The Place Between

Time as Palimpsest in the Reading and Writing of Women’s Fiction

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A thesis submitted to Murdoch University
to fulfil the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the discipline of
English and Creative Arts
November 2017
Author’s Declaration

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.

Suzanne Moore
Abstract

Time is one of the many measures through which women make sense of their embodied and emotional lives, and negotiate their relationships to work, community, culture, politics and history. However, traditional definitions often segregate ‘women’s time’ from contexts of public life and social change. This thesis, presented in two parts, is interested in developing, critically and creatively, a new understanding of women’s time through the conceptual framework of the palimpsest.

The first part of this thesis is an original novella that explores themes of family history, mother-and-daughter relationships, identity and time. Set in present-day Sydney, the narrative traces the fraught relationship between Sarah and her mother, Beryl, utilising the technique of time-shifts to gradually reveal silenced family histories. The novella treats its characters’ diverse experiences as palimpsestic, through a combination of conventional linear and radically subjective modes of time, to represent women’s lives as complexly constructed and intertwined with the lives of others.

The dissertation, the second part of the thesis, explores the creative representation of time in fiction, particularly by drawing on Julia Kristeva’s seminal essay “Women’s Time” (1996e), and her notion of subjectivity, in order to develop the conceptual framework of time as palimpsest. This framework is proposed as a way to render women’s lives creatively and imaginatively in fiction. A critical reading of two novels by Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) and *Life After Life* (2013), harnesses the temporal palimpsest and offers insights into
Atkinson’s treatment of time as a multifaceted phenomenon, one that both shapes and is shaped by the subjective and relational experiences of the everyday, experiences at once individual and politically and historically significant.

The thesis thus demonstrates how the temporal palimpsest might revitalise critical practices of reading and writing fiction, enabling a dynamic approach to moving beyond reductive renderings of gendered time.
## Table of Contents

- **The Place Between**  
  1
- **Author’s Declaration**  
  i
- **Abstract**  
  iii
- **Table of Contents**  
  v
- **Acknowledgements**  
  vii
- **Part I: Fiction**  
  1
  - **The Place Between**  
    3
- **Part II: Dissertation**  
  183
  - **Introduction**  
    185
    - Women in Time and Fiction  
      187
    - Women and Time in Feminist Theory  
      189
    - Overview of Thesis  
      195
    - Structure of Dissertation  
      197
  - **Towards a Palimpsest of Women’s Time**  
    201
    - Palimpsest  
      202
    - Kristeva’s Subject  
      205
    - “Women’s Time”  
      210
    - Monumental Time  
      216
    - Cyclic Time  
      216
    - Linear Time  
      217
    - The Ethics of ‘Women’s Time’  
      219
    - Kristeva and Atkinson  
      220
    - Critical Reception of Atkinson’s Fiction  
      222
  - **Behind the Scenes at the Museum**  
    229
    - Overview of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*  
      230
    - Overview of the Temporal Palimpsest  
      232
    - Monumental Time: Dismantling Good Mothers  
      237
    - Cyclic Time: Rescuing Wicked Mothers  
      243
    - Linear Time: Rewriting the Fairy-Tale Heroine  
      256
    - Imagining a New History  
      260
4

Life After Life
- Overview of Life After Life 273
- Monumental Time: Constructing a New Heroine 279
- Cyclical Time: The Politics of Motherhood 287
- Linear Time: Witnessing the Past 295
- Conclusion 304

5

Conclusion 307
- Women and Time 308
- Future Time in Fiction 311
- Implications of this Study 313

Bibliography 319
Acknowledgements

I would like acknowledge the many years of support given to me by Dr Christine Owen who saw me through two children, many tears, and the frustrations of balancing research and motherhood.

I would like to extend a heartfelt, and grateful thank you to Associate Professor Anne Surma, who took up the baton of supervision in the final year of this project. Without Anne’s insightful, inspiring and motivating feedback, along with her unflagging optimism, I have no doubt I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

To Michael, my PhD widower. There is too much to say. You know.

To my parents who counselled, babysat, comforted and urged me to continue.

To Lily and Owen who have never known life without a PhD in it. The book that is “taking a very long time” is finally done, and I love you too xx.
Part I: Fiction
The Place Between
The heavy metal bell of Sarah’s stethoscope bounced against her chest as she moved along the corridor. She registered its familiar weight with a new awareness. She took the time to lodge the details: disinfectant; rubber shoes on linoleum. Soft whimpers, grunts, moans and the haunting emptiness of resigned silence—the sounds of life and death—spilled out into the long, bright corridor from an endless repeat of gloss blue door-frames. She fingered the soft tubing of the stethoscope and wondered how she would feel when she woke up in the morning. A free agent. No longer a doctor, but a mother, a wife. A housewife. The last made her shudder. Last day. She concentrated on breathing softly, evenly, aware of the air in her lungs, the force of her diaphragm pushing and pulling to keep her alive, and she was aware of the wriggling body wedged just below it making everything tangibly more difficult. The baby kicked her swiftly, sharply, as though it had sensed what she was thinking. Sarah winced and brought her hand to her left side. How was it possible that she and her daughter were already disagreeing with one another?

The morning news blared from the room closest to the nurses’ station. Sarah tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, dropped her bag on the ground, then kicked it under the desk. She took in the scene: strewn paperwork, dirty mugs and a salad sandwich decomposing on an open sheet of cling-wrap. The two night-shift nurses looked conspicuously dishevelled as they finished up the last of the paperwork ready for handover.
“Anyone die?” Sarah asked, screwing up her face in anticipation of the answer.

Charitra shook her head, “No, nothing as bad as that.” The front of her scrub top was smeared with a suspicious, muted stain that looked as though she had tried, unsuccessfully, to wash it off. The other nurse, Rosheen, sighed dramatically and with a forceful thrust rocketed in her chair across the floor towards Sarah. In a different life, Sarah imagined them sharing a friendship, but there wasn’t much point now. The foreseeable future was tied up with small children and—if magazines, social media and television were to be trusted—the stimulating, satisfying and seductive world of domesticity. Catch-ups for coffee and girls’ nights out at the pub hadn’t been on the cards for many years.

“The old bag in room ten played up all night,” Rosheen said. Sitting up straight in her chair, she changed her voice to parody the old woman. “It’s awfully hot in here. I need another blanket. I’m having a heart attack. Stop sending her in.” With this she pointed towards Charitra who had started laughing. “I don’t trust that dark nurse. I think she’s trying to bump me off in my sleep.”

Sarah laughed. “Well, were you?”

“Bloody right I was.” Sarah smiled at Charitra’s casual use of the Australian vernacular.

Rosheen clapped her hands, “Anyway. Last day? Excited?”

Sarah bit her lip, “A little bit,” she lied.

Rosheen touched Sarah’s stomach gently, a whimsical expression on her face. “You look after your mummy now. Make sure she comes back to us.” She addressed Sarah’s stomach as though it were a great Cyclopean eye. An oracle.

The tea trolley rattled past. The jingle of cups and saucers broke the spell between Rosheen and Sarah’s ballooning stomach. Outside the nurse’s station,
muffled voices accepted the hot liquid and plastic wrapped biscuits. If nothing else, tea broke up the day: time measured in teacups. Or was it teaspoons? What would she measure her time in after today? Feeds? Teeth? Words. Milestones. Minutes were already becoming irrelevant. Sarah thought of her mother. How did Beryl measure the time?

“So what’s happening?” Sarah used her serious, doctor’s voice.

Rosheen pushed her chair back across the open space to the opposite desk. Charitra folded her arms across her chest and perched on the edge of the desk next to Sarah. Their bright expressions were replaced with worried frowns. The long hours of the night-shift suddenly made the bags under their eyes heavier and the creases between their brows deeper.

Charitra said quietly, her voice weary, “I’m not happy with room twelve. She’s been pretty unstable all night. We had Gary out twice to see to her. You’d better check her first.”

Sarah pumped sanitising gel into her palm and walked into room twelve. A frail old body, doing its best to die, barely disturbed the flat expanse of sheets across the bed. Oxygen hissed from a tube into the woman’s nostrils but the blue outline tingling her lips suggested that it wasn’t enough. Sarah pulled the woman’s chart from the end of the bed and smiled. Bright and professional. The chart said Lillian Agnes Sitwell, eighty-four.

“Good morning, Lillian. I’m Sarah. I’ll be looking after you today.”

Lillian smiled meekly then coughed, the air crackled as it was forced through the fluid in her lungs. Sarah skimmed through the notes and sighed. Third admission since June. She moved around to the right side of the bed, keeping her expression as positive as she could manage.

“You feeling any better? I heard you kept the nurses on their toes last night.”
Sarah examined the fluid bags hanging on the stand next to the bed. She compared the time scrawled on the label with her watch. Lillian’s breakfast tray sat untouched on the table, the glass of water undrunk, straw wedged at a peculiar angle. Next to the glass Sarah noticed a leather-bound notebook. It was old and battered, as though it had travelled through Lillian’s entire life wedged in her handbag. A black ribbon held the place close to the end and a heavily chewed biro stuck out of the top. Sarah checked the chart again, relieved to see Lillian’s temperature had come down.

When Lillian finally answered, Sarah heard the wheeze in her breath. “A little better thank you.”

Sarah lifted the bell of her stethoscope. “Mind if I have a listen?”

Lillian nodded and Sarah helped her lean forward. The stethoscope was cold and hard against Lillian’s skin despite Sarah’s attempt to be gentle. Lillian flinched as though she has been struck. Hyperaesthesia. The sound of her lungs was a cacophony of crackles and wheezes, high-pitched pops interrupted by the sudden and shocking sound of nothing at all. Sarah eased Lillian back onto the pillow and conjured a smile.

“Where are all your visitors?” she joked, not wanting to give an honest report on what she had heard. Not yet.

“Didn’t you see them? They just left.” Lillian faked indignation but succumbed to a coughing fit without completely pulling it off.

“Oh …” Sarah lifted the glass of water and held it for Lillian to drink. “All of those people were for you? I thought they’d come for my farewell party.”

“I’m afraid not,” Lillian shook her head. Then her expression brightened. “Last day? Lucky you. Soon you’ll have a lovely baby to cuddle.” She paused, wandering off for an instant. “It will be much nicer than dealing with sick people all the time.” Lillian’s eyes sparkled and Sarah glimpsed a much younger woman.
“We’ll see. I’m not sure being a full-time mum of two is something I’m ready for. Sick people are a breeze.”

Lillian coughed, “Don’t you think it’s bit late to change your mind?”

Sarah laughed, “Well, yes. Still scary though.” They sat in silence for a minute. Sarah felt a reluctance to move on that she couldn’t explain. “Do you have children? Grandchildren?”

Lillian frowned for a fraction of a second, as though she couldn’t quite remember. “I had two children, a boy and a girl. No grandchildren that I know of.”

Sarah pretended not to notice the word ‘had’, stood up and clapped her hands together. “Okay, well I’d like to see you eat some of that breakfast. I’ll write up another bag of IV antibiotics and something to keep you comfortable. Try and sleep and I’ll stop in on you later.”

“Thank you.”

Sarah patted Lillian’s hand and felt a tug of pity. It was a personal horror of hers: to die in hospital—all alone.

The day trudged on in a never-ending succession of cake, tea and gifts. The pile of pink mounted up at the nurse’s station. How was she ever going to get it all home? She fished her mobile out of her hand bag and rang Luke.

“Hey,” his voice beamed out.

“Hey.”

“How’s it going?”

“Okay. Weird. I dunno.” She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts.

“Listen, how are you tracking today?”

“Alright, why?”

“Could you swing by and pick me up?”

“Um.” Sarah heard the clicking of fingers on a keyboard, “what time?”
“My shift ends at seven. I should be done by then.”

“Sure. I’m not too busy today. We could ask Lisa to stick around with David and grab some dinner to celebrate?”

“Sounds good. Can you ring her?”

“Chicken,” he laughed.

“Thanks. See you soon.” Sarah hit the red icon on her phone and dropped it back into her bag. The call button from room twelve lit up. She looked around but everyone else was busy. What the hell. She headed down the corridor.

“Hi, Lillian?” Sarah peeked around the curtain. “The nurses are all busy, can I help?”

“Oh,” Lillian seemed surprised to see Sarah. “I can wait.”

“I don’t mind,” Sarah slipped into the room. She looked over her shoulder as though making sure they were alone. Nurses didn’t like it when doctors did their job for them, despite their constant complaints about having too much to do.

Sarah leaned in conspiratorially, “To be honest, it gives me an excuse to hide out for a minute. If I eat any more cake I’m going to explode. You’re looking better,” Sarah brightened, noticing the pink of Lillian’s lips and cheeks and the visible improvement in her breathing.

“Much better, thanks.”

“Great. What can I help you with?”

Lillian looked guilty. “I need to go to the loo, and I don’t think I can make it on my own. I’m a bit wobbly on my feet.”

Sarah looked down at her enormous stomach and considered the logistics of manual nursing. At just over thirty-four weeks she was meant to be strictly hands off. She surveyed Lillian, taking into account her slender shoulders and guessed she couldn’t weigh more that forty-five or fifty kilograms. Flicking over the cover of the
chart, Sarah checked, forty-seven. She could do it. David weighed twenty-six and she could still handle him most of the time. A compliant forty-seven kilograms would be easy by comparison.

“Not to worry. Let’s get you up.” A walking frame stood by the window and Sarah dragged it to the edge of the bed. Lillian pulled back the blanket and eased her legs over the edge, tentatively putting her weight on her feet. Sarah kept close, ready to catch Lillian as she transferred her weight to the walking frame and guided her to the bathroom door in the corner by the window. Lillian’s ribs pressed into Sarah’s hands as she helped her sit down on the toilet. Too much pressure and she would shatter.

When she had settled Lillian back into bed, Sarah sat and leaned against the foot rail. Lillian didn’t speak, too exhausted from the trek to the bathroom.

“When will I go home?” Lillian eventually managed. Her voice was small and tired. Sarah flinched. Too soon, she thought.

“Um, a few days, maybe a week. If you keep improving.” There was an unspoken familiarity between the two women: as though each understood that neither was ready for the next phase of their lives.

“I don’t have anyone,” Lillian said, an edge in her voice. “I live alone. I can’t go back,” she paused, “I can’t go into a home.”

“Has a social worker come to see you?”

“Yes.” Lillian looked at her hands. Sarah smiled at the unconscious gesture. David did that when he didn’t want to talk. When he was frightened. Would it be a habit of a lifetime for him as well?

“You can’t go home to an empty house. You know that, right?”

Lillian nodded, her eyes filled with tears.

“Do you have anyone you can stay with? Your kids?”
Lillian shook her head. “My daughter lives interstate.”

Sarah shifted awkwardly up the bed and took Lillian’s hand. “I’ll write up for you to stay in as long as is feasible, then, maybe,” Sarah emphasised the “maybe”, not wanting to give false hope. “You will be well enough to go home with our out-patient nurses checking in on you every day.” Sarah held up a finger, again thinking of David, and added, “No promises.”

Lillian smiled, tears spilling over. “Thank you.”

“Okay,” she patted Lillian’s hand gently. “I’ll get the nurses to try and reach your daughter as well. Perhaps she could come and stay with you for a few weeks until you’re back on your feet.”

Lillian opened her mouth to speak but coughed instead. Sarah’s phone buzzed in her pocket and she signalled an apology to Lillian and left the room.
Day one. Sarah looked at her watch. Eleven a.m. Perhaps she should scratch marks in the wall. She thought for a moment: eleven a.m. here made it eight a.m. in Perth. She was still having to do the calculation even after six years living in Sydney. She dare not ring her mother. Bruce would be up by now, but waking Beryl would be a fatal mistake. She woke her phone and scrolled through Facebook for the hundredth time. The Greens were outraged at the government. Beyoncé had a health scare. Antivaxxers were staging a protest at Parliament House. A video of a hamster eating a tiny burrito had gone viral. Sarah laughed at its chubby cheeks and tiny, humanoid hands. Other people had lives. Lives that, judging by the photographs, did not involve sitting alone in a kitchen waiting for a different time zone to move into its waking hours. Sarah flung the phone onto the table and huffed. She took a mouthful of tea but spat it straight back into the cup—it was freezing cold.

“David?” she called. Silence. No thumping footsteps. What was he up to? Breaking something? A soft tapping noise drew her up the stairs. It grew louder as she approached David’s room: the sound reminiscent of a rubber mallet striking wood, heavy, dull and crushing. She paused outside his door, hand hovering over the handle. He had gone quiet, even more disturbing than the previous sounds of destruction. Sarah searched herself. How would she handle whatever waited on other side of the door? As a doctor, or as the Sarah that, for the foreseeable future, was a stay-at-home mum? A STAHM. She hated that acronym. For months the sequence of
letters had appeared on her news feed linking to articles designed to bolster her self-
esteeem, yet left her inexplicably depressed. The thought that her life was about to be
reduced to planning healthy meals or “engaging” David in educational activities
made her uneasy, as though she were about to be erased entirely. Sarah didn’t
remember her own mother ever “engaging” or “developing” her, or her brother. No,
Beryl had been an old-school, boredom-is-good-for-you kind of mother. Still, Sarah
thought, she wasn’t Beryl and things were different now. Her hand hovered over the
handle of David’s door. She still had to open, no matter what David was doing on the
other side. In the same way that she still had to cook dinner, wash his clothes, drive
him to school, bath him at night, read to him, listen to him. Because, after all, at the
end of the day, the responsibility for producing a child that could live and act like a
socialised human being was her responsibility, at least, more hers than anyone
else’s—even Luke’s. It was all very well to indulge in the injustice of it, but the
reality remained the same.

“David?” She peered around the door. The routines of at-home David still
foreign to her. For the past three years, while Sarah had worked and pushed her
career forward, those little jobs had fallen to the nanny. Sarah and David’s time
together had been a hectic cramming of running errands, going to kindy or burning
energy at the playground. There hadn’t been time for anything else. As Sarah
carefully pressed her ear to the door, her mother’s voice whispered to her. Do you
even know him? Words Beryl had thrust at Sarah as a justification for trying to sack
the nanny. Words that accused Sarah of loving her job more than she loved her son.
Had Beryl been right? Sarah had never admitted, could never admit, to anyone that
she was frightened of being solely responsible for David. And now there was the
baby.

What met her on the other side of the door was not the carnage of smashed
toys and emptied toy boxes she had expected. There was no destruction, no disaster. Just a train wending its way across the carpet, two oversized tin-pressed robots perched on top of the lead carriage. David made train noises as he pushed the colourful wagons around the track. He scooted along the carpet, left knee on the ground, left hand splayed on the carpet for balance, the other foot inching forward to keep pace with the train’s progress.

“Hi, Mummy,” he said without looking up, his curly hair obscuring his face.

“What’s up?”

What’s up? Was he a teenager now? “Nothing sweetheart, just making sure you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” he said between toots.

Sarah leaned against the doorframe and folded her arms.

“Why are you just standing there?”

“No reason. I like your train set. I haven’t seen you play with it much.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. It’s a bit boring. Henry has one that runs by itself. It goes really fast, and has lights, and makes lots of different noises. It’s way better than this one.”

“Lucky Henry.”

“Yeah.” David went back to pushing the train around in his awkward, one-knee shuffle.

Sarah went back downstairs and rang the hospital. Lillian from room twelve was improving, the voice on the line told her. Then it told her to get on with being a mum, to turn off her working brain; everything was under control. Sarah promised she would, then hung up. Half-past eleven. Beryl would be up. Sarah punched in the number and waited. A click, a hiss, like compressed air being released sounded in her ear. It rang three times. Sarah closed her eyes. She would tell Beryl about the baby.
Clear the air, but she frowned, there was a lot of air between Sydney and Perth.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mum.”

Beryl breathed out heavily into the receiver. She sounded relieved, as though she had been waiting for bad news. “Oh hi, luv.” She was breathy and the heavy rush of air down the line stung Sarah’s ear. Sarah pictured Beryl in a montage of domestic tasks: cooking, vacuuming, doing the laundry. What vital task had she dropped in order to run to answer Sarah’s call?

“You okay, Mum? You sound flustered.”

“I’m fine,” Beryl answered. There was a pause. “Well, if you must know, I’ve just had a set-to with Barry from next door…”

Sarah zoned out, annoyed with herself for giving Beryl an opening. David slunk around behind her and opened a drawer in the buffet. He pulled something out, his eyes darting between Sarah and the drawer, then disappeared back up the stairs before Sarah could twist around far enough to see what he was up to. He had left the drawer half open. Paper, tissues, pens and cables spilled out in a still-life display of the chaos of their lives. Beryl’s voice forced its way back into Sarah’s thoughts.

“Sarah?”

“Sorry?” She felt guilty, not so much for not listening to Beryl, but for her inability to hide it.

“Don’t you work on Thursdays?”

“Normally.” More guilt. “I just, um, my roster was a bit stuffed this week.” She felt the tone of her voice rise. She screwed up her face and clenched her teeth. Tell her, a little voice whispered in her ear, but Sarah pushed it away.

“Oh, everything okay?”
“Fine,” Sarah bit her lip, eyes still closed. When she opened them she was surprised to find the room unchanged, no bolt of lightning or gaping hole in the floor.

“We have a surprise for you,” Beryl said.

“A surprise? What kind of surprise?” They’ve won the lotto and are going to pay off my mortgage? Fat chance.

“Well, we thought, as a treat, that we would come visit you all before Christmas.”

“Oh?” There was that high pitch in her voice again. Beryl have misunderstood the meaning of “surprise”. Sarah understood the concept of a surprise to involve glittering packages with ribbons, sparkling diamonds, or soft puppies leaping out of people’s arms to the loving embrace of overjoyed children. Impromptu visits from Beryl, right before Christmas no less, had not previously figured in that understanding.

“I know! We arrive on Sunday morning. It’s the midnight flight of course because your father won’t pay for a daytime one.” Beryl’s voice trailed off as though she had turned away from the receiver. “Oh, right,” she said to someone else. “I’ve got to go, luv. Can’t wait to see you. Dad will pop you through an email with the details. Give David a kiss and we’ll see you next week.”

The line went dead and Sarah sat in disbelief. She put her hands on her stomach and looked down. “Well, darling, we’re in big trouble now.”

***

Sarah wrestled the trolley down the aisle where cartons had been stacked in ragged piles, as though giants had been playing Jenga. She cursed as the corner of the trolley barely missed a pile of boxes filled with bottles of soy sauce. A young woman,
straggly-haired, and blank-faced, knelt with a pricing gun discounting packets of soup mix. *American Pie* wafted down from invisible speakers, and across the store hands tapped rhythmically on trolley handles. People sang softly as they inspected shelves and read packets for calorie content and allergy advice. A man sneezed over and over into a brown handkerchief in front of the sauce jars. Sarah snatched a pack of rigatoni and tossed it in the trolley, narrowly missing David’s head.

“Mum,” he whined. “I want those ones.” He pointed to a bright blue packet on the top shelf. Sarah ignored him. At almost five he was too big to sit in the fold-out seat at the front of the trolley, so Sarah had him standing amongst the groceries. His hands were primed, at the cost of his stability, to grab the glittering objects on display at the ends of the aisles. The glare of the fluorescent lights drilled into Sarah’s eyes as she pressed on.

“Muuum … This is booooring. I wanna go home.” David gripped the trolley and started to rock back and forth like a caged animal. Fighting the will of both David and the trolley Sarah lent against the bar to keep the trolley moving, the effort pulled at a muscle in her pregnant belly, which seemed to have doubled in size overnight. Day one, she thought. Perhaps indefinite leave had been a mistake. Perhaps if she had just parcelled up her maternity leave into a neat and respectable six months—one year, tops—she would be able to pace herself until it was time to go back to her real life. As she manoeuvred into the next aisle David made a lunging grab for a tin of spaghetti. The stack of tins, which had been arranged into a pyramid, trembled. Sarah waited, but the precarious stack held, saving her the embarrassment of scrambling around the floor to recover them.

She turned to David, head tilted to the left and held out her hand, “Give it to me. I mean it David.” She tried to infuse her voice with menace, imagining the tone her mother would have used, but knew as well as he did that there was no force
behind it. Negotiating the safe return of a spaghetti tin being held hostage by a four-year-old had not been a lifelong dream of hers.

“Here!” David pouted and flung the can. His sudden movement took her by surprise and she didn’t react quickly enough. The can caught her just above her left eye, glancing of her head and fell to the floor where it spun in a slow, menacing circle.

“Ah, Jesus!” Pain exploded in her head. She smelt blood and felt the first trickle of wetness run down her cheek. David’s mouth hung open, his eyes wide and he gripped the edges of the trolley tightly. His shocked silence hung momentarily, like an empty beach as the water is drawn back from the shore and into the building wave before crashing down, and he began to cry. Sarah saw him through a red lens, and while she knew he was making a noise, she heard nothing. David felt far away as she clutched the trolley and slid to the floor.

Sarah looked up at David, her inventory of calming adages—the ones every mother used in moments of crisis—at the ready, but she stopped. He looked different. He wasn’t in the trolley; instead, he stood silhouetted against a brightly lit doorway. A trick of the light that streamed between the aisles of the supermarket? Sarah tried to focus on him, tried to read his expression. Was he upset? Was he sorry for hurting her? She expected him to be crying, or perhaps crouched down in the trolley pretending nothing had happened, but he wasn’t. If Sarah hadn’t known better she would say the little boy in front of her wasn’t David at all. His stance—feet spread apart and flat, arms hanging by his side, right hand partly tucked behind his body—showed a confidence, a boldness that Sarah didn’t associate with David. Light from behind caught in the crease of his pudgy hand. He gripped something tightly but it was obscured behind his back. What else had he picked up?
(Not now.) Sarah felt as though she were out-of-focus: a voice inside her
nagged but she pushed it away and tried to fix her attention on David. Why was he
just standing there? A hand, her hand, reached towards him—yet Sarah hadn’t
reached. She tried to stand up, willing her arms to push down, but nothing happened.
What was happening to her: concussion? A coma? An hallucination? The hand still
outstretched in front of her shook. (For God’s sake, Andrew.) The voice pushed in
against Sarah again. Andrew? Surely she meant David? The outstretched hand
clicked its fingers. The dark figure of David jerked and moved his right hand further
behind his back. Why couldn’t she see him properly? Why couldn’t she control her
own body?

Sarah studied the outstretched fingers. They were long and slender, with
smooth, unmarked skin and neat, unpolished nails. A small solitaire tipped to the left
and a scuffed yellow-gold wedding band caught Sarah’s eye. They reminded her of
Beryl’s rings. (Why now?) The voice hissed again. It was hard and angry. Her
mother’s rings. David set his shoulders and stood firm in front of her.

“Andrew, put the knife down. Now.” The voice spoke, aloud this time. It was
furious, threatening and familiar. A knife? Sarah focused again on David’s obscured
right hand. He slid it forward showing the knife hanging, weighted, his fingers
wrapped around the handle. Where had he found a knife?

“But I want it.” David’s voice sounded strange, a voice Sarah knew but that
was somehow altered. The other voice spoke again. As if paralleling the slight
inflection in David’s voice it came from Sarah, yet didn’t belong to her, as though
she had heard a recording of herself.

“It’s a knife. It’s dangerous Andrew. Put it down.” Why was she calling
David Andrew? That was her brother’s name.

“Why don’t you bring me a book? I’ll read it to you.”
“I want an apple.” The boy—David or Andrew?—backed through the door behind him into a kitchen. She didn’t remember a kitchen display in the supermarket. Sarah squinted against the light blazing through the window on the far side. She felt her anger spark. (Don’t you dare.) A baby cried nearby. Sarah rose suddenly, propelled by her anger at the small boy in the kitchen. She raced after him. He pushed a stool over to the counter-top and climbed up. Still holding the knife, he reached for a large, red apple from a bowl of fruit sitting next to a white, plastic kettle. A cluster of fruit flies rose into the air.

“Put it down Andrew. Just let me finish feeding your sister then I’ll cut it up for you.”

The boy ignored her and began cutting the apple with clumsy, hazardous strokes. Sarah’s arm, driven by an overwhelming and uncontrollable rage, swept across the bench sending apple segments, a cup of cold tea and the fruit bowl across the open expanse of the kitchen. Apples and oranges scattered across the floor; a half-eaten and decaying banana landed heavy and silent on the lino and began to ooze towards the still spinning shards of ceramic. Sarah gasped at her own, unexpected actions. She noted something cumbersome and unwieldy at her hip. A baby. It screamed.

The boy, Sarah no longer sure who he was, still gripped the knife, but his determination had vanished. She wrenched it from him and turned the blade towards his upturned face, the voice in her head screaming. It pushed against the inside of her skull, trying to escape, or was it trying to be contained? (Just once! Can’t I have some peace? I can’t. I can’t.)

“You will listen. Do you understand?”
He began to cry, lips quivering, but he didn’t speak. Sarah slammed the knife down on the bench and snaked one arm around the boy’s waist, lifting him over the shattered remnants of the fruit bowl onto the carpet in the other room.

“Go to your room.” These words Sarah spoke calmly and he obeyed. She slumped into a recliner, finally succumbing to the tears that had been threatening and comforted the crying baby in her arms.

The supermarket lights tore at Sarah’s eyes. The world had become bright, loud and grotesque. David still sobbed in the trolley. Time must have stopped, because nothing had changed. Sarah’s hand, obeying her now, clutched her throbbing head. The shop assistant dropped her pricing gun and ran over.
The smell of melted crayons wafted through the open doors of the kindergarten. Sarah urged David towards the cubed shelves along the far wall. He aimed his bag at an empty square but his throw was haphazard and underpowered, and the bag slumped to the floor. David ran outside, oblivious. Sarah groaned and picked up the bag. On the wall to her left, a huge cork board displayed the latest artistic masterpieces being churned out in the class. Today’s picture caught Sarah’s eye. “My Mum”, an interpretative depiction of Sarah as a pregnant stick figure. A ballooning stomach protruded from the line of her back and within the ragged curve was housed a miniature stick-figure: splay-legged with luscious, curly red hair. Sarah smiled. She should have it made into a t-shirt, like the shirts with a skeletal foetus tucked under a rib-cage that pregnant women wore at Halloween. She rifled through David’s back-pack and pulled out his water bottle and lunch box. The zip caught when she tried to close it so she gave up and pushed the bag to the back of the shelf.

Through the double glass doors, she saw Cameron wave at her from the sandpit. He rolled his eyes and tilted his head to where his daughter wrestled a thin, anaemic girl for access to the ladder, the gateway up to the cubby and the sought-after wooden kitchen set. The first up the ladder ruled the playground. Emily won. On the other side of the fenced-in square, David had scored a red trike and roared, red-faced, after another boy, his scrawny legs pumping up and down as he raced around the little track. The bell jingled behind Sarah, her cue to exit. She waved at
David. He raised an arm briefly then turned around the bend without looking back. As usual, this moment left her deflated. She had spent the morning rushing around, nagging at David to get ready, making sandwiches, chopping fruit, wiping chocolate stains off his favourite shirt. A frantic, frenzied, stressful morning that culminated in an absent-minded flick of his hand. Another new day, unemployed and all alone. Cameron, who had received an enthusiastic hug goodbye from Emily, came over to where Sarah still stood.

“Coffee?”

They walked to the small shopping centre that crumbled on the other side of the car-park. A place of dilapidated people and eclectic, out-dated shops. All the misfits that didn’t fit into bigger, more popular shopping centres had found refuge here: a haberdashery, Connie’s Cake Supplies, an Asian grocer with shelves spilling into the walkway. “Angie’s” cafe made easily the worst coffee in the city, but through its proximity to the kindy it served a steady stream of overwrought, frazzled parents morning and afternoon. Sarah and Cameron—not wanting to risk the rickety chairs and greasy, plastic tables—opted for takeaway and sat outside in a small, grassed area overlooking a rusted swing set. Dry grass crunched beneath their feet. Sarah’s head still throbbed from yesterday’s altercation with the spaghetti tin. Her attempts at disguising the black eye had only made it worse. She touched the throbbing bruise self-consciously. Cameron hadn’t mentioned it. Perhaps he was frightened to.

“Do you think if I rub my feet back and forward really fast, the grass will catch fire?” Sarah demonstrated, making the bench shudder. The baby kicked inside her and Sarah caught her breath. “Ooh,” she grunted.

Cameron laughed. “You look like a pregnant roadrunner.” He ran his hands through his dark hair, looking for a second like he was posing for a catalogue.
Sarah slapped his arm. “It’s not nice to make fun of a pregnant woman.” She smiled, but she flinched. She hated being pregnant. Hated the way her body had developed a mind of its own. Hated the way everything—emotions, size, time—were all out of her control. Luke, on the other hand, loved the way she looked. Loved to touch her stomach. He would run his large hands over and over the hard, smooth surface, as though it were a magic ball that could tell his future. He marvelled. That was the word for it. Marvelled at her body in a way she never could.

A compulsion to tell Cameron about what had happened at the supermarket the day before overwhelmed her.

“I think I’m channelling my mother,” she blurted out. There was no reason for it. As she spoke she knew how ridiculous she sounded. Last night, Sarah had lain awake, Luke breathing heavily beside her, and run over and over the scene with her mother, her brother and the knife. She had decided, for no reason other than not wanting to sound ridiculous, to keep her experience from Luke for the moment. How could she explain time-travel, or whatever it was that had happened yesterday, without sounding deranged? As it was he’d fussed over her bulging eye, making her tea, and rubbing her feet. He’d kissed the top of her head the way she kissed David’s when he hurt himself. It wasn’t meant to be patronising but it still irritated Sarah. He was doomed to suffer her wrath no matter what he did.

Cameron didn’t fuss. He was amused. He sipped his coffee. The words ‘She carefully checked the ingredients again...’ curled around the cup’s crenelated surface. The writing’s curly continuity encouraged Sarah to think she was part of a large, cultured community. Made her think she could write a novel.

“Is your mother dead?” He grimaced, then looked distastefully into his cup as he stuck out his tongue, trying to air-dry the rancid taste away.

“No, she lives in Perth.”
He nodded as if that made sense. “So how can you be channelling her?”

Sarah shrugged. “It happened yesterday. I was at the shops, but then I wasn’t at the shops. It was like … like … I’d become her. I even looked like her. At least I think so.” She waited for him to laugh, or scoff.

He opted for a smirk and took another sip of coffee, wincing again as he forced the bitter liquid down, not having learned his lesson from the last sip. The swing creaked, as though it was listening.

“They say women turn into their mothers. Perhaps it’s your metamorphosis.”

He glimpsed down at her belly.

She raised one eyebrow. “I haven’t gone crazy. At least I don’t think so.”

Sarah ripped the lid off her cup and tipped the acrid brown liquid onto the parched grass. It crackled.

“It was as though it was me, but I was her as well. It was disturbing.” A raven hopped on the grass in front of them. Its head jerked as she spoke, as if surprised. Sarah felt as though she were on the edge of something.

Cameron shooed the raven away. “It didn’t happen to coincide with this did it?” He pointed to her poorly masked black eye, his curiosity finally getting the better of him. His face expressed concern, despite the lightness in his voice, and something tugged in her that didn’t belong.

“Well, yes. But it happened again. Last night, when I was in bed.”

Cameron looked alarmed. The words that made her sound crazy were coming as though she had no control over them anymore. She rubbed her stomach as the baby kicked. The baby at least reminded Sarah that she still lived in the real world. Screeches drifted across the car-park from the kindy. Bright-coloured blobs moved about in the play area on the other side of a tall green, powder-coated aluminium fence. David and Emily were among the frenzy of colour, but Sarah couldn’t make
either of them out.

Cameron shifted on the bench, “does the word concussion mean anything to you?”

She assumed it was meant to be funny but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I don’t have a concussion,” she insisted. “It wasn’t that.” She ran through the scenario as if from Cameron’s point of view. What would she say? She’d pat him gently on the arm, tell him he’d had a nasty bump on the head. It would pass. Or she’d drop the hint that an MRI wouldn’t be out of order. She sighed. Perhaps it was just anxiety about her mother’s pending visit. It was perfectly normal to hallucinate a scenario where your mother might threaten a small child with a large knife. Perhaps it was her punishment, for holding grudges. For keeping secrets.

“The human brain is a weird and enigmatic thing. Nothing is clear-cut. Who’s to say that…” he pointed to Sarah’s eye.

“—Being hit with a flying spaghetti tin,” Sarah supplied.

“Right. Who’s to say that wouldn’t lead to an hallucination, or bodily possession, or whatever it was that happened? You have to keep an open mind right?” A kookaburra cackled in the distance, adding to Sarah’s anxiety.

“I’ve been hit in the head before. But nothing like this has ever happened.”

Cameron raised his eyebrows and his lips turned down at the corners a slightly. “Good to know. So what exactly did you see?”

She told him what she had seen: her mother, her brother, the knife. Herself as a baby.

“Wait a minute. You saw yourself? That must mean the universe has to end!”

Sarah laughed. “Don’t be stupid.”

Cameron grinned again, and gestured for her to continue.
“Then later, when I came home, I went upstairs and had a lie-down. That was when it happened again. I was lying in bed. We were both there. Mum was exhausted. I felt it. I was her. I wanted to cry, but couldn’t.”

A woman hurried past their bench, pushing a trolley overflowing with groceries and two small children tussling. She pleaded with them to be quiet, but she might as well have begged the trolley to stop veering.

“You should ring her,” Cameron said after a pause. “Maybe it was a warning. Don’t ghosts visit just at the moment a person dies?”

“That’s comforting.”

“Sorry.” He finished his coffee and threw the cup towards the overflowing bin at the end of the bench. He missed. “You should ring her anyway.” He jumped up to rescue the paper cup before it blew away.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” The cup hit the rim of the bin and toppled.

Sarah breathed out heavily. It was a good question, without a good answer. Of course she should ring. They spoke only yesterday but talking to Beryl after what she had seen would be awkward. Almost as if Sarah had been spying.

“Well,” she hesitated. How much dirty laundry did she feel like sharing?

“She doesn’t know I’m pregnant.” She deserved her black eye. She deserved worse.

Cameron looked mystified.

Sarah pressed her lips together. “And worse. They have decided to surprise us with an impromptu visit. I found out yesterday.” She bent forward and put her face in her hands. “Oh God.”

“You think she won’t notice? You’re a moon hopper.”

Sarah sat up again then looked down at her pregnant form, “I thought I was a pregnant roadrunner? Anyway it’s not malicious. I just haven’t got around to it yet.”
“It sounds malicious,” His frankness stung. “If you ring her now she’ll have time to get over it before she gets here. That way the worst will be over.”

Yes. That was sensible but Beryl treated grudges like gold: as precious treasure to be hoarded.

“You don’t know my mum,” Sarah said. “It’s not just the pregnancy. We had a fight last year. A big one. I kind of threw her out of the house. Things have been … strained … since then. Hence not telling her about the baby.”

“You threw her out? What did she do?”

“Oh you know,” Sarah paused for breath. Then as if falling from the top curve of a roller coaster she unloaded the hard facts of last year’s visit. “She sacked the nanny. Told me I was working too much. That I was a bad mother. That David was spoiled. That my selfish attachment to my career would ruin David and our marriage and I would end up alone and miserable.”

“Serious? She actually said all that?” Cameron looked sceptical.

“Well, sort of.” She shook her head. “Not in so many words. She did sack the nanny, though. That took some smoothing over.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Sarah looked at her stomach. Her first pregnancy had been oddly abstract. She had indulged in eating too much, buying expensive baby gimmicks that she never used, and fantasised about what life would be like at home doting over a small, pink baby. This time it was visceral. A completely different experience. She was yet to set foot in a baby shop and other than the stack of gifts from the hospital, the house was conspicuously lacking in baby paraphernalia. No pink baby-grows, no stuffed bears or velveteen elephants. They hadn’t even pulled the cot down out of the roof. The spare room was still painted in a neutral coral and would now have to wait until her parents went home.
“You know,” Sarah said, breaking the silence. “Everyone expects families to be close, and so honest, like the ones on TV. It’s bullshit.”

Cameron’s phone rang. *Meghan*, he mouthed, as he walked away to the edge of the sand-pit. He kicked at the sand absently, sending fine white particles into the air in dramatic arcs. He held his hand out, then shrugged and ran his hand through his hair. Tucking the phone into the back pocket of his jeans he mumbled to himself as he came back to the bench.

Sarah had met Meghan a few weeks before. Though she expected someone small and sharp, with thin lips, it was a shock when Meghan was exactly that. Sarah wanted Cameron’s wife to be someone ordinary, someone cosy. Someone she could look down on. The realisation jolted her.

“Meghan can’t pick Em up today. I’ll have to re-arrange things.” He pulled his phone back out of his pocket and jabbed at it, muttering under his breath.

“Why don’t I pick her up?” She would help. Do something right. Be filled with community. After all, she was a STAHM now and this was exactly the kind of thing people like her did. And she would ring Beryl. Ring her and tell her about the baby, smooth things over before their visit.

“Could you? Really? That would be amazing. I think I can get out by about four?”

“Easy, just put her seat in my car. David will love having someone to hang out with. He gets in a post-kind-y funk in the afternoons.”

Cameron put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “Thanks Sah, you’re a lifesaver.” *Sah*. That was what Luke called her.
Sarah studied the sequence of large white numbers displayed on her phone. Her mother reduced to a code. All she needed to do was press the call button. Easy. The same as yesterday. The same as last week and the week before that. It would be easy to put a stop to this ridiculous situation, especially since there was no reasonable explanation for why she hadn’t told her mother she was pregnant. Yet, while she knew that if Beryl arrived and discovered the pregnancy first-hand, things would get exponentially worse, Sarah couldn’t muster the courage to break the deadlock. Images of Beryl, at first berating, then trying to sack, the nanny flashed through her mind. The poor girl had left in tears, scorched by Beryl’s wrath. But a bunch of flowers and an apology had set that right. Lisa, it seemed, also had a difficult mother. But Beryl had also accused Sarah of being a terrible mother. Or had she? Sarah second guessed herself. The details had dimmed over time and she couldn’t quite remember which of her memories were true, and which were borne of her own anger. There was no doubt that Beryl had pressed the ever-present guilt button, pointing out Sarah’s commitment split between David and work. She hadn’t, Sarah noted, included Luke in any of that reprimand. Worse than that, though, Beryl had pulled out the I-didn’t-have-a-mother card, the often-rehearsed sob story Sarah had heard throughout her life.

Beryl had associated Sarah’s relationship with David with her own, motherless childhood. The idea had lodged in Sarah like a fine splinter, her body
healing around it keeping it buried somewhere deep and tender. She closed her eyes and imagined Beryl’s voice at the news of the baby. The inevitable flat “Oh”, and “Why—since you don’t really want the one you have?” Sarah didn’t want to hear it. Was she frightened to admit that some part of her believed it.

Cameron’s car pulled into the driveway fast. Sarah tucked the phone in her pocket, the perfect excuse to delay the call. He just missed the tail of Sarah’s car jutting out of the garage. He slammed the driver’s door shut and stomped up the path. Sarah opened the front door and gestured for him to come in. He shook his head, staying put. Sarah was about to comment, but stopped, remembering how much she hated having her own temper pointed out.

“Has the sprocket been good?” He asked absently, and Sarah suspected he wouldn’t take in her answer.

“Absolutely. They’re upstairs. I’ve barely heard a peep out of them.”

“Sarah,” he stopped, hands in his pockets, eyes on the tangled grain of the wooden floor, “Look, I owe you.”

She didn’t want him to owe her. She wanted him to be sarcastic, make some wisecrack about not sending him home with dinner as well. Serious Cameron unsettled her. Where was the Cameron she could chat to?

The kids came crashing down the stairs giggling. Emily’s face brightened then dropped when she saw her father. A smear of chocolate around her lips betrayed the bribe Sarah had bought on the way home.

“What are you and Meghan up to this Saturday night?” Sarah blurted out.

“Not much, I don’t think. Why?” He beckoned to Emily.

“We’re having a dinner party for some of Luke’s workmates. Why don’t you come? You’d be doing me a big favour. You know, having someone in my camp.”

Sarah searched his face, trying to read his thoughts. Was he pleased?
Annoyed? Put upon? She couldn’t tell. She felt ridiculous, standing on her doorstep, seven months pregnant and second guessing their friendship. The phone, still displaying her mother’s number buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, as if by reflex and looked at the lit up screen. It was a message from Luke to tell her he would be late. She scowled. When she looked back up at Cameron he was elsewhere. He had now waited so long to answer that Sarah was trying to think of how to rescind the invitation. She drew a deep breath as if to suck the words back into her mouth.

“I’ll let you know,” he said finally.

“Oh. Okay,” she said. “No stress. It’s nothing important.” She laughed a stupid girlish laugh that made her cringe. She turned away to speak to the kids, hoping to hide her embarrassment.

It took a few seconds for Sarah’s eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room, though a bright light shone through a window on the far wall. She sat, back rigid, in a hard chair. Her hands fidgeted in her lap—there were those rings again—her feet flat on the floor. On the other side of a deep wooden desk scattered with paperwork sat a serious-looking man wearing a dense moustache, and a chocolate brown suit. He had thick, heavy-framed glasses and his expression suggested he was pleased with something. The man was pleased with her, she realised and Sarah puffed up with pride in response. (I can’t believe it. Bruce said I wouldn’t get it.) Sarah’s heart beat noticeably beneath her white blouse and she felt the buzz of adrenalin that pushed her system ever so slightly faster than normal. Other than the mess on the man’s desk, the office was sparse. Above his head, three bookshelves were attached to the wall with chunky wooden brackets. Each contained a neat row of lever-arch files wedged between bookends of rearing horses. Sarah would normally have laughed at
such gaudy decorations, except this time, she didn’t seem to find the horses funny.

The man was speaking to her, but Sarah had missed what he had said.

“Three days a week?” he asked. He looked at her expectantly.

“Yes, that would be perfect ... thank you.”

It was more than that. Sarah felt a blank space inside her flood with light.

(See? I was right. I’m not just a housewife.) The feeling was warm. Sarah wanted to touch it. To scoop great globs of it up and keep it close.

“Fantastic. Well,” he shuffled through a pile of papers, “we’ll get you in on Monday next week. It will take a couple of weeks to train you up, then you’ll be off.”

He handed her a piece of paper that Sarah folded and slid into the handbag that sat next to her right foot. She stood up and straightened her skirt before extending her hand.

“Thank you for the opportunity. With the kids that little bit older, it will be nice to have some independence.”

He moved around the desk. “My wife has been nagging me about getting a job.” He laughed, “Can you imagine? She wanted to work here.” (A silly woman indeed.) He shook his head as though it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard and ushered Sarah out of the door.

Sarah gasped as the sound of the closing door faded behind her. A job? Beryl had never had a job. It was a point of pride for her that she was a mother before anything else. It was her mantra. “Just surrender to it, Sarah”, she would say. Bloody hell, Sarah thought. Her mother had worked. Bitterness flooded in.

“You know what? Bugger it. We’ll be there,” Cameron said from behind her.

She turned around. His face was triumphant, as though he had just made a major life decision. “It’s not as if Meghan never springs things on me.”

He was oblivious to what had just happened. Nothing in his expression.
suggested he had noticed a change in Sarah. The world around her was moving as though nothing had happened at all. Perhaps it was all in her head. But it was different this time. No blow to the head. No chance it was a dream. No, her mother’s excitement had been real. Sarah still felt it. The man in the brown suit was as real as Cameron was now, she still felt the pressure of his hand on her lower back as he saw her out of the office.

“It just happened,” Sarah heard the wobble in her voice and she reached out to hold the door-frame.

“What happened?”

“My mother. I just saw her again.”

“What, now?” He looked over his own shoulder as if the ghost of Beryl might be behind him. Sarah nodded, still feeling shocked.

“What did you see?” Cameron moved half a step closer. “Are you okay?” He searched her face, perhaps for signs that she was delirious, or might collapse. His earlier grumpiness vanished.

“I can’t believe it,” Sarah shook her head. “My mum was in a job interview.”

“And?” Cameron seemed confused.

“You don’t know my mother. She prides herself on what an amazing mum she is. How she gave up everything for my brother and me. That motherhood is a calling, that work and motherhood don’t mix. Blah, blah, blah. Remember? I told you how we had a huge fight over it last year. Things between us have been super tense ever since.”

Cameron’s face was blank.

“It’s one of the reasons I haven’t told her I’m pregnant. I can’t face the fallout.” Sarah tucked her hair behind her ears and put her hands on her hips. “All this time she was bloody lying. I can’t believe it. You wait until I tell Luke.”
“But how do you know what you saw actually happened?” Cameron’s phone rang. He lifted it angrily, “Hi, Meg,” he almost sighed, bringing up his left hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I’m just getting her now. Sarah, David’s mum.” A violent pause. “Jesus.” Cameron closed his eyes and tipped his head back. “She’s a friend, Meg. A friend.”

Sarah pointed inside, mouthed the word “kids”, and escaped. They had slunk back upstairs while she and Cameron were distracted. Sarah found them in her bedroom where they had re-purposed her make-up as drawing material on the carpet. Succumb to it? Yeah, right. She groaned and shooed Emily downstairs and out of the front door.

Cameron was right, she realised. She had no way of knowing if what she had seen had ever happened. Hadn’t she seen her mother threaten her brother with a knife? Beryl would never do that. Sarah let out a frustrated growl. But everything she had seen seemed so real. She had just shared in her mother’s sensation of triumph, of joy, of self-worth. The feeling lingered.
Luke danced around the kitchen wearing the red-checked apron Beryl had sent over for Sarah’s birthday last year. It hung around his neck like a prize-winner’s sash. Sarah pictured his bio: this year’s Mr Sydney likes cooking, surfing and romantic comedies. He gave Sarah a stupid grin as he swooped past her, she smirked and deliberately looked at her phone. She texted Cameron the details of the evening in response to his cheeky message asking her if dinner was still on, or was she too crazy? She smiled despite the impending sense of gloom surrounding the prospect of her mother’s visit. Sarah still had not rung. She touched her stomach—so much for happy news, she thought.

“Cheer up Sah. You never know, you might have fun tonight.” Luke flicked the pan of frying onions with a dramatic toss, pulling a face like he’d performed a magic trick. Sarah watched from the other side of the breakfast bar as beads of oil splashed out of the pan and congealed on the bench. She tucked her feet around the posts of the bar stool, set her phone down and rested her chin in her hands, as if she were sulking. She was sulking. She couldn’t help herself. There was so much to sulk about: her house was about to be invaded by Luke’s workmates, and Bruce and Beryl were due in the morning. She would do anything to make the world go away. David’s voice wafted in from another room.

“You’re stupid!” he said. “I’m going to rip your arms off.”

Sarah slid her hands up over her ears and knotted her fingers in her hair. Over
at the stove, Luke’s shoulders slumped. They waited, holding their breath for the sound of something breaking. After a few seconds they both relaxed as David’s giggling overrode his threat of violence.

“I might have fun tonight,” she conceded, “and I might enjoy seeing Mum tomorrow. I might win the bloody Nobel Prize too.” She traced the grain in the bench top with the tip of her finger, leaving a hazy, smudged trail.

The pan sizzled and Luke shook it. “What’s gotten into you lately? You’ve been mooching about all week. I thought you’d be full of it now that work’s finished and you can put your feet up.” He poured in some stock, which sizzled as steam poured out from the cook-top and coursé gently across the ceiling. Sarah took a deep breath. It smelt amazing. Something at least was going right.

“Trans-natal depression I think,” Sarah gave him a sharp look. Despite her best intentions, her temper poured into the room. But it washed over Luke without sticking. The corner of his mouth curled, the way Sarah had seen it do almost daily for the past ten years.

“It’s possible,” she insisted, feeling her grip on her bad mood slacken. “I’ve probably got the often unrecognised condition known as pre-post- and intra-natal depression actually. It’s called PPIND.” She said the made-up acronym as though it were a single word and tried not to laugh. Although it was half true. The way she felt was beyond anything Luke could understand. His life was stable. He was stable.

“Did you just make that up?” He turned to look at her with the wooden spoon in his hand. She saw Beryl threatening Andrew with the knife and scowled.

“Seriously, c’mon, what’s up?” He set down the spoon and wiped his greasy hands on the back of his jeans, leaving the apron immaculate, the creases from the shop still sharp. He pressed his lips into a thin line and looked at her. Sarah felt him trying to peel away her furrowed brow, the slight downturn in her lips. He flinched at
the sight of her bruised eye, which was now purple and blue fading to yellow at the edges. His worried look only made her feel worse. The air in her lungs felt thick, almost viscous and she decided that she needed to tell him what was happening to her.

When she stopped talking, Luke let out a long, slow breath. “And you think what you are seeing really happened? To your mum I mean.”

Sarah nodded. “I know how ridiculous it sounds, but all I can say is that it all feels so real. Everything Mum sees or feels, I do too. Everything that happened to her happens to me. Right down to the little details. Like yesterday, when she was in the job interview, the man was wearing a strong, musky cologne. The smell of it is still in my nostrils. And the first time, at the supermarket, she was breastfeeding me as a baby. When she stood up to stop Andrew she had to kind of wrench the baby-me off her nipple and it hurt. It really hurt. I still feel it.” She stopped, feeling herself getting out of breath. Luke looked terrified.

“I’m okay,” she said after a long silence.

“Are you?” He reached out to touch the side of her face but stopped when she flinched.

She took his hand and lowered it. “I promise. How’s this for a deal? When Mum arrives—which is tomorrow, by the way—I’ll suss out whether or not I’m seeing things that really happened. If I am, great! If not, I promise I’ll get checked out. I can’t explain how I know but I just know I’m okay.”


“Thanks. Now I feel all icky.”

He laughed. “So you should. The whole thing is kind of icky. Do you really want to know your mum that well?”
“I guess it’s a bit wrong. Like I’m spying on her.”

“So if it’s real … I mean, if what you are seeing actually happened, is it time-travel? Or telepathy?”

“God knows.”

“I don’t think God has anything to do with it. Now,” he patted his apron, “where did the wine go?” The wine was on the drainer, mangled lumps of cork strewn across the steel. It took a few second before he finally saw it, giving out a silent “Ah” that reminded Sarah of her father, Bruce.

He lifted the bottle, “Given everything you just told me, is it too early to drink this? I can open another one for dinner.”

Sarah raised her eyebrows and gave him a long look. He slumped and poured most of the wine into a bowl and plunged his hands in. His fingers came up stained purple.

“I’ve invited a couple more people from work.” Luke said. He tasted the sauce bubbling on the stove.

“Who?” Sarah jerked, startled by a crash from the other room. She moved as if to investigate but Luke held his hand up, scrunching up his nose and shaking his head. He cocked his head and when no further sound came he continued.

“Angus and the new associate from Melbourne, Eva. Is that okay?”

She shrugged, “you’re the one cooking. Besides I just dumped Cameron and Meghan on you so I can hardly criticise.” Sarah looked over her shoulder, “what’s David up to?” Images of smashed vases, cracked television screens, and torn cushions filled her head. She pictured her brother Andrew with a knife. David hadn’t wielded a knife yet; that was good.

“He’s digging out my Gastronomica,” Luke said with a flicker of pride. The timer buzzed. “Do you want me to go and get the flowers?” He clanged a loaded
baking tray onto the cook top. The meat was roasted to perfection as it always was when Luke cooked. It smelt like home.

“No, Mrs Dalloway said she’d get them herself,” Sarah said.

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll waddle down and pick them up. I could use some air. Keep an eye on David.”

Sarah climbed off the stool and, hands in oven mitts, pulled down the heavy glass oven door. She reached in and lifted the hot metal tray out. It was evening and the room was filled with dinner smells, steam and the slight buzzing stress of getting the family dinner ready. She pulled off the gloves, lifted a carving fork and large carving knife. With the precision of a surgeon, she portioned out the pieces of meat onto the four dinner plates laid out on the counter top. Every scrap was accounted for and Sarah’s share was the smallest. (Is that enough for Andrew? He’s been eating so much lately. Must be having a growth spurt.) She cut a slice off the meat on her plate and transferred it to Andrew’s.

The kitchen looked as tired as Sarah felt. Coffee-coloured, rumbled tiles, with large faintly orange sketched flowers, a kind of loose petalled daisy, ran around the walls above the beige melamine bench tops. The bloated chip-board cabinets had flaking cream doors and the floor was covered in a textured white lino. Sarah scowled at a tea-stain on the floor. (I just mopped that. This floor will be the death of me.) Sarah counted potatoes, dished out the carrots and corn and left space on the plates for peas. (The peas! I forgot the bloody peas.) She poured the juices from the roasting pan into a pot on the stove and began stirring in the corn-flour.

“Mum, I’m hungry.” Andrew whined from the doorway.
“Dinner’s almost ready.” Stirring the thickening gravy with her left hand, Sarah managed to tip the forgotten peas into another pot. Andrew scoffed and dragged his lanky teenage form out of the room.

Bruce sat in the lounge room listening to a record; the tracks kept skipping, though the interruptions didn’t seem to bother him. Sarah had caught Andrew using the records as Frisbees a few weeks before, but hadn’t said anything to Bruce. An image of a cupboard under a dilapidated staircase flashed before her. The records were there in a box filled with mouse droppings and nesting material. It stank. (Bloody hell. Don’t think of him.)

Andrew returned and this time Sarah noticed a tear in his school shirt. She added its repair to the mountain-high pile in her mind. He needed it for assembly the next day. (God! I’m supposed to bake scones for the P and C meeting in the morning.)

“Here you go,” she said to Andrew and gestured at the steaming plates.

Bruce sauntered in and lifted a piece of roast off Sarah’s plate, shoving it whole into his mouth.

“Mmm, yum.” Then he frowned, a pre-meditated frown. Sarah bristled. (What now?)

“Umm...” Bruce hesitated. “I invited the boss and his wife over for dinner ... tomorrow.” A pot on the stove boiled over and Sarah swore under her breath as she lifted it off and onto the drainer. She switched off the gas and scowled at Bruce, one hand on her hip, a tea-towel slung over her shoulder as though it lived there permanently.

“I’m not here. Remember?” Sarah snapped, folding her arms across her chest.
Bruce looked dumbfounded, as though the notion that he would know about the comings and goings of her life was ridiculous. Bruce’s expression changed from confused to offended.

“One where are you going?”

“I have choir! For God’s sake. I go every Thursday.” Sarah wiped the beading sweat from her forehead with the tea-towel from her shoulder. As she said it, though, she knew she had lost.

“I suppose I could miss it this week.” The disappointment in her voice rolled straight past Bruce’s satisfied smile.

“Thanks, luv,” he said. “Could you make lasagne? Which one’s mine?”

(Seriously?) Out of habit he grabbed the biggest serve before Sarah could answer, leaving behind her partly emptied plate.
The reflection of roses echoed to infinity between the window and the hall-stand mirror. Sarah stared into its depths and thought of her mother, thought of her mother’s life in a way that she never had before. What would Beryl make of this dinner party? Sarah thought it was all a bit pretentious. Expensive wine, an array of opulent dishes that cost more than the weekly budget of some families, even Sarah’s clothes—that she would never wear again—were over the top.

Sarah checked her watch, seven-thirty and, like clockwork, the doorbell rang. She chased imaginary wrinkles down the front of her ballooning skirt and wiped away an invisible speck of mascara from beneath her eye, wincing as she pressed on the momentarily forgotten bruise. David ran down the stairs giggling and naked. He called to Sarah and wiggled his backside at her. The babysitter ran after him, flustered, apologetic. Sarah smiled and winked at David, then pointed back up the stairs. Luke came up behind her.

“Get that bum upstairs,” he said, laughing. He pressed a gentle kiss to Sarah’s cheek and eyed her appreciatively. “You look great.”

Luke opened the door, plastering his face with the same exaggerated smile beaming from Marcus and Annette on the other side. They exchanged polite kisses on the cheeks and hugs that only made contact at the shoulders. Then everyone took turns to exclaim how inordinately pregnant Sarah was, as though it were a surprise. Angus loped in behind them, hands in pockets, hair flat and heavy. He gave Sarah a
twitching smile but didn’t speak. The new girl, Eva, swanned up the path like a starlet on a red carpet. Girl wasn’t quite the right word, Sarah noted. Luke’s annoying habit of calling all women girls—even Beryl—meant that Eva could have been any age. But she wasn’t any age. She was the right age, young and thin. She pulled her shoulders back and pushed her chin forward and Sarah watched her with envy, suddenly feeling aware of the extra weight she carried in her cheeks, on her arms and the increased width of her hips and thighs.

“Sarah,” Eva said. Simple. Plain, True. She was Sarah, but it sounded wrong coming from Eva, as if she gave it more meaning that it deserved. The wrong meaning, like Eva was pushing at Sarah’s name. Testing her.

“Thank you so much for inviting me. Things have been hectic … with the move. I’ve barely left the house since I got here. It’s lovely to get out somewhere other than the office.” She pressed a bunch of pink lilies into Sarah’s hands, but looked past her, taking in the details of the entrance way. Sarah flinched as Eva’s gaze snagged on the cracked plaster running along the cornice of the hallway.

“Your house is gorgeous. Lucky thing.” Eva stopped and looked at Sarah. Her expression transformed into mock delight, the way one might look when talking to a little girl dressed up for a wedding.

“You look absolutely fabulous by the way. I keep meeting all these glamorous mums-to-be,” she put her slender hand on her chest. “I don’t know how you all do it.” It was as though she had strung a pile of sentences out of women’s magazines together. Sarah hated women who gushed.

“Thank you. Lilies are my favourite.” Lilies were her favourite. Had Luke told Eva that? What else had they talked about? Sarah stood feeling awkward. They were still in the hallway. Eva affixed a broad smile to her face. She looked like an exotic insect—yet somehow perfect: strange, delicate, even poetic. Sarah’s father
would say that Eva was ‘nicely put together’, as if she were an engineering project, with each of her features designed to go with the rest. What was that called? Sarah grasped at words. Built to tolerance. That was what she was, though the expression bludgeoned the subtle wonder of her.

Cameron and Meghan arrived last, managing to slip into the noisy room without Sarah realising. When Sarah did see them, she noticed the way that Meghan’s eyes scanned the living room, one eyebrow flicking up and down, like a ticking counter of the house’s failures. On another night Sarah wouldn’t have noticed. She would have been bright and welcoming. In another life she might even have been friends with Meghan. Uni buddies. Sharing in-jokes behind the backs of Luke’s stiff workmates. Luke reached Cameron and Meghan first. He gave Cameron’s hand a hearty shake and laughed loudly about something. Sarah caught Cameron’s eye and waved, splashing champagne down her arm.

“Oh dear,” Eva said, taking her glass from Sarah. “You didn’t get any on your beautiful blouse did you?”

“No. It’s all good,” Sarah felt like an idiot. “Just clumsy.” She slapped the heel of her palm against her forehead, “Pregnancy brain.” She cringed. Why did she feel the need to make excuses, to Eva of all people?

Sarah excused herself, heading towards Cameron. He had his hand on the small of Meghan’s back, possessive and controlling. It was nothing, but it made Sarah uncomfortable. Meghan didn’t seem to notice. She clutched a small petrol-blue evening purse, her shawl falling off her pale, right shoulder and she stood in a way that seemed practised, as though she was posing for a painting.

“You made it,” Sarah said, stating the obvious.

Cameron grimaced, “Sorry we’re late. You remember Meghan.” He stepped away from Meghan slightly, as though presenting her.
“Of course, how are you?”

“Busy,” Meghan replied. Her tone wasn’t angry, or rude but it had the effect of static electricity. Sarah waited for Meghan to elaborate but the other woman looked back at Sarah with a passive expression. The moment stalled and Cameron, who seemed to be enjoying Sarah’s discomfort, gave her a stupid grin and let the tension hang. It was a characteristic of his that she liked, but only when it was directed at other people. Right now she wished he could be more conventional, observe the social niceties. Luke, on the other hand, was oblivious.


“Who’s watching Em?” Sarah eventually asked.

“She’s with a sitter,” Meghan said with the same blunt voice.

“We ended up getting a sitter for David too. I think he’s giving her a run for her money,” Sarah laughed. Cameron smirked but Meghan didn’t respond at all.

Sarah coughed. “Can I get you a drink of anything?”

Meghan’s expression brightened, “what’s the champagne?”


He shrugged, “don’t know. The guy at the bottle shop said it was popular. I’ll get you a glass. Want a beer Cameron?”

Meghan blinked three times in quick succession, then smiled tightly.

Cameron gave Luke a thumbs up.

Drinks delivered, Luke announced dinner and everyone ambled over to the table. Sarah thought about running away. Could she reach the front door before anyone noticed? She could always feign some pregnancy-related illness and hide out upstairs until everyone had left. It would be for the best because she had an overwhelming urge to say something outrageous: insult Meghan or spill wine on Eva. Instead she
swanned around the table, filling wine glasses, laughed at Marcus’s comments about her new curves, and helped Luke bring out large steaming dishes from the kitchen.

Luke kissed her as she walked past. “So far so good,” he winked.

“This is incredible.” Sarah was in awe of Luke’s efforts. Such a feat was beyond her. When Sarah invited people over for dinner they were lucky to get spaghetti bolognese and shop-bought garlic bread. The tray she carried was stuffed with miniature crepes into which Luke had piped a herbed salmon mousse of his own creation. Sarah barely knew how to whip up toast.

He shrugged, “Eh, it’s not as fancy as it looks.”

They headed back into the fray, a united front.

Sarah took the empty seat next to Cameron, falling more than sitting on it. She made a short “hmmf” noise as she landed, loud enough to disturb the conversation between Eva and Meghan. Sarah took a swig of lemonade and cursed the absence of alcohol. The two other women returned to their conversation.

Cameron leaned in closer and whispered, “Any more encounters from beyond the grave?”

She nodded, “More than one. You can’t blame it on my black eye now.”

“Yeah … not convinced by that.” He peered at the discoloured skin that throbbed beneath her makeup. “Spill it,” he demanded through a mouthful of crepe. He looked at the remnant of the entrée in his hand in appreciation. Everyone else at the table laughed and drank and ate, but Sarah felt like an observer, as though she were watching through a thick glass window. Luke nodded emphatically at something Marcus said, his cheek bulging with food, his knife and fork working furiously at the food on his plate. Sarah looked at her own plate but couldn’t muster the enthusiasm to eat.

“What are you two being so mysterious about?” Eva and Meghan turned as
one to look at Cameron and Sarah. Sarah couldn’t read Meghan’s expression. Was she irritated? Angry? Bored?

Cameron answered, sparing Sarah the humiliation of an unconvincing lie. “Shop talk,” he waved his hand as if to dismiss it. “Sah was just giving me some advice about a patient I saw yesterday.”

Sah. There it was again. Sarah involuntarily looked at Luke just in time to see him flick his gaze to Cameron. Cameron’s familiar use of her name must have triggered some internal radar, like the reflex action of hearing your own name. Sarah was both pleased and anxious.

Meghan, who either hadn’t noticed Cameron’s use of “Sah” or didn’t care, seemed to relax a little. She put her hand on Cameron’s arm.

“How do you two cope? Having to touch people all the time?” She grimaced and emphasised the word “touch” as though it implied something disgusting.

“I don’t touch much actually,” Sarah said. Her mother popped into her head at that moment, a memory of Beryl complaining about the way doctors seemed to be allergic to physical contact with their patients. “It’s mostly talking.” She forced herself to take a bite of food.

“Huh. Cameron comes home exhausted from man-handling people all day. Then he has the nerve to say he’s too tired to give me a neck massage. I mean, what’s the point of being married to a physio if they don’t fix your neck?” She laughed and looked around the table, as though her insight was clever and original. “It’s not like I say I’m too tired to pick prints for the wall for goodness sake!”

Cameron winked at Sarah and took another crêpe from the tray on the table, putting the whole thing into his mouth.

“Well, the world would be a boring place if we were all the same. I have no eye for art at all.” Sarah couldn’t understand Meghan’s work, though on one level
she was strangely attracted to it.

“No.” Meghan’s eye flicked to the painting hanging on the other side of the table. A wedding gift from Beryl and Bruce of a pastoral scene of outback Western Australia. The artist had gone to school with Bruce. “I’d be happy to give you a few pointers, if you like.”

In Sarah’s mind Meghan’s days were calm and evenly paced. There was good coffee and wine, and high heels clicking across expanses of shining floors. Then again, perhaps that was all a complete fiction. What did she know about Meghan? Or art? Or culture? All she knew was drugs and diseases, antiseptic and suppuration. Pregnancy and mess.

Sarah rallied and came to Cameron’s defence. “Physios have it tough. You know, they do all the tricky physical stuff that makes me look good.” Sarah took a mouthful of potato to stop herself talking. She didn’t really need to insert herself into Cameron’s marriage.

Meghan looked surprised but Cameron asked Eva for the butter before she could say anything. Eva pushed the small dish along the table, keeping her eyes on Sarah, as if summing her up. Deciding whether or not she was important.

Sarah took a sip of her drink, then a deep breath. “So Eva, how are you finding the new job? Is Luke looking after you?” Sarah rested her fork on the edge of her plate.

Eva’s face lit up and Sarah groaned inwardly.

“Everything has been just fabulous so far. I can’t thank Luke enough for how kind he’s been and how welcome he’s made me feel.” She looked across at Luke, stretching her hand out to rest on the table, but only because, Sarah thought, she couldn’t reach his arm. Was she imagining that there was something more than gratitude in her expression? What was that? Was she flirting?
Luke must have heard his name because he stopped talking to Angus and was looking their way with what Sarah recognised as his drunk grin. Was he blushing? Sarah put a hand to her cheek but her skin felt cool. Perhaps it was just the alcohol that made him look flushed.

Eva threatened her lips with half a bite of food, thought better of it, then set her fork back on the plate.


Luke laughed, like an explosion, and all the conversation around the table came to an abrupt stop. Sarah cringed. She had an inkling that he was about to land her in it. He was different around this group. They were his friends, some of them were his employees, but they knew him in a way that she didn’t and that made him unpredictable.

“Sarah’s parents have surprised us and are coming over from Perth.” His voice was loud and sarcastic. Where was his famous diplomacy now?

“You don’t sound too excited,” Eva said, giggling.

“I don’t mind that much,” Luke shrugged, all the attention in the room still on him. “But Sah’s mum drives her crazy. Besides,” he took a large gulp of wine that made Sarah uneasy, “Sah hasn’t told them she’s pregnant so it’s going to be a pre-Christmas shit-storm.” He winked at Sarah. Her heart pounded. She pursed her lips and felt her cheeks go hot.

There was a collective gasp in the room. Sarah glared at Luke before trying to dismiss it with a fake and uncomfortable laugh. She waved her hand, “He’s exaggerating,” she said straining a smile. “It will be great to have my folks around. They’re wonderful with David.”

The group smiled and nodded.

Luke stood up suddenly, scraping the chair across the floor. “Who wants
dessert?”

“I’ll help,” Sarah said also standing up.

Cameron clutched her arm and whispered, “You okay? You’re shaking.”

Sarah nodded and headed into the kitchen. Behind her she heard Meghan ask Cameron to call a taxi, along with a snide comment about alcohol and train-wrecks.

Once everyone had left Sarah changed for bed and checked on David. The babysitter had gone home once David was asleep and Sarah swelled with love for him as she looked at his tranquil face. She usually did in moments like these. In moments like those at the supermarket she was filled with rage and resentment but it was a tide that always receded.

She went back down to the kitchen where Luke was cleaning up, feeling more herself in pyjamas and a dressing gown. Her slippers slapped the floor with every step. Luke was still in his shirt and trousers, like a tired waiter at the end of a shift. She helped him silently, wrapping up leftovers, stacking plates in the dishwasher and running a sink of soapy hot water to wash the wine glasses.

“That went well, don’t you think?” he asked eventually. He had sobered up somewhat and Sarah noticed he had the decency to seem sheepish. She moved around the breakfast bar and sat on a stool. Resting her chin in her hands she watched him and leaned in to her exhaustion.

“Eva’s full on, isn’t she?”

He chuckled and nodded his head. “That’s one word for it. You get used to her.” He stopped stacking the dishwasher and turned to look at her.

“I’m sorry for what I said about your mum. I shouldn’t have made a joke of it.”

“No,” Sarah said, “you shouldn’t.” But her anger had left her. All she wanted to do now was go to bed and sleep. Beryl arrived in the morning.
“I’m in big trouble aren’t I?” she said in a soft voice.

He nodded. “C’mon,” he walked around and helped her off the stool. “Let’s go to bed, I’ll finish this tomorrow.”
Sarah joined the throng in the airport arrival hall, slumping into an empty chair near the door. It was a space in limbo between here, there and somewhere else, a kind of vacuum chamber for the controlled collision of worlds. A mobile coffee cart sat in the shadow of the escalator with a sign, “Closed for business until further notice” dangling at an angle off the cash register. Sarah felt hung over, which she found offensive. A hangover should, at the very least, be preceded by a good time and alcohol. Last night had contained neither. Luke hadn’t stirred when she left this morning; his hangover was probably in full swing. Hopefully he would pull himself together before Sarah brought Bruce and Beryl back to the house.

Flashes of white and red streaked past the window: taxis trailing like ants along the curb on the lookout for stray passengers. Taxis, according to Beryl’s learned opinion, were for people who had no family—say a businessman traveling alone or, alternatively, for someone whose family didn’t love them. As Beryl was neither of those things it was Sarah’s duty to be at the airport on time to collect her parents. She scanned the monitor; the plane was late. Though not very late, the delay foiled her plans to be home before David dragged himself out of bed. He had become like a teenager in the last few months: difficult to rouse, scraggly-haired and moody. She knew that children grew up faster than they used to, but surely adolescence didn’t hit at only five years old? Assuming she survived the first encounter with her parents, Sarah had envisaged sneaking them in like a present from Santa before
David woke. But before long he would know she was gone, any chance of a surprise vanished.

The flight landed. The man sitting next to her patted his clothes, wheezing. He settled on his left trouser pocket and pulled out a gold lighter and a pack of cigarettes then heaved himself up and headed outside. Sarah tapped her foot and chewed at her nails, pulling enough skin off the side of her right index finger to spring blood. Passengers began to trickle out. Each time a new face appeared the crowd held their breath. Sarah crossed her arms, uncrossed them, then pulled her phone out from her bag and checked her email. Bruce and Beryl would be the last out. They always were. She could have slept another hour then brought David with her as a kind of shield.

* A voice, loud and familiar, rang in Sarah’s ear. She looked around to see who was talking but everyone nearby was focused on the incoming passengers. She shrugged it off and went back to her phone. But the voice was insistent. *(I don’t want to talk about it.)* Talk about what? She turned again. This time something had changed. Instead of rows of clipped-together plastic chairs Sarah sat at a small round formica table. At its edge was a pile of opened letters, their envelopes randomly torn. There was a plate of scones in the centre of the table and beside that two small round dishes containing jam and cream. *(Just let it go, Coral.)*

Sarah turned. A woman in her sixties, bent down to hug a little girl in pink and blue pyjamas. Behind her a couple kissed again and again, their lips hard and insistent, the woman crying as she clutched the man’s head in her hands. Sarah shook her head and checked the phone in her hand. The monitors on the wall still displayed current arrivals details. The people to either side of her still looked bored. Cautiously Sarah twisted in her chair and looked behind.
The table returned, though more detail had been added to the scene. Beyond the table, stood a tall buffet. Displayed along the upper shelves was unmistakably Beryl’s ‘good’ dinner service. She would recognise the twisting vine of delicate bluebells anywhere. It was an old-fashioned pattern that was no longer in production—she’d tried to buy Beryl a replacement teapot a few years ago.

Sarah turned again, expecting to see Beryl standing, hands on hips, lips pressed together in a thin line, but all she saw was a group of teenage boys in matching tracksuits pulling heavy trundle bags. Some had zip-up carry bags shaped like surfboards. They stood stiffly as their mothers hugged them and their father’s hid their emotions behind large grins and loud jokes. For God’s sake. Sarah closed her eyes and took three long, deep breaths. She opened her eyes, facing forward, and … what? What had she expected? The other people in the airport went about their business. No one else held cups of tea, or a delicate bluebell plate of scones with jam and cream. But what would happen when Beryl came? Would she see it too? Sarah almost wished she would. They could sit around the old table, drinking tea, eating scones, reminiscing. Turn back the clock to a time when Beryl would forgive her anything, to a time when she shared her deepest fears, her worst thoughts, with her mother and could still be assured of understanding and forgiveness. She touched her stomach and felt tears well. What if Beryl didn’t forgive her?

Sarah turned around in her chair. Across the table from her sat another, older woman, with tightly permed grey hair, wearing a peach blouse and an amethyst brooch. She thought she saw a distant resemblance to Beryl. Perhaps a cousin? Or an aunt? Coral? Close up she looked older than Sarah had first thought, in her late fifties or early sixties. Coral sipped tea and gave Sarah a mournful look.

“I think you should come.”
(No.) Sarah recoiled from the suggestion, as though Coral had touched a deep bruise. It throbbed below the surface: black, purple, raw.

“No,” Sarah said flatly. (No bloody chance.)

Coral sighed heavily and set the teacup back in its saucer. Sarah lifted the teapot covered in a navy and white crocheted tea cosy and re-filled Coral’s tea. Steam swirled up from the cup and curled its way into the air. Sarah couldn’t see anything of the airport anymore. She felt like an actor on a dimly lit stage, the spotlight illuminating the tiny circle around her and Coral, the rest of the world empty and black.

“It wasn’t as simple as you think, B. He wasn’t a bad person.”

Sarah scoffed. “Really? How was it then? Why should I go?” (He lost that right a long time ago.)

Sarah picked up a scone and took a large bite. It was dry, even with the jam and it stuck to the roof of her mouth. Coral had a nerve expecting her to go to the funeral. (She knows how I feel about him.) She drank some tea to wash down the lumps of scone.

“Why are you so bloody stubborn?” Coral pushed her chair back from the table and stood up slowly. “Come to the funeral. You’ll regret it if you don’t.” Then she turned around and walked away. Sarah stood as well but didn’t stop her aunt from leaving. She stacked the plates and cups and swept the crumbs off the table into her hand.

A gust of hot air from the sliding doors behind Sarah made her shudder. She closed her eyes and counted to ten. Whose funeral was Beryl missing? Sarah opened her eyes, blinking a few times, forcing them to focus back on the airport. She still clutched her phone in her hand, the screen displaying a long list of unanswered emails. Most were rubbish: a continence clinic based in Brisbane wanted to send her
free samples of colostomy bags. Natural Skincare wanted her to enjoy the benefits of clearer skin in just two weeks. And the virus protection on her home computer was about to expire. A voice interrupted Sarah just as she clicked on an email from the hospital.

“So are you going to say hello?”

She jumped. Bruce. Sarah felt a swell of happiness at the sound of her father’s voice.

“Dad!” She stood up quickly, feeling a little dizzy, and beamed at her father.

“Hi, Mum.” Sarah turned to her mother and smiled, forgetting for an instant that they had been fighting. Bruce’s hand rested on Beryl’s arm, his subtle way of restraining her.

“I’m … I’m…” Beryl stuttered. “I’m stunned. Why?” Her voice wobbled, “You didn’t say anything.” Beryl took half a step back, as though trying to make enough room in the frame for all of Sarah.

Sarah’s mouth gaped open for a second before she rallied her thoughts. “I don’t know, Mum. I’m sorry.” And she was. She was sorry for everything. Sorry for last year. For the hundred times she’d picked up the phone with the intention of telling her mother about the baby, and for the hundred times she’d put it down again without saying anything at all.

Bruce put his hand between the two women like a referee. “Now isn’t the time. Let’s talk about it when we get home.” He stared at Beryl.

She nodded, pursing her lips and walked past Sarah with her jaw set, chin jutting out and eyes fixed ahead. Sarah cringed.

Her father put his hand on her arm and peered in at her face. “What happened to your eye?”

“It’s nothing. An accident with David at the supermarket.” She held up
crossed fingers, “Promise. How was the flight?” Sarah’s voice was weak and conciliatory.

“Awful,” he put his arm around her shoulder. She wanted to cry. How many times had this scene played out in her life? Beryl storming off, furious and indignant, Bruce comforting Sarah and letting her know that it would be alright.

“Your mother did well, though,” he linked arms with her. “Some kids ran amok the entire flight. No one got a wink of sleep. Somehow your mother restrained herself from taking things into her own hands.”

Beryl turned around and scowled at him.

“Mum restrained herself? Never!”

Beryl glanced at Sarah but turned away quickly and walked on. As they neared the pay station they passed a group of passengers frantically lighting cigarettes. The man with the wheeze from earlier was there, laughing at a joke he’d made about blondes. The cigarette hung between his index and middle fingers. His hand weaved through the air, leaving faint circles of smoke that lingered like an auguring spectre. Sarah coughed pointedly but he didn’t take the hint. Instead he winked, as if the joke had been meant for her.

When Sarah had paid for the parking—twice as much as it should have been, thanks to the delay—they made their way to the car. Bruce whistled as he loaded the bags into the boot. Sarah didn’t know anyone else who whistled after a red-eye flight. He slammed the boot of her car shut and grinned. Then he rolled his eyes in the direction of Beryl who stood by the back passenger door, her back to them, arms folded. Sarah was glad to see him.

The remnants of the sunrise cut through the car-park. Red light stole along the pavement and the cars soaked it up like litmus, a world set in bronze. Despite Bruce’s cheery face, and his whistling, Sarah felt gloomy. He had aged. His face was
greyer, his skin looser and his pants, the same style he’d worn as long as she could remember, seemed held by a belt several notches tighter. Was he ill? Or just older? On the other hand, Beryl hadn’t changed since last year, right down to the pursed lips and creased brow. She wore sensible shoes, crisply pressed trousers and a pale pink t-shirt, like a woman in her eighties rather than her sixties.

Squeezing behind the wheel, Sarah took a second to catch her breath, started the car and backed out of the bay. It was going to be a long, hard few weeks she thought as she drove away from the airport, the gap between her and Beryl wider than ever.
I am an imaginary person. Skin, muscle, blood, bones—they are all real enough but flesh doesn’t make the woman. It turns out I can be whoever I need to be. Whoever I am told to be. A person made many times over. The beginning is tricky to pin down. A more common problem than people are willing to admit, I think. At what point do I draw the line? With death? With life? With a line that stretches beyond me, back, and back to a beginning that can’t be found? I begin with a not-so-simple assertion and an attempt to unravel the tangled mess that surrounds it.

I killed my son to save my daughter. I am the worst kind of murderer.
Sydney conspired against Sarah on the drive home. Red lights at every intersection. Cars jammed the lane turning right against unusually busy traffic and a cycle race had closed major roads, causing a long, tortuous detour. The bridge was congested. So much for Sunday-morning traffic, Sarah thought ruefully. Perhaps Beryl really did have magic powers that controlled time. Bruce chatted for the first fifteen minutes or so, catching Sarah up on the dispute with their neighbour and the ins and outs of aunts and cousins. Beryl remained silent in the back seat, managing to emanate disapproval.

Whenever Sarah looked at her mother in the rear-view mirror she was met with a blank expression that was worse than any scowl, pursed lips, or frown she had suffered before. How was she going to determine whether her experiences of Beryl’s past were real or not? She mused on what had happened at the airport. Beryl hated her own father: a poorly kept secret. But the exchange between Beryl and Coral had hinted at something else. What had Coral said?

“It wasn’t as simple as you think. He wasn’t a bad person.” What did that even mean?

David’s small face peeked out from the bottom corner of the lounge room window as they pulled into the driveway. He broke into a grin, waving frantically. Bruce returned the wave, his smile crinkling the edges of his eyes. Sarah felt a tug of remorse that she didn’t see more of him.
“Gosh,” Bruce said, “David looks so much older.”

Sarah nodded. “I know. He’s full-time school in a few months. It’s hard to imagine.” She often found herself falling into the cliché of ‘they grow up so fast’, a sentiment both true and untrue. It was inconceivable to her that David would soon have a life independent from hers: friends, in-jokes, teachers whose opinions he thought more of than hers. On the flip-side, though, from the moment David was born time had become claggy and motherhood had left her limping from week to week.

Beryl stared out the window, jaw set, eyes narrowed, silent. Sarah wasn’t sure if she should be glad of this or not. Her mother’s anger was like an abscess; better just to lance it and be done, rather than let it fester and grow more toxic. They paused in the driveway while the garage door rattled open. David disappeared from the window, leaving the curtain swinging. The door to the kitchen opened as they pulled into the garage and David stood beaming next to Luke, who was only slightly worse for wear. He restrained David until Sarah stopped.

“Granddad!” he yelled as Bruce opened the car door.

“G’day mate!” Bruce pulled him into a tight hug. He was almost as excited as David. How long would that last? Sometimes she felt that her parents idealised their only grandson. Three weeks of David-the-reality-show might take the shine off him.

David looked over to the back seat and beamed, “Hi, Granny!”

“Hello, gorgeous.” Beryl smiled properly for the first time since she had arrived.

Sarah hauled herself out of the driver’s side, trying not to make the physical restrictions of her pregnancy too obvious. Luke’s eyes searched hers and she shook her head. He scrunched up his face in sympathy then went around to the boot to get the luggage out.
“Hi, Beryl,” Luke chirped, kissing her on the cheek.


“Good thanks, Bruce. Busy as always.” He hid his hangover well.

Sarah went inside and busied herself making tea, hoping that the worst was over. She had seen them; they had seen her. Beryl knew she was pregnant. Sarah lingered at the sink, letting the bubbling of the kettle distract her. It was a beautiful morning, though already a little too hot for comfort at eight months pregnant. In the distance, through the gap between the two houses backing onto the garden tree, she could see the harbour glistening.

“Did you bring me any presents?” David asked.

“David!” snapped Sarah.

“It’s alright.” For the first time Beryl looked squarely at Sarah. “That’s what grandparents are for.” Then she turned to David and put her hands on his shoulders. “Give Granny a few minutes to get sorted then I’ll see what I can find for you in my suitcase.” She kissed the top of his head and winked. Beryl bent over and picked up a solitary yellow Lego brick off the floor and placed it in the centre of the expanse of breakfast bar without looking at Sarah.

Sarah ignored the brick as she handed Beryl a mug and signalled to the stool. Beryl manoeuvred herself onto the chair and took a sip, eyes closed. Bruce and Luke sat in the other seats, but Sarah stayed standing on the kitchen side of the bench. She flicked the corner of the yellow brick, spinning in a tight circle.

“So how was the flight?” Luke asked.

Bruce rolled his eyes in Luke’s direction and shook his head as if to say
“don’t ask”.

“That good?”

“It was dreadful,” Beryl said. “But we’re here now.”

An awkward silence erupted with the usual “What’s the news?”, “What’s happening in your life?” or “How’s things?” eluding them all.

“So.” Sarah spoke, no longer able to stand her mother’s glare, her father’s vague expression or Luke’s completely blank one. “What’s happening, then? Are we going to sit around not looking each other in the eye for three weeks, or what? Sounds like a lot of fun, but we could have ignored each other from opposite sides of the country.”

Luke snorted, suppressing a laugh then coughed and straightened himself under Sarah’s glare. Beryl jutted out her chin and narrowed her eyes at Bruce expectantly. Was her lip trembling?

His eyes widened, “What? What am I supposed to do?”

Beryl slid her stool back and stood up gingerly, “I think I’ll freshen up.”

Bruce shrugged at Sarah then held his hands up in a gesture that Sarah recognised as placatory. She wasn’t sure who exactly it was he wanted to placate, her or her mother. He followed Beryl up the stairs with the suitcase.

“Bloody hell,” Luke said, once they were out of earshot. “That was uncomfortable.”

“Do you think?” Sarah snapped across the bench at him, “And don’t even think of skiving off into work today. You aren’t leaving me alone with them.”

He raised his hands in surrender, “I wasn’t going to. Besides,” he put one hand on his forehead, “I have a stinking hangover. Why did you let me drink so much last night?” He moved to the sink, poured a large glass of water and guzzled it. He shook his head and blinked rapidly.
Sarah glared at him.

“Okay, sorry. I mean—what was I thinking?” He looked up at the ceiling.

“What d’you think they’re talking about up there?”

“What do you think?” Sarah rested her elbows on the bench and hid her face in her hands. After a few seconds she looked up.

“I can bloody well hear her you know. She’s going on about what a terrible person I am. That maybe they should get straight back on the plane. That she was right all along last year when she said I was selfish. Oh my God! How the hell are we supposed to get through the next few weeks? Merry-frigging-Christmas.”

“It’ll be alright. She’ll come around. She always does.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh don’t be sensitive,” Luke said peevishly. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples in slow, firm circles and Sarah flinched at how serious his hangover must have been.

“It means,” he eventually added, “that you two have been at each other’s throats for as long as I have known you and you always get over it.” He emphasised “always” in a way that made Sarah suspect his patience was wearing thin.

“You watch, next week she’ll be out buying presents for the baby. Have you told her it’s a girl yet?”

Sarah’s mouth gaped. “Have I told her? What do you think?”

He shut his eyes in exasperation. “Well maybe that’ll cheer her up. She’s desperate for a granddaughter.”

“No she isn’t. She’s desperate for a different daughter.” She wasn’t sure what she resented more, her mother’s disappointment in Sarah-the-mother, or the way Beryl boasted to anyone who would listen about her daughter, Sarah-the-doctor. For some reason it was okay for Beryl to get the best of both worlds, just not Sarah.
“Self-pity much? And don’t get grumpy with me,” he wagged a finger at her.
“You’re as bad as each other. Anyway, of course she wants a granddaughter.”
“What makes you say that?”
“Um, let me think. Apart from the fact that she has said it so many times I’ve
lost count. Let’s look at the other facts … don’t give me that look.” He stopped and
began an imaginary tally on his fingers. “Your mum has made how many pink
quilts.”
“Well, yeah, but … that doesn’t mean anything other than the fact that she
likes pink.”
Luke raised his eyebrows and folded his arms.
“Okay, maybe.” Sarah groaned. “What a bloody mess.” She tucked her hair
behind her ear and contemplated how she was going to deal with her mother.
“Mum?” David interrupted her thoughts. She cursed herself for forgetting he
was in the room.
“Yes, hun?” she said turning in her stool to look at him.
“Can we go to the beach today?”
“Not today, baby, maybe during the week. Granny and Granddad are a bit
tired after their plane trip and well…”
“Well, can we go when you and Granny stop fighting?”
“Sure, mate.” She tousled his hair and grimaced at Luke, who widened his
eyes as if to say: “See?”
Beryl brooded, her eyes flicking to Sarah’s stomach every now and then as though it were something threatening. Sarah imagined the baby bursting through her skin and launching itself at Beryl, alien-style. When Sarah walked into a room, Beryl walked out. Beryl scowled, Sarah laughed too loudly. Together they made a single appropriate response. Her mother held the patent on grudges, Sarah knew that, but, at no other time in her life had Beryl been so openly foreign.

Now they stood together in the kitchen, alone for the first time, immersed in a robust and unmoving silence. Their hands worked like cogs in a machine. The sounds of their labour pierced the quiet with a percussive insistence. Sarah listened to its rhythm. The way the knife ‘clopped’ against the chopping board, the soft crack of splitting pea shells and their eventual fall into the glass bowl. They were undemanding sounds; a gentle rhythm of Sarah and Beryl working in unison that betrayed a deeper connection between them.

Had Bruce manufactured David’s urgent desire to go to the park? Who had suggested they cook a roast? She couldn’t quite remember. Strange, Sarah thought, it was the exact meal Beryl had been preparing when Sarah had witnessed the dinner scene from years ago. Would Bruce come in this time and steal Beryl’s dinner? Seeing her father through her mother’s eyes was an illuminating, if not disconcerting, experience. He was like a stranger. Beryl’s love for him glowed strong and strange. Different from Sarah’s, as though they loved a completely different person. But then,
Sarah realised, nothing was the same anymore.

Beryl’s puffy fingers peeled potatoes and sliced carrots, while Sarah prepared lamb and stewed the apples for dessert. As a child Sarah had sat in the kitchen, watching her mother, subconsciously absorbing the rituals of motherhood, womanhood. Things that Luke didn’t know. A lifelong, silent apprenticeship. When Sarah had moved to Sydney she thought she had left the domestic world behind. She had waved goodbye to Beryl with a kind of relief she was ashamed to admit to. She had done it, she once thought. She had escaped the trap of the female lot. She was a doctor. She stood alone.

Yet, now … what was so different about Sarah and Beryl? A faint smile touched her lips as she felt the shared rhythm of work with Beryl. A pulsing collusion of time and act. A likeness she had never seen before. Hormones, she thought wryly. They do curious things to the mind.

She’d been in Beryl’s past again this morning: pregnant and alone in a dark hallway, the telephone held to her ear, crying. It had been short and intense. A visual and visceral explosion and then it was gone. She glanced sideways at her mother and tried to push into Beryl. Nothing happened. Of course it didn’t.

Beryl broke her silence. “How have you been keeping?” Beryl asked, adding quickly, “with the pregnancy. I know you had a terrible time with David.” Sarah felt the hurt engulf them both. She closed her eyes and let it crash against her. A rock in a raging river.

Sarah kept her voice light. “I’m okay. The usual stuff. You know. Things haven’t been as bad this time.” Sarah rubbed her stomach and, as if on cue, the tiny body inside wriggled. Someone else’s bones inside her muscles and skin.

Beryl nodding knowingly, “every pregnancy is different. Andrew was easy, but you … you were hard.” Sarah had heard this many times. It was a shifting story
that could mutate to fit the circumstances. A flexi-tale: one minute Sarah’s birth was the most miraculous moment in Beryl’s life; the next an ordeal that Homer would have trouble recounting. Yet wasn’t that what all women did? They recounted the birth of their children as a mixture of horror and wonder, whispering the terrifying secrets of its reality to each other, letting out snippets of pain, fear, confusion then snatching them back as their confessions were qualified with such banal phrases as ‘but it’s worth it.’ Sarah had done her fair share of glorifying as well as dramatizing her own pregnancy.

“I’m not sure whether it’s easier this time, or whether I’m more prepared. Last time I was so naive.”

Beryl nodded. “So,” she took a deep breath as though she was building up the courage to continue, “how far along are you?”

Sarah looked down at her hands, unwilling to look Beryl in the eye. “Thirty-five weeks tomorrow.” Thirty-five weeks of secrets. The air filled with something hard and heavy.

“That far?” Beryl paused, raising her eyebrows. Her eyes openly appraised Sarah’s body in a way that Sarah found violating, as though her mother could read every curve of her body.

“It feels further.” Sarah tucked her hair behind her ear and tried to look away.

Sarah slid the sliced carrots into a bowl. They landed in the dirty brown water with an unpleasant ‘plop’. She scowled, the colour of the water was troublesome; it indicated a problem bigger than Sarah could grasp. (I’ll pray for rain) Pray? Why would she need to pray for rain? She didn’t pray for anything. But the drought was in its nineteenth week; the rainwater tank was almost empty. Rotting gum leaves had produced a tea-coloured sludge with what was left. It was undrinkable as it was. Sarah had to boil it first and Bruce had insisted that they couldn’t afford to have a
top-up supply trucked in. She worried about money. About her future in a way she never had before. A child cried, though it was outside her field of vision. Andrew. As the child’s screams intensified, Sarah hobbled into the back room. Andrew stood in his cot, arms outstretched for rescue. Sarah’s right foot ached. Two more weeks until the cast came off. Three weeks until Bruce came home from site. (Hopefully, the baby won’t come until then.)

“Sarah?” Beryl’s voiced startled Sarah into the present once more. Beryl touched her tentatively. Was her hand shaking?

“Sorry?” Sarah looked around: no crying toddler, no dirty water, no broken ankle.

“The carrots? Where do you want them?” Beryl held out the bowl. The carrots swam like tiny logs in a crystal lake. The water was so clean, almost as if it wasn’t there at all. Sarah stared into the bowl in wonder. How had she taken for granted something as simple as water for so long?

“Oh! Um, just set them over there. Cuppa?”

“Yes, please.”

Sarah made the tea and they sat quietly, though not uncomfortably, and sipped from their mugs. Beryl looked almost content. This was her opportunity. She had to know whether what she had been seeing of Beryl’s past had actually happened. Luke said she should just ask Beryl outright, but Sarah didn’t think her mother would respond well to an interrogation about her past. Worse, if what Sarah had seen was real, then would Beryl want Sarah having such intimate access to her inner life?

“Mum?”

“Mmm?” Beryl blinked slowly and looked up at Sarah.
“Did you ever think about working, you know, when Andrew and I were at high school?”

Beryl pulled her head back, creating a small double chin, and paused. She repositioned her hand, sliding her fingers through the handle and encircling the whole mug. With her other hand pushed her glasses up on her nose.

She sipped her tea before answering. “Actually I did have a job for a little while.”

Sarah felt her pulse quicken a little. “You did? I don’t remember that.” Sarah plucked a piece of thread off her jeans and rolled it between her fingers.

“Oh it wasn’t for very long. I worked at a building society, but only for a few weeks.” She smiled as though remembering a joke she hadn’t thought of for many years.

“What?”

“I got the job because your father yelled at me for spending too much money. I think I had bought something so extravagant as a new handbag or a pair of shoes. No!” she said sitting up straighter as her memory returned. “It wasn’t a handbag; it was a bloody kettle. Ha! I haven’t thought about that in years.” She paused and laughed. “He must have had a bad day at work and he went completely mad.” Her eyes started watering. “He told me that if I wanted to throw away money like that I could bloody well go and get a job. So I did.” She looked at Sarah, as though she was rather pleased with herself.

“And? Why only a few weeks?”

“Oh, I hated it.” She waved her hand dismissively, and lowered her voice as though including Sarah in a conspiracy, “Your father hated it more. In the end he apologised and asked me to stop.”

“Why don’t I know about any of this?”
“You want me to explain my entire life to you?” Beryl laughed. “Do you have sixty years to spare?”

They sat without speaking for a few minutes. “It’s strange … me being here I mean, isn’t it?” Beryl frowned, preoccupied, turning her wedding band on her finger. Sarah felt herself soften in a way she hadn’t been able to before. “A little,” Sarah said. Then quickly asked, “Is Dad okay?”

The question seemed to take Beryl by surprise. “I think so. Why?” Beryl then reached across and lifted her handbag off the sideboard. She pulled out a blister pack of tablets and pressed two tiny pink pills into her hand, as if Sarah’s question had jogged her memory. She swallowed the tablets without water.

“It’s just … he seems more … frail than last time.”

“He’s old,” Beryl said matter-of-factly.

“He’s not that old!” Sarah felt the need to defend her father.

“He’s a retiree, officially a pensioner. I think that entitles him to be considered old if he wants to be.” Beryl leaned on the words “retiree” and “pensioner”, her tone peevish.

“Why would he want to be considered old?” Sarah scratched the back of her forearm. A droplet of blood sprang up on her skin. She wiped it away.

“It’s not so bad. It has its perks. Discounts. Seats on the bus,” Beryl tapped the side of her nose with her index finger.

Sarah laughed, “Since when do you guys take the bus?”

“We don’t, but we might.” Beryl looked at her wide eyed.

“Okay, okay. But he is well?”

Beryl shrugged, “As far as I know. He’s just old, Sarah.”

Sarah stood and took the mugs to the sink, running them under the tap. She wanted to ask her mother about the past but wasn’t sure how to broach it. This was the most
they had spoken in over a year and prying into the past might break the fragile skin
that had begun to form over their shared wound.

“Have you heard from Andrew lately?”

Beryl laughed. A real laugh, as though Sarah had said something hilarious.

“No. Last I heard he was involved in some hair-brained scheme with a man called
Osvaldo. They’re building an ice-hotel.” Beryl shook her head, half amused, half-
bewildered, as though it was something she had come to expect from Andrew.

“I think he’s just trying to see how ridiculous a lie he can concoct and still get
away with it.”

“Oh I don’t know. I mean, if he was going to make up an excuse for why he
can’t come home, don’t you think he’d think of something that would make you
happy? Maybe it’s the truth.”

Beryl looked sceptical. “An ice hotel?”

Sarah shrugged, “They’re very popular. Quite fashionable actually.”

“Bloody ridiculous.” Beryl sighed. Suddenly the atmosphere between them
changed. Beryl looked sullen and angry. Her shoulders slumped and she slouched
back in the chair as though defeated. When she spoke again, her voice was unsteady,
yet her words stabbed at Sarah.

“How could you Sarah? Are we really this broken?”

Sarah felt twelve again. Her mother was not the meek pensioner she claimed
to be. She loomed. She dominated, and Sarah was still frightened of her. Sarah’s
hands shook as she ran them through her hair. She closed her eyes and tried to
formulate an answer that would soothe, rather than inflame Beryl. It wasn’t easy,
because this time Beryl was right. Their fights in the past—their fight last year—had,
in Sarah’s mind, been Beryl’s fault. Sarah had been in the right. This time the ground
was shaky.
“I didn’t…” She felt the sting of tears threatening as her guilt welled up.

“Didn’t what?” Beryl’s eyes narrowed and her body hardened. She didn’t look lost, or tired, or defeated anymore. She looked the way she had when she had threatened Andrew with the knife: full of rage. Her eyes bulged, her neck rigid.

Sarah breathed heavily. “I didn’t plan it this way, Mum,” she said in a low voice, her hands up defensively. “Believe it or not Mum, I don’t spend my life thinking of ways to piss you off.” It was not the right response and Sarah knew it.

“Clearly,” Beryl spat, as her lip quivered and her voice faltered.

“Why do you always have to be the martyr?” Sarah’s mind screamed at herself to stop. Her mother was right to be angry.

Beryl’s hand came to her chest, “What? This is my fault? My betrayal?”

“Frankly Mum, it is.” Sarah couldn’t comprehend what was wrong. Why couldn’t she say sorry?

Beryl stormed out of the room and up the stairs in defiance of her own body’s physical laws: her arthritic knees, her collapsing hips—evident in her slightly twisted gait and the heavy thud of her left foot. If only Sarah had cried, paid enough penance. It was all her mother ever asked—for Sarah to be sorry. Sorry enough.
Little towns have big memories. They never forget. *Silly girl.* Never silly boy. Sex was against the rules. I knew that, but warm bodies lying together on cold, clear nights have their own rules. So it was that I became another silly girl.

I remember the sound of the river lapping against the bank. A gentle rhythm in time with the chorus of cicadas and the rumbling rise and fall of frog calls. I lay next to Matthew, my head fitting into the dip of his shoulder. He stroked my hair and blew cigarette smoke into the darkness above us, the sensation of his hands still raw on my skin.

“Marry me,” Matthew said.

I laughed. It was a game. We were pretending to be in love. But it was just a made-up story. A fun game of make-believe. We were still children.

“I mean it,” he said again.

I shook my head. Marry? Already? I imagined my life as Matthew’s wife. Children and laundry. Cooking and cleaning. My mother’s life. She could keep it. I was almost free of Lonehill. A few more months then I would be gone. I hoped forever.

“I don’t understand, Lil. Why not? I can come with you. Get a job in the city.”
I sat up, pulled the cigarette out of his hand and dragged on it. I shook my head again, smiling faintly, then I kissed him. He sighed, kissed me back and mumbled against my lips. “I’m going to miss you.”

A few more months. They came and went but I did not. Because I was a silly girl. And for that there were consequences.
A young girl on the brink of adulthood, with soft rounded cheeks and lips set in defiance stared up at Sarah. She had thick, blond hair in a single plait. Loose strands wafted around her face as though they had been rubbed loose by a hat or the friction between a head and a pillow. By the state of the crumpled school uniform and sagging socks in dusty shoes, Sarah guessed it was the former.

“How could you? I’m so disappointed in you.” Sarah’s voice wobbled. (Why did you? You have talent.)

The girl didn’t answer, jaw rigid, unblinking. A muscle in Sarah’s arm twitched in preparation to lash out. The rumble of Bruce’s car interrupted her rage. She breathed deeply trying to calm her anger. (Surely he won’t let her off this time.)

“He won’t save you this time,” Sarah hissed. Bruce’s heavy foot-steps drew towards the front door, a tidal wave moving towards the shore. His smile quickly transformed into a frown as he took in Sarah’s posture: legs apart, hands on hips, ready to catch the girl if she tried to flee.


The young girl’s lip quivered. Sarah took half a step closer and pushed her shoulder, turning her body to face Bruce. The girl resisted the push, trying to move back, trying to shrink. Bruce exhaled heavily, shoulders sagging, eyes flitted between Sarah and his daughter.
“What happened?” He was looking at Sarah. (Why is he looking at me like that? Does he think this is my fault?)

Sarah’s resentment, kindled by Bruce’s question, burst out. As it washed over Sarah, she felt it fill every corner of her body. She hadn’t understood it before. But now it was clear. (Why is it always my problem? The fights? The drama? Why does he have to come home and play the peacemaker? Why do I have to carry all the worry?) Sarah bit her lip. Nothing belonged to her; not her time, her house, not even her body.

Sarah groaned. “Your daughter has forged your signature and withdrawn herself from the music program.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose, as if trying to suppress a sneeze. What urge was he suppressing now?

He let out an exasperated, “Right. Well, we can’t force her to do it if it isn’t what she wants.” His expression appealed for calm and Sarah watched the young girl hide behind it. She slid behind him, putting Bruce between Sarah and herself. Sarah started to move towards the girl, she wanted to force her out from behind Bruce but he put his hand up and stopped her.

Sarah slumped. “For once Bruce, I wish you’d back me up.” She lifted her chin and stared at him. Something in her shrank almost imperceptibly.

“Where’s Andrew?” Bruce asked.

“He’s out the back, trying to fix the wheel of his bike. He bent it doing a stupid stunt.”

“I’ll take a look,” he shrugged. “Boys do these things.”

And girls?

Sarah sighed losing another small battle in a long, drawn-out campaign.

“Do you want chips or mash with dinner tonight?”
The oven timer beeped, the roast needed turning. Bruce and David were due back from the park any minute and Luke had rung to tell her he would be home on time. After all, Beryl’s roast lamb was his favourite. On a different day Beryl, who had hidden upstairs for the last hour, might have delighted in an afternoon spent cooking with Sarah. Sarah cursed, tapping the timer then opened the oven door.

“Ow!” She pulled the thin neck chain that carried her engagement and wedding rings away from her neck. The garage door rattled on its way up. Luke, thank God. Perhaps some of Beryl’s rage could be deflected onto him.

The gas ring lit with a satisfying “thwick” and Sarah stared into the melting lump of butter, as though she were reading tea leaves. Bubbles of fat expanded and coalesced, passing each other in slow, slippery movements. She had never actually decided not to tell Beryl. It wasn’t a choice she had made. It was just that they lived on opposites sides of the country, in different time zones, and in different worlds. Sarah jabbed at the onions dancing in the bubbling butter.

Luke burst through the door and dropped his keys on the end of the bench. He kissed her absent-mindedly before thumbing through his phone, unchecked on the thirty-minute drive home.

“Bugger,” he said under his breath.

“What’s up?”

“Huh?” He was distracted, home but still in the office.

He shook his head and smiled as if to apologise for being distracted. “It’s nothing. Where is everyone? It’s so quiet in here.”

“Dad’s taken David to the park, and … Mum’s having a lie down.”

“Any news?” He buried his head in the fridge, missing the way Sarah’s face crumpled.

Her eyes wide, lip trembling. “No.”
“Sah?” He asked again, looking at her this time.

“Mum and I had a fight about the baby.” She recoiled from his sympathetic expression. “It’s fine. It’s good. It’s done now.” She forced herself to brighten, “Apparently Andrew wants to open an ice-hotel with a guy called Osvaldo. Weird, huh?”

Luke shrugged. “Not for him. They’re very popular these days,” he said, mimicking Sarah’s earlier comment to Beryl. It struck Sarah as odd, as though they were both quoting from a manual they weren’t aware of.

“I’ll just get changed.” He headed up the stairs. His evening ritual began with him peeling away his professional skin. Sarah sometimes imagined him like a paper doll with a variety of clip-on clothes—an ungenerous comparison. A few minutes later he thudded back down the stairs in shorts and t-shirt, making no concession to the ‘resting’ Beryl.

“How was work?” she asked, feeling revoltingly domestic. Anyone looking through the window might think her life was perfect. It was perfect, she reminded herself.

Luke gazed into the fridge for a few seconds then pulled out a slice of plastic cheese as if the meal she had spent the afternoon cooking didn’t exist. Sarah started carrying dishes through to the dining table.

“Workish,” he called, mouth full. He paused mid-chew when he saw her expression. “Sorry, I’m starving. I have to go back into the office after tea for a few hours.”

“Seriously?” She paused in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. It was a familiar conversation, but today it felt so much worse.

“But you said you’d be here.” Sarah found herself pouting.

“Sorry Sah, but I have stuff I need to finish,” he shrugged off the weight of
her disappointment. “I’m not on holiday.” And I am? Her temper simmered, but she felt too weak to battle Luke as well.

“Fine. Could you grab Mum?”

Luke looked at her with one eyebrow raised, then stalked out of the kitchen. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and called Beryl in a voice almost loud enough to make the house rattle. Sarah grimaced. David stomped up the front steps and burst through the front door, laughing hysterically. There was a scuffle before Bruce came through to the kitchen, breathing heavily followed by a sweaty, red-faced David. The sight cheered Sarah up.

“Hi guys. Perfect timing, dinner’s ready.” Her voice was too bright and Bruce’s gaze lingered on her longer than was comfortable, but then he nodded and herded David to the sink to wash his hands.

Beryl appeared like a ghost slinking into the room. Her presence signalled the start of dinner and Bruce, Luke and David buzzed around, pouring drinks, switching chairs, passing plates—vegetables, bread, butter, sauces, salt and pepper—Sarah felt dizzy from all the excited, greedy chatter. The contrast with her sullen, silent afternoon was stark and confronting. She set the sliced roast in the centre of the table to a satisfying gasp from David.

“Whoa!” His eyes widened.

“Looks delicious, ladies.” Luke patted Sarah’s arm as she sat.

“Well, this is nice. All of us together at last,” said Beryl.

Sarah leapt up. “Who wants music? Classical?” Her hands shook as she scrolled through the music selection. Last week she had spent a morning creating a play-list that her parents would approve of: no swearing, nothing too fast, or too thudding. Each selection censored with her mother in mind.

“There,” Sarah steadied her voice, “That’s better. How was the park, guys?”
“Good,” David mumbled through a mouthful of lamb.


“So.” Bruce lifted his glass and caught Sarah’s eye. “Here’s to another member of the family.”

She winced and they all lifted their glasses stiffly. Her father’s acknowledgment of her pregnancy felt as humiliating as if he’d walked in on her having sex.


“It’s a girl, you know. I want to call her Amy but Mum doesn’t like it.”

“That’s enough David, honey.” Sarah looked around the table full of food, at her parents, her husband, her son, and wished them all away.

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Sarah was waiting for Luke when he came in from work later than night. She wanted to rip his throat out. Was this how violent husbands felt? She made me do it. He pushed me too far. Luke scratched his elbow while Sarah stared in violent lust at the sinew in his neck. He rummaged in the coffee table drawer, looking for the remote control.

“Thanks very much.”

“Huh? What for?” Luke’s gormless expression was a flame to the tinder of Sarah’s resentment. What was so urgent at work? Eva? Sarah wasn’t prone to jealousy but the memory of the slender, elegant Eva had begun to press on her.

“You didn’t have to sit there with that stupid bloody look on your face,” she hissed. “Why is it my fault? You didn’t tell them about the baby either, you know.”

Luke opened his mouth, paused, then closed it again.
“What stupid look?” He frowned.

Sarah wanted to scream. “That one!” she said, keeping her voice low.

“I’m sorry that my face pisses you off so much.”

“Well it does.”

Sitting on the arm of the couch, Luke pushed one hand into his pocket and, with the other, turned on the television. Adrenalin-fuelled music blared out over a visual montage of crashing cars, skydiving and surfing. The noise ground Sarah’s nerves.


“What?” He looked past her.

“Why do I have to cop all the blame for this?” She pointed to her stomach.

“You were in on it too.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” He looked tired.

“Why can’t you be the asshole? What stopped you from telling them?” Her voice faltered. “You knew I couldn’t do it. So what? You thought you’d just send me in for the slaughter? Don’t you care?”

“What? You’re being ridiculous.” He stared at the television.

“Forget it.”

“I’m going to be late tomorrow. I have a late meeting.”

“Of course you do.”

He slumped. “I don’t know what you want me to do,” he said quietly.

Sarah left the room. Overhead, Beryl’s anguished tones seeped through the carpet, concrete, plaster and air that separated them. Sarah knew she should go talk to them. Instead, she grabbed her car keys and went out of the door.

She drove in and out of random streets, the way her father used to do when he fought with Beryl. He would just vanish, giving Beryl time to wallow, allowing time
for remorse to creep in. When he walked back in, it was as though the fight had never happened. Perhaps it would work for Sarah. Then something went ‘thump’ under the car.

It couldn’t have been anything big. The car had barely registered it. She stopped and got out of the car. The grey lump lay about ten meters back up the road, illuminated in the grimy plastic light of the street lamp. A cat. The tag said “Bella”, and a mobile number was etched crudely below. She stroked the cat’s soft, still warm body. She whispered sorry. Putting Bella on the side of the road she rang the number and left a message.

“You’re home.” Luke didn’t turn over as Sarah climbed into bed.
“I killed a cat.”
“Really?” He turned towards her. “Did it make you feel better?”
“Her name was Bella,” she said flatly. She wanted him to hold her, to stroke her hair, the way she had stroked the cat. She needed him to say he was sorry. Say that it would all be okay; Beryl would forgive her. David would be fine. That he loved her.
“Well, we’ll have to take that off the baby-name list then.”
“Mmm,” she turned on her side, her back to Luke.
“She’ll get over it you know,” he said after a long silence.
“I doubt it. She’s dead.”
“Your mum.”
Sarah tried to cry, but she couldn’t.
The noises of the family breakfast downstairs startled Sarah awake. She tried to home in on them, but the harder she tried, the more distant they became. Or was it that she was distant? She had dreamed all night about the cat. She felt over and over the sensation of its still, soft warmth. She shuddered. Images of her mother had been scattered amongst the memories of the cat. Nothing concrete. Nothing she could make sense of.

She worked herself up and rolled out of bed. Each day the effort became greater, yet when she thought of herself, she was as she had always been. Almost as if this was someone else’s life and she was just pretending. She went into the bathroom and ran a brush through her hair and splashed cold water on her face, trying to wipe away her weariness.

Somehow she managed to creep downstairs unnoticed. She paused at a distance and looked at her family. Luke sat absorbed in the newspaper, a frown wrinkling his forehead. She checked her watch. Eight; he must be going into work late this morning. Bruce puzzled over a crossword, squinting over the top of his glasses at the paper, concentrating. The hot water pipes clanged in the walls and the house shuddered: Beryl must be upstairs in the shower. David sat cross-legged on the floor, his neck craning over the Transformer that had materialised from Bruce’s suitcase the day before. The baby kicked. Both the baby and Sarah were outsiders in this tableau, the only ones with nothing to do. She imagined the collective hearts of
Bruce, Luke and David beating in slow motion and tried to slow her own, rapid beat.

“Operator-filleted fish, seven letters,” Bruce mumbled.


“Hmm, I think you’re right … What about this one? Seven letters again: receiver accompanies mouth organ and nose flute. What do you think?” Bruce looked up at Luke expectantly.

Luke lowered the paper, one eyebrow raised. “Too easy, Bruce,” his face broke out in amusement, “Mouth. Nose. Ear … eardrum!”

“Of course, it was staring me in the face,” Bruce winked, “Excuse the pun. I don’t know why I do cryptic crosswords. I’m bloody awful at them.” He scribbled in the answer, resigned.

“I get fed up with them,” Luke looked up and smiled, as he noticed Sarah standing at the edge of the room. “Sah can’t do them either, can you Sah?”

Sarah took this as her cue to enter and walked across to the table and pulled out a chair. “Nope. My mind doesn’t work that way. I think I’m too literal.” She liked the idea of them, though. Working out the answers. But she had long ago lost that childlike ability to stick obstinately to a hopeless task.

Bruce cleared his throat. “While I’ve got you two alone.” He glanced at the door. Luke set his paper on the table and assumed his barrister’s face. The “SpongeBob Squarepants” theme tune cut through the conversation; a pineapple under the sea didn’t seem so stupid to her anymore.

“Beryl’s pretty upset, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. But,” he paused.

Luke, who seemed to understand Bruce’s point, nodded in agreement. His eyebrow arched, his lips pressed ever so slightly together in contemplation; his gaze fixed on something vaguely distant. He would make a good dramatic actor.

“Look,” Luke said, rescuing Bruce, “This whole thing has gotten out of hand.
We’re all upset. I mean, Sarah killed a cat last night, for God’s sake!”

Bruce looked at Sarah startled. “You did?”

“Not on purpose.”

“Right. Well. My point is, you know your mum. Give her time. She’ll come round. She’s actually very excited and wants to be happy. So make it easy for her is all I’m saying.” He looked at Sarah.

She sighed, under her father’s gaze. “I know. Okay.”


Luke scratched his head. “Give me a minute.” He picked up the newspaper and flicked the page to straighten it.

“Righto.” Bruce stood up, his joints cracking angrily. “Better go see if she’s nearly ready, eh? Glad we got that all out in the open.” He left the room, his step lighter.

Sarah was perplexed by the ease with which both men, her father and her husband, considered the conflict resolved, though she had to admit that she felt the weight lifted ever so slightly as well. She picked up her phone and thumbed through her emails. They had built up since her parents’ arrival. It took a few minutes to sift through them, delete most, and reduce them to the half dozen that mattered. At the bottom of the list, from four days ago, was the email from the hospital she was about to read when her parents arrived at the airport. She sighed and clicked on it.

“Oh, no!”


“My patient died. The lady with pneumonia.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” Luke stretched across and touched her hand. Sarah was grief-stricken. It was ridiculous, she barely knew the woman. But still, it felt as
though she had lost something important.


“What?” She felt disoriented, as though she had just woken up. As David laughed at the television. Was she in an off-beat film set at a carnival or in a mental hospital? She rubbed her eyes and ran her hands through her hair. Luke looked pleased with himself. She squinted at him, half expecting his head to explode into a flurry of butterflies, or perhaps pop like a balloon.

“Family gathering to start a row.” He looked at her as though she should know what he meant.

He slumped and groaned, “Your Dad’s cryptic crossword. Family gathering to start a row—starts with a C. Clang.” He folded his arms and sat back in the chair, smug.

“Jesus wept, Luke. Have I stepped into an alternate reality? Have I come back to the wrong house? I can’t do it. If you’ve lost the plot, then I’m done. I’ve seen enough weird stuff lately without you joining in.”


Sarah blinked rapidly and clenched her teeth. It was all well and good for him. He came and went as he pleased. It wasn’t his parents, his mother, sitting in his house passing judgment. She took a deep breath.

“It hasn’t been the best week. But yes, I’m fine. Why aren’t you at work?”

“I thought you could do with the moral support.”

She scoffed. Then smirked. Then laughed.

“What?”

She stood up and kissed the top of his head. “Nothing.” She walked over to David and tapped him on the shoulder.
“C’mon buddy. Time to get ready for kindy.”

***

Killing the cat had felt like a sacrifice of sorts. Sarah left Luke and her parents to fend for themselves while she drove David to kindy. Yet, despite the night before, despite the fight with her mother yesterday afternoon, Sarah felt the day was going to get better. For one, Beryl had come downstairs that morning smiling, a real smile, and she had looked Sarah square in the eye without any hint of anger. Perhaps Bruce had given her a little speech too, weaving his magic over all of them. Sarah didn’t care anymore. She had more important things on her mind.

David unbuckled his seatbelt and was out the door before Sarah had switched the engine off. She groaned and fought her way out of the car, needing both arms to push her momentum forward. The baby kicked violently against her diaphragm and Sarah stretched, breathless, to catch David before he could escape completely, her fingers circling his arm. Her anger dissolved into the breeze tousling David’s hair.

“It’s my birthday soon,” David wriggled free from her grip. Sarah scowled and took his hand, guiding him through the car park.

“No, it isn’t. It was your birthday in September. Which means,” she nudged him playfully, “that your birthday isn’t for another ten whole months.” His backpack bounced on Sarah’s shoulder, water bottle sloshing.

“But I want a party.” He looked down at the ground, kicking at the loose gravel. “I want to invite Henry.”

“Henry can come next year,” Sarah said, distracted by the arrival of Cameron and Emily.

“Can I have cake?”
“Uh-huh.”

“And a bouncy castle?”

“Sure.” The gravel crunched under their feet. A pebble worked its way beneath Sarah’s sandal strap. With a flick of her foot she sent it skipping.

“And…” David pressed clearly sensing his opportunity.

She gave him ‘the look’. “What? No. I mean, let’s worry about it next year when it’s closer to your birthday. Isn’t that Henry?” She pointed to a sullen-looking boy walking along the footpath ahead. David nodded and forgot all about milking Sarah for a more extravagant party. Instead he pulled, urging her towards the concrete path so that she could release her grip on his hand. Sarah’s feet skidded in the gravel as she let herself be led.

Already, the excitement of David’s budding education had waned. Her fantasies of being a parent helper, watching David’s delight as he learned new things, guiding him through his years of education, had all buckled so quickly. The pregnancy was part of it, but not all. It was Sarah: she didn’t fit in. The realisation had struck her as oddly funny. She was a social reject—at kindergarten no less. David abandoned Sarah as soon as he reached the door. Other parents wandered around the small room, decorated in bright blues and reds. Above the shelves housing the schoolbags someone had painted a garish clown. It clutched a bunch of red, yellow and blue balloons, and smiled down on the classroom with an unsettling leer. The tiny bell that signified freedom sat alone and silent on the teacher’s desk. Time crawled. No one rang the bell. Freedom had to wait.

“How’s things?”

Cameron’s voice jostled her out of her self-pity.

She shrugged. “It’s hard to explain.” She fingered the rings hanging off the chain of her necklace. Twist and untwist.
“I killed a cat.” Sarah’s voice was deadpan and she didn’t turn to look at him.

“I left a wife.”

“I’m sorry.” Sarah looked forward into the playground where David played on a seesaw with Henry.

“Me too. Well, about the cat. Was it yours? Or did you pick someone else’s?”

“It wasn’t mine.”

Sarah felt Cameron’s arm around her shoulder. The touch was light. She closed her eyes. The teacher finally shook the tiny bell and Cameron moved away. When Sarah opened her eyes again she saw him heading back to his car. She pushed past the other parents and hurried to catch up with him.

Sarah was overwhelmed by the smell of bleach. She scrubbed manically at the tiles on the wall behind the stove top. It was covered in speckles of red. Blood? No, pasta sauce that had spattered up from the pot. Yet, as though in a nightmare, the more Sarah wiped, the more stains appeared. Sarah fought against rising panic. Everywhere she looked there was more and more mess that needed to be cleaned: cordial spills, grease splatters, burnt crusts on the electric rings of the stove, crumbs, footprints, dollops of jam. (Who poured tea down the front of the cupboard?) The enormity of it overloaded her senses, she felt overwhelmed. A task that would never end. Her throat tightened. Her head throbbed.

What was it all for? To what end? (It won’t make any difference.) Sarah moved, frenzied, from one incomplete task to the next. She had to be ready. She must not fail. Bruce’s mother was coming that afternoon and, buried in a deep, dark corner was a sense that her success as a wife, as a mother, hinged on impressing her mother-in-law. A nervous breakdown peeked its head around the corner. Tears that she didn’t try to stop streaked down her cheeks.
Scalding hot water gushed around Sarah’s feet. She gasped and sprang away. The water had soaked into her slippers and up through her tights. Where had the water come from? Sarah couldn’t find the source straight away. Then she turned and saw a toddler with wide blue eyes, barefoot in pink and lemon checked flannel pyjamas, grinning broadly, obviously delighted in her achievement. (Sarah! Bloody hell.) The girl’s sandy curls bounced as she stepped forward and stamped in the water, as though in a winter puddle. Then she plopped herself down in the now-cool water, patting it with her hands and sending splashes up the cupboard doors that Sarah had just finished cleaning.

She lifted her daughter onto the draining board and stripped off her sodden, chemical-laden clothes. Gently, as if restoring a precious artwork, she wiped carefully between the tiny fingers and toes, along the creases of her elbows and knees and into the skin folds on her thighs and upper arms. Eyes closed, she kissed the child’s warm, soft cheek. Sarah inhaled the smell of baby shampoo and talcum powder and marvelled at the softness of her daughter’s skin; wondered at both her reaction to the loveliness of the contact, as well as the unexpected groundswell of love. (Oh my Sah-bear. What a silly thing you are.) Sarah touched her infinite store of love. It was like snatching glimpses at the sun.

Cameron shut his car door and drove out of the car park before Sarah could catch him. She knew she should flag him down, but for the first time in a long time she wanted to get home, to David, and to Beryl.
My sister knew first. That was the kind of person she was: ears always open to other people’s business. She heard me retching into the toilet. I opened the door to see her bony finger pointing at me, her eyes disgusted and delighted at the same time.

“I know what’s wrong with you,” she sneered. “You’ll have to give it away, like Margaret did.”

Margaret. I grimaced. Margaret had ‘gone away’ the summer before to stay with an unnamed aunt in the city. The whole town knew it had been a thin excuse. When she came back, she looked worn. Thinner in a way that had nothing to do with her gaunt cheeks and pale skin. I shuddered. We didn’t have an ‘aunt’ to stay with, and I didn’t want to go to wherever it was Margaret had really been.

“Dad won’t let you marry him, you know. He hates the Montgomerys.”

“Shut up, Coral.” I pushed past her.

That night I took the car to the river and waded out into the icy waters, waiting for the current to seize me, drag me under. The freezing water snatched at my pants, like thick, heavy hands that couldn’t get a purchase on a slippery surface. The river was strong, but not strong enough.

Eventually I trudged back up the bank and drove home, sobbing the whole way back into town. My mother sat waiting for me beneath the dim light of the pink brocade lamp that had always stood next to her armchair, its tassels swaying as if to reprimand me. My mother tutted and shook her head. Her worry for me that night
doing two things: it made me grateful that the river had rejected me; and it made me
determined to keep my baby. I had to marry Matthew.
Sarah pulled into the garage and ripped the key out of the ignition. She rested her forehead on the steering wheel and breathed out heavily. Cameron had left his wife. Not that this was either a surprise or especially relevant. Between Beryl, the past, the baby, the dead cat, and now Cameron, it seemed to Sarah that her life would never be the same again. It would be funny if it wasn’t so terrifying. What was she supposed to make of Cameron’s announcement this morning? He had spoken so flippantly that Sarah had nearly missed it. It was as if he’d deliberately tucked it away amongst other insignificant facts, perhaps hoping it would get lost amongst them forever. But, she mused, what else was he supposed to do? He wasn’t the kind of person who savoured drama, at least not his own. Was she a terrible friend for accepting his indifference at face value?

Grabbing her bag off the seat beside her, she cursed as she fumbled for her phone. She typed a hurried message to Cameron asking him if he wanted to talk. After a few seconds, the screen went dark. Sarah frowned. Had she really expected him to be sitting on the other end just waiting for her to reach out? She shook her head and pushed the phone back into her handbag and shuffled out of the car.

There was no sign of Beryl in the kitchen, though the unmistakable smell of baking scones greeted Sarah as she clicked the door shut behind her. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, smiling.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Beryl’s voice interrupted.
Sarah jerked and opened her eyes. “Oh! Sorry, it just smells so good. I don’t get to come home to someone baking very often.” Sarah liked the pleased look on her mother’s face and felt herself soften. On impulse she walked over to Beryl and wrapped her arms around her, less to comfort her mother than to comfort herself. Beryl hesitated, then returned the hug with a heavy, unburdening sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said. The words had a different quality this time. She let go of Beryl, dumped her bag on the bench and kicked her shoes off, hooking one then the other with her right big toe and flicking them across the room to land in the opening to the hall. Beryl didn’t move. She stood half-facing Sarah, right hand cupped in left at her chest, her thumbs circling each other. She closed her eyes for a fraction longer than a blink, took a deep breath then spoke quickly as she turned to face Sarah.

“Luke told me you ran over a cat last night? Are you okay? What were you doing out that late anyway?” Beryl frowned, her eyes scanning Sarah, as though searching for signs of damage.

“Oh … well.” Sarah tucked her hair behind her ears and swallowed. “We had a fight actually, and I sort of stormed off in a huff.”

“A fight?” Beryl’s hands tightened. “What about?”

Sarah lifted her gaze to meet Beryl’s.

“Oh.”

They stood, Beryl staring at the floor, Sarah biting her lip and flicking the buckle on her handbag. Sarah began to smile. They were like children who want more than anything to play but wouldn’t say sorry. She laughed.

Beryl started. “What?”

“We’re pretty stupid aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?”
Sarah moved in front of Beryl and took hold of Beryl’s clenched hands. “I mean that I get it. We fight because we’re stupid. For some insane reason we want things to stay the same.”

Beryl scowled.

“You want to be my mum, and I want to be your daughter but, but that’s not all we are to each other anymore.”

Sarah looked down at her pregnant belly and made a decision. It was time. Time to tell her mother about the things she had seen. Time to find out whether the past really was coming back to haunt her.

“Mum … I need to tell you something.”

Beryl stiffened but Sarah shook her head.

“It’s nothing bad. Well … it’s … just sit and let me explain.” Sarah ushered Beryl into the lounge room and took a seat in the armchair opposite her. Beryl sat, but remained perched on the edge of the couch, tightly sprung and ready to run. She frowned, looking confused, hands clasped in her lap. Sarah recognised the gesture, felt her own hands twitch as if to mirror her mother’s. She forced herself to remain still.

“Well?”

Sarah searched for a place to start. The supermarket seemed like the logical place, but then, perhaps accusing Beryl of threatening her own son with a knife would be too much. This wasn’t about confronting her mother. Not anymore.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s gone to the shops. Luke said he could have his car today. Is that okay?”

“Yes, yes, of course. That’s good. I’d rather speak to you alone.”

Beryl rubbed her left eye, then cleared her throat. Sarah still didn’t speak. Eventually Beryl raised a questioning eyebrow. Sarah sensed her mother’s
impatience.

“Okay,” Sarah straightened in her chair. “The thing is Mum, I’ve kind of … well, this is going to sound super weird but I want you to listen, okay? I think that, I think it could be a good thing. I think it is a good thing. It’s sort of changed my life, actually. Ironic isn’t it? That you can live for nearly forty years thinking one thing, and then something like this happens and you realise that everything you know is … is … what’s the word?” She tilted her head to the side. “Well it’s just not at all what you think.”

“Sarah, luv? You’re babbling.” Beryl’s voice was edged with concern.

“Yes. Yes, I am. Sorry. It’s just when I tell you what it is I have to tell you; I want you to know that it was completely out of my control.”

“Right?” Beryl looked sceptical. It rattled Sarah momentarily. Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea. After all what had she experienced? Snatches of conversations. Fragmented images of her mother hurt, or angry. But then again, they must mean something. Otherwise what would be the point? Why relive Beryl arguing with her Aunt Coral over a million other arguments she must have had in her life? Sarah had to believe that there was a purpose and she knew it wasn’t something she could figure out on her own. She straightened her back, and angled herself towards Beryl. It was a posture she knew well; it was the one she adopted at the hospital when she had to deliver bad news: angled forwards, elbows on her knees, hands clasped together in front of her.

“When David hit me with the tin,” she pointed to her almost-healed bruise, “Well, the weirdest thing happened. I saw something strange. About you.” Sarah pointed a hand at Beryl then snatched it away again. She bit her lip and waited for her mother to react.

Beryl barely moved. She jerked slightly, twitching her head as though startled
by an unexpected noise. “About me?”

“Yes. About something that happened when I was a baby. And the thing is, um ... I keep reliving things that I think happened in your past.” Sarah cringed. Beryl would surely laugh, or insist on taking her to a doctor.

“What things?”

Had Sarah imagined a hardening in her mother’s voice? A subtle sidestep from indulgence to indignation? She couldn’t be sure.

Sarah took a deep breath. “Well, like, remember when I asked if you had ever had a job?”

Beryl nodded slowly.

“That’s because I saw you at a job interview.” She tried to keep her voice light as she watched Beryl’s reaction carefully, half expecting her to explode. Sarah had gone over and over this conversation in her head. Many of those imaginary conversations had ended with Beryl convinced Sarah was seriously brain damaged from David’s tossed spaghetti tin. Sometimes she imagined Beryl’s reaction as a mixture of resentment, embarrassment and anger.

“Saw me how, exactly?” She sounded unconvinced. Tell-tale signs of concern bloomed in her soft frown, in the way she shifted her weight forward—to catch Sarah if she fell. The tiny movements of a mother. They were so instinctual now that Sarah had to concentrate to catch them.

“Well, let’s see. Maybe I should tell you about it and you can tell me if I’m right? I guess, I really want to know if these things are real. God, they feel so real.” Sarah waved her hands at Beryl the way she might when sharing an exciting secret. She felt giddy. Her mother nodded slowly, clearly perplexed. There was nothing left to do but tell her.

Sarah took a deep breath, bracing herself, and spoke. She started with the job
interview, telling Beryl how she had shared Beryl’s anxiety. She described the bank manager, and his office down to the photograph of his children that lay flat and face-up on his desk. Then she told Beryl about the time her father had invited his boss to dinner and assumed Beryl would not only be home but happy to entertain. As she spoke Beryl turned pale and sat back in her chair.

“Why didn’t you go to your father’s funeral?” Sarah was breathless from purging herself of her mother’s memories. This one, however, was the one that interested her the most.

“What?” Beryl’s voice was sharp.

Sarah drew back into the chair, increasing the distance between herself and Beryl. “When I was waiting for you at the airport,” Sarah swallowed, “I talked to Aunt Coral. She was angry. She said that I, I mean you, should go to the funeral. That you would regret it if you didn’t.” She paused and gave Beryl a sideways glance. When Beryl didn’t move she continued.

“When I … I’m not sure how to put it … I somehow knew that it was your Dad who had died.” Sarah’s voice trailed off, “You were so angry with him, but Coral said something. She said something about things not being the way you thought?”

Beryl didn’t speak for a long time. She closed her eyes and rubbed her hand across her forehead. Beryl had gone to live with Aunt Coral after her mother died, and while Sarah had always been aware that Beryl and her father weren’t close, she’d never read anything more into it. When Beryl opened her eyes, they were glazed over, as if she had retreated and couldn’t get out again. Sarah waited.

“I … I don’t understand. How can you possibly know those things?” Beryl’s hands were shaking.

“I can’t.”
“Then … how?”

“So they’re real?” Sarah’s voice faltered. She needed to be right more than anything. Not just because it meant she wasn’t crazy, or that she hadn’t been injured. It was more. The things she had seen had created a connection with her mother that Sarah had never felt before. A melding of their experiences that made Sarah feel not just close to her mother, but part of her.

Beryl nodded, her eyes watering. “I, I hated him,” she spoke slowly, softly, as if confessing a terrible secret. “He left me all alone.” She wiped a tear that had escaped down her cheek and sniffed.

Sarah moved over and sat next to her mother. She put her arm around Beryl’s shoulders. Beryl remained stiff.

“What happened?” Sarah knew so little about Beryl’s past. Her grandfather had died when Sarah a teenager, an event marked by Beryl’s stubborn silence. Bruce had told Sarah and her brother, but the man had been a stranger and the news sat lightly as if made of dust. Sarah struggled to remember any details of his death. Had it been cancer?

Beryl shook her head. Her breathing was shallow and ragged and Sarah’s heart clenched at her mother’s raw grief.

“I had a brother.”

“A brother?”

Beryl nodded. “He died,” she said after a long pause. Her voice was husky.

“My mother died trying to save him. They drowned together. After that, my father sent me away to live with Coral. He … didn’t want me.”

“Oh, my God. Mum, I had no idea. I’m sorry. I … I can’t imagine.”

Beryl shrugged, and looked at Sarah, lips quivering, “He just sent me away. I couldn’t forgive him. Not for any of it.”
So much of Sarah’s childhood snapped into focus. Sarah screwed her eyes shut, wanting to move into Beryl’s past. The sound of the man across the street blowing leaves off his driveway drifted through the window. Beryl’s breath laboured, and the fridge in the kitchen hummed. Beryl spoke but Sarah held up her hand to silence her. She needed to focus. Even the baby stilled as though combining her efforts with Sarah. Her body felt heavy and loose. The muscles in her jaw slackened. Her eyelids softened. The space of her thoughts became black and deep.

An image flickered but didn’t linger. The moment seemed to pass. Sarah let out a long breath and opened her eyes. Beryl was watching her intently. Sarah shook her head and clenched her fist.

“I swear I almost did it,” she said. “I almost made it happen.”

“Maybe,” Beryl said, “I need to give you a memory?”

The idea lit a spark in Sarah. Of course, she thought. All the other times there had been a trigger of some sort, a way to link what was happening in the present to a moment in Beryl’s past. In the supermarket, David’s violence triggered a memory of confrontation between mother and son. The job interview, at the time seemed random, but wasn’t Sarah worrying about imposing on Cameron? Of being insignificant? They were all connected. Sarah nodded. What did she want to learn about Beryl? What did Beryl want to share with her?

“Tell me how you met Dad.”

Beryl smiled. She started to speak and Sarah closed her eyes again, blocking out everything except her mother’s words.

Sarah sat in a booth of a small, dingy restaurant, leaning against the cold window. An ache crept up her left arm and her breath streaked out across the glass like a search light, her foot tapped to the rhythm of the song playing in the background.
Sarah liked this song. Aunt Coral never let her play her own records at home. (It’s so unfair.)

“You going home this summer?”

Barbara sat on the other side of the table, sipping Coke through a straw, her bright red lips puckered.

Sarah shook her head, “I don’t think so. Dad has a new girlfriend.” (He won’t want me getting in the way.) She pressed closer to the window. It was raining, fat droplets congealed on the cars outside. The water, combined with the months of red dust build-up, made thick pools of orange mud on the ground. The grime of the town foamed and spluttered into bubbling drains.

A car, splattered with mud, pulled up in front to face the window where Sarah and Babs sat. Several boys jumped out and Sarah knew most of them. Boys from school, from around the town, a rabble of bored seventeen year olds. The last, however, she did not know. He was skinny with thick, slicked-back hair. Sarah sat up, her gaze following him as he made his way to the door. He pulled up his trousers to stop the cuffs from getting wet, and hopped over a puddle. His shirt was streaked wet from the rain, and he tucked his head in like a turtle and ran for the door. Sarah took in all of his details: the long point of his nose, and his thin, slightly crooked lips. She eyed the boy with curiosity. There was a newcomer in her small town.

Sarah opened her eyes wide and looked at her mother. Beryl twisted her wedding band, her focus fixed on Sarah as if she were trying to force the memories in.

“Well?” Beryl asked. She could always make a question sound like an accusation.

“It worked!” Sarah stood up and ran her hands through her hair. She paced around the room, unable to contain her excitement. “I mean, it wasn’t exactly the way you described. But I was there, Mum. Felt what you felt. This is amazing.”
“Do you want me to tell you about it?” Sarah asked.

Beryl nodded slowly. Sarah sat down again and began to talk.

After a long silence, Beryl took Sarah’s hand. She was on the brink of tears.

“Can you help me remember my mother?”

Of course. “I’ll try.”
Sarah had imagined a mother that did not exist. Or was it that she had only ever seen the aspects of Beryl that suited her? A cardboard cut-out version of a mother, filled with pre-recorded admonitions and maternal clichés that Sarah could rally against without guilt or regret. That Beryl had been replaced with someone new and strange. A flesh and bone woman that Sarah barely knew. It excited her.

They sat at the dinning table, sometimes holding hands, sometimes with their eyes closed, as Sarah immersed herself in Beryl’s voice and tried to see another invisible mother. But Lillian Agnes Montgomery hovered at the edges; a shadow rippling behind a curtain, a voice heard through a wall. Beryl slapped her hands on the table in frustration and growled. Sarah rubbed her temples in slow circles, trying to ward off the headache that rumbled behind her eyes like a thunderstorm.

“I need a rest anyway.” The chair scraped across the floor as Sarah stood. At the kitchen sink she ran the tap for a few seconds then cupped her hands, splashing cold water on her face. The shock helped revive her dry eyes that had begun to feel too big for their sockets.

Bruce paced, hands in pockets, muttering under his breath. He stopped behind Beryl’s chair and put his hands on her shoulders. She smiled, closing her eyes and leaned into him. He kissed the top of her head then went to check on David who was playing on the floor.

“Any word from Luke?” Beryl asked.
Sarah pulled out her phone but was disappointed to see an empty lock-screen. Luke had offered to search for any records or documentation that might tell them more. Being a partner in a law firm had to have its benefits.

Sarah shook her head, settled back into the chair and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Let’s go over it again.”

Beryl sighed, “I’ve told you everything I can remember. It’s been sixty years, luv, it’s impossible.”

“Maybe you don’t want to remember, Mum.”

“And why on earth not? That’s ridiculous.” Beryl turned away from Sarah, frowning as she looked out the window.

“You keep telling me how incredible she was. Pretty and smart. She went to church, she made you dresses. She’s too perfect, Mum. It’s like … it’s like you’re remembering your mum the way you wished she’d been.” An impossible mother dreamt up in fairy tales.

Beryl snapped her head around and looked at Sarah, eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean? You think I’m making it up? That I don’t remember my own life?

“No, it’s just that … well. I don’t know, Mum. Did she ever yell at you? Smack you? Lock you in your room? Force you to eat brussel sprouts or turnips, or something else gross that made you want to throw up?”

Bruce laughed. He sat on the floor with David, legs at ninety degrees to his left, feet in black ribbed socks and his right arm propping him up like a tent pole.

“Do you remember when you made Sarah eat brussel sprouts? She had tears pouring down her cheeks. She held that bloody green mush in her mouth for ages. Remember? And we kept saying to her—just swallow it and have a drink of water, but would she?”
David roared and smashed the Lego-brick house Bruce has just built. Flashes of red, yellow and blue skittered across the ground, with some bricks left spinning on the spot and other disappearing under the couch.

“I remember that!” Sarah grimaced, “that was child abuse.”

Beryl laughed, “Poor little blighter. I felt terrible, but you’d backed me into a corner. I couldn’t let you off.”

Bruce eased himself up off the ground, wincing as he stood on a piece of Lego. “Perhaps,” he said in a pained voice shaking his foot, “you’re going about this the wrong way.” Bruce ignored David’s tugging and pointed at Sarah. “You said before, Sarah, that there was usually a trigger, right?”

Sarah nodded.

“And from what you’ve told me it sounds like you’re going back in time. Almost like you’re following the sequence of your mum’s life, only in reverse.”

Sarah had worked hard to convince Bruce that the memories she had experienced were real. Now he seemed almost as eager as Beryl to see the past with clarity, as though Lillian’s death had not only haunted Beryl but him, and their marriage as well.

“What are you getting at?” There was a hint of irritation in Beryl’s voice.

“Well,” he said slowly, “the accident happened when you were … six?”

Beryl gestured agreement. “And?”

“It’s as though you’re trying to skip to the end.” He flicked his eyes from Sarah to Beryl and back again, as if he were waiting for them to jump out of their chairs in excitement. Beryl closed her eyes, pressed her lips into a thin downward line, and pulled her head back to deepen her otherwise small double chin. She sucked in air through her nose and seemed to hold it for longer that should be possible.

Bruce watched her, apparently in a trance connected to that breath. He relaxed when
Beryl finally let it out in long heavy, heavy, and frustrated gush and opened her eyes.

“This is ridiculous. What are we doing, Sarah? I think perhaps I got carried away by the possibility that you really were reliving the past. That somehow I could claim it back. But that’s stupid.”

“No, Dad’s right,” Sarah shifted in her chair, and lifted her feet onto the chair on the opposite side of the table. Beryl had been seventeen in the last memory. They needed to start there.

Bruce let himself be tugged back to sitting, groaning as he lowered himself onto the floor.

“Grandad, I need the blue brick that went over there.” David pointed at the dark space under the couch. Bruce looked at Sarah.

She shrugged, smirking as she pointed to her stomach.

He groaned again and lay on his stomach and extended an arm into the dusty darkness.

“Tell me about Lonehill,” Sarah said to Beryl. “No, wait,” she paused, “Tell me about Aunt Coral.”

Beryl frowned. “What does Coral have to do with it?”

“Are you serious?” Sarah’s raised her eyebrows, eyes wide and began counting on her fingers. “She was essentially your mother. She’s your mum’s sister. She would have known exactly what happened and why. You can’t get much more connected than that!”

“But don’t you think my memories will just get clouded by her?”

“I don’t know, Mum, but we’re at a dead-end anyway. We could try your dad?”

Beryl pursed her lips and shook her head. “No. Not him.” She closed her eyes. “Aunt Coral was, how can I explain? She was tough. Not mean, but she wasn’t
like a mum either. She was more like a school teacher. She loved me, but not the same way my mother had. She took me in and I never knew if she rescued me from my father, or if he had just offloaded me. They never talked about it.” Beryl narrowed her eyes. Sarah darkened with the shared memory of loss and loneliness connected to Coral and Lonehill.

Beryl took a deep breath and continued. “She still lived in my grandparents’ house, where my mother had grown up. Coral gave me my mum’s old room.” Beryl smiled.

After a pause, she continued, “There was an old wrought-iron bed, the enamel had chipped. I sometimes pretended that I was my mum as a little girl, trying to forget my own name. I didn’t want to be Beryl Montgomery anymore. I wanted to be Lillian.” Beryl tilted her head to the side, as if examining a picture.

“Aunt Coral didn’t really look like my mother. Though you could tell they were sisters, and sometimes,” Beryl smirked, “she would move in just the right way and I would think my mum had come back from the dead.” She frowned. “But that frightened me too. I had nightmares. I used to dream that I was drowning. They were so vivid.”

Sarah forced herself to relax. She rested her hands on the dining table and planted her feet flat on the floor. Perhaps, she thought, if she was well anchored physically, her mind would be allowed to wander. The baby twisted, and then settled as well.

*Aunt Coral stood looking out of the back window above the kitchen sink. The house sat atop what was generously called a hill and the town stretched out below towards the east. The last hint of civilisation before a vast, red desert. Sarah sat at the wooden kitchen table glaring at Coral’s stiff back, tapping her index finger on the table fast and hard, like a woodpecker. Coral flinched but didn’t turn around.*
Instead, she drew a deep breath, her shoulders rose and she held the air for an impossibly long time. (I can’t believe I’m grounded. It’s not fair. She’s not even my mother.)

Coral spun around and glowered at Sarah. Her mouth gaped and her skin stretched across her face in rage. Sarah pressed herself lower in the chair. It really had been an accident. (It wasn’t my fault.) Coral filled her lungs, chest rising and Sarah cringed, waiting for the tirade. But when Coral spoke her voice was low and stricken.

“What if someone had been killed?”

“It was an accident.” Sarah sat up, jutting her chin towards her aunt.

“Another one?”

(Another one? What other one?) Sarah folded her arms across her chest and slumped back in the chair, staring, at the table.

Sarah cried out. She pressed the palm of her hand to her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut.

“What is it?” Beryl looked concerned. “What did you see?”

“I’m fine,” Sarah was out of breath and an ache radiated across her back. She sucked in air and moved her hand to the focal point of the pain by instinct.

“Oh, baby didn’t like that one!”

Her phone buzzed and shimmied across the table. A little green bubble appeared next to the name Cameron, then the screen went black. She pressed the button and the message appeared again. It read: “Coffee? I need to see you.” Sarah unlocked the phone.

“I need to go see someone,” Sarah said to Beryl. “Can you guys watch David?”
“Of course,” Beryl said. Sarah knew she was disappointed, that she wanted to press on, to force her way back into the past.
Matthew paced outside. His worry couldn’t be contained by doors or walls. Nari—short for Anmanari—a local Aboriginal woman who served as midwife, cooed soothing sounds as she rubbed my back. I cried out as the pain exploded.

“Nari, I can’t.” Nari tutted and made wide circles on my back. She gave me water to sip. I wanted to drown in it, but she wouldn’t let me drink deeply.

“Won’t be long.” Nari made me walk. She made me kneel on all fours. She made me sleep when I could. Then she sang a strange song, as she rubbed my back once again. On and on it went like this. I cried out. Nari soothed. I rested. It was rhythmic, timeless and intoxicating. I was becoming someone else, someone outside of time. Round and round we spiralled, each cycle shorter than the last.

A day? A week? A life?—passed before Nari told me it was time. I remember screaming. Matthew’s shadow loomed through the curtains. Then my cries doubled in the hollowness of the room. I was split in two. No longer one. Nari laughed. She laughed so loud that I thought something terrible had happened.

“A boy.” Nari held up the wriggling body, covered in blood and something sticky and white. A smear of faeces on his leg. He was perfect. His fingers trembled in time with his ragged sobs.

A boy. He shouted with my voice although I was silent now.

Nari took hold of my breast and pushed it into the baby’s mouth. It hurt but almost right away, he stopped crying.
“I’ll get your man,” she said and left me alone.

I was no longer a silly girl. I was a mother.
The café throbbed with noise. Sarah squinted and forced her way through the clumps of mostly women, past the obstacle course of their assorted entourage of prams, strollers, baby-carriers and high-chairs. She tried to squeeze her way between a bottleneck of tables but realised quickly that her dimensions didn’t change, no matter how she positioned herself. A woman at one of the tables smiled sympathetically and moved her chair to make more room. Sarah thanked her, embarrassed. Her indignation rose. The manager of the café should be the one who was embarrassed. As far as Sarah could see almost every person in the café—mothers, carers, grandparents—were there with small children. The café should make allowances for the physical limitation of childcare: bellies, prams, bags as big as suitcases.

Cameron sat alone in the far corner, tucked into an armchair, a metal stand with the number twenty-four on the table. He stood as she approached but didn’t move towards her. He ran his hand through his hair, then put both hands in his pockets: not sure where they belonged. A lump formed in Sarah’s throat, though she wasn’t entirely sure why.

“I got you decaf, and some sparkling water. I wasn’t sure what you wanted so I got both.” Cameron didn’t meet Sarah’s eyes but sat down again quickly.

“Perfect, thanks.” Holding the table, she eased herself down into the chair, which was way too low. “How are you?”

Cameron gave a short, sharp laugh. “I’ve been better. You? You look good. I
mean, huge of course. Absolutely massive, actually, but still great.” His voice trailed off as the tease fell flat.

Sarah smiled. “Thanks.” She ran her hands over her belly, smoothing the fabric of her dress against her tight skin. Its smooth curved surface guided her hand in a motion that calmed her and the baby. In a few weeks she would be sucking her stomach in. Cameron wouldn’t tell her how beautiful her large stomach was anymore. She would hold it tight, trying to hide the evidence that this sumptuous one had ever existed. The shrivelled, floppy balloon to come would feel shameful. For now, strangers touched her uninvited; even Beryl couldn’t seem to help herself from laying a soft hand upon her in worship. Each person lay claim to the little person floating inside. Sarah hated the sensation of their hot palms pressing through her clothes, but at the same time she revelled in being so big and round. She was a good mother, she thought, then shook the idea away.

“How long to go?”

“Huh? Oh. Um. Three and a half weeks.”

“Not long,” he let his attention be dragged out of the window. A young, dishevelled-looking couple were arguing on the other side of the street. The girl, skinny and tattooed, prodded the man’s chest. Sarah could see that she was screaming but it was like watching a television programme on mute. The man threw up his arms in despair, exposing clumps of sweaty underarm hair.

A waitress in a white shirt and black apron, hair in two French plaits that made her look almost twelve, arrived with their drinks.

“The decaf must be for you,” the girl said brightly to Sarah.

“I don’t think so. I don’t drink that foul stuff,” Sarah smiled.

“Oh.” The girl apologised and set Cameron’s coffee in front of Sarah, then set the sparkling water in the middle and hurried away. Sarah felt guilty, briefly.
“That was mean.” Cameron’s eyes twinkled in amusement, a glimmer of his old self.

“I know. I’m just so sick of everyone assuming that my whole world revolves around this.” She pointed with both hands to her stomach.

“It pretty much does, though, doesn’t it?”

“Well, yes. But, you have no idea how frustrating it is to always come up second best to a person who isn’t even born yet.”

“You’re pouting,” he said, still smiling. “It’s cute.” He swapped their coffee cups.

“Oh shut up.” Sarah took a sip of her coffee then poured herself a glass of water. “So what the hell happened?”

The sparkle in his eye went flat. In fact, everything that Sarah liked about him seemed to fade, as if tarnished by her question.

“I fucked up.”

Honest. She admired that. If she had been him she would have floundered around until she found a way of making Luke culpable: he just doesn’t get me; we wanted different things; he loves his work more than he loves me. But, in the end, she knew that if something went wrong between her and Luke the burden of guilt would lie heavier on her side. A discomfiting thought.

“Oh?” She blew on her drink, waiting for him to continue.

“I met someone,” he said over the rim of his coffee though his eyes were fixed on something behind her.

“What?” Cameron had never struck her as an unfaithful person. She’d always thought of him as the kind of husband willing to be put upon or taken for granted, a martyr to love and family. She shifted uncomfortably, as though Cameron’s infidelity might be contagious. The idea was, of course, laughable. Sometimes she found the
intensity of physical contact required just to hug David an ordeal. Another thing to feel guilty about. But what about Luke? She thought with a jolt. If Cameron, who in many ways reminded her of Luke, could ruin a marriage, then was she safe?


“I don’t understand.” The image of Eva niggled at her. Eva’s open flirting with Luke at the dinner party, the way her dress draped off her shoulders: the perfect combination of feminine contour and stick thin—a reed bent by an artist.

“I just … I’ve come to realise that Meg and I, our hearts aren’t in it,” he shrugged. Sarah felt herself getting angry. How could he give up? What about Emily? And how dare he burden Sarah with this now, in the middle of everything.

She drank. “Does Meghan feel the same way?”

He nodded, then frowned. “I think so. I mean, don’t get me wrong, she was really pissed. But, that was all. She was only angry, and I don’t think being offended is a strong enough response. Do you?” Sarah saw the hurt in his face.

“I guess not.” She softened.

“I mean, if Luke said he thought he’d fallen in love with someone else, like that chick from your dinner party?”

“Eva?” Sarah’s felt a jolt. Had Cameron sensed something?

“Yeah, or whoever. How would you feel?”

Would Luke really be interested in Eva? She was beautiful, no doubt. She had flirted with him, giggled at his jokes, stroking his arm in a familiar way. But Sarah had been more annoyed than jealous. It was ridiculous to even entertain the idea that Luke would want someone like her. She was frivolous. Luke hated frivolous people. Sarah felt annoyed, but not at Luke. She was angry at Cameron. This wasn’t how their friendship was structured. He was her shoulder to lean on. He was her substitute
to Luke. Someone she could complain to, unburden herself on, someone who would laugh at her and tease her, force her back to the world. Before now, she hadn’t made the connection between Luke and Cameron. No wonder she had been drawn to him. No wonder she relied on him to help her through the insanity of David’s first year of school. He was her Luke for when she didn’t have Luke.

“I’d be devastated, but that’s not the point is it?”

He shook his head. “Meg was just mad. She kept saying that I was being ridiculous. That it was disrespectful and thoughtless. Thoughtless?”

“Why did you tell her? If you’re never going to be with this person?”

He covered his mouth with his hand, propping his elbow on the table. He looked out of the window again, eyes searching in the distance. The couple outside had moved on and the footpath was empty, save for the plastic water bottle being blown about in eccentric circles.

“I think,” he stopped and took a drink, “I think it’s because this woman made me realise what I was missing. Okay, so I’m never going to be with her, but it showed me what I didn’t have with Meg.”

Sarah nodded, not completely sure she understood.

“I think,” he shifted in his chair and caught Sarah’s eye. “I think we see the world in the same way.” He emphasised “we” in a way Sarah didn’t like.

Sarah frowned, an uneasiness creeping up on her. She laughed, but it was forced, nervous. “I don’t know how I see the world anymore.”

“I wish we’d met when we were younger.”

Sarah waved a dismissive hand and regretted her still full coffee cup. “You would have hated me when I was younger. I was even more of a know-it-all than I am now.” She needed to leave. She looked up from her coffee to Cameron with a tinge of remorse. She had used him.
Her phone rang. She took it out of her handbag and mouthed an apology. Luke. She answered in a hushed voice. He had news about her grandmother. He was on his way home.

“Luke.” She smiled. “He’s on his way home. He’s been doing some detective work for my mum.” She pushed her chair back and stood up. “I should go.”

He stood as well. “Of course. Look Sah, um … with things so up in the air, and well, the kids aren’t even at the same school next year.” He shuffled around to her side of the table and gave her an awkward hug. “I just think that we probably won’t see much of each other. You’ll have the baby…”

“Of course,” she squeezed his arm, “take care and good luck.”

As she drove home she turned over the conversation with Cameron. Surely she wasn’t the reason he had left Meghan? Had their friendship just ended? She pulled up to the lights and put the car in neutral. She tucked a strand of hair behind her left ear and breathed out heavily against a heavy kick from the baby. She had to put Cameron out of her mind for now. Luke had news, he’d found something. He said that he didn’t want to talk over the phone.

A car full of teenage boys squealed to a stop next to her. The car rumbled from an overburdened sub-woofer and their guffawing ground against Sarah’s ears. She looked straight ahead. The boy in the front seat, with shoulder-length, greasy hair, lowered his window and shouted something at her. Her heart pounded. He kept yelling, but Sarah couldn’t hear him properly and didn’t want to look at him. The shouting stopped and Sarah let out an involuntary sigh.

*Sarah reached down, pulled a stone out of her sandals and threw it across the road. She wasn’t frightened anymore. She was bored. The kind of deep and dragging boredom that only children feel when they are left to their own devices. She felt enveloped in a drooping warmth. It wasn’t unpleasant, but more an indulgent type of*
She sat with her back to the church watching the comings and goings across the street while she waited for Aunt Coral to finish talking to the priest. (Why does she always take so long?) The church, a plain red-brick building, could have passed for a community centre if not for the foreboding crucifix jutting from the apex of the nave. It cast a welcome shadow across the road that fell far past the buildings on the other side of the street, the cruciform shadow extending into the scrubby bushlands beyond. A fly explored the beads of sweat on Sarah’s neck and her wet toes squelched beneath the buckles of her leather sandals. She pulled her toes back and wiggled them, inspecting the five black circles of dirt and sweat that marked their usual resting place, as though someone had drawn an imprint of her foot. Across the street a steady stream of women clip-clopped in and out of the bakery; they emerged clutching boxes of butterfly cakes and treacle bread in white-gloved hands while their husbands leaned against the wall waiting, red-faced and poached in their Sunday suits.

Sarah pulled her skirt down to cover her knees, plucking at the sagging hem that Aunt Coral had been promising to fix for over a year. (Why do I have to wear someone else’s old clothes anyway? Couldn’t she make me something new?) Aunt Coral’s voice seeped through the heavy, double wooden doors of the church’s entrance. Sarah sighed and picked up another stone. As she pulled her arm back to fling it at the gum tree on the other side of the street, a green Mini spluttered to a stop in front of her. She dropped her arm and stood up. The driver, a boy with uneven blonde stubble, and a long nose that kinked slightly to the left wound down the window. Sarah recognised him as Hans: his family had moved to Lonehill a few months earlier. Sarah had overhead Aunt Coral talking about them—the small town rumour-mill suspicious of the family’s history.
“Hey, girl. We’re going to the creek. You want to come?” He flicked the back of his teeth with his tongue and looked Sarah up and down languidly. (Why is everyone so in love with him?) Sarah stooped over and squinted, peering into the car. Her friend Barbara sat in the passenger seat, dressed in a pair of white shorts and pale pink bikini, her hair tied up in a high bow. Phil Anderson sat in the back, his knees jammed against the back of the driver’s seat. He kept his eyes anywhere but on Sarah.

“Come on,” Barbara said winking, “it’ll be fun.”

Sarah twisted her skirt, pushing the drooping hem to the back. “I don’t have my swimmers.” (I sound pathetic.)

“So? Just get in the car, will you?” Barbara spat her chewing gum out the window, just missing Sarah’s foot then slumped back into her seat. Sarah looked back at the church, dithering. She was supposed to wait for Aunt Coral.

“I’m supposed to wait here.”

Barbara sniggered, “She’s such a goodie-goodie.”

(No I’m not.)

“Fine.” Sarah climbed over Barbara into the back. Her skin stuck to the hot vinyl seat, and Phil’s leg—sticky and prickled with coarse hair—jutted awkwardly, pushing against hers.

Sarah shrank away from his hot skin and pressed herself against the door.

Barbara swivelled in her seat and looked at Beryl. “God! Are you getting fat or something? Poor Phil, is she taking up all the room?”

“I’m fine,” Phil said.

Hans pulled away. (Aunt Coral is going to kill me.) Sarah closed her eyes and let the air churning through the car cool her. Barbara giggled at something Hans had said and Sarah’s hackles prickled. They pulled up at the entrance to the
path that led down to the creek a few minutes later. Sarah peeled herself off the car seat and tramped behind the others. The path was a clearing cut by water during heavy rains. Sarah stepped down from a tree-root that crossed the opening and nearly slipped on the loose gravel. She swiped at March flies that attempted to land on her bare ankles as she walked. This time of year the creek was almost stagnant.

Plumes of algae had sprouted across the shrinking expanse of still water and, at the edge, where rocks and reeds cut off smaller, shrinking pools, mosquito larvae wriggled, and water boatmen darted across the opaque, foaming surface. (Thank goodness I don’t have my swimmers.)

Hans led Barbara away along the edge of the creek, helping her over the rocks and fallen logs, leaving Sarah alone with Phil.

He cleared his throat. “Smoke?”

Sarah had never tried a cigarette. (This is wrong. This is wrong.) She held it in her palm, fingers wrapped around the thin, paper shaft, uncertain what to do with it. Phil laughed, peeled her fingers open and took the cigarette, lighting it for her between his thin lips. They sat. Sarah observed the ritual of lifting the cigarette up to her mouth but the taste didn’t tempt her to inhale. Phil skimmed stones across the creek, cutting black holes into the green veil of algae. Barbara’s laugh rebounded through the trees, and Hans made noises that reminded Sarah of the sound Aunt Coral’s horse had made just before the vet shot it. She shivered.

Phil shuffled closer to Sarah, until his leg touched hers. The stickiness of his sweat made her feel sick.

“You’re really pretty,” Phil spluttered. “Babs is wrong, you’re not fat, and even if you were, I’d like you anyway.” His hand crept onto Sarah’s thigh. Sarah didn’t move, couldn’t move. The cigarette hung from her right hand, the column of ash lengthening. (Should she stab him with it?)
Phil launched himself at her, pinning her down until she collapsed back on her elbows and dropped the cigarette. His body trembled as his hot breath grazed her cheek. His hand rolled over her knee and slunk beneath her skirt. His fingers, thin and sharp like Aunt Coral’s knitting needles, dug into her soft flesh and he rested his head against her breast. Sarah squeezed her eyes shut: her nostrils filled with his sweat, her muscles clenched against his probing hands. (Stop—stop—stop.)

Sarah opened her eyes and looked around for a way to stop him.

“Oh my God!” Sarah screamed and heaved him off, leaping up. He fell with a thud into the dirt, dazed.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“The grass, the tree, they’re on fire!” Sarah’s cigarette, a wisp of smoke still rising from its blackened end, sat at the epicentre of a growing fire. The brown grass crackled and shrivelled; the longer tufts led the flames to the nearby scrubland and from there to a large gum tree where the fire clawed up its trunk. Honky nuts popped, the scrub hissed in the heat of the flames, releasing acrid black smoke that scored the back of Sarah’s throat. (How did this happen so fast?)

“Oh God, oh God,” Phil spluttered. “What do we do?” He still lay on the ground, one side of his face covered in a fine haze of brown dirt. (Did I slap him?)

“We need to go. Where are the others?” Sarah yelled for Barbara and Hans.

“Babs! Babs! There’s a fire!”

Barbara and Hans scrambled along the creek line, stopping when they saw the flaming tree.

“Jesus!” Babs said. “Get to the car.”

They ran, Sarah at the back. She couldn’t hear anything other than her own breath ragged and panicked. They piled into the car. Hans started the engine and had driven away before Sarah had righted herself in her seat.
Barbara glared at Sarah and Phil. “What happened?”

Phil didn’t answer and Sarah shrugged keeping her gaze fixed on the rising column of smoke she could see through the back window.

“What are we going to tell everyone? My Dad’s going to kill me.”

(No.) “We don’t tell them anything.” Sarah turned to face Barbara. “We weren’t here.” She turned around again to look at the now pluming smoke. The base of the cloud glowed red and pink. She smiled. (I hate that place.)

Sarah fixed her gaze on the road in front of her. The boys in the car beside her were jeering now. They sped away a fraction before the lights changed to green but Sarah didn’t move. The driver behind sounded his horn in frustration. She pushed the car into drive and pulled away slowly. What was that all about? Her mother had started a bushfire? Was this the accident Coral had asked her about? Or was there more? The worst part was that Beryl hadn’t seemed remorseful. Beryl’s final thoughts—I hate that place—still sat with Sarah, but they didn’t seem to fit. She parked the car in the garage and with shaking hands lifted her handbag and headed inside.
We moved away from Lonehill not long after the wedding. Matthew couldn’t get enough work in the small town to take care of a family. My mother cried, and Matthew’s mother died only a few weeks after we left, an aneurysm according to the doctor. Despite Matthew and the baby, I had never felt so alone. I even missed my sister, which was a surprise. I wanted to move to Perth but Matthew had been wary. He thought that it might remind me too much of what the baby had cost. In some ways I don’t think he trusted me to stay with him. Perhaps he thought that another small town would be an easier compromise. He simply transplanted us to more of the same: a town only four hours away from Lonehill, with nothing but vast tracks of red dust and highway between the past and the future.

“Let’s have another baby,” he said one night, rubbing gentle circles on my naked stomach. “Robbie’s two soon and it would be nice to have a brother for him.”

“What about a sister?”

He shrugged.

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t say anything. I didn’t want another baby. I hadn’t wanted the one I had. I loved Robbie more than anything in the world, but the price of that love had been immeasurable.

Looking up at the ceiling, I eventually said, “I thought … I thought I might try and get back to my writing …”

He stopped me. “Lil, don’t be silly … You don’t have time for that. Besides,
it’s not like you need to do anything like that. You won’t have time, especially not when the baby comes.”
David flung himself against Sarah as she walked through the door. She grunted, wrapping a single arm around him in a half-hearted hug as she stretched to hang her handbag on the lopsided hook by the door.

“Hey chicken,” She pulled him in slightly. “What’s up?”

He crinkled his nose. “Granny made me eat peas. I hate peas.”

“Did she? Peas for lunch? What a nasty old witch.”

David giggled. Sarah looked around the empty kitchen. A jumble of dirty dishes littered the sink and draining board, more mugs than anything else. The fingerprints of a busy day. One of David’s half finished craft projects covered most of the breakfast bar. Sarah couldn’t be sure, but she thought she recognised the early stages of a diorama of the Jurassic period. At least, that’s what the shoebox filled with sand and plastic dinosaur figurines suggested. Her powder brush, which David had appropriated from her makeup bag, made a surprisingly good prehistoric cycad.

She felt her blood pressure rise, but her internal monitor reminded her to pick her battles. It was just a makeup brush after all. The sand was unlikely to do any damage to it anyway. She took David by the hand, ignoring the great lumps of craft glue beginning to dry clear on the bench-top, and headed into the lounge room. He wiggled free, as if sensing the tension, and ran up the stairs.

Sarah craned her neck through the doorway, “Hello?”
Luke sat on the armchair by the window, laptop balanced precariously on his legs. His feet were wide, legs angled with the knees together like a child. It was as though time had jumped forward, instead of back, and she was looking at David, all grown up. He grunted an acknowledgement but didn’t look up. Tucked into the shadows by the window, Beryl stood clasping and unclasping her hands. Her gaze was fixed in the distance, or was it the past? She jolted and, without looking at Sarah, moved to sit down silently on the couch by the far wall. Bruce smiled a hello that hung heavily on the bottom half of his face. Sarah wanted to move backwards, to slip back out of the room and into her car, but she forced herself to stay.

“Hi, luv.” Beryl slumped into the chair next to Bruce. He rose slightly as she landed, like children on a seesaw. “How was your coffee? Who were you seeing?”

“Cameron. His daughter goes to kindy with David.”

“Right, right.” She nodded, her eyes focused on something invisible in the middle of the room. Sarah wondered whether her mother’s response would have been the same if she had told her that she had met an alien from Mars, or a giant caterpillar named Alfred. Sarah looked to Bruce, hoping for a smile or a conspiratorial wink, but he was looking past Luke and out of the window, eyes flicking rapidly from left to right as through he were tracking a darting bird.

“Right!” Luke snapped his computer shut. “Sorry about that. I just needed to get that email off.”

“Is everything alright?” Sarah asked.

Luke set his laptop on the ground next to the chair, then stood up and stretched with a groan. He walked over to Sarah and kissed her forehead, then ushered her into the armchair he had been sitting in. It was warm, and she nestled into his indent.

“Anyone want a cuppa?” he asked.
“Great idea,” said Bruce standing up suddenly as if Luke were a hypnotist who had snapped him out of a trance.

“Yes, please,” Beryl said.

Sarah shrugged, “Sure.” She could hear David thumping around upstairs, then the sound of the bath filling. She looked at Luke pleadingly, “Could you check on him while you’re up?”

He pressed his lips together and headed up the stairs.

“What’s up?” Sarah twisted in the armchair so she was facing Beryl.

Beryl shifted forward on her seat, her knees together, her legs angled towards Sarah. “Honestly? I don’t know what to make of it.”


“Well, his assistant found out that … I just can’t believe it … but Luke says it must be true.” Beryl looked directly at Sarah. “He said that my mother didn’t die when I was six.”

Sarah scowled, “What? That’s ridiculous, she must have found the wrong Lillian.”

“That’s what I thought, but Luke says it’s definitely her.” Beryl gestured with both palms upwards, “And Luke would know wouldn’t he? He wouldn’t tell me unless he was sure.”

Bruce came back with two mugs of tea. He offered Sarah the large, charcoal mug, spilling some on her as he stretched his arm forward.

“Oh God! Sorry, Sarah, luv. Are you alright?” He shoved the other mug at Beryl, not noticing the slosh of brown liquid that splashed on the floor, and raced into the kitchen. Sarah went to call after him, but stopped and wiped the tea off her leg with the hem of her dress as she turned to Beryl.

“So, if she didn’t die … where did she go? I mean, she wouldn’t just leave
you, would she? From what you’ve told me about her, that doesn’t seem likely.”

Sarah tuned into the sounds of David upstairs. She could hear the rumble of Luke’s voice talking to him, and the sound of the bath being filled. David squealed and laughed. Sarah pictured his face, red and contorted, body buckled over as Luke tickled him. The sounds grew louder as Luke thudded down the stairs, and came into the lounge holding David upside down by the ankles.

“Anyone want this ratbag?”

David’s face was red and his blonde hair hung down like a spiky crown around his head. “Dad!” he screamed. “Put me down.” Luke swung David like a pendulum, then letting go of an ankle with his right caught David’s torso on an upward swing and righted him.

Beryl opened her arms and David ran over and nestled into her.

Bruce came back from the kitchen and handed Sarah a tea towel. She laid it over the arm of chair.

“Granny?”

“Yes?”

“Why is the skin on your neck so floppy? Mine isn’t floppy.” David prodded Beryl with a small pointed finger.

Beryl laughed, “Because I’m old, sweetheart. That’s why?”

“Oh.” David pulled away from Beryl and inspected Bruce. “Grandad’s isn’t as floppy as yours, but, he has no hair here.” David pointed to the crown of his head in an odd gesture that made him look like a dancing monkey.

“C’mon, buddy. Up you go and hop in the bath. I’ll be there in a sec.” Luke ruffled David’s hair and urged him out of the room. He watched David climb the stairs from the doorway, one hand propping him up against the frame, the other pointing up the stairs just in case David tried to run around and come down again.
Turning to face into the room, Luke raised his eyebrows at Sarah.

“So … what happened to Lillian?” Sarah asked him.

Luke caught Beryl’s eye and shrugged. He looked over his shoulder quickly then said to Sarah, “She went to prison, for manslaughter.”

“Manslaughter? Of who?” Sarah looked around the room, waiting for someone to answer, but Luke, Beryl and Bruce all said nothing. Beryl looked back at her wide-eyed and pale. Bruce wouldn’t look Sarah in the eye and Luke watched Beryl pointedly, as though he wanted her to answer Sarah’s question. Something jarred inside Sarah, like a block from one of David’s shape puzzles finally slotting into its corresponding hole.

“Oh … shit.” Sarah gulped a mouthful of tea, her eyes losing focus as she ran through the implications of what Luke has just said.

“Dad!”

Sarah sensed Beryl jerk at the sound of David’s voice.

Luke groaned, “What is it?”

“There’s water all over the carpet!”

Luke stiffened and stood up straighter. Turning his back to the room her called up the stairs. “What? Where?”

David was almost screaming. “It’s coming from the bathroom. It’s everywhere!”

Coral’s words came back to Sarah. “It wasn’t as simple as you think.”

***

Luke opened a bottle of red wine and poured three glasses. David sat wrapped in a towel on the couch between Bruce and Beryl, letting Beryl stroke his damp hair
absently. Beryl took the wine from Luke with her other hand, but rested the base of the long-stemmed glass on the arm of the chair. The red liquid washed up the edges of the glass, coming dangerously close to overflowing. No one wanted to talk about Lillian in front of David, but Sarah felt her presence in the room, almost as though she were sitting in the silence with them. There had been no mistake, according to Luke. Lillian Agnes Montgomery was convicted of the manslaughter of Robert Matthew Montgomery, nine years old, and had been sentenced to twenty-two years in prison.

Beryl cleared her throat, “David, darling, why don’t you go get your jammies on and bring me a brush and I’ll brush your hair.”

“Awww, do I have to?”

“Go on, mate,” Luke gestured to the door with his head. As David walked past, Luke turned in his chair and added, “I’ll be up in a minute and we’ll brush your teeth. Use our bathroom, alright?”

David groaned and stomped out of the room, and up the stairs, presumably with his back curved and his arms hanging loosely in front of him.

“Why was she in Heathcote, isn’t that an asylum?” Beryl said as soon as David was out of earshot.

Luke nodded. “They didn’t have a lot of facilities for female prisoners back then. Heaps of women convicted of criminal offences were dumped into state-run mental health facilities. In fact, it’s possible she was even moved interstate. I mean we’re talking what—the late ’fifties? God knows where she ended up.”

“Can you find out?”

“We’re working on it.”

Bruce took a sip of his wine, then asked, “How long will it take to get her records?”
Luke’s eyes widened. “How long is a piece of string? Honestly, it depends on who processes the request, how easy the documents are to find, or if they even still exist. I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

David, completely naked, burst back into the room with a loud roar. His pyjamas hung from his right hand, and he held a toothbrush with a large glob of toothpaste in his left. He jabbed at Luke with it. “Ha ha, I just stabbed you.”

Luke clutched his arms and screwed up his face in mock pain. “Ow!”

“Come here, bub,” Sarah beckoned him with her hands, “let’s get you dressed.”

He ran at Sarah, arms wide, making her grunt when he crashed into her. She wrestled the toothbrush out of his hand and held it out for Luke, who came over and took it from her. David lifted his arms in the air once Sarah had readied his shirt and let her pull the t-shirt, with a Lego storm-trooper on the front, down over his head. She held apart the matching shorts and he steadied himself with one hand on her shoulder as he stepped into them.

“Mum?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“Could you read to me tonight? You never read to me, and Dad is boooorrring.”


Upstairs, as Sarah tucked David into bed and perched herself next to him, she heard the muffled sounds of Beryl’s fraught voice. Sarah finished the book, a heartfelt story about a little monkey who has lost its mother and, instead of going back downstairs, eased herself into the bed next to David and closed her eyes.
Sarah sat at a table with Matthew. Coral hovered behind her, busying herself with wiping benches and re-arranging the tins of tea and sugar. The old house smelt of dust and aging wood, and the timbers rattled and creaked under the onslaught of a powerful easterly wind coming off the desert. Fine red dust penetrated the cracks and crannies of the house, settling in a mist of filtered red light, leaving the taste of dirt in Sarah’s mouth. Matthew, slouched in his chair; his body said one thing—legs splayed, left arm hanging limp, right hand resting relaxed on his thigh—his face, deeply wrinkled and weather-beaten, said another. Sarah studied the contours of his face, seeing both sorrow and hardness. He coughed, his dark eyes looked past her.

Sarah tensed and shifted her gaze to Coral.

Coral was perhaps in her mid-forties, slightly plump, but not fat, and with a round sweet face starting to show the lines and marks of age and sun. Sarah smiled quickly, lifted her eyebrows and widening her eyes for a fraction of a second. Coral winked back. A mirage of a memory lingered at the edge of Sarah’s perception. The whisper of a sweet voice. The faint smell of perfume. Then it was gone. (I wish I could remember her.) Coral, twitching her head in Matthew’s direction and shifting her gaze from Sarah to him and back again, signalled to Sarah that she should talk to him. Sarah laughed and Coral pursed her lips at her, though the corners turned up just a little.
“How’s school?” Matthew sat up straight in his chair and reached for the mug in front of him. Sarah noticed the grease-stained fingernails on his otherwise clean hands. His clothes were neat, washed and ironed, though verging on threadbare. An envelope, padded with money, sat on the table between Matthew and Coral, and Sarah eyed it. (Bribe money? A way to make himself feel better?)

Sarah pushed out her lower jaw. “Fine.” Her terse response gave away none of what she was thinking. (Your money doesn’t make it better. This isn’t being a dad. Everyone knows you pay to keep me away.) The light of her mother’s memory darkened.

“You’re learning the piano.”

Sarah shrugged. Matthew looked desperately at Coral, who sighed and shook her head.

“She’s quite talented actually,” Coral offered proudly.

“You must get that from your mum,” Matthew said. “No musical talent in my family.”

Sarah flinched.

“So ... I was wondering if you want, for your birthday, I might take you in to the city. You know ... have a day out, go to the movies. Get outta here for a day or two?”

Sarah stood up, knocking her chair over. Coral took a step towards her, hand outstretched but stopped and retreated again. Matthew’s hand tightened on the arm of the chair and he closed his eyes, dropping his chin towards his chest and tightened his lips.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. Why do you even come here?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but stormed out of the room.

Sarah rolled over, with difficulty, and rested her head on Luke’s shoulder. She
pushed away almost immediately.

“Ugh! You’re overheating me.”

He kissed her and apologised.

“I just saw my grandfather.”

“Really? Was he as bad as she says?”

Sarah shook her head. “I don’t think so. I mean, it’s hard to tell, right? But…”

she pushed herself up to a sitting position. “Well, it was as though I was seeing one thing, and Mum was seeing another.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s like there were two of him. The Matthew Mum saw, and then the one I saw. She was so angry with him.”

“And you didn’t feel the same way?”

“I did, but … at the same time, no. He looked so … broken. He looked like he wanted to hug me—Mum.”

Sarah thought again about Coral’s words to Beryl: *It wasn’t as simple as you think. He wasn’t a bad person.* Two days ago the truth had been as solid and ancient as a mountain. Beryl’s mother had drowned fighting against the current that dragged her son away. She died doing what all mothers are supposed to do: put their children first. Sarah even understood how Matthew fitted into that story. As a distraught father, a devastated husband, drained of the strength to look after his daughter. All of this made a tragic kind of sense. In the middle was Beryl. But Luke’s discoveries about Lillian changed all that.

Manslaughter. The word weighed down on them all. Luke explained the process Beryl needed to follow to obtain the legal records of her mother’s case, but cautioned that there was a chance the documents had been destroyed. Beryl barely spoke as Luke spelled it out. Who could blame her? Beryl’s past came faster to Sarah
now, as though Luke’s revelation had unsealed them.

Sarah climbed out of bed, grunting at the effort.

Luke laughed, “You sound like a pig.”

“Thanks.”

He grinned then crawled across the bed and kissed her belly as she pulled on her dressing gown.

“How are you holding up?”

“Honestly? I feel like I’ve lost my grip on reality.”

“I get that. I’m only hanging around the edge of this thing and I feel pretty weird about it all. So,” he sat up on the edges of the bed, “you didn’t tell me how it went with Cameron yesterday. What’s the low-down?”

Sarah’s eyes widened and she let out a sigh. Holding her hands up in defeat she said: “That, is a mess.” She moved to pull on her skirt then paused—right leg obscured in the scrunched green fabric, the other straining to maintain her balance—wondering how much to say about her conversation with Cameron. Luke was easy-going, not the jealous type. At the same time though, she liked to think that he would be at least a little put out with the idea that another man had left his wife for her. She manoeuvred her skirt up her legs, finding it hard to breathe as she bent over.

“Well, it was sort of … sort of … strange, actually.”

He raised one eyebrow.

“Well, he told me he had left Meghan because he was in love with someone else.” Sarah felt her cheeks flush. She turned away quickly and fumbled through her dresser for a shirt that would meet the miracle requirements of complementing her skirt and fitting over her pregnant body.

“And I’m guessing that was uncomfortable for you?”

“What do you mean?”
“Well, he’s got a thing for you, right? It was pretty obvious at dinner the other week.”

She spun around, mouth gaping. “What?”

Luke smirked.

“You never said anything about that?” Sarah said.

“Why would I? You clearly had no idea and, anyway, what was the point of making an issue out of it? You have enough on your plate as it is.”

“Oh.” Then she walked over and punched his arm as hard as could.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“You should have been jealous. That’s what husbands are supposed to do.”

He stood, rested his hands on her shoulders and looked at her, his face serious. “Really?”

“No,” she conceded.

“So what happens now?”

“Well, we kind of went our separate ways.”

“He dumped you?”

She punched him again, and went back to shirt fishing.

Beryl was already downstairs, dressed neatly in a grey linen skirt and white cotton t-shirt. Sarah looked down at her own efforts glumly: her blouse looked like it had been sitting at the bottom of the washing basket for years and her skirt, while loose and comfortable, was faded. Beryl was re-reading a print-out of a newspaper article from an old local Lonehill paper they had found online. It didn’t give away much. It mentioned a drowning of a local boy, and that his mother was helping police with their investigations. That was it, the sum total of what their rudimentary internet investigation had managed to uncover. Sarah hoped that Luke could do better, or that Beryl’s memories would reveal something.
Beryl stood and smiled. “Morning, luv, the kettle’s still hot if you want a cuppa.”

Sarah shook her head. Over the past two weeks she had drunk about as much tea as any human should consume in a lifetime. Sarah checked her phone but there were no messages. She had half-expected to hear from Cameron and she couldn’t decide if she was relieved or not that she hadn’t. Her back spasmed and she clutched the edge of the bench, inhaling sharply.

“You alright?” Beryl said.

Sarah nodded but couldn’t speak. Instead she pointed to her stomach. Beryl helped her onto a stool and watched, her concern apparent.

“Ooh, bloody hell. I don’t remember the Braxton Hicks being this severe with David. Speaking of which?” She looked around expecting to see him come running in from the lounge room at the sound of his name.

“He went to the shops with your dad. Bruce might have said something about the toy department.”

“Oh, okay good.” Sarah felt better now, her muscles easing. “How are you holding up?”

Beryl raised her eyebrows.

“That well, huh?”

“Listen, I know we didn’t have much luck before … you know directing things.” She twisted her hands together. “But I was wondering if maybe we could give it another try?”

“Sure. I wouldn’t hold your breath, though. I mean this thing seems to have a mind of its own.”

Beryl closed her eyes, seeming to picture the memory. She sat like this for two or three minutes while Sarah waited. She opened her eyes and took Sarah’s
hand. Anyone walking in on them would think they were performing a séance.

Maybe they were, Sarah thought.

“I want to remember her,” Beryl said simply, softly. “We went on a picnic. It was so hot. Even now I think it was probably the hottest day I’ve ever lived through. I remember touching the door handle of the car and crying out. My mother had to use her dress to pull the door open to stop her hand from burning. I have no idea what colour the dress really was, but I like to remember it as a lovely dandelion yellow. In that ’fifties style with the full skirt, tight bodice and broad summer straps. She put her hand in the pocket of the dress and opened the car door but didn’t let my brother and me in straight away. Heat, somehow even worse than the air outside, poured out of the car in a wave that I can still remember on my skin. Because of course, hot was hotter then. There was no air-conditioning, no respite. You just baked for months on end.

“Anyway, we were going to Lonehill to meet Aunt Coral. It might have been her birthday, I’m not sure. It was a long drive from our house. We lived a good four hours away, but to me it felt like we were driving forever. Miles and miles of flat, red, scrubby dirt. Nothing to look at. Nothing to do. My brother and I fought. Mum yelled at us. Dad, well, he either laughed or lost his temper completely so that we dare not speak for at least half and hour. Half an hour to a six-year-old is a long time. Can you imagine David staying quiet that long?

“We went straight to the river. I was angry at Robbie for something but who knows what. Brothers and sisters are always angry with each other. I remember I wanted to swim. Then…” her voice wobbled. “Then … I don’t remember anything else, just that Mum and Robbie were gone and I was at Aunt Coral’s house all by myself.” Beryl tightened her hold on Sarah’s hand and stopped speaking.
“What happened? What happened between driving to the river and being at Coral’s house? It must be in here somewhere.” Beryl touched the side of her head.

“Can you get it out?”

Sarah frowned. Nothing of what Beryl had said had triggered anything in her. The room hadn’t wobbled, no country town baking in the peak of summer had wormed its way into her thoughts. All she saw was her mother. And for this she was glad. Sarah wanted her mother to keep speaking, to bridge the gap between them with the stories of her past that had never been shared. Why hadn’t she ever asked? It now seemed urgent to walk through Beryl’s life, not in her mother’s memories, not as an intruder, but as Beryl wished her to see it. To hear it in her mother’s words, even if that meant the story changed. Sarah might feel closer to her mother, but what did Beryl feel now? Sarah had no idea.
I looked down at my daughter, her skin red, dry and wrinkled as though it were too big for her. This time I had done everything right. I was married. She was born in hospital, not the bedroom of a run-down house. A tall, white, male doctor with grey hair had pulled the baby out with long silver forceps before patting me on the leg and mumbling something about a job well done. I was never sure if he meant me, or himself. Then a brusque nurse moved her to a table on the other side of the room while the doctor sewed me back together.

“Textbook,” he said as he stood up and went over to the baby. “Lovely and big, a whopper.” He turned to me then. “You’re lucky I was here, Mrs Montgomery. No way you could have delivered this girl on your own. Nine pounds four ounces!”

Robbie was bigger, but I didn’t say.

Matthew and Robbie came to see me the next morning.

“Her name is Beryl, that was your grandmother’s name,” I said showing the baby to him. Robbie climbed onto the bed so he could see his little sister and I remember stroking his soft hair.

“Well? What do you think?”

Robbie’s eyes wide, and glinting he asked, “Can I hold her?”

“Of course my love.” I gently nestled him into the pillows and set the baby in his arms.

“She’s beautiful.” Robbie kissed her wrinkled little forehead.
She was beautiful.
“Dammit!” Sarah’s phone landed heavily in the bin as she bent forward. She fished it out and wedged it between her shoulder and her ear. “Sorry, right. What does it look like?” She paused, eyes widening as Luke spoke.

“But Luke, there are thousands of them in here. I’ll have to call you back.”

With a grunt she bent over and picked up the paper recycling bin. The bin was full of scrunched up post-it notes, most adorned with Sarah’s handwriting. She took it into the dining room and tipped the contents out onto the table. She sifted through and sorted them into piles. An autopsy of a daily life no longer hers. Most were for Lisa, the nanny: notes about David; shopping; insignificant things. “I’ve put the bins out”; “I bought milk”. Sarah laughed out loud at her own inanity. There were fifteen notes about which shoes David should wear. She had been called into the hospital thirty-three times since the bin had last been emptied.

She put her head in her hands; she wanted to re-write them all. “I saved Mr Warden today”. “I helped the Edwards family cope with the passing of their grandmother”. The other, real things she did with her life. The notes, scattered like mini indictments on the table, only confirmed that she lived in a contested world, where she was neither mother nor professional but an unhappy hybrid of both. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on her folded arms. The baby kicked violently and her back tensed. Exactly where did she belong? She found Luke’s note with a phone number scrawled in his handwriting, photographed it, and texted it to
him.

Sarah felt the prickly sensation of summer. Heat oozed in through an open window, bringing curious, bold flies that leapt on and off her sticky skin. Sarah looked around the overcrowded space of the church, a single stained-glass window sent shards of colour across the small congregation. To her left, a choir sang discordantly. Jesus on a crucifix carved out of solid jarrah loomed high behind the altar. Wooden bolts as big as Sarah’s fist pinned his limbs. She stared at his slim wooden feet, ignoring the murmurs of the boys from school in the row behind.

Aunt Coral sat erect beside her, a small, well-worn prayer book clutched in her hands. She nodded in agreement with the priest, but all Sarah could hear was a monotonous drone. Many of the children, even in their best clothes, were dressed no better that she was. Sarah wondered if her own, lost mother would have ended up like the other women in the room—all weary from farming and too many babies.

After the service Aunt Coral dragged Sarah forward to speak to the priest. He looked at her with only vague interest when Coral asked him whether Sarah could join the choir:

“She has a lovely singing voice,” Coral said, with too much enthusiasm.

The priest nodded and pointed out the choir mistress, telling Sarah to be at rehearsal on Tuesday evening at seven sharp. Then Coral and the priest began discussing the morning’s service, angling their bodies away from Sarah as though she were no longer there. She slipped away and went to wait outside. High-pitched giggles came from around the corner of the church, drawing Sarah in with their illicit promise. (Who is that? What are they doing?)

She slid along the wall and peeked around the edge of the building.

“What a load of bull.” A girl in expensive clothes stood in the centre of a mesmerised gaggle of girls. The little clique took turns at sucking on a cigarette.
Sarah edged further around the corner. (Who are they talking about? Me? Oh my God, has she seen me?)

Sarah pulled back, pressing herself against the wall and closed her eyes.

“What are you doing here? Are you spying on us?”

Sarah screwed up her face then forced herself to be calm and stepped out in front of the girls. The girl’s lip curled in disgust, hand on hip, cigarette dangling from her fingertips.

“Hi Barbara. No, I wasn’t ... I was just ...”

“Save it.” Barbara dismissed Sarah with a flick of her head. But then she stopped and turned back, squinting.

“Hey, you’re the loser whose dad kicked her out right? I’ve heard about you.”

Sarah froze. No words came to her lips. (Heard about her? Heard what?)

“Yeah ...” Barbara said, “your mum jumped in the river, right? Probably to get away from you.” The girls giggled. Barbara’s face set meanly. “Then your dad abandoned you here because he couldn’t stand to look at you.”

Tears welled in Sarah’s eyes and she clenched her fist.

Barbara smirked. “Thought so.” She walked forward and put her face close to Sarah’s, the stench of cigarettes on her breath. “Tell anyone about this,” she swirled the cigarette around Sarah’s head, “and you’re dead. Got it?”

Sarah nodded—petrified.

On the walk home Coral asked Sarah about the girls. It was lovely, her aunt said, that she was finally making friends.
Sarah looked up at the ceiling. The plaster was crazed and yellowing as though a smoker had spent their entire life blowing nicotine fumes at it. The blanket covering her skinny body smelt of camphor and dust, and felt heavy, as though she were being forcibly held down. Her eyes followed the cracks in the ceiling, almost as if she were trying to find a new route using a map she had already memorised. She rolled onto her side. A battered chest of drawers stood opposite, grubby marks on the handles. The faded floral motifs of the wallpaper swirled around her and in places it peeled off the wall like excess skin. Dirty washing was scattered on the floor, but the shelves on the walls were almost empty. She pouted. (I could put my dolls from home there.)

Sarah slid out of bed and through her bedroom door onto the landing at the top of the stairs. Extending each foot with care, trying desperately not to elicit creaks from the ancient wood, she crept down the staircase using the bannister to keep her steps light. (Is he awake?) She tip-toed into the kitchen, but her father was there reading the newspaper at the table. (When is he going to go home?)

“Morning, Daddy,” she spoke softly, hoping he would put down his paper and greet her with a huge smile, holding out his arms for a hug the way he used to.

“Morning, poppet,” he replied huskily, but didn’t put the paper down. He swallowed as if forcing something down his throat. Sarah’s shoulders slumped and she stomped into the pantry and took out a loaf of bread from the bread bin. She
dragged a stool across to the chopping board, climbed up and cut a clumsy slice of bread.

“Cut me one will ya, there’s a good girl?” Matthew’s voice came from behind his newspaper.

(Make your own.) Sarah remembered how her mother had never let her use a knife. She never even let Robbie and he was four years older than her.

“The toast!” Matthew yelled and Sarah jumped.

She rescued the charred bread and scraped the blackened surface layer into the bin.

“Mum! Mummy, the toast is on fire!” David shrieked as the thick smoke spiralled up to the ceiling. His perfect scowl was comical against his soft cotton pyjamas printed with tiny cartoon dogs. The mismatch of shirt buttons with buttonholes, now cute, were the remnants of last night’s battle: David versus four determined adults. The adults’ victory had been slim.

“Oh God!” Sarah snapped back to reality. She pulled the toaster plug out of the wall, reached across the sink to slide open the kitchen window and flapped a tea-towel at the rising smoke. Too late, the alarm went off. David covered his ears, his eyes squeezed tight against the noise.

Bruce rushed in. “Everyone okay?”

“We’re fine,” Sarah yelled, but Bruce didn’t seem to hear her over the piercing wail.

He pulled a stool around from the breakfast bar into the centre of the kitchen and climbed up. He pulled the cover off the smoke alarm and unhooked the battery.

“Thanks Dad. Bloody hell, I think I’m deaf now.” She rubbed her ears. David still sat with his eyes closed, teeth exposed, hands covering his ears. Sarah reached over and pulled his hands down, reassuring him that the alarm wouldn’t go off again.
“Eh,” Bruce shrugged, “I’m already deaf.”

Sarah picked up David’s empty cereal bowl and stacked it in the dishwasher.

“Okay, mister, why don’t you go and get dressed while I put on some more toast.”

Bruce ruffled David’s hair as he slipped past. “Think the house is trying to tell us something? Last night a flood, this morning fire? The apocalypse is coming.”

“Cuppa?” Sarah filled the kettle and clicked it onto its base without waiting for an answer. “Mum up?”

Bruce nodded, his finger pointing up at the ceiling, “Shower.”

“Ah.” Luke’s discovery about Lillian was still raw. They talked about little else. Sarah had almost missed her appointment with the obstetrician yesterday. The kettle beeped three times and Sarah poured the steaming water into two mugs.

“Dad?”

“Mmm?”

“Did you know Granddad Montgomery at all?”

If Bruce was surprised by the question he didn’t show it. He took the cup from Sarah with a short smile, then shook his head. “No, I only met him a few times. Your mum, well, you know, she didn’t keep in touch. Blamed him.”

“What was he like?”

“From what I could tell, he seemed like a decent enough bloke. He had a tough life. He came to the hospital when you were born. I found him looking at you through the window—you know how they had nurseries back then. I never told your mum.”

“Do you think that Mum was right to stay away from him?”

“I don’t know, luv. She was only a little thing when he left her with Coral. Just a baby, really, and obviously she didn’t understand what was happening. Bloody hell, I can barely comprehend it now.”
“Do you think we’ll find out what happened to Lillian?”

“Who knows?”

Beryl came in, hair still wet from the shower and looking as though she hadn’t slept. So much had changed in the past three weeks. Gone was Sarah’s prim, judgmental mother. In her place was a woman lost, drowning, with Sarah as her only anchor. Sarah pushed a mug of tea towards Beryl. She took it and the three of them sat without speaking. They had run out of things to say. Sarah didn’t even bother to tell Beryl about seeing Matthew that morning. What was the point?
Sarah woke in a car that was barrelling wildly down a dirt track. Nothing would ever be the same again. (I want to get out. I want my mummy.) It was hot. She kicked the air in a frantic rhythm, legs swinging forward and back as though counterweighted. She kicked the back of the seat in front of her, leaving a red, dusty footprint. (I want mummy.) The car threw up gravel that chinked and chipped at the underside of the car and a plume of red dust whipped up behind them. They rounded a bend—too fast—and the tail of the car skidded wildly. Aunt Coral pulled on the steering wheel, forcing the car back under control.

Coral turned to glance at Sarah sitting in the back seat. Her eyes were puffy and ringed with pink, angry skin and fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Everything will be okay, sweetie,” she said, unconvincingly.

Sarah squinted against the throb of air and dust that rushed past her from the open window in front. She clutched a broken peg-doll in her hand. (Why did Robbie break my doll?)

He was dead.

“We’re going to get help,” Coral yelled over the noise of the car and the wind. “He’ll be okay.”

(No he won’t.) He can’t be helped. He’s dead. His skin was grey. Blue veins threaded visibly across his cheeks. Sarah sobbed as she thought of Robbie’s eyes. They bulged. Veins which would, moments before, have been red, making his eyes
bloodshot, were now dark and prominent. Sarah vomited bile in her lap then
resumed her crying, softer this time. Broken.

Sarah sat up sharply, clutching her chest. The lounge room felt almost cold after the
sticky heat of the car. Something was terribly wrong with Beryl’s past. Sarah’s
experiences were moments strung together around large dark holes. But this time
Sarah had seen into one of those holes. Had reached into it, the one that surrounded
Robbie. The sensation had been sickening, as though she were reaching out to touch
something less than nothing: a negative. A sudden wave of nausea washed over her
and she rushed to the bathroom and threw up.

Beryl had been there.
Two policemen sat on either side of me on the train, big and silent. Handcuffs dug into my wrists. People stared. I didn’t like that. On the other side of the carriage a mother held her son’s hand and pulled him past me, as if frightened that I might strike out. I closed my eyes and, as I had so many times over the past months, relived it all. Robbie was dead. Drowned. The victim of an unstable mind. It was official. I had struck him and he fell into the water.

Coral took Beryl away. She would be her mother. And I was dead. That was important, I think. A dead mother is so much better than a murderous one. Matthew had argued with me. He had struggled with the lie but I think he finally understood why it was better for Beryl to be free of it all.

The train hissed to a stop. The policeman pulled me roughly to my feet and pushed me off the train and onto the platform.
Beryl’s mouth opened and closed like a fish. Sarah leaned against the wall waiting for the pain to subside so she could speak to her mother. She needed competent Beryl, the Beryl who liked to take charge: her mother.

“How? Are you sure?”

Sarah nodded. As the contractions washed over her, so did Beryl’s past, as though the two were somehow linked. Sarah could barely keep track of now and then, here and there.

“But…” Beryl stuttered and looked at her watch. “But you’re not due yet.”

The pain had been building, Sarah realised, over the past few days. She cursed herself. Surely an experienced mother, a doctor no less, could tell the difference between simple back pain and labour? Apparently not. How had she forgotten this? The pain was sharp and deep. Crushing. Surely the baby couldn’t survive these forces? Sarah straightened up. Beryl rushed forward and took her arm.

“Right,” she said. “Sit down, and tell me what to do.”

Sarah let her mother lead her to a chair. “You need to call Luke.”

Beryl nodded and yelled for Bruce. He ambled in, hands in pockets.

“Call Luke. Sarah’s having the baby.”

Bruce’s turned grey. He pulled his hands out of his pockets, then froze.

“What? But … but …” He checked his watch. “You’re not due yet.”

“Bruce.”
“Will the baby be okay?”

“Bruce!”

“Right. Right.” Bruce went into the other room in search of a phone.

Beryl turned to Sarah shaking her head. “Bloody men,” Sarah laughed but the sound came out gargled as it was transformed by the onslaught of another contraction. She squeezed her eyes tight as the pain seared through her body.

“How long was that?” Beryl said, more to herself than Sarah, checking her watch. “Four minutes?”

Sarah had no idea. Her grip of time was tenuous as it was, and in the scheme of the decades she had been traversing, minutes were meaningless.

“Plenty of time,” Beryl said. “Can I get you anything?” She pulled over a footrest and gently set Sarah’s feet up, slipping off her shoes. Then she gathered an assortment of cushions from the sofa and set to padding Sarah, like a precious ornament ready to be shipped.

Sarah did some quick calculations in her head as the contraction eased enough for her to function again. Luke would need at least forty minutes to get home. The drive to the hospital was around twenty minutes. An hour. Another contraction held off Sarah’s calculations. The contractions were four minutes apart. She scrambled back through the day to find when they had started in earnest. How quickly had she come to this point? She sat up.

“Mum,” she said. “You have to drive me to the hospital.”

“What? You have plenty of time, don’t you?”

“No. You have to take me and tell Luke to meet us there. I won’t make it if we wait.”

Beryl jumped up with surprising agility and disappeared into the kitchen.
Sarah gripped something in her left hand. A broken peg-doll. (Meg.) It was special. Her favourite and her brother had broken it. The other hand was grimy. Red dirt between her fingers and beneath her fingernails. Mute sobs wracked her body.

Beryl’s face flashed concern but she nodded and helped Sarah up. They walked slowly out to the car.

“Ugh, it’s so hot.” Beryl looped her arm through Sarah’s and guided her into the car. Sarah let herself be led. She climbed into the passenger seat, wincing from a discomfort that seemed to come from everywhere. Beryl shut Sarah’s door and moved around to the driver’s side. She started the engine, turned the fan as high as it would go and pulled out slowly. Sarah leaned her head against the windows and closed her eyes.

“I hate you,” Sarah hissed at Robbie. “I wish you were dead.”

Robbie stuck out his tongue, enraging Sarah. She clenched her fist, bent down and picked up a rock that glistened with quartz in the sunlight, like an invitation. It was a perfect aim. And a perfect hit. It landed on Robbie’s right temple, his tongue still sticking out. Then he was gone. Sarah stared at the spot where he had stood. Where had he gone? A woman screamed behind her. Then Sarah heard a splash as someone jumped into the river.

Sarah kept her eyes closed. Time strobed like the light between trees as they drove. Sarah wanted it to stop. They came so fast, painful and violent.

Beryl drove and Sarah saw.
One year, two years, three years, four. Five years, six years, seven years more. Like little bricks in my wall. Matthew stopped coming. I understood. The drive was long. It was hard for him to see me full of holes. The doctors chipped away at me, poking me with little needles and waking me up with big bangs. There were many sleeping days and sleepless nights as the doctors played with my reality. They were trying to fix me, for what I did to Robbie. One day here, another day, somewhere else. That’s what they said. “You’re in Sydney now, Lillian. A fresh start.”

I’d always wanted to go to Sydney.
“Okay, Sarah,” came the voice of the midwife. “This is it.”


Sarah couldn’t tell how far the moment stretched. They were all there: Beryl, Sarah, the baby. Each was fighting their way into the world. It was inside the searing pain that she saw her mother for the first and the last time.
The baby, Sarah had named her Lillian, slept in the plastic crib next to Sarah’s bed. Sarah wondered if she was dreaming. Were the wiggles and huffs, squeaks and snuffles, jerks and twitches Lillian’s response to an imaginary world? Or were they just reflexes? Perhaps the baby lived Sarah’s life in her dreams and would only later forget the things she had seen. Sarah would never know. For now, she was happy that her baby was here, safe and healthy. She was free from the physical bonds of pregnancy on the one side, and cut loose from her visceral tether to Beryl on the other. She had been split, not in two, but in three. At this moment there didn’t seem to be much left of her at all. Instead she felt like a bullet point between generations. A person bracketed by the great and looming figures of mother and daughter. Yet wasn’t that what everyone was? Just a single node in the tangle of human history?

Luke snored lightly next to her, one hand resting lightly on her arm, the other trapped somewhere beneath his body. He had only just made it in time to see their daughter born. Sarah had a vague recollection of him barging into the room, panicked and dishevelled. He had looked at her with a mixture of relief and permission. As though he believed he had a say in when their daughter would make her grand entrance. That any of them had control over anything seemed utterly ridiculous to her now.

For Sarah, the day before was an amalgamation of the hospital and that dreadful place by the river, the place that had shaped and directed Beryl’s and—
although she didn’t know it until now—Sarah’s life. That moment by the river with Beryl’s brother had played over and over again. Now it had stopped, all of it, and she was left drifting. She had been shown the fragments of Beryl’s tragedy and she didn’t know how to put the pieces together.

Someone knocked on the door and Sarah called for them to come in. Beryl’s head appeared slowly around the half-drawn curtain at the end of the bed. She smiled and tip-toed into the room.

“Where’s Dad and David?” Sarah whispered. She was eager to see David, to introduce him to his sister.

“They’re getting something to eat, then they’ll come up. I wanted to make sure it was okay to visit first.” Beryl looked down at the sleeping baby. “She’s beautiful. How are you?”

“I’m okay. I think. I mean … I feel strange.” Sarah put her hand to her stomach, “She’s gone and I think I’ve stopped seeing things from you as well.”

“Really? How do you know?”

“Yesterday was … intense. I saw something from when you were little. You were fighting with your brother and … well. The whole time yesterday I saw the same few seconds play out again and again. I must have seen it fifty times. Now … nothing. And I feel,” she put her hand to her head. “I feel empty up here as well.”

The baby chortled and Beryl smiled.

“Mum?”

“Mmm?”

“Do you think you could stay a little longer? Until New Year, maybe?” Sarah felt her voice wobble. She wanted her mother more than she had ever wanted her in her life.

Beryl opened her mouth to speak but another knock at the door stopped her,
and she turned as Rosheen entered the room. She carried a book in her hand. It was familiar but Sarah couldn’t place it.

“Oh Hello Dr S. How are you?”

“Oh Hello Rosheen,” Sarah beamed.

Rosheen cooed over the baby before handing Sarah the book. It was old and well used, and its pages were crammed with writing in a feminine, slanted hand.

“She Lillian Sitwell left this for you,” the nurse said, gently stroking the baby’s cheek. “It was the strangest thing. She was insistent that you have it, and that no one else was to read it.”

Sarah saw Beryl’s expression change over Rosheen’s shoulder.

“Oh Who did you say?” Beryl’s voice was soft and husky, the colour drained from her face.

“Oh, an elderly patient of Sarah’s who died a few weeks back.”

“What?”

“Sitwell was my mother’s maiden name.”
It was hot early. Balancing the picnic basket on one hip, I struggled to open the boot of the car. I ran through the list in my head again: chairs, towels, lemonade, sandwiches. I closed my eyes, though the sun was still bright through my eyelids, and I took a deep breath. Matthew still hadn’t returned despite his promises to be quick. He’d said something about chasing up a part for a customer. I was mad, even though I had no right to be. He had to make a living after all. I craned my neck to look down the road but there was no sign of him. Coral was expecting us at the river at eleven. I decided that we would pick Matthew up on the way.

“Kids!” I yelled. Beryl ran out crying, something clutched in her tiny hand.

“What’s wrong this time?”

Beryl sucked in a lung full of air and opened her mouth but I quickly lifted my hand.

“No. Stop. Breathe. Tell me, what’s wrong?” I knelt down and held her shoulders, looking into her eyes. “Don’t yell.” Her temper had been a bone of contention between us almost since the day she was born. It was as though I lit a fuse in her with no way of putting it out. Yet as I looked into her eyes I felt myself soften. She was so small. Only six, still a baby really. Her shoulders were hard and uneven—barely enough flesh to cover them. I pulled her in and hugged her until the sobbing eased.

“Robbie … Robbie broke Meg.” She pushed away from me so that I could
see the remnants of the little peg-doll in her hand.

I sighed. Meg was Beryl’s most beloved possession. Just once, it would have been nice to have a family day that did not involve Robbie breaking something, or Beryl butting heads with me.

“Let me see,” prising the pieces of the tiny doll from Beryl’s sweaty hand. The wooden body, still contained within the cotton dress, was clearly shattered. He must have hit it with a hammer. The few locks of curly woollen hair were torn off and the twine arms, each with a wooden bead for a hand had been viciously dismembered. My heart clenched. But it was just a doll, after all.

“Oh dear,” I said after I had taken in the carnage. “Robbie!”

Silence.

Beryl’s sobs had subsided to the odd, jerking sniffle.

“It’s not as bad as you think, sweetheart. We’ll patch her up, I promise. Her clothes are just fine and we can give her a brand new body so that she looks just the same.

Beryl shook her head. “I want Meg!” she screamed into my face.

I stood up abruptly. “Really, Beryl? Get in the car.” I pointed to the back seat and pushed Beryl with my other hand. “Don’t you dare speak back to me that way.”

Beryl cried out when she touched the handle. I put my hand in the pocket of my dress and opened the door for her. Beryl resumed her crying and climbed into the back of the car.


The house, shaded by an enormous gumtree, was dark and silent when I went inside. This was Robbie’s game. Where Beryl confronted, Robbie retreated. I called again. Nothing. I stormed through the house, violently throwing doors open, then
slamming them. I called again. This time he answered, and slunk out of the laundry, shoulders slumped, eyes down.

“What Mum.”

“Just get in the car.”

We drove around to the garage in silence. As we drew up outside the locked gate I honked the horn. Nothing. I honked again. The engine rumbled. The dash rattled. Heat poured through the windshield. A few seconds later, Matthew appeared at the office window and held up his finger to indicate he would only be another minute.

“Right,” I turned, faking cheeriness, to look at the two miserable children in the back seat. “Excited?”

They stared back blankly.

I closed my eyes for a second, reminding myself that they were the children and I was the adult. “We’re going to have a swim, and a nice picnic. It will be great. Trust me.” I looked back at the office building and thought, if we ever bloody leave. A fly, stuck between the dash vent and the windscreen buzzed. I wound down the window and ushered it out into the hot, still air. I gasped as Matthew pulled my door open roughly.

“I’ll drive,” he gestured for me to climb out. The car shifted as he slumped into the driver’s seat. I slipped into the passenger side and slid my feet out of my sweaty sandals. Matthew looked at Robbie and Beryl in the rear-view mirror, and rolled his eyes at Beryl’s puffy eyes. Then he boomed, “Righto! Off we go then.”

We drove in silence for perhaps five minutes before the boredom got the better of Robbie. I heard whispers and scuffles. I shut my eyes, trying to ignore them.

“Don’t,” Beryl whispered. “Stop it.”

I grimaced and Matthew smirked but didn’t say anything. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Two hundred to go.
“Robbie!” shrieked Beryl.

“That is enough!” I screamed.

Robbie and Beryl pushed themselves back against their seat, but there was nowhere to go.

“No talking. No touching. And so help me God if I hear another word I will thump the pair of you. Do you understand?”

Silence and wide eyes.

Matthew winked as I turned around to face the front again.

We were late, of course. Coral, who had probably arrived half an hour early, gave me an exasperated look as I trudged up the path, laden with picnic supplies.

“Don’t,” I said and walked straight past her to unburden myself at the table. We had only just arrived and I felt ready to collapse into bed.

“Hello to you too,” Coral said as she followed me. “How are you? My foot is much better; thanks for asking.”

I turned, hand on hip, head to one side. “Really? Leave off will you? It’s been a bloody ordeal getting here.” Coral had always pretended that I had abandoned her somehow. That my marriage, my children, my life away from Lonehill were devious steps to alienate her. As if I were responsible for her happiness.

Robbie trudged up next to us. As I looked at him, he shrugged then said, “Hi, Aunt Coral.”

“Hello, Robbie.” Coral kissed him awkwardly on the cheek. He bore it but wasn’t impressed. “Hello, B.”

Beryl walked past her aunt, pausing for a second to smile weakly. Coral scowled at her, then at me. Matthew had wandered off into the bush to collect wood for the barbeque.

“Can I swim?” Robbie asked, still disgruntled. Everything about him
expressed anger. From the way he stood there with his hand on his right hip, to the way his fist clenched his towel.

“Go on.” I waved my hand in defeat. I checked again. Matthew was by the river. “Let your Dad know where you are.”

“Can I swim too?” came Beryl’s meek voice behind me.

It was as though she had flipped a switch. I turned and lashed out. “For God’s sake, Beryl! Can’t I have two seconds to get organised? Honestly.”

Beryl’s lower lip quivered, as she backed away. I didn’t have the energy to go after her. I would make up with her later. I felt overwhelmed. But why? This was my everyday world. Was it Coral? I looked at my sister, rummaging through her picnic basket, looking smug. I steadied myself. I could salvage this day.

“Kids.” I used the self-deprecating voice that usually appealed to Coral.

“Mmm,” she responded then sat down.

“How are you?”

She seemed to soften, then. “I’m good.” She paused, titling her head back and closing her eyes. We sat like that for a while. A soft breeze had risen. It teased its way through the canopy of trees along the river bank. It touched my skin. I had been too harsh with Robbie and Beryl. They needed to hear me apologise, to feel me hold them and tell them I loved them.

“I’m thinking of selling the house.” Coral’s words came as a surprise. It was our parent’s house, and we both owned it.

“You are?”

“I need a change, Lil.” She sounded weary. “I’m lonely out there on my own, and, well…” she trailed off.

“Where would you go?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. I haven’t really thought that far ahead yet.
I was wondering if you and Matthew would want to buy me out?”

“No.” I didn’t want to go back to Lonehill.

She nodded, as though she had already known my answer.

Beryl’s voice pierced the air. “I hate you!” she screamed. Then Robbie laughed. I will never forget that laugh. Why did he have to laugh? Why? Things might have been different for all of us. Coral and I leaped up and hurried towards the top of the bank. The depth of the water was deceptive from this angle. The bank cut away steeply, with no shore to speak of on that section of the river. Robbie stood near the edge next to a thick rope that had been strung up on the branch of a massive gum.

As we drew close I saw something in Beryl’s hand. Something big and round, brown and orange, with flecks glinting in the sun. Beryl lifted her arm. I should have run faster. I should have punished Robbie properly for breaking Meg.

The rock flew through the air as though it had all the time in the world to reach its target. Robbie didn’t see it, not the way I did. I turned to look at Coral. Her mouth was distorted in horror. She saw it. She knew.

There was no more noise than a body slumping into a chair. My pulse drummed in my ears. The rock hit the side of Robbie’s head, and he fell.

I screamed but he was gone. He had disappeared. Down the muddy bank and into the river. I yelled for him. Silence. I scrambled down the bank and into the water. It was dark, thick with silt and leaves. I couldn’t see him. I groped blindly, calling his name. Behind me I heard Beryl crying, heard Coral shooshing her, heard Matthew call out for Robbie. Pain seared through my foot as something sharp pierced my skin. But I didn’t stop. There was a splash to my right and I looked up. But it was Matthew, his face white and gripped with terror. He was yelling and crying at the same time. But I didn’t have time for him. I looked back at the expanse
of water in front of me and reached out. Then I felt him. Heavy and wet, his bare arms waving in the current, like another sunken branch.

I yanked him out of the water, but he was too heavy and I kept slipping. Matthew came then, splashing through the water, snatching Robbie from my arms and dragging him up the bank to where Beryl stood. Her eyes were wide; she made no sound.

“Robbie!” Matthew shook him, turning to me with a crazed expression. “Help him!”

Coral clutched Beryl and forced her to turn away. Robbie’s lips were blue, his eyes wide and fixed on something far behind me. Beyond me. I covered his mouth with my own and forced air into his lungs. I pushed on his chest over and over. I heard his small ribs break. Nothing.

“I didn’t. I didn’t, Mummy.”

Coral lifted Beryl, rushing her away from the sight of her brother.

My heart broke into three. One for Robbie, one for Beryl, and the final smallest piece I kept for myself. There was no physical pain in the world that could echo through time in the same way. All I could do was save her.
Part II: Dissertation
Introduction

Women’s lives are shaped and informed by time: for example, by industrial clock-time that dictates the movements of the public and social worlds, and of production; by the cyclical time of care-work; and by the backward-reaching, intergenerational time of history that links the past to the present. Today, the instantaneous time of communication and social media key in ever-proliferating narratives (or narrative fragments) about who we are, who we might be (or wish to be), and who we will be. Time, in all its manifestations, is at once felt as a subjective, physical experience; as a shared, conventional concept measured by the passage of linear clock-time; as an imposed delimiting constraint of family, work, or social time; as a historical, generational, or civilising phenomenon; and as a relative, relational and personal encounter, through such experiences as anticipation, grief, boredom and pain. While women’s lives are shaped by many forms of time, each of its diverse manifestations acts upon individual women’s lives in different ways.

The relationship between time and the shaping of women’s subjectivity is the focus of this thesis and therefore an exploration of the structuring of time is essential to my project. Yet very quickly it becomes apparent that trying to make sense of time is maddeningly difficult: time is elusive, shifting and contingent; it is impossible to represent it as an objective entity separable from the lives and
cultures it inhabits and shapes. Therefore, this thesis traces, in creative and critical forms, a palimpsestic notion of time, reflecting on the way that narratives inform women’s experiences, identities and sense of being in the world. Philosopher and feminist Genevieve Lloyd asserts that, in both literature and philosophy, “narrative articulates our experience of time; and time is brought to language by narrative” (1993, 11). Moreover, fictional narratives are not limited to linear representations of time. Rather, fiction has the distinctive ability to weave multiple temporalities within its structure and is thus perfectly situated to imaginatively explore issues of temporality and identity. ¹

Questions of time have long been explored in fictional works. For example, Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (2009), a serial novel published between 1759 and 1767 is noted for its observations of the continuing effects of the past in the present. Marcel Proust’s sprawling seven-volume work, *In Search of Lost Time* (2015) published between 1871 and 1922, explores questions of memory and time. Novels, such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (2005), Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and Martin Amis *Time’s Arrow* (1991) have depicted time as non-linear in their representations of the Dresden bombing, the Second World War and the Holocaust, respectively. More recently, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) portrays a world in which time is commoditised, and David Mitchell’s cross-genre novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004) depicts

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¹ The terms ‘subjectivity’ and ‘identity’ are often used interchangeably, and both are used in this thesis. “Identity”, suggests Donald Hall, refers to “that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being”, while “subjectivity” is a “critical concept that invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (2004, 3-4). This thesis uses both terms: specifically, ‘subjectivity’ in relation to the theoretical concepts outlined in my discussion of feminist views on time, and ‘identity’ when referring to aspects of character in the fictional texts in which such theories are seen to play out.
six interrelated, but physically and temporally disparate, stories. Each of these works consciously and imaginatively plays with readers’ conceptions of temporal linearity in relation to story and narrative structure, of the role of time in patterns of cause and effect, and of the effects of temporal perspective on the making of meaning.

According to Mark Currie all fiction is about time whether or not it consciously addresses temporal concerns (2007, 2), and to suggest otherwise, he argues, is to “accept[] the way that conventional narrative temporality has embedded a certain view of time in our universe” (Currie 2007, 4). This would suggest that realist narratives, in which time is traditionally represented as linear and progressive (as cause and effect), can also be productively read through a temporal framework. By contrast, Paul Ricouer makes a distinction between the narrative time of a novel, and novels that explicitly address temporal formations in order to articulate the “aporias of time”, that is, the gaps that lie between our definitions of time, and our phenomenological experiences of it (Ricouer 1988, 99). This thesis takes both positions through its interest in exploring the contradictions, gaps and silences left by different constructions of time as traceable through the narrative time of works of fiction concerned with women’s daily lives.

Women in Time and Fiction

Few authors have written specifically ‘about’ time and women. Published in 1925,
Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (2000), is one example in which the story of a single day is juxtaposed with the duration of a lifetime. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2010) creates a densely structured temporal world of past, present and future, folding in narratives of myth and religion to depict a dystopian present in which women’s lives, time and bodies are tightly controlled. While few authors have written stories about women’s lives that make time the central theme (as Ricouer would argue is necessary for a novel to qualify as specifically addressing temporal formations), this thesis aims to show that questions of women’s experiences of daily life, their sense of being in the world and their identities can nonetheless be written and read in terms of their relational experience of temporality. For example, Rachel Cusk’s wry examination of the daily life of mothers, in her temporally compressed novel, *Arlington Park* (2006), explores through the details of the everyday (dictated by the specific timetable of domestic life) women’s experiences of the maternal and the domestic in the context of broader social norms (driven by the linear time of history). ³ Anne Tyler (1992), Alice Munro (2001), and Alice Sebold (2002) write about the personal and everyday experiences of women, yet bring an historical and mutigenerational aspect to their fiction. And Sue Woolf’s *Leaning Towards Infinity* (1996) explores the mother–daughter relationship through the micro-narratives of the everyday, while producing a sense of time as relational and

³ Rita Felski argues that the “everyday”, often associated with women because of their domestic work, is frequently, like women, “defined by negation” (2000, 80). That is, it has broadly been understood as that which is not the realm of “war, art, philosophy, scientific endeavour, high office” (2000, 80). Felski, however, contends that the realm of the everyday is not “opposed … to critical reflection and speculation” (2000, 80), and is “grounded in three key facets: time [repetition], space [home], and modality [habit and routine]” and is “above all a temporal term” (2000, 81).
malleable, as the narrative crosses multiple generations, and daughters speak for, and as, mothers. Joan Harris’s *Five Quarters of the Orange* (2001) draws on the emotional connections wrought through everyday acts, such as cooking, to trace two alternating timelines, shifting perspectives from child to adult and exploring the mother–daughter relationship. And so, while these authors may not deliberately or specifically address time as a thematic element of their fictional work, they each situate women’s lives and identities (as directed by circumscribed forms of time) in relation to their historical, cultural and social contexts and, in this sense, can certainly be read as concerned with matters of temporality.

**Women and Time in Feminist Theory**

The relationship between female subjectivity and the way that time is structured and represented has long been deliberated in feminist theory. In the middle of the last century, Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 book, *The Second Sex* (1997), described the trajectory of gendered time in binary terms, when she noted that “[the man’s] career is that the progress of his life through time creates behind him and before him the infinite past and future” (1997, 39), while the woman’s “misfortune is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life” (1997, 96). De Beauvoir’s observations describe a binary-gendered timescape in which men are linked with history, and women with reproduction, resulting in women’s lives

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4 The concept of gendered time refers to the way that men and women experience time differently due to “their distinct life situations” (Odih 1999, 10). Such a distinction recognises the “routinized circularity and repetitiveness of domestic labour … as incompatible with ‘linear conception of time’ associated with men and public life” (Odih 1999, 10). This distinction is problematic for feminist discourses, as it tends to embed a biological understanding of identity, and fails to recognise the way identity is constructed through social, cultural, historical and discursive practices (Odih 1999, 12–13).
being “mired in the repetitive tasks of everyday life” (Felski 2002, 25). Time is also represented as gendered, and put forward as a problem of pragmatics, in E. Thompson’s classic paper, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” (1967). Although not a feminist perspective on time, Thompson’s study indicates the differently gendered and temporal experiences of men and women that followed the industrialisation of clock-time. While limiting his focus to the relationship between time and labour, Thompson suggests that “the rhythms of women’s work in the home” meant that “the mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides” (1967, 79). Indirectly, Thompson’s argument about the relationship between temporality and subjectivity suggests that the gendered nature of domestic time shapes women’s sense of being in the world through both their connection to the tasks of care work and mothering, and their concomitant separation from the linear time of (industrial) production, history and the public realm.

More recently, the way that men and women experience time differently, and are shaped by time differently, has also been variously discussed by feminist scholars. Luce Irigaray (2004) and Hélène Cixous (1976) argue that time itself...

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5 The advent of clock time has been represented as a construct that “quite categorically, changed the meaning of time” (Adam 2006, 113), because it is at this moment that the experience of time became a disembodied experience: “a time cut loose from the temporality of body, nature and the cosmos, from context-bound being and spiritual existence” (Adam 2006, 115). In relation to the terms informing this thesis, the clock came to shape a linear temporality that, for women in particular, was in tension with domestic time of mothering and care-work. The introduction and impact of clock-time has been traced to industrialisation and linked to the imposition of an internalised “time discipline” (Thompson 1967, 90). In particular, differences between the task-orientation of pre-industrial time and the clock-driven experiences of post-industrial time is typically expressed as differently embodied times: “our experience of time is seething with differences … The challenge is how to theorize the temporal discontinuity wrought by the social relations of clock time in relation to embodied continuity” (Adam 2006, 116). While clocks were becoming increasingly common within the home from the early nineteenth century, their universal impact was felt in the latter part of the century. Greenwich Mean Time was adopted in England in 1880 and globalized clock time only began in 1913 (Adam 2006, 119), suggesting that clock-time as the major form of temporal measure is a relatively recent social and historical development.
must be thought of differently in order for women’s time both to be recognised as
different, and valued. Cixous, for example, argues that through writing, women
must dismantle images of a “universal woman subject” and instead “bring women
to their sense and to their meaning in history” (1976, 877–76). Cixous’s
discussion points to a divided, gendered notion of time in which women’s
experiences and lives are viewed as temporally separate from the progression of
history and linear time. Cixous’s writing in particular focuses on time in relation
to female mythological identities “as a way of re-establishing a spontaneous
relationship to the physical jouissance of the female body [that] may be read
positively, as a utopian vision of female creativity in a truly non-oppressive and
non-sexist society” (Moi 2002, 119).

For Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern critique of historical time is a debate
about “whose history survives”, (1988, 120; emphasis in original), and
“challenges the realist assumption of the transivity of language and of narrative as
an unmediated way to represent history” (1988, 177). Hutcheon’s discussion
disavows the assumption of the subjective nature of fictional narratives, in relation
to the supposed objectivity of historical discourses. In her discussion on the
mediated nature of history, Hutcheon destabilises the boundaries between truth
and fiction, to challenge the relationship of “history to reality and reality to
language” through historical representations in fiction (1988, 15). The shift in
critical thinking Hutcheon effects here liberates women’s histories from the
temporal obscurity of the traditional historical record and also opens the past to
representation through other, non-linear temporalities. This approach is also
reflected in more recent feminist discussion on time in which the mediated and
constructed nature of time is understood to reflect specific historical, cultural and social parameters. For example, Judith Butler sees gender as a “constituted social temporality”, that is formed through the “stylized repetition of acts through time and not an apparently seamless identity” but a “corporealization of time” (Butler, 2010, 179; emphasis in original). Butler’s description of time sees female subjectivity as embodied, historical, culturally inscribed and shifting, and reflects the recognition by time theory that time is subjectively experienced and enacted.

This thesis views the evolution of time theory in feminist discourse as moving ever-closer to a palimpsestic approach to representations of time. This evolution in conceptualising time and history is evident in both Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth and Ursula K. Heise’s postmodern constructions of time. Ermarth describes her vision of time as a temporal “collage” (1992, 8), or “rhythmic time” (1992, 45), which “opens a sense of alternative possibility foreclosed by History” (1992, 4). Heise reads postmodern narratives as constructing multifaceted temporal matrices that no longer see time as linear and infinite, but instead produces “fantastic transformations of twentieth-century history” through its “multidimensional explorations of temporality and causation” (1997, 4). Thus, she understands that postmodern novels “fracture time into multiple versions of itself by means of intricate structure or repetition and quotation, leaving neither characters nor reader with a firm hold on past or present” (Heise 1997, 4). For Heise and Ermarth this revaluation takes place within the textual and narrative strategies of postmodern fiction.

By contrast, Rita Felski is less interested in the specific textual practices of writing time, but instead draws together the differing feminist tactics of time
theory, advocating an approach to women’s time that incorporates “the many times of feminism” (Felski 2002, 27). She identifies four key principles in earlier feminist discussions on time: redemption, characterised by an optimistic “belief in progress” where the present and future are better than the past (2002, 22–23); regression, characterised by “reclaiming [a] mythic legacy and affirming the lost mother” (2002, 24); repetition, which involves the recognition of a non-linear concept of time, linked to “the everyday, and the everyday to woman” (2002, 25); and rupture, through which scholars “insist that feminine difference requires temporal otherness, a radical break with existing notions of time” (2002, 26).

Felski’s reading of time incorporates the key experiential and discursive constructions of time raised in feminist debate and thus, in a sense, can be read as advocating a palimpsestic approach to temporality.

These debates about the cultural construction of time and its material effects on women’s lives and subjectivities have developed alongside an ever-evolving understanding of the socially, culturally and historically constructed nature of time. Emily Apter considers that time, as a meaningful critical tool in women’s fiction, is more important now than ever as a marker of the texture, meaning and shaping of women’s lives. She suggests that the study of time “has become indispensable to feminist theory”, allowing a coming together of feminist concerns and other fields previously not considered as relevant to feminist issues, such as global geopolitics and translational studies (Apter 2010, 17). In this regard, she claims, there is a “‘becoming-feminist’ of time theory itself”, arguing that the dated, potentially essentialist and “universalist formulas” of time theories proffered during the second-wave of feminism have undergone a revision and
anachronistic resurrection (Apter 2010, 17). In light of new technologies, the ever-
expanding complexity of the scope of time, globalisation, scientific discoveries
about the heterogeneous nature of space-time, and women’s increasingly
convoluted straddling of and toggling between private and public realms, a fresh
perspective on time theory in capturing and reflecting on women’s experience is
more pertinent than ever.

In other words, I suggest that if there is to be a “becoming-feminist” of time
theory, as Apter would have it (Apter 2010, 17), then there also needs to be a
‘becoming contemporary’ of time theory. It is the contention of this thesis that
apprehending and reflecting on different temporal modes through the notion of the
palimpsest reinvigorates time theory as a feminist concern by providing a means
of representing the material effects of different modes of time on women’s lives in
fiction. Theoretical explorations of time in feminist criticism peaked in the last
three decades of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, and
while time continues to be of theoretical interest to literary theory, as a
specifically feminist practice it appears to have received limited attention in the
past decade. Victoria Browne’s *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* advocates
an approach to historical time that is “multilinear and multidirectional”, and
incorporates the perceptive experiences of “lived time” (Browne 2014, 2;
emphasis in original). She argues that historical time is “polytemporal” and rather
than a single, linear and progressive narrative, historical time is composed of
“different temporal layers and strands”, with different histories containing “their
own mixes of time and their own temporalities” (2014, 2; emphasis in original).

This thesis considers that such an understanding of time can be gleaned by
reading various temporal modes within a palimpsestic framework, to make visible the aporias left by the traditional organisation of gendered time and, working within contemporary realist narrative forms, generate new and complex representations of women’s subjectivities and identities. More than this, however, the palimpsest revitalises the value of time theory to feminist discourse by opening up the possibility of incorporating diverse modes of time into its analytical scope. Writing and reading time as a temporal palimpsest produces a dynamic, nuanced and expansive approach to rendering women’s individual and unique orientations to time, as well as the shared and relational experiences of women in time.

**Overview of Thesis**

This thesis explores the potential of the palimpsest as a conceptual framework for reading and writing fiction about women, through the production of two complementary components. The first part of the thesis is an original creative work whose narrative structure folds in different modes of time as it traces the resonances of family histories through the intimate moments and mundane actions of the everyday. Set in present-day Sydney, the narrative takes place over several weeks as the principal character, Sarah, embarks on maternity leave and her mother, Beryl, travels from Perth to visit her daughter. Sarah begins to experience time-shifts that slowly reveal a traumatic event of Beryl’s childhood, revelations that change Sarah’s understanding of her mother, and their family’s history.

The narrative’s manipulation of time and character perspective undertaken through the novella’s time-shifts, enables Sarah to glimpse key moments from her
mother’s past. The time-shifts produce a palimpsestic rendering of time and identity and while enabling Sarah to identify and understand the previously invisible relational connections and experiences that have shaped and informed her mother’s and others’ identities in the present, the time-shifts also highlight the network of familial, social and professional relationships and perspectives that inform individual identities.

The third-person narrative of the main text is alternated sporadically with a series of parallel first-person interjections. This secondary narrative thread superimposes another complicating layer of time, through which the ‘truth’ of the past is once again reviewed and rewritten. The layering of different modes of time produces a temporal palimpsest where each character’s understandings of the past—which are shown as disjunctive—shape their identity, their relationships with one another, and their sense of their situatedness in the world. In this way, I utilise the palimpsest in my creative work to imagine a way of writing women’s daily lives, histories and identities as multifaceted, and to produce a text that aims to grapple with and make imaginatively coherent, the complex set of relational ties that bind individual subjects and their various, and discontinuous, stories together.

The second part of this thesis (this dissertation) includes a critical analysis of two novels by Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) and *Life After Life* (2013). I employ Julia Kristeva’s concept of the subject, “in-process” (1996b, 91), and her three notions of time—monumental, cyclical and linear (1996e, 189) outlined in her 1981 essay “Women’s Time”—in my reading of these novels through the lens of the temporal palimpsest, in order to explore the ways that
narratives constructed in different modes of time can be understood to inform and shape women’s subjectivities. Through a reading of Atkinson’s texts, the dissertation explores the potential of reading time as palimpsest in women’s fiction as a productive means of dismantling the sometimes limited narratives about female subjectivity produced through singular accounts of time.

Structure of Dissertation

Chapter Two provides the theoretical framework through which I develop the temporal palimpsest as a critical tool for the reading and writing of fiction about women. I begin my discussion by outlining the concept of the palimpsest as it relates to literary theory, and propose that reading various modes of time within a palimpsestic framework provides a productive means of representing and reading women’s lives in fiction. Before discussing her seminal essay “Women’s Time” (1996e), I outline Kristeva’s theories of subjectivity to provide the context of my development of the temporal palimpsest as a literary tool. I define Kristeva’s concepts of the semiotic and symbolic phases of the development of subjectivity that inform her theory of the subject “in-process” (1996b, 91). Kristeva’s subject in-process is developed further through the discussion of “Women’s Time”, which links female subjectivity to concepts of gendered time. In my discussion of Kristeva’s ideas on temporality I also outline the way this thesis reads Kristeva’s three modes of time—monumental, cyclical and linear—as a potential way of constructing the palimpsestic understanding of time and its shaping of identity that informs both the creative and the critical elements of this thesis.

Chapter Three undertakes a critical reading of Atkinson’s Behind the Scenes at the
Museum, viewing Atkinson’s text as a manifold construction of the various modes of time that inform women’s lives. Set in the mid-twentieth century in York, Behind the Scenes at the Museum portrays domestic life across four generations of women. Using Kristeva’s three modes of time, the analysis traces—through fairy tale intertexts, representations of domesticity and the maternal, and the traditional historical record—the way that narratives shape and delimit women’s lives and identities. Reading these modes through the palimpsest firstly dismantles the limiting narratives constructed about (and sometimes without) women in singular modes of time, then imaginatively reconstructs representations of women as complex, individual, and relational subjects in-process.

While Life After Life, Atkinson’s later novel, also explores women’s domestic and daily lives in the context of England in the first half of the twentieth century, its focus shifts from a direct interest in personal and familial narratives to how various narratives about women (including personal and familial narratives) influence women’s political and public lives, and inhibit their capacity to act on

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6 This thesis is aware of the contentious debates surrounding women as “(good) mothers and (bad) feminists” (Robinson 2013, 101), with some authors considering that viewing women as ‘mothers’ or ‘non-mothers’ further embeds the public private split that would maintain women’s marginalised status, and “mystified the role of women as mothers and wives” (Dietz 1985, 19; see also DiQuinzio 1993, 10). However, other authors such as Sara Ruddick (1995) and Fiona Robinson (2013) argue that to consider women’s maternal roles as anti- or apolitical limits any possible “feminist political transformation” (2013, 101). This thesis views women’s domestic and maternal identities from both perspectives: firstly, as having limited and inhibited women’s political agency; and secondly as a potential site of political renewal. Fiona Robinson articulates the important difference in these positions when she argues that “the critical task of revealing that care is ‘what we do’ as human beings can occasionally slide into something which sounds like care is ‘what we should do’ because it is ‘better’ than claiming rights or handing out justice” (2013, 103). Critical to this position, argues Robinson, is that “while mothers need feminism, it should be stressed that feminists need mothering” (2013, 103; emphasis in original), because to accept that mothering cannot be fulfilling, rewarding or valuable, is to “accept the masculinist story of politics, civic life and the household” (2013, 104). This thesis takes as its definition of ‘mothering’ and ‘the maternal’ both the practice of caring for children, as well as, but not confined to, the physical process of bearing children.
their ethical responsibilities in relation to the political landscape. Chapter Four’s reading of Kristeva’s three modes of time as palimpsest explores how narratives about women constructed in different temporal realms shape, not only their personal lives, relationships and sense of being in the world, but also the physical, material and political outcomes of their lives. Read through the different modes of time, I discuss the way in which Atkinson’s novel exposes various narratives that work to disempower women in the domestic sphere, and extends the personal scope of representation undertaken in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* to explore in more detail women’s marginal position in the public realm. However, through its textual layering, the novel integrates women’s domestic lives into the political world to begin the process of restoring their personal and political agency.

Chapter Five, the Conclusion, outlines how the palimpsest has informed the practice of both the reading and writing of fictions about women in this thesis to demonstrate its value as a conceptual framework, discussing how the palimpsest creates the textual space through which to explore the multifaceted ethical and temporal complexities of women’s personal and political lives. I broaden the applications of the palimpsest as a conceptual tool for representing women’s relationship to time through a discussion of emerging temporal modalities such as those influenced by information and communication technologies. Finally, I look to future applications of the palimpsest in terms of reading and writing fiction to consider not only my own creative work, and the two novels read within this dissertation, but also how the palimpsest might be applied to readings of fictions about men, and those texts written from other cultural perspectives. This thesis offers the palimpsest as an exciting and dynamic way of reading and writing.
fiction that is capable of incorporating the myriad forms of time into its renderings of women’s lives.
Towards a Palimpsest of Women’s Time

This thesis explores, through the reading and writing of fiction, the different ways in which the female subject is shaped by cultural, historical and mythological narratives and the impact such influences have on women’s daily lives, sense of self and place in history and time. In this dissertation, in order to untangle and map the meanings and significance generated by fiction in terms of temporality and the female subject, I combine Julia Kristeva’s concept of the subject “in-process” (1996b, 91), and her discussion of temporality in her essay “Women’s Time” (1996e) with the figurative tool of the palimpsest. Reading time as palimpsest realises a nuanced and arguably intricate form of representation, one envisaged by Kristeva at the end of “Women’s Time”, which renders women’s lives as unique, multifaceted, relational and historical. In subsequent chapters, I apply this tactical reading to Kate Atkinson’s novels *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) and *Life After Life* (2013) to demonstrate the potential of the palimpsest as a means of representing the female subject in fiction and time.

I begin this chapter by defining my use of the palimpsest as a critical metaphor before discussing Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity, one interwoven with her concepts of the semiotic and symbolic aspects of language and the ways in which these produce the subject in-process. I then offer a discussion on those elements of
“Women’s Time” that inform and enrich my construction of a temporal and palimpsestic reading of Atkinson’s (and, potentially, other) fiction, explaining how Kristeva’s discussions on time extend her theory of subjectivity. Finally, I discuss Kristeva’s three modes of temporality—monumental (mythological), cyclical (domestic), and linear (historical)—that form the temporal palimpsest through which I read Atkinson’s novels. My analysis of Kristeva’s concepts of the subject, of time, and of the palimpsest in this chapter enable me to develop a potentially fruitful and enriching framework within which we might read (and write) the female subject in fiction.

Palimpsest

The palimpsest, understood in both its material and metaphorical senses, is an ancient concept.¹ The physical act of producing a palimpsest involves the rubbing clean of a parchment upon which a new text is then inscribed. However, the imperfect nature of this erasure (and subsequent recovery of overwritten texts over time) is reflected in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the extended use of the palimpsest as a “multilayered record”.² The coexistence of disparate texts written many centuries apart on a single surface has transformed the physical palimpsest into a metaphorical tool applied across multiple disciplines.³

Like the physical palimpsest, the meaning of the palimpsest as a figurative tool has evolved, particularly over the past two centuries, and this evolution is reflected in

¹ As a physical entity it can be traced back to ancient Egypt as a method of vellum and papyrus recycling and became a common practice from the seventh to the twelfth centuries AD. Recovering palimpsest documents now encompasses an entire field of academic endeavour that utilises new technological advances in chemical, spectrometry and photographic techniques (Dillon 2013).
³ The palimpsest is utilised in cartography, architecture, historiography as well as literary criticism (Dillon 2013).
the (albeit limited) academic discussions surrounding its use. The emergence of the figurative palimpsest has been traced to essayist Thomas De Quincey’s 1845 paper, “The Palimpsest”. De Quincey views the palimpsest as a metaphor for memory and resurrection, similar to Sigmund’s Freud’s “Mystic Writing-Pad” (Dillon 2013, 30). The next evolution of the palimpsest as a critical metaphor is its use in historiography in the nineteenth century. Josephine McDonagh suggests that the increasing number of palimpsest documents discovered in the nineteenth century changed history writing as a practice because of the increasing recovery of texts previously considered lost. In this sense, nineteenth century historians viewed the palimpsest as an archaeological path to the past, which provided an understanding of the chronological “origin”, of history (McDonagh 1987, 211). In the late nineteenth century the palimpsest shifted from an understanding of its value as a chronological link to the past, to a contemporary metaphor for intertextuality and the often obscured relationship of the past to the present. This most recent evolution of the term palimpsest was introduced to literary theory by Gérard Genette’s 1981 text, *Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree*. Genette’s use of the term palimpsest described his concept of the intertextual nature of all discourse: the idea that all texts exist in relation to each other in a complex and tangled network (Genette 1981, 9).

But it is Sarah Dillon’s 2007 monograph, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, that provides the most substantive engagement to date with the notion of the figurative palimpsest. For Dillon, the power of the palimpsest lies in its scope as an interdisciplinary and intertextual tool to refigure current understandings of history, subjectivity, sexuality and time. She views the palimpsest as providing the opportunity to couple previously incongruous theories in order to revitalise and reimagine restrictive forms of, and approaches to, representation. She applies this
reading to various critical and fictional texts, including combining Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality with Gérard Genette’s palimpsest in a reading of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), to develop a case for the palimpsest’s importance in contemporary literary criticism. The palimpsest facilitates an engaged, critical and inquisitive form of reading, Dillon argues, by its “sustained interrogation” of the “way in which we read texts (be they literary, critical, theoretical, political, cultural, etc.)” (213, 3; emphasis in original).

This thesis is interested in tracing the tension between the points of erasure and preservation of representations of women in fiction (including time) made visible by the palimpsest. In particular, I read three modes of time in Atkinson’s novels as textual layers—operating sometimes simultaneously, sometimes independently, often interdependently—to explore the processes of both erasure and recovery of female identities and histories. I tease out the points at which different layers of time act to inform, silence and change Atkinson’s female characters, as well as the points at which the novels dismantle these actions of layering and erasure. Such a reading requires attention both to the surface layer of the temporal palimpsest as well as to the careful unveiling and integration to the whole of the work and temporalities obscured by this surface layer. For example, a surface reading of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life After Life* would discover two novels interested in the England of the first and Second World Wars, but, as Dillon points out, the palimpsest is “anything other than that which it offers at first sight” (Dillon 2013, 2).

In an interview on *Life After Life*, Atkinson states on the one hand that she merely wanted to write about the Blitz of the Second World War, yet later states that “writing is an artefact”, and the purpose of writing is “about rescuing the past”

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4 Dillon flags other authors such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2006, 255), Jacques Derrida (2013, 2), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as briefly discussing the palimpsest (2006, 260).
And so, through a palimpsestic (re)construction of time, Atkinson’s texts produce a subtle re-imagination of women’s narratives within, beneath, and entangled amongst, the historical surface. Atkinson’s texts are thus artefacts that explore erased histories and, in doing so, tell us more about how women’s identities are constructed in time. My reading of the texts’ creative construction of the temporal palimpsest explores the way that representations within the different temporal layers of the novels shape women’s lives, firstly as a point of erasure, but ultimately, through the palimpsest, as a means of recovery. I now turn to Kristeva’s theories on subjectivity as temporal and in-process to trace these points of erasure and renewal across three layers of the palimpsest.

**Kristeva’s Subject**

My discussion of Kristeva’s concept of subjectivity will be limited to a brief overview pertinent to this dissertation’s focus on the ways in which fiction might figure women’s subjectivity in terms of the temporal modalities which inform and structure female characters’ lives (or, more precisely, their narratives). In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva articulates two modalities of the signifying process in relation to the subject: the semiotic and symbolic. Kristeva distinguishes between the semiotic and the symbolic, in both their functional role in subject formation and the chronology in which they act to shape the subject. However, despite viewing them as distinct phases, central to Kristeva’s theory of the subject as in-process is the understanding that the two modes co-exist in a constant dialectic that produces all signifying practices (Kristeva 1996b, 91).

The semiotic phase, described through the “chora”, is the developmental stage of the subject that precedes the establishment of the symbolic order and
language. In this phase the subject cannot distinguish itself as existing separately from the mother and therefore understands its physical and emotional drives through the maternal body, which acts to “mediate[] the social relations and become[] the ordering principle of the semiotic phase” (Kristeva 1996b, 95). Kristeva views the semiotic phase as spatial and rhythmic rather than temporal, and thus she imagines the chora as a “topology” rather than as “axiomatic” (1996b, p.94). Much of the criticism of Kristeva’s work has stemmed from her association of this semiotic phase with the maternal body as a pre-cultural function (Söderbäck 2010, 2). However, Kristeva views the semiotic chora as a crucial developmental phase in the formation of the speaking subject, and she is careful to emphasise that the semiotic is always integral to, and interdependent with, the symbolic order and symbolisation (Kristeva, 1996b, 104). For Kristeva, the semiotic is not a finite or discrete phase of development, but rather an always-present aspect of the subject, always acting upon language and discourse.

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5 Kristeva’s *chora* is a term taken from Plato’s *Timaeus* (Kristeva 1996b, 93).
6 The semiotic chora is linked with Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious and is the phase of subject development prior to Jacques Lacan’s mirror-stage, in which the infant begins to constitute itself as a body separate to the maternal body. Following the mirror-phase the subject is able to constitute objects distinct from the semiotic chora (Kristeva 1996b, 100).
7 A key criticism levelled at Kristeva is the concern from many feminist scholars about what they see as Kristeva’s essentialist views on the maternal. The claim here is that Kristeva’s maternal, associated with the semiotic, ascribes the role of mother to an essential realm that is beyond culture and signification. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, suggests that Kristeva’s writings on the maternal reifies maternity, producing a representation of the maternal principle that is universal rather than heterogeneous, so that it “preclude[s] an analysis of its [maternal] cultural construction and variability” and cannot act as a source of subversion (Butler 2010, 109). Other prominent authors concur that Kristeva makes the maternal an imperative for women by apparently equating the feminine with the maternal (Fraser 1992, 64; Grosz 1989, 82; Jones 1984, 7; Spivak, 1989).
8 Sara Beardsworth (2004), Kelly Oliver (1993b), Cecilia Sjöholm (2005), and Fanny Söderbäck (2010) argue that it is exactly this essentialist viewpoint that Kristeva’s semiotic and maternal rally against. Söderbäck stresses that Kristeva understands the semiotic as already integral to the symbolic order and to processes of symbolisation. Rather than reifying the maternal as a position anterior to linear time, Kristeva liberates the maternal from its repressed history, providing it with a genealogy and, in doing so, creating an “open future” for women in which the maternal is not the only form of subjectivity available (2010, 2). In a similar argument, Oliver sees Kristeva’s idea of the maternal as moving beyond the phallocentric discourses of religion, science, and even of those feminists who view the mother through the lens of a phallocentric culture (1993b, 49). As Oliver explains, Kristeva’s work is problematic, complex and contradictory, but is “useful for thinking about women’s oppression as a partial consequence of the representation of women’s association with reproduction” (1993b, 6).
Kristeva develops Jacques Lacan’s definition of the symbolic order beyond what she considers to be the stagnant process of symbolisation that is representative of the social practices of language, linear time, and the law (Kristeva 1980, 25). By understanding the semiotic as a dynamic element of the symbolic, rather than its chronological predecessor, Kristeva argues that her approach to subjectivity allows for an “acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of that law for the purpose of renovating it” (1980, 25).⁹ Yet her theory would suggest a paradox: because of its position as preverbal, the semiotic phase can only ever be articulated from within the symbolic order.¹⁰ Kristeva counters this argument, however, by positing that the semiotic can be expressed within the symbolic through poetic language.¹¹

Modern poetic language, for Kristeva, calls into question the representation of the subject to dispel the notion that literature reflects a fully formed and fixed subject (1996e, 109). Importantly, through poetic language, the semiotic chora remains open and “constitutes the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory” (Moi 1996, 13). That is, not only is the semiotic phase a prerequisite for language development and

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⁹ Butler sees Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity as “depend[ing] upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace” (2010, 108). Similarly, in a 2003 interview, Toril Moi too argued that the flaw in “Women’s Time” was that Kristeva’s analysis of the feminist movements as historical phases relied upon a “sterile opposition between equality and difference” (Payne 2003, 148).

¹⁰ I see these arguments against Kristeva’s work as focusing on the same perceived problem: treating the semiotic and symbolic in opposition. To valorise the symbolic over the semiotic is to reinforce existing power structures of phallocentric culture and deny women the opportunity to speak; yet, to prioritise the semiotic over the symbolic is to reaffirm women’s reproductive and biological function as an imperative. However, the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic realm, as Kristeva conceives it, is palimpsestic and works to “take us beyond categories that have traditionally been used to limit us, all of us, women and men” (Oliver 1993b, 7).

¹¹ Kristeva’s writing is necessarily positioned from within a social construct of time and language, because to “abolish the Symbolic is to abolish society” (Oliver 1993b, 9). Instead, Kristeva considers that “social problems always have their core in representation” (Oliver 1993b, 7), and that the symbolic order is not a rigid structure that must be taken at face value, but rather can be refigured through a form of representation (poetic language) that allows for the disruptive influence of the semiotic.
entrance into the symbolic contract, but it is always present and active in, and potentially disruptive of, the symbolic realm, and it is this dialectic that produces the revolutionary potential of Kristeva’s subject. This thesis contends, however, that through a palimpsestic reading of narratives constructed in various layers of time, realist texts can also provide a poetic interjection and imaginative reconstruction of the way women’s lives are, and can, be represented in fiction, to challenge fixed and reductive representations of traditional narratives.

This evolution of Lacan’s symbolic order from a closed and fixed representation of subjectivity is important because it creates what Kristeva calls a subject in-process and views the act of signification as mobile and ongoing. Through the study of poetic language, Kristeva argues, the subject can “restore his connection with that negativity—drive-governed [semiotic chora], but also social, political and historical—which rends and renews the social code” (1996d, 33). Thus, Kristeva describes the semiotic as a potential source for both personal and political renewal by understanding the semiotic as intertwined with personal, historical and social structures. She specifically flags the reading of the semiotic within the symbolic as a way of creating a new “historical typology … a new perspective on history, perhaps a new principle for dividing up historical time, since signifying temporality is not coextensive with that of the modes of production” (1996d, 32). Consequently, Kristeva’s subject in-process can be understood within a temporal framework, and this connection between subjectivity, language and time is important for my application of the temporal palimpsest as a way of critically reading fiction. While

Kristeva still recognises the Oedipal phase in the development of the subject and their entry into the symbolic contract. The castration phase completes the process of separation by detaching the subject from the mother: “the subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, separates from his fusion with the mother, confines his jouissance to the genital and transfers semiotic motility on to the symbolic order” (Kristeva 1996b, 101).
Kristeva does not develop this connection further in her own work, she gestures towards what I develop as an approach to reading and writing women’s lives that moves beyond simplistic binary oppositions that would see women associated with particular modes of time (such as circular) and men with linear, historical time, along with the rigid narratives of subjectivity that may accompany them. Rather, Kristeva’s proposition that the semiotic oscillates within, shaping and reshaping the symbolic or political sphere through the use of poetic language, when read in terms of a palimpsest, creates new opportunities for how representations of women’s lives can be read, written and understood.

Kristeva develops this connection further in “Women’s Time” by linking her theory of the subject in-process, as a complex interaction of the semiotic and symbolic functions, to her understanding of time, whereby female subjectivities and the semiotic are traditionally linked with the processes of monumental and cyclical time as distinct from, and subordinate to, the masculine and symbolic temporality of linear time and history. This is a problem for women because such an understanding of subjectivity, as it is socially constructed and represented within (perhaps particularly realist) narratives, consigns women either to emulating the symbolic social structures or to acting in response to biological processes and drives. In my reading of Atkinson’s texts, I explore the irruption of the semiotic into the symbolic through the temporal palimpsest which sees mythological and cyclical narratives interwoven with historical (linear) time. Thus I use Kristeva’s discussion of temporal modes as a way of further imagining her theory of the subject in-process within narrative. By reading the different temporal layers of Atkinson’s fiction as palimpsest I realise a form of representation that views women’s sense of self as multifaceted, contradictory, and continuously evolving, as well as interwoven with
their domestic, professional and political concerns.

“Women’s Time”

In her essay “Women’s Time”, Kristeva harnesses a temporal framework to apply her theories of subjectivity to an interpretation of the ambitions and outcomes of the feminist political movement of the twentieth century. Running parallel to this appraisal, however, is the way in which her discussion on time produces a method by means of which to read the subject as constructed in different understandings of time. I utilise the three notions of time outlined in “Women’s Time”—monumental, cyclical and linear—to structure my reading of time as palimpsest to draw attention to the dynamic connection between the socially constructed and culturally sanctioned narratives of each temporality and the individual subject that Kristeva foresees, but does not develop, in “Women’s Time”.13

At the beginning of “Women’s Time,” Kristeva outlines a temporal framework of subjectivity that builds upon her work on the semiotic and the symbolic. She describes three modalities of time, connecting monumental and cyclical time with the semiotic, and the linear time of history to the symbolic. Within these modalities of time are specific forms of narrative representation that act to shape women’s subjectivities, experiences and sense of being in the world. Kristeva’s discussion on each form of temporality informs how time and narrative can be read in terms of the female subject, but also how, when read as palimpsest, the rigid and limiting representations of each independent form of time can deconstruct universalising

13 Kristeva’s three modes of time pertain to the two approaches to gendered identity and equality undertaken by successive feminist movements. However, like Rita Felski who advocates for a combination of all the approaches to temporality undertaken within feminism (2002), this thesis posits that a palimpsest notion of time allows for Kristeva’s theories to be extended to include other forms of time, such as those associated with technology and social media.
narratives and replace them with nuanced and complex representations.

By reading these temporalities as palimpsest in Atkinson’s fiction, this dissertation aims to address the criticism of some feminist thinkers that Kristeva’s theories of subjectivity are “unable to account for the relations between the subject and the social”, because “nowhere are we given a specific analysis of the actual social or political structure that would produce such a homologous relationship between the subjective and the social” (Moi 2002, 170–71). Thus, “Women’s Time” informs this dissertation in two ways: firstly, as a temporal expansion of Kristeva’s theories of subjectivity; and secondly as a productive means by which theories of the subject, as shaped by time, can help explain as well as figure, creatively and imaginatively, political viewpoints and endeavours. As such, “Women’s Time”, as I make use of it for the purposes of this discussion, provides an important connection between Kristeva’s work on the subject and the individual, and its broader applications to the strategies of narrative fiction and, by extension, social and political reform.

Women, Kristeva suggests, have their subjectivities shaped and understood through the “anterior” temporalities of monumental and cyclical time (1996e, 192). Monumental time is present in mythological ideologies that cross historical periods, and Kristeva draws on the myth of the Virgin Mary as an example of a female identity that informs and shapes women’s lives across broad historical contexts (1996e, 191). Cyclical time she associates with the work of reproduction, mothering and domestic labour and as separate from, and subordinate to, the linear time of history, language and economic production (1996e, 192). Linear time is associated with nation building, economic production, language and the clock, and Kristeva treats it as a predominantly masculine temporal modality from which women are
often excluded and silenced (1996e, 192). In this way Kristeva describes existing understandings of time through a binary structure of gendered time. She sees the methodology through which the phases of the feminist movement sought change as responding to this political and biological oppositionality.

Kristeva’s appraisal of feminism sees the political aspirations of women as an historical process on the one hand, but ultimately she reimagines this process, through what I refer to as a palimpsestic understanding, in order to “anticipat[e] a possible transformed future,” on the other hand (Watts 1999, 232). First-wave feminists, according to Kristeva, sought equal representation within social and institutional structures and relations of power governed by linear time (1996e, 193), such as through gaining the vote, and access to social justice and educational equality (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 9). Although she acknowledges the crucial value of the gains made by this form of political activism, Kristeva argues that the politics of first-wave feminism did not alter the logic of the existing order. As Noelle McAfee describes it: “The first generation of feminists identified with and upheld the existing order. It didn’t want to overturn the system. It wanted to join it” (2004, 79). Such a position, Kristeva argues, inevitably denies the other aspects of women’s time—monumental and cyclical—by prioritising masculine values associated with the time of history or the “socio-political life”, over that of women’s maternal, reproductive and biological lives (1996e, 193). As Kristeva points out, first-wave feminists’ identification with linear time did not account for women’s maternal lives and thus a new phase of feminism undertook the task of “clarifying the difference between men and women as concerns their respective relationship to power, language and meaning” (1996e, 196).

Second-wave feminism, then, says Kristeva, was linked to “an exacerbated
distrust of the entire political dimension” (1996e, 194), and shifted the focus of feminist politics from that of equality within linear time, to the recognition and articulation of biological difference. However, in demanding identification as an “irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex”, radical women of second-wave feminism became situated “outside of the linear time of identities” and confined themselves to the anterior temporalities of monumental and cyclical time from which the previous generation had fought to be liberated (Kristeva 1996e, 195). Kristeva argues that second-wave feminism’s attempt to seek new forms of discourse created an idealisation of “Mother” and a universal “Woman” that “erased actual women’s individuality and specificity” (McAfee 2004, 84). More importantly for Kristeva, however, such a position also precluded the feminist movement from acting as a source of subversion for existing political ideology because “women are too entranced by the image of woman as mother and by respect for the paternal law to be free to remain in the margin subverting or deriding the law” (McAfee 2004, 82). Thus, in Kristeva’s account, second-wave feminism, when carried to its extreme, developed into a form of counter-culture that continued to maintain women as outside of the linear time of history and politics.\footnote{Kristeva’s discussion of second-wave feminism is a simplistic rendering of the aims, scope and achievements of this period of feminist political activity. She focuses specifically on aspects of second-wave feminism that support her discussion of the temporal progression of feminism and the flaws in what she views as broad, over-arching political aspirations. Given that Kristeva’s views on political renewal stem from a linguistic, psychoanalytical, and individual focus (Bowden and Mummery 2009, 38, 112, 118), it is not surprising she glosses over the complexity of the feminist political struggle that sought collective change. However, it is important to recognise that “feminist arguments and indeed feminists cannot all be said to possess the same barcode” (Bowden and Mummery 2009, 8). While recognising that second-wave feminism was not a monolithic movement is important, exploring the nuances and intricacies of what Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery call the “multiple feminisms” of the second wave is beyond the scope of this study (2009, 8).}

Yet Kristeva sees political value in both phases of feminism and perhaps this is why some feminist scholars argue that she maintains the binary of patriarchal authority as well biological essentialism (Butler 2010; Grosz 1989; Fraser 1992;
Kristeva’s approach walks a tightrope between two feminist positions that make her work appear contradictory. On the one hand, she stresses that political equality and representation within the linear time of history and language are imperative for women to be understood as cultural beings, as well as the practical necessity for access to education, equal pay and reproductive freedom; on the other hand, she recognises that the politics of first-wave feminism did not answer the question about, or provide the language with which to articulate, women’s continued desire to have children and how to express the multitude of female experiences in ways that are neither universalising nor mystical.

Thus, Kristeva foresees a third phase of feminism that would combine the efforts of the first and second waves in a way that mirrors her discussion of the integration of the semiotic and the symbolic into her theory of subjectivity. It is because of this third perspective that Watts suggests “Women’s Time”, despite its historical treatment of feminism, has a future application (1999, 230). Kristeva foresees a feminist ideology enacted within poetic and aesthetic practice through

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15 Butler suggests that Kristeva “safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality” (2007, 109). For Grosz, Kristeva “readily accepts an essentialist account of maternity as a process without a subject”, and ascribes maternity to a “space-time of an archaic ‘phylogenetic inheritance’” without any connection to female identity (1989, 99). Thus she considers that Kristeva only describes maternity in “biological and physiological terms”, and as such reduces women to their biological function (1989, 99).

16 Kristeva’s third-wave of feminism in this context is separate from (though not entirely unrelated to) what is now commonly understood as third-wave feminism as well as the emergence of postfeminism. While third-wave feminism and postfeminism are terms that are at times used interchangeably, they represent different approaches to feminism. Postfeminism, suggests Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, “characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against feminists of the second wave” (1997, 1). Influenced by contemporary consumer culture, postfeminism extends beyond a mere “backlash” against second-wave feminist politics. It is instead, argue Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, built upon a contradictory belief in the “pastness” of feminism (2007, 1), whereby the “very success of feminism produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture” (2007, 8). Conversely, third-wave feminism, “contains elements of second-wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (Heywood and Drake, 1997, 3). Moreover, third-wave feminism seeks to critique feminism as a “white women’s movement” and extend it to include issues of race, class and sexuality, and “give voice to a politics of hybridity and coalition” (Tasker and Negra, 2007, 9). My discussion of the “third-wave” of feminism pertains specifically to Kristeva’s imagined future of discourse and representation as a form of individual and political renewal that is separate to, but not incongruent with, current third-wave feminist thought.
which women can claim their historical and political agency, as well as maintain a
connection to the maternal without their individual subjectivities being pressed by a
romanticised image of “Woman” (McAfee 2004, 84).

It is this third perspective that drives my discussion of time in Atkinson’s
novels, because while Kristeva uses the word “generation” to describe the three
phases of feminism, she finishes her paper with what I argue is a palimpsestic notion
of time. She envisages the political aims of future feminist endeavours as a
“corporeal and desiring mental space”, a “signifying space” in which women’s
connection to monumental and cyclical time is understood as integral to, and
interwoven with, their historical presence (1996e, 209; emphasis in original).

For Kristeva this is an ongoing pursuit. In her novel Murder in
Byzantium (2006), the protagonist articulates the tensions produced by binaristic
notions of time, gender and identity in a way that suggests Kristeva’s third phase is
yet to be achieved:

“My Byzantium,” Stephanie confesses, “is a matter of time, the very
question that time asks itself when it doesn’t want to choose between
two places, two dogmas, two crises, two identities, two continents,
two religions, two sexes, two plots” (2008, 88).

As such, Kristeva draws attention to the way in which a binaristic approach to
gender, politics and representation continues to restrict and confine women to
specific identities, associated with political and domestic life. Indeed, Stephanie’s
words in the novel echo Kristeva’s imagined future from “Women’s Time”, and it is
from within this stratified, multiple and complex signifying space that I read
Atkinson’s fiction. By exploring the ways in which women are represented in
different temporal modalities in Atkinson’s novels, I explore how a palimpsest, or
Kristeva’s third-wave understanding of time, narrative and representation might be
harnessed in reading (and writing) of contemporary women’s fiction.
Monumental Time

Kristeva describes monumental time as an “all-encompassing and infinite … imaginary space” to which the term “temporality … hardly fits”, and she argues that this form of time is connected to female subjectivity because of the conceptual association of “repetition and eternity” with the reproduction of the species (1996e, 191; emphasis in original). Although Kristeva links monumental time with the (pre-verbal) semiotic chora, she also points out that monumental time is represented in language through myths that preserve core ideologies across broad historical periods, and that these myths produce powerful and enduring identities, which silence the articulation of women’s lived experience (1996e, 191; 208).

Kristeva presents the myth of the Virgin Mary as a dominant and determining Western cultural fiction, which perpetuates an “ideal totality that no individual woman could possibly embody” (1996c, 171). Kristeva dismantles reified images of the maternal through her critical deconstruction of the myth of the Virgin Mary in her essay “Stabat Mater” (1996c), running her own lived experience of the maternal alongside her critical discussion to create a palimpsestic critique of maternal representations. My reading of Atkinson’s fiction in this dissertation views the construction of a maternal ideal as written into the western fairy tale tradition (and informed by the broad cultural construction of the “Virgin Mother”) as an influential temporal layer for female subjectivities past and present. The novels both acknowledge and deconstruct the role played by such mythological representations by depicting women’s lives as embodied and historical.

Cyclical Time

The second temporality Kristeva associates with female subjectivity is cyclical time.
She links cyclical time to women because of their connection to “reproduction, survival of the species, life and death, the body, sex and symbol”, linking this form of time with women’s traditional biological and domestic roles (1996e, 189; emphasis in original). Conversely, cyclical time is disconnected from the “production of material goods,” which Kristeva associates with linear time (1996e, 189; emphasis in original). Inherent in the subjective experience of time is the circularity or repetition associated with reproduction, such as domestic chores and the care of others. Such repetition can be understood to exclude women from the historical, linear time that shapes public life, leaving women “trapped in the deadly grip of cyclical time” (Felski 2002, 25).

I read cyclical time in Atkinson’s novels as the material manifestation of the narratives constructed in monumental time, such as the ideal mother, in the daily lives of the female characters. In other words, the daily reality of domestic time, reflected in the routines of mothering and housework (repeated across generations), continues to reflect the myths of idealised female identities that serve to limit women’s active involvement in the projects of linear time of history. The novels dismantle such representations through their depictions of women’s material lives, as well as restoring the physical and emotional participation of the female characters in activities that produce the historical record.

**Linear Time**

Julia Kristeva’s third modality of women’s time is linear or historical time—a temporality that she describes as “inherent in the logical and ontological values of any given civilisation”, and which is, therefore, the time that is inherent to “language” itself (1996e, 192). Linear, historical time is an essential aspect of
women’s time, because, as Kristeva maintains, women must enter the symbolic realm of linear time “to have a voice in the chapter of politics and history” (1996a, 156). The problem, however, is that although linear time is an essential aspect of women’s sense of themselves, it is, she argues, “readily labelled masculine” on the basis of its dominance in culture and society (Kristeva 1996e, 193).

In *The System and the Speaking Subject* (1996d), Kristeva foregrounds the way in which her theories of subjectivity and time might create a new type of historical thinking:

> Semiotics can lead to a historical typology of signifying practices by the mere fact of recognizing the specific status within them of the speaking subject. In this way we arrive at the possibility of a new perspective on history, perhaps a new principle for dividing up historical time, since signifying temporality is not coextensive with that of the modes of production” (1996d 32; emphasis in original).

This leads to an important question Kristeva raises in “Women’s Time”: “What can be [women’s] place in the symbolic contract?” (1996e, 199; emphasis in original). Or rather, what might a different historical typology, one that is not based on a masculine, “transcendental ego” but a structure based on “the relativity of his/her symbolic and as well as biological existence” (1996e, 210; emphasis in original), look like? This statement leads into Kristeva’s assertion at the end of “Women’s Time” that multiple modalities of time and political activism must co-exist for women’s (and men’s) lives to be recognised and represented as historical and embodied. I read such a typology in Atkinson’s novels through a palimpsestic construction of time to realise Kristeva’s third-wave of feminism.

In Chapter Three and Four I explore Atkinson’s refiguring of linear time in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life After Life* through her setting of women’s lives in historical context as well as her manipulation of historical chronology to
produce a palimpsestic reading of time and subjectivity in the novels. By the end of each novel, Atkinson’s protagonists are no longer trapped within the temporal narratives ascribed when monumental, cyclical and linear time are perceived independently but, rather, dramatise their engagement with a palimpsestic sense of time to be understood as subjects in-process.

The Ethics of ‘Women’s Time’

For Kristeva, the speaking subject as a subject in-process is inherently ethical because it rallies against the fixed and abstract prescriptions of symbolic law and language. In “The Ethics of Linguistics” she argues that the discursive practice of ethics exemplified by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, work as a “coercive, customary manner of ensuring the cohesiveness of a particular group through the repetition of the code—a more or less accepted apologue” (1980, 24). This cohesiveness, Kristeva suggests in “Women’s Time”, values the narrative of national identity over that of the individual (1996e, 188–89). As such, her reading of the structure of national identity and time problematises women’s ethical agency, because “in order to have an ethics of life, women must be involved” (Oliver, 1993b, 18). Women’s ability to act ethically is limited, therefore, by different notions of time—through the stultifying of women’s political identity in monumental and cyclical time, as well as through limiting their capacity for political intervention in linear time.

Contemporary discourse, for Kristeva, therefore must formulate different, less rigid interpretations of women’s ethical lives:

Now, however, the issue of ethics crops up wherever a code (mores, social contract) must be shattered in order to give way to the free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure, and jouissance, before being put together again, although temporarily and with full knowledge of what is involved (Kristeva 1980, 23).
Kristeva examines women’s ethical lives as mobilised through poetic language, representations of maternity and psychoanalysis, and thus through the subject in-process, because, for her, it is not enough to presuppose a fixed subject which subscribes to “juridical models of ethics … through the force of law” (Oliver 1993a, 17). Rather, Kristeva’s ethical practice integrates notions of love (emotional and experiential knowledge) with the ‘Law’ of symbolic language. Similarly, Kristeva’s “Women’s Time” views the temporal constructions of women’s subjectivities as an ethical question. Reconfiguring the way women’s identities are constructed in relation to time, by representing their political and personal lives through the integration of poetic and symbolic language, Kristeva conceives of dismantling the “ethics defined by classical philosophy” (1996e, 211), which would see women restricted from exercising their political and ethical agency.

Kristeva and Atkinson

Kate Atkinson’s novels, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) and *Life After Life* (2013), explore family histories and women’s lives as mothers, daughters, and political agents, interlaced amidst the historical turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century. Atkinson weaves together intimate moments of family life, mothering and the search for identity amongst the grand threads of history to render the experiences of women’s lives not only as visible, but as of equal value to those lives recognised by the historical record. In doing so, Atkinson writes female protagonists who are temporal and embodied, continuously redefine themselves and form identities embedded in both the personal and the political.

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life After Life* were published eighteen years apart, however, themes of history, family, women and time persist across
Atkinson’s body of work. The two novels speak to each other across this temporal divide and represent women’s identities and lost histories. Towards the end of *Life After Life*, after having lived many lives over, Ursula Todd proclaims: “Time isn’t circular [...] It’s like a … palimpsest” (456); and Ruby Lennox in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* depicts York in palimpsestic terms, a place that is “so crowded with history that sometimes it feels as if there’s no room for the living” (451).

This dissertation reads Atkinson’s fiction as the realisation of Kristeva’s third phase of feminism by viewing the temporal modalities interwoven in the texture of the novels as palimpsestic, and therefore the female protagonists as examples of subjects in-process. “Women’s Time” was published in English in 1981, at the peak of Kristeva’s political engagement with theory, and it triggered debate about feminism and time. Yet, despite feminist theorists acknowledging its impact at the time of publication (Payne 2003, 148), and the abundantly available summaries of Kristeva’s description of the two phases of feminism, it is my view that “Women’s Time” is under-explored in the broader discussions of Kristeva’s work, as well as on discussions of time and narrative. Perhaps this is because “Women’s Time” sits problematically alongside the larger body of Kristeva’s writings, between two phases of her critical focus: language and psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, “Women’s Time” extends Kristeva’s ideas about subjectivity to what Carol Watts calls a “praxis of women’s time” (1999, 233), and it is in this way that I harness its key concepts to develop the temporal palimpsest as a critical tool for reading and writing fiction.

“Women’s Time” provides a potentially challenging and enriching approach to reading, interpreting and refiguring fictional texts, particularly in relation to modes of representation of women’s subjectivity. The value of Kristeva’s construction of time and subjectivity becomes apparent through what Maria Margaroni describes as a
“hermeneutics of complication” (2007, 804). Margaroni explains the relationship between Kristeva’s theoretical practices and her political potential for contemporary feminism in terms that are distinctly palimpsestic:

…the act of weaving [idioms of psychoanalysis, sociology and politics] produces creases, layers, and folds that restore difference within the process of transference and give depth to what otherwise might have been mistaken for the smooth, shiny surface of an analogy or mirror” (2007, 804).

Margaroni here alludes to the refiguring of existing discourse through Kristeva’s understanding of subjectivity, and particularly her focus on the personal, even if, as Birgit Schippers points out, “Kristeva herself does not develop this further in her writings” (2011, 89). My reading of Atkinson’s texts as temporal palimpsests involves a reading of each layer of time and narrative to look below and between the ‘smooth, shiny surface’ of traditional representations of women, women’s lives and relationships.

Atkinson’s novels view women’s lives within recognisable and familiar historical contexts. Her characters live through the substantial social and political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century and their lives are represented as an intricate interaction of personal and political forces. Drawing on Kristeva’s work on subjectivity and time enables a reading of the ways in which Atkinson’s female characters are shaped by multiple cultural narratives, by means of different temporalities. The complexity of Atkinson’s texts, through her blending of myth, domestic and historical narrative, produce characters that defy fixed identities constrained by binaristic or singularly reductive notions of time.

**Critical Reception of Atkinson’s Fiction**

Atkinson’s fiction has received limited critical attention, despite (or perhaps because)
of its commercial success, with the most interest centring on her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. There is a consensus amongst critics of Atkinson’s work that her fiction prioritises women’s histories, maternal plots and the relationship between identity and fairy tale in her texts. Despite this consensus, however, Atkinson’s treatment of these themes has been read in many different ways. For example, Sinead McDermott’s “Family Romance: Missing Mothers and Hidden Histories in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*” (2006) reads Atkinson from the psychoanalytical perspective of Freud’s family romance; Ayako Mizuo (2012) considers the historical reconstruction of Atkinson’s text to be working towards the renewal of the mother–daughter relationship in line with feminist concerns of restoring maternal representations from a silenced position in narrative (2012, 85); while in “Redressing the Queen’s Two Bodies in Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*” (2009) Tracey Hargreaves frames women’s domestic narratives against allegories of nationhood. These conflicting, though not contradictory, discussions about Atkinson’s fiction point to what Sandra Meyer suggests is the “remarkable” diversity of “stylistic devices and narrative techniques she [Atkinson] uses” (2010, 443.)

Glenda Norquay argues that the significance of Atkinson’s work lies both in her ability to produce “deeply unsettling experiences” for her readers, which is marked in her later novels by her “experiments with chronology” (2017, 120), but also in her ability to produce narratives that are character- and plot-driven and easily

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17 Other authors who have written about Atkinson’s work: Barbora Jirošová’s (2014) dissertation provides an analysis of the intertextuality of Atkinson’s novels, arguing that the intertextual allusions across Atkinson’s texts both enhance and inform questions of female identity. Emma Parker (2002) provides a book-length reading of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* outlining the many narrative techniques utilised in the novel, she discusses notions of nation, identity, the mother–daughter plot, intertextuality; Kevin Smith (2007), whose reading of *Human Croquet* explores narrative techniques of magic realism through Atkinson’s rendering of fairy tale elements. *Human Croquet* (1997) has also been read by Samanta Trivellini (2016) in terms of how myth informs the representations of violence against women in the novel.
accessible (119). In her discussion of *Life After Life* and its companion novel *A God in Ruins* (2015), Norquay also links Atkinson’s treatment of time to Kristeva’s “Women’s Time”, identifying a correlation between Kristeva’s three phases of feminism and Atkinson’s treatment of women’s histories in her fictions (125). Atkinson’s texts, she suggests, expands Kristeva’s vision of time and feminism through their structural and temporal experiments not only to “present[] a challenge to gendered versions of history” but to begin “to interrogate progressional versions of temporality” (125). Atkinson’s success in reimagining both women’s histories and conventional linear temporal structures lies in the very accessibility that has limited critical attention to her work to date. In writing fiction that allows her readers to “feel through character and plot”, Atkinson encourages her audience to “develop new modes of organising [their] understanding” (125). Norquay considers the success of this strategy is achieved through Atkinson’s “engagement with the[] intimate spheres” of women’s lives within an historical context (126), and it is this tension that this thesis explores in detail through its reading of time as palimpsestic.

This dissertation’s analysis of Atkinson’s work is informed by two critics in particular who also explore the way in which Atkinson intertwines women’s personal and political lives: Dominguez Garcia, whose reading of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* discusses the novel’s tension between the “personal and political domains” (2001, 143); and Fiona Tolan (2009), who incorporates second-wave feminist theories of rewriting fairy tale and myth with postmodern techniques of historiographic metafiction in her reading of Atkinson. Each of these authors reads Atkinson’s historical revision in terms of the construction of women’s lost narratives. For Garcia, Atkinson’s text throws into relief the “personal in the political” by reading the imaginative reconstruction of the past in *Behind the Scenes at the*
Museum as a means of “creating a history of womankind” (2001, 142). Garcia’s discussion of Atkinson’s text focuses predominantly on the novel’s historical reconstruction of the past. Despite her assertion that Atkinson’s text prioritises the personal as a political concern, however, Garcia leaves largely unanswered just how Atkinson envisages a melding of the personal and political, leaving us with the ongoing dilemma of “the difficulties that women have to come to terms with within a movement that obliges them to transform their personal lives into a political issue or their political ideas into their personal lives” (2001, 155). My analyses of Atkinson’s novels, particularly the reading of Atkinson’s later novel, Life After Life, seek to bridge this gap between representations of myth and history to explore notions of the personal in the political.

For Tolan, Atkinson’s novel also addresses representations of women’s histories by blurring the boundaries between the fantastic of fairy tale, and the ‘fact’ of historical discourse, to disrupt the authenticity of traditional historical accounts that would render women’s lives invisible. Tolan’s account of Behind the Scenes at the Museum looks more specifically at the use of fairy tale as a limiting narrative for women, highlighting its connection in the novel to cultural constructions of female identity. Tolan reads the novel as a postmodern work of historiographic metafiction in which Atkinson usurps the authority of traditional historical discourses through the blending and imaginative reconstruction of myth, fantasy and fiction within the novel’s larger historical framework. Tolan suggests that Ruby constructs a “palimpsest” and “stratified vision of history” with the past and present as co-existing in the same historical moment (2009, 287). Like Garcia’s critique of the personal as political, Tolan’s thoughtful reading of Atkinson’s novel focuses on specific narrative techniques used in Atkinson’s fiction to interrogate narratives of
myth and history, alluding to the role that representing women’s daily, domestic lives might take in restoring their historical agency, and arguing that “Ruby works toward an inclusive historical narrative, incorporating even the most seemingly unimportant and private elements of the past alongside the officially sanctioned public record” (2010, 278). Tolan reads Atkinson’s representations of women’s domestic lives in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* specifically in relation to her discussion of the novel as a work of historiographic metafiction and a second-wave appropriation of the fairy-tale form.

This thesis draws on the fruitful discussions already generated about Atkinson’s fiction, building on the work already undertaken in reading myth and history. My reading of Atkinson’s work steps back from detailed discussions of specific narrative techniques, to explore instead the entwined and layered depictions of women’s lives in relation to modes of time. I am specifically interested in how the constructions of narrative of myth and history in the novel also interact and inform the narratives of the maternal and the domestic in representations of the everyday. It is my contention that reading different modes of time through a temporal palimpsest and incorporating representations of women’s everyday, domestic lives with further explorations of the depictions of history and myth in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life After Life* will provide a new understanding of representing women, identity and time as personal and political.

In the following chapters I read *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life After Life* in terms of Kristeva’s three temporal modes, in order to seek out the moments in which Atkinson’s female characters are silenced through traditional narratives of mythical, cyclical and historical time, and where, through a palimpsestic reading that opposes binaristic, reductive interpretations, they are restored to become complex...
individual characters, as subjects in-process.
Kate Atkinson’s first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996), winner of the 1995 Whitbread Award, is an intergenerational narrative set in post-World War II York, England. Informed by feminist appropriations of the fairy-tale narrative, and postmodern theories of historiography (Tolan 2009, 275), Atkinson’s novel constructs complex representations of women’s personal and public lives to render visible their experiences and desires as fully formed individuals and historical entities. Yet Atkinson’s novel does more than repeat the work of other authors in deconstructing the function of myth and fairy tale in restricting and directing women’s lives, or in correcting the absence of women’s experiences from the historical record.¹ Rather, Atkinson taps into these traditions of feminist discourse, building on them to produce a form of writing that looks forward, actively generates and continues to regenerate modes of representation and understandings of women’s diverse identities. As Elisabeth Grosz suggests,

> Discourses are not just the repositories of truth, of concepts and knowledges; they are also, and most significantly, modes of action, practices we perform to facilitate or enable other practices, ways of attempting to deal with and transform the real (2005, 158).

Thus, I read *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* as a novel less about history than

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¹ For example, Angela Carter’s revision of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1993), and the extensive feminist scholarship on fairy tale as a form of female acculturation: see Cristina Bachillega (1997); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000); N. J. Girardot (1977); Marcia Lieberman (1987); Marina Warner (1994). Other postmodernist readings have extensively questioned the validity of the historical record as either true or representative of the past: see Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1992); Elizabeth Grosz (1989, 2005); Ursula K. Heise (1997); Linda Hutcheon (1988).
about the connections between time, narrative and gendered identity; as a novel that engages in the active practice of ‘women’s time’. In other words, I aim to show how reading time as palimpsest in the novel allows us to better understand the past as it might have been, to read the contradictions of the present, and to imagine a future as it could be.

**Overview of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum***

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is divided broadly into two complementary and alternating sections mediated by the novel’s narrator and principal character, Ruby Lennox. The first-person, linear narrative of Ruby’s life follows her conception in 1951 through to the death of her mother Bunty in 1992. These titled and dated chapters are supplemented by the episodic “footnotes” that comprise the second section and, narrated in third person from Ruby’s perspective, chronicle the domestic lives of Ruby’s female ancestors dating back to 1880, including her mother Bunty, grandmother Nell, great-grandmother Alice, step-great-grandmother Rachel, substitute mother Auntie Doreen and great-aunt Lillian. In the critical attention Atkinson’s first novel has received, much of the focus has been on the relationship between these two sections, in the sense that the linear narrative deconstructs mythological representations of female identity through the tightly woven fairy tale intertext of “Snow White” (2003), while the second supplements the deconstruction of mythological identities by imaginatively reconstructing women’s domestic lives perceived to have been lost to the historical record. My reading of the novel’s temporal layers as palimpsest builds on, and extends these readings from a mode of writing that addresses the past as “lay[ing] claim to a heritage of female narrative representation” (Tolan 2009, 286), to an active practice of writing women’s identities as intricately constructed in time, and always “in-process” (Kristeva 1996b, 91).
In navigating the past to reclaim individual agency over her own identity, I consider that the character of Ruby must recognise the way in which the women in her family have been historically silenced by mythological identities perpetuated in monumental time and fairy-tale narratives, restore the physical reality of women’s embodied and domestic experiences of mothering and care-work read through the cyclical layer of time and, finally, in the linear time of the novel, reinstate women’s public and historical presence in relation to all three temporalities. Atkinson’s novel restores women’s ethical positions through its recognition of the value, significance and fulfilment involved in the relational significance of their domestic and maternal work. In other words, it is not enough for Ruby simply to express the experience of women in each different temporality. As I see it, Ruby’s task is to pull women out from “behind the scenes at the museum” by creating a family history that imaginatively intertwines the lived and embodied experiences of women into the traditionally recognised historical record. In doing so Ruby is empowered to create an identity that is not limited by prescribed narratives of myth, domesticity and history but instead remains in-process.

My reading of the temporal palimpsest of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is guided by Julia Kristeva’s three modes of time—monumental, cyclical and linear—and complements the concept of the subject in-process. It is my contention that reading time as palimpsest productively conceives of how women’s histories can be (re)presented and imagines a future way of writing women’s lives that depicts them as relational, individual and embodied. In other words, through a palimpsestic reading of time, Atkinson’s fiction can be understood as a way to imagine how women’s stories might be told, rather than what women’s stories should say.

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2 Marilyn Edlestein links Kristeva’s ethics in “Women’s Time” to a feminist ethics of care, arguing that while few authors have acknowledged Kristeva in discussions of ethics of care, the connection warrants further investigation (Edlestein 1993, 213).
Overview of the Temporal Palimpsest

Before discussing the three layers of time in detail, I will first provide an overview of the structure of the temporal palimpsest in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and the relationship developed between the three layers of time. The narrative structure of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is an elaborate and interwoven series of textual layers, which, through Ruby’s narration, undergo continuous revision. This is because, as a palimpsestic reading of time reveals, three versions of Ruby work simultaneously within the novel to (re)present and ultimately reimagine women’s lives as multifaceted and irreducible to any singular discourse. As Ruby tries to understand her identity and her place in the world, she seeks guidance from the histories of her female relatives. Yet, historical material about women’s lives is scarce, with little or no readily accessible material about women’s experiences, motivations or aspirations available to Ruby. Rather, she is forced to scavenge from amongst the remnants of historical artefacts in the family to piece together the scattered narratives of past lives. Alongside this attempt to reconstruct the past, Ruby weaves her own observations of her mother Bunty’s seemingly ambiguous participation in family life in an effort to understand her own place in the world. Thus, Ruby’s struggle to construct a narrative for herself begins with a reconstruction of the past using the materials at hand. This reconstruction becomes necessarily more complex as Ruby’s perspective matures—from child to adult—and as she comes to understand that history is not fixed, objectively known or, necessarily even true.

The first level of narration is seen through Ruby’s naïve imposition of the fairy-tale structure as a template through which she describes the women in her family. Ruby seems initially to rely on such representations to make sense of other characters with whose histories she is unfamiliar, for example, her great-grandmother Alice. Thus the narrative, following Ruby’s chronological life and seen through
Ruby’s child perspective, tends to reduce the stories of the women in her family to generic, two-dimensional stereotypes, such as those idealised identities of the submissive fairy-tale heroine, the ‘good’ mother and the ‘wicked’ step-mother depicted in fairy tales such as “Snow White”. Yet, early in the novel, even from her child’s perspective, Ruby is suspicious of the stereotyped idealised mother, explaining the identity in such impossible terms as “a huge, galactic figure, treading the Milky Way in search of her lost infant” (57), and in particular she is wary of the idealised maternal figure through which she is introduced to her great-grandmother Alice, whose name Bunty could not immediately remember, yet she knew her to be “the real mother, the true bride” (37).

Coextensive with Ruby’s naïve assessment of identifying the women in the novel with fairy-tale identities is her ironic and revisionary perspective that overlays her initial, child’s outlook. This mature Ruby further deconstructs mythological identities by voicing the domestic reality of women’s lives through her mother’s “housework timetable” (152), and drawing connections between the generations of women in the family as subject to the same daily and domestic limitations. Thus, the depiction of domestic life, in the cyclical layer of time in the novel, begins to complicate the way in which women’s daily lives and desires, and their attitudes to motherhood are understood and represented. In these moments in the novel Atkinson restores women’s ethical position within the home by neither valorising nor denigrating their domestic and maternal roles but by showing them as both personally and emotionally invested in their family roles, while at the same time engaged with the concerns of the political and public sphere.

Ruby’s naïve early characterisation of Bunty (echoed in her depiction of her step-great-grandmother Rachel) as a ‘wicked’ fairy-tale identity—made evident in Ruby’s belief that she has been given “the wrong mother” (57), and confirmed
through her ongoing perception of Bunty’s “blatant lack of mothering” (297)—is set against a more empathetic, and nuanced depiction of the struggles of motherhood and domestic life for women in the mid-twentieth century. This layer of narration, read through the cyclical temporal layer of the palimpsest gives voice to women’s bodily and emotional experiences, and necessarily complicates the simplistic and typically binaristic depictions of fairy-tale identities propagated and renewed through the monumental layer of time. Yet, despite firstly recognising the way in which fairy-tale identities create generic and simplistic representations of women, and voicing the experiences that mythological identities work to silence—for example, Ruby describes the physical moment of her own birth in non-mythological or euphemistic terms: “My tender skin … is being chafed raw by this sausage-making process … Any clouds of glory I might have been trailing have been smothered in this fetid bloodstained place” (52)—Ruby still repeats the lives of the generations of women that come before her in perpetuating the fairy-tale narrative of marriage and domestic life as a necessity rather than a choice. It is not until Ruby is married and herself a mother that she comes to realise that recognising fairy-tale identities and voicing women’s experiences of the domestic and mothering alone is not enough to prevent her from repeating the fate of the generations of women before her.

This more mature viewpoint foreshadows and precipitates the act of re-writing the past. The voice of the mature Ruby often interrupts and qualifies her own naïve and immature observations, disrupting the novel’s linear timeline. For example, throughout the novel Ruby alludes to a future knowledge: “—our Gillian, the promise of the future. (Not much of a future as it turned out, as she gets run over by a pale blue Hillman Husky in 1959 but how are any of us to know this?)” (26). This Ruby also connects the linear narrative to the episodic and historical footnotes, signalling the connections between the present of Ruby’s story and her construction
of a family history—“(see Footnote (iii))” (107). Thus in the footnotes, read in the linear temporal layer of the palimpsest, Ruby’s authoritative, third-person voice, lends credibility to her discussions of the past. It is in these sections that Ruby connects the mythological and domestic depictions of the women in her family within an historical perspective to ultimately liberate women’s stories from ‘behind the scenes’.

Central to this process for Ruby is her eventual recognition of herself as an often submissive agent in her own story. Despite actively working to deconstruct mythological representations of her maternal ancestors, Ruby unwittingly repeats in her own life the prescriptive narratives she recognises in her ancestors’ lives. For Ruby this realisation only begins after she discovers the death of her twin, Pearl. The discovery of Pearl’s life and death completely changes Ruby’s understanding of the past and because of this, history, for Ruby, ceases to be dependable or definitive. What Ruby believes she knows, what she has been told and what she has witnessed are no longer reliable sources through which she can construct her worldview. For example, in light of Pearl’s death, Bunty’s ‘bad’ mothering is reinterpreted as grief: “Sometimes you could hear Bunty crying in the night, ‘My Gillian, my pearl,’ which I thought was very odd, because I’d never heard her call her that when she was alive. And anyway, surely it’s me that’s the jewel in the family?” (245). The discovery of Pearl leads to Ruby’s realisation that the documented past is no more reliable than the fictionalised past she has been constructing for her family.

And so, at the end of the novel Ruby attempts to re-write the past, reflecting a sense of her ethical obligation to restore the histories of her maternal ancestors, beyond the two-dimensional renderings of prescribed female narratives, as historically relevant and embodied individuals. The footnotes are Ruby’s first attempt at restoring history by depicting the difficulties of her ancestors’ social
positions as women in the early- and mid-twentieth century, and the choices they are forced to make in terms of work, marriage and children. Even these portrayals, however, ultimately fall short for Ruby in capturing the complexity of the emotional and relational history of women’s lives. At the end of the novel Ruby determines to write her family history all over again, augmenting and overlaying traditional modes of representation with a “cycle of poems based on the family tree”, in which “there will be room for everyone” (490)—not just those who are sanctioned as historically significant. This is not to suggest, however, that Ruby’s new version of the past replaces the existing one but, rather, that it serves to complicate and enrich it. Ruby’s revised understanding of the past recognises the need to work from within existing discourses, because as she states at the end of the novel “the past’s what you take with you” (488), and as such her new vision for representing her family does not replace, but enriches, that which came before.

By the end of the novel we are left with a palimpsestic notion of time and a recognition of the fallibility and partiality, but not denial, of linear history. Ruby’s narrative builds, layer by layer, upon the existing discourses of women’s lives in the recognition that all forms of representation influence and shape women’s understandings of themselves and their world. Thus, Behind the Scenes at the Museum eschews limiting depictions of women in favour of an elaborate layering of narrative and time. Working as it does from within symbolic language and the existing discourses of fairy-tale narrative and the sanctioned historical record, the novel echoes Kristeva’s sentiment that the complexity of women’s lives might best be represented by an irruption of the semiotic, through poetic language, into symbolic language. Thus the practice of women’s time in Behind the Scenes at the Museum both represents and reconfigures the past as more than a two-dimensional and arbitrary representation of fact. Instead, as Sarah Dillon describes, a palimpsestic
reading “traces the inscriptions, erasures and reinscriptions … that compete and struggle with each other” (2013, 8), within the different temporal layers of the novel. Atkinson’s work, when read through a temporal palimpsest demonstrates the richness and possibilities of realist texts to poetically refigure traditional representations, and through its multifaceted exploration of past and present, fact and fiction, renders ambiguous and supple the possibilities of the novel’s textual layers. In exploring and imagining the multitude of experiences, emotions and desires that drive women’s lives it allows Ruby to be an active agent in telling and reinterpreting her own story.

Monumental Time: Dismantling Good Mothers

In reimagining how women might be represented in fiction, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* works from within the traditions of narrative, identity and representation it has inherited. And so the novel starts by deconstructing the stories of women that have already been told, beginning with Ruby’s appropriation of the fairy tale form. Due to the lack of historical material with which to build her family history, Ruby’s reconstruction of the past is initially organised through a child-like perspective that aligns her own story with the fairy tale “Snow White”.4 Ruby uses the structure and

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3 “Snow White” is the well-known tale of a young princess persecuted for her beauty by her stepmother. I refer to the Grimm Brothers’ 1857 version of “Snow White” partly because of its widespread popularity and familiarity, and partly because the late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century setting of *Behind the Scenes* is when this version was most prevalent. The tale begins with Snow White’s mother sewing and looking out of an ebony-framed window. She pricks her finger and three drops of blood fall on her white handkerchief. Struck by the contrast of colour, the queen wishes for a daughter “as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame!” (Grimm 2003, 181). The queen dies shortly after Snow White’s birth and the king remarries. The new queen is obsessed with her own beauty, and owns a magic mirror that tells her she is the fairest woman in the land. Eventually Snow White surpasses the new queen in beauty and becomes her rival. The new queen orders a huntsman to kill Snow White but the huntsman is in love with Snow White’s beauty so he sets her free. As in the popularised, filmic Disney version, Snow White then wanders the woods and finds the cottage belonging to the seven dwarfs who let her stay if she becomes their housekeeper. When the mirror informs the queen that Snow White is still alive, she disguises herself and tries to kill Snow White three times. On the queen’s third attempt, Snow White eats a poisoned apple, which puts her in a catatonic state. The dwarves can’t revive her and, assuming her to be dead, prepare her body by putting her on display in a glass coffin on top of a mountain. When a passing prince sees the slumbering Snow White, he falls in love with her. As his servants carry her down the mountain the apple is dislodged from her throat and she revives. The wicked queen is forced to wear hot iron slippers and dance to her death at Snow White’s wedding.
tropes of the fairy tale as a template to frame the histories of her maternal ancestors through the values put forward in fairy-tale narratives. For example, Ruby opens the footnote pertaining to her grandmother Nell by remarking “[t]his is the story of my grandmother’s continually thwarted attempts to get married” (59). This serves as a framing device to reflect Ruby’s use of the fairy tale as an organising structure because, in fairy-tale narratives, marriage is the “fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale” and is the only viable endpoint to the heroine’s story (Lieberman 1987, 386).

Another key function of Ruby’s use of fairy tale in Behind the Scenes at the Museum is her need to account for her conflicted relationship with her mother. Bunty’s apparently ambivalent feelings towards her children and her domestic life lead Ruby, as a child, to conclude:

I’ve been given the wrong mother … I trust it will be sorted out and I will be reunited with my real mother—the one who dropped ruby-red blood onto a snow-white handkerchief and wished for a little girl with hair the colour of a shiny jet-black raven’s wing. Meanwhile I make do with Bunty (57–58).

Thus, for want of a better version of her maternal past, Ruby attempts to fit herself and the other women in her family into predetermined fairy-tale stereotypes, with herself as the “innocent persecuted heroine” (Jones 1993, 13), and the other women constructed as binary maternal identities of the ‘good’ mother and the ‘wicked’ step-

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4 “Snow White” in particular is understood by many theorists as a mother–daughter narrative through which children attempt to understand the “difficulties inherent in the closest of female bonds” (Barzilai 1990, 523).

5 Steven Swann Jones’ paper, “The Innocent Persecuted Heroine Genre” (1993), recognises the repetitive use of specific motifs within various fairy tales featuring young, female protagonists. Jones, building on the work of other folklore theorists such as Isaakovich Nikforov and Vladimir Propp, looks at the structural components of fairy tales which have, he claims, at their core, an “innocent persecuted heroine” (1993, 13). He suggests that such tales are centred on the perspective of the child, and are a means of making sense of the “maturation process” by exploring the “tasks, difficulties, and goals that she faces and must succeed in mastering” (Jones 1993, 4). Tales of innocent persecuted heroines are commonly but not exclusively divided into three “Acts”. In the first Act, argues Jones, the heroine is “persecuted or threatened in her family home” (1993, 17). In Act Two she is “attacked, interfered with, or otherwise abused in her attempt to be married”, and in the third she is “displaced, slandered, or calumniated after she has given birth to children” (Jones 1993, 17).
mother. Idealised maternal identities—be it the myth of the Virgin Mary, as recounted by Kristeva (1996c, 171), the “good” queen of fairy tale (Barzilai 1990, 526), or Gilbert and Gubar’s “angel” woman (2000, 16)—are well understood to silence and limit representations of women’s embodied and lived historical experiences. The novel’s treatment of such idealised representations focuses specifically on two characters, Alice and Doreen.

Ruby’s great-grandmother Alice’s relegation to a mythological figure is represented by a framed photograph that Bunty finds in the bottom of a cardboard box. All that remains of Alice’s story is the familial memory that she died giving birth to Ruby’s grandmother Nell. In fairy-tale discourse, this places Alice in the role of the “good” queen because, as in “Snow White”, Alice is understood to have necessarily sacrificed her life (and her story) for her daughter’s (Girardot 1977, 286). Ruby’s understanding of Alice’s apparent sacrifice is captured in her description of her great-grandmother’s photograph in which Alice, “[t]he woman in her padded frame—the real mother, the true bride—gazes out inscrutably across time” (37). Ruby’s description imagines an ageless, self-sacrificing mother who ceases to be an embodied and flawed individual, becoming instead a symbol that signals the loss of the physical and living Alice to a mythologised maternal identity. This description of Alice reproduces a generic fairy-tale symbol of a woman with no story—reflected in her “inscrutable” gaze as a woman who becomes a representation rather than an individual (37). The timeless portrayal of Alice, an icon behind the glass of her framed picture, is contrasted with Ruby’s depiction of her own mother, who Ruby

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6 In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that female authors must overcome “those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her [woman’s] human face both to lessen their dread of her ‘inconstancy’ and—by identifying her with the ‘eternal types’ they have themselves invented—to possess her more thoroughly” (2000, 16). Here they refer to the hyper-representations of the female and the maternal, the “angel” and the “monster”, which pervade cultural texts and myths and form the subconscious measuring stick by which women and mothers are judged.

considers, by virtue of her physical and emotional presence, as an imposter. This
dynamic between dead, ‘good’ maternal figures and living, ‘wicked’ identities is
later reinforced in Ruby’s retelling of Rachel’s (Alice’s replacement) past as the
“evil step-mother” (50).

Framing and mirrors are significant fairy-tale symbols, and according to
fairy-tale scholars represent the constraining “patriarchal voice” (Gilbert and Gubar
2000, 38). Constrained and reified within the frame of the photograph, Alice is
limited to the image of a ‘good’ mother in much the same way that the mirror in
“Snow White” represents and controls the wicked queen (Bachhilega 1997, 34). The
explicit reference to the frame therefore situates Alice as an idealised, fictionalised
figure rather than an historical or embodied one.

Even as a child, however, Ruby recognises the loss of Alice’s lived story as a
form of historical erasure. This erasure is alluded to when Bunty “had to think for a
second” to remember Alice’s name, and only had a “vague, handed-down memory”
of Alice’s story (38). In the first of the historical footnotes, Ruby determines to give
voice to the lost history of her great-grandmother: “I want to rescue this lost woman
from what’s going to happen to her (time). Dive into the picture, pluck her out” (39).
This determination asserts Ruby’s early understanding that women’s histories are
more often than not lost and replaced by idealised notions of women, particularly of
maternal figures. Ruby’s re-voicing of Alice’s last days in distinctly physical terms,
“she can feel the sweat trickling down her skin beneath the blouse” (44) and
psychological terms—“a bloodcurdling yell that would bring the dead inquisitively
out of their graves let alone a mother back from an out-of-body experience … Poor,

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8 The mother’s perspective of self-sacrifice implies a “maternal function”, not a subject but rather an
“object, always distanced, always idealized or denigrated, always mystified” (Hirsch 1989, 167). In
the “Snow White” references in Behind the Scenes the good queen is the idealised mother whose death
is represented as a necessary maternal sacrifice (Girardot 1977, 286).
9 Gilbert and Gubar present a similar argument in relation to the wicked queen’s mirror, suggesting
that her anxiety about Snow White’s beauty is driven by the dominating social voice of the mirror
(2000, 38).
hypomanic Alice finds herself being sucked back into her life, through the bluebird-blue sky” (48)—(re)constructs a past for Alice outside of the mythological narrative of the ‘good’ mother. For example, Ruby describes Alice’s decision to marry in terms of her limited choices: “My foolish great-grandmother was charmed, although by what we can never be sure—his easy banter perhaps, or his solid-looking farm or his peach trees” (43). This depiction maintains the veneer of a fairy-tale narrative but also adds the undercurrent of Alice’s material and financial reality as a woman of the late nineteenth century who relied upon marriage for her financial security.

Through this reimagined past, Ruby creates connections across the generations of women in her family to begin the process of restoring the histories of her maternal ancestors as embodied individuals, and as such rescues her great-grandmother and the other women in the novel from having their stories considered historically insignificant. For example, when Bunty notes that Alice and Ruby look alike, Ruby wonders if “the lost Alice and I were fellow members of a conspiracy, intent on stirring up trouble” (39), and later in her footnotes imagines a scene that ties Alice and the generations of women that follow her to their shared experiences:

This woman is lost in time … This woman is about to slip out of her life. One of those curious genetic whispers across time dictates that in moments of stress we will all (Nell, Bunty, my sisters, me) brush our hands across our foreheads in exactly the same way that Alice has just done. (41)

Such a description begins to build the palimpsestic notion of time by accentuating the traces of the past in the present and the inheritance of a sense of identity across generations. This description of Alice places her in historical relation with the rest of her family and forms the beginning of a collective agency of women’s histories. As such, Ruby draws Alice back into the family narrative and alludes to the way that all the women in her family are at risk of becoming overwritten by history, on the one hand, but creates the promise of reclaiming that past, on the other. In doing so, Ruby
attempts to rescue, not just Alice, but the other women in her family from becoming obsolete, and begins to reformulate how she thinks of the past, women’s narratives, and her own identity in relation to them.

The other idealised maternal figure in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is Auntie Doreen, who appears briefly when Ruby is seven after her mother goes missing. Auntie Doreen steps in as a substitute to take Ruby and her sisters away on holiday, and to Ruby’s immature perspective she fulfils Ruby’s wish for an idealised maternal figure. Yet, like Alice, Ruby’s depiction of Doreen as a fairy-tale stereotype is short-lived, partly through Ruby’s simultaneous ironic understanding that Doreen is her father’s mistress and, as such, could never fulfil an idealised maternal role in her life, as well as through Ruby’s burgeoning awareness of the impossibility of the ‘good’ mother stereotype as a viable position for women.

Doreen is only able to enact the fantasy role of the ‘good’ mother in the lives of Ruby and her sisters because of the transitory nature of their relationship. Once Doreen is no longer in Ruby’s life she quickly becomes “as unreal as Mary Poppins herself”, with Ruby remembering her time with Doreen “as if it had happened to children in a story rather than us” (212). Ruby’s encounter with Doreen is shown to be outside the mundane reality of domestic life, with their surroundings “completely free of the usual domestic clutter” (201), and because her time with Ruby and her sisters is fleeting, Doreen is shown to be the opposite of their mother, “the contrast with Bunty is unavoidable” (203). Free from the ongoing responsibilities of motherhood and domestic life, Doreen is able to “listen[] to girlish aspirations with real interest” and she “actually *enjoys* playing games with us” (205; emphasis in original). However, Doreen’s role as mother is temporary and when Ruby and her sisters return home and normal daily life is restored, Doreen swiftly fades into a mythological memory:
Some months later Gillian had even come to believe that we had seen [Doreen] flying, skimming along the West Pier and circling the green and red lights of the harbour mouth. So sweet did this memory seem to our benighted sister, that we never had the heart to disenchant her (212).

Thus, even from Ruby’s initial, naive perspective, the figure of the ‘good’ mother is a physical impossibility for real, embodied women. Yet her recognition of the ‘good’ mother as a punishing, if not impossible, position for women fails at first to lead Ruby to a similar deconstruction of the idealised maternal counterpart—the ‘wicked’ mother. Rather, Ruby must look beyond mythological narratives in rendering her mother, and ultimately herself, to dismantle the “fantasy” of the image of motherhood put forward in myth (Kristeva 1996c, 161; emphasis in original), and replace it instead with representations of women as multifarious, situated and embodied individuals. Thus, Ruby’s second layer of narration, read through the cyclical layer of time in the temporal palimpsest, complicates the simplistic and generic identities of fairy tale. The more involved ideas of the ‘wicked’ persona through which Ruby initially understands her mother Bunty is deconstructed in the cyclical layer of time by a closer and more nuanced reading of Bunty’s (and mirrored in Rachel’s) domestic life.

Cyclical Time: Rescuing Wicked Mothers

It is through the characters in the novel who are assigned wicked personae that we begin to see the layering of both Ruby’s multiple perspectives as well as a more complex representation of the novel’s temporal narrative structure. This is because, in order for Ruby to dismantle the stereotyped persona of the ‘wicked’ (step)mother, she must render visible the conflicted nature of her mother’s experiences, as well as those of other women in the novel in relation to their domestic responsibilities of mothering and care work. By reading time as palimpsest we are able to trace the
points at which Ruby begins to question stereotyped and restrictive identities that see women as wicked, and to replace them with nuanced and empathetic renditions of women’s domestic experience and restore their ethical agency. Ruby’s narrative examines women’s experiences and feelings towards childbirth, mothering, domestic work and the tradition of caring for each other across generations in a way that neither diminishes nor privileges the investment women make in this work. This produces a collective emotional and experiential memory for the women in Ruby’s family, and begins to undo the limitations of representations offered in the mythologised layer of fairy tale.

Bunty’s condemnation as a wicked character by Ruby’s initial, naïve perspective is driven by her belief that Bunty neither loves nor wants her children. This assumption stems from Ruby’s comparison of her own conception and birth to that of Snow White’s in the popular fairy tale. Snow White’s mother wished for a daughter as “white as snow, as red as blood and as black as the wood of the window frame!” (Grimm 2003, 181) and thus Snow is conceived. Ruby’s conception, however, is depicted in far less romantic terms: “I’m begun on the first stroke of midnight and finished on the last when my father rolls off my mother” (13). In opposition to the good queen’s wish for a child, Bunty was “pretending to be asleep” (13), and the conception left “Bunty feeling irritable” (15). Ruby’s suspicion that her mother is unmotherly is later confirmed when

… a terrible idea forms in Bunty’s head—she’s pregnant! … She sits abruptly down on the toilet and mouths a silent Munch-like scream … She throws the nearest thing (a red shoe) at the mirror and it breaks into a million splintery pieces (35).

This scene produces a complex textual layering between fairy-tale intertext and the deconstruction of time and identity. In this moment Bunty is both “wicked” queen and “innocent persecuted heroine” (Jones 1993, 13), made evident by both the
presence of the mirror and the red shoe—each potent fairy-tale symbols. Because the trajectory of the novel is told from Ruby’s perspective as the heroine of the tale, this moment marks the transition of Bunty from the fairy-tale heroine of her own story, to the maligned and wicked queen of Ruby’s. Behind Bunty’s frustrations lie her lack of agency and consequent lack of control over her body and her future.

Central to Bunty’s wickedness, then, in Ruby’s early understanding of her mother (and ultimately her empathetic portrayal of her) is the collective difficulty for women in the novel of coping with the loss of identity associated with their maternal roles. This loss of identity becomes significant in my discussion of linear time to follow, because it is through both her empathetic depiction of women’s domestic lives, as well as her recovery of their individual identities in historical time that Ruby is able to produce a collective history for her family, and finally to deconstruct the mythological identities that have shaped and silenced each of its women. As such, the deconstruction of the limiting and stereotyped identities of fairy tale is alluded to by Bunty’s frustrated shattering of the mirror (and represented in the lost history of Alice beyond her image in a photograph) that would seek to control her image and her future. Yet understanding this is beyond the scope of Ruby’s immature perspective and is therefore narrated ironically and retrospectively, stemming from a future understanding that Ruby herself will enact the same narrative path.

Like her early reading of Alice and Doreen through fairy-tale identities, Ruby’s naïve construction of her family history initially reads her mother as a wicked character, affirmed by Bunty’s apparent dislike of children and her obvious dissatisfaction with her role as mother, wife and housekeeper. For example, an early

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10 Red shoes in fairy tales have been read widely as an “exclusively woman’s symbol” and associated with the monstrous woman (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 56), and with female sexuality and agency (Bettelheim 1991); (Paige 1996, 146).
11 Reflecting Jones’ three-act structure of “Snow White” in which the heroine ultimately progresses to a maligned position after giving birth (Jones 1993, 17).
passage in the novel shows a typical domestic scene where Bunty is cooking breakfast for her children. When Ruby’s sister Patricia comments that she doesn’t like porridge, “As fast as a snake, Bunty hisses back, ‘Well I don’t like children, so that’s too bad for you, isn’t it?’ She’s joking, of course. Isn’t she?” (21; emphasis in original). Ruby’s question—“Isn’t she?”—encourages the reader to conclude that Bunty is a wicked character who dislikes her own children.

In another scene, Bunty takes her daughter Gillian for a walk and, from Ruby’s naïve perspective, is understood to be an imposter trying to emulate the image of an idealised mother, maintaining a “Madonna-like expression of serenity and silence for as long as she can” (26), until her

… impatience suddenly boils over and she yanks the handlebars of the tricycle to hurry it along … tipping Gillian onto the ground, where she lands in a neat little blue-and-white heap, sucking her breath in and screaming at the same time (26).

Even more damning and evocative of Bunty’s wicked identity, in Ruby’s view, is Bunty’s response. Rather than tending to her daughter, Bunty “hauls Gillian to her feet, pretending not to notice that her tender palms and knees are grazed” and bribes her silence with the promise of “some sweets if she stops crying” (27). Read in terms of fairy-tale identities, Bunty’s attempts to maintain the façade of the good mother in public reflects common fairy-tale tropes in which only the young heroine is aware of the step-mother’s abuses.

Ruby’s suspicion of her mother’s wickedness is then confirmed when Bunty sees the infant Ruby for the first time. Unlike fairy-tale mothers, Bunty is not overcome with feelings of love for Ruby but instead “[s]he takes a quick glance and pronounces her judgement. ‘Looks like a piece of meat. Take it away’” (53). Ruby initially attributes Bunty’s hostility and feelings of revulsion towards her infant daughter as an indication of wickedness because good mothers are known to be fiercely protective of their children. Ruby’s corresponding rejection of Bunty as her
true mother is reflected in her wish for a mother who more closely resembles the idealised stereotype:

My real mother is roaming in a parallel universe somewhere, ladling out mother’s milk the colour of Devon cream. She’s padding the hospital corridors searching for me, her fierce, hot lion-breath steaming up the cold windows. My real mother is Queen of the Night, a huge galactic figure, treading the Milky Way in search of her lost infant (56).

In contrast to Ruby’s imaginary mother who epitomises the fantasy of a protective and nurturing figure, Bunty “complain[s] all the time”, bottle-feeds Ruby because she considers “there’s something distasteful about breast-feeding”, and allows the nurses to silence Ruby by making her “spend [her] first night on earth in a cupboard” (55). The reality of caring for children, something never specifically written into fairy-tale narratives, does not match the fantasy of Ruby’s young perspective.

Overlaying her initial interpretation of Bunty’s perceived rejection is Ruby’s mature awareness of the physical reality of childbirth. So while on one level Ruby’s birth scene validates her belief in Bunty’s wickedness, on another it articulates the intensity and physicality of the lived experience of childbirth for women, something that Kristeva suggests “language necessarily skims over from afar, allusively” (1996c, 162). Through Ruby’s more empathetic understanding of her mother, the reader is able to see that Bunty has no control over Ruby’s birth, becoming instead a means of (re)production, rather than an active agent in the experience. This is made evident through Ruby’s description of her birth, portrayed as an inconvenience for the attending doctor: “‘Get a move on, woman!’ an angry voice booms like a muffled fog-horn. ‘I’ve got a bloody dinner party to go to!’” (52). The depiction of Ruby’s birth is far from delicate and Ruby’s mature narrative voice alludes to the physical burden of childbirth as her mother “screams convincingly” (52), and Ruby describes herself as “something unnamed, raw and bloody” (53).
Yet childbirth is also shown to be a point of connection for women in the novel. Ruby’s historical footnote recreates a scene from sixty years before, portraying Rachel delivering her son Samuel at home in a prolonged, traumatic birth overseen by the local midwife. Interwoven with this depiction, in an echo of the past, is the midwife’s memory of Alice delivering her son Albert—“a tiny cry came from the room behind them and Mrs May had a sudden memory of handing the newborn Albert to Alice Barker” (174). The intersection of these three birth stories contributes to the palimpsestic layering of time in the novel and connects Bunty, Rachel, and Alice in a common experience that is of great significance in each of their individual and relational lives. Atkinson’s depiction here of women’s shared experiences of childbirth and the maternal, invokes a Kristevan sense of a semiotic irruption into symbolic language, made visible through the novel’s palimpsestic modes of time, that render that which has been previously understood through “broken up visions, metaphors of the invisible” (Kristeva 1996c, 161). Rachel, labelled “the unreal mother, the false bride” (38) and widely characterised by the family as “the evil stepmother” (50), “surely the Devil’s own” (177), is Bunty’s historical counterpart and Alice’s opposite, yet in their shared experience of the significant experience of childbirth, often omitted from fairy-tale narratives, all three women are represented as living, embodied, emotional and connected.

The connections across generations, and the potential for women’s subjectivity to be silenced by their relationship to others, is noted early in the novel when Ruby describes her grandmother Nell as “defined by her relationship to other people”, creating a place in history for her by describing the network of relationships of which she is part: “Nell is my grandmother, Bunty’s mother, Alice’s daughter” (30). However, the novel harnesses these network structures, using them to strengthen and animate, rather than silence, the women in the novel, serving to lift
them out of a marginalised history that such a relational view might engender. Central to this is the cycle of caring that is continued across time.\textsuperscript{12} As such, Ruby’s reconstruction of her family history, in one sense unshackles women from the limitations imposed upon them through their connections to cyclical time, but on the other validates the important work undertaken by women that is often obscured both by historical discourses, and by identities perpetuated in monumental time. In other words, \textit{Behind the Scenes at the Museum} does not seek to disconnect women from cyclical time, but instead works to recognise the valuable work undertaken by women as mothers and carers as equal to and inseparable from the linear time of history.

Even as Ruby’s naïve perspective builds a case for Bunty’s wickedness, her more mature perspective deconstructs the representation through its empathetic depiction of the struggles of Bunty’s daily life—struggles mirrored and echoed across the generations of women in the family. Where Ruby’s childish perspective understands her mother’s frustration and anger as a sign of wickedness, the mature Ruby begins to develop an understanding that Bunty is overburdened by the physical and emotional work of mothering, as well as the frustration she feels at her own lack of freedom and agency. This lack of autonomy is made evident when Ruby compares her father, who is at liberty to move between the domestic world and the public world at will, to Bunty: “\textit{He might at least ask. ‘Would you mind, Bunty, minding the shop for me.’ And of course I would mind, very much. But I’d still have to do it, wouldn’t I?’}” (21–22; emphasis in original). Ruby’s ironic narration qualifies the dynamic of her parent’s relationship observed by the young Ruby to deconstruct her

\textsuperscript{12} The ethics of care, variously explored by feminist theorists, holds that strong familial, social, professional, as well as local and global relationships are reliant for their flourishing on the concrete ties of interdependence and care that bind human beings and communities together. See, for example, Peta Bowden (1997); Virginia Held (2006); and Joan Tronto (1993).
initial evaluation of her mother’s wickedness. For example, when Ruby’s father George announces to her that he is going out, “Bunty turns a contorted, murderous face on him and lifts the knife as if she’s considering stabbing him” (33). From Ruby’s naïve perspective Bunty’s behaviour is irrational, confirmed by George’s response “For heaven’s sake, what’s wrong with you, what do you think I’m doing—meeting another woman for a riotous night on the tiles?” (33). Yet at this point the mature Ruby interjects in parenthesis to qualify her initial observations and contextualise her mother’s responses: “(A clever question, of course, as this is exactly what my father-of-a-day is going to do)” (33). Thus, where the naïve Ruby sees only her mother’s apparent wickedness, the reader and the mature Ruby are privy to future insights that deconstruct this early perspective and create, through the overlaying of “details, traces and texts that constitutes its [the palimpsest’s] ‘essence’” (Dillon 2013, 8), a more empathetic understanding of Bunty’s life.

The layering of time and perspective is applied to the daily domestic routine of Bunty’s life and then extended to Ruby’s imaginative reconstruction of the histories of her maternal ancestors. For example, Ruby’s naïve perspective reads Bunty’s hatred of cooking as stemming from the understanding that it is “too much like being nice to people” (32). However, the next two sentences deconstruct this assumption attributed to Bunty’s apparent wickedness by depicting the thankless and repetitive task of cooking from Bunty’s perspective—“all those meals, day after day, and what happens to them? They get eaten, that’s what, without a word of thanks!” (32–33; emphasis in original)—as well as the psychological impact that the limitations of her domestic responsibilities produce:

Sometimes when Bunty’s standing at the cooker her heart starts knocking inside her chest and she feels as if the top of her head’s going to come off and a cyclone is going to rip out of her brain and tear up everything around her (33).

Ruby then uses the insights she has gained into her mother’s experiences of domestic
life as a scaffold to reconstruct the lost histories of her family. For example, the above description of Bunty is echoed in Ruby’s later historical reconstruction of Alice’s thoughts:

She was thinking, in a glumly metaphorical way, that she felt as if a great stone had been laid on her breastbone and she was being slowly suffocated by it, like one of the martyrs of old, although—godless woman at the best of time—she couldn’t work out what on earth she was suffering for (435; emphasis in original).

Ruby draws on her understanding of her mother’s experience of domestic life to create a fictionalised history for Alice in which she doesn’t die in childbirth, but instead walks away from her family entirely. Thus, in this depiction, Ruby uses her observations and insights into Bunty’s life, to imaginatively reconstruct histories of other women’s domestic experiences outside of idealised representations.

Part of Ruby’s exploration of the way in which women’s lives, sense of self and sense of worth are constructed in relation to cyclical time is examined through her imaginative construction of an alternative past for her great-grandmother Alice. In this version of history, Ruby attempts to address questions of women’s dissatisfaction with their domestic and maternal lives by constructing a version of the past in which Alice discards her domestic life (and therefore connection to cyclical time), leaves her children behind and pursues her romantic desires. While this revised history initially appears to resolve Alice’s despondency with her life as a wife and a mother (and as such offers a potential alternative pathway for other women) the results for Alice are disastrous and she dies alone in a bombing raid, clutching a photograph of her estranged children (447). Ruby attempts to reconstruct a life for Alice outside of the traditions of cyclical and monumental time with its associated burdens of family, maternity and domestic life, in favour of a closer association with linear time. However, the fictionalised alternative that Ruby constructs—in which Alice pursues a love affair and the adventure of travel—reveals
that a wholesale rejection of the domestic is no more a viable alternative for Alice
than the original narrative in which she is over-determined by her domestic and
maternal role.

One of the elements of domestic life that is shown to both fulfil and frustrate women
in the novel, and that is a common experience across generations, is the way in which
women are judged and characterised by their domestic abilities. Fairy-tale narratives
depict domestic proficiency as an essential ‘female’ attribute, and tales such as
“Snow White” depict the heroine performing chores, tasks that are considered to be
“appropriate for a woman” as part of her “socialization” (Jones 1993, 28). Women’s
value is measured—both from a perceived societal pressure, and one imposed and
policed by women themselves—through their domestic prowess. For example, Bunty
“believes shop-bought cakes are a sign of sluttish housewifery” (30). In a similar
judgement, Rachel, sixty years earlier, condemns Alice for her poor housekeeping:
“Not to judge by the amount of soot and grease in the kitchen, the lamp-black on the
walls, the unswept dust on the floors, the unmended, unpatched linen” (166–67).
Conversely, Rachel prides herself on her own domestic abilities:

… shelves were weighed down with her clever housewifery—jams
and pickles and chutney, big glass jars of raspberry jewels and
gooseberry globes, a fat leg of ham, a bowl of brown eggs, flagons of
rhubarb wine, puddings, both sweet and savoury, wrapped in cloths
(171).

But women’s ability to be efficient and skilled in their domestic labour is also judged
by men. Bunty’s sister Babs is labelled by her husband as the “Queen of
Puddings” (153), and her husband “never has to wait more than two minutes for his
tea when he comes home at night” (152). Such recognition speaks to the broader
social importance of domestic labour in women’s traditional role of caring for others.

While women in the novel take pride in their work, they are also shown to be
frustrated about the limitations imposed upon them by their confinement in the
domestic sphere across generations. Bunty and Babs are understood to live their lives according to a strict “housework timetable” (152), to which Ruby comments they are “fellow slave[s]” (152). The housework timetable dictates the tasks for each day: for example, “On Saturday she does the shopping” (152), and despite the gratification they glean from their aptitudes as housewives, the women in the novel are also depicted as unsatisfied and constrained by their roles. Early in the novel Bunty laments “I spend my entire life cooking, I’m a slave to housework—chained to the cooker” (32–33; emphasis in original), a sentiment mirrored in Ruby’s comment that “Auntie Babs is also a slave to housework, I know this because she tells me so. Often” (152).

Voiced by Ruby’s mature, ironic perspective women’s domestic lives are at times shown to be unfulfilling and in many instances detrimental for the characters in the novel. Ruby recognises the intellectual, psychological and emotional costs of limiting women’s lives to stereotyped identities, and particularly those shaped predominantly in accordance with an idealised domestic space. In her second reconstruction of Alice’s past, Ruby imagines a scene in which Alice contemplates suicide:Later that afternoon, if you had been watching, you might have seen Alice high up, aloft in the hay loft, its upper doorway framing her spreadeagled figure, standing like Pythagorean woman and contemplating the height/weight implications of a fall (439).

This depiction denotes Alice, as an historical and rational (Pythagorean) woman, as being overwritten by the demands and limitations of her domestic and maternal identity. A generation later, Alice’s daughter Nell is shown to be suffering from mental illness when the child-Bunty comes home from school to find her mother:

… clearly not quite herself for the big two-pint enamel dish she used for milk puddings and egg custards was full to overflowing—yet Nell kept on pouring from the big blue jug she was holding so that the milk poured over the edge of the dish … Nell was also talking to herself
like a madwoman putting a curse on someone—although when Bunty listened she found that it was nothing more than an alphabetical recitation of the cake recipes from Nell’s Dyson’s Self-Help book” (254).

While there is not always a direct correlation made in the narrative between these illnesses and domestic work as such, the novel does draw parallels between women’s physical and mental health and their obligations (socially, historically and within the family) to fulfil the domestic role as indicated in the above example through Nell’s fixation on baking. These connections appear in the cyclical temporal layer of the palimpsest, because the representations of stereotyped identities from fairy tale are not complex enough to articulate the intricate emotional, physical and psychological elements that make up women’s lives.

For instance, in another scene, Ruby stumbles into a room to discover her Aunt Babs has undergone a mastectomy. Ruby’s description of the scene she witnesses puts her aunt’s body in both a sexual and a reproductive light:

Bunty, Auntie Gladys and a captive Nell are spectating at a morbid women-only striptease show with Auntie Babs as the main attraction. She moves like a statue on a revolving dais and, turning to her audience, she peels back her navy blue cardigan and white blouse to reveal—on one side a pendulous, matronly breast, and on the other side—nothing, just a pucker of skin and scar tissue (300).

In this scene, women’s maternal (matronly breast), domestic (navy blue cardigan) and sexual (women’s only striptease) identities interact to construct a collage of these various elements of women’s lives as finely intertwined and lived at once. In this scene, amongst a community of women who are caring for each other, women are depicted as not only carers and mothers, wives and sexual beings but as all of these identities at once and through time. The mortality implied in Babs’ mastectomy also highlights the inevitability of women’s mortal, linear life with Ruby noting that Bab’s breasts are no longer the healthy, life-giving tissue of a breastfeeding mother—“it also makes an unfortunate contrast to Auntie Babs’ chest, now entirely
shorn, as she lies looking paler than a sheet on her bed in St James’s in Leeds” (301)—but rather signal the end of her life. Conversely, Ruby recognises her own immaturity, marked by her physical appearance in that she hasn’t “even learned about getting breasts yet, let alone about losing them” (300), but indicating her emergent understanding of the implications of the scene in front of her in terms of the community of women in her family, and the complexity of women’s emotional, ethical and physical lives.

The concept of cyclical time as consisting of shared experiences repeated across generations and as an ethical position is further demonstrated in the novel through the way in which the female characters care for each other. That is, Ruby’s depiction of her family extends the function of the domestic realm beyond the role of mothering reductively depicted in fairy tale. Both Bunty and her mother, Nell, succumb to dementia and the novel artfully depicts the difficult moments of caring not only for children but for ill and aged family members too. For example, Bunty cares for Nell in the family home, and Ruby and her sister Patricia find their grandmother “in the kitchen trying to do some very odd things to the uncooked turkey” (242). In a mirrored depiction of Ruby caring for Bunty at the end of the novel, Ruby describes their day in almost identical terms to the first day depicted in the novel, where Bunty cooks, cleans and takes her daughter for a walk: “Our days together speed past, eaten up by house-work, shopping, cooking, little trips to the park” (471). In this section of the novel the cycle of care sees Ruby switching places with Bunty as her mother battles with dementia. Ruby notes that Bunty’s confusion “centres on people’s identities” and repeatedly asks her mother, ‘Do you know who I am?’ (471). This is a bigger question of the novel than an indication of Bunty’s dementia. In a moment of insightfulness Bunty replies “Do you know who you are, Ruby?” (471). In order to answer this question Ruby must incorporate the third mode
of time into her family narrative and deconstruct her own identity as the fairy tale-like heroine of her own story.

**Linear Time: Rewriting the Fairy-Tale Heroine**

The final layer of the temporal palimpsest I read in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* sees Ruby (re)writing her family history in the “footnotes” of the novel. The present of Ruby’s narrative—the perspectives through which she views women in a fairy tale context, and the intertwined depiction of cyclical time through which she articulates the often difficult and ambiguous relationship women have to their domestic roles—only partially restores women’s stories. And so, to complete Ruby’s reimagining of how women are represented in narrative and time, she must reconstruct her family history to include those stories lost to the traditional historical record. Ruby’s footnotes add a third level of complication to enrich and untangle the tensions of the present narrative, not by simply creating backstories but by drawing correlations between women’s experiences and relationships across generations as well as contextualising women’s place in history. This third, linear layer of time and narrative enables Ruby to finally discard the identity of the fairy-tale heroine to create a family history that helps her gain agency over her future as an embodied and historical individual, something she hopes she will pass on to her own daughters. This move enacts Kristeva’s assertion at the end of “Women’s Time” that future discourses must find a means of representing “the multiplicity of every person’s possible identifications” as well as the “relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence” (1996e, 210; emphasis in original).

Ruby narrates her own birth, declaring herself as follows: “I am a precious jewel. I am a drop of blood. I am Ruby Lennox” (58). From her initial, naïve perspective this statement places Ruby in the role of the submissive heroine of her
own fairy tale, mimicking the imagery of “Snow White”. Yet this statement carries more meaning than simply identifying Ruby as a passive character in the novel, because fairy-tale heroines do not typically speak in the first person; rather, their stories happen to them, and are told about them (Bacchilega 1997, 34). Thus, despite identifying herself in fairy-tale terms, Ruby’s ironic voice, in the very act of speaking, is already beginning to deconstruct the fairy-tale heroine, creating a sense that what is written should not be taken at face value. At her birth, the naive Ruby determines that she has “been given the wrong mother” and is “in danger of embarking on the wrong life but I trust it will all be sorted out and I will be reunited with my real mother” (57). Ruby’s mature and ironic voice is also present in this statement, because the “wrong life” she embarks upon is in fact the very life she thinks she is supposed to lead: that of the passive, fairy-tale heroine.

The idea of living the wrong life is also echoed in other characters in the novel. For example, the second footnote pertaining to Alice is in fact entitled “The Wrong Life” (435); at the end of the novel Ruby tells her husband he has “got the wrong wife” (462); and, of course, Ruby’s repeated assertion that Bunty is “the wrong mother” materially damages their relationship (57). Through Ruby’s exploration of her family narrative, however, it is finally understood that Ruby’s perspective, in seeking out fairy-tale narratives to explain the complexity of women’s lives and relationships, is misguided. Thus, despite her early seduction by fairy-tale narratives, the act of narrating the lives of the women in her family and the resultant shift in her understanding of the past, sees Ruby discard her belief in the idealised but frozen fairy-tale heroine. Ruby’s identity, therefore, evolves from her first fairy tale-derived representation as heroine, through to the closing statement of the novel—“I’m in another country, the one called home. I am alive. I am a precious jewel. I am a drop of blood. I am Ruby Lennox” (490)—marks Ruby’s shift from
Ruby’s transformation from submissive heroine, to active agent of her own story evolves through her telling and retelling of her family history. Key to Ruby’s 
(re)imagining of the past is the revelation that she has suppressed the memory of the life and death of her twin sister Pearl. Pearl signifies a gap in Ruby’s interpretation of the past, calling into question her authority as the narrator of the family history: “I read Pearl’s birth certificate over and over again and then compared it with mine, looking from one to the other endlessly as if eventually they would explain themselves” (420). Unlike other gaps in knowledge in the family—such as Alice’s absence—Ruby cannot explain Pearl, and her reconstruction of the past has no place for a forgotten sister. This is because until this point Ruby has authoritatively represented herself and her family through her own version of the truth of her and their lives. The discovery of Pearl’s birth certificate drastically changes how Ruby interprets the past, particularly her perception of her mother, Bunty. The realisation of Pearl’s existence triggers a “strange surge of memory—as if caught in a photographer’s flash” (421), and we are drawn back through Ruby’s earlier narrative to find such flashes littered throughout the text.

Ruby begins to re-evaluate the way in which she has interpreted the past and her family with this new knowledge. Early scenes in the novel, when re-read in the context of Pearl’s death become new, ambivalent and distressing. For example, the scene of the house party for Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation in which Ruby moved
around the room so quickly that “if you blinked you’d almost think there were two” of her (103), or the moment in which Ruby sees her mother’s silver locket with “two tiny photos of me” pressed inside (193), highlight the (sometimes) arbitrary interpretive practice of rendering the past because Pearl has always existed within Ruby’s world, yet to Ruby she remained invisible. Signified by Ruby’s misinterpretation of the photographs in the locket, “one of them was the false Ruby and the true Pearl, I couldn’t for life of me say which” (421), Pearl’s death calls into question Ruby’s ability to differentiate between the past that she believes to be true and an entirely different truth of the past.

The discovery of Pearl, then, changes how Ruby understands history and time in general. In her footnotes she seeks out other lost moments and connections to the absent histories of the women in her family and writes them back into her narrative. This not only gives voice to the lost histories of her family to restore women’s subjective and ethical agency, but also creates a narrative that is sympathetic to her mother’s experiences, and ultimately Ruby is able to forgive both Bunty and herself for the misconceptions that have damaged their relationship. Forgiveness for Ruby and Bunty, however, only comes after Bunty has lost all sense of herself to dementia. When Bunty dies, Ruby is “gripped by a wholly inappropriate urge to shake Bunty back to life and make her be our mother all over again—but do it better this time” (479–80). In this depiction Bunty is no longer viewed by Ruby as the wicked stepmother but as a flawed woman whose “autistic mothering” was shaped by a restrictive narrative, structured by the sometimes stultifying modes of monumental and cyclical time (480). And so, the discovery of Pearl calls into question all of Ruby’s previous representations of her family and the past. Ruby’s depiction of her mother as a wicked character, already revised through the cyclical layer of time in the novel, is also contextualised through the recovered history of grief, which Ruby
had dismissively described as Bunty’s affected behaviour, or her mother’s “‘My Gillian, my pearl’ routine” (268). Ruby’s portrayal of her mother as wicked, signified here, from Ruby’s naïve perspective, in Bunty’s reaction—“She catches sight of my reflection walking past and gives a start as if she’s just seen a ghost … But when she twists round to look she says, ‘Oh it’s only you’, and Ruby’s response “‘It’s just me! Just Ruby!’ I sing in an inanely cheerful way” (268)—casts Bunty in an entirely new light when informed by the knowledge of her sister’s death. Rather than a mother irritated by the presence of her child as would be typical of a wicked fairy-tale step-mother, the suggestion of a ghost Pearl in the mirror renders Bunty as a sympathetic character, grieving for her dead child.

**Imagining a New History**

Driven by the discovery of Pearl’s death, and the gaps in her knowledge of the past Pearl signifies, Ruby undertakes a “philosophical quest for understanding” through her “Lost Property Cupboard theory of life” (412), using the metaphor to explain the lost histories and accumulated memories of the women in her family. Inherent in Ruby’s understanding of the past following the discovery of her sister’s death is the realisation that being lost does not equate to not having existed. Thus, she likens the past to a “cupboard full of light and all you have to do is find the key that opens the door” (486). Drawing on the symbolism of the museum, which presents a limited and curated version of the past, Ruby’s “Lost Property Cupboard” contains

all the things we have ever lost … every hairgrip, every button and pencil … the other less tangible things—tempers and patience (perhaps Patricia’s virginity will be there), religion (Kathleen has lost hers), meaning, innocence (mine) and oceans of time” (414).

Ruby uses family artefacts that have survived across the generations around which to structure her recovered histories and to link the present to the past. These items connect apparently disparate moments in time thematically—such as women’s
investment in war-time work, their quest for identity, and the choices that determine their futures—to help Ruby understand how her own life has unfolded. This quest through the forgotten past helps Ruby understand how the women in her family have come to be who they are, live the lives they have lived and, ultimately, steer Ruby away from “the wrong life” she has embarked upon (57). That is, Ruby replaces the narrative of “Snow White” with a family narrative as a way of gaining agency over her future and her identity.

One of the historical objects that Ruby uses to link women in her family to the past, and to restore the past to the present is her great-grandmother’s clock. In the opening scene of the novel Ruby announces that she is “conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantel piece” that “once belonged to my great-grandmother (a woman called Alice) and its tired chimes count me into the world” (13). This palimpsestic description links Ruby to history and linear time as well as to her maternal past. Signalling the beginning of Ruby’s story and the continuum of time across generations, Alice’s clock is a metaphor for Ruby’s journey to selfhood, but also her task of (re)writing the past to liberate her maternal ancestors from behind the scenes. Ruby integrates her grandmother’s clock into daily moments in her maternal histories, signalling the place of important domestic and maternal events in reference to the objective time of the clock and history. For example, Alice’s clock presides over Ruby’s conception (13); is present at the death of Alice’s daughter Ada, “the tick-tock of her mother’s clock” (182); survives the house fire in Ruby’s childhood (417); and is finally taken to Australia with Patricia following Bunty’s death.

The clock, or ‘objective time’ is responsible for marking the passing of linear time, measuring production and marking the achievements of history and civilisation, but it tends not to be associated with the domestic work of reproduction and
mothering, or the achievements of women’s domestic lives. Thus, as Alice’s clock journeys through time in the possession of successive generations of women in the family it is shown to survive alongside, but somehow inferior to, the so-called authentic version of time represented by the traditional historical record. For example, Ruby notes that the grandfather clock in the doctor’s office makes “solid clopping noises” that are “much nicer than the tinny noises our mantelpiece clock makes” (260). Ruby refers to the clock through the text as “tinny” (260), she mentions that it “chimes unevenly” (416), that it is “slow” (246), and eventually that it is broken, and thus she suggests women’s uneasy relationship to the objective world of clock-time. These depictions of Alice’s clock allude to the way that women’s association with historical or linear time, because of their historical connection to the cyclical nature of domestic time and reproduction, has been traditionally considered subordinate to the more conventional representations of history. Alice’s clock is set against the events of history that have been typically deemed valuable and worthy. For example, events considered historically significant, such as Queen Elizabeth’s coronation, in Ruby’s new version of the past, are set aside to the margins of the narrative to provide historical context to her more important personal and intimate domestic depictions of women’s lives that have traditionally been understood as less significant than other versions of the past.

It seems to me, however, that the narrative is not suggesting that the traditional historical record be replaced by the domestic focus in Ruby’s rendition of the past but, rather, that women’s histories be viewed as equally valid lived, ethical experiences, to augment and enrich what is already known and understood historically and politically. As such, Behind the Scenes at the Museum is a narrative that complicates simplistic representations rather than replaces history with an alternative version of the past. The way that the novel works to complicate, but not
supplant, known history can be traced through another of the family objects that triggers Ruby’s exploration of the past. The lucky rabbit’s foot that is passed from generation to generation serves to highlight some of the correlations between the historical lives of men and women in the novel. The rabbit’s foot was “chopped off” with the “cleaver that hung by the range” by Rachel in the late nineteenth century (168), and remained in the family until Ruby’s sister finally planned to “bury it in the garden” following Bunty’s death in 1992 (484). Held as a token of luck in many women’s lives, with Bunty clutching it during the childbirth scene at the beginning of the novel (52–53), the rabbit’s foot also connects and contrasts women’s lives in the novel to the only footnote through which Ruby writes a history from a male perspective in the novel. This section follows the journey of the rabbit’s foot through the male characters’, Frank (Nell’s eventual husband) and Jack’s (Nell’s second fiancé), experiences of the First World War. This footnote works to historicise and integrate women’s perspectives in the novel as inextricable from men’s histories by acknowledging the relevance of major historical events such as the First and Second World Wars to the lives of both men and women.

Ruby’s reconstruction of the past also speaks to silenced men’s histories in which the personal, emotional and physical experiences of war for men are overwritten by broad-reaching historical, and nationally focused narratives. Ruby reconstructs harrowing scenes of war and loss, and the characters are shown to acknowledge the way that the emotional and distressing experiences of the past are often glossed over in traditional representations of historical events. In a scene set alongside Nell’s history in “Footnote (ii)”, Jack returns home on leave and he and Nell watch a movie depicting the war at the local cinema. This scene in which the war is portrayed through images of “German prisoners being offered cigarettes” is considered an “unsatisfactory account” (90), with Jack saying “in a very quiet voice,
‘It wasn’t like that, Nell’” (90). Nell’s response, “No, I expect it wasn’t”, marks her understanding that the narrative of war as represented in the cinema could not articulate the lived reality of that experience (90). Thus Ruby’s historical footnotes allude to the way traditional records, represented by the museum, tend to overwrite lived experiences for men as well as women, suggesting that while the novel focuses specifically on women’s lives and experiences, this method of constructing and representing time and identity in narrative need not be a practice specific to women. And so, the tracing of the ownership of the rabbit’s foot from Rachel’s kitchen to Jack and Frank, through Bunty and to the moment that Patricia determines to bury it in her garden close to a century later, draws parallels between all lost histories and, in this way, the novel’s treatment of historical time also works to disrupt binaristic notions of gendered time.

Yet, this is a novel principally about women and Ruby’s footnotes work to balance the male perspective of war depicted in Jack and Frank’s experiences, and in historical records in general. Ruby’s footnotes portray Lillian and Nell’s experiences of work and loss during the First World War, and Bunty and her sister Babs’ during the Second World War. In these recovered histories women are depicted in the workforce with Ruby focusing on both the pleasure and pride women took in their contribution to the war, as well as illustrating the emotional burden they carried, in both worrying for their loved ones who fought, and the people around them who were in danger. For example, Bunty’s war story is triggered by a teaspoon that once belonged to her mother Nell, who took it from a neighbour killed in a bombing raid (133). Nell and Bunty supported their neighbour Ena by helping with childcare after Ena’s husband was killed. The teaspoon is passed down between generations and Ruby notes in the present of the novel that it remained on Nell’s mantelpiece, polished, as a “memento mori” (143)—or a symbol of the “inevitability of death”—
and as if honouring Ena and her son’s deaths, Bunty “always polished Ena’s spoon regularly and kept it as clean and shiny as a new coin” (143). The teaspoon, a mundane domestic object, comes to represent the lives lost outside of the battlefield and the community of women who came together to care for each other.

The scenes of women’s domestic experiences of war, and war-time work, also do more than simply acknowledge women’s contribution to the war effort through their work in industry and munitions factories. Rather, Ruby’s portrayal of her great-aunts, aunt and mother show that women enjoyed their work and the freedom that war granted them. Unlike depictions of women in the cyclical layer of time, Ruby’s historical representation shows how women were also viewed as important outside of their domestic roles, with Nell made “a forewoman because of her experience with hats” and Lillian “a conductress on the trams” (75–76). Their new-found place in public life created a different sense of identity and pride for the women in the novel, reflected in Frank’s observation that “[t]he two sisters were so full of life that in the end the war was left more or less unspoken of” (76).

While wartime work is seen to give women valuable public roles outside of domestic work, it is also portrayed in the novel as an opportunity for long-term change. Ruby’s great-aunt Lillian saw the opportunity for work as a chance to forge a different career outside of “service” (313), and the potential to open up women’s lives to new possibilities is noted in Bunty’s vision of the future:

it was like tossing coins in the air and wondering where they would land … it made it much more likely that something exciting would happen to Bunty and it didn’t really matter whether it was the unbelievably handsome man or a bomb—it would all mean a change in one way or another (124).

Yet, the war did not automatically mean a change in circumstances for women in the novel. What Ruby’s reconstruction of her family histories make clear is that taking the opportunity for change presented by the upheaval of war, meant women would
no longer remain in obscured, domestic roles.

So while the wars of the first half of the twentieth century created great social and economic change, many women were left behind, with Nell, Babs, and Bunty unable to change their futures. As Ruby notes, “in the end, Bunty’s war had been a disappointment. She had lost something in the war but she didn’t find out until it was too late that it was the chance to be somebody else” (142). Throughout this footnote Bunty is depicted as emulating famous actresses and fictional characters—much like Ruby emulates the “Snow White” fairy tale—in an attempt develop her identity, “her personality shifted up several gears, from Deanna Durbin to Scarlet O’Hara” (127). Later she undergoes “another metamorphosis to become very like that of Greer Garson in Mrs Miniver” (133). Thus, like Ruby, Bunty searches for a narrative through which she can understand her sense of being in the world and her life. She chooses adventurous and strong willed characters, yet ultimately succumbs to the repetition of her own mother’s life and is unable to seize the opportunity for change presented by the war.

Both Bunty and her mother Nell are depicted as regretting their missed opportunities to change the trajectory of their respective narratives. For Bunty, her inability to break with a submissive identity is lamented in Ruby’s comment “somewhere at the back of Bunty’s dreams another war would always play—a war in which she manned searchlights and loaded ack-acks, a war in which she was resourceful and beautiful, not to mention plucky” (142-43). This is echoed in the revelation of Nell’s dying words later in the novel that indicate her own regret at remaining a submissive agent in her story. Nell utters the words “Mind your boots, Lily!” (303), which Ruby links to a footnote denoting a decisive moment in Nell’s life in which she watched her sister climb out of the window to attend the local fair. Nell remained behind, watching from the bedroom window as her sister climbed
down the tree, too fearful of her step-mother, Rachel, to risk the adventure (303). This decision in her young life is shown to have lasting consequences, with Ruby’s historical account of her grandmother portraying a woman who remained trapped in a submissive role. Ruby writes Nell sitting alone in her hotel room as an old woman, thinking back over her life and regretting the marriage that her young self believed was her only choice. At the end of the scene Nell gets up “awkwardly from the bed and struggled back into her corset. She stood in front of the mirror to brush her hair and put a dab of powder on her nose and tried to remember the smell of Jack Keech’s skin” (218–19). Unlike other women in the novel, such as her sister Lillian and ultimately Ruby and her sister Patricia, who are able to break from the limitations of fairy-tale identities, Nell remains in front of the mirror, confined by her corset and unable to emulate the life of her sister, who is willing to assert control over her future and not simply “trust it will all be sorted out” (57). In contrast to Nell’s fear, it is Lillian’s willingness to risk change that marks the difference between Nell, as a character who continues to be defined by reductive representations of women (and Bunty a generation later), and Lilian, as an active agent in her stories and her future.

And so, of all of Ruby’s female ancestors, the only character to capitalise on the new opportunities presented by war was Lillian, who uses the uncertainty and the upheaval of war to write a new future for herself and her son. Lillian fell pregnant during the war to a who was killed in combat. The baby was born in 1917 and despite pressure from her sister Nell, who “screwed up her face in disapproval” (387), Lillian defies social convention and refuses to give him up for adoption. Instead she uses the war to construct a backstory in which she is a war-widow and created a life for herself and her son. Both Patricia and Lillian move continents to start their lives again after the birth of their children, but unlike Patricia who was running away from the loss of her baby, Lillian (in refusing to accept the social
mores of marriage and mothering) asserts her desire to move to a new frontier: “New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia, Canada—... she closed her eyes and pulled out the future” (393). Lillian’s journey is set in contrast to her sister Nell’s, whose inability to break with tradition and risk change is marked.

“Footnote (x)” outlines Lillian’s decision to move to Canada with her son Edmund and is linked to the present narrative through Ruby’s portrayal of her sister Patricia’s unplanned teenage pregnancy (364). The disastrous impact on Patricia of her family’s decision to have the baby adopted, described by Ruby when her sister returns from the “Methodist mother-and-baby home” as a “mother-and-no-baby”, signals a dark change for Patricia who had become a “different person” (343). Ruby’s description of Patricia as a “mother-and-no-baby” recognises that Patricia’s life was forever changed by her pregnancy, the experience of childbirth and the existence of her child. Simply taking the baby away, like the histories of Ruby’s family, and the forgotten Pearl, did not negate the baby’s existence. As a result of her loss, Patricia was “so full of darkness” that Ruby was grateful when Patricia left home and never returned (343). It is not until Patricia is an adult and has moved to Australia that she discards the expectations of family and tradition. Patricia changes her story and becomes a veterinarian, marries and has a family. When she does finally contact Ruby, she announces that she is going to find her lost child because they each realise that the past cannot be left behind, but is rather “what you take with you” (488).

The sense that women are repeating the same mistakes across generations because of their continuing identification with submissive fairy-tale and domestic identities is confirmed in Ruby’s first experience of marriage and motherhood. Ruby moves to Scotland twice in the novel, the first time as a fairy-tale heroine, and the second as an active agent. On Ruby’s first trip to Scotland she works as a chamber-
maid which she ironically points out is “housework under a different guise”, while awaiting the results of her A Level exams (454). But when she fails her “History A Level”, Ruby believes that a “curtain falls across the wide open vista that was my future” (456). Like her mother and grandmother before her, Ruby reverts back to plots in which her determination to “get on with The Rest Of My Life” (453) manifests in marriage not by choice or for love, but as a default position, with the capitalised “Rest Of My Life” echoing the realist-narrative-ending notion of living ‘happily ever after’. Yet Ruby’s marriage is as much a fantasy as the notion of an idealised maternal figure, and as a married woman and mother, Ruby repeats the fate of Bunty, Nell and Alice. The imagery from the opening of “Snow White” returns in Ruby’s description of her relationship with her husband. However, rather than an idealised, fairy tale depiction of marriage, Ruby appropriates fairy-tale terminology to expresses her disillusionment with her own story: “I scream at him in Italian, in words that sound as if they are embroidered in blood” (456). Ruby ultimately rejects the identity of the fairy-tale heroine, but not until she herself has repeated the mistakes of her maternal ancestors.

Through her continual (re)writing of the past, however, Ruby ultimately deconstructs the fairy-tale heroine in her own story. Thus Ruby’s second attempt at the “Rest Of My Life” is undertaken with her understanding of herself as an embodied, emotional and historical entity (463). Ruby’s reconstruction of her maternal past through the items in the “the lost property cupboard” does not change the past, but it does change Ruby’s interpretation and understanding of it. In recovering lost histories, Ruby constructs a view of time, narrative and identity that has “room for everyone” (490), not just those stories deemed historically significant by traditional understandings of the past. In her final iteration of her narrative, Ruby determines once again to embark upon the task of writing her family history, this
time in the form of a “cycle of poems” (490). Thus by the end of the novel Ruby once again looks back at her attempts to represent the past and her family, and once again determines to continue writing, suggesting that the complexity of women’s lives can’t ever be definitively represented in a single story, or in a single version of the past.

Conclusion

*Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, through Ruby’s exploration of the past, demonstrates a way of writing that produces shifting and nuanced depictions of women’s lives, desires and experiences. Through the evolving characterisation of Ruby in the novel, we glimpse a way of writing that—like Kristeva’s ‘third wave’—sees women’s lives as irreducible to a single temporal formation and, instead, as multifaceted, embodied and historical. As the protagonist and narrator, Ruby is left in-process, forever writing and (re)writing her family history in order to “construct a world that makes sense” (490). As each new iteration of the past is constructed through Ruby’s narratives, we are moved further and further away from the fixed and rigid rendering of the past represented by history and traditional narrative, and drawn closer into the metaphorical and the poetic. In doing so, Atkinson reworks the realist elements of her text to garner an ever-deepening representation of the ambiguous, multifaceted and diverse elements of women’s lives and identities that, made visible by the palimpsest, can not be captured by direct, prosaic language.

Reading the modes of time in the novel as palimpsest therefore produces a performative practice of ‘women’s time’, which traces through different temporal modes the ways in which women are represented and understood, how they may be silenced when limited to singular discourses of myth, domesticity or history.
Kate Atkinson’s 2013 Costa Book Award winning novel, *Life After Life*, is an intricate, episodic narrative that employs a palimpsestic temporal structure in its exploration of women’s historical, domestic and public lives. Set in England in the first half of the twentieth century, *Life After Life* continues the focus on women, identity and time begun in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996), centring upon women’s lived experiences to carefully interrogate the prescribed identities constructed through narratives of myth, the maternal and the domestic, and history.\(^1\) While in many ways the portrayal of women in *Life After Life* is similar to that in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*—through its representations of daily life, particularly in terms of women’s domestic and maternal responsibilities—the novel’s palimpsestic temporal structure develops Atkinson’s earlier work by further expanding the creative rendering of women as complex characters in-process, in order to explore how this new way of imagining and representing women’s identities might also inform and make visible women’s interventions into and engagement in the public sphere.

\(^1\) Kate Atkinson’s novels *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000) also view women’s lives through historical and fairy tale contexts. These two novels together with *Life After Life* and *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* represent Atkinson’s ongoing interest in the way in which women’s lives and histories are represented in narrative. Each novel interrogates narratives that shape women’s lives, such as the mother-daughter relationship, and how that specific relationship informs her protagonists’ identities. Through her portrayal of women in time, utilising various narrative techniques such as historiographic metafiction, magic realism, time-travel and reincarnation Atkinson also explores the action of the past in the present in the shaping of her protagonists’ sense of self, and sense of being in the world.
Consistent with my reading of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, my understanding of the palimpsestic temporal structure of *Life After Life* is directed by Julia Kristeva’s three modes of time—monumental, cyclical, and linear (1996e). In each of these temporal layers of the novel (and as with Ruby in the earlier novel), the principal character Ursula Todd’s narrative explores the limitations and consequences of subscribing to prescribed female identities, whether to the fairy-tale heroine, to an idealisation of the maternal, or to the limited opportunities available to women in the public sphere. In both novels, Atkinson demonstrates a practice of women’s time that asserts her characters’ individual agency to produce a sense of their lives as temporal, embodied and situated. However, while maintaining a focus on the subjective development of Ursula as a character whose identity is never fixed but under continuous revision, *Life After Life* extends the exploration of women’s identity as an essentially personal and private concern to a political and public one.

In this sense, I understand *Life After Life* to make an imaginative political intervention in highlighting the integral role women played as mothers, workers, and volunteers during the first half of the twentieth century and, in voicing and validating women’s historical contributions, reimagining a future in which the political voices of myriad women (as represented by Ursula’s diverse identities)—mother, daughter, sister, wife, lover, worker, volunteer, martyr, heroine—are heard. By viewing different female identities in both domestic and public contexts, the layered, palimpsestic temporal structure of *Life After Life* dismantles, or at least dislodges, the boundaries between domestic and political spheres, and works to produce women as political agents without denying their existing investments in maternal and domestic subjectivities.

Driving Ursula’s multiple narratives is the overarching question: “What if we had a chance to do it again and again, until we finally did get it right?” (405). As
time is reset in the novel, the question of getting it right is explored in the context of
the different identities that are available to women at different historical and cultural
moments. Much like the effect of textual layering achieved through Ruby’s dual
narrative voice and the imaginative reconstruction of the past in *Behind the Scenes at
the Museum*, the temporal structure in *Life After Life* (in which Ursula lives out
variations of her possible narrative trajectories) overlays different narrative
possibilities that act to limit, and then to release Ursula and the other women in the
novel to specific identities. Extending Ruby’s journey to self-awareness in the earlier
novel, *Life After Life* explores Ursula’s quest to get it right by firstly recognising and
giving voice to women’s lives, experiences and histories, and then connecting these
histories to the political realm through the interweaving and combining of domestic
and war-time narratives. In doing so, the novel disrupts the boundaries between
women’s and men’s lives, between the personal and the political, between the
concerns of the domestic sphere and the public and national concerns of war. *Life
After Life* thus alludes to a different, more capacious and flexible temporal structure,
one in which time and identity are not reductively constrained by delimiting notions
of gender, and in which getting it right is no longer a choice between women’s
domestic and political concerns but an integration (even if uneven) of the two. Such a
reading allows us to glimpse a world in which women’s domestic and political lives
are not mutually exclusive, but enrich and inform each other, albeit often in tension
and contradiction.

**Overview of Life After Life**

Before discussing the specific temporalities identified in *Life After Life* I will firstly
provide an overview of the plot, narrative structure and themes of the novel in order
to contextualise my reading of the three layers of time utilised to form the temporal
palimpsest. Given the complexity of Atkinson’s use of time, and my reading of the narrative through layers of time, rather than as chronologically written, this overview will broadly trace the way in which the temporal layers work both independently, and ultimately interconnectedly, in the novel to provide a sense of the palimpsest as a whole, before moving on to a close reading of each layer of time.

*Life After Life* is constructed in a series of textual layers, each representing a repeat of Ursula’s life with at times subtle, and at others drastic, differences. This structure builds a vision of a past that is never complete but multifaceted and continuously manifesting its complexity. Ursula’s journey to self-awareness mimics the increasing intricacy of the novel’s textual layering, with the early chapters of the novel addressing the challenge of surviving to adulthood—from birth, where she is strangled by the umbilical cord (17); to early childhood, where she drowns at the beach (38); and middle-childhood, where she and her brother die in the Spanish Influenza pandemic (103)—while later chapters move on to address issues of identity and political agency. As an adult, Ursula lives out many of the prescribed female identities that, in different contexts, might be considered getting it right for women in the novel, such as in the roles of mother, wife, and heroine.

The surface narrative of *Life After Life* sets Ursula on a distinctly political trajectory by suggesting that, for her, getting it right involves fulfilling her quest to assassinate Hitler, thereby preventing the Second World War and saving the life of her brother Teddy. Yet, despite succeeding in her assassination attempt in two versions of her life, Ursula’s political success does not lead to a long-term shift in the events of the past. Rather, time continues to be reset, Hitler is not erased from history, war is not prevented, and, presumably, Ursula’s brother is not saved. Instead, as Ursula lives through the various incarnations of her life, the question of getting it right becomes increasingly complicated, and readers are disabused of the notion that
a large, single gesture can be the sole means for provoking social and political change. Therefore, if as the novel suggests, a single heroic act on Ursula’s part changes nothing, we are left with the question, what does it mean to get it right? Using this premise to direct the reader through the textual layers of Ursula’s story, the narrative then explores the prospect that getting it right in the context of women’s lives, cannot be reduced to a single historical shift, but rather, involves an incremental re-imagination and re-negotiation of their domestic and public lives as historical and ethically responsible individuals.

In the monumental layer of time in Life After Life, Atkinson draws upon fairy-tale structures and tropes to explore Ursula’s early understanding of her place in the world. Fairy tale is used to demonstrate the limitations of mythological narratives as directors of women’s lives, and through this interrogation the novel engenders Ursula’s independence and her drive to achieve her political goals. Ursula’s identification with a submissive persona constructed in monumental time is restricted to a single version of her life in which she enacts the role of a victimised character (175–230). In this rendition of her life, Ursula identifies with the qualities typical of a traditional fairy-tale heroine of “docility, gentleness, and good temper” (Lieberman 1987, 385), and this manifests in her unwitting acceptance of victim status. The novel takes the consequences of the submissive identity to its extreme in its graphic portrayal of rape and domestic violence, with Ursula being murdered by her husband, thus underscoring the psychological and physical risks such identities engender.

The novel’s monumental temporal layer also uses the language and tropes of fairy tale to interrogate submissive female identities in the broader scope of politics and war. The rendition of Hitler and Germany in fairy tale terms puts into relief the question of the female figure’s ethical responsibility to act within the political sphere, a responsibility that submissive fairy-tale identities typically suppress because, in
such narratives, “active, resourceful girls are in fact rare” (Lieberman 1987, 387). Through its palimpsestic depiction of the limitations of Ursula’s personal and political agency in the monumental layer of time, the novel works towards the construction of a female protagonist who integrates her domestic and public identities in order to enact political change. As such, *Life After Life* draws parallels between Ursula’s episodic quest and that of the protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Snow Queen” (2009), Gerda. Unlike other fairy-tale heroines, Gerda is the active agent in her story and her quest involves bravery, cunning and perseverance, a portrayal that is an aberration in the tradition of fairy-tale heroines.

While Ursula quickly rejects the identity of the submissive heroine, her understanding of women’s maternal and domestic identities in relation to history and the public sphere is more difficult to disrupt. The depictions of women’s maternal lives in *Life After Life* present a complex portrayal of the satisfaction they derive from, and the significance they place upon, motherhood, while at the same time the physical and political restrictions their confinement to the domestic realm imposes. As such, the choice for women in the novel between a maternal, domestic life, and a political and public life is represented as a source of conflict and compromise for them.

Women’s domestic and maternal identities are explored predominantly through Ursula’s mother, Sylvie, and the domestic space of Fox Corner. Sylvie reifies her domestic life, asserting that a “woman’s highest calling is to be a mother and a wife”

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2 *Life After Life* draws indirectly on the superficial, episodic structure of Andersen’s fairy tale, on associations between Hitler and the Goblin and the Snow Queen, and also on the tale’s depiction of a heroine on a quest. “The Snow Queen”, the less well-known fairy tale by Anderson published in 1844, is divided into seven parts and is the story of Gerda, who journeys to rescue her childhood friend Kay from the Snow Queen’s palace. On Gerda’s journey she endures many trials, meeting characters such as the old woman in the flower garden and the robber girl, who interrupts her quest. Gerda does eventually save Kay, and they return as young adults to their home town where it is no longer winter but spring (Andersen 2009, 302). In *Life After Life*, Ursula’s story resets to a snowy winter scene, suggesting that her quest is not complete.
(183), and urges her daughters to value domesticity above education and public life. At the same time, however, Sylvie is portrayed as limited by her mothering role through her physical confinement to Fox Corner, and her powerlessness to change the political events that lead to death of her son Teddy. Mirroring Sylvie’s narrative, Ursula’s own experience of mothering serves to highlight the way in which maternal and domestic identities constrain women’s capacity to engage in political activity. For example, Ursula finds herself unable to fulfil her quest to assassinate Hitler, despite having the opportunity, because she is fearful of the consequences for her child. This curbing of her power to act leaves her helpless and alone in Berlin and ultimately manifests in Ursula’s murder–suicide of herself and her daughter. The question of getting it right for Ursula, then, also becomes a larger question of how women might maintain their connection to the domestic and maternal realms without necessarily surrendering their political agency or participation in the public sphere.

*Life After Life* attempts to address this question through an exploration of women’s public lives in the linear temporal layer. In several incarnations Ursula leads a life in the public domain, living in London where she works in the civil service and (in the Second World War) volunteers as a rescue warden. These versions of her life are compared to the experience of her aunt Izzie, whose decision to remain childless (after being forced to give up a baby adoption at sixteen), and whose successful career represent a different narrative for women. Izzie is excluded from the intimate domestic, emotional and social connections to other women because of her rejection of motherhood and her desire for career and its associated social freedoms. While at times Izzie’s choices are depicted as desirable, with Ursula trying to emulate her aunt, ultimately, Izzie is represented as a character who is rejected by other women in the novel, as well as living on the fringes of the masculine world of linear time. Ursula too is depicted as positioned at the margins of
public life, particularly in contrast with her brother Maurice. Despite her lifelong employment in the civil service and her achievements as a woman in government, Ursula comes to understand that she never had any real power, noting that she was “not that senior unfortunately … not in charge. That was still for the Maurices of this world” (421; emphasis in original). This comment wryly acknowledges the disparity between opportunity and talent evident in some men’s successful careers, including Maurice, whom the family consider “a complete dolt” (183). And so the novel reveals that women’s choice between a public or a domestic life, but never both at the same time, is always a compromise.

As the novel progresses, the boundaries between the domestic and the political worlds are literally and figuratively dismantled. The physical demarcation of public and private spaces is broken down by the effects of the bombing raids, with domestic lives torn open and exposed on the city streets. Alongside this visual depiction of the novel’s deconstruction of the physical spaces within the novel, which also represent the collapsing of distinctions between different temporal modes, is the subtle interlacing of Ursula’s palimpsestic experience of reincarnation in which the discrete layers of her various lives begin to coalesce and intermingle. She begins to remember previous experiences, and develops a sense that “the past seemed to leak into the present” (455; emphasis in original), evoking the sense of palimpsest time in which the temporal layers of her narratives, as well as the temporal modes through which the various female identities in the novel are constructed, force what Sarah Dillon describes in her discussion of *Atonement* (2001) as the “interwoven palimpsestuous”, the “fabric in which the present is inhabited by the past” (2013, 112). The effect of this, therefore, is that Ursula comes to embody all of her past lives and their associated identities: mother, wife, daughter, heroine, victim. In her new understanding of time and identity Ursula’s quest, then, becomes a search for a way
to integrate the personal with the political.

Near the end of the novel, Ursula chooses to sacrifice herself in order to reset time and lead a life that she knows will allow her to fulfil her quest to assassinate Hitler. This subsequent life is informed by all of the identities that she has embodied and witnessed throughout the novel, and before she dies she thinks: “This is love … And the practice of it makes perfect” (458). This sentiment produces a palimpsestic depiction of Ursula’s domestic, maternal and political motivations by drawing together the three modes of time that have informed and shaped her ever-evolving sense of identity. Further, it suggests, what Kristeva describes as the “demand for a new ethics” (1996e, 211), the importance of women acting upon their ethical responsibilities as both a domestic and a political concern. In this moment Ursula is a martyr, sacrificing herself in the hope of saving her brother; a mirror for her mother, repeating the words that Sylvie spoke as she saved Ursula’s life with a pair of gold scissors, “Practice makes perfect” (468); and the active heroine of her own narrative. And while, ultimately, Ursula does not succeed in integrating the domestic and the political, the novel expresses the understanding that the effort to do so will always be contested and conflicted: “We can never get it right, but we must try” (404).

Monumental Time: Constructing a New Heroine

While the many lives experienced by Ursula in Life After Life are narrated as largely independent of each other—with, for a substantial portion of the novel, Ursula’s uncanny recollections and inklings being explained away as déjà-vu—the palimpsestic configuration of Life After Life encourages a collated reading of her various experiences, with each incarnation viewed as interconnected with the others. Consequently, with the two lives in which monumental narratives are most explicitly rendered in the novel—one beginning with a portrayal of Ursula as a sixteen-year-
old girl, the other a depiction of her time in Hitler’s summer retreat as a wife and mother—each works to interrogate simplified and reductive mythological portrayals, the outcomes of which become integrated into Ursula’s understanding of herself in the other variations of her life. And while these two lives appear disparate, in terms both of chronology and narrative focus, when read in palimpsestic terms they collectively speak to the novel’s interest in puncturing narratives that maintain women as inactive or static characters in both their personal and political lives. Thus, I address these two versions of Ursula’s life as complementary halves of the same question: reading first the dismantling of the fairy-tale heroine as a viable personal narrative for Ursula; and secondly, the rendition of Hitler in fairy tale terms as an ironic expansion and critique of the novel’s examination of traditional monumental narratives. In other words, on the one hand Life After Life contrasts the superficial, stultifying, and ethically regressive narrative of fairy tale against the very real consequences for women of embodying a submissive identity and, on the other, extends this deconstruction through irony, by imposing the limited and superficial scope of fairy-tale imagery onto its portrayal of Hitler. When read together, these two versions of Ursula’s life expose monumental narratives as simplistic, dangerous and ethically reductive, and through these renditions, seek to generate more positive and productive narratives about women that will go on to inform the cyclical and linear temporal layers of the novel.

Life After Life undertakes a specific interrogation of identities constructed in monumental time through an exploration of the physical and psychological dangers to women inherent in traditional fairy-tale narratives if they are carried out in their literal sense. In this incarnation of her life, Ursula is depicted as identifying with the

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3 The connection between fairy tale language and imagery and violence against women is a recurrent theme in Atkinson’s work. Samanta Trivellini (2016) discusses this connection in her reading of Atkinson’s Human Croquet.
traits of a submissive fairy-tale heroine, such as “good-temper and meekness” (Lieberman 1987, 385). Caught between two maternal influences—her aunt Izzie, who encourages Ursula’s burgeoning sexuality by buying her a “satin and lace bedjacket” for her sixteenth birthday, and her mother, who denies Ursula’s sexual maturity by insisting that the gift is “far too grown up”, and that “Ursula wears flannelette” (178)—Ursula turns to the example set by fairy-tale narratives to help her navigate the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood. Such narratives, however, often link beauty and docility with romantic success and potentially run the risk of blurring the lines between consensual and dangerous sexual encounters.

When her brother’s friend Howie kisses her on her sixteenth birthday, Ursula’s response to his aggressive overtures—of which “‘kiss’ seemed too courtly a word”, and from which she thought “she would choke, for sure” (182)—is to congratulate herself on the “considerable accomplishment” of being singled out “in such an unlooked-for way” (182). Ursula’s ambivalent sense of ‘pleasure’ at Howie’s unexpected advances stem, not from the sexual act, but from her apparent success in emulating the desirable qualities of the fairy-tale heroine, and the validation that her unassuming identity will lead to the attention and admiration of men. Having accosted Ursula in the garden, Howie then rapes her when he finds her alone on the staircase.

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4 Ursula alludes to her engagement with fairy-tale narratives throughout the novel. For example, she and her sister read “The Red Fairy Book” (88) and the “The Lilac Fairy Book” (90); she remembers reading about “fairy tales of wronged princesses” (321); considers Munich to be “more fairy-tale-like than England” (462); and alludes to the way in which fairy tales manipulate time: “it felt like hours had passed but she supposed it was only minutes really, like in the best fairy stories” (182).

5 Linking characteristics of beauty and docility with reward, fairy tales reinforce the notion that a young girl “does not have to do anything to merit being chosen” other than be beautiful and unadventurous (Lieberman 1987, 386).

6 It is important to note here that neither this thesis nor Atkinson’s representations of women in Life After Life subscribe to the belief that women are responsible for their own victimisation. This thesis reads Atkinson’s rendering of this extreme version of Ursula as a passive identity as instead exploring and experimenting with the way in which fairy tale narratives, if enacted in a literal sense, disempower women by valorising victimhood. For discussions of feminism and victimisation, see Astrid Henry (2004); Liz Kelly, Shiela Burton and Linda Regan (1996); Carolyn Sorisio (1997); Katie Roiphe (1993).
The rape scene itself is short, though no less horrifying for that; however, the long-term effects of the violence perpetrated by Howie against Ursula establishes a cycle of victimisation that continues through this version of Ursula’s life. Consistent with her learned submissive behaviour, Ursula assumes that her rape is a result of her own moral failure to uphold the virtues of chastity and innocence expected of her, rather than as a consequence of Howie’s violent and ethically bankrupt actions. She thus feels responsible for her own victimhood, determining that her attacker must have detected “something written on her skin, in her face”, sensed “something unchaste” about her, and that, somehow, she should have known “better than to be caught on those back stairs—or in the shrubbery—like the heroine in a gothic novel” (186). This assertion is later confirmed when her mother rejects Ursula for having, as she tells her daughter, “thrown away your virtue, your character, everyone’s good opinion of you” (196). As a character (in this life) who, more generally, takes no personal responsibility for her physical or psychological safety, Ursula becomes hostage to the belief that her victimisation is warranted and of her own doing.

From this positon, Ursula is no longer able to protect herself against the emotional and physical consequences of her rape. When she discovers she is pregnant, she turns to her aunt Izzie (a character who is never depicted as submissive), who procures her an abortion in a London clinic. This scene reflects Ursula’s physical and emotional compliance in relying on other people to solve her problems, and a naïve world-view that is reflected in her misunderstanding that, rather than having an abortion, her baby will be born and given “to someone nice” (194). And so, as if to confirm Ursula’s lack of agency over her body and her future,

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7 As Sue Misheff explains, fairy-tale heroines are “not merely passive” but they are “frequently victims and martyrs” (Misheff 1998, 193).
8 The reference to the gothic genre—a genre closely associated with myth and fairy tale—indicates simultaneously her self-blame as well as a dawning knowledge that she needs to refuse the roles assigned to women by this generic script (Rowe 1989, 237).
the abortion scene mirrors the rape scene: with Howie having his hand “clamped over her mouth” in one (185), and the nurse in the clinic “pushed her down and hooked her feet up … place[ing] a mask over her face” in the other (193). In each instance Ursula is physically silenced by the person acting upon her body, and through these acts she loses control over her physical and emotional wellbeing, reflected in her conviction that “the arch that led to womanhood did not seem so triumphal any more, merely brutal and completely uncaring” (186).

This belief then shapes her narrative trajectory, with Ursula perpetuating the physical and emotional abuse upon herself through alcohol dependence. When she meets her future husband, after she has fallen in the street and broken her nose, she imagines that he has ‘rescued’ her from her long-term punishment. Feeling a moment of liberation that “she was going to belong to someone, safe at last, that was all that counted. Being a bride was nothing, being a wife was everything” (210), Ursula replaces the possibility of love with gratitude, relieved that “someone wanted to look after her” (209). However, unable to break the cycle of self-blame and victimisation, she is once again unable to foresee the physical danger inherent in her submissive behaviour. And so, rather than being rescued by marriage, Ursula’s relationship with her husband repeats the cycle of events from her interaction with Howie. Ursula concedes that Derek’s violence against her is inevitable: “she was asking to be killed”, and her acceptance of her husband’s abuse reflects her ongoing belief that she deserves to be punished, for both her rape and the resultant abortion of her unborn child—“but wasn’t that easier than doing it herself? She didn’t care anymore, there was no fight in her” (225).

However, something does shift in Ursula’s understanding of herself following the violent assault by her husband. She places herself in a new narrative, imagining
herself as “Ibsen’s Nora” (226), and flees to her aunt’s house once again. Despite Ursula’s husband eventually finding and murdering her, Ursula’s shift away from reductive narratives and towards stories in which women act on their own behalf is an important one. It marks the end of her victimisation in the novel, allowing her, in subsequent lives, to discard the materially limiting and ethically reductive narratives of monumental time in her personal, domestic life. Ursula’s recognition of the dangers of enacting and conforming to passive narratives about women is made apparent in the life that follows, where she once again encounters Howie in the garden. This time, however, Ursula punches the would-be rapist “in a very unladylike way” (231). A shocked Howie remarks “it wasn’t like I was trying to rape you or anything” (231; emphasis in original), and Ursula “might have blushed, should have blushed at the word but she felt a certain possession of it” (231). Where in the previous life Howie’s kiss had been the harbinger of Ursula’s persistent victimhood, in this new life, where Ursula refuses the conventional response, her actions represent a “small triumph for her womanhood” (231). This shift, a rejection of the limiting identities available to this character in monumental time, reflects an incremental transformation across the palimpsest of Ursula’s many lives that sees her experience and reject many different versions of what getting it right might mean for women, not just in monumental time but, later, in cyclical and linear time too.

While this early version of Ursula’s life reflects the inherent physical, emotional and psychological risks of embodying a submissive identity in women’s personal lives, *Life After Life* further complicates its disruption of monumental time through the portrayal of Hitler in fairy tale terms to explore the implications of women taking up

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9 Feminist readings of Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*, written in 1879, argue that Nora is an example of “Everywoman’s struggle against Everyman” (Templeton 1989, 36), and the “clearest and most substantial expression of the ‘woman question’” that had been published to date (Templeton 1989, 32). At the end of Ibsen’s play Nora storms out of the house and slams the door behind her, effectively ending her marriage.
or being assigned submissive identities in their political lives. In the months leading into the Second World War Ursula is encamped at Hitler’s summer retreat—“the kingdom of make-believe” of “the Berg” (321). She finds herself immersed in a sinister fairy tale-like world of “prowling she-wolves” (322), where Hitler is portrayed in terms such as the “wolf” (322), the emperor, whom only Ursula can see is naked (337), and the Prince who awoke Germany, though “not with a kiss” (335). Each of these depictions relies on the reader’s ability to “recognise ‘fairytale-like’ qualities in a fiction, without knowing a specific fairytale to which this text relates” (Smith 2007, 48; emphasis in original). Thus the novel’s appropriation of fairy-tale language in its depictions of Hitler, like its earlier portrayal of Ursula’s rape, builds on the expectations of a predetermined outcome, the so-called ‘happily ever after’, in order to construct an ironic juxtaposition of the fantastical horror and pleasure of fairy tale with the truly horrific events of the Second World War.

The novel’s engagement with monumental time in this portrayal of Ursula’s experiences in Germany depicts Ursula’s loss of innocence, in both her naïve belief that, as consistent with fairy-tale narratives, there would inevitably be a “restoration of justice in the world” (335), as well as her own culpability in observing, but not acting against, the actions of Hitler. Once “an avid reader of fairy tales”, Ursula discovers through her time at Hitler’s castle that she has “been duped by die Brüder Grimm” (335), and that the events of World War Two will not miraculously be righted by resolution of the story. Thus the novel presents a complex layering of both fairy-tale imagery and the atrocities of the Second World War to compound the individual and social consequences of transposing submissive identities into a broader political context. For example, on the same page that Ursula learns that her friend’s husband has been taken to a concentration camp—“They’re not really factories, you know” (335; emphasis in original)—is the incongruous discovery that
Hitler’s favourite movie is Disney’s *Snow White* (334), and his favourite song is “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” from *The Three Little Pigs* (322). And so, the myths of monumental time, in producing narratives that might magically correct the wrongs of the world, such as Ursula’s rape, or the atrocities of war, are rendered ethically absurd, even outrageous. Instead, Ursula’s world-view shifts once again and she determines that nothing will change, personally or politically as long as, as fairy-tale narratives would have it, “good women do nothing” (333; emphasis in original).

These two versions of Ursula’s life, linked through the monumental layer of time in the novel, enable a palimpsestic reading that works against the oversimplification of women’s lives, sexual and physical safety, and personal, political and ethical authority in mythological narratives. This reading suggests that subscribing to the traditional narratives constructed in monumental time inhibits women’s potential for active and autonomous intervention into the private and public spheres of which their lives are a part. However, the novel’s exposure of the limitations of fairy tale to narrate productive gendered representations of how to get it right does not propose a disengagement with monumental time altogether but, rather, expresses a need for the creation of new myths that produce a more evolved sense of monumental time. The possibility of new female mythological narratives is alluded to through a depiction of Sylvie. At one of Ursula’s births at the start of the novel, Sylvie determines to buy a pair of surgical scissors in case she ever needs to cut the cord from around another baby’s neck. She imagines herself to be “like the robber-girl in *The Snow Queen*” (21), a character that (like Gerda from “The Snow Queen”) is adventurous and self-sufficient. This scene is then repeated at the end of the novel, where Sylvie produces “a pair of surgical scissors that gleamed in the lamplight. ‘One must be prepared,’ she muttered” (468). This doubling of imagery represents a transition in the novel from mythological depictions of female characters
in traditional fairy-tale narratives to the production of new myths that, in palimpsestic relation with cyclical and linear time, assert women’s personal, political and ethical agency.

Cyclical Time: The Politics of Motherhood

Women’s domestic and maternal lives are finely constructed in the cyclical temporal layer of *Life After Life*, helping to account for both the intense emotional fulfilment to be gleaned from women’s connection to the maternal, as well as the contradictions contained by the traditional maternal figure as both imbued with national and political significance, and source of political disempowerment. Through its depictions of Ursula’s and her mother, Sylvie’s, experiences and feelings towards motherhood, *Life After Life* establishes that for women a denial of their connection to domestic and maternal identities does not address or overcome their exclusion from public life, but presents instead an impossible choice that limits their personal, ethical and political agency. At the same time, however, *Life After Life* explores the use of the maternal identity in the larger national narrative, both as a justification for war and imperialism, and as a means by which women’s political marginalisation is understood as a consequence of the idealisation of their maternity. Therefore, in portraying motherhood, the narrative balances the ambivalence inherent in women’s maternal and domestic identities by acknowledging the significance of this identity, while also dismantling idealised notions of the maternal through its evolving depiction of Ursula’s mother and childhood home, Fox Corner, as isolated and apolitical. In so doing, *Life After Life* does not work to disconnect women in the novel from their maternal and domestic roles, but rather works to unsettle the

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10 Kristeva’s ‘third-wave’ of feminism involves both the “insertion into history and the radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history’s time on an experiment carried out in the name of the irreducible difference” (1996e, 195)
boundaries between the personal and political that would force women to choose between domestic and public spheres.

Through its representation of Sylvie, the novel explores the positive elements of women’s maternal and domestic lives, specifically the intimate relationship women have with their children. This is pitted against the inevitable constraints such an identity may impose on women in terms of their public and political lives—often rendering women in the narrative as politically disempowered because of their association with the care of children and their physical isolation in the domestic space. Unlike in the monumental layer of time, women’s maternal identities are not viewed through the fantastical rendering of fairy-tale mothers in an individual sense, in that no single female character is created as a flawless maternal figure; rather, in the cyclical temporality, women’s domestic and maternal lives are idealised (and critiqued) as part of the historical, cultural and political fabric of a nationalistic image of England.

The notion of women’s maternal role as a nationally idealised identity interwoven with the political realm, and with history, is reinforced through Ursula’s reference to the nation in such terms as “mother tongue” (297), and the “motherland” (335). These terms connect national and imperial power to the maintenance and protection of the physical space of the home. They also define the ideological values underpinning the depiction of the domestic realm as distinct from, and yet critical to, the survival of the public and political arenas. In both cases, the maternal figure is positioned at the centre of such delineations.  

This is reflected in Sylvie’s, understanding that

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11 Amy Kaplan argues that the domestic sphere, of which the mother is the cornerstone, is a key site of nation building because it provides a “sense of at-homeness” in relation to a foreign, “external world” (Kaplan 1998, 582). On this basis, the domestic realm is an integral component of “empire and nation building” (Kaplan 1998, 584), which unites men and women with a common understanding of home versus foreign (Kaplan 1998, 582).
Motherhood was her responsibility, her destiny. For lack of anything else (and what else could there be?), her life. The future of England was clutched to Sylvie’s bosom. Replacing her was not a casual undertaking, as if her absence meant little more than her presence (51).

In this depiction Sylvie’s positon is represented as central to the idea of nation, “the future of England” (51), with the maternal identity elevated to embody a national identity. At the same time, the above description alludes to the prescribed and limited way in which women in the narrative risk becoming subsumed by the maternal—“for lack of anything else (and what else could there be?)”.

And so, Sylvie’s understanding of her place in the world relies upon her own investment in the idealisation of the maternal role and the domestic space as foundational to the nation’s identity and political objectives. As such, Sylvie and the women at Fox Corner work to perpetuate the distinction between foreign (territory) and home, and to maintain the idea of home as a safe and apolitical space. For example, during the First World War, the women of Fox Corner embark upon a “knitting frenzy” (64), producing “mufflers and mittens, gloves and socks and hats, vests and sweaters—to keep their men warm” (61). For Sylvie, this contribution is reflected in the belief that her domestic life is as much a calling as a matter of circumstance because, for her, a “woman’s highest calling is to be a wife and a mother” (183).

Sylvie herself is not represented as an idealised maternal figure, as in fairy tale; rather, she signifies the challenge for women in the novel of developing an identity that will facilitate their participation in both the public and private spheres. Sylvie perpetuates the valorisation of women’s maternal lives as a personal calling (as well as one which supports the nationalist narrative of England) and the tradition

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12 The alternative to a maternal identity is explored in my discussion of linear time through the character of Izzie, whose decision to pursue a public life and career as an author sees her characterised (particularly by Sylvie) as “mad, bad and dangerous to know” (157), because she does not uphold the traditional, gendered distinction between public and private realms that helps support the dominant national identity of England, as Atkinson depicts it, in the first half of the twentieth century.
of domesticity, which she then attempts to pass on to her daughters. For example, Sylvie’s acceptance of her central, and apparently inevitable, maternal role is reflected in her assertion to her daughters that “University won’t teach you how to be a wife and mother” (301), and that “academia was pointless for girls” (183). This is not to say, however, that Sylvie uncritically accepts the disparity between the social and historical status of women’s lives in the domestic and the public spheres. When Pamela (Ursula’s sister) asks her mother if she would prefer she “slave over a hot stove rather than a Bunsen burner”, Sylvie responds, “What did science ever do for the world, apart from make better ways of killing people” (183). Sylvie’s response to Pamela’s accusation reflects a pragmatic acceptance of her isolation from public and political affairs because of her domestic identity, while at the same time levelling a wry indictment of the disproportionate (and often dubious) value accorded to activities played out in the public and political worlds. Accordingly, Sylvie’s understanding of her maternal role, to her mind, is of no less significance than the large political landscape represented within the text, reflected in her contemplation of how to “explain the magnitude of motherhood to someone who has no children?” (50).

Sylvie, as a character that identifies most significantly with the domestic realm, is depicted almost exclusively within the limits of Fox Corner. As if to support the idea of the maternal as coterminous with a romanticised national identity, for “the English Soul, if it resided anywhere, was surely in some unheroic back garden—a patch of lawn, a bed of roses, a row of runner beans” (323), Fox Corner is depicted in terms of its connection to nature, “the foxes, the rabbits, the pheasants, the hares, the cows and the big plough horses” (347). The expository partitioning of Fox Corner from London produces a material representation of the traditional ways in which women’s lives, as embedded within the cyclical temporality of the maternal
and the domestic, have been segregated from the political realm of history, which in
the first half of the twentieth century is dominated by the narrative of war. London,
for example, in figuring the public and political realm of historical, linear time stands
in contrast to Fox Corner, with Ursula’s apartment building being described in
distinctly different terms than those depicting her childhood home: “The building had
been Dickensian in its dinginess to begin with and was now even more neglected and
unloved. But then, the whole of London looked wretched. Grimy and grim” (134).

Such depictions act in the novel to demonstrate the way that women’s private
and domestic lives have traditionally been treated as incompatible with the public
and political worlds, as well as reinforcing the domestic as a venerated space that
must be protected from the rough and tumble of the public domain. For example,
despite the devastation that the war is wreaking on the city of London, Fox Corner
remains both productive and safe, with Ursula receiving care packages from home:

A wooden crate filled with potatoes, leeks, onions, an enormous
emerald-green Savoy cabbage (a thing of beauty) and on the top half a
dozen eggs, nestled in cotton wool inside an old trilby of Hughes’s.
Lovely eggs, brown and speckled, as precious as unpolished
gemstones, tiny feathers stuck here and there. Even more puzzling
was how her sister had managed to dig up this wintry harvest when
Earth stood hard as iron (135; emphasis in original).

This description creates an image of Fox Corner as a place that thrives in spite of the
devastation wreaked by the war, producing a sense that the domestic space is
somehow immune from the events playing out in the political sphere. However, the
idealised depiction of Fox Corner—which Ursula later recognises as an illusion
perpetuated by nostalgia, that “home was an idea, and like Arcadia it was lost in the
past” (286)—and indeed Sylvie’s maternal steadfastness are both disrupted as the
narrative progresses. Ursula’s own experiences as a mother force her to the
awareness that Sylvie’s venerated version of a maternal and domestic identity merely
works to highlight women’s isolation from, and powerlessness to intervene in, public
and political life.

Ursula’s awareness of the inextricable connection between the public and private spheres becomes apparent as the opposition between women’s domestic and political identities—both through the disruption of Fox Corner as a physically protected space, and the character of Sylvie as an unwavering image of the maternal—are slowly dismantled in the novel. As Ursula’s various lives are lived and repeated, fissures appear in her ability to demarcate the temporal realms which she inhabits, with “the past seem[ing] to leak into the present, as if there were a fault somewhere” (455; emphasis in original), and with it the rendering of Fox Corner as an idealised space held apart from the changes of time and war. Instead, the veracity of Fox Corner as an idealised and naturalised domestic realm, and the maternal identity as something immune from the vicissitudes of history, are deconstructed through the inevitable seepage of the effects of war into the daily lives of the women in the novel.

Ursula’s father’s return from war alludes to the impact upon families of men’s absence as well as the cost of their experiences of war. Hugh returns as a stranger to his children, indicated by their confusion at his presence: “‘Mummy’s kissing a man. She’s crying. He’s crying as well’ … ‘I think it might be Daddy,’ she said.” (130). Yet despite attempts to maintain the domestic space as protected from the territories of war, the silenced histories of the men in the novel haunt the idealised depiction of Fox Corner. This becomes evident to Ursula as her lives repeat and her own experiences of war begin to inform her domestic identity and daily life: “She thought of all those soldiers from the last war who had come home and never spoken of what they had witnessed in the trenches. Mr Simms, Mr Palmer, her own father too, of course” (365). Despite the romanticised image of Fox Corner that dominates in the narrative, the material impacts of war cannot be glossed over by the
repeated descriptions of Fox Corner’s natural beauty:

[the local villager] had been invalided out of the army and now wore a tin mask … she gave an impolite little scream when he turned round and she saw his face for the first time. The mask had one wide-open eye painted blue to match the real one (80).

Similarly, the depiction of Fox Corner as a distinctly maternal space is disrupted by the violent rape and murder of the anonymous “Angela” in one of Ursula’s lives (173), and Ursula’s neighbour, Nancy Shawcross, in another (198). As if to dramatise Ursula’s understanding that cyclical and linear time are interwoven, by the end of the war Fox Corner is swept away by national progress and absorbed into the city: “the village had grown around them, more and more houses. The meadow is gone, the copse too, many of the fields from Ettringham Hall’s home farm had been sold off to a developer” (423).

As Fox Corner as an idealised space detached from the political turmoil of the war is dismantled, so too is Sylvie’s conviction about the supremacy of her maternal role. Towards the end of the novel Ursula’s father comments to Sylvie, “I remember that you once said there was no higher calling for a woman than marriage” and she responds, “Did I? That must have been in our salad days” (366), as if, as for Ursula, time and experience have shifted her understanding of who she is. And so, Sylvie’s faith in the maternal identity as a venerated figure is called into question by the small moments in the novel that allude to the physical restrictions mothering places upon her, such as navigating “the always tricky problem of how to feed a baby in public” (37), as well as the large events in Sylvie’s life that demonstrate the emotional burden of caring for, and investing in, children’s lives. For example, in a version of Ursula’s life in which she and her brother Teddy die from Spanish Influenza, Sylvie’s grief is overwhelming and she “snatch[e] Teddy from the bed and held him tightly to her breast and howled with pain. Dear God, Dr Fellows thought, the woman grieved like a savage” (102). The intensity of Sylvie’s emotional
commitment to her maternal identity is later echoed by Ursula, who notes that “she had had no idea (Sylvie gave little indication) that maternal love could be so gut-achingly, painfully physical” (322; emphasis in original).

While Sylvie and Ursula acknowledge the intensity and significance of their maternal roles—“That’s how motherhood feels every day” (161)—the cost of their maternal identities is the limitation placed on their agency as characters in public life. For Ursula, the way in which maternal and domestic identities isolate women from their ethical responsibility for public action is made apparent in the section of the novel in which she has direct access to Hitler in his summer retreat, “the Berg” (321). In this version of her life, the only time she enacts a maternal identity, Ursula conveys the restriction that motherhood places upon her, as though her domestic responsibilities trump her ability to act in the political world—“Plenty of guns, thought Ursula, easy enough to get hold of a Luger and shoot him through the heart or the head. But then what would happen to her? Worse, what would happen to Frieda?” (332). The contradiction between Ursula’s willingness to “walk on knives for the rest of her life if it would protect Frieda” (321), and her reluctance to act on the opportunity to assassinate Hitler precisely because of her responsibilities as a mother, mirrors the broader incompatibilities between women’s public and private lives.

For Sylvie, this discrepancy between the magnitude of her domestic and maternal obligations and her incapacity to shape the political landscape leads ultimately to her suicide. Once a source of pride, Sylvie’s maternal identity leaves her helpless to prevent the death of her son Teddy in the war. This helplessness leads Sylvie to “swallow[] a bottle of sleeping pills” in two versions of Ursula’s life (136; 415), and, as if to recognise that women’s domestic and maternal lives cannot be viewed as separate from the public and political realms, Ursula notes that her
mother’s death “was another casualty of war, another statistic” (136).

Driven by political powerlessness, Sylvie’s suicide is mirrored by Ursula in one episode when she and her daughter are alone and helpless in Berlin. In this life Ursula is stranded in Germany as Russian troops march on the city and, fearful that she and her daughter will be raped by the approaching army, that they will starve, or that Frieda will succumb to her illness, Ursula exercises the only power she has left over her life and chooses murder–suicide (347–48). Both Ursula and Sylvie thus become “casualties of war” (136), because of their inability to act outside of the domestic or maternal realms. This moment of helplessness for Ursula is shown to change her perspective of time, identity and her own actions. Echoing the scene that created her break with monumental time at the hands of her husband Derek in another life, Ursula in this scene sees the world as “cracked and broken” and comes to a realisation that “the order of things had changed” (348). This is because getting it right for Ursula must ultimately result in finding a way to embody a maternal identity that does not preclude the possibility of her participating in the public and political realms.

Linear Time: Witnessing the Past

My reading of Life After Life’s temporal palimpsest has so far explored the theme of ‘getting it right’ through identities constructed in monumental and cyclical time, such as the fairy-tale heroine, and the maternal. In each case, the novel demonstrates that over-subscribing to an identity assembled in a single mode of time leads to the restriction of women’s ability to act both on their own behalf, but also of their personal, ethical and social obligation to engage with the political world. In my reading of the linear mode of time in Life After Life I extend these readings to explore women’s identities as constructed in linear time through the portrayals of
Izzie and Ursula’s experiences of working in the civil service. The rendering of women’s lives as public figures works in the novel to demonstrate the schism between women’s public and domestic lives because, as Izzie and Ursula show, women in the novel can be either mothers or workers, but not both—and, as demonstrated by Ursula’s sister, Pamela, not at the same time. Thus, while no woman in the novel is able to get it right, *Life After Life* inches ever closer to a palimpsestic notion of time, and to imagining the stratified and integrated identities envisaged in Kristeva’s ‘third-wave’ that such an understanding might offer.

It is through the depiction of Ursula’s work as a rescue warden during the Blitz that *Life After Life* begins to integrate women’s political, public and domestic identities as entwined temporal palimpsest. Many of Ursula’s incarnations partake in this form of work, and the novel takes great care to demonstrate this version of Ursula’s life as an extension of both a domestic identity, and a politically active and ethical one. The physical boundaries between public and private, domestic and political are literally demolished by the devastation of the bombings, leaving the domestic space bare and open to the public and political realm of London to represent visually the inextricable connection between the different spheres. The act of volunteering reflects Ursula’s care ethic through the physical act of rescuing those caught up in the bombing, as well as the political act of bearing witness to the personal and domestic narratives of war. Thus linear time in *Life After Life* explores the limitations placed on women’s desires, ambitions and achievements in the public realm and strives, through its complex layering of domestic and political imagery, to disrupt the circumscribed boundaries between representations of domestic (cyclical) and the historical (linear) time to finally realise time as a “palimpsest” (456).

In its representation of linear time, *Life After Life* explores an alternative to a domestic, maternal life for women through its portrayal of Ursula’s aunt Izzie. While
at times acting as a quasi-maternal figure for Ursula in the novel, she is depicted as a character who has rejected a domestic or maternal identity, choosing instead to pursue a publicly-based life as an author. As a woman in the novel portrayed as living outside the limitations of domestic and maternal life, Izzie is isolated—because of her sexuality, childlessness and career—from other women, such as Sylvie, who had “never forgiven” Izzie for giving up her baby for adoption (154). Izzie’s own mother rejects her for failing to uphold the social norms expected of women in the first half of the twentieth century, seeing her sexual independence as shameful and remarking that she would have “preferred it if Izzie had been kidnapped by white slave traders rather than throwing herself into the arms of debauchery with such enthusiasm” (33)—a position that reflects a strict understanding of women’s identities as constructed solely in the terms of monumental and cyclical time. And so Izzie’s position as emphatically distinct from that of other women in the novel is exemplified in her explanation of her position in society to Ursula: “I, of course, am considered mad, bad and dangerous to know” (157). Izzie’s choice to live outside the cyclical time of the domestic realm of home and motherhood thus positions her outside the community of women in the novel.

Consistent with this depiction of Izzie as free from the restriction of cyclical time and domestic life and as a (sometimes) mentor for Ursula, it is in Izzie’s house that Ursula explores her sexuality. Izzie, who rejects such fairy-tale ‘virtues’ as chastity and passivity, encourages Ursula to try on petticoats, stockings and shoes, and to cut her hair because she is “in danger of looking like a milkmaid, when really I think you’re going to turn out to be deliciously wicked” (163). Izzie challenges Ursula to act on her ambition and explore her sexuality, and in some of her lives set in London Ursula maintains a long-term affair with a married man that she hides.

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13 Hair is a potent symbol of a woman’s virtue and ‘goodness’ in fairy tale (Warner 1994, 367).
from her family, while in others she uses Izzie’s flat to meet her lovers. And so, Izzie’s flat, as a domestic space, is not portrayed in the same romanticised way that Fox Corner is, but instead as a domestic space that is authored by Izzie, not by nature: “Izzie’s bathroom was pink and black marble (‘I designed it myself, delicious, isn’t it?’) and was all sharp lines and hard corners” (163).

Izzie’s rejection of a maternal and domestic identity in favour of what is perceived to be a more adventurous life, lived predominantly within the linear time of the public realm, is represented as a complex set of compromises and, as such, instils a different set of restrictions upon women than those inherent in monumental and cyclical time. For example, while Izzie adopts away her baby when she is sixteen, his existence and her identity as a mother continue to be part of her understanding of herself and the world. When her son (adopted by Ursula’s family in this version) drowns at the beach, Izzie’s maternal identity and right to grieve is disallowed by Sylvie: “‘He was my boy,’ Sylvie said vehemently, ‘don’t you dare say he was yours’” (443; emphasis in original). And in a different narrative thread, Izzie confides to Ursula: “I’m a mother” (383). These moments suggest that in order for women in the novel to live a public or political life they must renounce their maternal and domestic lives, but that Izzie, having merely suppressed rather than surrendered her maternal identity, is incapable of doing so entirely.

In viewing linear time from the perspective of women’s lives, Life After Life also provides a commentary on the limited scope of women’s involvement in the public realm. Izzie, for example, while isolated from other women and the domestic sphere, is also understood to survive on the margins of public life. In one of Ursula’s many lives, Izzie marries a “famous playwright” but, in spite of her past as a columnist and highly successful children’s author, her credentials are not taken seriously and, rather than being “asked to write screenplays for the film industry,”
her job opportunities are limited to the task of writing “some ‘silly’ costume drama” (381). Eventually Izzie’s marriage ends, because, as she explains, her husband was surrounded by “Hollywood starlets” and he was “shallow enough to find them fascinating” (382). While Izzie offers the possibility of a different identity, and a different narrative path than those offered by maternal and domestic identities constructed in cyclical time—reflected in Sylvie’s acknowledgement that she is “envious of Izzie’s war, even the awfulness” (154)—in which a woman may be “independent, emotionally, financially and, most importantly, in her spirit” (153; emphasis in original), the cost of this independence is that “the modern woman must fend for herself without the prospect of the succour of hearth and home” (153). This position, reflecting a disjunction between domestic and public spheres, is one that Life After Life works to repair.

The way in which women’s political and public lives are circumscribed, despite the sacrifice of their maternal and domestic identities, is further illustrated through the portrayal of Ursula’s career in the civil service. While viewed through the lens of care-work, with her employment described as “many years of loyal service” (421), the cost of her public life is that she “had never been a mother or a wife and it was only when she realized that it was too late, that it could never be, that she understood what it was that she had lost” (424). Like Izzie, however, Ursula’s considerable achievements—with her secretary acknowledging, at Ursula’s retirement, that she “helped to pave the way for women in senior positions in the civil service” (421)—are limited. The unequal treatment of Ursula and her brother Maurice is further highlighted at the end of their respective careers by Ursula’s retirement gift from the civil service—tickets to the Proms and a carriage clock—while Maurice receives a knighthood (421).

While the portrayals of Sylvie and Izzie, as examples of identities constructed
within different temporal modes, foreground the limited opportunities of subscribing to either a solely domestic, or a solely public identity, *Life After Life* begins to expand, through the characters of Ursula and her sister Pamela, the notion that women’s domestic lives are interwoven with their public and political identities. This is not to say that the novel provides an idealistic vision of women’s lives as they could be. Rather, through its portrayal of Pamela’s integration of her role as a mother and her later pursuit of life as a public figure, and Ursula’s volunteer work as a rescue warden, the novel begins the delicate work of examining how women’s public lives may also cohere with their domestic identities, and of viewing the domestic space as co-extensive with the public sphere. For example, while Pamela cannot completely fulfil a domestic and a political life at the same time, restricted as she is by the demands of motherhood and her home life, she later becomes a “JP and eventually a chief magistrate, was active on charity boards and last year had won a place on the local council as an independent” (423). Ursula wryly notes, however, that, despite Pamela’s considerable achievements in public life, she still has “the house to keep up” (423), an observation that suggests Pamela’s success in public life will always remain contingent on her ongoing fulfilment of the expectations of her domestic life. And so, while Pamela is the only female character in Ursula’s family to find any form of balance between her public and private identities, it is made evident that her public life and aspirations to act in the public sphere is subordinate to her ongoing domestic responsibilities.

It is through Ursula’s experiences in work and as a volunteer rescue warden during the Blitz that *Life After Life* disrupts notions of the political and public spheres as divorced from the domestic realm, with the palimpsestic nature of time in *Life After Life* serving to imagine the integration of the domestic and political realms by playing out, again and again, the different permutations of Ursula’s possible lives.
While, in the discussion of cyclical time, linear time is shown to leak into the idealised domestic space of the novel, so too does *Life After Life* work to reveal the presence of the domestic within the public, political and historical spaces. The narrative accounts of Ursula’s experiences as a warden depict the civilian impact of war through graphic representations of bombing victims, and provide a visual representation of the inextricable connection between domestic and public concerns through the destruction of the physical boundaries separating these spaces. More than this, however, *Life After Life* creates an ethical connection between the political and the domestic through its empathetic renditions of the far-reaching effects of war.

In the many versions of this life, Ursula participates in the rescue of civilians, some of whom she knows, and many she does not. The novel constructs a sense of continuity and connection between the layered versions of Ursula’s life by returning over and over to the same characters and places, with only Ursula’s mode of connection to them changing. For example, in one life Ursula huddles in the basement shelter with her neighbour Mrs Appleyard and her son Emil; in another, in which Mrs Appleyard and Emil are strangers, Ursula discovers Emil’s body: “She peeled back a layer of wool and then another … a small unblemished hand, a small star, revealed itself from the compacted mass” (396). Similarly, Ursula herself is sometimes killed in this scenario—“She sensed something inside her was torn beyond repair. Cracked.” (292)—and in others, she is saved by the incidental events of daily life, such as chasing a dog across the street. In all these depictions of Ursula’s warden work, the narrative draws out the connections between the personal and the domestic, refusing to generalise its illustrations of war to an “endless stream of figures that represented the blitzed and the bombed … the six million dead, the fifty million dead, the numberless infinities of souls—[that] were in a realm beyond comprehension” (137). Instead, the novel focuses on the unique and the personal, on
Ursula’s experience of “the gruesome sensation of putting your hand on a man’s chest and finding that your hand had somehow slipped inside that chest” (365; emphasis in original). In doing so, that is, in focusing on individuals and details, the novel begins to dismantle the boundaries between personal and political lives. Such representations help provoke empathetic and ethical responses to the narrative of war. In one life, for instance, Ursula is described as finding “herself more moved by these small reminders of domestic life—the kettle still on the stove, the table laid for a supper that would never be eaten—than she was by the greater misery and destruction that surrounded them” (390).

The focus on the details of daily life and the personal consequences of war weave together the domestic and the political, dispelling the logic that the narratives of history are independent from those of the everyday. Consequently, getting it right for Ursula ceases to be the single act of Hitler’s assassination, but rather becomes the willingness to act upon her ethical and social obligations in the face of political turmoil. Ursula is directed to this final conclusion through the third maternal figure in the novel, Miss Woolf—Hitler’s foil (with Adolf meaning “noble wolf in German” (322)). A retired hospital matron, a mother, and now a senior warden, Miss Woolf represents an empathetic perspective that insists on women acting upon their ethical and political responsibilities in response to the war.

Miss Woolf appears in each of Ursula’s lives as a warden, and “took her

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14 Atkinson’s insistence on rendering the personal and individual experiences of the war reflects Kristeva’s assertion that a new discourse of ‘third-wave’ feminism will “henceforth be situated on the terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, in order to try to discover, first, the specificity of the female and then, in the end, that of each individual woman” (1996e, 196).
15 There is also a correlation between Life After Life’s Miss Woolf, and Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf’s essay, Three Guineas (2000), was published in 1938 and responds to the question of how war is to be prevented. Her essay reframes the politics of war in terms of a feminist discussion on the limitations placed on women to enact social and political change because of their reduced access to education and meaningful employment. As such, for Woolf, the politics of war and feminism are inseparable, and her response to the question of how to prevent war becomes inextricable from a discussion of broader social changes to the individual lives and fortunes of women. The connection Life After Life makes to Woolf further complicates the palimpsestic nature of the text, by providing echoes of other works that examine the connection between women’s individual destinies and the national destiny of war.
duties very seriously” (355), training Ursula and the other wardens in first-aid, “anti-gas procedures, in extinguishing incendiaries, and how to enter burning buildings, load stretchers, makes splints, bandage limbs” (356). More than the practical skills she endows Ursula with during the war, however, Miss Woolf as a “woman of many talents” (356), connects the concepts of foreign and home through her understanding that the “casualties in war were very different from the routine accidents that one saw in peacetime”, linking the experiences and horrors of the battlefield with the domestic experience of “shovelling up unidentifiable lumps of flesh or picking out the heartbreakingly small limbs of a child from the rubble” (357). As well as this, Miss Woolf, through her work with the “Refugee Committee” and the “Central British Fund for German Jewry,” worked to protect German Jews from internment and deportation (355). Therefore, Miss Woolf is a character that does not passively watch the events of history unfolding; and Ursula “was never sure whether Miss Woolf was a woman of some influence or whether she simply refused to take no for an answer. Both, perhaps” (355).

In this sense, Miss Woolf is the most progressive female character rendered in the novel. She pragmatically takes responsibility for her life and the events unfolding around her. This pragmatism is taken up by Ursula, reflected in her comment to her brother Teddy: “‘I worry about you,’ she said. ‘And none of that worrying has done either of us any good.’ She sounded like Miss Woolf” (404; emphasis in original). This is because Ursula comes to understand that waiting, that doing nothing, that submitting to (though women often had no choice but to submit) circumscribed and limiting narratives of women’s identities will not prevent war, but enable it. Finally, Miss Woolf teaches Ursula that she is not a passive bystander in history, explaining that “we must get on with our job and we must bear witness … we must remember these people when we are safely in the future” (357).
And so Miss Woolf prompts the final shift in Ursula’s understanding of her identity. Through her palimpsestic experience of time (which leaves the reader with the sense that it continues beyond the confines of the narrative’s close) Ursula collects and acknowledges all the stories, experiences and truths of the past, not just those sanctioned by history, and lives with the understanding that she must work, in whatever capacity available to her—in some lives as a warden, in others as an assassin—in order to mitigate the effects of war. Her shift in perspective, from a desire to change the course of history to one in which she accounts for every past and every action, brings together the domestic and political realms by recognising their interdependence and their inextricability from one another.

When at the end of the novel (in the life that leads to her second successful assassination attempt on Hitler) Ursula chooses to die in order to reset time, this death is not represented as a reflection of her powerlessness. Instead, the novel draws together the many different lives of Ursula to produce a palimpsestic understanding of time in which this character is at once all of the lives she has lived, remembering the people from each of her different lives as though she had lived only one life:

She thought of Teddy and Miss Woolf, of Roland and little Angela, of Nancy and Sylvie. She thought of Dr Kellet and Pindar. Become such as you are, having learned what that is. She knew what that was now. She was Ursula Beresford Todd and she was a witness (458; emphasis in original).

Conclusion

As the layered narratives of Ursula’s many lives intersect, the novel explores the ways in which singular notions of time and identity may limit women’s personal, ethical, and political agency. In its disruption of the boundaries between domestic and political spheres, and through Ursula’s new understanding of identity and time, which renders significant all histories, *Life After Life* hints at a future where women’s
identities are not limited to a choice between domestic and public, personal or political. Instead women’s lives in the novel are intricately constructed through a palimpsestic notion of time that enables action over submission, without forgoing intimacy, connection, compassion and ethical responsibility: “This is love, Ursula thought. And the practice of it makes it perfect” (458).

*Life After Life* thus produces a multifaceted, elaborate and layered narrative that weaves together women’s lives as domestic, public, and political, constructing a text that moves closer to a realisation of Kristeva’s ‘third-wave’ of feminism. Atkinson puts forward a protagonist that inhabits many of the identities constructed for women across different layers of time and who strives to overcome the limitations inherent with identifying with any singular temporal layer. Like her earlier novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, Atkinson’s text extends the boundaries of prosaic language and rigid realism, drawing to the surface, through the temporal palimpsest, the contradictions, ambiguities and often obscured elements that form the female self, and inform women’s way of being in the world.

Viewing time as a palimpsest in *Life After Life* creates a way of writing and reading that at once breaks through the tangle of narrative layering, without reducing or closing down the nuanced and multifaceted rendering of women’s lives in the novel. The novel, through what I read as a practice of women’s time, thus creates a narrative with no end, offering a way of writing and reading women’s lives that is textured, ambivalent, and that continues to make possible alternative imaginings of getting it right.
5

Conclusion

This thesis opened with a creative exploration of how women’s daily lives (and particularly their experiences of the maternal) are represented in fiction—the motivation for which stemmed from my aim to articulate the conflictual and often fraught transition from a public, professional identity to a domestic and maternal one. Through both the creative writing process, and the reading of various fictions about women’s lives, I discovered that, not only are narratives about women sometimes prescriptive and reductive, but that relatively few seem to treat women’s subjective experiences of the domestic and the maternal as both warranting imaginative reflection and as constituting a complementary and vital element of their public and political identities.¹ This thesis therefore has sought to carve a space that encompasses the multitude and range of women’s interests, experiences and diverse subjectivities without privileging either their private or their public/political identities. Instead, the palimpsest renders visible the dynamic and contingent relationships between the many and varied temporal modes that inform, shape, and modify women’s diverse subjectivities.

¹ Tolan argues that Carol Shields’s rendering of women’s domestic lives in her novel Unless (2002) also links the domestic experiences of the mundane and the everyday (with housework as the signifying trope). Tolan suggests that Shields neither valorises nor denounces women’s domestic activities or their connection to the domestic space: “Shields takes her text beyond both second-wave dismissal of the homes as site of female oppression and postfeminist celebrations of domesticity as liberative irony; both camps, she suggests, underestimate the potential depths of the seemingly mundane” (2010, 8).
Women and Time

Understanding our relationship with time, how its many modes affect and shape our lives, is essentially an endeavour to better understand ourselves: as individuals; family members (mothers, daughters, wives, sisters); and as public identities in relation to our places in community, workplace, national and global domains. While the focus in this thesis has been on creative and literary critical work, it is important to note that women’s relationship to time has been extensively investigated through empirical (particularly sociological, management, and psychological) studies, which map the temporal divisions of women’s labour. For example, in a recent study Wilma A. Dunaway shows that, globally, gender significantly influences the labour market, and is further complicated by geographically specific cultural factors, noting that “the sexual division of labor in households is often replicated in productive nodes of commodity chains” (2014, 8). In an Australian study, Lyn Craig, Killian Mullan and Megan Blaxland (2010), trace shifts in the composition of the Australian labour market through Time Use Surveys between 1992 and 2006. Although a general trend towards a more gender-balanced division of paid and unpaid work emerged over this period, much of this shift, they argue, is due to women’s increased participation in the workforce, with less marked increases in men’s participation in unpaid work (2010, 28). That women “continue to bear the primary responsibly of unpaid work in households, including both domestic task (e.g. cooking, cleaning) and the provision of care to family members” (Lee, McCann and Messenger 2007, 64; emphasis in original), can be comprehended through labour market statistics. In Australia, for example, women’s participation rate in the overall workforce as of 2016 is 46.2%, yet women represented 71.7% of those in part-time employment.

Such information suggests that women’s “temporal availability” to participate in the public sector is understood to be dramatically impacted by their domestic responsibilities, particularly when women are caring for pre-school-aged children (Lee, McCann and Messenger 2007, 67).

However, while empirical data, such as that briefly alluded to above, can trace broad cultural and economic trends in the way women’s time is divided between the private and public spheres, it does little to illuminate the nature of women’s subjective experiences of various modes of time. For example, can such data answer the question of whether women are over-represented in part-time employment because their domestic identities are of central importance to their relational lives, or whether this stems from their own (and socially reinforced) desires to be a ‘good’ mother? Moreover, can such empirical data generally account for, in qualitative terms, the ‘mental’ or ‘emotional’ load of family life, which still largely remains the purview of women? Can statistical analysis quantify the tension that exists between many women’s desire for motherhood and their sense of ethical responsibility in undertaking care-work within the family (as mothers and carers), and their individual ambitions that are driven by a need for intellectual, financial, and personal fulfilment?

The “gender identity hypothesis” suggests that women’s greater association with part-time employment reflects social and cultural constructions of gendered roles in which the division of labour in public and private life reflects “prescriptions[s] endogenous to a society” and is “dictated by social custom” (Booth and van Ours 2009, 178; emphasis in original). The “gender identity hypothesis” further suggests that women garner more personal satisfaction from part-time employment because it provides a means of “combining domestic and market production” (Booth and van Ours, 2009, 178; emphasis in original). Alison L. Booth and Jan C. van Ours note that, under this rationale, women “gain esteem through working, while obtaining social and self-approval from being with and caring for their families and their homes” (2009, 178), concluding that women continue to undertake a larger proportion of domestic work even if they are also responsible for the “majority of market work”, and therefore prefer part-time employment (2009, 191). These findings, hint at, but do not explicitly address, the possibility that women’s preference for part-time employment is less a choice, than a necessity that reflects their ongoing domestic obligations.

An Australian survey that found that 55% of employed women compared to 46% of employed men felt they “were always or often rushed or pressured for time”, with women citing the difficulty of balancing family and work responsibilities, and “having too much to do/too many demands placed upon them” as the cause of this time pressure (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016, sec. 5, par 1), with women accounting for 95% of primary parental leave requests in 2017 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017, sec. 1, par. 1).
As new modes of time continue to develop and inform women’s lives, so too must the ways we imagine and represent our relationship to time. For instance, the advent of the internet and smart-phone technology has changed the relationship of domestic time to that of production and the workplace. The ease of access to information and speed of communication has made the boundaries between the public and the private spheres porous, and as public and private spheres becomes less discrete, a new dynamic of women’s time is evolving (Wajcman, 2008, 68). This is something, for example, that Mark Davis argues has created a “curiously ‘hurried life’ in which the perception of time has become so acutely accelerated that we live in a series of fleeting, episodic moments” (2013, 8).

Changes in the ways that our lives are informed by technologies can, argues Judy Wajcman “collectively produce[e] new patterns of social interaction, new relationships, new identities” (Wajcman, 2008, 70). Historical and personal data, down to the minute details of the everyday, are recorded and stored in perpetuity through social media, and women’s identities, domestic and maternal lives, body image, professional profiles and social proficiency are informed by digital technologies as well as recorded and commoditised (Kraun and Stiernstedt 2014, 1157). Social media, thus produces a new way of accumulating and structuring time, as such technologies “have entered into the production of event” and as a consequence “transform our possibilities for experiencing temporality and engaging with the past, present and future” (Kraun and Stiernstedt 2014, 1157).

The technology of time, while in many ways potentially liberating—through its disruption of defined boundaries between the private and public spheres, and in enabling instant and global communication and information sharing—also has the potential to change our relationship to time in less benign ways. New technologies

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5 Lizzie Richardson argues that digital technologies “enable work to extend or take place beyond the firm or formal workplace” (2016, 3).
create an ‘untimed’ time culture, in which the very boundaries between public and private that have circumscribed women’s public and political aspirations in the past, are now overridden with an uninterrupted stream of information and reduced delineation of conflicting spaces. 6 ‘Work’ and ‘home’ cease to be clearly defined physical and temporal boundaries and, thus, ‘work–life balance’ is not always a case of balance, but of amalgamation, with neither occupying a discrete or dedicated timescape (Wajcman, 2008, 69). 7 I have argued in this thesis that reading fiction through a temporal palimpsest provides the scope and flexibility of representation with which to render and reflect on the complicated and interwoven nature of women’s relationship to time.

Future Time in Fiction

In “Women’s Time”, Kristeva alludes to a third generation of feminist activity that, through “aesthetic practices”, will be able to counter new modes of time that have defined and will define, limit and inform women’s lives, and combat what she, in 1981, saw as the universalizing and totalising effects of “present-day mass media, data-bank systems and, in particular, modern communications technology” (1996e, 210). This thesis has proposed that the palimpsest provides a creative and imaginative approach to reading and writing women’s experiences of time as represented in fiction, to convey women’s multifarious and irreducible relationship to the diverse and often competing modes of time that they experience both individually and collectively. Fiction allows us to explore the narratives and the identities that

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6 Wajcman argues that new technologies, rather than reducing time-pressure through automation, merely increase the pace at which people work, as well as reconfigure the relationships between people and the spaces they occupy (2008, 66).
7 Fiona Smith, Emma Wainwright, Susan Buckingham and Elodie Marnadet, consider work–life balance as being “essentially about individuals having some level of control over where, when and how they work and having a ‘life’ beyond paid work”. However, they assert that the “production/reproduction interface reflects the persistent gendered nature of wider society, where the idea that it should be women who are responsible for the work of social reproduction remains persuasive” (2011, 604).
inform and shape our lives in a way that, arguably, the contemporary vernacular of public language can not. This is because fiction can move beyond dominant empirical and positivist accounts of women’s lives and explore the intricacies and ambivalences of women’s ethical, emotional and experiential encounters in its renderings.

As we saw in Chapter Two, for Kristeva, the disruption of symbolic language occurs through the rupture of the semiotic into the symbolic (1996, 109). This is possible, she suggests, through the metaphorical and evocative language of poetry. However, I consider the palimpsest (perhaps itself a quasi-poetic tool) as facilitating and invoking Kristeva’s idea of the semiotic as disruptive of the symbolic language of everyday, conventional prose. In other words, fictional narratives whether written or read as palimpsest can account for the variety of often elusive temporal experiences that shape our lives. Moreover, structuring time as palimpsest in realist fiction allows for a representation of women that moves beyond the limits of linear narrative without necessarily straying across generic borders into science fiction or the fantastical. As Dillon flags in her reading of David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten* (1999), “traditional linear narratives are now being replaced by complex systems that more accurately represent our experience of the contemporary world” (2010, 157).

Accordingly, this thesis has sought to examine the creative and critical effects of disrupting the mainstream symbolic, frequently monolithic representational narratives of women’s lives through a self-consciously semiotic and temporal intervention into the realist text. Further, constructing a temporal palimpsest for the reading and writing of fiction creates new opportunities for exploring the way women’s subjectivities are informed by, and may themselves inform, the intricate interplay of personal, familial, historical and cultural narratives.
Implications of this Study

Through the writing and reading of fiction about women, this thesis has harnessed the conceptual framework of the palimpsest, incorporating Kristeva’s three modes of time (monumental, cyclical and linear) and her notion of subjectivity to develop a critical and creative practice of women’s time. The original work of fiction, “The Place Between”, together with a critical reading of Kate Atkinson’s novels *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996) and *Life After Life* (2013) have variously explored how different narratives, such as family histories and culturally situated depictions of gendered roles, make visible the ways women imagine and make sense of their temporal lives, their identities and their places within society. Each component works towards a means of representing the wealth and array of women’s experiences, desires and obligations—through the eyes of both creative writer and critic: a symbiotic relationship that enriches the practices of both writing and reading.

While the creative work of this thesis draws upon Kristeva’s three temporal modes to broadly inform its structuring of time, the palimpsest as a conceptual framework also allows us to understand that these modes of time are neither discrete nor objective entities providing a definitive ‘formula’ for understanding women’s time. Rather, in this thesis I have considered Kristeva’s discussion of temporal modes as three among many possible examples of how time in fiction might be structured and read—particularly as women’s lives in contemporary settings are struggling with increasing demands on their maternal, domestic, professional and embodied identities. For instance, because of its setting in the contemporary moment, “The Place Between” does not work within the same modes of time as those read in Atkinson’s work. Rather, it incorporates contemporary representations of time as informed by both linear and cyclical notions of time as these have traditionally been understood, as well as by digital time; relational time, whereby women’s experiences
of time and identities are contingent on their interactions and relationships with those around them; and geographical time, evidenced in the way that the female characters’ physical, topographical locations direct their relationships to time, and particularly their understanding of the maternal and the domestic.\(^8\)

For example, one of the temporal modes explored in the novella views aspects of women’s identity through the ways in which social media, the internet and technology, particularly the immediacy of communication, shape and inform our lives. The character of Sarah, in “The Place Between”, is in part shaped by contemporary discourses of ‘good’ mothering, today communicated largely via digital media. Sarah muses on social media and the growing presence of non-professional voices, such as ‘mummy bloggers’ shape her daily life: “The thought that her life was about to be reduced to planning healthy meals, or ‘engaging’ David in education activities was more than upsetting. She felt as though she was about to be erased entirely” (12). In this example, Sarah’s understanding of how her time within the domestic space is to be spent, both physically and emotionally, is informed by the continuing presence within the home of the influential voices of digital time, as she actively adapts to conform with the perceived norms imposed by social media. As such, the subjective modes of time in the novella not only inform the historical and linear trajectory of the primary plot, but reveal how time directs our daily lives, the routines and rituals we observe, the way time (and the narratives developed according to different modes of time) shape our relationships, our self-perception and the narratives we inhabit to make sense of the world around us.

Reading Atkinson’s two novels, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Life After Life*, as a palimpsestic construction drawing on Kristeva’s three modes of time has enabled a mapping of the nuanced and insightful way in which Atkinson renders

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\(^8\) The relationship between geography and identity has been taken up by Robyn Dowling (2009); Robyn Longhurst (2002); Kees Terlouw and Bouke van Gorp (2014); Melissa Wright (2010).
women’s subjective lives and identities in narrative. While I read the modes of time as palimpsest in each of the two novels independently, I also consider them to be working synergistically in a palimpsestic representation of time and identity more broadly. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, for example, through its dismantling of personal and family narratives that would circumscribe and limit women’s personal agency and sense of individuality, lays the groundwork for rendering visible the domestic realm as a central element of women’s lives. This novel explores specifically the relational elements of subjectivity through its focus on the mother–daughter relationship across generations. These themes are then advanced in *Life After Life* by extending the implications of viewing women’s domestic and personal lives as important imaginative and creative narrative material in order to explore women’s ethical responsibilities and obligations as public individuals. As I argued in Chapter Four, reading *Life After Life* as a distinctly political text is enhanced by Atkinson’s negotiation, in the earlier text, of the ways that women’s lives are understood and represented in time. Accordingly, Atkinson’s two texts do not merely constitute discrete palimpsests, but both are part of a continuing creative conversation about women, narrative, and identities across temporal landscapes.

Thus, Atkinson’s work presents an ongoing temporal project concerned with women’s lives and, as such, a critical investigation of time, narrative and identity in her novels *Human Croquet* (1997) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000) would provide further insights into the potential of the palimpsest as a conceptual tool. By extension, Atkinson’s latest novel *A God in Ruins* (2015), a companion novel to *Life After Life*, and written within the same fictional universe as the latter but from the perspective of Ursula’s brother, Teddy Todd, could, given its interest in notions of masculinity and the creative possibilities of disrupting of linear time, provide an
interesting contrast to Atkinson’s imaginative treatments of women’s time.\footnote{Similarly, Paul Auster’s recently released novel \textit{4 3 2 1} (2017) is a palimpsestic rendering of a young male protagonist’s experience of growing up in the USA. This text is a highly self-conscious construction of the multiple possibilities of a single life, and it can be read both as a palimpsest of American history, American culture, men’s developmental narratives, the political climate of the mid-twentieth century, the cultural examination of Jewish-Americans, and as a palimpsestic exploration of literature and film in shaping identity.}

Of course, Atkinson is not the only author whose work can be constructively read in terms of the temporal palimpsest. While this thesis has focused on narratives constructed about women in western, Anglocentric cultures, a productive extension of the palimpsestic rendering of time in narrative could be applied to explore narratives written from different cultural perspectives and to reflect on the ways that ethnic groups situate themselves and are situated within broader national narratives of multicultural societies such as Australia, or as means of navigating how specific temporal modes shape cultures outside the western tradition. For example, Min Jin Lee’s \textit{Pachinko} (2017) is an intergenerational narrative following four generations of a Korean family during the Japanese occupation. This novel lends itself to a palimpsestic reading, through which we might better understand how specific cultural, social and historical moments form and direct women’s lives and identities from an alternate perspective.

There is also rich work to be done in examining how the temporal palimpsest might help cultivate diverse cultural representations of women’s identities, as well as how such narratives inform the continually developing sense of various national and global identities.\footnote{Other examples include: Maxine Hong Kingston’s \textit{The Woman Warrior} (1981), a novel that integrates Chinese mythological narratives within a family setting to interrogate questions of race, gender and social position; Octavia E. Butler’s \textit{Kindred} (2009) utilises time-travel to recover the histories of enslaved African–American women; Kathryn Stockett’s \textit{The Help} (2009) explores issues of race, class and cultural constructions of gender through the lives of women.; and more recently, \textit{Americanah} by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (2013) and Zadie Smith’s \textit{Swing Time} (2016) explore questions of race, gender and identity through contrasting depictions of women’s lives in the developed and developing worlds.} For example, Sue Woolfe’s \textit{The Oldest Song in the World} (2012) explores (individual and national) identity, family, women and a different concept of time in which histories are recorded in song, through her portrayal of a young student
There are many who travel to outback Australia to record a sacred song held by and passed down through generations of Indigenous women.

One of the great powers of fiction is its ability to reconfigure temporal landscapes and to move beyond the notion of time as linear, as constituting a continuum of cause and effect, or as a singular trajectory. Fiction, in its search to represent the stories and relationships that make human subjects and their lives meaningful, is free to stop, reverse, repeat or reimagine time in order to ask questions of how lives are lived, shaped and imagined in ways that both define and defy the daily experience of time. In turn, the power of the palimpsest as a conceptual tool for reading and writing fiction lies in its ability to map and navigate the multifarious modes of time that influence our everyday understandings of ourselves and the world.

In reading and constructing fictional narratives through the layered and interlaced temporal modes of the palimpsest, this thesis thus offers a dynamic creative proposition for representing women’s lives, from a focus on the smallest detail of the everyday, to a focus that takes in the largest public canvas, each acting to enrich and complicate the ways we see ourselves, our relationships with one another, and our places in time.
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