have found this to be so, attested by a strong tradition of cycles by and about women as daughters, sisters, lovers, wives and mothers, as aged women, poor women, middle-class, of different ethnic and cultural background, and sexual orientation. This chapter has shown some examples of characters who reflect this diversity, including African American women, older women and white, middle class women.
Explored too, are the ways that these features of the short story cycle make the form suitable for illustrating the impacts of a subject’s intersectional identities, and the importance of relationships in shaping a subject’s autonomous capacities. The remainder of this thesis applies the concepts examined thus far to a close reading of one contemporary Australian short story cycle.
Purple threads as individual and community narrative

To this point, the discussion of the short story cycle has drawn primarily on texts by North American writers because it is within this tradition that the form has received greatest critical attention, and from which a great many creative works have emerged. A key interest of this thesis, however, is to increase awareness of the form in Australia, which does have its own creative tradition, if one not yet fully realised. ‘Five seeds’ in the first part of the thesis and these final chapters of the dissertation bookend this discussion with an original short story cycle set in Australian suburbia, and a critical study of a published contemporary cycle, Purple threads, by Australian writer Jeanine Leane respectively. Set more than forty years apart, in different social and geographical settings, each portraying three generations of women and girls from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the two creative works are brought together to demonstrate the diversity of experiences represented by the form.

Each of these cycles represents the notion that women develop a sense of self that is not only embedded in the communities they belong to, but is also indebted to them. As Barclay puts it: selves’ ‘immersion in networks of relationships forms their desires, aspirations, indeed their very identities’ (2000, 52). Further, Barclay claims that autonomy is not, therefore, achieved
by ‘mysteriously [escaping] the forces of socialization,’ but by ‘reflectively [engaging] with them to participate in shaping a life for [oneself]’ (2000, 55). The suitability of these claims that women come to a greater sense of themselves through relationships over the course of their lives is born out in the fictive cycles: ‘Five seeds’ and those discussed thus far. And this becomes apparent in a different way in Purple threads because the journey of the central character depicted in the stories represents the author’s own life experiences, thereby supporting claims that women’s writing based on their own lives has repeatedly been shown to draw on notions of relationality and collective identity (Smith and Watson in Wheeler, 2013, 66). Further, the process of life-writing can be one way of engaging reflectively with the forces that shape an individual and thereby actively striving towards relational autonomy.

Purple threads shares the focus and purpose of much writing by Indigenous peoples around the world, which explores the impacts of colonisation and its aftermath, functions that Justin Edwards describes as, ‘scrutinizing power relations and resisting imperialist prerogatives … [offering] a “symbolic overhaul” to reshape meanings in light of dominant hegemonies and powerful ideologies’ (2008, 11). This investigation therefore, brings together my interest in how women’s experiences are represented in the short story cycle form and Nagel’s findings that the form is popular with writers exploring complex issues of ethnicity and cultural identity. Launching from Nagel’s work, this study of Purple threads seeks to understand the significance of the short story cycle form and how it is
working in the context of postcolonial women’s writing. The discussion is carried over two chapters, one that situates the text within the tradition of Aboriginal women’s life-writing, and another that draws on the features of the short story cycle to show how the cycle represents relational identity within the small community of three generations of Aboriginal women.  

A deeper understanding of *Purple threads* is gained by considering the text within broader discussions about Aboriginal women’s life-writing. This chapter explores how *Purple threads* reflects relatively new developments in this field from auto/biographical to more overtly fictive forms. This chapter also argues that *Purple threads* can be read as a community narrative because it transcends the story of an individual girl, and becomes one that represents the experiences of a community as a whole. The experiences of individuals in any social group collectively form a broader picture, enabling patterns to emerge and deeper insights into the groups’ experience in society to be gained. The structure comprising interrelated stories in the short story cycle enhances this reading of *Purple threads.* Harkening back to Ingram’s early description of the way that cycles work, the reader’s successive experience of engaging with the whole work modifies the experience of the component parts (1971, 19). And, as Nagel claims, the suitability of the form to explore issues of identity formation—precisely because of this unique structural characteristic—is evidenced by

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27 This discussion could draw heavily on postcolonial theories; however, the thesis’s particular focus on creative writing and the short story cycle does not allow for such an orientation. See Brewster (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2006), Westphalen (2012) and Wheeler (2013) for detailed discussions about Australian Aboriginal literature from postcolonial perspectives.
the range of authors from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds adopting it. Chan’s reflections on using the short story cycle to write his thesis about Chineseness support this claim. He found that the cycle enabled him to expand the lives of the characters beyond the single story, showing individuals to be more complex through being embedded in social networks of family and community (2005, iv). In a similar fashion, comments made by *Purple threads* author, Leane, woven through these discussions, are valuable additions that illuminate this study with insights into her creative practice.

*Purple threads*—auto/biography, creative non-fiction or fiction?\(^{28}\)

Postmodern theorists have questioned humanist assumptions of the auto/biography as a fixed, coherent record of an essential “truth” which

\(^{28}\) Several overlapping terms are used in this chapter. They include auto/biography, life-writing, history and community narrative, according to the focus of the scholars to whose work I refer. For the purposes of my approach to *Purple threads*, I use the term life-writing to refer to this range of narratives, whether auto/biography, fiction, or creative non-fiction, which from the author’s point of view, record their actual experiences or those of other family members. Readers who seek out research drawn on in this thesis may come across the term “narrative of community” as used by Roxanne Harde and contributors to her edited book. Harde uses the term to refer to connected story collections that ‘negotiate the tensions between individual identity and community’ and that privilege ‘community over self, and a concern with process rather than a linear narrative’s conflict or progress’ (2007, 2). While this idea is applied to cycles written into the twentieth century, Harde draws on Zagarell’s theories as a starting point. To Zagarell, “narrative of community” is a literary tradition that emerged in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, dominated by white, middle-class women writers who shared a commitment to ‘rendering the life of a community to readers who lived in a world the authors thought fragmented, rationalized, and individualistic’ (2007, 454). While Harde’s and Zagarell’s ideas are consistent with claims made in this thesis, I am reluctant to forge a definitive link between Zagarell’s study of the North American tradition of that period and community narrative as I understand it in relation to Australian Aboriginal women’s life-writing, where the individual’s story reflects the broader experiences of a community.
view ‘autobiographical personhood as monadic and autonomous’ (Moore-Gilbert, 2009, 17). As scholar Betty Bergland asks:

Do we read at the centre of the autobiography a self, an essential individual, imagined to be coherent and unified, the originator of her own meaning, or do we read a postmodern subject—a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses? (1994, 134)

Eakin similarly objects to assumptions implied by the “auto” in autobiography:

The subject of autobiography to which the pronoun “I” refers is neither singular nor first, and we do well to demystify its claims … autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: I write my story; I say who I am; I create my self (1999, 43).

This section examines the ways in which overtly literary aspects of Purple threads disrupt the assumption that auto/biographies represent objective truthful accounts of a singular subject, and instead suggest that they are, rather, active and often shared representations of relational experiences that shape individual and community identities.

As with other short story cycles, each of the ten stories in Purple threads can stand alone and be read independently, yet each is linked in several ways so that they create richer meanings when read together. Therefore, in spite of a strong chronological narrative in the way these stories are organised, they could be pleasurably read out of sequence. The linking devices include the narrative point of view of the main protagonist, a child called Sunny; the common setting of Gundagai and its environs in the late

29 For instance, in 1907 Georg Misch ‘proposed that the objective of the autobiographer is to “stand as an I, or, more exactly, as an ‘I’-saying person, over against, other persons and living beings.”’ (Moore-Gilbert, 2009, 17).

30 For a more comprehensive discussion of feminist thinking on autobiography see Stanley (1992), Summerfield, Lury and Cossslett (2000), and Smith and Watson (2010).
1960s and 1970s; a small ensemble of other characters; and themes about identity and belonging. An eleventh text piece, an epilogue aptly entitled ‘Country turns’, told from an adult Sunny’s perspective, reminisces on the years covered by the stories and ponders on key themes about family and how a person’s earliest experiences help to shape her life.

In *Purple threads*, Sunny and her younger sister, Star, are cared for by their Aboriginal relatives, Nan and Aunties Boo and Bubby, in a ramshackle house with various ‘lean-to verandas’ (Leane, 2011, 98) where the roof ‘creaked and sagged’ (95), on a patch of land that was once part of a larger farm owned by their late white grandfather, William. Other aunts and uncles have all left home and some have established families of their own. Boo and Bubby are the unmarried daughters who cared for their father, and now do the same for their mother. Sunny and Star’s mother Pearl, the youngest of Nan and William’s children, is rarely present in her children’s lives, or actively involved in their care. The stories in *Purple threads* are placed side by side in a loosely chronological order, following Sunny from about age five to early adolescence. They cover a range of experiences, including her resistance to Sunday school and her confusion about the role of religion in the family; her distant relationship with her mother; meeting her father and white relatives for the first time; and starting school. There are also many other incidents, articulated in the narrative present or told as stories from the past, involving the family’s interactions with the white farming community that surrounds but largely excludes them.
In many respects *Purple threads* continues a tradition of auto/biographical narratives written by Aboriginal women, which began to appear in the 1980s, and gained momentum in the 1990s. This canon includes Sally Morgan’s *My place* (1987), Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t take your love to town* (Langford, 1988), Alice Nannup’s *When the pelican laughed* (1992), co-authored with Lauren Marsh and Stephen Kinnane, and Rosalie Fraser’s *Shadow child* (1998). Like these texts, *Purple threads* draws on the personal experiences of the author, and makes a significant contribution to this rich field of Australian literature. However, there are distinctive points of difference in Leane’s narrative. As a creative writer I am particularly interested in the mimetic fictive techniques that *Purple threads* deploys as a cycle of stories. The stories are closely based on Leane’s experiences growing up and, importantly to her, the characters and events described are faithful representations of those actual people and experiences. My view of the book does not seek to challenge this position, and accepts the view that life-writing by Aboriginal women represents lived experiences that have been ignored, silenced or denied in mainstream culture. That these histories reflect the “truth” is often fiercely defended. For instance, Langford Ginibi declared:

> I’m not interested in fiction. Don’t need to be, because I’m too busy writing the truth about my people, in the hope that this country will open its eyes and say, ‘Hey, here’s this whole wonderful human resource that we’ve only used for our own gain, and never accepted into our society’ (Little, 1994, np).  

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31 Originally published under the author’s name, Ruby Langford. In 1990, Langford’s aunt, Eileen Morgan, a tribal elder of Box Ridge Mission, gave Langford her tribal name ‘Ginibi’ (black swan). Langford has been known by this full name since (Ginibi, author record, AustLit, 2002–).  
32 Debates about the ‘truth’ of fiction are various and ongoing. For example, the narrator in Virginia Woolf’s *A room of one’s own* (1929/1989) self-consciously disrupts the boundaries between truth and fiction when she says: ‘Fiction here is likely to contain more
Yet, Brewster, who has written extensively on Aboriginal women’s writing, claims that it is inappropriate to label earlier life-writing by Aboriginal women as unproblematically autobiographical, because in many cases the boundaries between the author’s own life story and that of other family members is often blurred. Brewster does, however, suggest that ‘these texts examine the author’s own life within the context of other family members … [and they] are in fact both autobiographical and biographical’ (1996a, 9). Further, as previously argued, these texts do important archival work, creating imaginative spaces within a dominant white culture to record alternative versions of a history that has privileged white assumptions and priorities, and to invoke a sense of continuity with traditional Aboriginal modes of recording and sharing history. As Brewster claims,

in the transition from orality to literature, story becomes history, at least in the sense that Aboriginal historians construct it; namely, a discourse that establishes continuities between past and present (1995, 61).34

While grounded in the literary heritage of Aboriginal women’s life-writing, Purple threads reflects a growing field that, in contrast with Langford’s defence of the truth of fiction: ‘a systematic scrutiny of the textual mechanisms and the verbal structures that represent or imply the truth of a fictitious tale’ (1990, xii). By extension, note the criticism following publication of author Kate Grenville’s novel, The secret river. For instance, Inga Clendinnen’s essay, ‘The history question: who owns the past?’ (2006) and Tom Griffiths, ‘History and the creative imagination’ (2009), about the blurring of the line between (historical) truth and fiction.

33 Brewster remarks that generic boundaries are further disrupted because these texts often contain features of other genres such as memoir, the testimonial and the polemic, and many are essentially oral and collaborative in nature (written with editorial assistance) (1996a, 9).
34 Brewster’s remarks resonate with the discussion on narrative closure in Chapter Three, where the claim was made that closure in the short story cycle is often provisional. The connections between the stories, and the silences maintained in the narrative spaces create a stronger sense of open-endedness and continuity than novels often achieve.
Ginibi’s autobiographical texts, for instance, draws more readily on literary storytelling techniques, including poetic language, imagery, metaphor, characterisation and dialogue. Once Leane decided to focus on significant events through the linked, independent stories of the short story cycle rather than a strictly singular and chronological narrative, she found that the form dictated, at least to some extent, the style. She says that she was conscious of the literary devices that make stories work and that people expect … the need for each story to be containable in its own right, e.g. each story needing a climax while not necessarily a resolution, at least some sense of finish.\textsuperscript{35}

To Leane, however, these “literary devices” do not diminish the \textit{truthfulness} of the stories. For instance, when I suggested to her that the extensive dialogue in the stories might be one example of the fictionalising of the past, she responded by saying that

the dialogue, to me, is the least fictional element of the book. The wording was very real … I really worked and thought hard about keeping the dialogue, this voice, this life blood of oral history.\textsuperscript{36}

These features blur the boundaries that western literary traditions have traditionally maintained or at least tried to maintain, between fact and fiction, auto/biography and memoir. Leane questioned the reductive limits these generic categories might impose on texts, dismissing those categories as setting up dichotomies that may not be universally applicable to all literatures.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35} Jeanine Leane, interviewed by Helena Kadmos, August 2013.
\textsuperscript{36} Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.
\textsuperscript{37} Traditional auto/biographical texts that record significant aspects of the collective Indigenous story, including the complex basis of cultural identity, continue to be written by women. Notable amongst them is Anita Heiss’s \textit{Am I black enough for you?} (2012), which won the Victorian Premier’s Award for Indigenous Writing, and responded directly to
Scholar Tess Cosslett, who is interested in narratives that disrupt the generic boundaries in this way, sees them as part of a ‘feminist-inspired move by which contemporary women’s autobiographies construct a matrilineage for their protagonists’ (2000, 142). In other words, the authors of such texts, according to Cosslett, attempt to reclaim or recover the mother’s subjectivity by writing the mother’s stories in conjunction with their own (2000, 141). In some instances, the mother’s story is lost or hidden (where older relatives are dead, illiterate, or are not writers, for instance), and here, Cosslett says, ‘fictionality necessarily and overtly enters’ (2000, 142). She claims there would be no need for these elements of fiction in auto/biography if the author were merely wishing to present what she remembers about her female relatives, but very often the author wishes to restore subjectivity to the mother and other female relatives, as well as to show their influence on the protagonist. Cosslett describes this, in terms equally suited to the short story cycle, as a ‘complex move—the telling of several interconnected life-stories at once, emphasising both the similarities and the differences, the interrelationships and the separateness, of their subjects’ (2000, 142; italics added). Bart Moore-Gilbert frames a similar observation in terms of relational autonomy:

For many feminist critics, this conception of the autonomy of autobiographical identity is as clearly gendered as the emphasis on unified and centred Selfhood which traditionally accompanies it in Auto/biography Studies. By contrast, they have almost unanimously

claims made by journalist Andrew Bolt that light-skinned people who identified as Aboriginal did so for personal gain.
argued that subjectivity in women’s life-writing is primarily relational rather than monadic (2009, 17-18).³⁸

Leane’s reflections on the creative elements of *Purple threads* resonate with these claims. She remarked that, ‘the subjectivity of the women was most important for me, and that it came through their own words.’³⁹ She wanted to reveal her older female relatives to a world that she believes didn’t see them, through ‘episodes in and outside of the home that brought home the character, strength and resilience of the women, the subjectivity that wasn’t necessarily obvious to the outside world.’⁴⁰

Thus personal and artistic judgements informed Leane’s choice of the short story cycle as the most appropriate form through which to capture snapshots of her unique upbringing in rural Australia. That *Purple threads* draws more explicitly than some of its predecessors on fictional storytelling conventions does not lessen its role in the important political and archival work that Aboriginal women’s life-writing has been doing for several decades.⁴¹ The

³⁸ Moore-Gilbert does caution, nevertheless, against the ‘dangers of reification which attend discussions of the issue of (de)centred subjectivity’ (2009, 18). He argues that in the post-colonial context, ‘women’s life-writing does not embrace relationality as a matter of course’ (2009, 18). This thesis does not seek to essentialise Aboriginal women’s life-writing, but it does draw on research by scholars quoted here that claim that relationality is a feature of much of the writing in this field.
³⁹ Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.
⁴⁰ Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.
⁴¹ *Purple threads*’ fresh approach to recording women’s experiences does open up new lines of investigation into the development of this literary tradition. For instance, in one collection of Indigenous writing, the editors speculate that the rare appearance of fiction amongst the texts (at that time) may be due to ‘a lack of familiarity with or assimilation to this particular genre [amongst older Indigenous writers] and the generational specificity of the imperatives driving the production of life stories (such as their value as archival and pedagogical documents)’ (Brewster, O’Neill and van den Berg, 2000, 10). Leane concurred with these views, claiming that her education and extensive reading of world literature has informed her understanding of literary narrative (Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013). The suggestion that educational accomplishment and familiarity with western literature influenced a writer’s output was also made nearly twenty years ago by Ruby
next section further disrupts the notion of auto/biography as the objective narrative of a singular, autonomous subject, an “I”-saying person’ (Moore-Gilbert, 2009, 17), claiming the concept of Aboriginal women’s life-writing as primarily relational. Reflecting the view that ‘it is only in virtue of the fact that we are exposed to social influence in multifarious ways that we are ever capable of being autonomous at all…’ (Barclay, 2000, 58), this section argues that this cycle of stories about an individual girl growing up is in fact a community narrative.

**Purple threads as a community narrative**

This thesis argues that the short story cycle constructs meaning in a unique way through its structure of independent yet interrelated stories. Individual stories explore a particular theme or idea, but when the cycle is read as a whole, richer, deeper meanings often take shape. Thus, *Purple threads* explores a range of themes through the successive stories, which, when brought together, develop more complexity, such as the notion of relational identity, while resisting the development of a single overarching plot line. It does this by homing in on significant events in the young protagonist’s life that show the influence of family and others on her developing sense of self. Through the older women’s sharing of stories from their own lives, a more diverse range of experiences are brought into relief. *Purple threads* can therefore be viewed as a story about a principal character, as well as a text.

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*Langford Ginibi when she said, in response to a question that compared her work to Sally Morgan’s highly successful *My place* (also purportedly auto/biographical): ‘Oh, we’re two different people, Sal and I. Put it this way. Sal’s an academic, she’s been to university, got a degree, she’s an artist to boot. And me I only went to second form, class 2F actually and that’s a long way from A, B and C’* (Little, 1994, np).
that uses individual stories to explore, more broadly, the experiences of many Aboriginal people in Australia. It achieves this in three ways. At one level there is the predominant thread that traces the story of a young girl growing up in rural Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. But as is typical of much Aboriginal women’s life-writing, the stories also explore the importance of family and the interconnectedness of family members. At yet another level the text reflects the experiences of many Aboriginal people living in rural NSW under the impacts of colonisation. This section examines these three layers of this short story cycle: individual, family, and community, and concludes that Purple threads, while offering alternative representations of the lives of women and girls, can be read as a community narrative, thus highlighting the claim that autonomy is achieved through an individual subject’s relationships with family and wider communities, and is ‘attributable to our developing and remaining embedded within a network of social relationships’ (Barclay, 2000, 57).42

42 Similar effects can be achieved in dramatic instances of the short story cycle. During the writing of this chapter two seasons of the Australian drama Redfern now aired on ABC television—the first drama series to be written, produced and directed by Indigenous Australians (2012. Sydney: Blackfella Films). Each season comprises separate stories involving different characters, exploring how their lives are changed by a seemingly insignificant moment—the decision to go back into the house to answer a phone call, to get into the back-seat of a car. This approach to television is not new. The series’ British story developer and scriptwriting mentor, Jimmy McGovern, used the same technique in his acclaimed series, The street (2006. Manchester: Granada Television). In Redfern now, stand-alone stories that spotlight moments in different characters’ lives—connected by place (inner-city Sydney), race (Aboriginality) and theme (how a person’s responses to unexpected events speak to their character, and shape their relationships with others)—seem to allow for a greater diversity of experiences to be represented in a limited time than would have been possible in a sustained narrative following a few central characters. This approach underscores the view that individual experiences do not occur in a vacuum but are interrelated with the shared experience of the community.
While the book is not a unified sustained narrative, the chronological framework of the stories tracing Sunny’s development through her formative years, exploring her growing self-knowledge, how she perceives herself and how she is perceived by others, echoes in some ways a feminine bildungsroman. Although the bildungsroman is usually associated with the novel, it has been used as a descriptor for a short story cycle before. Nagel makes this claim about Annie John, by Jamaica Kincaid (1985), which consists of eight stories spanning seven years in the life of the eponymous character (also a young Indigenous girl) as she moves through her childhood towards her departure from her Antiguan home (2001, 57). Annalisa Pes makes the same claim about the Samoan short story cycle, Where we once belonged (1996) by Sia Figiel, about thirteen year-old Alofa (Pes, 2010, 207). Importantly, remarks made by Leane elsewhere, that the Aboriginal bildungsroman can be seen as ‘social and emotional growth towards the formation of an identity that is collective rather than individual,’ supports the reading of this short story cycle as narrativising the concept of relational autonomy (2013, 113).

Purple threads contains many stories that explore the demands confronting Sunny as she grows up and as she interacts with various people beyond her family unit. They show her in different situations, at different stages of her life, struggling to meet the expectations placed on her as a niece, grandchild, daughter, sister, neighbour and friend. Added to these pressures is her growing, confusing and sometimes painful awareness of what it means to be
Aboriginal as she understands it, according to the significance some others appear to assign to that identity. Some of these experiences will be explored in the next chapter, particularly where I discuss the development of Sunny’s intersectional and relational identity through the short story cycle form. For now, I emphasise a few examples: Sunny’s striving to be accepted at school, her sense of alienation from the white community, and her own white relatives’ ambivalent reactions to her. These experiences reveal how her individual identity is dependent for meaning on relationships with others. Simultaneously, these stories illuminate the experiences of the broader family by crossing paths with the storytelling by Sunny’s Nan and Aunties as they reminisce about significant experiences from their respective pasts, and how those experiences continue to have an impact on the present.

**Family**

Sunny’s individual story works to elicit the reader’s interest and empathy in the young girl’s dilemmas, but this book is very much about the family, headed by women who are central in Sunny’s life—her Nan and Aunties—richly drawn characters who offer insights into the diversity of Aboriginal women’s experiences in ways that many western readers may find refreshing. For instance Nan, as a young woman, was taken out of domestic service by the white, protestant settler who married her. She was raised a Christian and ‘always said it was best to keep up the act in public’ (1). But her real spiritual solace is found in her garden, an extensive, flourishing oasis of native and exotic plants, which she nurtured on Sunday mornings, ‘right under [William’s] nose while he was out worshipping other idols’
Aunties Boo and Bubby utilise remarkable ingenuity to negotiate with other white farmers over stock. Aunty Boo is a swearing, staunch realist who identifies with the women’s movement, even echoing the radical second-wave feminists of her time when she remarks, ‘“All this world needs, girl, is women an’ dogs an’ kids”’ (2). Younger sister, Aunty Boo, the dreamer, buries herself in romantic novels, re-reading her favourite, *Wuthering Heights*, well into her old age. Sunny provides a clear description of how different the two women are, and what each brings to her life, in the following:

‘Ya know, girl,’ Aunty Bubby once said, ‘quickest way to a man’s heart is with good food an’ a clean house.’

Later on, when we were up the hill, Aunty Boo said, ‘Quicker way to a man’s heart is straight through his chest with a bloody big spear!’ (4)

The stories in *Purple threads* thus create spaces where the reader can appreciate the vitality yet complexity of these women’s ordinary lives. Through a range of experiences recounted to Sunny by the women, these stories function to give voice to the women’s knowledge about the land, about surviving in a white patriarchal society as Aboriginal women, and about using their inner strength to cope with the difficulties that will inevitably arise in such circumstances. In this respect, *Purple threads* departs from the classic *bildungsroman* in that it is as much a book about the older women who feature in the stories and the family relationships that help to shape Sunny’s life, as it is about Sunny herself. This purpose seems

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to be well served through the features of the short story cycle, due to its narrative capacity to roam across the landscape of family and community life, homing in on particularly significant events and experiences.

Leane affirmed this view when I asked about her decision to write the story as linked, independent pieces. She agreed that the book is ultimately homage to her Aunties, but reported that she had difficulty settling on the most appropriate way to do justice to the lives of these women who were so important to her. She said that, after many attempts to record their lives as a longer narrative, she came to realise that what was really important to her was the impact their love and guidance had on her:

I tried on a number of occasions, and once I wrote a huge manuscript about the women in my life … I think that after I wrote that quite grandiose piece about my Aunties … that I felt that it wasn’t all necessary, and that there were particularly important things, incidents, episodes, that I should focus on.44

These comments reinforce the idea that ‘the fact that any of us has the capacity for autonomous agency is a debt that we owe to others (Barclay, 2000, 57).’ The structure of the short story cycle, therefore, provided Leane with a form through which she could capture significant personal experiences in a way that acknowledged the importance of family in her developing sense of self.

Broadly understood as multi-generational and inclusive of extended family and sometimes close friends, family is a strong feature in much writing by Aboriginal women. Brewster claims that the home (and, by extension,

44 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, December 2011.
family) is often portrayed as a woman-centred place, a site of women’s knowledges and practices. It becomes, she says, ‘a site of resistance to a dominant culture which, both indirectly and directly, applies pressure to minority cultures in its midst to conform and assimilate to the dominant culture’s codes and conventions’ (1996a, 11).  

The family in *Purple threads*, dominated by strong women, is certainly conveyed as a site of resistance. The women are unstinting in their efforts to nurture each other and keep the family intact. The book is, therefore, both the story of a girl growing to adulthood, in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, and a short story cycle reflecting the experiences of a whole family. It is also part of the canon of writing that represents the shared and diverse experiences of the broader Indigenous community.

**Community**

Given each individual’s multiple subjectivities, the extent to which any individual can lay claims to shared experience with other members of a community is not always clear. Questions may arise as to which community one can lay claim to at any time, and to what extent the similarities and differences between members of that community constitute a shared understanding. It wasn’t until the 1960s that, forced by the impacts of dispossession, marginalisation and increased regulation of their lives, people from distinct Indigenous groups in Australia began to unite around shared

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45 Brewster does raise the point that the importance of family in Aboriginal women’s narratives can be seen to run against the views of some first-world feminists who, as discussed in Chapter Three, view the family as oppressive for women (1996a, 10).
interests and common goals. Brewster describes this notion of pan-Aboriginality as politically charged and contingent, and argues that ‘Aboriginal people’s narrativisation of the past is always relative to their position in the present … [which] is in a constant state of flux as the present changes’ (1996a, 4). Given the rich diversity of pre-colonial Indigenous cultures, and the often-violent ruptures to those communities caused by colonisation, and this ever-changing present, it is reasonable to expect that Indigenous people’s thinking about identity and shared experience is varied and sometimes conflicting. For instance, Moreton-Robinson says that Indigenous women’s ‘belonging is based on blood line to country [and their bodies are] tangible evidence of our sovereignty, and … evidence of our ontology … born of the interrelationship between ancestral beings, humans and country’ (2010, 6). Yet others find such claims problematic. Yin Paradies, who identifies racially as an Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian Australian, declares:

I do not speak an Aboriginal language, I do not have a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity, I have little contact with my extended family, and the majority of my friends are non-Indigenous (2006, 358).

Martin Nakata proposes a model for shared experience that acknowledges these differences of opinion when he says:

Regardless of their distance from what we understand as ‘the traditional context’, the Indigenous epistemological basis of knowledge construction and the ways of ‘doing’ knowledge are not

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46 Writing about the problems associated with notions of a shared, distinct and coherent pan-Indigenous identity, Paradies says that while this can be a positive experience for many, the constructions of such an identity can also involve elements of ‘boundary construction/policing’ which can in themselves be restricting and alienating for others (2006, 356). He draws on Anderson, Nakata and Russell to claim that ‘in order to challenge prevailing stereotypes, Indigenous people are often required to publicly confess our intimate subjectivities [and such confessions] serve to remind us of the situated and partial nature of knowledge’ (2006, 357).
completely unfamiliar. These are embedded, not in detailed knowledge of the land and place for all of us perhaps, not perhaps in environmental or ecological knowledge, but in ways of story-telling, of memory-making, in narrative, art and performance; in cultural and social practices, of relating to kin, of socialising children; in ways of thinking, of transmitting knowledge, even in creolised languages; and in that all encompassing popular, though loosely used term, ‘worldview’ (2007, 10).

This understanding of shared community experience is useful for my study of Purple threads. In this text, the characters and themes do not explicitly claim that knowledge expressed, or experiences shared, are exclusively Aboriginal, but the constructs of and emphasis on family, the place of children in the community, and the significant role of language and story-telling in a range of different situations, are implicitly informed by traditional epistemologies that have survived colonisation and, in some instances, blended with western influences. In this way, Purple threads, like other Aboriginal women’s personal life stories, reflects a broader narrative about Aboriginal people’s shared experiences and struggles as the effects of colonisation continue to have an impact on their communities.

As this chapter argues, the notion of a self-contained, self-made subject is incongruous with the lived realities of social beings. It is the unavoidable interdependence of relational subjects that reciprocally form personal and shared identities. This thinking is consistent with views that Aboriginal women’s narratives are histories of actual communities that collectively tell a much larger story, one that has been largely untold in mainstream culture. For instance, Langford Ginibi says, of her autobiography, ‘this is not only
my book, my story, it’s the story of every Aboriginal woman in this country today that’s got kids to raise. I’m only one’ (Little, 1994, np). And historian Jackie Huggins, who wrote a book about her mother, *Auntie Rita* (1994), has said that the importance of recording the stories of Aboriginal people, particularly elders, is that they collectively record an existence that is profoundly silent and invisible in the official records of white government bodies and institutions (1998, 2). Similarly, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasises the collective nature and benefit of personal stories from Indigenous people. She claims that the sharing of personal histories (in oral and written forms) is integral to Indigenous research because

> the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a *collective* story in which every Indigenous person has a place … the story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story (1999, 144–145; italics added).

These comments highlight the point that our individual selves are inextricably linked to others’, and that our personal journeys, our apparently independent struggles, are part of a much larger, collective human story.

The short story cycle, as *Purple threads* demonstrates, depicts this interrelationship between the individual and collective story in its very structure, and, as a result of its tendency to disrupt temporal linearity, is suitable for telling stories that illustrate the relational aspects of women’s lives. Moreton-Robinson’s views resonate with this claim. She says that Indigenous women’s life-writings do not necessarily fit the usual strict chronological narrative of autobiography [and are] fundamentally social and relational, not something ascribed separately within the individual. Indigenous women’s life-writings are based on the collective memories of inter-generational
relationships between predominantly Indigenous women, extended families and communities (2000, 1).

More recently this discussion continues in the academy in relation to the importance of generating and sharing the stories of Indigenous people in processes that move Australia beyond the impacts of colonisation. For instance, Paradies argues that, given the complex compositions of Indigenous identity, auto/biography can be utilised as a ‘rhetorical construction [which] along with contemporary scholarship on identity both in Australia and abroad [can] explore … fantasies of Indigeneity’ (2006, 357), and thereby deepen awareness of the wide diversity of Indigenous experiences, past and present. For Westphalen, and the authors included in her research study, as well as the writers and scholars quoted above, auto/biographical writings by Aboriginal people in Australia are most often stories about whole families and communities, and can be seen as histories that reflect something of the broader Indigenous experience in Australia.

The views Leane expressed during our conversation are consistent with these ideas. When asked about the auto/biographical nature of Purple threads, she said that the terms autobiography and biography may be valid in western literary history, but that “life-writing” or “community narrative” more adequately describe the process by which a subject, like the central protagonist in her book, writes herself into something larger, where she is part of a greater thing.47 ‘I didn’t ever see it as my story’, she said, ‘and I still don’t.’48

47 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, December 2011.
48 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013.
Conclusion

This chapter situates *Purple threads* within broader discussions about Aboriginal women’s life-writing. I have claimed that *Purple threads* draws more overtly on creative or fictional storytelling techniques than many of the personal narratives that preceded it, but that it shares the focus and purpose of these other texts to record the personal histories of family members and build a picture of the diversity of Indigenous experiences in Australia. I have argued that this text is at one level a story about a girl growing up and at another level a bigger story about a family and community. The character Sunny’s personal development, therefore, represents the larger narrative of the impacts of colonisation and racism on Aboriginal people, their communities and their cultures, a narrative realised in the lives of Nan and the Aunties and the small family they nurture and protect with strength and wisdom. This representation of family and community encourages a reading of the text as a *relational* community narrative. I suggest that the various formal and structural components of the short story cycle discussed in Chapter Three complement this orientation because its component parts lend themselves to representations of a range of characters and perspectives while at the same time develop common themes around the shared elements of those experiences.

In the final chapter I explore, in greater detail, how key themes about women’s relational identities are developed through the interdependence and interrelatedness of the stories in *Purple threads*. 
As the discussion in the previous chapter has shown, *Purple threads* is a book about the relational lives of women and girls depicted through significant moments in the lives of the family. This thesis argues that the transformation and learning, the certainty and ambivalence in many women’s lives are revealed through ordinary experiences, particularly over time. Many aspects of women’s lives are touched upon in this cycle: the experiences of girls growing into women; of working women and single, unmarried women; of older women, especially their influence on younger members. Representations of caring and mothering in the stories raise questions about who can claim the identity of mother, and biological versus social mothering is also explored. There are also stories that bring to light the experiences of Aboriginal women living in a colonised world, and how these women reserve and reclaim some measures of power in their lives. Notably, these women and girls represent an ensemble of multifaceted characters in the stories. Other characters, where they are present, are less complex, less formed. This privileging of female characters, especially Aboriginal women, may be a deliberate strategy to redress the silencing and invisibility of Indigenous women and girls in mainstream representations of Australian social, cultural and political life.
For all these reasons, Purple threads supports claims made in this thesis that the short story cycle aptly represents conceptions of relational autonomy, which, in Mackenzie and Stoljar’s words, ‘analyze the implications of the intersubjective and social dimensions of selfhood and identity for conceptions of individual autonomy and moral and political agency’ (2000, 4). More specifically, as a text grounded in Aboriginal women’s life-writings, Purple threads represents intersectional relational identity, which, as Diana Tietjens Meyers remarks, reflects the ways that ‘individuals internalize gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and ethnicity in sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, and xenophobic societies’ (2000, 153).

This chapter, therefore, carries the discussion of Purple threads forward through a close reading for the ways relationality is represented as a key feature of women’s lives, and in particular, the development of the young protagonist’s intersectional identity as an Aboriginal girl. While this theme can be successfully traced in other narrative forms, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the features of the short story cycle work in specific ways to explore how women learn who they are, and their place in the communities they belong to, through relationships of care and interdependence. Firstly, this chapter identifies three underlying themes—country, time and orality—that serve as discursive links between the independent stories, and unfold through the successive reading of the stories in the cycle, reinforcing the notion that subjects interrelate in geographical, temporal and social locations. Secondly, underpinning this discussion is the idea that the short story cycle aptly represents the interactive processes.
whereby family knowledge shared and withheld in families contributes to a sense of self. Thirdly, features of the short story cycle identified in this thesis—the independence and interrelatedness of the stories, the focus on isolated events, the resistance to narrative closure, and the longer story within this cycle—are shown to be particularly suitable for the imaginative exploration of relational identity.

**Thematic links in *Purple threads*: country, time, orality**

The independent stories that comprise short story cycles are unified in one or more of several ways that reinforce the interrelationships of the subjects whose lives are explored in the form. In *Purple threads*, the garland of the purple wisteria is a motif weaving its way through the stories and symbolising the older women’s influence on every aspect of Sunny’s life.\(^49\) Weaving through these stories too, are elements of specific physical, temporal and cultural locations that contribute equally to a knowable sense of self. Country, incorporating both the physical and emotional landscapes in which the stories are set, represents one of these thematic links. In fact, *Purple threads* teems with references to it, images of it, and stories about it. While I acknowledge that the term country cannot mean the same thing to everyone, least of all to all Indigenous people, *Purple threads* is grounded in claims to country that resemble ideas expressed by scholars Moreton-

\(^49\) The garland is a rope of intertwined threads formed by weaving separate strands together. In this text, the garland is purple, a colour traditionally associated with women’s emancipation. Pes also conjures the relational, cyclical nature of the short story cycle by drawing on the imagery of the garland. She claims that the form ‘cannot be enclosed in a canonic western genre, [but] draws on South Pacific modes of oral story-telling called *su’ifiloi*, that denote in Samoa the making of a *ula* (or garland) with many different types of flowers, or the weaving or threading of many different songs to make out a long long one (2010, 205).
Robinson and Maggie Walter, who say that ‘Indigenous peoples have developed their knowledge systems over millennia living on and alongside the land … [and] are therefore predicated on societal relations with country’ (2010, 3). Even more than a metaphorical or symbolic relationship between identity and country, the book suggests an interpenetration, a literal meshing of bodies and land, and thus expresses understandings about the relationship between people and the land that are ontologically quite different to commonly-held western ideas. For instance, the narrator ‘was born into the purpleness of October’ (Leane, 2011, 51). A body is buried in the flooding river bank; the earth, we are told, should be so healthy it could be eaten. And an Aunty would rather ‘lay down an’ die under a tree on the hill … An’ bury meself too so the crows won’t get me” (150) than suffer old age in the way her frail white neighbour does, neglected by family.

Chapter Three explored how the short story cycle is suited to representing notions of time that may not be straightforward or linear, but rather multilayered and provisional. In Purple threads, time unfolds in journeys involving patterns of leaving and returning through stories emphasising that turning and returning are materially significant acts connected to land and home. For instance, Nan tells how her white husband, William, tried to force her to relinquish her cultural traditions with threats such as: ‘there’ll be no talk of the past or heathen talk or superstitious mumbo-jumbo or I’ll

50 Brewster remarks that in his life-narrative, The man from the sunrise side, Ambrose Chalarimeri’s ‘Indigenous ontology of land reverses several western binaries, perhaps the most widely recognized instance of which is the notion that the land belongs to the people; in his formulation the land is primary and the people “belong” to it’ (2006, 99).

51 A full discussion of country in Purple threads can be found in Kadmos, 2014b.
sent you back to where you came from’ (43–44; italics in original). He meant the place where she was working as a domestic servant when he met her, but that place was far away from her home country. Ironically, Nan says:

‘Tell ya one thing, though! … I was born round here, on this country, bit further back from the river ’tween two creeks, place called Murrumburrah … One thing I hafta say ’bout William is he brought me home’ (44).52

Forever present throughout the stories, either directly engaged in the matter at hand, or in the background, commenting on the present or recalling the past, are the older women. The experiences they share, the knowledge they have gained from having lived through much of what their nieces experience now, function as a palimpsest to the events in Sunny’s life. There is a sense of history repeating itself; however, although Sunny lives out much of what her Nan and Aunties themselves did, the place she ends up is not where they found themselves at her age, or now. Her life in part echoes their experiences, but it does not replicate them.

Orality—by which I mean speaking, directly and through the messages conveyed—is a third thematic link between the stories in Purple threads. The older women’s direct speech, in their own unique style, peppers the stories, and their talk, as they teach the girls about the world, share stories about the past and reflect on the present, is unguarded and immediate. For instance, in reference to the Country Women’s Association, we are told that

52 Leane explained that “Murrumburrah” refers to the ground that lies between two creeks that were previously one, and have forked in two. This often fertile land is thus “encircled” by the winding, twin creeks (Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, August 2013).
Nan says that ‘she’d never seen a “pack o’ more sour-faced women” in all her life. “Bloody gossipin’ mob, always pokin’ ’round afta church askin’ questions ’bout things that aren’t none of their business’” (14).

Author Kim Scott, pointing out that his own novel, *That deadman dance* (2010), opens with a Nyoongar word, “Kaya”, remarked that this action establishes, right at the start, that the story originates in the experiences—through the eyes, the ears and the lips—of Aboriginal people, embodying ‘the very business of language retrieval [which is] a narrative of Aboriginal resilience, survival, potentially self-determination, sovereignty.’

Similarly, *Purple threads* opens with dialogue, and a mix of English and Aboriginal words: “‘Bloody gammon ya know, girl!’” (1). And the many conversations which follow, often taking place in front of the fire or during long walks in the countryside, also echo traditional storytelling practices and usually occur within the tight circle of the three elder women, whom the two

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53 Of the language mix of Samoan and English in *Where we once belonged*, Pes says it gives the book a ‘truthful and genuine’ quality, that is ‘very far from the stereotyped exoticism of western writers and artists’ (2010, 206). She reports that Figiel’s reasoning behind the use of both Samoan and English words is that ‘they are intertwined in the cultural reality of Samoa, they co-exist and hybridize’ and that this “‘contamination” [of language] … should be seen as a wealth’ (2010, 206). Pes adds that ‘there is also a problem related to the difficulty of giving a written shape to a culture that is essentially oral, and of adapting oral storytelling to a western fictional medium, a goal that perhaps can be achieved only by blending both narrative modes and languages’ (2010, 207). As Pes claims, the short story cycle, as a narrative *ula* (or garland), structurally and thematically represents this intertwining and blending.

54 *That deadman dance* won the Miles Franklin Award in 2011. These comments are drawn from the Miles Franklin Oration that Scott delivered at Curtin University in May 2012, during which he was asked to reflect on the following quote from Franklin: “Without an indigenous literature, people can remain alien in their own soil” (available, at the time of writing, in video format at http://www.milesfranklin.com.au/). Scott’s interest in Indigenous literatures also finds expression in his work to regenerate the Nyoongar language through The Wirloman Noongar Language and Stories Project, details of which can be found at http://wirlomin.com.au/.
little girls watch and listen to. The reader, through Sunny’s narration, also watches and listens from outside this fireside talk. Brewster claims that oral storytelling features prominently in Aboriginal women’s narratives, and that it is often ‘didactic (drawing a moral from a particular story or incident)’ and highly colloquial, ‘suggestive of everyday conversation’ (1996a, 52). And further, that the purpose of these stories is twofold: educative measures for younger family members who have not lived through the times the grandmothers did; and a means of breaking the silences and blindness of white ignorance about Aboriginal experiences of colonisation (1996a 43).55 Teaching, in all forms, is a process of passing on, often from one generation to the next, and may be better understood as an iterative oral process, because there is always some mutual exchange and some repetition as lessons are reiterated.

It is clear, therefore, that language functions at many levels and it is intimately tied to relational notions of belonging between people, and between people and place. It connects a person to home and family; it can gain them access to new places and different forms of power; and it brings them home again too. We see that Sunny learns these lessons, and that, while her life takes her away from her home and the aunties, language helps orient her to the places and people she is with at a given moment. In the epilogue she says:

55 Westphalen also argues that Indigenous women’s stories have a core educative purpose. She claims that, ‘in the same way that Dreaming Stories are used to educate others, particularly the young and uninformed, to identify people with (and in) their past and to connect people to each other and to the land, life-stories operate to teach, identify and connect’ (2012, 13).
I was a big woman by then, and the Aunties said they’d finished growing me up. They were delighted that I’d made it through school and been offered a place in university.

‘Good on ya, babe,’ Aunty Boo gushed as she slapped me on the back. ‘You’ll be able to talk to the gov’ment an’ lotsa ’portant people. But donchya forget ya home talk when ya learnin’ to be flash’ (152).

Country. Time. Orality—three thematic links that tie the individual stories together, and help to create a deeper sense of the connections between a character’s developing sense of self and the material, temporal and social places she inhabits. How knowledge, about oneself and others, forms over time, contributes to yet another underlying theme central to understanding the processes involved in constructing relational identity.

**Family knowledge: shared and withheld**

Meyers claims that

self-ignorance is one of the principal enemies of autonomy, and self-knowledge requires being honest with oneself about who one is—owning up to and owning one’s identity. [Further, that] … understanding the impact of group memberships on one’s identity is necessary not only for personal autonomy but also for moral and political autonomy (2000, 158–9).

The stories in *Purple threads* build an imaginative picture of how Sunny develops self-knowledge about herself and her family. Her membership of an Aboriginal community culminates in an epilogue that suggests that some measure of personal, moral and political autonomy is achieved through self-acceptance. Throughout the stories, both the presence and absence of information—or the details shared with Sunny (and, by extension, the reader), and those left unresolved—contribute to Sunny’s self-knowledge,
and to the reader also building a knowable sense of the women’s lives.\textsuperscript{56} However, knowledge passed within and between generations in families is not neutral or definitive, but relational and co-created through exchanges that are often ambiguous, sporadic and inconsistent. The stories in this short story cycle represent the interactive and inconsistent processes of making sense of experience, as Sunny adapts and reconstructs knowledge to suit her own subjective needs and understandings. Further, as argued in Chapter Three, the short story cycle suitably accommodates silences, and these inevitably linger in the telling, sharing and receiving of stories about family members. As Meyers claims, ‘autonomy unfolds in situ, and autonomous individuals must work with whatever material is at hand’ (2000, 159). Thus, these silences equally contribute to Sunny coming to a greater understanding of herself and her family.\textsuperscript{57}

Early in \textit{Purple threads}, the idea that knowledge is acquired in discontinuous and mosaic, rather than linear, processes is inferred by the reader. In the first story, ‘Women and dogs in a working man’s paradise’, Sunny introduces the reader to Nan and the Aunties. She describes the daily task of accompanying Aunty Boo into the hillsides to collect tufts of wool off fences, or cut off the backs of dead sheep, to be used for weaving and knitting, and picking up stray or abandoned animals to be taken home and added to an ever expanding menagerie: ‘our wheelbarrow was always full of

\textsuperscript{56} While I use the term “information” here, I acknowledge that it is an inadequate descriptor for the tangible and intangible material we use to construct knowledge. We receive snippets, either directly given to us (however filtered and impartial), or observed, discovered, happened upon by ourselves, through which we make inferences and speculate about certain truths. Nevertheless, alternative terms, such as data, wisdom, or intelligence, seem equally constrained.

\textsuperscript{57} This discussion about family knowledge is developed more fully in Kadmos, 2014c.
lucky lambs and our bags packed with dead wool, all gleaned by women in a working man’s paradise’ (6). One original meaning of the word glean is ‘to gather or pick up ears of corn which have been left by the reapers’, which implies the skimming-off of the produce of the dominant, “regular” world (OED, 2013). Common usage of the word broadens its definition to include the processes by which a person gains knowledge: piecemeal, or slowly. Together, these meanings suggest the processes by which the less powerful in society, such as Aboriginal women and children in 1960s Australia, learned what they needed to survive. For Nan and the Aunties, their home, where they were mostly physically confined, was dominated by the father and sons. Beyond the home was the male-dominated farming community that controlled land on all sides of their plot, and white society. Understanding of white cultural assumptions and practices would have been important for these women as they navigated their way through these dominant cultures. This is suggested in one scene where Aunty Boo is using binoculars to spy on a gathering of local white farmers. When Aunty Bubby asks her what she’s doing, she says: ‘never ya mind, sista-girl. I’m jus’ keepin an eye out. Learnin’ lotsa things ’bout this lot’ (143).

For Sunny, the dominant world is the one inhabited by the adults who own and control knowledge about the family and the world, to be given or withheld at their discretion. The short story cycle, as a composite of separate experiences in different stories, also leaves the reader to glean information, make links, cross-reference and draw conclusions. In this way the reading process itself aptly parallels how Sunny pieces together the information she
gathers, directly through knowledge that is specifically and intentionally imparted to her, or indirectly through what she understands from a look, tone of voice, or silence. This forms the knowledge base about her family and her place in society.

Philosopher Lorraine Code claims that ‘knowledge of other people is possible only in a persistent interplay between opacity and transparency, between attitudes and postures that elude a knower’s grasp, and traits that seem to be clear and relatively constant’ (1991, 38). The “truth”, therefore, about others (and therefore a sense of oneself and one’s family), is constructed from what can and cannot be told, what is and what is not known. What remains unspoken in a family, therefore, also contributes to a whole picture that forms. As a writer, Leane had to grapple with writing stories about her relatives when she did not know the full extent of some of the events she relates, and while understanding that some of these stories represented experiences that caused pain and suffering to people she loved.

The short story cycle, which resists narrative closure, thus provides Leane with opportunities to include the unknowable in her family’s story. While other narrative forms can, of course, handle silences, the short story cycle seems to be especially suited to this task because, by its very structure of independent, yet related stories, it does not promise to answer all questions, or resolve all ambivalence but allows some loose ends to dangle between and beyond the stories. Not all of the stories in Purple threads are fully explained, and one of the reasons for this is that the child, who is recounting these experiences, may never have heard all the details. Aunty Boo warned
this would be the case early in the text when she says, ‘ya never give away ya best secrets’ (26). Nevertheless, Leane admitted that not everyone was comfortable with the idea of loose ends in the book. She said that one of the early editorial readers of her manuscript said that she’d ‘written some good stuff’ but that she should close off some of the stories and answer more questions. Leane said that her reply to this had been, ‘but I don’t know. I don’t know.’

As a short story cycle Purple threads depicts how women gain knowledge, about their histories and their present, in relational processes that are fragmentary and sometimes discontinuous. Knowledge is built over time, not purely through a linear trajectory or the empirical abilities of individual subjects, but through processes that engage others, through repetition and return, and revisiting the past with fresh ears and eyes, conjuring once again the spiralling shape of the helix which represents, too, the recursive processes involved in reading the short story cycle. This understanding of how knowledge is gained is foundational to the exploration, across the stories, of how personal and cultural identity is both cumulatively formed and yet always contingent, a theme developed in the following section.

**Relational identity**

A key theme that develops through the successive stories in Purple threads is how personal identity is intrinsically tied to a subject’s social context and formed through interrelationships with others. The acquisition of self-

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58 Leane, interviewed by Kadmos, December 2011.
knowledge, therefore, is an active and interactive process. As Meyers remarks:

Intersectional subjects analyse their position in social hierarchies, interpret the psychic impact of their social experience, and reconfigure their identities as members of social groups (2000, 154).

The independent, internally coherent nature of the stories in this short story cycle works in two specific ways to develop these themes about relational identity. On one level, each story sheds light on how Sunny views and understands herself at a particular time in her life. At another level, by reading the stories together, the reader is shown how this character’s self-knowledge changes at different stages of her maturity, as Sunny comes to see her intersectional identity as an awareness and experience of self that is modified in different contexts and communities. At the same time, the reader’s understanding of Sunny also undergoes change. Therefore, through both the independent and interrelated natures of the stories, the cycle explores how identity is not fixed, but is rather relational, fluid and contingent.59

From the security of the family, as an initial reference point, and through many experiences that bring her into contact with other people outside that unit, Sunny begins to learn what it means to be Aboriginal in relation to the white other. Langton explores this notion. She says that

Aboriginality is not just a label to do with skin colour or the particular ideas a person carries around in his/her head which might be labelled Aboriginal, such as an Aboriginal language or kinship

59 A version of this section appears in Kadmos, 2014a.
system. Aboriginality is a social thing in the sense used by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Aboriginality arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book (2005, np).

Aboriginality, as Langton argues, is not an essential identity. And in *Purple threads*, Sunny’s experiences, as she engages with the wider, white, community, demonstrate the processes by which Aboriginality, like all identities, is socially constructed.

What follows are four examples from different stories in *Purple threads* that illustrate how the short story cycle can work to develop this notion of relational identity. Each story focuses on a separate incident in Sunny’s life which in some way shapes her sense of self. Taken separately, each event reveals something about how Sunny’s interpretation of her experiences causes some shift, however slight, in her knowledge of herself, her family and others. When these events are read together, they bring to light how identity changes, modifies and adapts according to different social and historical contexts. This discussion also demonstrates the unique function that the longer story, within the short story cycle, can serve.

‘God’s Flock’

Set when Sunny is about five years old, this early story in the cycle has her sharing memories of going to church, and ruminating on the role of religion in the family. She grumbles as she and Star are dressed for Sunday school: fixed up in their best dresses, their hair tied with freshly ironed ribbons, and
their feet trapped into patent leather shoes. Once ready, Nan tells Sunny to go and stand by the wall for a final check, so that she can ’ave a good look at youse. Gotta make sure ya look like somebody owns ya’ (11). Sunny reminisces, ‘I always thought that was a crazy thing to say. Everyone in the district should know who owned us but I knew better than to ask’ (11).

Later, when Aunty Boo arrives at the church to drop the girls off, Sunny complains:

‘Why do we hafta go?’ I’d bark though pouting lips.
‘Because,’ would come the standard reply, ‘youse hafta look respectable jus’ like me an’ Bubby an’ all the other Aunties did when we were little. An’ white people, they think churches are respectable an’ sometimes ya hafta go along with what other people think, jus’ to stay outta trouble.’
‘But youse never go to church!’ I was relentless trying to get out of this religion thing.
‘Big people can’t get taken,’ she’d huff (12–13).

The scene is humorous but the story reveals a deep disconnect between the girls’ understanding of their situation as Aboriginal children in 1960s rural NSW, and the very real fears the women have about the girls’ safety and security. Aunty Boo’s blunt reply alerts the reader that, while Sunny’s childhood memories are on one level innocent and amusing, the text will not spare the reader darker realities, such as the Aunties’ very real fear of having the children taken away under the then prevalent attitudes towards and practices of Aboriginal child welfare and “breeding out” of colour. As a community narrative, the Aunties’ words and actions here reflect what many Aboriginal women experienced.60

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60 Moreton-Robinson claims that ‘Indigenous women lived life under a vague but real sense of threat that their children would be taken from them … Their experiences told them that their lives could be disrupted at any moment by government officials, and, of course, that the closest relationships were often the ones most at risk’ (2000, 12).
It is clear that in this story, at such a young age, Sunny has no reason to share the women’s fears, and cannot comprehend the threat to her security. Over time however, as the next story shows, increased contact with the outside world, “educates” her about the ways some others in the wider community view her and her family, and their lifestyle.

‘Coming home’

In *Purple threads*, ‘Coming home’ is the longest story in the cycle and one that seems to be pivotal in shaping Sunny’s awareness of her personal and ethnic identity. It covers a particularly difficult time in the girls’ lives when they are taken away from their home by their mother Petal—who drifts in and out of their lives—and their father Dinny, whom they have never met. They travel hundreds of miles to visit their white relatives where ‘the flat country was a haze of swaying grasses and massive, sparsely leafed reddish-black trees’ (75)—and where, unbelievably, there are no sheep. This story is also framed by one of the most enduring stories in western literature of a child’s journey to a strange country, and her yearning desire to go home—*The wizard of OZ*. We are told it is Sunny’s favourite book. There follows a series of images that conjure parallels with this famous tale: the travelling circus and mysterious man (in the form of the rodeo and Sunny’s cowboy father); the surprise of being whisked away from home; the weariness of a long journey and the terrors in unfamiliar land, where women appear as witches and nothing is as it seems; and, finally, the return.
This is also an important story for exploring Sunny’s relationship with her mother, and to question, largely western ideas, about who is a mother, who can mother, and what mothering is, through the juxtaposition of the Aunties’ constant care for the girls, and Petal’s unpredictable and sometimes self-serving efforts to do so. When Petal informs the Aunties of her intentions to take the girls to meet Dinny’s family, the news sends ‘a harpoon through the women that split blubber from bone’ (63). Aunty Boo says, ‘Don’t be mad, Petal … ya know what can happen ta the kids if the authorities think they bein’ neglected … we always looked afta’ them fer ya …’ (64). And old Nan says, shaking, ‘but they’re strangers, Petal’ (64). This provides Petal with her only drawcard, her biological connection to her children. She throws back at the women their own professed commitment to family ties: ‘They’re family! Even if we haven’t met ’em yet’ (65).

On arrival at the station, their new family seems cold and unfamiliar. Of her father’s sister, a nun, Sunny says ‘Sister Bernadette was the strangest looking woman I’d ever seen, story books and all. She was tiny with weird, red crinkly skin’ (70). And she asks her grandmother, ‘Who’s that funny lady dressed up like a witch?’ (69). There is very little for the girls to do on the farm, and instances when they do interact with their grandparents leave Sunny feeling that she has failed, in some way, to have understood her grandmother’s expectations: ‘[Grandma] looked daggers at Star and me

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61 Sunny’s remarks “return the gaze” of the marginalized other, reminding readers that an Aboriginal girl, for instance, may also observe differences that are foreign and perplexing in comparison to her realities. Arising from postcolonial studies, and impacting on literary, linguistic and visual culture, the return of the gaze describes the ‘potential activity occurring once the relational and unstable dynamics of [the see/being seen dyad] are reactivated’ (Amad, 2013).
when I grabbed a piece of bread from a plate in the middle of the table before the adults were all seated’ (70). She resorts to napping to protect herself from her family’s confusing attentions and during one of these moments she overhears the following conversation about Petal:

‘I wanted a good Catholic girl for our Dinny …’ I could hear Grandma’s lament to Paddy and Sister Bernadette carried on the hot breeze … ‘But an Abo! Lord, what did I do to deserve these trials and tribulations?’ (74)

Sunny is unsettled not just by the unfamiliar term, but also the tone of voice with which it is uttered, and the reactions the word arouses. For instance, trying to minimize his wife’s negative attitude towards Petal’s ethnicity, Sunny’s grandfather, Paddy, says ‘she’s not a full-blood … she’s got some white in her. Looks to me like she’s less than half Abo. And the kids, you can hardly tell’ (74).

These are the first references to any form of the word Aboriginal in the text, which until this story, centres exclusively on the family as they look outwards towards the world. Sunny, confused by the tone in Grandma’s voice, as much as the unfamiliar word, broaches the topic with Petal:

‘What’s an Abo?’ I asked her.

Petal wasn’t good at explaining things like the Aunties were, and she wasn’t patient either. The colour in her face rose.

‘Wait here!’

Petal found Dinny with Paddy on the veranda, smoking and drinking tea …

‘Get here!’ Petal’s coal eyes flamed and she stamped her foot …

Later, above the clinking of the cups and plates for afternoon tea, we heard harsh words coming from the kitchen …

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62 The lack of importance of the term Aboriginal to the family’s sense of its own identity, is in keeping with the claims by Langton as quoted above, and when she comments that ‘before Captain Cook and Governor Phillip, there was no Aboriginality in the sense it is meant to day … [and while] Aboriginal people saw whites as a group, they did not see them as a “race”. This was a concept of the whites’ (2005, np).
‘You’ll have a bit of respect, Mother!’ (75–6)

The conversations impact on Sunny greatly, even if she doesn’t fully understand why. Claims by scholar Hilary Weaver (writing about the Native American context) that the language used by the coloniser to describe the colonised powerfully influences understandings about identity, are pertinent here:

The constructionist approach to representation states that meaning is constructed through language. Thus, the words we choose to use such as American Indian, Native American, or First Nations not only reflect but shape identity … Today, Native people often learn about themselves and their culture in English and therefore adopt some stereotypes and distorted meanings (2001, 242–3).

As a young Aboriginal girl in rural Australia in the 1960s, Sunny must have struggled to absorb the full meanings and implications of these outsider perceptions of her family’s ethnicity. Eventually even Petal realises the risks involved in staying in such a hostile environment. In this moment of need she reveals some of the determination and protectiveness shown Nan and the Aunties. She seeks the help of the local postie, Pete, a strange woman who ‘sat on the ground with the men near the front steps and smoked, drank tea and swore’ (84), but who, like the Great Wizard, recognises a desperate situation when she sees it: ‘Had enough, eh? … need to escape the Wild West?’ (89). While the rest of the family are out, Petal packs their bags and she and the girls do escape, not in a hot air balloon but in Pete’s ‘seedy smelling van’ (90). The trip home by train takes a couple of days with limited funds for food, and some uncomfortable moments when, for instance, ‘the waitress on the train looked daggers as Petal kicked off her
shoes and blew smoke rings into the air’ (92). But Petal does get them home. So exhausted is Sunny by her efforts to comprehend and adjust to her new family in Queensland that when she reaches the Aunties’ house she is overcome with the relief of being in a place where she understands the rules, and feels accepted and safe:

My head was thumping with questions and stories about strangers and horses and cattle and peddlers and charlatans and prayers and dingo shooters and nuns and chores and Abos but I just wanted to sit back and eat as much as I wanted with my feet up on my chair and listen and laugh and fall into bed on the old club lounge by the kitchen window (93).

This story covers some events in Sunny’s life that greatly disrupt her stability and security. It also takes its time to explore this mother–child relationship. This extended period when the girls are “mothered” by Petal is significant and needs the consideration given in this lengthier story; however, as the story is only one part of the short story cycle, the reader is encouraged to see Petal’s role in Sunny’s life in relation to everything else that is conveyed in the remaining stories. Nan, Aunty Boo and Aunty Bubby create the enduring family bonds that Sunny needs. Although this mother-child relationship could be explored in a book of its own, here it is not meant to. The cycle provides the space to examine this aspect of Sunny’s life without promising any further development. In this example, the short story cycle also enables an exploration of the development of Sunny’s personal and cultural identity. Here, we see that she has gained some awareness that her understandings of what family is and means are not as simple as they seem at home. Growing up and moving beyond her family
may bring difficult and confusing challenges that she cannot anticipate. As the reader progresses through the independent stories in the cycle, other significant moments in Sunny’s life reinforce the idea that identity is contingent and relational.

‘Purple threads’

This title story explores how transitions can sometimes be painful experiences. The reader sees the two girls struggle to adapt to school life, where, for the first time, they are exposed to some of the racist attitudes that their Aunties, by keeping and educating them at home, have tried to protect them from. Sunny is excited at the prospect of making new friends. However, her hopes are dashed when she discovers that some children at school have been forbidden to play with her because their parents have told them that the Aunties are “black witches”. Sunny is mortified, but becomes further incensed when she tells her Aunties this devastating discovery, and they do not respond in the outraged way she expected and wanted them to. Instead, they demonstrate a nonchalance that Sunny isn’t mature enough to share:

I waited for her angry reaction. It didn’t come. Aunty Bubby stopped her cutting and stood calmly with the bread knife in her hand. A big smile spread across her face.
‘I wanted to be a witch when I was young,’ she announced (105).

This is one of several instances in Purple threads that unsettle stereotypes by reminding the reader that many Indigenous people have dual or multicultural heritage and therefore access to multiple sources of knowledge for making meaning. Aunty Bubby, rather than affirming Sunny’s
indignation, continues with a history lesson about the witch hunts of the Middle Ages (107) and Aunty Boo attempts to offer comfort by drawing on the words of the Greek philosopher, Epictetus, weaving in once again the purple motif that helps tie the stories in the cycle together:

‘When Epictetus’ mates told him he should be more like everyone else, he came back real smart like an’ said to ’em, *Because you consider yourself to be only one thread of those that are in a toga it is fitting that you take care how you should be like the rest of men, just as the thread has no design to be anything superior to other threads. But I wish to be purple, that small part which is bright and makes everything else graceful and beautiful. Why then do you tell me to make myself like many? And if I do, how shall I still be purple?’* (108–9; italics in original).

The Aunties’ responses infuriate and confuse Sunny, who is torn between loyalty to her family and her desire to have friends, a yearning she believes her Aunties do not understand. The story concludes with Sunny emotionally vulnerable, poignantly questioning the impact of her intersectional identity in a world dominated by representations that appear to exclude her:

I couldn’t tell them I wanted to be white then. But if I was white I’d see myself everywhere. In the classroom, when I opened up a book or looked at a picture. In the crowded playground, laughing, skipping and jumping between elastics. Down the main street in town. Or on the movie screen. I’d not stand out from the rest. But purple? Black? Too hard. Too ugly. Too different (109).

Sunny’s words here reveal her awareness that identity is relational, and inextricably linked to belonging. That self-acceptance of one’s identity as a social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience can be aided by the validation of the communities we are situated within (or without). The isolating experience of not-belonging and its impact on identity is explored in the final example.
‘Land grab’

This fourth example completes the depiction of Sunny’s transition from the happy, imaginative and playful child the reader is introduced to in the earlier stories to a circumspect teenager, whose interactions with the wider world have increased her sense of isolation rather than lessened it, showing how relationships are not always life-enriching. The sisters have outgrown the adventurous games in the countryside around the property that kept them entertained during their childhood, but these have not been replaced with the kind of pursuits their peers in town enjoy. On a hot afternoon, bored, and lazing on the veranda, Sunny reflects on the “differences” that isolate them, literally and figuratively, on the fringes of the town. Thinking about the Aunties’ strong attachment to their old property, she complains

‘Stupid bloody land! … We could go ta town an’ have a flash house … An’ I could ’ave friends … an’ … people would think we were normal.’

‘It won’t make any difference,’ Star said … ‘People won’t think we’re normal no matta what we do. Get used to it’ (131).

The conversation is overheard by the Aunties who are deeply hurt. They decide to tell the girls the story of how they secured the home for themselves and the nieces. They reveal that in preparing for his death, William presumed to leave his wife and unmarried daughters in the care of his son Richie, who Aunty Bubby claims was ‘never smart … All he wanted ta do was wait til the ol’ man died an’ sell the place’ (133–34). Knowing they would be out of a home, Aunty Boo decided to intervene. She plotted and schemed, drew on her bookkeeping and masterful negotiation skills, and even practised forgery to manipulate her father into keeping the house and
garden apart from the rest of the estate, thereby ensuring some future
security for the unmarried sisters. In recounting this story, the Aunties
convey pride in their skilful dealings that obtained the title on the house, and
gratitude for their home’s comfort, not resentment of its simplicity:

‘So now youse know how I grabbed this little bit o’ land fer us an’
I won’t give it up, never. Ya’l hafta carry me outta here in a box
before I’ll be goin’ anywhere!’
‘Me too,’ Nan said.
‘An’ me.’ Aunty Bubby set her lips firmly.
All my visions of a house in town vanished out the window (140).

Their conviction is overwhelming, but not comforting, leaving Sunny
feeling defeated rather than satisfied, and painfully aware that her belonging
to one community—her family—may leave her excluded from other
communities throughout her life.

As independent texts, these stories focus on particular events, encouraging
the reader to reflect on how each has an impact on Sunny given her age and
understanding at the time. But working together, the interrelatedness of the
stories shows how Sunny’s racial and cultural identity changes as she grows
up, through interactions with others. We see how increased contact with the
outside world, beyond the loving protection of her family and home, educate
her about the ways that her family, and their lifestyle, are viewed by the
white community. It is a process of shifting identity as she measures her
own perceptions against those of other people. As a community narrative,
these stories contribute to building a picture of the kinds of complex
experiences many Aboriginal people have encountered under colonisation.
Conclusion

Leane found the short story cycle to be a suitable form for conveying the many incidents and influences that she remembers as particularly formative in her life. The cycle enabled her to capture the recursive nature of a woman’s links to her past, how those links embed in the present, and also shape the future. While each story in the cycle has its own narrative arc, larger themes develop as the book assembles a broader picture that encompasses the family’s past and future.

Themes explored include Sunny’s growing self-knowledge about herself and how others see her, and the recognition that identity is not fixed but relational and flexible, changing over time and in response to different circumstances, and is ultimately a journey towards a shared end with others to whom she is inextricably connected. An important factor in this learning is how knowledge is shared in families, how children sometimes clumsily piece together snippets and fragments in order to make sense of the adult world they will one day venture into independently.

The reading practices provoked by the short story cycle parallel thematic threads in Purple threads. For instance, by treating these experiences separately, in independent stories, the cycle encourages the reader to make connections, cross-reference between stories, and more fully understand the narrative as a complex of layers rather than linear strands or trajectories. Further, the reader is able to reflect on these different experiences in the pauses after small resolutions of minor narrative arcs in the various stories.
comprising the short story cycle. In these ways, the independence and interrelatedness of the stories, the emphasis on apparently isolated events, the presence of unresolved threads and the space for the longer story, enable a diversity of material and themes to be explored in a relatively circumscribed text.

The stories in *Purple threads* each tell the reader something different about the experiences of one Aboriginal girl growing up in a loving family in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. And as a short story cycle it contributes to a strong canon of community narratives that help to build a broader picture about the diverse experiences of Indigenous families and communities, past and present, and the relational aspects of subjects as socially situated beings.
Conclusion

This thesis argues that the short story cycle is a suitable narrative form for representing women’s relational lives through the focus on minor narrative arcs about their ordinary experiences as they engage in relationships with others. It explores this claim through an original work of fiction, and a critical discussion that examines how unique conventions of the form have been used by writers to tell stories about women. One overarching theme of the fiction, which opens the thesis, is how an intimate relationship changes over time, and how different phases of that relationship are prompted, and in turn shaped by, personal transformations within the central character, a woman named Connie. The dissertation examines several features of the short story cycle in detail by drawing on specific examples from short story cycles about women written in the decades following second-wave feminism, and culminates in a close reading of a contemporary cycle about three generations of Aboriginal women and girls in Australia.

This thesis draws on the feminist concept of relational autonomy, which does not define any one philosophical concept, but functions as an umbrella term for a range of perspectives that emphasise the notion of the self as socially embedded, and by which the structures and relationships that tie an individual to others make autonomy possible (Westlund, 2009, 26). Therefore, in this context autonomy, understood as the ability to reflect on
and make decisions based on the authentic values and desires of the person, can be achieved even while accepting that those values and choices may be shaped and informed in some way through relationships of obligation and care (Christman, 2004, 148–9). It is this concept of autonomy that underpins the processes of personal transformation and self-determination that emerge through many stories about women, which the short story cycle represents structurally and thematically. As Kelley claims, of the feminist subject in short story cycles: ‘negotiating between coherence and fragmentation, as well as between autonomy and interactivity, this subject is aware of its multiple, ideologically interpolated subject-positions and, in fact, consequently is able to act subversively’ (1995, 305). This thesis has shown how the interweaving of recurrent themes and motifs, the emphasis on minor narrative arcs, the prevalence of mosaic rather than linear narrative structures (and consequent prioritising of theme over chronological time) and the silences within and between stories, are features of the short story cycle that enable these distinctive representations of women’s relational lives.

In order to bring together the threads of this thesis, and suggest areas for development for future research, this conclusion draws briefly on one final short story cycle to highlight the characteristics of the form that are explored in this thesis, and to demonstrate different ways in which the form is being used by contemporary writers. Other potential areas for further research, including thematic developments, are also mentioned.
Further developments in the form

Traditionally, short story cycle theory has focused on cycles that are conceived as whole texts. The inclusion of a mini short story cycle within collections of short stories, might be one avenue to follow for further research into this form. Where the god of love hangs out (2011) is a collection of short stories by American writer Amy Bloom. Amongst the otherwise unconnected stories are two small story cycles consisting of four stories each, entitled ‘William and Clare’ and ‘Lionel and Julia’. This sets the collection apart from other cycles examined in this thesis. Here, the short story cycle is not the entire text, but is utilised within the text to tell two particular stories about women. Interestingly, in both cases the stories explore how a significant relationship changes and impacts on the central characters over time, a theme that, it may be assumed, Bloom judged could best be articulated in a story cycle. This conclusion looks more closely at the first of these mini cycles.

‘William and Clare’ is about a middle-aged man and woman who, married to Isabel and Charles respectively, and having been friends for many years, now launch into a sexual affair. The four stories cover several years, with time passing indicated by occasional references to William and Clare’s adult children as they marry and start their own families. Each of the first three stories occur within very short timeframes—the first only an hour or so, and the second and third during two different afternoons. The last story is different, spanning a longer period so that the ramifications of a major shift in the couple’s relationship can be explored. Point of view also differs
between the individual stories. Only the first story is told in the first person, from Clare’s point of view. Nevertheless, having been privy to Clare’s innermost thoughts at the start, the reader is positioned to read the subsequent stories, narrated in third person, as Clare’s story. From this perspective, the cycle is a woman’s story that privileges the importance of relationships to the processes by which a woman develops a greater sense of herself over time.

Many of the features of the short story cycle discussed in this thesis can be identified in ‘William and Clare’ to show how the relationship between the two lovers is not negotiated in an isolated social and temporal plane inhabited by the two of them alone, but is considered and reconsidered, fostered and reshaped, over time, in the context of their relationships with friends, spouses, children, extended family and others. William and Clare’s relationship is not explored as expansively as it might be in a novel. Typically for a short story cycle, the subsequent stories glimpse into their lives at intervals, homing in on particular events that nevertheless amplify the development of the relationship and its impact on the central and, to a lesser degree, minor characters. The internal integrity of the stories provoke the necessary tension that Mann writes about (1989, 18), leaving the reader free to go no further after reading one story, or to read on to find out more about the lovers. However, as discussed in previous chapters, the reader must be prepared for some of their questions about minor characters or specific events not to be answered in following stories. Only what is absolutely necessary to explore this one aspect of Clare’s and William’s
lives is offered to the reader. The events that are chosen to represent changes in the relationship are generally unremarkable, part of the fabric of ordinary lives. They occur in the private, domestic spaces of home and family, and while the narrative present of each story follows chronologically from the previous story, the stories nevertheless jump back and forth in time—typically as we have seen in short story cycles—to extend the particular theme being explored.

In the space of four short stories about mundane events in daily life, with so little textual webbing between them and relying heavily on the silences between the few scenes the reader is privy to, the textual components of ‘William and Clare’ nevertheless provide an engaging picture of how one woman has achieved autonomy, and has made choices based on her own authentic sexual desires. These decisions are formed within the context of a range of relationships throughout her life, from youth to late middle-age, and prompted by several mundane experiences that are nevertheless significant triggers for self-reflection and ultimately change. Because the whole picture of Clare’s life as a mother, wife, friend and lover is so important in developing these themes, the snapshot approach that the short story cycle so effectively employs serves this story well.

If research uncovers that Bloom’s book is not an isolated example, but that other contemporary authors are drawing on the cycle form in different ways to suit different purposes, this trend might suggest that the short story cycle is becoming more widely recognised as a distinct form in its own right, and
the unique opportunities it offers writers better understood. It would also be interesting to explore how the impact on the narrative action and themes thus developed differs between a full-length cycle, and one as brief as ‘William and Clare’, where the features of the cycle emerge in sharp focus, and can be seen to be working to maximum effect to illustrate change over time.

Another feature of short story cycles written in the new millennium, and which we see in ‘William and Clare’, is the strong presence of the male character’s perspective within a woman’s story. What little the reader sees and hears of William is filtered through Clare’s eyes, and yet he is more fleshed out and rounded than many of the male characters in the cycles drawn on as key examples in this thesis. Of course, stories about women inevitably include male characters because women share their lives and societies with boys and men in a great variety of relationships. And men and women do write short story cycles about men too. However, the focus in this thesis has been on the suitability of the form to represent women’s lives because a wealth of cycles can be drawn on to reasonably conclude that the form is often used by writers wanting to tell stories about women’s ordinary experiences. Many of the cycles drawn on in this thesis were written during or just after the height of second-wave feminism in western societies (The beggar maid, The women of Brewster Place), and may reflect the specific focus on women deemed culturally significant and politically strategic at the time. Nevertheless, some recent cycles written by western writers include individual stories about male central characters. For example, Olive
*Kitteridge* includes several stories from the perspective of a male character, even as the cycle as a whole develops around an evolving picture of Olive.

And in a different way, *A visit from the goon squad*, and Australian cycles, *Having cried wolf* and *The dark wet*, focus less on the trajectory of a primary character (woman or man) and portray the interconnecting lives of several characters of different genders, and how those relationships inform and affect self and others over time.

The inclusion of male central characters in some contemporary short story cycles may reflect a greater concern with the community over the individual, and/or indicate lingering discomfort by younger writers over perceived restrictions associated with feminism, some of which are explored in Chapter Three. Fear of appearing anti-male by focusing too overtly on women may be one of these anxieties. Further research may explore how the short story cycle represents women’s relationships with men and other women, and non-heteronormative relationships, in contemporary western societies where feminists’ continued determination to name gender equality and suggest alternative personal, social and political structures is so often questioned.

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63 Emma Watson, a young British actress famous for her role in the *Harry Potter* movie franchise, and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, is a good example of the conflict young women may feel when grappling with the realities of gender inequality in a society that, for the most part, devalues the continued relevance of feminism. In a speech delivered at the launch of the HeForShe campaign to bring men and women together to end gender inequality, Watson said: ‘The more I have spoken about feminism, the more I have realised that fighting for women’s rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating …. For the record, feminism by definition, is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes’ (Anderson, 2014).

64 An area for further exploration is the way in which contemporary themes of interest to younger writers, such as the inescapable reality of modern warfare, are represented and narrated in the short story cycle. Australian Shrim’s *Having cried wolf* (2010), already
This thesis claims that much of the critical material written in English on the short story cycle emerges from scholarly work in the United States. An important research objective in this project has been to increase awareness of the creative and critical work being done around the form in Australia. Therefore, attention is drawn to several Australian research projects and short story cycles. The cycle, Purple threads, is dealt with through explorations of its place in the tradition of life-writing by Aboriginal women in this country, and through closer inspection of how the features of the form facilitate storytelling about Aboriginal women and girls. Purple threads, though a recent example of the form, continues in the vein of earlier “feminist” cycles by privileging storytelling about women. This might support claims by scholars such as Brewster that since colonisation women have come to occupy a more central position in Aboriginal community and family life (Brewster, 1996a, 9). How this development is represented in short story cycles written by and about Indigenous women could be explored as a topic of its own. As noted above, Purple threads sits in company with several other contemporary short story cycles by Indigenous women writers. This growing field could be explored for trends in new ways of representing the Indigenous experience in Australia.

Drawing on Nagel’s claims, stated at the beginning of this discussion, the short story cycle has been used widely in many cultures around the world by writers of different ethnic backgrounds. How women’s relational lives are mentioned in this thesis, tackles the influence of war on a soldier and his young wife who is left behind. More recently, American author Phil Klay has produced a cycle of stories based on his own experiences in the Marine Corps, deployed to Iraq from 2007–2008 (2014).
represented through some of the culturally specific and cross-cultural trends in this broader field beyond western literary traditions would extend the necessarily limited scope presented here.65

*The beggar maid, The women of Brewster Place, Olive Kitteridge, Purple threads, ‘William and Clare’ and the other cycles referred to in this thesis, represent developments in American and Australian short story cycles from the height of second-wave feminism in the west to the present day. Sharing a strong focus on women’s ordinary lives, they explore how women come to a greater sense of themselves and their authentic desires—for personal and shared ends—through relationships of obligations to care for and attachment to others over the course of their lives. Short story cycle theorists have shown that the form is an adaptable, flexible genre that has been used for different purposes for centuries. Current indications suggest that the form is growing in popularity amongst a new generation of writers who are adapting to specific needs to represent diversity, intersectional identities, and relationality in contemporary, multicultural and postcolonial societies.*

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65 Two recent book chapters exploring postcolonial themes in short story cycles are worth noting here. Dirk Wiemann (2013) examines the treatment of globalisation and postcolonialism in cycles written by Indian English novelists, and Margaret Wright-Cleveland (2012) explores race and national identity in Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) and Hemingway’s *In our time* (1925).
Appendix

Various insights into the use of the short story cycle in chapters Four and Five of this dissertation are drawn from my formal and informal exchanges with *Purple threads* author, Jeanine Leane, over the course of this research project, from September 2011 to the present. The processes and protocols followed in the course of including Leane’s thoughts on using the short story cycle are outlined below.

In September 2011, following the public release of *Purple threads*, I contacted Leane via email to broach the idea of interviewing her for my research. Over several subsequent exchanges Leane responded positively to the idea, prompting me to initiate the process to apply for ethics approval to conduct a formal interview with her. Though normally based in Canberra, at this time Leane was living and working in New York.

Both the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* (NS) and the Murdoch HREC policy on *Ethics in Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* were consulted in preparation for my application. In particular, as the research participant was an Indigenous person, I was required to attach a separate statement ‘outlining how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sensitivities will be addressed’ (NS 4.7). In response to this requirement I sought peer review feedback on my research application and all protocols were duly followed.
Following successful granting of ethics approval, I instigated a formal interview. I forwarded a list of questions and discussion points to Leane to enable her to consider her responses ahead of our conversation. Between us we arranged a mutually suitable time to discuss these points via Skype. The first discussion was carried out in video format and recorded with an audio device on 16 December 2011.

I maintained contact with Leane by email and phone. I endeavoured to keep her informed on a regular basis of the progress of my research. Two informal conversations occurred in person, during a research trip I made to Canberra in January 2013, and as co-participants at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature national conference in July 2013. A second formal interview was conducted in audio format via Skype in August 2013. I recorded Leane’s responses on paper.

Throughout 2013 I sought clarifications on some points raised during our conversations. When actual responses, directly quoted or paraphrased, were selected for incorporation into the thesis, I sent these sections to Leane via email and sought her permission for their inclusion.

An added opportunity to engage with Leane occurred in August 2014. With support from the Krishna Somers Foundation, I co-hosted a research visit by Leane to Murdoch University. Leane delivered a paper on the intersection between the personal and the professional, the creative writer and the
During this visit I sought informal feedback from Leane on some of the ideas I was working on in relation to creative non-fiction and the short story cycle.

Leane maintained the right to amend the context in which her words were used in my thesis, or withdraw her participation altogether, right up until the submission of the thesis for examination.
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