The Other Side of Silence:

Using fiction to explore the resources and limitations in writing about women's lives.

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

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Abstract

This dissertation consists of two distinct components: a creative manuscript, titled “The Other Side of Silence,” and an accompanying exegesis. Both pieces endeavour to answer key questions: What are the different ways fiction might be used to write about the life of a woman from the past? How might we write about such women, taking into account the constraints by which their stories have been forgotten, omitted or displaced? And what are the implications of foregrounding such silences in the writing and reading of narratives?

“The Other Side of Silence” tells the story of Alba, an Italian woman who, with her young family, is leaving her hometown of Salerno for Australia in 1952. The narrative focuses on Alba’s relationship with her mother, Serafina, who fears that Alba’s journey to Australia is motivated by a desire to distance herself from her past. Within this narrative I explore how each of these characters views and consequently deals with the past.

The exegesis discusses several texts that have influenced and inspired “The Other Side of Silence.” In reading contemporary texts about the lives of women in the past, I noted two distinct approaches in the ways women’s stories were written. Some writers use recuperative strategies that allow them to tell stories previously omitted from or distorted by historical discourse and dominant cultural ideologies. By contrast, other writers use poststructuralist narrative strategies to foreground the ways in which traditional realist narratives gloss over the gaps, contradictions and omissions in women’s stories. These alternative narratives indicate how revelation and closure in traditional realism can preclude the probing of some subtle and significant questions about narrating and making sense of women’s experiences. The exegesis examines the
different ways writers have challenged and subsequently enlarged conventional notions of realist fiction to imagine and speculate on the possibilities for and limitations on narrative.
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The Other Side of Silence
Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her.

Toni Morrison *Beloved* (1987)
prologue

Picture a woman, tall yet somewhat stooped, as if she is carrying her long years in her shoulders. She has strong, sinewy limbs, fine fingers. Sharp angular features, a wide sober forehead. Her dark, grey-streaked hair is pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her skin is tanned; not the glow of someone who enjoys sunshine as an occasional hobby, but the coarse olive skin of someone who works long hours in the sun. Imagine this woman walking into a room, a sparsely decorated but well-stocked kitchen. There is a large wooden table made with curved edges, flanked by six matching wooden chairs, their tall backs buffed with polish. Behind the table is the sink, the basin free of dishes or scraps of food. Wash-cloths, rinsed and squeezed dry, hang neatly from the side of the basin. The window over the sink shows sunlit fruit trees: lemon, blood orange, pompelmo, a prickly pear tree, its thorny leaves curling up towards the sun. The window is open and there is a faraway sound of street vendors and customers haggling over prices in the markets. It is a hot day, and the air inside the kitchen is warm enough to stick to the skin.

The woman stands by the table. One hand rests on the stiff back of a chair. Her fingers are long. The palms of her hands are etched with lines from so much washing of clothes, so much scrubbing of sinks and endless polishing of surfaces. She wears no jewellery on her hand, no thin band of gold on any finger, no bracelet dangling from her wrist.

On the table is a bowl of fruit. Bananas, apples, lemons and a few blood oranges. The woman leans over the table. For a moment her hand hovers over a banana before selecting a blood orange. She wipes it on the apron she wears, although she probably
washed the orange herself yesterday. Her left hand is still resting on the chair, which she pulls away from the table.

The woman sits down, the orange in her right hand. She lifts it to her nose and sniffs the skin. It is something she has done since she was a little girl. Smelling fruit is as important to her as breathing in the aroma of a plate of pasta with fresh tomatoes and basil, or savouring the smell of freshly fried fish or fine parmiggiana. She puts her thumb into the star-shaped centre of the sanguinelle to crush through the skin. With her thumb and index finger she pulls at the peel, making sure she also takes off the fluffy white pith. She makes a little mound of discarded orange and white skin on the brown table. She peels slowly, and when she has finished peeling, she places the red orange on its shed skin. In her hand is the last piece of peel, and she brings it up to her nose once more then shuts her eyes. She squeezes the piece of peel, the light mist spraying her lips and under her nose. She smiles as she breathes in the scent of orange on her skin.

She places the last piece of peel on the table and picks up the orange. With her thumb she breaks the orange apart and begins to eat the fruit, segment by segment. She stares straight ahead, though she is facing nothing except for the door which leads to the backyard. She chews slowly and rhythmically, enjoying the way her teeth pierce through the filmy skin of the orange segments, the spray of juice inside her mouth. The kitchen is silent except for the slow sound of her chewing. After the orange is eaten, she picks up the peel from the table and walks to the sink. There is a rubbish pail to the left of the sink, the woman bends slightly to throw her peel in. She washes the orange stains from her hands and wipes them on the apron she always wears. She goes to the table and pushes the chair back underneath it.
The woman looks around the room once more. As she walks to the door leading outside, the table in all its brown solidity begins to fade, the chair backs grow paler and thinner, the sounds of the sea and the children become a low hum, more and more difficult to hear. The bright sunlight outside dulls and the clean silver sink begins to turn ash in colour. But the woman has not yet reached the door, because perhaps she never walked through a door like this one. Never wore an apron, never had long brown fingers or sharp angular features. Perhaps she never sat and ate a sanguinelle, never felt the citrus spray against her skin or sniffed the peel. This woman occupies no space, not at the table, not by the sink. She doesn’t stare through sunlit or starry windows. The one remaining photograph of this woman is kept in a spare room, hidden behind a large cluster of more recent photographs. No one mentions this woman, not in polite conversation or in hushed tones. There is no rustle of her name in thick leather books bound by the weight of history, or in the small stifled pages of old diaries. All that remains are the ways in which she has not been remembered.
Salerno, Italy. August 1953.

Serafina is waiting. She sits at the kitchen table, her back straight, the fingers of her right hand drumming against the wooden surface. A pot of water bubbles on the cooker behind her, modest strips of fettuccine are lined up on her wooden cutting board, and piselli left over from lunch are warming in an enamel bowl on the kitchen bench. But she is not thinking of her dinner, she is remembering the hour after lunch she spent with her daughter Alba and Alba’s husband Emilio. The hour had been filled with sudden silences and sideways glances. Alba had seemed on the verge of saying something important several times. Mamma, she had begun, pulling on the sleeve of her dress or straightening up in her chair, mamma, she had repeated, and Serafina had leaned forward to listen. But then with a shrug or a small shake of her head Alba would begin chattering about something or other; a new dress she was helping Aurelia sew, or how much she paid for apricots that morning. Serafina’s nipoti had been quieter than usual, too. Paolo and Marco usually ran around the yard, unable to keep their small bodies still any longer than it took for them to kiss their nonna and accept one or two of her biscotti. But today, there were no angry sounds from chickens being chased, no yelps from Marco as Paolo tried to push him towards the goat. And when they all left, there was a stiffness to Alba’s neck, a rigidity as she leant over to kiss her mother goodbye. And then a too-casual remark about coming back in the evening, after the boys were in bed.

This is one of the days that Serafina has been dreading. After Alba and her family left at two, Serafina found it hard to concentrate on her afternoon chores. The day
tumbled around her like a broken down thing. She let the ricotta in her outdoor oven burn black and dropped a jar of tomatoes she had just dried. She stabbed her left index finger three times with the end of her needle as she hemmed a skirt.

There is a knock at the kitchen door, so Serafina gets up, goes over to her enamel cooker, and switches off the gas.

“Un momento,” she calls as she makes her way across the small bare room to open the kitchen door. She leans her head to receive Alba’s kiss and walks back to her seat at the table, gesturing at her daughter. Sit, sit. Alba follows, but does not sit down. The sun streaming in through the window over the sink seems to slice the room in half. Serafina sits in the light, the silver sink gleaming behind her. Alba stops on the other side of the table, her features obscured by the shadows. She is standing in front of the wooden cabinet in which Serafina keeps her good things. The bomboniere from her grandchildren’s baptisms and holy communions sit alongside the fine tall glasses which her eldest daughter Violetta bought, and which Serafina refuses to use. Alba is leaning on her right leg, her hip bumping up against a side of the wooden chair, and the fingers of her left hand are scratching at some invisible thing on her soft white skin inside her elbow. Serafina recognises this as one of her daughter’s habits left over from childhood. Something she does when she is nervous.

“It is a wonderful opportunity mamma,” she says, “Emilio’s brother can sponsor him, which makes it easier for all of us. Besides,” she goes on, taking a shakily deep breath, “things here have been so difficult since the war. If we go over there and work for a few years, we will be able to come back here and afford a big house of our own. Something that the boys will be able to grow into. And of course we will be able to send you money every month.” A smile flits briefly across Alba’s face. Alba’s words
are rushing from her mouth. “Mamma, it’s not forever,” she says, and Serafina can hear a hint of panic in her voice. “We will come back. Italy will always be our home.”

Serafina knows that if Alba wasn’t standing in the shadows, she would be able to see a long red mark on her daughter’s arm. They all have their habits, Serafina’s children. She knows when they are anxious, or when they are not speaking the truth. If Alba was standing closer, and was about fifteen years younger, Serafina would snatch her left hand away from her right arm. She would tell Alba that people will stare at this long red spot on her skin.

But Serafina cannot do this anymore. Alba is thirty-one years old. She has her own children. Alba is too nervous this evening, anyway.

“Alba! Basta!” Enough. Alba stops speaking; she looks down at her hands, motionless before her.

“Sit down,” Serafina says, as she gets up to fetch some water. Her footsteps are loud as she marches to the sink. Serafina’s hand shakes as she holds a glass under the tap. She looks out the window over the sink. Her goat is asleep by the shed, and the chickens are roosting in the coop. Serafina wonders why these ordinary scenes should look so different this evening. She ignores her daughter’s outstretched hand and clunks the glass of water on the table in front of her.

“Grazie mamma,” Alba says, her voice a whisper in the quiet room.

For a moment the two women say nothing. Alba puts her hands flat on the table, while Serafina’s are knotted in her lap.

“I don’t understand why you need to go,” she says, rubbing the hard knuckles of her left hand. “I don’t understand why you and Emilio cannot just remain here, with your families.”
“I know it’s a long way to go, but it will be such a blessing. Enzo already has a house over there. He works for a very good building company and he says that there will be no problem getting work for Emilio.”

“But Emilio already has work here!” Serafina says, staring at her daughter. Alba picks up the glass and sips her water slowly. She puts it back down onto the table, her hand still encircling it.

“He would have more work over there and be better paid for it.”

“And what about Paolo and Marco?” Serafina asks. “How do you think they will feel when you take them away from all that is familiar to them? All they have ever known is Salerno, yet you want to pull them up by their roots and take them to some Godforsaken place!”

Alba’s cheeks flush pink. “It is Marco and Paolo that I am thinking of the most,” she whispers.

“Oh Alba,” Serafina says, shaking her head. “How can this be the right thing to do, taking them away from their family?”

“They have family there too,” Alba says, her voice still quiet. “Enzo and Regina are there with their daughters. They will have their uncle, their aunt, their cousins.”

“Oh Dio!” Serafina spits. “You want your family to be nearer to that big buffoon and his dough-headed wife!” Serafina stares at Alba, who looks away. “You know what kind of woman she is, Alba.”

“Mamma, please, this is Emilio’s family you are speaking of!”

“And what about our family Alba? Have you thought about that?” Serafina jerks her chair backwards and stands up. “Porca miseria! Have you thought about how this will affect your sister? Your brother?”
“Letta will be fine mamma, she has more than enough sisters-in-law to keep her company.”

“It’s not the same thing!” Serafina says, slamming her open palm on the kitchen table. Every part of her body is shaking in anger. She takes a deep breath, and when she speaks her voice is low, her words deliberate. “You will tear this family apart, Alba.”

Alba pushes her chair out from the table, stands up and looks at her mother. The women are almost the same height. For Serafina, looking at Alba across the table is almost like staring at her own face thirty years ago.

“You are not being fair mamma. Violetta went away to school for seven years. Gianni worked in Switzerland for two years.”

“They came back.”

“Please mamma! Umberto has been living in Switzerland for almost twenty years!” Alba exclaims, her hands slicing the air in anger.

“That is different.”

“Oh how, mamma, how is that so different?”

“Umberto is a man Alba! A son! You are a daughter. A daughter should stay with her family.”

Alba shakes her head. She is angry, agitated.

“Letta will still be here.” Alba picks her handbag up from the table. “Don’t forget that Emilio is Aurelia’s son, mamma. And that he is my husband. I go where my husband goes.”

At these words a hot white pain sears Serafina’s chest. She cannot move, and she feels suddenly tired, as if she has run very far. Her face must show some kind of
exhaustion or fatigue, because Alba slings her handbag over her shoulder, hesitates for a brief moment, and then goes to where Serafina stands. Alba leans in and kisses her mother’s cheek quickly.

“I will see you soon,” she says as she walks to the kitchen door. The door clicks shut behind her.

Serafina stands still, her hands limp by her side. As if she is staring at the air. She feels something inside her chest, behind her ribs. The brutal heat has turned to a cold so sharp it is as if Serafina has swallowed a long shard of ice. She shivers in the humid kitchen. She walks to the window over the sink and pulls it in, locking it shut with a click. It is still light outside and she can see three young boys running down the hill chasing a thin wooden hoop rolling quickly away from them. The boys are laughing. They cannot be older than ten or eleven. They wear t-shirts tucked neatly into their shorts. One boy wears long socks, all wear sandals. Serafina imagines that their mothers have had to push the boys into seats to slick their hair down into neat parts. They catch up with the hoop at the end of the road, and Serafina turns away. Amazing that she has been in this town long enough to see another generation of children grow up around her. Amazing, that after everything she is still here.

It is nearly ten o’clock before Serafina is able to eat her supper. After she has gulped down her pasta and piselli, washed and dried her plates, she goes into the salotto and sits in her chair, a small glass of grappa in her hand. The room is sparsely furnished. There are three straight-backed brown chairs. One small sofa. A round table with a candlestick sits between Serafina’s chair and a window which faces the street. A picture of the Madonna with the Infant hangs on the wall behind the sofa. Serafina lights the candle and draws the curtains. She sips the grappa, and leans into
her seat. Her shadow looms largely on the wall, her head stretching up away from her body. She watches it for a moment, and sighs. She rubs at her breast with a rough fist, but the cold is still there. Why has the thought of Alba leaving crept under her skin like this?

Umberto lives far away in Bellinzona, an Italian-speaking province nestled at the foot of the Alps. Serafina has never been there, and Umberto rarely visits Salerno anymore. Even when he does, Serafina hardly sees him; he has been working too long and too closely with his father to want to have much to do with his mother. Serafina knows that Violetta will stay in Salerno until she is a nonna herself, fat with pasta and pizza and surrounded by grandchildren. Despite her years abroad, Violetta returned to Salerno and the fortunate match her father had procured for her. Federico, Violetta’s husband, is from one of the town’s oldest families. His brothers and sisters live in tall homes which line the greenest part of the village, and they own much of the coastal land and several local stores.

Alba has always been Serafina’s daughter, in more ways than one. There is a resemblance that goes beyond their broad shoulders, long limbs and coarse dark hair. Alba was never sent away; she did not go to boarding school, she never lived in Switzerland as Gianni did. Alba, Serafina thinks, was the one possession she was allowed to keep as hers alone.

The September light has faded completely and night has dropped, soft as silk. Even though her small house has electricity, Serafina takes her candle from the table. It flickers as she walks through the living room and into the bedroom. Tomorrow she will wake at five to feed the chickens, pick more tomatoes for drying, and make melanzane sott’olio. She will milk the goat, she will shoo the chickens off their nests to

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check for eggs. Hours of work in the hot sun. Serafina places the delicate brass candlestick on the small wooden table by her bed and changes into her white linen nightgown. She pauses, as always, before pulling back her sheets. Despite the bare wooden cross that hangs above her bed-head, she no longer kneels by her bed. Serafina wonders which of her children get on their knees to pray before sleeping, and what their prayers might be. She looks up at the bare wall beside her bed, and in the dim whiteness she sees Alba, her hand lifted in a gesture of farewell. Serafina’s sheets slap against the mattress as she snaps them back and gets into bed. The thin frame creaks as she pulls the sheets up to her chin. She blows out her candle and tries to settle on her back. She shivers as she lies in her bed. She rubs her arms, trying to warm herself. Even though humid air blows in through her bedroom window, Serafina gets out of bed and goes to fetch a blanket from her linen closet. She tucks the blanket in and gets in under the covers. Tonight, she knows sleep will not come easily; it will hover over her for hours, just out of reach. For she knows that despite what Alba mumbled today about going away for a few years and coming back, if Alba has decided to leave, she will be gone forever.
two

It is just past nine in the evening and the sun has begun its descent towards the horizon. Soon it will touch the surface of the sea, poised like a hundred lire coin before it is dropped into a wooden collection box. It is early September and still light enough to walk home. Many of the stores are closing now. From up here in the dewy mountain light, Alba can see the vendors pulling down heavy aluminium shutters with hooked sticks. She can see men in white aprons, their fists thick with keys, locking the doors of their shops. The humid mountain air is already buzzing with mosquitoes and other night-time insects.

Alba makes her way carefully down the steep incline of Via Arce, heading towards Piazza XXIV Maggio and the street on which she lives. Alba had hoped that by finally telling her mother of their plans to move to Australia, some of the guilt which she’d felt pressing against her ribs for weeks now might be released. But she can feel it even more heavily in her chest. She has carried this guilt all through the long summer evenings as she and Emilio sat huddled in their bedroom, planning each detail of their move over to Australia.

Alba had hoped that her mother would understand why she wanted to leave Salerno. As she sat across the table from Serafina this evening, Alba had been praying that her mother would stand up, hug her to her chest and say, You are doing the right thing, my daughter. Alba wanted her mother to once, just once, acknowledge the difficulty of her life in this village. But Serafina had scolded her instead.

You will tear this family apart, Alba.

As if, Alba thinks, their family could be spread more widely than they already are. The last time Umberto had been in Salerno, Alba barely recognised him. His face
sagged with age, his body had grown round and his hair was thinning near his temples. After half an hour of chatter about their children, they had run out of conversation. Alba hadn’t known what to say to this brother she’d spent most of her life away from. Although she saw her sister often, Violetta lived in her huge house on the long thin stretch of land by the sea. Their father’s house was even further north along the coastline, closer to the lemon groves which stretched along the Amalfi Coast. Gianni lived not far from Alba and Emilio, but Alba only ever saw him on special occasions; birthdays, christenings, deaths. Alba bumped into his wife Stella at the markets nearly every week, but none of these meetings ended with visits.

This family, Alba thinks, have been cast further and wider apart than any other in the village. They are separated by so much more than kilometres, money or years. But it seems that for her mother, there is still some semblance of familial togetherness.

It’s ridiculous that mamma still sees them all this way, thinks Alba as she marches through the piazza. Her mother hasn’t spoken to her father in years. Alba merely nods if she sees him at the markets or in church. There was no way that her staying here was going to bring any of them closer together. Yet Alba’s presence in Salerno appears to be crucial to whatever twisted idea of family Serafina still holds. The other children had been allowed to come and go, but not Alba.

Before adolescence Alba never left Salerno, apart from short journeys to Switzerland, Austria, France or wherever else her father had business interests. Those were the years when Serafina’s idea of family was not so precariously cobbled together, and home meant one house with the six of them living in it, except when Umberto or Violetta left for school. But Alba was kept home the year she turned
fourteen, the year she was old enough to be sent to boarding school. Instead, a chubby governess with a wobbling chin came in four days a week to teach her and Gianni. Alba had not understood why she had been denied boarding school. She had waited patiently for her turn to go, for her turn to pack her best dresses in a long trunk, to place her hats in a circular hatbox. She wanted to don her kid gloves and her coat and sit at a railway station, waiting for a train to take her somewhere new. She had watched for years as Umberto and Violetta moved back and forth between Italy and Switzerland, coming home each time knowing something that they hadn’t known before. But in 1940, just before the outbreak of World War Two, something else invaded their house. Suddenly the huge house with the oak door wasn’t large enough for the six of them. Alba’s father sent Gianni to Switzerland to stay with Umberto, and Alba and Serafina left the big house, the blue stretch of sea, the scent of lemon groves, and moved into the small house in the mountains.

Now her own children are growing up. Paolo is almost eight, Marco five. Alba feels that the life Emilio has mapped out for them all is the kind of life she wants her boys to have. She doesn’t want her boys growing up in a place where they could be pigeonholed by the family history they had inherited, judged by events they had no control over.

Alba walks through the piazza, where tired shop-keepers wave half-heartedly at her before turning and trudging wearily home. It is because she has stayed too long, Alba thinks, that her mother sees her as the thread that holds them all together. Alba was the child who had been able to make a life for herself in Salerno after everything fell apart.
Alba turns onto the street where she lives with her boys, her husband and her mother-in-law. It is in the middle of Salerno in every sense; geographically, economically, socially. She inhales deeply; even from here she can smell the fresh salty scent of the sea. These smells, Alba thinks, are numbered. Numbered too are the times she will walk this familiar path from her mother’s house to her mother-in-law’s house; the times she will rummage in her handbag for this particular set of house-keys, the two copper ones which always sit heavily at the bottom of her bag. All this will come to an end soon.

*You will tear this family apart, Alba.*

The tears which had threatened when Serafina flung these words at Alba in the dimly lit kitchen overwhelm her now, and she sits on the steps in front of Aurelia’s house, the copper keys snug in her hand. Yet the tears are not due to the sting of Serafina’s words, but because of the desperation behind them. For it seems that her mamma needs to believe that somehow, up until now, their family has been kept together.
three

To Serafina it seems that her daughter is already full of goodbyes. It is still three months until they leave, but already Alba has become frenzied with last things. Her daughter is wearing herself out, taking the boys to the doctors, buying bolts of fabric, pickling eggplants, tomatoes, anchovies. Alba denies it, but Serafina is certain that if she were to go to Aurelia’s house, she would find a large cassapanca half open, the bottom lined with folded clothes, in Alba and Emilio’s room. Alba now visits every day, sometimes even twice a day, and Serafina can see that when she sits at the wooden table her daughter is thinking of somewhere else she should be, of yet another thing she could be doing. Her fingers never lie still in her lap anymore, her feet tap under the table so regularly that Serafina sometimes wants to dig her thick wooden heels into them.

Yesterday when Serafina asked Alba why she has put her faith in a place so far away and so unknown, Alba had sighed. Oh mamma, she said, the impatience in her voice making Serafina flinch, this is important for Emilio, he wants to give his boys more than they could ever get here. Serafina knows there are other reasons her daughter would never confess, reasons Alba would imagine her mother would have no hope of understanding. But Serafina too knows what it is like to want to leave somewhere completely.

Yet Serafina has never dreamt of going as far as her daughter is planning to go now. And anyway, where would she have gone? Europe has become a wounded place, in the grey shadows of two wars. The landscape of Campania itself has changed. So many lives have been lost here in so few years; it is no wonder that people are leaving in droves, clutching the handles of their suitcases as if their hopes of a better
future line the insides. But to Australia? To the pale, faded shoreline Aurelia has shown Serafina in the postcards Enzo sends? The place looks like a piece of cloth that has been left fluttering in the sun too long; all the colours are drained from it.

When Serafina opens the door today, Alba is carrying the map of the world that she had asked her to bring so that she could see the distance from here to Australia for herself.

“Ciao mamma,” Alba murmurs as she kisses her cheek, the map rolled up in her hand. Serafina leads her into the kitchen and lights the stove under the caffetiera.

“Sit,” she commands, motioning to the table.

Alba seems even more tired today. Her hair is pulled back into an untidy bun at the nape of her neck; her eyes look as though they are still creased with sleep, even though it is almost ten o’clock in the morning. Serafina wonders why her daughter looks so drawn. She asks if the boys are at school, if Emilio is at work, if Aurelia is well. Alba nods, *si, si, si*. Serafina walks over to the table and, before she realises what she is doing, she has placed the back of her hand on Alba’s forehead. Alba looks up at her and there are so many unsaid things in her expression that Serafina pulls her hand away.

“I think you are just tired,” Serafina dismisses, as she stumbles towards the larder to look for her tin of biscotti. As the caffetiera bubbles Alba gets up and fills two small coffee cups. Serafina joins her at the table, a plate of almond biscuits in her hand.

“Is that the map then?” she asks, setting down the biscotti as Alba pushes the long scroll towards her.

“Si,” her daughter replies. “That’s the whole world there.”
Serafina unrolls the scroll, alarmed at how large the world seems, even on paper.

“Where is it?” she asks, her eyes roaming around the familiar shapes of Europe.

“There.” Alba points to a strange brown lump almost at the very end of the page. Serafina spreads her thumb and smallest finger apart and marches her long olive fingers across the page while Alba holds down the curling sides. Australia is four hands away on paper, while the space between here and Bellinzona, where her son Umberto lives, is not even the width of Serafina’s smallest finger. Alba tugs at a piece of thread on her skirt. She always fidgets. Even as a very small child she couldn’t sleep peacefully. Serafina would go into her room to wake her up, and she would be sucking her thumb, or grasping a corner of her sheets, her legs crooked and her small feet poking out from under her blankets. It would pain Serafina to see those toes faintly blue with cold. But when Alba was awake, Serafina would complain about the state of the sheets. *These are linen Alba! Mio Dio! Why must you always move about and crease them, why do you always create more work for me?* It worried her though, even back then. What was it that made her daughter so restless, so afraid to stay still?

Alba is still picking idly at that thread. Serafina can hear her thumb and forefinger sliding along her cotton skirt, even though her own gaze is fixed on the map before them. Serafina’s eyes are raking through all the different shades of blue, and all the small coffee-stained coloured countries separating Italy from Australia. She looks at the world spread out on her old kitchen table and is filled with a desperation so intense it seems to scuttle up and down her bones.

Serafina looks up from the map and the cruel distance that will soon separate her from her child. Now she sees that there will be no once-yearly visits, no sound of Alba or her children in this house. The day feels drained of warmth; the sun looks pale.
from the kitchen window. Serafina stares at her coffee, and cannot speak for fear of blurring out her panic. She picks up her cup and gulps back the espresso. Alba does the same.

“Do you want some more, mamma?” Serafina nods, hoping that the next cup might calm her nerves. As Alba fills the caffetiera with more coffee and water, Serafina is glad of the silence, and relieved that her daughter is not cooing false words of comfort into the cold kitchen. Serafina looks back at the map and the enormity of the world makes her rub her knuckles across her chest so vigorously that Alba turns away from the stove to look at her.

“Are you all right mamma?” Alba’s green eyes are wide with concern.

“Of course,” Serafina snaps, rolling up the map of the world with trembling hands. Alba sits back down and slides the cup of coffee towards her mother.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s nothing,” Serafina sighs, shaking her head. She pushes the scroll back towards her daughter and swallows her coffee so quickly that it sears her throat. She watches as Alba dangles a biscotto in her cup.

“So, Aurelia tells me that you have been saying your goodbyes already.”

Alba glances at her, and then looks back down at the table.

“Well,” she says, “there are a lot of things to do before we go; I just want to make sure that we get everything done in time.”

“Who have you spoken to?”

“I sent a letter to Umberto and Genevieve last week, and one to Emilio’s cousin in France. Pasquale. Do you remember him? He took the lovely photographs at our wedding.”
Serafina waves her hand, impatient. “Do you think that Umberto will come back to see you before you go?” she asks, her gaze concentrated on the biscotto crumbs on Alba’s fingers. Alba shrugs.

“I don’t really know. I imagine it depends upon his work, and whether or not he is planning to bring the children.” She sighs as she dunks the rest of her biscotto in her coffee. “It would be nice to see the little ones again, but I cannot imagine Genevieve coming over here, and I doubt whether she will let him bring them out on his own. Isabella is only what now? Three, four?”

“Three last July.”

“Exactly, I don’t think that Genevieve will let her travel with Umberto yet. She’s so precious about those children.” Alba shakes her head. “And I don’t expect Emilio will get to see Pasquale either,” she adds.

“But Pasquale is only his cousin, Umberto is your brother,” Serafina argues.

“Still,” Alba says, “you know what Umberto is like. He works very hard.”

“I know.” There is a bitterness in Serafina’s voice whenever she speaks of her eldest son. “His family doesn’t matter to him any longer.”

“Oh mamma,” Alba says, her fingers circling the rim of her coffee cup. “That’s just the way things are now.”

The air between them thickens with unspoken words. Serafina looks at her daughter; she imagines laying her hand over Alba’s and saying, Listen to me. What would it be like, Serafina wonders, telling her daughter about that night, all those years ago? Serafina remembers it so clearly. Listening to the sound of her children and their father at their evening meal as she scrubbed pots and pans in that huge kitchen of the house they lived in back then. There had been no sounds out of the ordinary. Serafina
had been poised for a shriek, a sudden scraping of a chair from the table. Raised voices. But there was nothing. He hadn’t told Alba then, she’d thought, scrubbing the inside of a pot with vicious intensity. One more thing he had left for her to do.

Serafina listened as one by one the children and their father left the table, and after the last chair had been tucked back into place, Serafina put the pot she was holding onto the bench. It was half-washed, she remembers, still soapy, but she put it down anyway. She wiped her hands and took the apron off. This is vivid in her memory; untying the apron, as if not having the apron on would make a difference to what she had to say. She climbed the staircase, her hand gripping the banister, and walked the long hallway to her daughter’s room. The light had been on, so Alba must have been awake. Serafina raised her hand and touched the wooden door, not with her knuckles, as she had intended, but with the tips of her fingers. Soundlessly. Then she leant forward, her forehead pressed against the back of her hand. Serafina does not know how long she stood there like this, but something made her walk back down the hallway and downstairs into the kitchen. She had not been able to tell Alba about what would happen the next day, about the agreement she had made with Alba’s father, and she cannot do it now. Alba has enough to worry about.

For several minutes they are both silent. Alba’s fingers flit from her cup to twist a strand of hair that has fallen from her bun. The midday sun is disappearing into the high blue sky. Serafina looks at Alba and wonders if she has become another name on her daughter’s list of people to visit. She turns her head and looks over to the place where the kitchen meets the living room. She scans the floor and takes in the window at the front of the house. Tonight the curtains will be drawn shut, the candles lit, the doors closed against the cooling wind. The day will end as it always does, with her
rigidly alone in her narrow bed. But now she worries that the emptiness of the house might swallow her whole.

Alba looks at her watch. It is gold and fine, an engagement present from Emilio’s family.

“It’s nearly eleven,” she murmurs. Alba stands up and takes the cups to the sink, unscrews the aluminium caffetiera and tips the percolated coffee down the drain. She washes and wipes the dishes as Serafina gets up and puts the rest of the biscotti back into the tin, placing it by her daughter’s handbag.

“Take the biscotti home with you,” she says to Alba’s back, “the boys will eat them.”

Alba wipes down the kitchen table, rinses the cloth, and wipes her hands on a tea-towel.

“Thanks mamma.” Alba kisses her cheek, picks up her bag and the tin of biscotti.

“All right now,” Serafina murmurs, patting her shoulder quickly. She walks to the kitchen door and holds it open. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says as Alba steps out into the garden and waves good-bye. Serafina nods before shutting the door with a swift click. In the empty kitchen Serafina’s fingers tingle and her daughter’s good-bye kiss is hot on her cheek.
Aurelia’s house is the home that Alba never had before she was married. Not too big, nor too small. A house that was not built out of a sense of either self-importance or guilt. It is a house built for a family, for children to grow into and out of; with the right number of rooms, with just enough space in the kitchen for a dining table and eight chairs. Everything seems to fit in this house. Everything has its place.

Emilio has lived within these four walls all his life. His father and uncles built it long before he or his brother and sisters were born. Alba cannot believe how well she has found her place in this house, how easily she has brought her two boys into it. When she leaves Salerno in three months time there will be many things that Alba will not miss. But she will miss this house, and she will miss Aurelia.

It was not supposed to feel this easy, slipping into another family’s home. She will drive you mad within a month, Violetta had predicted, come and live with me instead, we have more than enough room. But Alba had shaken her head. She did not want to be around her sister’s expensive things. The mahogany end tables imported from England, lounge suites covered in fabric from France, all the different shapes and colours of Murano glass blooming like exotic flowers on tables, over the fireplace, in small cabinets built for trinkets. The thought of all that money and all those things made Alba’s palms damp. She had learnt at a very young age what that much money could do to people. And there was always the chance that she might run into her father at Violetta’s house. On that side of Salerno they would be sharing the same stores, the same narrow streets, perhaps praying at the same church every weekend. No, she had told Violetta, it would be easier to live with Emilio’s mother. That way, Alba reasoned, she could remain closer to Serafina too. In the middle, always in the
middle. *This is what I want for us someday,* she had murmured to Emilio shortly after she had moved in, *a house built for our family.*

Now that the time is approaching when she must leave this house, Alba is increasingly tired. Every day she walks up the steep slope of mountain to visit her mother, sometimes twice a day. Serafina never conversed much before, but since Alba told her mother that it was done - the sponsorship approved, the voyage booked, the tickets paid for - Serafina speaks less and less. The time oozes by slowly, until Alba feels the moments spent sitting at her mother’s kitchen table have the consistency of something thick and gelatinous, like over-cooked gnocchi stuck to the bottom of a pot.

Sometimes Alba is convinced that Serafina is sulking; other times she fears that her mother is rigid with rage. She can almost see it simmering under the wrinkled surface of Serafina’s skin. Alba can sense it too in the way her mother’s hand reaches out suddenly to straighten the tablecloth, the way she lunges forwards to pick up her coffee cup, and the way her empty cup lands in the saucer. It doesn’t clink against the curved white edges, or rattle gently into place. It is thrust precisely into the shallow circle. Alba doesn’t know why, but this exact placement of cup onto saucer unnerves her.

Alba finds it easier when she has Marco and Paolo with her at Serafina’s house. The two boys fill the house with noise, whether they are outside chasing the chickens and prodding the goat with careful toes, or inside wriggling in and out of chairs, slapping cards onto the floor or trying to beat each other at games of knuckle-bones or marbles.

The other thing which has bothered Alba is that Serafina has kept the map she brought over a couple of weeks ago. Alba spies it whenever she walks into the kitchen;
either rolled up on the kitchen bench, tucked on top of the cabinet or sitting above the cupboards. Alba doesn’t know what her mother does with this map. Does she spend long hours gazing at it, trying to decipher the different countries by their shapes? Serafina does not read, she has never been taught to, but Alba knows that the large jagged shape of Australia is clear in her mother’s mind. Alba is not sure why Serafina is keeping the map, but every time Alba walks into the kitchen and sees the map in a different place, she has the urge to grab the thin creamy paper and rip it to shreds. The map has become something else that Alba and Serafina do not talk about.

By the time Alba leaves Serafina’s house this evening she is exhausted. She has been there twice today. This morning her mother barely spoke at all, so Alba went back after supper. Going to her mother’s house now feels like doing penance. By the time she slips her copper key into the lock of Aurelia’s wooden door, Alba is barely standing up straight. She feels her whole body sag as though her bones and blood have been filled with lead ball-bearings. Aurelia’s door is white, the kind of impressive white that does not seem to weather. It has always been so bright and unblemished because it is one of the things which Emilio paints fastidiously each and every year. As she walks through the vivid white door Alba worries about who will keep it so shiny, so carefully tended to when they are gone. One of Emilio’s brothers-in-law, hopefully. Giacomo, or maybe Alessandro.

Alba closes the door behind her and walks into the hallway that is already cool with night air. It is almost ten o’clock and Alba imagines that Emilio is putting the boys to bed. Usually Alba or Aurelia do this, the nightly ritual of tucking the sheets in, telling a story, or, when Marco demands it, singing a song. But now they have decided that
Emilio should start doing this too, because Aurelia will not be there to tuck the boys in and send them gently off to sleep when they are in Australia.

So it is Aurelia who Alba sees first as she walks into the living room. Aurelia stands up and gives Alba a hug, even though Alba has not said a word about her evening with Serafina. Alba supposes that her mother-in-law must have noticed how much more frequent these visits have become, and how tired Alba is when she returns home from them. Alba wants to excuse herself, to run a bath and lie there until the water turns cold. But Aurelia’s fist is already at Alba’s back, working its way up her spine, to the space between her shoulders where Alba stores so much of Serafina’s silence.

“How is your mamma, Alba?” Aurelia asks as she steps back. Aurelia is impossibly short, Alba thinks, bent prematurely double. It must have been from having her children so young, from bending over to pick them up, carrying them to bed, leaning over to put them to sleep. Aurelia is always stooping to give Marco and Paolo a cuddle or pinch their cheeks between her fingers. She still picks up Marco if he cries. By comparison, Serafina is tall and straight.

Alba shrugs.

“She’s fine I suppose.”

She wishes she could say more. But Alba learned a long time ago that what happens within Serafina’s house stays within Serafina’s house. She feels an odd sense of propriety about her mother’s grief as well as her anger. As much as it would relieve her to speak of her mother’s actions, to lay the scant bones of their last conversation here on Aurelia’s living room floor, she holds herself back.

“She seemed a bit tired tonight,” Alba admits.
“It’s getting darker earlier now,” Aurelia looks toward the window, “the seasons are changing. That always brings a little bit more pain into old bones.” Aurelia rubs her legs; she barely has to bend over to reach her shins.

Alba nods.

“Is Emilio putting the boys to bed?” she asks, sitting down on one of the two matching lounge suites. The cushions are getting soft, Alba thinks as she sinks down onto the lounge. She leans her left arm along the wooden arm-rest. It is smooth, cool to the touch. Soon these cushions will have to be re-stuffed. Alba closes her eyes and makes a note to do it before she leaves.

“Alba, cara, is everything all right?”

Alba opens her eyes, notices the way her mother-in-law’s face is inclined towards her, the way her hands are knotted in front of her.

“Yes, yes, of course.” Alba’s hand flutters through the air. “It’s been a tiring day. There is so much to do before we go and time seems to be slipping by so quickly.”

Aurelia smiles.

“You and Emilio will be fine,” she says, “the boys too. Enzo and Regina are doing well over there. As much as it pains me to admit it, they have a better life there than they would have had here.” Aurelia sits down next to Alba on the sofa, the cushion pouts beneath her. She pats Alba’s knee. “You and Emilio will do well over there. Of course I will miss you terribly, but who knows? Maybe I will be able to come over and visit you all some day.”

Alba looks at Aurelia’s smiling face. She cannot think of anyone who deserves being alone less. Emilio’s father died years ago, and her eldest son has been in Australia for six years. Emilio will be the second son to leave, his will be the second
family to move away. And instead of being sullen, or angry or hurt, instead of dragging Alba through long silences, Aurelia is happy for them. Maybe even a little proud.

Aurelia sees them moving towards a better future, rather than away from their past. Whenever Alba kneels before her bed at night, the stubbled bits of carpet pressing into her knees, Aurelia is one person she always gives thanks for.

“I should go to sleep mamma. I have to be up early and make sure we have everything ready to go into town in the afternoon. Do you need anything done before I go to bed?”

“No Alba, you go to bed. Get some rest. You look so tired.”

Alba kisses Aurelia’s cheek as she stands up.

“Good night mamma.”

“Good night Alba, God bless.”

Alba nods as she walks down the corridor towards the bathroom. She needs to wash her face, brush her teeth and take down her hair. But she stops at her bedroom door first. She turns the iron doorhandle and stands on the threshold between the corridor and the bedroom she shares with Emilio. She leans against the doorframe, and wishes she felt as comfortable out there with the people of this town, and in the quiet shell of Serafina’s home, as she does when she is inside this house.
Serafina has been up since five this morning. She has swept and washed the floors of her small house, the bench and table tops have been wiped down with bleach, the goat has been milked. Now Serafina stands in the kitchen lighting the stove for a second cup of espresso. There is a knock at the back door. She looks up at the clock which hangs over the doorway into the living room. Almost 8.30. It will be Alba, always on time. Serafina walks to the door, lets her in.

“I’m just making espresso,” she says as she leans to receive her daughter’s kiss.

“I’ll make you a cup.”

Alba nods, and slings the straps of her bag over one of the chairs. On the stove the caffetiera is hissing, flames licking its aluminium sides black. Serafina fills two small cups, places a teaspoon of sugar in Alba’s. Today Alba is wearing a long black skirt and a dark green blouse which is flecked with small white, red and yellow flowers. Her hair is pulled back and held at the base of her neck with a black ribbon. It catches Serafina off guard sometimes, Alba’s beauty. She looks nothing like her cherub-cheeked sister, or her dark-eyed, long-jawed brothers. As they drink, Serafina notices that the vivid colour of the top brings out the green of her daughter’s eyes. A few loose curls fall around her face and emphasise the fine lines of her cheeks and her jaw. Her full lips are smiling.

“Ready to go, mamma?” Alba takes the coffee cups to the sink.

Serafina grunts in reply, but lets Alba take her arm as they cross through the back yard and into the street. Serafina notices weeds twisting their vicious way into her small garden. She squats, tugs them out, and throws them onto the dusty road. She stands up again and takes Alba’s arm. She knows she is lucky to even have her own
home. This home and this daughter were the only things that Serafina was given by Alba’s father; these were the things she wanted most. It is hard to imagine that she has lived here for almost fifteen years, even harder to believe that Alba once lived in its cramped rooms with her. She had resented its small size when Alba and Emilio were married; she knew that there was no room for a man, or for the children that were sure to follow, in the tiny bedroom Alba had shared with Serafina’s sewing machine. This cottage is on the outskirts of Salerno, up the green slopes of the mountains, and this street is littered with a few other small homes like her own, inhabited by old men or women whose children have moved on.

As they turn onto Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, the stretch of road that will lead them into Piazza Vittorio Veneto, Serafina looks at Alba.

“Isn’t Aurelia coming along?”

“I thought it might be nice if it was just the two of us,” Alba says with a hesitant smile. “I hope you do not mind, mamma.”

Serafina shrugs her thin shoulders, but she is glad that Alba has chosen to spend this time with her. It is late September and the early morning wind from the sea raises goose-bumps like pinpricks on their arms, making them shiver. From here Serafina can see Piazza XXIV Maggio is already busy with the business of buying and selling. The panetteria is full of people buying their daily bread. The macelleria is busy with customers choosing cuts of meat for their lunch-time meal. A few bloated old women sit on stools outside their homes.

Lucia Di Nero and Anna Morrone are among them, and they both avert their eyes when they see Serafina coming. Giulia Torre, Maria Silvano and Tindera Trimboli nod in recognition; no-one calls out the loud familiar greetings which usually ring around
the piazza. Serafina sniffs and holds her head up, yet the averted gazes are enough to make Alba grip her mother’s arm more tightly. Serafina looks away from Alba, keeps her shoulders squared and her back straight.

The train arrives soon after they reach the station platform. The women take two battered seats next to each other. Alba sits by the aisle so that she can pay for the tickets. Serafina drops into the seat by the window and stares past her reflection, thinking. She cannot believe that women like Anna and Lucia still bother her daughter. There is no doubt though that her youngest child had the hardest time after they left her father’s house. Those few years were the worst for Serafina: suddenly living in a small house, wondering what would happen to her daughter, always questioning whether or not she’d done the right thing in insisting on keeping Alba. Back then, if Serafina walked through the town square, a vindictive hiss of gossip would follow her. She remembers one particular day a week or so after she had moved into the small house. She’d walked into Piazza XXIV Maggio on market day, as she had always done, and as she was bending over to sort through a crate of zucchini, a warm tomato hit the side of her face. It was a hot day, and the tomato smelled sickly sweet and overripe. Serafina had been so shocked that she stood still, her head bent, the tomato oozing down her neck and onto the collar of her blue cotton dress, her mouth sticky with alarm. An unusual hush washed over the market stalls; the vendors stopped calling out the price of their vegetables, the customers quietened their haggling. Serafina’s pulse echoed distantly, as if someone had stuffed gauze into her ears. If she looked around, she knew that every face would be turned in her direction. She’d stood up, pulled a handkerchief from her bag, wiped her face, and without looking right or left, strode the hot length of the piazza. All she saw as she walked away was a blur of
brown faces, black hair and dark coloured clothes. For a few moments Serafina had thought she heard footsteps behind her, following. She hurried her steps until all she could hear was the frenzied sound of her own feet on the cobbled road. She did not stop at any of the fountains along her way, walking straight home; the sun scorching the top of her head, the red flesh of tomato stinging her skin. The silence of the market-place buzzed in her ears like one hundred angry wasps as she held her shopping bag with a grip that made her knuckles white and the straw press into her fingers.

Serafina had stumbled in through the back gate of her new home, went straight to the tap by the chicken coop and washed her face, neck and the top of her dress. Taking her handkerchief from her bag she blotted her pale blue collar with fast, furious hands, her short breaths stabbing at her chest, the coppery taste of humiliation in her throat. Before she stepped inside, Serafina checked her reflection in the kitchen window to make sure that there were no bits of tomato, no small seeds anywhere on her neck or her dress. Once in the kitchen, she put the potatoes in the larder and the celery in the ice-chest. When she washed the bright orange mandarins and placed them in a small bowl on the table, Alba got up from a chair in the living room where she had been doing her sewing. Serafina hastily wiped her face and slung the tea-towel over the damp shoulder of her dress as she heard her daughter approach.

“Have you finished hemming your skirt yet?” Serafina had demanded, the shame of what had just happened scraping her throat so that her voice came out ragged, sharp. Alba stepped back.

“Not yet mamma,” she said in a thin whisper.
“Well, don’t you think that you had better be going on with it?” Alba bowed her head, her hands clasped before her. She stumbled out of the kitchen and back to the living room as Serafina stood there, the shoulder of her dress damp against her skin; annoyed she had let her anger spill into this new house already.

That night, and the next, Serafina and Alba had eaten plain brodo for dinner. As they sat opposite each other, Alba raised her spoon to her lips without asking Serafina why there weren’t any carrots or tomatoes in their broth. On the third day Violetta bustled into the house with a basket full of vegetables and two bags of fruit. Serafina remembers that as she and Violetta put them all away, Alba stood in the doorway and watched, her fingers scratching at her arm, her lips moving as if in silent prayer. In that moment Alba looked like a child, gangly and skinny, and Serafina felt the weight of raising this young woman on her own. She’d wondered what might become of Alba in a town so full of such coarse, vindictive rage.

The train shudders towards the mountains and Serafina leans into her stiff seat and sighs. The scenery outside begins to change; the train has trundled through the mountains and on one side Serafina can see only the high grey walls built just after the war. On the other side the sea rises up, so close that Serafina thinks that if all the passengers were to stand up and press on the side of the train closest to the water, the train would tip and fall, segment by segment, and splash into the light blue of the Tyrrhenian sea. Serafina’s gaze, like Alba’s and the gazes of all the passengers in their compartment, is drawn towards the sea. For a moment Serafina imagines that the vast Tyrrhenian would be enough, just enough, to swallow her whole, to submerge her body so completely that not a single regret would be able to rise to the surface. She turns away from the sparkle of blue and closes her eyes. So much time has passed
between that day in the markets and this moment now. Yet the memory persists, predatory as the black and white cat she shoos from her chicken coop night after night. It was the memory of that day which had caused Serafina to kneel by her bed and give thanks after Emilio Canella had asked for Alba’s hand. She had not heeded the village rumours that Enzo Canella was planning to leave for Australia and his younger brother was sure to follow. Back then it had seemed such a small price to pay to have Alba married. As the train moves into another cavernous black tunnel through the mountains, Serafina wonders how she could have believed that having Alba move so far away was a sacrifice she could make. A breath catches in her chest, as though it has snagged on the way out of her lungs. Serafina places a hand on her breastbone and exhales a long shaky breath.

“Are you all right mamma?” Alba asks, leaning in so close that her arm presses against Serafina’s, pinching it. Serafina shrugs away, irritable.

“I’m just tired.”

Alba nods and presses her lips together. Serafina wonders if Alba is thinking what she is thinking; that this trip might be the last one they take together.

*

The train comes to a halt at Napoli Centrale. The station is filled with slack-mouthed, dull-eyed men who hulk up and down the station platforms, their dark stares searching for pockets to pick. *Vagabonds*, Serafina thinks, gripping Alba’s arm as they walk through into Piazza Garibaldi.

“Which store are we going to?” Serafina asks as they head for Via Dei Tribunali. The streets of Napoli lie in the shadows of the tall buildings that stretch greyly up towards the sky. The dank mossy smell of mould and the sickly sweet smell of over-
ripe fruit and vegetables permeate the air. Bicycles and cars weave in and out of the narrow streets, kicking up billowing clouds around them. Much of Naples has been rebuilt since the war, but the city still has a torn-down look about it, as though such improvements are only a temporary thing, and the real beast of the city lurks just behind the façade, fangs bared. Young men with greasy hair and white t-shirts stand bruise-lipped outside the macellerie where sheep’s intestines hang like leather from menacing grey hooks. The women head west, towards the larger piazzas and away from the stink of the markets. They cut through Piazza Bellini, turn left onto a large street, and walk past several stores before reaching a ladies’ boutique. Serafina moves towards the door, but Alba catches her arm.

“Now don’t get angry, mamma,” she says, smiling at Serafina, “but I did not bring you here to buy an outfit for myself.”

Serafina looks up at the store.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I have enough clothes for now, and I’ve already bought a lot of fabric so that I can sew anything I need when I get to Australia.”

“What are we doing here?”

Alba bites her lip. She adjusts the strap of her bag on her shoulder. “I wanted to buy something nice for you. Emilio and I will not be here for Christmas, and who knows how long it might take to ship something over. So I thought that I could get you something special now, and I thought it would be nice to come here together so that you could find something you liked.” Alba has said all this so quickly. It is as if her words are chasing each other from her mouth. Serafina looks into the store window, and is overwhelmed by all the racks of new dresses and suits.
“Alba, I don’t need any clothes.”

“Oh mamma.” The exasperation in her daughter’s voice makes Serafina stand up straight. “When was the last time you had something lovely and new?”

“I don’t need anything lovely and new,” Serafina retorts, “I can make all my clothes myself.”

“I know you can! It’s just that . . . well, this is something that I wanted to do for you. Please mamma.” She places her hand on Serafina’s arm. “I cannot remember the last time I got to be the one who bought you something nice.”

Something in Alba’s voice stops Serafina. Violetta has always been the wealthy daughter, the one who buys her good linen sheets, handbags, scarves. And although Alba gives Serafina money every month, Emilio’s modest salary does not allow for the extravagant gifts that her eldest daughter is able to buy on a whim.

“Allora, we will see what they have here.” Serafina pats her daughter’s hand so quickly that all she feels are her knuckles. “Come then,” she says and steps into the store.

“Buongiorno!” A lady wearing a rich blue woollen dress, her hair pinned away from her face, approaches them. This woman’s hair is set in such perfect ringlets that Serafina wonders if she slept with her hair wound in rollers. Her lips are painted the ruby red of a film star, and she sings her greeting like a song. She looks at Alba, smiling.

“Do you need to be measured cara, or are you here to look at our ready-to-wear range?” Serafina sees Alba’s awkward smile. She looks down at the floor where the bright light shows scratches, like dull scars, on the polished wooden floor.
“Actually I am looking for something for my mother,” Alba says, and Serafina casts a wary eye on the tape measure that hangs over the woman’s shoulder like a yellow and black striped snake. She wishes she could think of a retort that would send this powder-faced saleswoman click-clacking back to her place at the counter. The woman’s eyes crawl like spiders over Serafina’s dress, a faint smirk on her red lips.

“I think we will have a little look through your ready-to-wear range,” Alba says pleasantly.

“Very well, please call if you need my help.” The assistant goes back to the counter. Heat creeps up Serafina’s neck and into her face; she wishes that she was one of those women who could walk into a store like this, look around, and dismiss everything in it with a wave of her hand. The clothes here are the expensive kind, beautiful fabrics and styles from Milan, the kind of outfits she used to wear when the children were young. This thought alone makes her want to rush out of the shop and back onto the gritty streets. She turns to implore Alba, but her daughter is already rifling through a rack with quick hopeful hands.

“What about this, mamma?” Alba is holding up a dress made of a fine, burgundy coloured wool. It is belted at the waist with a thin, dark brown leather belt, and buttons run from its high neck to the waist. The skirt is slightly flared, much like the styles advertised in newspapers. Next to it, Serafina’s good black woollen dress looks frumpy and hastily made.

“Alba, I am a sixty-five year old woman! I would look ridiculous in that.”

Alba hangs the burgundy dress back on the hook and pulls out a navy blue suit. “This one would be nice to wear to church,” she suggests, holding the suit up to
Serafina’s neck. Serafina sees that the well-tailoured jacket and straight skirt are made of heavy cotton.

Serafina shakes her head, “I don’t like the cut of the collar,” she says backing away. She cannot imagine walking into the cavernous interior of San Tommaso D’Aquino in such an outfit, never mind the smaller church she goes to twice a week. Alba sighs as she rehangs the suit in its place. She turns to look through the next rack, her fingers moving with brisk impatience. Serafina looks around; everything here looks too new, too different. Alba is now lifting a black dress from its hanger. It is woollen, with a v-neck, and its sleeves are gathered from the shoulder, and flounce a little at the wrist.

“Mamma mia! What a waste of material!” Serafina exclaims, peering at the gathered sleeves, the pleated skirt. Alba puts the dress back on the rack. Again and again her daughter holds up dresses and suits for Serafina to look at. Again and again Serafina dismisses them with a shake of her head or a click of her tongue. Under the bright light, near all these elegant dresses in rich fabrics, Serafina feels old and worn. Two more women enter the store; they are dressed in styles like the ones on the hangers.

“Signore!” The saleswoman exclaims, striding towards her customers, “how lovely to see you again!” The women smile at the saleswoman, chatting to her in the comfortable tones of regular customers. Serafina thinks that they look like birds, clustered together in their bright clothes, made-up faces and slick hairstyles. They stand together for a few more moments, before the saleswoman leads them towards a few racks by the front counter. The women do not turn to register Serafina or Alba.
Serafina’s head is pounding. Beside her Alba looks as if she is trying hard not to let her smile fall away from her face.

“Alba, please,” Serafina says as her daughter starts to move towards another rack. “I want to go home and start cooking lunch.”

“But we haven’t found anything!”

“I don’t need anything from here.” And in one sweeping movement, Serafina looks up, nods to the saleswoman and walks out of the boutique.

The streets are more crowded now; pigeons compete with people for space on the footpaths. Old men sit outside at rickety tables drinking espresso and playing cards. Alba follows Serafina down the street in silence.

“That store was too expensive,” Serafina says as she turns to wait for her daughter to catch up.


“But I don’t need any new dresses.”

Alba shrugs. “It would have been nice.”

Serafina turns to her daughter, her voice vehement.

“I am not ashamed of the way I look. There is nothing wrong with simple, hand-made clothes!”

Alba steps back.

“I know there isn’t mamma! It’s not that, it’s just . . .” But Serafina moves away quickly and Alba, muted, follows her. As they turn down another street towards Piazza Bellini, Alba stops outside another store.
“Mamma, look!” Alba is pointing to a sign on the window front, Serafina goes over to her. “It says that their new stock of ladies’ winter coats has arrived,” she continues, excited.

“Ridiculous,” Serafina says, shaking her head. “As though people will buy that kind of heavy wool at this time of year.” She steps back onto the street, but Alba is still standing in front of the store.

“Alba! Andiamo!”

“I thought we could take a quick look inside.” She turns back to Serafina.

“What for?”

“I thought maybe I could buy you a new coat for winter.”

“I do not need to think about my winter coat just yet,” Serafina sniffs, “it is barely autumn, Alba.”

“But mamma, I do. What I mean to say is, it would be good to buy you a coat now, since we won’t be here next winter.”

Looking towards the piazza, Serafina does not know what to say to her daughter. She cannot bear to shop for something she can only wear when Alba is no longer here. She does not want to have a reminder of her daughter hanging in her armadio when Alba is living thousands of miles away.

“I am going home,” she says, without looking back at her daughter. She walks towards the station, and for just a moment it is Serafina who is leaving, and Alba the one left behind.
These are the last frantic six weeks of Alba’s life in Salerno. They have had to leave it until now to go across to Bari. Emilio has been busy with all sorts of forms and documents. He has become bad-tempered under the weight of all this paperwork. He has been saying for weeks that he will book the tickets to Bari. Today he flings them onto the kitchen table when he comes home from work.

“There,” he says to Alba, who is leaning over the table, cutting soft grey cotton into shorts for the boys. “We leave a week from today.” Alba has barely time to look up from the material before Emilio stumps down the hallway. She keeps her left hand steady on the cotton as she marches the scissors through the fabric.

On evenings like these when Emilio walks into the house under a cloud of annoyance, Alba is relieved she doesn’t have to sift through the paperwork, to organise passports and visas for work. At other times she wishes she could be responsible for all the paperwork for their journey. It seems cleaner, easier than dealing with her family.

Violetta has been dropping around more frequently, stopping in on her way to the markets at about ten or eleven in the morning. These visits usually take place on Wednesdays and Fridays. She comes at this time, Alba knows, because this is when Aurelia goes to visit her daughters. Violetta’s visits have become almost as tiring as the hours Alba spends at Serafina’s house. As the time for Alba’s departure has crept closer by, Violetta has been bothering Alba, pestering her about seeing their father.

She had arrived this morning at about eleven, shortly after Alba had returned from Serafina’s house. She had set her handbag down on the one corner of the kitchen table which wasn’t covered in blue linen or skirt patterns.
“Lovely,” Violetta said, touching the fabric with the tips of her fingers, “this blue will look beautiful on you Alba.”

“I’ve had it for nearly a year,” Alba admitted, “it was expensive and I didn’t know what to do with it. I wanted to see if I could sew a gathered skirt for me, and maybe make a nice jacket for mamma, but I don’t think there’s enough material here.” Alba smoothed the linen over the table. It fell lightly over the side and onto the chairs, where it pooled like blue puddles in the seats. This blue, Alba thought, would look beautiful on her mamma. It was a dark blue with just a hint of green behind it. It would have brought out the warm brown of her mother’s eyes. But after their last disastrous shopping trip to Naples, Alba was not sure she should present her mamma with any new clothes.

Violetta was waving her hand in the air; the quickness of the gesture brought Alba back.

“You don’t have to worry about clothes for mamma, Alba. I can take care of that.” Violetta sat on one of the chairs at the table, and the blue linen fell into her lap. She picked up the edge, rubbed the fabric in between her fingers.

“This would make a beautiful dress Alba. There’s enough fabric for something for summer, something for parties; maybe a little fitted, with an open neckline. I have some magazines I could bring over.”

Alba shook her head. Honestly, what kind of parties did Violetta think Alba would be attending in Australia?

“I think a skirt,” she said, pulling the fabric towards her, “and maybe a little jacket.”
“Oh Alba you have so many skirts already! Mio Dio! Just make a dress. This fabric is too lovely for a skirt. Look.” Violetta stood and held the fabric up to Alba’s face. “This is beautiful against your skin and your eyes. You still have a lovely, slim figure. Make a dress. I’ll drop over some pictures this afternoon for you.”

Alba felt the cool linen against her cheek. She knew her sister was right. The material was too good for another skirt.

“All right, all right,” she smiled at Letta, “bring over the pictures and I’ll make up a new pattern.”

“Good girl,” Violetta patted her hand. “You have to do it now, while you are still young enough to wear these new styles. Soon,” she said, her hand on her stomach, “you’ll be old like me.”

Alba smiled as she folded the material. “Don’t be silly Letta, you’re only a few years older than me.”

“Alba I’m seven, nearly eight years older than you!”

“Oh well.” She placed the neat square of blue on the table. “Can I make you a coffee?”

“No thanks cara, I had a cup before I came over.”

“A glass of water?”

“Nothing Alba. I’m fine, let’s just go and sit down for a minute.”

Alba moved away from the stove. She followed her sister into the living room. Violetta sank down on one sofa, Alba on the other.

“How are your plans progressing?” Violetta asked.

“Good, good. Everything is coming along I suppose. Though I received a letter from Umberto yesterday. He won’t be able to make it down before we leave.”
“I didn’t really think he would, he’s been so busy with work lately.”

“I didn’t expect it either,” Alba said. “It would have been nice to see the little ones, but,” she shrugged, “what can you do?”

Violetta settled back into her sofa. She shook her hair back from her face. “Ah well, you’ll see them when you come home to visit.”

Alba nodded; she knew what Violetta was going to say next. She wished there was some way of stopping her sister, but Letta was so persistent. Alba looked down at her hands, at her fingers. They are exactly like mamma’s hands, she thought. The crease of her knuckles, the length of her fingers, the shape of her nails, all Serafina’s.

“Why don’t you come over tonight Alba? Even if it’s just for a cup of coffee? I know papà would love to see you before you go.”

“Letta please.” Alba looked at her sister. She had his broad nose, and his skin the colour of milk. “You know I can’t.” Alba pressed her hands onto her knees.

“You can Alba, and I think you should. It’s been too many years since you’ve seen him.”

“That’s not true, I see him around here and there,” Alba replied. She thought of the last time she had seen her father, a few weeks ago. How she had nodded at him and walked in the opposite direction down the Corso.

“That’s not what I mean Alba!” Violetta threw her hands up in the air. She was sitting upright in her seat now.

“Letta, please! I don’t want to argue with you!”

“He’s your papà, and he’s getting old.”

Alba gripped her knees. She was not going to do this. She would not fight with her sister over this man. “Letta I can’t. Think what it would do to mamma.”
“She doesn’t need to know,” Letta suggested. She shifted on the sofa, crossed her legs.

At this Alba let out a shout of laughter. “Managia Letta! Mamma finds everything out! People in this town do nothing but talk, talk, talk. Someone is sure to tell her, or mention it in front of her.” Alba stood up and walked over to the window. “I just can’t upset her anymore than I already have.” Alba looked outside at the street, the haze of trees, the distant shimmer of blue. Where does it end, she wondered, how many people must she please at once? In how many directions could she be pulled? When Alba turned around Violetta was standing behind her. She looked so much like him. Maybe this is how it is. Alba with her long limbs and straight, thin fingers will always be Serafina’s child. Letta with her wide face and her paunch will always belong to her father. Violetta put her hands on Alba’s shoulders, and Alba could see her father’s stare peering out at her from behind Violetta’s chestnut eyes.

“Is this how you want to leave things between you, Alba? Is this how you want to go?”

Alba looked at her sister. “You know what he did Letta.”

“But Alba, he had no choice! He made the best decision he could. He gave mamma what she asked for; the house, furniture, everything!”

Alba jerked away. “Basta!”

“But Alba . . .”

“No Letta, that’s enough. I don’t want to spend my last few weeks here fighting with you about this. What’s done is done.”

“Alba, is this what you want? What you want?”
Alba nodded. “I can’t see him Letta.” And there was something so small, so fragile in Alba’s voice that her sister acquiesced. Letta went and sat on the sofa. She looked out of the window.

“Va bene, Alba.”

When Letta had returned that afternoon, a stack of magazines under her arm, she didn’t mention their father. The two sisters sat at the table and looked at dresses, argued over the cut of the style, the length of the skirt. Together they chose a dress for Alba, and Letta watched over her shoulder as Alba sketched out the pattern; as her scissors bit into the beautiful blue material.

* 

Now Alba finishes cutting out the shapes of shorts from the grey cotton. Folding them over her arm, she takes them into the sewing room which sits snugly between Aurelia’s room and the boys’ bedroom. She places the cut grey fabric over the blue linen, and walks back to the kitchen. She wipes the table down with a damp cloth to catch the fine blue and grey threads. After rinsing out the cloth she goes back over to the table and picks up the tickets. She can hear Emilio washing in the bathroom as she opens the envelope.

Five tickets. They travel next Friday, and spend three nights in Bari. When they come back home there will only be four and a half weeks until they leave. So little time.

Alba goes over to the cupboard, takes out garlic, onion and potatoes. From the icebox she picks two carrots and some celery. She washes the carrots and the celery, peels the potatoes and begins to chop them. In the bathroom the water has stopped running. Emilio has finished washing and will be getting dressed in their bedroom.
Alba wonders whether or not she should go and speak to him, lay her hand on his arm and ask if he is all right. But she decides against it. She fries the garlic and onion in the cast-iron skillet. Alba knows that Emilio becomes flustered around those official pieces of paper because he is better with more tangible things. A brick on top of another and then another until a wall is built, then a whole house. An empty bucket that slowly, sometimes very slowly, fills up with fish. He does not understand paperwork. He never had the sort of education Alba was given. Alba adds the potato, celery and carrot to the pan. She stirs them into the oil. Emilio walks into the kitchen, picks up his tobacco, then goes into the living room. He will sit and smoke for a while, enjoy the quiet house before the boys come back with Aurelia. If Alba has time, she will sit down too, maybe share a cigarette with him. After dinner Emilio will smile at her and tell her how wonderful her risotto was. Later he will tuck her hair behind her ear so that he can press his lips against her cheek. _Bella,_ he will murmur, _bella, bella._

* 

Ten days later they are on their way back from Bari. The train is looping the slender ankle of Italy on its way back to Salerno. It has been a hectic visit. Aurelia was so obviously happy to be with her brother and sister again. Salvatore and Domenica had exclaimed about how much the children had grown, while lamenting their own white hair and stooped backs. Emilio’s cousins had cooked and talked non-stop about Australia. There were at least two huge meals a day, as well as conversations and card games that lasted into the early hours of morning. Plenty of wine and limoncello.

Alba doesn’t mind them, Emilio’s family in Bari. She likes the fact that they have grown up so far away from her. Surely they know of her family, of her past. Then again maybe they don’t. Maybe questions were asked and Aurelia lifted up her hand
and silenced them. She might have shaken her head or clicked her tongue. *Alba is a lovely young woman*, she might have said, *a good wife, a good mother. A kind, considerate daughter-in-law.* Alba knows that Aurelia has had to do this before, but she can only guess how many times.

The train is rattling along, taking them away from the hellos and goodbyes of Bari, and back to their own lazy stretch of coastline. They are sitting in four seats, facing each other. Paolo next to his father, Aurelia beside Alba, and Marco curled up in Alba’s arms, asleep. Aurelia is humming an old song from her village. Her eyes are closed and her head is tipped back, the wavering notes of music slipping past her closed lips.

“You look tired Paolo,” Alba whispers over Marco’s head, “why don’t you close your eyes and try to get some sleep?”

Paolo shakes his head. He is sitting next to the window, watching the Italian countryside as it slips past them. The rows and rows of houses. The endless farms. The spiky plants which grow along the train tracks, the mountains looming ahead.

“It’s still going to be a while before we get back to Salerno.”

“I’m all right,” he says. He is grumpy, over-tired. Alba is not sure if he understood the permanence of their goodbye in Bari. These are people her son is used to saying goodbye to. But she thinks that some hint of the finality has gotten to him, perhaps because he is sitting next to his father and has absorbed some of his father’s sadness. Four more weeks, Alba thinks, four more weeks of these goodbyes.

Aurelia is still humming beside Alba.
“That was a nice visit, wasn’t it?” Alba asks Emilio. Emilio turns his gaze from the window and looks at her. His eyes are red; he was up until very late last night, playing scopa with his cousins Leo and Eugenio in Salvatore’s kitchen. He smiles a weary smile.

“It was good to see Zio Salvatore and Zia Domenica again,” Emilio says, “but Bari has changed so much. Every time we go there, there are more and more grey buildings. So many more people.”

“Ah,” Aurelia’s eyes have opened, “it was such a beautiful little town when I was a girl, not so many people as now, not so busy, busy, busy all the time.”

“It’s changed since the war.”

“Si, si,” Aurelia nods, “it was so, so pretty before.”

“Everything was better before the war,” Emilio says. As he speaks he touches the skin near his elbow on his left arm, as he always does when he mentions the war. Alba knows this mark well. The pink stain on the tender stretch of skin where the bullet entered his flesh. Amazing to think that something that almost killed him might have saved his life. Emilio came home in the middle of 1944, but most of the men he left behind didn’t come home at all. Emilio turns to stare out the window again, his index and middle finger covering this round spot, this exclamation point on his skin. Alba looks at her husband’s profile. He is still a handsome man. He has not turned puffy or doughy with age. His skin is dark from so many long hours spent outside. A mess of tight black ringlets spring from his scalp. Long eyelashes, eyes the colour of espresso with just a hint of milk. He has inherited Aurelia’s uncomplicated sweetness. He is a kind man, a good father, and Alba loves him in a way she never expected to. Yet he is not the man Alba imagined she would marry when she was younger.
From the time she was twelve Alba was told that she would marry Ernesto Parioli, Federico’s cousin. Alba remembers Ernesto as a man who was slightly too soft. His face too round, his hair too fair. He was the eldest son, his father was richer than Alba’s papà, richer than even Federico’s father. It was Ernesto, Serafina would tell Alba as she combed through the dark tangle of Alba’s hair before bedtime, whom she would marry when she grew up. At nineteen Violetta, still slim-hipped and pretty, had just married Federico. And even though Violetta was older and had been to boarding school and knew all sorts of things that Alba did not, Alba was going to be even luckier, her mother had said. Because the most beautiful daughter, her mother had explained, was the one who married the richest husband. And the richest son was always the oldest son. Always.

But when she was twelve years old, Ernesto seemed like an old man. He had fingers thick as sausages, and a sad, drooping smile. As she got older, she realised if she could choose her husband, she would have chosen Ernesto’s younger brother Gabriele. Gabriele had smooth dark hair and a swift smile and seemed to fit into his body perfectly. Gabriele was only a year or two older than Alba and she could talk to him because he didn’t have the dark spectre of marriage hanging over his head. But before she turned sixteen, Alba and Serafina had been sent to live in the small house in the hills. Ernesto was promptly married to another young woman, and Gabriele was sent to France or England, somewhere cold and white where Alba had no hope of reaching him. She’s heard that he’d survived the war, but he never returned to Salerno.

So Alba married Emilio Canella at the end of 1944 when he came home from the war. She’d married him partly because he was tall and handsome and came from a
good family. She liked the way he angled his head when he spoke to her at the markets, or outside the church. Most of all, Alba married Emilio because she couldn’t believe that anyone who grew up in the same village as she did would ever take her as his bride.

After nearly nine years she still loves the way he smells as he comes out of the shower; the way he smiles when she walks into a room; his patient, gentle nature. She is glad that her love for her husband has grown and they have their two beautiful sons. Because after years of living in that house on the hill with her mother, Alba had only wanted two things: a husband and a way to get out of Salerno. When she married Emilio Canella, Alba knew she was getting both.
seven

Today Serafina wakes up late. It is almost quarter past six by the time she has thrown her blankets off and touched the cool wooden floor with her toes. The late autumn winds have started; salt spikes the gales that blow through Salerno each pink dawn and rattle Serafina’s roof-tiles each night. It has always been a bitter wind, and this year it’s made more bitter by the knowledge that her first winter without Alba is approaching. Serafina senses that her winter will stretch its icy grey fingers past March, with no promise of respite.

She yawns and stands up. Today she will be having lunch at Violetta’s house. All Serafina’s children will be gathered there, with the exception of Umberto, who has remained, as Serafina knew he would, within the refuge of his green Alpine mountains. Violetta’s husband is in Rome on business; but the rest of them will be there. Alba and her family; Aurelia, Gianni, his wife Stella and their children. It will be nice, Serafina supposes, to be with all her children and her nipoti, even though the meal will carry the unbearable flavour of farewell.

Serafina lingers over her morning chores and leaves the house later than she should. She has wrapped herself in a woollen coat, a scarf knotted across her throat. She heads down Via Arce, an umbrella clutched in her hand. Today the sky is the colour of lead, the clouds as swollen as an over-ripe sanguinelle, waiting to burst open and shower rain on the dusty roads and the dry fields. Yet she enjoys walking alone with nothing but the howl of the wind keeping her company. When Violetta asked Serafina yesterday if she wanted to be picked up with the car, she shook her head. No, she prefers walking; she likes feeling the hard earth beneath her shoes and being alone in the silence of the empty streets, rather than listening to Violetta’s chatter as they
drive. In the distance amidst all the sleepy mountains, Serafina fancies she can make out the thunderous shape of Vesuvio looming over Campania. Serafina turns onto Via Mercanti, taking a road she always used to travel, heading towards the streets she once knew so well.

Violetta’s home is in the newest part of this neighbourhood. Serafina is glad Violetta’s house is a few kilometres away from the place where they all once lived. This way Serafina doesn’t have to look over her shoulder, or to see his face on every man who passes. She has heard that he is away often, the call of his business luring him to various parts of Europe. But she still imagines him alone in the house; a bitter king presiding over his empty castle. Serafina knows that Violetta still sees her father. How could she not, when he remains enmeshed with Federico’s family and their business? But Violetta knows not to speak of him in front of Serafina; she understands that Serafina will not tolerate it. Serafina has banished the man from her life. The children are the only link they have left.

Serafina turns onto the street that leads to her older daughter’s home. The houses on this road are a few storeys high and shine with marble. Violetta’s is no exception: tall white columns flank her home, her wooden door sinks into a marble frame, two sleek statues of cats sit on either side of the entrance, their coats slick as black water. Serafina presses the doorbell, hears the buzz inside the house, and then Violetta’s hurried steps along the terazzo floor.

“Mamma!” Violetta cries as she opens the door. She swoops over and places two airy kisses on Serafina’s cheeks. “Come in, come in,” she says, her hands outstretched to take her mother’s coat. She hangs it on a hook in the entrance hall,
leans Serafina’s umbrella by the door. The many rings on her fingers and her bright nail polish glitter in the lit entryway.

“Is everyone already here?” Serafina asks as she follows Violetta down the hall towards the kitchen.

“Si, si. Alba has been here since eight or nine cooking. Everyone else arrived about half an hour ago. We were all beginning to wonder where you were!”

“Is lunch ready then?” Serafina asks, glancing at the paintings which crowd the walls, the ornamental urns perched on thin-legged tables.

“No, not yet. We didn’t want to put all the pizze in the oven until you got here.”

“Then why were you worrying?” Serafina turns her gaze to her daughter.

“Because, mamma! Oh never mind.” Violetta’s hands flutter before drooping down by her side. “You’re here now.”

Serafina smiles, although she knows she shouldn’t. Her oldest daughter amuses her. Violetta’s melodramatic mannerisms have not changed since childhood. If anything, she has become more dramatic with age.

The women step into Violetta’s airy kitchen and the living area which sprawls off it. Just about all the people who populate Serafina’s small universe are standing in these two rooms. Alba is at the stove in the kitchen, an apron over her dress, she is tearing basil leaves, scattering them over one of the pizze.

“Ciao, mamma,” she says, wiping her hands on her apron and stepping away from the stove top. She kisses her mother’s cheek. Serafina’s rough hand hovers over her daughter’s for a moment, before she reaches and clasps it.

“Ciao, Alba.” Serafina leans over and sniffs the pizza, before Violetta shepherds her past the kitchen benches towards the group of people clustered in the living room.
“Aurelia,” Serafina smiles, stooping a little to kiss Emilio’s tiny mother on the cheek. “How are you?” Aurelia shrugs her small shoulders and inclines her head.

“Non c’è male,” she replies, “a little bit of pain in my back, but otherwise I’m all right. And you?”

Serafina purses her lips together in a brief smile. “Bene grazie, bene.”

“Ciao, Signora,” Emilio calls over his mother’s shoulder. Aurelia ducks out of the way as Emilio touches his lips to Serafina’s cheek. “Come va?”

“Bene, bene,” Serafina echoes, “and you?”

“Bene grazie.”

“Ciao mamma.” It is Gianni now, leaning over to kiss his mother. A tall man, he dwarfs everyone in the room, particularly his wife Stella. Stella is standing beside Gianni and his hand is on her shoulder. Serafina thinks they look ridiculous together, separated in height by more than a foot. Stella kisses Serafina’s cheeks and calls her children over.

“Isabelle, Jacques come here!” The children stand up and trundle over to be kissed by their Nonna.

“Ciao, Nonna, ciao!” they greet in sing-song tones. They are both as wide-eyed as their mother and thin as chickens.

“Look at you two!” Serafina exclaims. “You have grown so much since I saw you last!” She looks at Gianni and Stella before tousling the children’s hair. “It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen you!” Serafina turns to kiss Paolo and Marco, and holds them both to her in a fierce hug.

“Piccolini! How are you today?”

“Bene, Nonna,” replies Marco.
“Hungry, Nonna!” Paolo exclaims. Serafina knows it is wrong to have favourites, but Alba’s oldest son claims some small, hidden piece of Serafina’s affection with his quick answers and cheeky questions.

Serafina herds the children over to the table. Violetta comes to take her handbag. Emilio pulls a seat out for her.

“Where are the girls, Violetta?” Serafina asks as she sits down.

“Oh they’re in the bathroom I think, washing up.”

“And have all of you washed your hands?” Serafina asks, her eyes falling on each of her grandchildren in turn.

“Si Nonna,” the little ones crow at her.

“Bene, bene.”

Laura and Claudia come into the room. They hasten to where Serafina sits, and kiss her cheek. Both girls are now young women, and Serafina thinks she detects a whiff of perfume on sixteen-year-old Claudia’s neck. She tries to sniff again, but Claudia has moved quickly towards her seat.

Alba and Violetta bring two trays of pizze to the table and everyone sits down to eat. Gianni leads them all in grace before they begin their meal. Looking around the table, Serafina is proud of the gusto with which her children eat. In contrast Stella eats like a rabbit, taking little bites and leaving the crusts. Serafina has never understood what her son sees in this woman, with her long yellow hair, her pale bleached face and her too-small hands. Serafina loves their children of course, but cannot understand why Stella had insisted on giving them French names. Serafina always calls them Isabella and Giaco. They are Italian after all, and she gets a twinge of pleasure seeing Stella’s brow furrow every time she addresses the children this way.
“Mmm, pizza! We haven’t had pizza in a long time,” Giaco pipes up, mozzarella hanging from his lips. Serafina looks at Stella, and Gianni rests his hand over his wife’s.

“Poor Stella,” he says addressing everyone with that melancholy smile he inherited from his father. “When she cooks Swiss food, the children want Italian, when she makes pizza, the children want rosti.”

“What’s rosti?” Marco asks.

“It’s like an omelette, but made out of potatoes,” Stella smiles. “I cooked it for Isabelle’s birthday last year. Ti ricordi?”

Marco shrugs. Paolo looks up. “Did it have that egg thing on it?” he asks his aunt.

“Yes, that’s right,” Stella takes a sip of wine.

“Oh, I remember it.”

“Was it nice?” Marco asks his brother. Paolo is trying to pull the strands of mozzarella off his chin.

“Of course it was nice,” Alba tells her youngest son. “Now hurry up and eat what’s on your plate, there are another three pizzas as well as pasta marinara.” She leans over her son’s plate and folds his piece of pizza in half. “Come on Marco, mangia.”

*

When the last pizza has been eaten, Laura and Claudia clear away the dishes, and Alba and Violetta bring over a large bowl of pasta marinara. Serafina helps herself to another glass of wine.

“Oh this smells wonderful Alba,” Aurelia exclaims, “the fish smells so fresh.”
“I love these clams,” Violetta says, spooning out the pasta, “you did well to get these Emilio.”

Emilio shrugs. “It’s just patience, fishing.”

“For the wife as well as the husband!” Violetta laughs.

“There’s nothing like fish straight from the sea,” Gianni says, slurping his spaghetti.

Aurelia tilts her head towards Serafina. Serafina nods in appreciation, beaming at Stella, who is separating her pasta from the clams. Next to Serafina, Alba is teaching Marco how to twirl his pasta and stab his fish at the same time. Claudia and Laura speak quietly between themselves; Violetta shows off one of her many glittering rings to Stella. Giaco, Paolo and Marco rank their favourite football players on what seems to be a never-ending list. Too soon, the plates are once again clear of food. Emilio and Gianni lean back in their chairs as Alba and Violetta clear away the dishes.

“Do we want dolci now, or do you want to wait a while?” Violetta asks from the kitchen.

Marco and Giaco moan in their seats. “I’m so full mamma,” Giaco complains, holding onto his stomach. Serafina sees Stella glancing up at Gianni.

“Let’s wait a moment eh?” Gianni calls to his sisters.

“Yes, let’s do the dishes first,” Serafina replies, standing up.


Serafina looks at Claudia and Laura. “You girls, quick, go help your mother and your aunts,” she commands. Claudia and Laura slouch into the kitchen, dark eyebrows furrowed. Serafina does not care. She will have to talk to Violetta later about their
attitudes. Neither of Serafina’s daughters were like that at such a young age, not even Violetta, who was spoiled horribly by her father. Money, she thinks, how it’s softened these girls.

“Well, Emilio,” Gianni booms. “Have you got a job sorted out in Australia yet? Are you going to stay with Enzo?”

“Yes, we will stay with Enzo and his family for a short while, until we get on our feet.” Emilio is holding the stem of his wineglass between his fingers. He looks up at Gianni. “Enzo already has some building work organised for me. Apparently his boss is Italian. From Lazio, I think.”

“Good, good. And how long will it take you to get to Australia then?” Gianni asks.

“Enzo said it will take about four weeks,” Emilio answers, bringing his wineglass to his lips.

“Managia! Four weeks! We could never go to Australia. My little Stella gets sick if we are on a boat for just one hour!”

“Yes, well.” Emilio gives a little cough of laughter and finishes his wine. Serafina notices that he is looking away from her, gazing at some indescribable spot on Violetta’s white wall. He has been like this for months, ever since Alba came to tell Serafina they were leaving for Australia. Next to Serafina, Aurelia is looking at Gianni, her hands clasped together.

“Gianni, you will not be going to Australia too!” Aurelia exclaims.

“No, Signora, no, it is too far for us to travel, especially when Stella’s parents live so far away already.” He leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. “For now it is enough for us to live in Salerno and visit Switzerland when we can.”
“Very good,” smiles Aurelia, laying a sympathetic hand on Serafina’s arm. “You will still be here to keep your mamma company.”

Serafina looks into the kitchen. She doesn’t say anything, but she knows that Aurelia’s family has never been wealthy, and her sons have had no choice but to leave Italy. For Serafina it will be different, Alba’s leaving. It will be more than just her absence. What will haunt Serafina will be all the ways that this is her fault; all the ways she couldn’t make enough of a home for her daughter to stay.

*

After the dishes have been done, the pots and pans scrubbed, and Violetta’s marble counter-top wiped spotlessly clean, the women come back to the dining table with the dolci. Serafina sees that Violetta and Alba have made cannoli stuffed with ricotta, and Stella has baked amaretti.

“A tavola!” Alba instructs the children, who are grouped on Violetta’s sofas reading comics. The children hurry to their places at the table. Violetta goes back to the kitchen and returns with a bottle of store-bought limoncello and seven small glasses. She sits down and pours them out, then pushes them towards the adults.

“Where’s ours?” Laura demands.

“Sorry girls,” Violetta says, “but this brand is too strong for you. There’s a home-made bottle in the icebox if you want some.”

Claudia grumbles and gets to her feet. She flounces back to the table with two more glasses and another bottle and sits down. Alba has served out the cannoli and the biscuits. Paolo is reaching his sticky fingers towards his cannoli, but Gianni lays a hand on his skinny arm.
“Before the dolci, let’s raise our glasses, eh?” And before Serafina can say anything, he continues. “To Alba and Emilio. We hope that God watches over you and your family in Australia.”

“Buon Viaggio!” Violetta chimes.

“Buon Viaggio!”

“To good health!”

“And good luck!”

“To new beginnings!”

“New beginnings!” The cheer goes around the table. Glasses are raised in the air and clinked together. *New beginnings.* The words strangle in Serafina’s throat, coming out as a croak.

Everyone gulps their limoncello. Gianni nudges his glass towards Violetta to be refilled. She pours another big dose into his glass and into Emilio’s.

“Mamma?” Violetta asks, holding the bottle out to Serafina.

Serafina shakes her head. She wants to say *no grazie*, but she cannot speak. A sharp twig of pain has splintered in her chest, a tight fist seems to be squeezing her lungs so that she has to gasp for air. The glass in her hand has become slippery, as though it is wet, and her fingers fumble, trying not to let it fall from her shaky grip. Serafina closes her eyes. The voices of her family echo strangely in her ears. No one has noticed her jittery hands, or the beads of sweat across her forehead. With a trembling arm, she manages to bring her glass down to the smooth surface of the table. She reaches her right hand towards the bottle of water by Alba’s arm.
“Do you want some water mamma?” Alba asks, reaching for a clean glass.
Serafina nods, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Alba passes the glass to Serafina and looks at her. “Mamma, your palms are damp!”
Serafina gulps at her water as the gazes of her family focus on her.
“Are you all right?” Violetta asks. “You look pale! Do you feel unwell?”
“I’m fine,” she whispers, “fine.”
“You don’t look well mamma. Perhaps I should drive you home?” Gianni says. He looks at his sisters.
“Mamma?” It is Alba now leaning in towards her, “do you want to go and lie down for a moment?”
Serafina shakes her head. “I’m all right,” she says, clearing her throat so that her voice comes out a little louder. The pain intensifies beneath her ribs, a ball of fire. She takes another sip of water. Everybody is looking at her, even the children are staring open-mouthed and fearful. She wishes she was in her own house, with nobody to witness this. Keeping her breathing steady, Serafina stands up on shaking legs, her hands gripping the table for support.
“Violetta, I need to use your bathroom,” she says, pushing her chair away.
Violetta bustles over. “Do you need help mamma?” She takes Serafina’s arm. Even though her heart is hammering and her legs have turned to panna cotta, Serafina pulls free from her daughter’s grip.
“I’m fine,” she says as loudly as she can, “I can get there myself. Stop fussing Violetta.” Serafina does not look at her family and walks, as steadily as she can manage, out of the kitchen. Once in the empty hallway she presses a flat palm to the wall and rests for a moment. The light in the room starts to dim, her head feels too
heavy for her neck. She stumbles forward towards the bathroom. She flicks on the light and shuts the door behind her, leaning against it. The solid wood feels cool against her back. Serafina looks across the bathroom into the mirror which hangs above the basin. Her face looks like somebody else’s. Walking over to the sink, she opens the tap and lets the cold water wash through her hands for a moment, before she cups them together and splashes water onto her clammy face. She shuts off the water and rests her hands on the vanity. Serafina stays like this until the pain in her chest loosens and her breaths come easily again. Although her grief has hung over her like a shawl since Alba’s announcement all those months ago, this pain seems to be something else altogether. Almost as though she could peel away the layers of her remorse and sadness like the leaves of an artichoke and there would be something hard and dark hiding beneath the clasp of her ribcage, pulsing into her blood. The tick, tick, tock of a clock which keeps skipping time. *It’s my heart,* she thinks, the realisation making the back of her neck tingle. *My heart.*
eight

*She isn’t here.* Alba scans the crowd, searching the faces, looking for that high fine forehead, those angular cheeks, the lips pressed thin. The face of her mother. But she cannot see her. Alba looks at her watch. There is a little over an hour before she has to herd her boys onto the wooden platform leading to the boat. A little over an hour before she has to give her mother one last kiss, to look at her one last time.

Aurelia is here already. Her face is pale, as though it has been scrubbed with bleach. Maria is standing beside her mother, holding onto her arm; Giulietta is on Aurelia’s other side. Maria’s steady hand at Aurelia’s elbow looks like a promise. A way of letting her mother know that she will never leave as her brothers have done. Emilio is standing by his older sister. Two suitcases sit at his feet like well-trained dogs. His head is inclined towards Aurelia and he has a steady hand on Paolo’s shoulder. His voice is low, soft. Alba can hear him promising to call as soon as they get to Enzo’s house in Melbourne. To visit in a few years’ time after they have made some money. Aurelia smiles at her son, and Alba sees a resigned sadness in her mother-in-law’s face. Aurelia grabs Emilio’s arm, her face is level with his shoulder and she kisses it. The gesture is so intimate that Alba looks away.

There are many faces Alba recognises in the crowd. The Mancinis are here; Tony and Vittoria are going to Adelaide to be with Tony’s parents. Vittoria is being smothered by her mother’s embrace. The two short women are squished together like balls of dough. Alba coughs out the laugh at the back of her throat. Tony is about five years younger than Emilio. Alba remembers him as a boy, so tall and thin, in clothes that were always too short for him, as if he grew in his sleep every night. Even now the sleeves of his Sunday jacket are not long enough to cover his bony wrists. There is
a vulnerability to those bare wrists which makes Alba want to cover them. Behind Tony and Vittoria, Alba recognises Giulia Amarose. She is wedged in between her parents and her husband’s parents. Her husband Natale has been living in Melbourne for three years now. Giulia’s second son Silvio was born six months after Natale left. What must it be like for her, Alba wonders, on her way to live with a man she has not seen for three years? Rumours of Natale’s other women have wafted around Salerno since Silvio was born, persistent as summer mosquitoes. Yet here Giulia is, in a woollen dress the colour of deep wine, a brand new navy blue coat with shoes and bag to match. Her light hair has been set in curls, her hat is perched on her head at a jaunty angle. Giulia catches Alba’s eye, they smile at one another before Alba cranes her neck to look for her mother.

The pier is crowded with unfamiliar faces as well as those which Alba knows so well. People have come from all over Campania to take this boat. Alba has stood on this pier more times than she could count, but it has never felt like this. The air around her is frenzied, dense with movement. A small crowd of onlookers has formed on the streets. Fathers and their young sons gesticulate towards the boat; women in church shawls are clutching framed pictures of St Christopher to their chests and mumbling prayers. How many times has Alba watched people get on and off boats here, begin and end their voyages? Today she is finally one of those people she has envied: one of the lucky ones who boards a ship to sail off for a new life. But she never imagined that she would feel as unsteady as she does now, as though the ground beneath her is a thin plank of wood, tipping up and down beneath her feet.

Next to her Marco is trying to tug his hand out of Alba’s grip.
“I want to go and have a look in the water!” he complains as Alba’s hand tightens over her son’s.

“A minute, caro,” she murmurs, “we have to wait here so that Nonna and Zia can find us.” In her grip his hand squirms like a fish. Alba stands on tiptoes. She is sure that she has just seen Violetta’s head bobbing towards her in the crowd. Alba leads Marco towards his father. Emilio looks at Alba in surprise as she puts Marco’s hand into his. “Violetta,” Alba rasps to him as she moves away to meet her sister.

Violetta’s cheeks are splotched pink despite the cold November morning. Her breaths come out in short, sharp bursts. Alba reaches for her sister’s hands.

“She’s not there,” Violetta breathes. “I drove back, banged on the back door, the front door and her bedroom window. All the curtains are pulled shut.”

Alba’s mittened fingers are trembling in Violetta’s leather-clad hands. She cannot look at her sister’s face. They stand there for a moment, like much younger versions of themselves, their hands clutched tight in each other’s grip. Violetta slides her hand out of Alba’s grasp.

Alba bites her lip. A shaky sigh snakes its way into her chest, bringing with it the threat of tears. Violetta pulls Alba into a hug.

“She must be on her way Alba, you know mamma. She probably decided to walk here herself. Stubborn woman. If only she would give me a spare key, I could have checked the house. Made sure she wasn’t just bathing.”

“Why is she so late?” Alba twists away from her sister and checks her watch. The thin gold hand is making its steady way up towards nine o’clock. “You don’t think, you don’t think something could have happened to her?”

“Like what?”
“I worry about her Letta.” Alba wraps her jacket around her like a cocoon. The wool of the collar scratches at her throat. “She’s getting older, and . . .”

Violetta laughs out loud.

“Alba, our mother has the strength of an ox!” Violetta sucks in her stomach, lifts her shoulders. She pats her hair, three, four times. When she speaks again it is in the authoritative tone of the big sister. “You know what she’s like Alba, she must always do things her own way. She will be here. You just have to give her time.”

“It’s my fault, I should have gone to see her this morning.”

“Oh Dio! With two little boys and two trunks full of luggage? How would you have managed that?”

“I don’t know,” Alba murmurs. She turns away from her sister and looks up at the mountains. From here she can see the Bastiglia and Castello Arecchi on the highest peaks. The way the low white and grey buildings sprawl out over the mountain reminds Alba of the first flush of snow. When will she see these mountains again? Will she forget all this; the way the morning light seems to rise up from the sea, the way the mist hovers at the feet of the mountains? She is leaving before the first snow. Sailing off before winter beds down properly around Salerno. Someone has told her that there won’t be snow in Australia, at least none in Melbourne, where she and Emilio will live. What then, thinks Alba, will the mountains look like in winter? She feels it suddenly, the itch of panic. What if there are no mountains in Australia? And what if she never does make it back here to see these ones again? For all Alba’s life the mountains of Salerno have been here, standing sentinel beside the sea.

“Alba!” Emilio is walking towards her. He is holding his body as straight and taut as he does in church on Sundays.
“Paolo and Marco?”

“They’re over there, with mamma.” He blows on his hands. Emilio never wears gloves before December. He hadn’t put them on this morning when Alba offered them to him, stowing them instead into his jacket pocket. His palms look so coarse that it is almost as if he has grown another layer of skin, a kind of hide. Alba stares at his hands now and cannot believe how much faith she has placed in them.

Emilio reaches past Violetta for Alba’s arm. “There’s about half an hour before we have to start boarding. I think we should get the boys ready.”

Alba’s attention snaps back to the pier. She can hear the hum of the small crowd around her. Everywhere she looks there are families huddled together. There is the furtive feeling of eavesdropping, a witnessing of private grief. Alba looks over at Emilio’s mother, standing with Maria, Giulietta and the two boys. Part of her wants to board the ship now, as some people are doing, walking up the gangplank with determined steps as if every ounce of their being is intent on moving forwards. But more than anything she wants to run to her mother’s house, to bang on the shutters, to break through the windows and find Serafina. From here her mother’s home seems so close and yet so very far away. Emilio is following Alba’s gaze.

“There isn’t time cara,” he says, his voice low. “Come, she’ll be on her way already,” he says as he presses his palm against hers and leads her back to his family.

Alba stands as tall as she can. Her eyes scan the crowds again, but everyone is clustered into groups. There are no lone figures walking towards her. Alba turns around on the spot. She can see her boys saying goodbye to their aunts and their Nonna. Aurelia is crushing Paolo to her chest, Maria and Violetta are crouched down with Marco, who is hugging Giulietta. Alba looks at Emilio. His unmoving arms look
like they have been stitched in place beside his body. Alba stares back at the mountains.

“She really isn’t coming,” she says, and her words drift into the cold air of the morning, like a handkerchief fluttering to the ground. Emilio pulls her into a hug, tucks her head under his chin. Alba holds onto the lapels of his jacket as his arms encircle her. He doesn’t say anything. There are no words he could say that wouldn’t wound her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers into his chest, her lips brushing against the wool of his jumper. Still he doesn’t speak, she can feel his thumbs moving up and down her spine before his hands fall away.

“We really should get on board Alba,” he murmurs into her hair. “I don’t want the boys getting any more upset than they are now.”

Alba turns around. Paolo looks sullen, his lips pressed tightly together as he stands wedged in between his aunts. Marco is red-eyed from crying. He is grasping Aurelia’s thumb in his small hand. To Marco, Aurelia is as much a part of his family as his brother and his parents. They have all lived together throughout his short life. He doesn’t understand why his nonna is staying behind. But there is something else that keeps him bound to his grandmother. Marco is more like Aurelia than anyone else is. The two of them share more than just eye colour. It is as though, for all the difference in their years, they see and feel things the same way.

Alba walks over to Maria and Giulietta, and hugs each of them in turn. “Please take care of her for us,” she whispers. Giulietta nods, and Alba moves to Aurelia. Behind her she can see Maria step into her brother’s arms. As Alba looks at Aurelia, she sees the space where her mother should be. Aurelia is smiling up at her but there
is grief in her face. As Aurelia leans up to kiss Alba’s cheek, she presses a small cotton pouch into her hand.

“It was my grandmother’s,” she breathes into Alba’s ear, “I’ve been keeping it for you. No, no,” she folds her hand over Alba’s as Alba moves to open the little purse, “don’t open it here, the girls would never forgive me if they saw it.” Aurelia places her hand on Alba’s chest. “Your mamma loves you Alba. I think that’s why she is not here. Some of us find it harder to say goodbye.” Alba looks at her family, his family, she thinks, and she feels as if she might fall to the ground. Nothing in her life has prepared her for this moment. The large concrete pier they are standing on seems suddenly frail. It juts out from the land, at once part of Salerno and separate from it. She has an urge to run off the pier and feel, once more, the stable earth of her hometown beneath her. To be immersed, again, in the reassurance of familiar routine. She, Emilio and the boys have begun this journey without knowing where it will end. Australia is, and has only ever been an idea for her. Somewhere far away from here.

Aurelia’s palm is flat against Alba’s chest. Surely Aurelia can feel Alba’s hastened heartbeat. A sob lurches from the bottom of her ribcage. Alba stifles the sound, but tears start to slide down her cheeks. Still Aurelia’s hand does not move. Alba looks at her mother-in-law, her dark brown eyes which crinkle the same way as Emilio’s when they smile, at her mouth, the bottom lip which always pouts, just a little, like Marco’s. Alba realises how fragile rib-cages are. How they hold so much in, how different sensations register in them: guilt spreading out darkly, fear bouncing back and forth between the dark interior and the skin, love cushioning the heart. It is amazing to Alba that she feels all this at the same time. She breathes in deeply. Aurelia’s warm gloved hand is held to Alba’s heart like a poultice.
Alba covers Aurelia’s hand with her own. She wants to say so many things, to express how much the hand on Alba’s chest and the small pouch mean to her: her gratitude for Aurelia’s kindness to Serafina and her family, how very sorry she is to leave. The words are forming in Alba’s mind, a haze of black letters marching across a white background. But all she manages is another dry sob as she hugs Aurelia to her chest. The only words Alba manages to say are thank you, and then, after a pause, “I’m sorry. She should have been here.”

A loud horn blares out. All around are the muffled desperate sounds of farewell. Alba turns her head, for an instant she thinks she has seen the long drape of Serafina’s black coat, the wispy grey hair. When she cranes her neck she sees that the woman is a stranger. Someone else’s mother.

“Come, Alba,” Emilio says as he puts his arm around her, the two boys standing in front of him. Alba feels torn by his words. Her feet want to stay still, she feels more a part of this place than she ever has before. Alba goes over to her sister. This will be her last goodbye before she boards the ship and sails away from Salerno. She never imagined that this final farewell would be to Violetta. When Alba had imagined this scene, it was always Serafina with whom she would share a last kiss and a long hug. Violetta smiles and moves towards Alba, taking an envelope from her bag as she does. Alba eyes it warily.

“Don’t worry, it’s just something from me,” Violetta says hastily as she thrusts the envelope into Alba’s hand. Alba peers inside. It is padded thick with banknotes.

“Violetta, no, this is too much.” Alba tries forcing the envelope back into her sister’s bag, but Violetta snaps the clasp shut and tucks the bag under her arm, her hands on the leather straps.
“Just take it Alba, you don’t know what is waiting for you over there. We,” Alba raises her eyebrows, “I mean, Federico and myself, wanted you to have this. Just in case.”

“It’s not from . . .” Alba looks left to the coastline which stretches like an arched back towards Amalfi; to the jagged cliffs on which the wealthy perch in brightly coloured houses surrounded by lemon groves.

“No. It’s from me. I am, after all, your older sister.”

Alba closes the envelope and puts it into her bag. Her shoulder aches with all the last-minute things which have been crammed inside her handbag.

“Now look Alba,” Violette puts her hands on her sister’s shoulders, “I don’t want you to feel guilty about going. You have been looking after mamma for a long time. Gianni and I are still here. Heaven knows I won’t be leaving Salerno, not while Federico’s business is doing so well. We will take care of mamma, you needn’t worry about that.”

Alba nods. Tears are falling silently down her face once more. She does not sob, nor does she lift her hand to wipe her face. She forces herself to keep looking into her sister’s face, to not turn around again and search the pier for her mother. Violette places her hands on either side of Alba’s face, as if she has understood the impulse Alba has just had.

“Think of your children Alba. Think of them every day so that you remember why it is you are leaving. Promise me that.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Good girl.” The sisters hug one last time. They hug like they have not hugged in years.
Alba stands back and sees her family waiting for her. Emilio’s hand is on his mother’s shoulder. Paolo is holding Marco’s right hand, Marco is sucking his thumb.

“Letta, I don’t. . . I mean, I thought she would be here.” Violetta’s hand falls away from Alba’s arm. Violetta sighs and as she exhales, she looks somehow smaller, less sure of herself.

“I know Alba, I thought so too.”

The ship’s horn blares out three times. Men in uniforms are now hurrying the queue of passengers onto the boat. Alba looks at her sister and again there are no words left.

Violetta sniffs, pulls in her stomach and pats Alba’s arm.

“Come now, you don’t want to be late.”

Alba joins her husband and boys. Aurelia has let go of Emilio and is fingering the chain of rosary beads she wears around her neck. Alba picks Marco up. Paolo is standing in front of his father.

“All right then,” Emilio says, and there are more desperate kisses and muffled farewells before he leads his family towards the gangplank which joins the pier of Salerno to the gently rocking ship. Alba steps into the queue leading up to the wooden planks, barely seeing the heads of the people in front of her. Why is Serafina not here? Under all her confusion and hurt there lurks a thought so sinister that Alba feels the bitter taste of bile rise in her throat. When she’d pictured this day she’d imagined so many of the things surrounding her now: the handkerchiefs damp from tears, the rosary beads clutched in women’s hands, her own heavy heart at the sight of Aurelia’s face. But she’d also expected something else, a kind of secret jubilation bubbling inside her and making all these scenes of farewell a little easier to bear. Instead, the
adrenalin pulsing through Alba’s veins is from fear over her mother’s absence. She feels a sharp jab below her ribcage; she gasps at the pain. Emilio turns to look at her, but she shakes her head. They step up onto the gangplank. Emilio hands over their papers. A uniformed man with a thick moustache flicks through the documents, his eyes raking over the family before nodding and handing back the papers. *So quick,* Alba thinks, *so casual.* They step onto the boat and Alba hugs Marco tightly to her as they make their way through the crowd towards the viewing deck. People are lined up here, pressing against the rails, staring back at the families on the pier. Emilio leads Alba and the boys to a less crowded part of the deck. Marco’s face is pressed up against Alba’s and together they locate Maria, Giulietta, Violetta and Aurelia in the crowd.

“Nonna Fina didn’t come,” Paolo says, his chin pressed against the smooth black bar of the ship’s railing. Alba’s ribs feel as though they are about to split open. Emilio ruffles Paolo’s hair.

“We saw her last night,” he tells his son, “we said goodbye to her last night.”

Alba closes her eyes. It is then that she sees her mother, standing at her back gate, the November wind lashing the loose strands of her grey hair about her face. She was wearing her black shawl and her hand was raised in farewell. Alba remembers turning back, two or three times, as they walked down the hill. Serafina didn’t move. She kept her arm in the air. Alba waved again, and her mother’s arm finally dropped down by her side. Alba opens her eyes and sees Letta, Maria, Giulietta and Aurelia waving at them from the dock. She looks past them, past the building and roads to the green mountains yawning up from the earth and the place where her mother lives.
“She still could have come this morning,” Paolo says as the plank is pulled up from the pier and onto the ship. Alba feels bruised by the matter-of-factness of her son’s tone, the directness of his statement. Emilio looks at Alba and she looks out to the dock. The horn blasts again and she lifts her hand and waves goodbye. All around them people are shouting out to those they love. The boat creaks away from the pier and into the sea. Marco’s arm tightens around Alba’s shoulders. She hugs her son as the distance between the boat and the shore, between her family and the life they have known begins to lengthen, like a fine woollen string being spun from fleece. At this moment Alba feels as though everything which connects her to her mother tautens and quivers to breaking point. Alba closes her eyes, unable to bear, for one moment more, looking at the pier from which her mother is missing.
This is the third night. Alba has already dressed and walked down the swaying corridor to the toilets. She’s splashed her face with water and tiptoed back into her cabin. In the bunk above hers, Emilio is sleeping. Emilio doesn’t snore, but over the last nine years his night-time breathing has become deeper, more guttural. A few feet away, both boys are asleep in their bunks. Alba has stood on the bottom rung of the small ladder to check on Paolo. She has tucked Marco’s blankets in again. Marco’s vivid dreams often mean he wakes up in a completely different position than the one he falls asleep in. Sometimes he will awake with his head at the foot of the bed, sometimes he crawls out from underneath the covers and wakes up with his nose and toes icy cold. Tonight he has kicked the blankets off his feet and huddled himself into a ball, his pillow tucked under his belly, the bottoms of his feet exposed to the night air.

Alba takes off her coat and gets back into her bunk. For three nights now she has woken at four, unable to get back to sleep. Alba does not know why she is waking up like this, as suddenly and as fully as if she has been plunged into water. She thought at first it could be the unsteady rhythm of the ship, but now she doesn’t think so, or Marco would be awake as well. She wonders if she is waking up from bad dreams, but on waking Alba cannot remember her dreams at all. What she knows for certain is that as soon as she is awake she thinks of her mother. She remembers scanning the dock for her mother and feels the same sense of panic as she did that day. There is no getting back to sleep. So she lies in her bed, and waits for light to creep in under the door so that she can wake her family.

*
It has been a week since they left Salerno. Now the ship sails on in a sea so open that Alba cannot see anything on the horizon. Alba has always loved the water, but the length and breadth of this sea is terrifying. The ship seems so small, so vulnerable in this vast blue. The ship is buffeted with wind and the smell of salt and fish. There is so little on the horizon that Alba feels that they are merely floating, completely directionless, and she worries about where they may end up. Ever since she has stepped onto the ship, Alba has wanted to go back to Salerno. Her mother’s absence at the pier has taken on so many different meanings out here, away from everything.

Alba stares up at Emilio’s bunk. Even in the dark she can make out the shape of him on his bed, can see where the coils strain under the weight of his body. Alba misses lying beside Emilio on nights like these, misses the easy rhythm of his breath like a balm soothing her to sleep. She misses the simple pleasure of being able to turn over and look at his profile, or to feel his night-time breath against her cheek. She feels childish admitting these thoughts to herself. Many couples have been divided on their journey to Australia. There are so many lonely men on the boat, Italians as well as Yugoslavians. Many of them have thin gold bands on their fingers. These men are going over first, leaving their wives with their mothers while they forge a life away from everything they have ever known. Some of these men will go straight into camps, others into boarding houses. Very few will go to the relative luxury of a family member’s home. Alba wonders how the men will do this without the comfort of their wives and children. She remembers how tired Giulia Amarose looked last night as she left the dining room, her baby tucked under her chin, her little girl hanging onto her arm. Alba had stood up to offer help, but Giulia shook her head, her eyes on the sleeping child in her left arm, and Alba sat down again.
On her bunk Alba rolls onto her side, one hand under her face, the other resting on the mattress. She closes her eyes and exhales, she slows her breathing so that her breaths are in time with Emilio’s. She imagines that she is lying in her bed in Aurelia’s house. She imagines that the cramped muscles in her neck and shoulders are like the wings of the large birds which plunge in and out of the water. She imagines spreading those wings wide open.

No, it’s no good. Her eyes are open again. Alba does not know how much more of this sleeplessness she can endure. Surely her body cannot keep going on three or four hours of broken sleep a night. By three o’clock in the afternoon she is so tired she can barely keep her eyes open. Yesterday as she sat on a deck-chair outside with Emilio and the boys, she felt herself being pulled forward into sleep. She woke up after ten or fifteen minutes. She was astounded that she had just drifted off like that. Emilio was sitting beside her smoking and flipping through an old newspaper, not watching the boys. On the boat there are so many ways for them to be hurt. Paolo loves holding onto the railing and tipping his face towards the sea, and Marco always follows his older brother’s lead. When she woke up, they were chasing a ball across the deck. She’d stood up swiftly and marched over to them. Emilio looked up from his paper; he smiled at the ball clutched in her hand as she walked back to her chair, the boys trailing after her. *Mamma mia Alba! Let them play, they are not running very fast.* Alba shook her head, her eyes on the blue sea before her. It was choppy that afternoon, the waves leapt like living things with foamy fingertips. Emilio stood up, took the ball from her and led the boys to a part of the deck that was far from the ship’s railing. Alba sat back on her chair and watched them, every nerve in her body alert, as if she hadn’t been asleep at all.
Maybe, thinks Alba, sleep would come if she just knew why Serafina had not been there to say goodbye. As a mother, Serafina knew when her presence was required. She was not prone to emotional displays, she did not get carried away by the moment like Aurelia, but she was always steadily and reliably present for birthdays, baptisms, holy communions, confirmations. Alba had always known that Serafina would be upset by her leaving, that she would feel the grief differently to Aurelia. Her mother knew better than anyone why Alba would want to leave Salerno so completely behind.

On their last night in Salerno, they had eaten dinner at Serafina’s house. Alba remembers thinking for the first time in her life that her mother was an old woman, as Serafina opened the door. Alba thinks that maybe it was the eyes. Serafina’s eyes were usually bright. Fierce too. But that night Alba could see a dullness in her mother’s eyes, a weary, almost glazed look about them. All night Alba had tried to catch her mother’s gaze, but couldn’t. Serafina moved around with the same restless energy she always had. She chivvied them into her house with her usual, matter-of-fact hellos. Alba had been worried on her way over that her mother would greet them with cold silence, or with acidic remarks. Instead, Serafina welcomed them into her home as she had in the days before Australia had ever been mentioned. Once inside, Alba noticed that the table was set with Serafina’s old candelabra, and that she had, for the first time in years, taken out the crystal wine-glasses she usually kept tucked away in her cabinet.

“Oh Dio, mamma!” Violetta had exclaimed as she picked up a glass and held it to the light. “Don’t tell me you are actually going to use these!”

Serafina didn’t answer. She moved over to Aurelia.
“Let me take your jacket and your scarf Aurelia. Here Alba,” Serafina thrust Aurelia’s coat at her, “take these into my bedroom.”

Alba collected the rest of the coats and scarves, and took them into her mother’s bedroom. Here she laid the coats carefully on the bed and looked around. It had been a while since she had been in here and she had forgotten just how sparse the room was. The walls were a cold shade of white. Serafina’s night-stand and dressing table were made of dark wood, as was the small crucifix that hung over her bed. Being in there was like being in a nun’s room at a convent. There were no framed photographs on the night-stand or dressing table. There were no flowers or ornamental vases. The silver candlestick on the bedside table was pretty enough, but Alba knew that Serafina used its light to get in and out of bed at night. Her dressing table held only things that Serafina would use every day: her hairbrush, a small mirror, a box containing her rosary beads and two necklaces, and a bottle of holy water in the shape of the Virgin Mary. Alba thought of Aurelia’s dressing table, of the picture of Saint Christopher in front of which Aurelia had propped a photograph of Alba, Emilio and the boys. She thought of the flowers on her own night-stand, how the heady scent of those roses helped to lull her into sleep. She looked around the room before walking out. There was something about the crucifix which had always bothered Alba. It was too alone on the wall, too dark against the white. It reminded Alba of doing penance. Of praying because it was demanded of you, not because it might comfort you. Alba turned away from the wall and switched off the light. She closed the door behind her as she walked back to the living room.

In the kitchen, Serafina had instructed everyone to sit down, and had gone back to the stove. Alba walked up to her and placed a hand on her arm.
“Is there anything I can do to help, mamma?” Serafina had shrugged Alba’s hand away as she moved over to the bench where she peeled oregano off the stalks and into a bowl full of cut tomatoes. She added salt and olive oil, and shook the bowl to mix everything together.

“You can put the tortellini into a bowl and take it to the table,” she said, without turning to look at Alba.

Alba went to her mother’s cupboard and pulled out a large earthenware bowl. She ladled all the tortellini into it and covered them with pasta sauce. She set the bowl down on the table, smiling at her boys as she did so.

“Look at this, Nonna has made our favourite dish!”

“Are they meat tortellini Nonna?” Paolo called out to his grandmother’s back. Serafina walked over to the table with the tomato salad. She put the bowl down and leant over to pinch Paolo on the cheek.

“Cheeky boy,” she said, a smile teasing the corners of her lips. “Of course they are. No spinach for you heh?”

“Serafina this looks wonderful!” Aurelia gushed. “I don’t know how you manage to keep the tortellini so firm, mine always seem to come apart.”

“You just have to pinch them down,” Serafina said. She sat in her chair at the head of the table and dug her thumbnail into the lace tablecloth as though squashing a bug. “Each and every one. That’s what takes the longest.”

“Mamma, you went to so much trouble for us,” Emilio said as he poured wine into Serafina’s glass. Alba knew that he would be thinking about all the meat Serafina had bought, and how much it would have cost her.
“It’s nothing,” Serafina said, taking a gulp of wine before setting the glass back onto the table and looking at him. “Emilio, would you like to lead us in grace?”

Emilio nodded. Everyone closed their eyes and bowed their heads as Emilio spoke. “Heavenly Father, thank you for this gift of food which mamma has prepared for us. Thank you for watching over us today, as you have every day. Thank you for bringing us all here as a family to share in this meal.” He paused, Alba waited for him to go on. “In Christ’s name, Amen,” he finished.

Alba looked at Emilio as Serafina spooned food into his plate. At lunchtime when he had said grace, he had also asked for a safe passage over to Australia, and for God to watch over his mother when they were away. Alba didn’t know why he had left it out now, but the omission struck her as tender. It seemed a small mercy that Emilio hadn’t mentioned their leaving in his prayer.

“Mamma,” Violetta said, half rising from her chair, “you’ve left the oven on.”

Alba turned around; flames were indeed spitting up in a thin line in Serafina’s oven.

“I know,” Serafina replied. “I’m keeping the osso buco warm in there.”

“Osso buco as well!” Aurelia exclaimed. “Serafina, you must have been cooking for hours!”

Serafina had waved her hand in the air.

“It was nothing,” she said as she plunged her fork into her bowl of tortellini.

Where, Alba wondered, had Serafina found the time to prepare this meal? When Alba had dropped by this morning, Serafina was already cooking her pasta sauce, but Alba hadn’t seen the tortellini anywhere, nor the meat. Had her mother waited for her to leave the house before she started? If so, thought Alba, she must
have been cooking all day. Serafina had cooked all of Alba’s favourite things. The warmth of the candlelight on her mother’s face reminded Alba of how her mother looked as she knelt by the small altar at church, down by the shrine where people lit candles for those they had lost. Alba had wondered how many candles Serafina would light the next time she knelt by the shrine.

Alba had watched Serafina intently for the rest of the meal, looking for signs of fatigue or sadness in her face, listening to the timbre of her voice. But Serafina seemed normal to Alba. She and Aurelia spoke about the kinds of things they usually talked about: the rising cost of meat and cheese, how much they were looking forward to the upcoming season of winter vegetables. Artichokes, porcini mushrooms and chestnuts would be appearing in market stalls soon.

Alba would miss the smell of chestnuts roasting in Serafina’s outdoor oven this year. She and Emilio were sailing into summer and God only knew what kind of food. For the last few months they had all talked about the difficulty of getting good fruit and vegetables in Australia. Alba had heard from Emilio’s brother that everyday foods like sausages, salami, pasta and parmesan were hard to come by, and vegetables like zucchine and eggplants were difficult to find. Alba had packed as many packets of vegetable seeds as she could in her large trunk, along with sausages and cheeses she had spent the last six months drying, and the vegetables she had pickled. At that last meal, Alba had expected her mother to remind her, once again, of the difficulty of finding these kinds of foods. Things like tortellini, decent tomato sauce, osso buco and gremolata. But Serafina didn’t mention it and Alba didn’t bring it up.

After the dinner dishes had been cleared away, Serafina went to the pantry and came back to the table holding a plump cherry tart, sweetly and deeply scented. As
they ate their dolci, the conversation circled around Salerno, as if there wouldn’t be a large boat at the docks in the morning, waiting to take half the family away.

In a way Alba found it comforting to spend their last night in her mother’s house, talking about familiar things. All day Alba had been agitated about the departure. She kept running a list of all the last-minute preparations in her head. But that night, the only mention of tomorrow came as they left. Serafina pulled Alba aside as the others walked out through the back gate. She had wrapped the left-over cherry tart in a napkin.

“Put this in your bag tomorrow morning,” she whispered, her warm breath tickling Alba’s ear, “you’ll be able to eat it on the boat.” Alba could smell the sharp tang of cooked cherries through the napkin. She looked at her mother, her eyes full of tears.

“Thanks mamma,” she whispered back, tucking the cake into her bag.

“All right, all right,” Serafina murmured as Alba grabbed her mother in a fierce hug. Serafina’s right hand stroked the length of Alba’s curls, from the crown of her head all the way down to the middle of her back. Alba couldn’t remember the last time Serafina had touched her hair that way. She didn’t want to let go of that moment of tenderness, she didn’t want to move away from her mother.

“Come now,” Serafina said, pulling away. “I will see you tomorrow.”

Alba let her mother step out of her arms.

“You know that the boat leaves at nine-thirty, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Violetta will be here at quarter past eight with her car.”

“All right then.” Alba wiped her eyes, she smoothed her hair back from her face.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”
“See you tomorrow.”

And with those words hanging in the cool night air, Alba walked out of her mother’s backyard. She turned around and watched as Serafina locked the gate latch behind them and lifted her hand in farewell.

If only, Alba thinks as she lies on the ship bunk, if only she had realised that moment was the last time she would see her mother before embarking on the ship. If only she had recognised it as the moment of their final farewell. She wished she’d said I’ll miss you mamma. And she cannot remember if she had said it before that moment, during all those visits with Paolo and Marco, when she’d tried to make sure that Serafina was imprinted in her children’s memories.

Now Serafina is countless kilometres and more than a week away. Alba turns to lie on her back. It had seemed so simple at first, the idea of starting again in a place where no one knew who she was. But instead of feeling as though she is moving forward, Alba feels trapped by not knowing why Serafina had not been there the morning they left. When the children are out of earshot she brings it up with Emilio. Since the first evening on the boat his answer has remained the same. I think it’s like my mother said, he recites, some people just cannot say goodbye. Either that, or she was tired, Alba. You saw all the effort she went to for dinner that night. She may have simply slept through and woken late. Anyway, you can always call her and ask her when we get to Australia.

But Alba knows she won’t do this. She cannot stop thinking that her mother’s absence at the pier was deliberate. That Serafina was forcing Alba to realise the magnitude of her actions. The thought jabs at Alba like the tiny invisible needles of a
prickly pear tree. It spreads under her skin like a rash. She worries that it will sink into her bones and that she will carry this sickness off the ship and into her life in Australia.
Melbourne, Australia. December 1953.

ten

In Carlton, where Enzo and Regina live with their two teenage daughters, there is no scent of the sea, no mountains rising up from the earth. Alba has never seen anything like this place. The roads here are new, built for cars rather than for pedestrians. Trams roll up and down the streets, bells ringing. Everything about Melbourne seems carefully planned. As she stares out at the sparsely peopled streets, Alba sees a city that is just beginning.

The house Enzo and his family live in is large and square, built only a few years ago. A rectangular expanse of spiky green grass leads up to the front door, the driveway lies flat and grey amidst the lawn. Inside, the house is big and airy, wide windows stretch to the ceiling. The floors look as though they have been newly carpeted; the walls seem slick with paint. A long hallway cuts through the middle of the house. Alba knows that it has taken Enzo and Regina six years to save enough money to buy a house. She is impressed, nonetheless, by its generous proportions, and the way it sits alone in the middle of its own patch of land, without other houses hemming it in.

It has been more than five years since Alba has seen Enzo and Regina. When they were last in Italy, Enzo had much the same build as Emilio, but he has become fat, as if bloated with a sense of his own self-assurance. Regina’s hips are plumper and her shoulders more rounded, but now her fingernails are dotted with bright flashes of pink. Her thick dark hair no longer coils down her back, swaying neatly on her shoulders instead. At night she smears cold cream on her face and walks around her
home in matching nightgown and bedjacket, her brightly coloured nails trailing on the
dark wooden bench-tops. Their daughters Anna and Luisa are fifteen. They are tall,
like their papà, and thin like Emilio. But both girls have their mother’s face. They
remind Alba of Regina when she was young, the way she used to avert her eyes when
she was addressed, her sulky demeanour. The girls gabble away in fluent English, and
sometimes Alba is glad that she cannot understand what it is they are saying.

They have been in Australia for a week now, and although, as Emilio reminds her,
they are staying with family, Alba has not been able to relax here. Living with Regina is
very different to living in Aurelia’s home. In Aurelia’s house there had been no
awkward distinction between ‘yours’ and ‘mine.’ Here Alba has the sense that
Regina’s name is on everything. She feels as though it is stamped on the floors,
imprinted on her furniture, embroidered on her linen. Alba finds herself walking
tentatively down hallways, peering into rooms before she enters them, muffling her
footsteps. Now in the living room, Alba is conscious of Regina fussing about in the
kitchen. Even with the wooden door between them closed, Alba can hear her sister-in-
law murmuring instructions to Anna and Luisa.

Today Alba, Emilio and the boys are closeted in the living room, waiting for the
telephone to ring. Before today, Alba had no concept of long-distance telephone calls.
She had expected to step into the house, pick up the receiver and hear Violetta’s voice
on the other end of the line. She hadn’t known that a call had to be placed to
Overseas Exchange first so that they could book a time in which the call could be
received. She hadn’t imagined that the call might not make it through. It has been
over five weeks since Alba has spoken to her mother or her sister. She has already
written a letter to Violetta, but that will take weeks to get to Salerno. She is sitting on
one of the vinyl armchairs, the black telephone on a little wooden table beside her. Marco and Paolo are sprawled out on the floor; Paolo is leafing through books with red, blue and yellow pictures on shiny pages. There are English words typed in thick black ink on each page, but the boys ignore these and they identify the pictures in Italian: cavallo, cane, gatto. Emilio is standing by the window, a cigarette dangling in his right hand. He is looking out at the street, and Alba wonders what he sees when he looks outside. Emilio brings the cigarette up to his lips, breathes in deeply and exhales slowly. He moves over to the ashtray without taking his eyes off the street in front of him. Today he is wearing the navy blue linen suit they bought for Marco’s christening. It is a suit he wears nearly every Sunday in summer, and there is something unsettling about seeing him in this familiar outfit in this strange setting. Cigarette at his lips again, he breathes out and turns to smile at Alba, his face obscured by the puff of smoke.

It is a hot day. The backs of Alba’s legs are sticking to the vinyl chair cushion. She wants to get up, stretch her legs, but she is afraid that she might be too far away when the telephone rings, or that she might somehow miss the long-distance connection. Alba looks at her watch. It is almost six thirty now, which means that it is still morning in Salerno. Violetta and her mother will be walking out of church. She wonders if Violetta has managed to coax Serafina into attending Mass with her at the Cattedrale, or if Serafina has attended Mass at Santa Maria Della Consolazione as she usually does. Most of the people in Salerno go to the newly rebuilt cathedral with its white painted walls, serene curved archways and ancient domed tower, but Serafina prefers her own small church nestled at the foot of the mountains. Serafina cannot bear the spectacle of Sunday Mass in the Cattedrale. She dislikes the open sunlit
square within the church walls into which people group after the service, greeting each other with quiet murmurs as they take note of who has or has not appeared, of who is wearing new Sunday clothes, and who is not. Alba is almost certain that Serafina will avoid crowded Via Duomo altogether, instead walking down the narrow streets through the Centro Storico towards Violetta’s house.

Alba’s throat is dry. Even in here the heat is ferocious. It seems to creep up through the thinly carpeted floors, sucking the air out of the room. Emilio is looking at his watch; on the floor the boys are grasping the pages of the story books with sticky fingers. Alba closes her eyes. She does not know what she will say to her mother when the telephone rings. She struggles to put Serafina’s absence from the docks out of her mind. Alba registers a dull thud in her chest, like a broom hitting the underside of a rug, beating away the dust. It leaves her breathless.

How different today is from yesterday. Last night, they were all in here, Enzo, Regina, Anna and Luisa, Alba and her family. Last night Regina dialled Aurelia’s telephone number and the two families passed the telephone between them, one by one, so that they could all hear Aurelia’s voice for themselves. Alba had pressed the receiver to her ear, and over the hums and clicks of the long-distance connection, she could hear the weariness in her mother-in-law’s voice, could hear the echo of the empty house behind her. Aurelia had promised to let Serafina know what time Alba and Emilio would be at home waiting for her call, and told Alba again not to worry, that she would be able to speak to her mother soon.

As Alba looks at her watch again, the telephone cries out shrilly on the table next to her. She looks at Emilio, who hastens over to her as she picks up the telephone. An English operator speaks.
“Yes,” Alba says as she’s been instructed to. “Yes.”

“Pronto?”

“Pronto!” Violetta’s voice echoes down the line. “Alba! How are you? How was the journey on the boat? Are the boys all right?”

“We’re fine, everything is fine here Letta. How are you? How is mamma? How are the girls?”

“Oh, the girls are the same as always, they don’t give me a moment’s peace. Mamma is well; she is sitting next to me, waiting to talk to you.”

“Good, good.”

“So how is it over there?” Violetta lowers her voice. “Is it very different to Italy?”

Alba closes her eyes. She thinks of the overwhelming greyness of Melbourne, the flat black bitumen roads, the grey footpaths. The way the city is sliced open, a grid of streets criss-crossing at right angles. Compared to home with its shadowed and winding cobbled streets, Melbourne is precise, ordered, clean. Yet Alba cannot help feeling that the city is lacking something.

“It’s different I suppose. Everything is new here. Not new like at home, where things were rebuilt because of the war. But new, as if there was not much here before. It’s,” Alba looks at Emilio and smiles, “it’s a pretty city, I suppose, lots of space.”

“It sounds nice enough. Is it hot or cold over there now? It’s absolutely freezing here, the winds have started sweeping in from the sea. It looks like it will snow soon.”

Alba thought of Salerno in winter, how the mountain peaks were covered in snow; how people didn’t stop to chat in the stores, but walked briskly home. The slow
darkening of the days. She looked out of the window. The sun was still glaring, although it was almost seven o’clock.

“It is really hot. As hot as it gets in summer at home, except the air here is dry. It is not as humid as Salerno.”

“And how is Regina? Is she still the same?”

“Oh,” Alba turns away from her husband. Out of the corner of her eye she sees the dark door leading from the living room into the kitchen. Even with the telephone pressed to her right ear, she can hear murmurs coming from the kitchen. She can feel Emilio’s stare grazing her right cheek, and she clears her throat. “Fine,” she says. “Just like before, really.” In her mind’s eye Alba can see her sister nodding, her lips pursed.

“Well I look forward to getting a letter from you.”

“I’ve sent one, but I’ll write again as soon as I can.”

“Are the boys there? I’d like to say a quick hello before I pass the telephone onto mamma.”

“Okay Letta,” Alba says, motioning to her eldest son, “I’m giving the telephone to Paolo.”

Paolo scrambles up from the ground, brushing his shins as he stands. Alba hands him the receiver, and places her left hand on his back.

“Don’t speak too long. This is costing Zia a lot of money,” she whispers as he wriggles under the curly black cord and presses the telephone to his ear. Paolo nods at his mother. He speaks loudly into the receiver, as if doubtful that his aunt can hear him from so far away. Alba gets up from the chair. Her legs peel away from the vinyl and the cushion sighs as she stands.

“She sounds fine,” she tells Emilio. “She sounds just like she always does.”
“That’s good,” Emilio says, flipping his pouch of tobacco round and round in his fingers.

“The boys will say hello, and then we can talk to mamma.”

Paolo hands the receiver to his brother. Marco pushes the telephone up against his ear, his eyes wide. He keeps the receiver tucked firmly under his chin.

“You take the telephone next, Emilio,” Alba says. “I’ll talk to mamma after she has spoken with all of you.”

Emilio nods. He slips the packet of tobacco into his chest pocket and crouches down next to his youngest son. Marco hands the telephone to him, stretches, and heads towards the kitchen door.

“Aspetta,” Alba holds out her hand and hooks him around his slim hips. “Wait, you still have to speak with Nonna before we go and eat.”

“But I’m hungry,” Marco whines.

“Shhh,” Alba says, tucking Marco’s t-shirt back into his shorts. She looks at Paolo, now on the telephone. “You just have to say hello and ask how she is. You haven’t spoken to her for a long time,” she whispers into his ear. “Now go and sit down.”

When Alba finally reaches for the telephone, the smooth black receiver slips a little in her grasp. She doesn’t know whether it is because of the sweat of the boys’ grubby hands or from the dampness of her own palm.

“Pronto?”

“Alba?” Serafina’s voice fills her ear, but although Alba has been expecting to hear her mother’s voice all day, she finds she cannot speak. Her heart feels as if it’s
bouncing off her ribcage like a ball attached by elastic. "Alba!" her mother’s voice blares into the telephone.

"Mamma," Alba croaks, her voice bleating feebly over the line. She sits back down in the chair, the cushion sinking beneath her. "How are you?"

"Non c’è male," Serafina replies. "I cannot complain. And you?"

"We are all well."

"Are the boys all right?"

"They’re fine, mamma."

"It must be difficult for them." Serafina’s voice is stiff and flat. Alba knows the expression that accompanies this tone. She can see Serafina’s pursed lips. She can visualise the crease of her mother’s forehead, her eyebrows furrowed, like long angry caterpillars squaring off for a fight. Alba breathes in, and when she speaks, her voice is not as loud or as clear as she wants it to be.

"They are good, mamma, really. They loved being on the boat."

Over the long-distance line Alba thinks that she can hear Serafina grunt impatiently.

"How is the food over there?" Serafina asks.

"It’s fine, similar to home. There are quite a few Italians over here, so finding food that we are used to hasn’t been very difficult."

"Good," Serafina replies, "that’s good."

Alba does not know what to say next. The question of the day at the docks is at the back of her throat, itching to be asked. But this long-distance line seems like such a fragile link that Alba is afraid of breaking it. And Emilio, Marco and Paolo are crowded around her, waiting for her to finish talking so that they can go and eat their
supper. Alba feels the tick of empty seconds. She can hear Serafina’s breaths, can almost hear her waiting. What can Serafina hear? She imagines her mother standing in Violetta’s living room, her long back impossibly straight except for the familiar hunch of her shoulders. She will be wearing one of her black dresses; a prayer shawl will be folded neatly beside her handbag on Violetta’s kitchen table. She will be holding the telephone carefully, unsure of how it should sit in her palm. Her unease with telephones might be the reason for the bite of impatience in her voice, or perhaps she is looking at the clock, worried about how much this is costing Violetta.

“How is everything at home?” Alba asks finally.

“Everything is as it was when you left, Alba. It has only been a few weeks.”

“And you are all right? Everything is all right?”

“Of course.”

“Allora.” Alba looks down at the boys sitting cross-legged on the floor. Marco looks hungrily at the door. The long-distance line pings with static.

“Pronto?” Serafina calls into the telephone line, her voice loud, worried.

“Pronto?” Through the static Alba can hear the urgency in her mother’s voice.

“Mamma? Can you hear me?”

“Pronto?”

“Mamma!” Alba calls into the telephone. The line crackles like cellophane paper being crushed. “Mamma!” she calls again, although the noise is getting louder. Alba presses the receiver to her ear as hard as she can. “Mamma I miss you!” she cries into the telephone. But the line has already been lost. Alba hears a loud click, then a hum. She puts the receiver down onto its cradle, where it rocks gently into place.
Today Regina has decided to take Alba and the boys into the heart of Melbourne. They do not take the bus or the tram; instead they walk all the way down Lygon Street towards the very centre of Melbourne. Gripping Marco’s and Paolo’s hands in her own, Alba realises that walking into Melbourne today has less to do with saving a few shillings worth of tram-fare and more to do with Regina greeting people she knows: poking her nose into the green-grocer’s, singing out a hello to the lady in the fabric shop on Lygon Street, grinning at the man who sits on the corner by the red post-box.

As they approach the large public library, Regina calls out.

“Pina! Maria!” Two Italian women stop and turn to greet them. Regina hugs each of these women to her chest. It is the kind of hug Regina would share with her sisters back home, or Alba with Violetta. On the very rare occasions Alba and Regina hug, they merely brush shoulders.

“Pina, Maria,” Regina says, smiling, “I’d like you to meet my sister-in-law, Alba.”

As the two women extend their hands towards Alba, she sees them glance at Regina, then at each other. Alba notices that both women raise their eyebrows, she sees Regina nod her head. This exchange is over so quickly that it might not have happened at all. But the women now look at Alba expectantly, their eyes travelling from the top of her head to her open-toed shoes.

“Piacere,” they murmur.

“Piacere,” Alba replies, her eyes cast down.

“Pina and Maria are sisters,” Regina explains. “They have just come back from visiting family in Sydney. They are my oldest friends in Melbourne.” Regina squeezes her friends’ hands as their eyes roam over Alba and her boys. “They have been like
sisters to me.” The two women beam identical smiles at her. Alba does not know what to say. She tightens her grip on Paolo and Marco’s hands and wishes she could shield them from these women’s eyes.

Alba waits for Regina to move, but she stays where she is, smiling at her friends. In these drawn-out moments Alba realises that these two women knew all about her. That the vicious hiss of gossip which had followed her around Salerno has travelled to Melbourne. Alba lifts her head; in front of her on Swanston Street, a tram slows to a halt as passengers step in. A bell rings, static spits along the wires overhead and the tram jerks into motion. Alba’s gaze follows the tram as it moves away towards Flinders Street Station. The passengers sit in rows. From here the faces are indistinct blots of colour. When Alba turns her head, Pina and Maria are still staring at her.

“Lovely to meet you both,” Alba croaks.

“You too,” Maria says, leaning forwards to kiss Regina goodbye.

“Yes, lovely to meet you too,” echoes Pina. “Finally.”

“I’ll speak to you later!” Regina trills as the women turn to go.

“Ciao!”

“Ciao!”

“Ciao!”

Regina marches them into the city. She points out different buildings: the church, the bank, the Italian Consulate. While the boys look around avidly, Alba pays little notice to what is going on around them. She tries, but she cannot get those looks from Pina and Maria out of her mind. How strange, to see those familiar expressions in this new city. To be so quickly sized up and cut down again.

*
By the time they arrive home at two o’clock, the boys are exhausted. Paolo
dives his feet along the hot bitumen driveway, scuffing his shoes. Marco sags in Alba’s
arms. He is getting so heavy, this boy of hers. His legs hang down past her thigh,
almost to her knees. Soon he will be too big to be carried. After they step into the
cool of the house, Regina fusses about in the kitchen, making sandwiches for
everyone. Paolo attacks his sandwiches in furious bites, Marco nibbles around the
edges of the bread, his head lolling over his plate. Excusing herself from the table,
Alba leads the boys into the sleep-out. She undresses them both, and coaxes them
into their cot-beds.

“Time for siesta!” she announces. Paolo eyes her with sleepy distrust.

“Zia doesn’t have a siesta,” he says.

“Well we are going to have one today,” Alba replies. “Here,” Alba walks over to
the cantilevered window and creaks it open, “this nice cool breeze will help you get to
sleep.” Alba goes to Regina’s sewing machine and picks up the chair which sits in front
of it. She carries it over to the boys’ beds and plonks it between them. “I’m going to
sit here awhile,” she leans her head onto the cool stone wall behind her, “I want to
make sure you get some sleep.”

Paolo grunts and rolls over onto his side, his back to his mother. There are small
beads of sweat on his back, between his white singlet and his shorts. Marco already
has his thumb in his mouth. Alba closes her eyes. She is tired, so tired from being
trotted around Melbourne all morning. Her arms ache from carrying Marco the long
way home. But beneath this tension of sinew and muscle lies a deeper exhaustion.
Alba feels it in her bones. She knows she should get up and clear away the lunch
dishes, and start helping Regina prepare tonight’s meal, but she does not move. She
can’t. With her eyes closed, Alba hears the slow sigh of Marco’s breathing, and the short huffs which Paolo snorts from his nose. In the distance she can hear the clatter of dishes, a refrigerator door being swung open and closed again. Alba leans her head back against the wall. Today as those two women looked her up and down, Alba felt it again, that dull thump spreading out into her chest. She had felt it that first night off the boat. It was as if someone had slapped her chest with an open palm, and for a moment, she felt as though she could not breathe.

A sensation of something lurking beneath her ribs has been with Alba since that first night, but she hadn’t felt it as intensely as now. As she leans against the wall, it presses down on her, constricting her windpipe, making her breaths irregular and painful. Rubbing her chest with her hand, Alba recalls the first time she experienced this sensation.

It was her wedding day, 21st of November, 1944. The thin band of gold was on Alba’s finger, and as she and Emilio walked down the aisle towards the back of the church, Alba’s eye flitted between this band of gold and the people calling out to her from the pews. Her right hand was clasped in Emilio’s and she remembers the pressure of his hand on hers. As she walked between the pews, Alba was aware of her body, her arm against his arm, her hip under the swish of fabric brushing his thigh. Each time her body pressed against his, it was as though every part of her skin was alive, as if each nerve was tingling. In her stomach there was a hollow sensation, a mixture of nerves, of excitement, and something that Alba would come to recognise as the sweet slow burn of desire. Everything is all right, Alba remembers thinking, he is my husband, we are married now, and she looked at Emilio’s handsome profile, then back down at her wedding ring.
They had stepped out into the sunshine, and small pieces of paper rained down upon them. A few of Emilio’s cousins had hurried out of the church to shower them with handfuls of the stuff. Alba had shaken her head, and Emilio had leant over, smiling, to brush the confetti from her hair. Alba was laughing, she could see Gianni standing amidst Emilio’s cousins, his fist full of confetti. She heard the loud click of the camera. Whenever she looks at that photograph, the one that Emilio’s cousin Pasquale had snapped, Alba can recall exactly how she felt as the picture was taken. A child-like glee is etched into every feature of her face, her eyes are bright. As she stood on those church steps, Alba realised that this, this moment, was happiness.

The congregation spilled out onto the church steps. It had been a small wedding, even in comparison to other weddings which had taken place shortly after the war. Alba concentrated on who was there, rather than on who was missing, yet she couldn’t resist quickly scanning the crowd for her father, though she hadn’t seen him in the church. Umberto had come down with Genevieve from Switzerland, Violetta and Federico were there of course, and Alba had even noticed one or two of Federico’s brothers in the crowd.

Serafina came and kissed Alba first. Her hands were on Alba’s shoulders, her thumbs moving up and down the lace of Alba’s sleeves. She had murmured something about being so proud, or so happy, Alba couldn’t quite hear her over the noise of the crowd. Emilio was being smothered by Aurelia. Alba could see the tears in her mother-in-law’s eyes. Her heart seemed to stop for a moment, but she relaxed as Aurelia hugged Alba to her body, as she felt Aurelia’s lips pressed against her cheek.

The two mothers stood by the newly-weds, ready to receive the congratulations of the guests. Alba remembers a rush of people, the feel of different sized hands
squeezing her hands, the impression of countless lips on her cheek. Even though there are no photographs of this, Alba remembers it clearly. She and Emilio flanked by Serafina and Aurelia, all of them smiling. Alba recalls seeing Regina and Enzo walking towards them, Regina wearing a midnight blue dress, so dark that it might have been black. Enzo kissed his brother on both cheeks, shaking his hand. Regina moved closer in; but she embraced only Aurelia, Emilio and Alba, before moving away into the mass of people, her dress a dark blot amidst a sea of colour. Enzo stood still. His hands, Alba remembers, were motionless before him as if he were holding onto something invisible, or else grasping the air in front of him. He shuffled quickly over to Serafina, and placed one, two kisses on her cheeks. His hands hung in front of him, and Alba could see an awkward fumble of fingers between Enzo and her mother. He grasped Serafina’s hands, or else she grasped his, and then he ducked his head and moved away. If Pasquale had taken a photograph of this moment, what would Alba see? Her head turned towards her mother, perhaps a look of surprise or confusion on both their faces? In any case, Alba’s hand was grasped by somebody else’s, her cheek was kissed again, but her happiness disappeared in this moment. A painful knot tightened in the middle of her chest. For a moment or two Alba felt as though she was gasping for air, and then there was her mother’s hand gripping her elbow. Alba’s cheeks must have been flushed because she could feel the heat spreading in her skin. She turned to her mother, her lips parted, but Serafina shook her head. Her mother’s face had been, until then, relaxed into a smile; now Serafina sniffed and held her head up rigidly. Emilio looked at Alba, and she could see a frown creasing his eyebrows. Like her mother, Alba shook her head. She extended her arm and lifted her head for the next embrace.
Aurelia had sat Alba down a few days after the wedding. She had explained that Regina said that it had been unintentional, that Regina had been pushed out of the way by the surge of people around her. Alba was watching the way Aurelia’s hands were moving through the air as she spoke, knew by the look on her mother-in-law’s face that she was supposed to nod, to say that’s all right mamma, I understand. So she did these things, not out of any love for Regina, but out of appreciation for this woman in front of her, this woman who had insisted on cooking for Alba since her wedding, who had been talking excitedly of grandchildren, who had arranged her home around her son’s new bride.

It was different with Serafina though. They had been shopping in the markets shortly after Alba’s wedding when they bumped into Regina’s mother. Barbara Martino looked once at Alba and Serafina, then looked away. Serafina gripped Alba’s arm and the two of them turned and headed for the market stalls north of the Piazza. They finished their shopping in silence, Alba barely noticing what she was putting into her basket. The women began walking back to Serafina’s house

“I cannot believe that woman,” Serafina spat as soon as they had left the main square for one of the steep streets leading up towards the house in which Serafina now lived alone, “who does she think she is, treating us like that?”

Alba lifted her right shoulder, brushing a fly away from her face.

“Mamma,” she said, keeping her voice as steady as she could, “You’re making too much of this. I told you what Aurelia said. How Regina intended to kiss you at the wedding!”

Serafina snorted and spat on the ground. “Like mother, like daughter,” she sneered, “both of them too big for their boots.” Serafina turned onto Via Sante
Remita. Alba trudged behind her. From up there, Alba could see Salerno spread out beneath them. Alba had thought that it would be enough to marry into a respectable family like the Canellas. Nothing had changed though, she thought, as she looked out on the same terrain she had seen all her life: Piazza XXIV Maggio, the dark stretch of Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. Serafina was walking quickly now, gravel crunching under her feet. Alba followed.

They had reached the narrow road which led to Serafina’s house. Alba’s arms tingled with the weight of the two baskets of fruit and vegetables she was carrying. Even though it was still warm, she shivered.

Serafina looked at Alba, her eyebrows knotted in anger. “Even if what Regina told Aurelia was true, Regina could have approached me afterwards.” Serafina moved her basket from her right arm to her left arm, flexed her fingers. “She could have congratulated me later.”

Alba looked down at the ground, at the cobbled stones of the street. She wanted to appease her mother, but she didn’t want to create any problems in Emilio’s family, not when Aurelia had been so good to her. “I don’t know mamma,” Alba said, “that’s what Aurelia told me.”

“Oh, Alba. Your mother-in-law is one of the kindest women in this town. She does not gossip, she has raised all her children well. But Regina is not her daughter.” Serafina had stopped outside the gate leading into her backyard. She slapped the wood with an open palm. The chickens which had been pecking by the fence hurried away. Serafina reached over the top of the gate and unlocked it. She opened the door and led Alba into the kitchen. “Barbara comes from the worst, the very poorest part of Salerno, and yet she and her daughter think they have the right to look down on us!”
“Mamma, I am going to try and be pleasant to Regina, she is married to Emilio’s brother.” Alba swallowed. “I have to do this; you know I have to do this. I am living in Aurelia’s house.”

Serafina seemed to be staring at the curtains over the sink. Alba could see the long stretch of her mother’s back. Serafina placed her hands, palms down, on the sink. Serafina shook her head, exhaling slowly, before turning to face Alba.

“Do what you have to Alba, but don’t ever forget how they treated us.” Serafina picked up her shopping bag and took it to the icebox. “And remember where you came from Alba; think of the education you and your brothers and sister have received. Do not ever forget who you are, or what that woman is.” The icebox door clicked shut.

Serafina had been right to be angry, of course. Alba knew it at the time and she knows it now. She’d hoped Regina would have forgotten what happened in Salerno all those years ago. But meeting those women today shows her that Regina still thinks of her the same way she did when they were in Salerno. In six weeks Regina has not asked once about Serafina. She has asked Alba about everyone else back in Salerno: Aurelia, Alba’s siblings, Maria and Giulietta and their families, the priest, the butcher, the shoe-maker. In Regina’s house, Alba feels as though she has not left Salerno, in spite of the new furniture, the appliances branded with foreign names, the English words spat out by the radio. This is not the Australia Alba had dreamed of.
It has been another long, hot day. It is early February and the temperature has been hovering between thirty-five and forty degrees for three days now. In Salerno, summer days are always humid as well as hot, with breezes blowing in from the sea by early afternoon, cooling the houses. In Melbourne the heat is dry, menacing. Stepping outside is like walking into a furnace. The sun shines so brightly that the very air seems to shimmer in front of Alba’s eyes. All day Alba has worried about her boys who have just started school at St Anthony’s, and about Emilio, who spends each day outside stacking hot dry bricks. She wraps their sandwiches in greaseproof paper and covers them in napkins to keep the cheese firm and the mortadella cold. As she does so, she imagines what Serafina would say about these tin lunch-boxes, not big enough to hold a proper Italian lunch.

Alba knows that she is pregnant. She’d suspected it on the boat, but now she is certain. She can taste that same salty panic that she’d tasted when she realised she was carrying the boys. She thinks that this anxiety can be traced back to memories of her mother. Alba was only three when Serafina became pregnant with Gianni, and she remembers the way the house seemed suffused with a sudden darkness. She remembers Serafina getting fatter and closing herself in her bedroom, and she can recall, quite clearly, a taste of salt in her mouth, as if she’d swallowed a gulp of seawater. For what seemed like an endless stretch of time, someone else washed, fed and put Alba to bed. She doesn’t know who this was, whether it was Violetta, a maid, or one of her aunts, but she remembers that it wasn’t her mamma. Alba cannot recall how long it took for Serafina to emerge from her bedroom. It could have been a few days or it might have been a number of weeks. But when Serafina did come out, Alba
remembers that her face looked caved in and unnaturally white. It was as if someone had tried to chip her features from a block of marble and hadn’t stopped in the right place. She had become thin again and there was a crib in her bedroom. Looking back, Alba wonders how a crib had fit in Serafina’s narrow bedroom beside the kitchen downstairs. Alba remembers standing on her toes next to the crib to look at this wailing baby. Her brother. In a house full of grown-ups he was the only person smaller than she was. There was a smell about him; of Felce Azzura powder, milk, and something else, sweet and sticky. The smell filled Serafina’s bedroom and the pockets of her apron, it clung to her body and every strand of her hair. Alba remembers that after Serafina put her to bed in her room upstairs, the smell followed her mother out the door. Alba was relieved to be left with the smell of the sea and the scent of the lemon trees in the orchard below.

Serafina must have nursed him. She must have sat in her bedroom, looking out the window perhaps at a view of the lemon grove, and held the baby in her arms. But Alba doesn’t remember this.

After Gianni was born, Serafina worked harder than anyone else in that house, yet there was something strange about the way she moved. Before, she had always been quick, agile. Now she moved slowly, as if she were made of unbending wood. Alba could see difficulty even in Serafina’s smallest gestures: cleaning out the grates, setting the table, picking up the plates after each meal, sweeping the floors, washing the windows. But although it took Serafina longer to get through it all, she never stopped working.

Alba also sensed a greater distance between her mother and the other people in the house after the birth of the baby. When Alba tried to clamber up onto her
mother’s lap, a hand stopped her; either her mother’s palm against her chest, or
someone else’s another hand catching her from behind. There was a kind of cold rage
in the pale features of Serafina’s face. Alba could feel it whenever she got close
enough to her mother. It was the first time in her young life that Alba realised her
mother could be terrifying.

When Alba fell pregnant with Paolo, she noticed that her mother, who rarely
made eye contact with anyone, stopped looking at Alba’s face altogether. Instead,
Serafina addressed Alba’s right ear, chastised the space above her left shoulder,
appealed to her hair. Of course by then, Alba understood what every one of Serafina’s
children had cost her.

Alba knows she cannot stay in Regina’s house much longer. At the same time
she feels that tiny new life fluttering in the pit of her belly. She imagines its pulse
ticking with the consistency of a metronome, keeping time, pushing her forward.

In the evening the heat persists. It lingers in every corner of the house; it trails
after her like a weary dog. Alba feels it filling the space between her nightgown and
her skin. She feels the damp sweat forming creases in the fabric under her arms. She
has just shut the door of the sleep-out. She had soaked a linen towel in cool water and
wiped it over the boys’ warm bodies before they got into bed. She takes the towel and
washes it again under the tap in the laundry outside, before carrying it down the
corridor into the bedroom she shares with Emilio. Even though Emilio has opened the
window, there is no night-time breeze to cool this room. Emilio is sitting on the bed,
wearing a white singlet and a pair of shorts. His feet are bare; his hair is slick from his
shower.

“Are the boys asleep?” he asks as Alba shuts the door behind her.
“Finally,” Alba replies, going over to the bed and sitting down next to him. The mattress whines beneath them. “It took a while, they were so, so hot.”

“I’ve never known heat like this.”

“Neither have I.” Alba hands Emilio the damp linen towel. He slings it over his shoulders.

“At least in Salerno we used to get the afternoon breeze from the sea.”

“Mmm.”

“But this heat is so dry. Maybe it’s because we are in the middle of a town. Anyway.” Emilio shakes his head. “Tutto bene?” he asks, wiping the edge of the towel across his forehead.

“I’m fine.”

“I meant with the bambina, are you coping all right being pregnant with this heat?”

“It’s a little uncomfortable, I suppose, but everything seems to be fine.”

“Good, good.” Emilio takes the towel and wipes it up and down Alba’s left arm, she turns to offer her right arm. The linen is still wet, though not as cool as it was. “We will have to tell everyone soon,” Emilio says, running the towel over Alba’s forehead.

Alba nods. There is no chance of keeping it a secret much longer. At almost three months pregnant, her belly has begun to jut out a little, as if testing the air. Her spine has begun to arch and she often presses her palms onto her hips to straighten her back. With this heat, her feet and hands have begun to swell, to the point that her engagement ring and wedding band leave a tight indent on her finger. She no longer sleeps on her stomach. Regina is already making comments about the roundness of
Alba’s cheeks and her increasing appetite, but when Regina serves up pieces of bread with anchovies, Alba has to turn her head so that the salty smell does not make her retch.

“I don’t want to tell Enzo and Regina until I have a chance to tell our mothers.”

“I thought you were going to write Violetta a letter.” Emilio rolls up the linen towel in his hands.

“I am. I mean I was going to.” Alba shakes her head. “It’s just such a delicate subject. Don’t you think it would be better to speak to your mamma and my mamma on the telephone?”

Emilio shrugs.

“All I know is that you better do it soon, cara mia. You know Regina, she’ll work it out for herself. And it will be difficult to place a telephone call without them knowing why. I think you should write to Violetta and your mamma. And my mamma.”

“They’re not going to like it,” Alba says. She watches a fly hover around the dressing table mirror. “My mamma especially.”

“Eh, what can you do Alba? She’s not here.”

Alba watches the fly as it zooms into its own reflection. Her mother will think that she deliberately planned to have this baby far away from Salerno. Alba smoothes down the patch of bedspread between her and Emilio.

“Allora, I think we should also start looking for a house of our own,” Alba says. “We can hardly bring another child into this house. It’s already so crowded as it is.”
“A baby doesn’t take up much space, Alba. Not unless you are planning to have a really big one this time.” Emilio holds out his hands, pinning the linen cloth between his thumbs and forefingers, a gypsy grin on his lips.

Alba laughs. “I hope not. But you know what I mean. Besides, don’t you want to have your own house?”

“Of course I do.” Emilio looks down at his hands, resting on the linen. He scrubs them every evening after work, but somehow, dirt remains underneath his nails.

“Maybe I should talk to Enzo,” he says, “you know, get him to help us find a house.”

“Where?”

“Well I don’t know, Carlton seems nice enough. There are a lot of Italians moving here, too. But there might be other suburbs.”

Alba looks at her husband. He seems so darkly out of place against the pink and white of Anna’s bedroom. *This is not mine*, Alba thinks, *none of it*. Not the smooth dressing table, not the wallpaper, the carpet. Not even the bed they lie in, like two sardines, night after night.

Emilio looks away and Alba waits. There are so many things she does not want to tell him. She doesn’t want to describe the thousand tiny barbs from Regina, she does not want to complain about feeling out of place in this house. She cannot describe the way the walls of this house seem to press in around her. Alba knows that Emilio will dismiss this with a wave of his bear-sized hand. Tell her not to be silly. Remind her again how things have changed, even though Alba feels the dull thud of her past every day she spends in this place.

She will not talk about these things.
Australia is too big, Alba thinks, everything is so spread out. She has seen maps of the country in the atlas on the living room shelf. If she could, Alba would put the whole country between herself and this house. She left Salerno to get away from all this, why can’t she leave Carlton?

“What about another city?” Alba asks, her hands on her knees. “There are so many other cities in this country. It might be nice to move somewhere new.”

Emilio yawns, he has a habit of opening his mouth so wide that his jaw clicks. Paolo is beginning to do it now, his mouth wide open, his tongue curled back.

“It might,” Emilio says, “but it will be difficult. Here we already know where things are. Good cheese, meat, coffee, pasta. Work. If we go to a new city, it might take months to find all these things. We might not be able to find them at all.”

“I know, Emilio, I know that it would be difficult.” Alba rubs her hands up and down her legs, she grips her knees. “I miss the sea Emilio, I miss being able to look out on all that blue every day.” She looks at Emilio. “Don’t you miss it too? The sound, the smell. Being able to fish whenever you want?”

“Alba, there are so many things about home that I miss.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Of course I miss the sea, I miss the mountains too. But if we stay here we will be able to buy our own house sooner, you know that. We will be able to do it much faster that Enzo and Regina did. We have all my wages, we have the money your sister gave us. It won’t take us long at all.” Emilio pauses, he cocks his head to one side. “I know that you aren’t very comfortable here. I know it must be difficult for you, staying here every day with Regina.”

Alba stays quiet. She does not want to complain about Emilio’s family in his brother’s house.
Emilio keeps his gaze on Alba’s face. “Don’t you want your own house, cara?” He puts his arm around Alba. He smells of Lifebuoy soap and tobacco.

“Of course I do,” Alba says.

“Allora, then we have to be patient. I think we have to stay here.”

There are so many words waiting to be uttered. She knows that Emilio knows more about money and work than she does. She knows that he is being practical, but she is disappointed nonetheless. If only this country wasn’t so big. If only they could get on a bus and go somewhere else, Sydney, or maybe Perth, and be there in a few hours. She turns her head. The pink wallpaper is so bright that she closes her eyes.

“Can you ask at work, Emilio? Can you see if we can go somewhere else?”

“Alba . . .”

“Please, Emilio, just in case?”

Emilio pulls the linen cloth from around his neck and places it on its knee. It has already dried.

“Maybe, cara,” he says, “we’ll see.”
thirteen

Enzo and Regina are having a party. The twins turned sixteen yesterday and today Regina has dressed them in pink and white organza dresses and invited her friends over to celebrate. Everyone is gathered outside. There has been a respite from the heat this week: a cool breeze blows around the garden, teasing the hems of women’s skirts, fluttering the napkins on the tablecloth. Chairs have been placed around the garden and under the eaves of the house. Women are sitting, holding glasses of spumante and balancing plates of cake on their knees. A card table has been set up by the shed for the men. They will eat cake later, they tell their wives, as they guard their cards and take pensive sips of limoncello or grappa.

There are a few children here, sprawled on a number of blankets on the lawn. Marco is playing knucklebones with a little girl about four or five years old, while Paolo is playing marbles with a few boys his age. The two brothers seem happy to be separate from one another; they have been forced to spend so much time together since leaving Salerno.

The twins and their friends sit on another blanket, away from the chatter of the smaller children. They are posed like question marks, Alba thinks, with their legs tucked under their skirts, and the tips of their shoes peeking out from under their ruffled skirts. The record player has been set up in the sleep-out, and the voices of Dean Martin, Mario Lanza and Claudio Villa have been ringing out across the garden all afternoon.

Alba’s feet are sore. This morning they were so swollen that she had to squeeze them into her best pair of flat shoes. She had wanted to wear her blue linen dress, the one which Violetta had urged her to make all those months ago. She had worn it on
Christmas day, and it had fit beautifully then. But when she tried it on this morning she could only get the zip halfway up. The fabric stretched across her hips and her belly bulged through the linen. She has gained so much weight already. Alba isn’t sure if this is only because of the pregnancy, or because of the way her eating has changed since they moved to Australia. She had to try on dress after dress this morning, until she found something that she could fit into. She had no choice but to wear the long cream skirt and matching loose jacket she had worn when she was nearly six months pregnant with Marco. In this suit with her flat shoes on, Alba feels frumpy and old.

Alba has not stopped moving today. This morning she helped Regina fill the two large custard tarts and top them with fresh fruit. She had stuffed countless cannoli with ricotta and scraped through three ice-cream tubs of lemon granita so that it would be soft enough to serve later. And for the last two and a half hours she has been clearing away empty plates, refilling glasses, swatting flies away from the food on the little table in the garden. She doesn’t want to sit down with Regina and her friends. She had done it once or twice earlier, perched herself on a chair in that semi-circle, until one of the women leaned in towards her and said “So, Alba. Tell us all about yourself.” Alba saw in the raised eyebrows of the women listening that they already know all about her life, that they were keen to hear what she might say about herself and what she would omit. So Alba has stayed on her feet since, even though that semi-circle of women makes her remember the company of her own women; her mother, Violetta and Aurelia. If Violetta were here today she would take Alba aside and, holding onto her elbow, say something like, *You are not going to let a woman with three chins get to you are you, Alba?* Looking over at Maria and Pina, Letta might whisper, *Can you see how cheap that fabric is? It hugs their bodies in all the wrong*
places. If Aurelia were here she would be sitting next to Alba, her quiet, contented smile making Alba feel calmer about everything. If Aurelia was here, Regina would behave herself, Alba thinks, and there wouldn’t be those stares, raised eyebrows and voices hushing suddenly whenever Alba came closer. And if Serafina were here, what would she do? Try as she might, Alba cannot picture her mother here.

Alba walks back outside; she is tempted to stay in the kitchen and start washing the dishes, but she forces herself to go back out into the sunshine. Mario Lanza is starting one of his slow operatic ascents on the record-player. There is already a loud intensity to his singing, even though he is nowhere near the top range of his tenor’s voice. Alba wishes she could switch the record to Dean Martin or Frank Sinatra. She loves the smooth lilt of their voices. They remind her of melted butter, cigar smoke and something else, the soft touch of velvet on the back of a hand. But she doesn’t change the record; Regina has a fondness for the more dramatic operas.

Alba steps away from the warble of Mario Lanza and closer to the other party noises: the high-pitched voices of the women, the click of marbles, the slap, slap, slap of cards on the table, and pours herself a sip of spumante. She hovers near the table awhile, shooing flies away from the sticky custard of the cannoli and the tarts, making sure the napkins do not blow away in the breeze. As she takes a sip from her glass she hears the tinkle of a laugh behind her. It sounds like Trizia or maybe that other woman, Andrea. Alba tenses; she does not want to know what this woman is laughing about. Alba smoothes down the front of her skirt, lifts the glass to her mouth, feels the tickle of the bubbles against her lips.

“Alba!” She turns around. Pina is smiling, patting the empty seat next to her. “Come,” she says, “sit with us awhile.”
Alba walks past her boys, taking care not to step on the blankets the children are playing on.

“Allora,” Pina flicks her hair out of her face as she turns to face Alba. Pina’s lips are painted a deep red, her hair is set in tight curls. She is squeezed into a dress the colour of vino rosso. “You haven’t sat with us all day,” she says as she brings her glass of spumante up to her lips.

Alba takes a seat uneasily. “There has been so much to do,” she says. “And I don’t like seeing all these flies hovering over the glasses and near the dolci.”

“Flies are a part of life in this country, I’m afraid,” Andrea says as she turns to face Alba, “Mamma mia! There are more flies in Australia than there are people!”

“There are certainly more flies here than there are Italians, anyway,” Maria says as she crosses her legs. Her lips, Alba notices, are the same shade as her sister’s. Perhaps they use the same make-up. Alba imagines, fleetingly, these two women applying lipstick to each other’s mouths.

“Perhaps my sister-in-law is simply saying that I don’t know how to look after my guests,” says Regina. Her voice is unsteady with wine. Regina looks directly in front of her, away from Alba.

“Not at all,” Alba mumbles. She clears her throat. “It’s me. I am just not used to these horrible flies yet.”

“Well, cara, you had better get used to them,” Pina says. She pulls her skirt over her knees. Alba can hear the soft swish of the fabric on nylon stockings. Pina and Trizia’s glasses are both empty.

“Shall I pour you some more spumante, Pina?” Alba asks. “What about you Trizia, would you like another glass of wine?”
“Oh Dio, Alba!” Regina turns and stares at her. “I can take care of my own guests!”

The backyard becomes quiet. None of the adults are speaking. There is only the sound of Mario Lanza in the background. The men have stopped playing cards, or perhaps a hand has just been dealt, because no one is putting their cards down onto the table. Instead they are holding them in their hands, keeping them close to their chests. From where she sits, Alba can see Enzo staring at Regina. She can see the back of Emilio’s head; his neck looks stiff. The twins and their friends stop speaking. A few are staring up at Alba. Anna and Luisa are looking at their mother. Only the children keep playing. Alba can hear the click of marbles hitting one another. Plastic knuckle-bones rattling in a small fist. She takes another sip of spumante, but her hand is unsteady and she can feel the cool trickle of liquid down her chin, onto her neck. Next to her, Pina clears her throat. At the end of the semi-circle, Trizia laughs.

“Oh I don’t know why you are complaining, Regina. Let her refill the glasses.” Trizia lifts her empty glass. “I would love another glassful thank you, Alba.”

Alba stands. Her legs feel shaky, as though she has been sitting too long. She takes the glass Pina offers her, she moves past Regina to Trizia and takes her glass too. As she turns back to the table, Trizia speaks.

“See how lucky you are, Regina!” Trizia exclaims.

“I suppose so.” Regina’s voice is loud, her words deliberate. “I suppose it is like having a domestica around the house.”

The word domestica freezes Alba for an instant. She falters, then keeps walking, the two empty glasses in her hands. The crystal stems are unsteady in her fingers. Alba looks at the table in front of her, at the bright pinks and yellows of the flowers, at
the swirl of coloured almonds. She does not look left or right. In her mind’s eye she can see her sister-in-law sitting with her back curved into the spine of her chair, her arms folded. She imagines that Regina’s head is leaning to one side, as if waiting for Alba’s reaction. Nobody speaks. Alba can hear a grappa glass being placed onto the card table. She doesn’t look at her husband as she fills the glasses and hands them back to Trizia and Pina. She turns to walk back inside. In the reflection of the glass windows of the back room, Alba sees Emilio. He is sitting up so straight. If he were a dog, his ears would be pricked into perfect triangles, she imagines. She stares for a moment more at her husband’s back, his crisp white shirt and the dark tan of his arms before she steps inside the house. She walks past the record-player and into the quiet of the kitchen.

*  

It is eight o’clock that night when Alba tugs her shoes off her swollen feet, removes her jacket and lies flat on the bed. When she closes her eyes, small lights appear in the darkness behind her eyelids. The bedroom door creaks, the light flicks on and Alba opens her eyes to see Emilio walking towards her. She struggles to sit up; her bones feel weary with fatigue, her belly heavy with the baby. Emilio puts his hand in the hollow of her back to support her. When she is sitting up, he sits next to her and looks her in the eyes.

“Long day, eh?”

“Very long,” she replies, “thank goodness it wasn’t too hot.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine, fine. I was just going to lie down for a few minutes and then go and have a shower.”
Emilio nods. He runs his hand through her hair and cups her face. Alba can smell tobacco on his fingertips.

“How’s the bambina?”

Alba moves her hand to her belly. “I think even the bambina is tired today,” she says, attempting a smile. She breathes out slowly, she feels as though she has been holding her breath all day. Do babies pick up on such tension? Did the baby feel the shock that reverberated in Alba’s body when Regina made the comment about the domestica?

“Not a good day eh?” Emilio says.

“It was a busy day, Emilio.”

“I know, I know, but . . .” his hand slips away from her face, and he grasps her hand. “I heard what Regina said, Alba. We all did.”

Alba turns her head, she sees her reflection in the dressing table mirror. There are dark circles like bruises under her eyes. She straightens her shoulders, and looks into her husband’s face. “She might not have meant anything by it.”

Emilio inhales deeply.

“I don’t think that’s true Alba. I know Regina. I grew up with her.”

Alba feels Emilio’s breath on her ear. She moves her head, she wants to pull her hand free of his grip, but he is holding it too tightly.

“What do you mean?” Her voice quavers. Her stomach is clenched once more. She can’t bear hearing this from the man that she loves so much.

“Oh Alba, we both know the woman cannot keep her mouth shut.”

Alba wriggles her hand out of Emilio’s grip. She doesn’t turn her head away, she doesn’t want to see her face in the mirror. She looks down at her cream skirt. The
linen is wrinkled, there is a smudge of chocolate sauce on the hem. One of her boys’
grubby fingers, she thinks.

“Alba?”

“Please, Emilio, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I am not trying to upset you Alba.”

“Emilio, please.” Alba feels dizzy, as though she had drunk more than one glass
of spumante. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Va bene,” Emilio says, and he stands up. “But I think we should consider
moving to Western Australia.” Emilio undoes the top two buttons of his shirt. “It’s a
port city, a little like Salerno from what the boss has told me. His cousin Tonino has a
company there, and they need more men.” Emilio pauses, he smoothes Alba’s hair
away from her face. “I think you were right. I think the best thing for all of us would
be to start afresh somewhere else.”

Alba is still looking at Emilio, mesmerised. She cannot believe that he is saying
this. She clears her throat. “Really, Emilio? Do you really mean it?”

“I do,” he says, and he leans over. He smoothes a few loose strands of hair from
her face and kisses her forehead. “Why don’t you go for your shower? I’ll put the boys
to bed.”

“But Emilio, what will Enzo think?”

“Don’t worry about Enzo,” Emilio smiles, his hand on the brass door handle.
“Just go for a shower and get yourself into bed.” Emilio disappears behind the closed
door. Alba knows she should get up, but she stares at the white door. Had the other
men at the card table looked at him with raised eyebrows as Alba walked into the
house? Had one of those women’s husbands said something? Alba’s forehead is sticky
with sweat. She rubs her knuckles across it. Is he doing this because he was ashamed
to be linked with her, with her past? No, Alba thinks, no. She shakes the thought
away. No matter what had happened, what had been said or left unsaid, they will
move away. This is all that matters, Alba thinks. This is enough.
The week after the twins’ party, the house seems heavy with urgent words murmured in secrecy, hushed conversations. At mealtimes, the loudest sounds are forced gulps of wine and the rhythmic clink of cutlery on china. None of the adults make eye contact, except for the furtive glances between Alba and Emilio. The children’s high-pitched chatter occasionally breaks the quiet. But as the week passes, so too do these attempts at conversation. They follow their parent’s example, the two teenage girls and the little boys. Alba wishes that she could bring herself to start talking, if only for the sake of her sons, but a part of her finds the silence liberating. Her shoulders have begun to relax a little. She does not have to think of anything to say to Enzo and Regina anymore. There is an honesty to this new sombre dinner table. The women take it in turns to cook now, even though Emilio believes that Alba shouldn’t have to lift a finger after what Regina said. But Alba keeps cooking, as well as sweeping and washing the floors. She now attacks the bathroom and the kitchen with bleach, deriving a savage pleasure from scrubbing the tub and sinks every two days. Sprawled on her hands and knees in the bathroom, the bucket of bleach beside her, Alba reminds herself of her mamma. Serafina’s cleaning was almost theatrical, as if she was on show. Kneeling by the bathtub in Regina’s house, it occurs to Alba that the ferocity of Serafina’s cleaning was about more than getting rid of the dirt. Door open, bucket by her side, Serafina cleaned almost relentlessly, as if reminding Alba’s father every day where she belonged.

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The real conversations in Enzo and Regina’s house start after meal-times, when the girls have gone to their room and Regina has locked herself in the bathroom. As
Alba puts the boys to bed at night, she can hear Emilio and Enzo shouting angry words at one another in the living room. She imagines them in there, Emilio standing by the window, Enzo by the sofa and the telephone table, each brother inflated by anger.

“Why are papà and Zio fighting?” Marco asks one night as Alba tucks him into bed. She smooths his hair away from his face, traces the line of his cheek and his jaw with her fingers before cupping his chin.

“They are not really fighting,” Alba says, looking into those eyes that are so like Aurelia’s. “They are just having a disagreement, that’s all.”

“They’re so loud, mamma,” Paolo mutters as he pulls his sheet over himself.

“Come now,” Alba says, looking at her eldest boy, his arms jutting out from beneath his sheet, his jaw set. He is a tangle of sharp angles and indignation. Alba smiles as she goes to her seat between them, the place from which she usually tells them bedtime stories and watches them drift off to sleep. “You two are always fighting about something or another.”

“But papà and Zio are fighting all the time now!” Paolo says.

“Your papà and your Zio have some things they need to decide. You know yourselves how hard it is to agree on things.” Alba grins. “Mamma mia, just yesterday you boys argued for nearly half an hour about who got to play with which marbles.”

“That’s because Paolo won’t let me play with the big ones,” Marco whines, sitting up in his bed, “he always . . .”

“I won those marbles, stupido. I won them at school, they are mine.”

“Paolo! How many times have I told you not to call your brother names?” Alba stands up and leans over her eldest son. “You say sorry now!”

“But mamma . . .”
“Now, Paolo.”

“Sorry,” Paolo mutters, his chin tucked into his chest, his eyes on the sheet that covers him.

“Paolo, how many times do I have to tell you that you must look into a person’s eyes when you apologise? Now get out of bed,” Alba says as Paolo groans, “come on now, go and say sorry properly.”

Paolo tugs his sheet off, walks past Alba and over to his brother’s cot.

“Sorry Marco,” Paolo says, as he thrusts out his hand, “sorry I called you stupido.”

Marco looks at his brother’s hand, extended towards him. He turns to look at Alba, and she nods her head. He reaches up and grasps his brother’s hand. He grins shyly, and tucks his hand back under his sheet.

“Tutto bene?” Alba asks looking from Paolo to Marco, “All okay?”

“All okay,” Marco says as Paolo nods.

“Good.” Alba sits down and manages to tap the back of her hand against Paolo’s backside as he goes past. He gets into bed and pulls his sheets up around his neck once more.

Emilio and Enzo’s voices are still echoing through the house. Alba cannot hear the words, but she can make out the tones. Emilio’s voice is filled with uncharacteristic bitterness. Enzo’s sounds as though it is booming with righteousness.

“I wish they would stop,” Marco says. He is clutching his sheets, his thumb hovers near his mouth.

“So do I,” Paolo echoes. Alba wishes that she could lie down next to her children and say me too boys, me too. She feels tiny, as if she were listening to her own father
arguing with someone. She knows what it is Emilio and Enzo are arguing about. Her boys, she can see, are waiting for her to say something, to reassure them that everything is going to be all right.

“You boys shouldn’t worry. Your papà and your uncle love each other, even if they get angry with one another.” She reaches out a hand to Marco, then her other to Paolo. Alba smiles. “They don’t have their mother here to tell them to stop arguing.”

“If Nonna Relia was here, would things be different?” Marco asks. Alba thinks of Aurelia, the lilt of her voice, her small arms so ready to embrace so many different people, whether they deserve it or not. If Aurelia were here she would take Marco to her breast, and the softness and simple scent of her would be enough to quieten all his fears. If Aurelia was here, Alba thinks, none of this would have happened in the first place.

“Yes caro, if Nonna was here, things would be very different. But Nonna Relia is in Italy with your aunties and your cousins. She has to look after them now.” Alba gets up, crouches over each boy’s bed in turn, and kisses them on their foreheads, on the tips of their noses, on their cheeks. “Allora, go to sleep,” she tells them, “and dream beautiful dreams.”

Alba closes the door and walks quietly down the corridor to her room. She shuts the door behind her, kicks off her slippers and lies on the bed, waiting for Emilio. She rubs her hand over her stomach. Each night since the party she lies in here at this time, her body tense, her ears pricked. Tonight she listens out for the boys too, afraid that they might be upset, wary that she might have to get up and invent more false words of comfort for them. As the doorknob turns and the door creaks open, she sits up. Emilio walks in. He looks so tired, even more tired than he did last night.
He sits on the bed, his back to Alba. She can see him undoing the buttons on his white shirt, his hands moving slowly down his chest. She shuffles forward to sit beside him as he folds his shirt and places it on the bed. He is in his singlet, the white standing out against the smooth olive of his skin. He has become so dark here, Alba thinks, working under that fierce Australian sun.

Emilio takes a deep breath, rubs his hand over his face.

“I’ve told him we’re leaving as soon as we can. I think I finally got through that testa dura of his.” Emilio says, tapping his fingers against the side of his head.

“How did you convince him?” Alba breathes, twisting one of the ribbons on her nightgown in her fingers.

“I just told him that it was impossible to stay. That we are our own family; that we need to do what is best for us, and what is best for our children.” Emilio looks at Alba as he rubs his elbow with his index finger. He always rubs this when he is agitated. Does he feel the residue of the bullet in it still, something dark and hard in his flesh, Alba wonders, or is there still an echo of the pain there? She looks at his face again.

“What did he say?”

“Oh the usual arguments, about how we should remain here, about how mamma won’t like it, the thought of us living so far away when we could have been close together.” Emilio shakes his head. “I told him that he wasn’t so concerned about this before, or he would have told Regina to keep her mouth shut.” Emilio rubs his hand over his face again. “If family is so important to him, if blood matters so much, then I don’t understand how he could let his wife talk to her friends about us in that way.”

“What did he say when you told him that?” Alba asks, the ribbon sliding between her thumb and forefinger.
“He said that we don’t understand how hard life has been for them here. Regina doesn’t work, the children are in school all day, and so all she has are her friends. Her sisters are back in Salerno, all her aunts, all her cousins, and so she doesn’t have anyone here but those women to talk to.”

Between her fingers, Alba can feel the thin threads that are woven into the ribbon, and the two thicker edges. She is aware of a quiet rage pulsing within her. She squeezes her fingers together tightly, and it is almost as if she can feel the skin of her fingers through the ribbon. Emilio is quiet, waiting for her to say something. They have to speak about her past now, all over again, so far away from home.

“Did she have nothing else to talk about? Does my family have to be dragged up here, too?” Alba’s voice is weary with resignation.

Emilio coughs; it is not a proper cough, he is clearing his throat. He does this, Alba knows, when he is preparing himself to say something he does not want to say. “Enzo said that she didn’t lie. That nothing Regina said was untrue.” Alba starts to speak, but Emilio holds up his hand. She closes her mouth, although she can feel a howl of anger welling in her. “I told him that it is no excuse. No excuse at all.” He puts his hand on her knee. “I told him that he should be able to control his wife’s nastiness. I told him that she should have better things to do with her time.” Emilio shakes his head. “What an example she is for those two girls!”

Alba looks at Emilio’s hand, flat on her left leg. She wonders if he can feel it, the anger raging beneath the surface of her skin.

“Just because something is true,” Alba begins, “just because she thinks she knows the way things happened.” She shakes her head. “She doesn’t know anything,” she hisses. “Only the gossip she heard in Salerno. She doesn’t know me. Not really.
She doesn’t understand my family. She has never once, not once . . .” she pauses, the ribbon slides out of her hand. “Did we make a mistake, Emilio? Was this all a mistake, coming over here?”

“Shh,” Emilio grasps Alba’s hand, “it was not a mistake coming to Australia, the only mistake was coming here to Melbourne. But what did we know?” He shrugs his shoulders. “Allora, we are here now. It will be easier to move around, to find somewhere new to live.”

“But what about the money, Emilio? We will have to use our savings, we will have to use the money Violetta gave us.” Alba closes her eyes. It is gone then, the house that Alba imagined, sitting in the middle of a green patch of lawn. Gone too is the backyard where the boys would have played, the rooms she could have painted any colour she liked, the hallway she would have decorated with a mirror. She looks around the room she and Emilio are sharing. She feels a rush of envy for that horrid pink wallpaper, the white painted bureau, the carpeted floor.

“Alba, you know that we wouldn’t have been able to buy a house straight away, even with my savings. Not even with your sister’s money.”

“But . . .”

“There was no way,” Emilio says, his hands slicing the air as if he is dividing it.

“We would have been able to do it sooner.” Alba knots her fingers together in her lap.

Emilio’s hands stop moving. He seems to droop, like a ragdoll with all the stuffing pulled out of it. He takes a deep breath. He does not look at her.

“Yes,” he says, “va bene, we would have been able to do it sooner.” He turns to face her. He places his hand on the side of her face. “It will happen, cara, maybe not
as soon as we’d hoped, but soon enough.” She leans into his warm hand. His wrist stays still, despite the weight of her head. He looks into her eyes. “I promise you this Alba. You just have to be patient.”

Alba nods. And even though anger is still pounding through her body, she reaches up and holds Emilio’s wrist. How can she thank him for this, for going into that living room night after night to face his brother. For standing his ground and defending her. More than this, after everything, Emilio still looks at her the same way. She can see it in his eyes now: that concern, that love. She cannot think of any words that would express just how grateful she is. She leans forwards and kisses him. Her fingers are at the back of his neck, feeling the curly tendrils of his hair, pulling him towards her. Alba is ravenous all of a sudden. She unbuttons his shirt. She wants to merge with him, to immerse herself in that idea of her that he still keeps.
fifteen

Fremantle is just as Alba remembered it from their stop-off on their way to Melbourne. They return to Fremantle by boat on the last day of March, and the port city is gripped in mean heat. It is the kind of heat that would mean the closing of the primary schools in Salerno so that children could lie in the cool of their family homes, or go down to the sea. It is the kind of heat that sags in the air long after the sun has disappeared. When they had left Melbourne, the air had been cool, and the crisp nights required blankets. In Fremantle the heat disorientates them. It is almost as if they have stepped backwards into summer, as if they have, once again, arrived in a different country.

The second floor flat they have moved into seems hotter inside than outside. The roof is so low that it seems to press against the top of Emilio’s head. It has only one bedroom and one bathroom, but it is cheap and, as Emilio’s new boss Tonino explained to them, this heat won’t last, not for much longer.

As the blaze of heat settles into milder sunny days, Alba knows they have made the right decision. They have unpacked only the things that they will need: clothes, linen, soaps, pastes and a little of the food that they brought over from Melbourne with them. They have left the rest in their trunks, which are stacked neatly behind the two small sofas on which the boys sleep. The flat has wooden windows which need to be jiggled and rocked from side to side before they can be lifted open. The white ceiling in the bathroom is dotted with mould and the tap drips through the night. The kitchen is gritty with dirt and the smell of grease and unknown spices. The noise of the much larger family downstairs comes up through the floor. But what bothers Alba the most is the feeling of neglect in this place. There is something sad about the hastily
painted walls, a despair to the long unopened windows. It looks like a place that’s been given up on. When she walked into the flat, tired from the long journey, Alba was reminded of the first time she saw the house in which Serafina lives now.

It had been warm, Alba remembers, the day they left her father’s big house. The sun had been hot on her head as she walked to the place she would be sharing with her mother. Alba had followed Serafina up the steep roads which criss-crossed into the mountains. All Alba could hear was the clump of Serafina’s boots on the ground. They would have been carrying travelling bags, one each, although Alba remembers that many of her things were already in the house when she got there. Though this doesn’t seem right now, Alba thinks as she looks back on it, their belongings must have arrived gradually. She would have noticed if lots of her clothes had gone suddenly missing from her father’s house. Yet for some reason she remembers opening the armadio in her room in the house on the hill, and seeing its top shelf given over to her hats, gloves, scarves.

What had been in those bags then, the ones which she and Serafina had carried up the hill, the bags that had made everyone along the Corso turn their heads as they passed? As though Alba and Serafina were part of some parade. Alba remembers that as they walked down the Corso, she lifted her hand to wave at someone. A woman no doubt, perhaps a neighbour. As she lifted her arm, Serafina hissed No Alba, no. Alba dropped her arm, and something inside her seemed to stop. In that moment, Alba realised that her mother wanted to be unnoticed by others. Her hand felt hot by her side, her throat was dry with the greetings she hadn’t uttered.
She and Serafina had trudged along the Corso in silence after that. Alba was overwhelmed with self-consciousness about the bag in her hand, her mother at her side. She had walked this street countless times before, but never like this.

The kind of quiet Alba experienced along the Corso that day was almost like the quiet that settled on Salerno as the war progressed. But the war had not started by then, not really. There had been some violence between Italy and Albania, much talk about Hitler, whispers about Il Duce, especially in the South, where people had so much more to lose. In the years to come Alba would get used to the feeling of trepidation as she opened a newspaper or heard people speaking in the town. She would get used to the sights of officials walking through Salerno, those envelopes in their hands, and although part of her wanted to watch these men to see whose house they visited, she kept her head bent low, already praying for the lost boy. What did it matter, really, Alba thinks as she looks back on this image of herself and Serafina walking down the street avoiding familiar gazes. What did that small humiliating event matter, compared to the war which followed such a short time after?

But Alba’s memory of that day is keener than her memory of the beginning of the war. Nobody Alba knew lived in that unfamiliar street which cut into the mountain so far from the Corso and Piazza XXIV Maggio. From her father’s big house close to the sea, all Alba would have seen of this was the rolling green of the mountains. The sharp winding roads and little houses would have been tucked in behind the mountains. They were being sent away, Alba and Serafina, they were being sent somewhere Alba’s father could not see them.

Serafina had walked the length of the new house’s hallway and back again. Alba thought for a moment that her mother was walking out. That this had been a mistake
after all, and that there was another house, a different one, waiting for the two of them. One that didn’t smell of dust and mould and disuse.

Even though this flat in Fremantle has that same air of neglect, Alba knows why they are here. The boys are still confused, even though Alba and Emilio explained what they could about moving to Fremantle when they boarded the ship. Alba can see apprehension in Marco’s eyes in the first week when he wakes up in the flat. He looks around and his lower lip protrudes a little, as though he might cry. Alba swoops down on him.

“Marco, you’re awake. Come,” she reaches for his hand, “I’ve made breakfast already.”

Marco yawns, he pulls back just a little, his head resting against the back of the sofa. “Mamma, why are we here?” he asks.

The question is like hers all those years ago in the house on the hill. Unlike her mother, Alba lifts her little boy’s chin so that she can look into his eyes. “We’re here,” she says, “because your papà was offered a very good job. And because this is a nicer town. We are right near the sea here, you boys can fish with papà, you can swim while the weather is still hot, you can do all sorts of things that you couldn’t do while we were in Carlton.”

Marco looks around. He likes nooks and crannies this child, little places where he can hide away and play by himself. This room is square and sparsely furnished. He won’t be able to make himself cosy here.

“Do we have to live here, though?” Marco asks. “There’s no room to play in here.”
In the kitchen, Alba can hear a spoon hit the side of a bowl. Paolo is listening too, even though he woke up and climbed out of his makeshift bed with a smile on his face, asking for food. Alba squeezes Marco’s hand. She speaks loudly enough so that Paolo will be able to hear every word she has to say.

“We are only staying here for a little while,” Alba says. “If we stay in a small place like this, then we will be able to live in a big one sooner.”

Marco nods. Paolo picks up his spoon and keeps eating. Alba pulls Marco out from under the sheets and hugs him to her, her fingers in his curly hair. She can smell his night-time breath, and feel the sleepiness of his body.

“Come,” she says again, pulling him up and out of bed. “Come and eat your breakfast and then we can walk to the sea.”

As Marco walks into the kitchen, pain spreads through Alba’s abdomen, and she recalls the way she used to look towards the front door each night at seven o’ clock during those first weeks in Serafina’s new house. She never expected him to walk through that front door, could not picture him standing in his well-cut suits in this small shabby entryway, but it took Alba months to get out of that pattern of waiting for her father. Serafina too used to lift her head at about seven, as if she was expecting someone. Alba would wait for her mother to speak, but Serafina would drop her head and resume preparing their supper. Her mother would not mention Alba’s father; not even when Alba pleaded to know what they were doing in this place. If Alba pressed her mother, Serafina would answer, Please Alba, not now, or else she might say, Alba, I do not want to speak of this. On those nights when Alba refused to stop questioning her mother, Serafina would stand up, abandoning what she had been doing - cooking, sewing, cleaning, whatever - and walk out of the room. Alba got used
to the way the little house echoed, the way a door slammed shut could reverberate through each small room.

After several weeks or several months, Alba can’t remember the exact amount of time, she stopped talking about her father, stopped asking why Gianni had been sent to school in Switzerland while she was left behind. She focused on the little things instead. Why there wasn’t room for a night-stand by her bed, where her white gloves had gone, the way the water dribbled out of the kitchen tap, the drabness of the living room. She wanted to know why there were fewer pieces in the cutlery set she found in the kitchen drawer, she talked of missing the view of the sea from her bedroom window. She carried around a list of complaints, adding missing scarves, hats, books. She focused on these things, she knows now, because she couldn’t bear to think about the big things any longer. Nevertheless, Alba is embarrassed by this image of herself aged fifteen, taking inventory of all the things they did not have anymore. Only now does she realise how difficult it must have been for her mother, that list of missing things. To be reminded, item by item, of all the things she could no longer provide for her daughter.
They go to church every Sunday, the Canella family, even though the softly rounded words the pink-faced Irish priest speaks in English slip right past them. They still pray in Italian. Mass here goes for the hour, as it did in Salerno, and they all know the routine of prayer off by heart, especially Alba and Emilio, for whom going to church has been the most important part of their Sundays since they can remember. In St Patrick’s in Fremantle, Alba tries to translate the priest’s words to Latin by looking at her missal, but he speaks too quickly, this Father Michael. Alba misses knowing what the readings are every week. She would like to hear the priest inflect the words, to know what she should pay special attention to, to understand why the members of the white-faced congregation nod when they do. She takes home the leaflet though, and looks up the readings in her Bible. The letters from St Paul to the Corinthians; from St Peter to the apostles. She reads them to her family in Latin after they have finished their Sunday lunch.

There are several Italian families in St Patrick’s on a Sunday morning at ten. Alba sees them clutching their Italian missals or Bibles, their rosary beads wound around their fingers. Some of them sit together in clumps. Most of them are scattered through the back few rows, the same place that Alba sits with her family. Alba likes to imagine her mother sitting next to her in this church with its low ceiling and brightly coloured windows. She recalls her coils of dark grey hair caught in a bun at the base of her head, her rosary beads wound around her left hand, the fingers on her right clasping each glittering jet-black ball in turn, her lips moving with her own silent prayers. Serafina’s back would be straight of course, stiff against the hard wood of the pew, her dark eyes would be roaming around the small church. What would her
mamma find most interesting, Alba wonders. Would her gaze be fixed on the sandy-haired Australians crammed into the front half of the church? No doubt she would be glaring at the fair-haired children who seem unable to sit still, who are not as well behaved as Marco and Paolo are in church. *No respect* she might hiss to Alba, *no respect*. Serafina would no doubt find the absence of nuns unsettling, as Alba did when they first started attending Mass here. There are a few, bunched together in the very front seats, but nowhere near as many as there are in Salerno. Alba knows that her mother would think that there was something missing in Mass in Australia, a lack of ceremony, of reverence and devotion. The flowers on the altar would be too bright for her, the bunches too small. The smell of incense would not be strong enough, the hymns played on the new organ would sound, to Serafina’s ears, unholy.

Alba imagines Serafina leaning forward ever so slightly as the priest begins to speak. He preaches in English, but his words don’t have the clipped precision of the British accent, instead they roll around in his mouth like sweets. His voice is musical in pitch, filled with the peaks and troughs of his Irish accent. Serafina would stare at this man, with his hair mottled ginger and grey, his white hands spread out wide, and she would have trouble recognising him as a priest. To her, he wouldn’t look like a man who had been chosen by God, or a man who could get things done. There would be nothing about him that Serafina would see as divine. Alba can see the way her mother would tilt her head as he spoke, trying to ascertain if he was solemn enough for her to believe what he said. His robes would strike Serafina as too white, too new. The brick walls, the carpeted floor, the vases of flowers, the brightly coloured windows would all seem too modern. She would look at the people in the front few rows, the women
without gloves, their hymn books hanging from their freckled wrists. Alba imagines that her mother wouldn’t believe that they prayed to the same God she prayed to.

As they reach the large wooden doors, Alba pulls off her black gloves so that she can dip her fingers in the little copper bowl and make the sign of the cross. Stepping outside, she sees Marco and Paolo already talking to a group of small boys. Emilio’s hand is at her elbow as they make their way towards the boys.

Despite all the English Paolo and Marco have learnt, they are speaking rapid Italian with their school friends. Alba watches them for a moment; part of her wants to shepherd them away from the gaggle of boys and back towards the flat, another part of her is glad for them and almost amazed by how uncomplicated their conversation is.

“Look at them,” Emilio says, leaning in towards her, “they have already made friends from school.”

Alba nods. “I’d feel better if I knew who their parents were,” she admits.

“Alba, I’m sure they are all fine.” Emilio shakes his head.

“Are any of them sons of the men you work with?”

Emilio scans the small boys’ faces, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh.”

“Alba, they are fine, look at them!”

Alba smiles at Emilio. She straightens her coat over her stomach. Today she is wearing a smocked coat over her dress. Emilio calls it her bell-jacket, but Alba doesn’t care. It’s a stylish coat and it covers her belly well. Alba looks at all the people milling around outside the church. Even if she couldn’t hear, she would be able to distinguish the Italians from the Australians. The Australian women don’t wear gloves, and their
veils are made of a new kind of lace which looks like the netting Emilio uses on his fishing baskets, the embroidery simple and repetitive. And even though they are dressed in their Sunday clothes, nothing seems to match. There by the tall stringy tree is a woman wearing a red dress, black shoes and carrying a navy blue bag. She is talking to a woman who is wearing a black dress with navy blue shoes. But the Italian women wear outfits that actually coordinate. That woman with the dark brown hair is in a navy blue dress, beige shoes and carrying a beige handbag. The fair-haired woman she stands next to has on a beautiful white suit, tan shoes, a tan handbag slung over her shoulder. Alba’s bell jacket is a soft powdery blue with thick black buttons, so she had chosen her black shoes and is carrying the black handbag that Violetta gave her for her last birthday. Clothes on Italian women, Alba thinks, are like a second skin. In contrast, most of the Australian women look as though they are playing dress-ups.

A man approaches Emilio with an outstretched hand and a familiar “Ciao!” No one here knows Alba well enough to say hello. There are, of course, faces that become more recognisable each week at church, or outside the school as Alba waits for her boys, but she has been so self-conscious about the growing size of her belly that she has kept to herself. Emilio introduces her to Franco and his wife Mirella, and Alba feels again that ache for Violetta, Serafina and Aurelia. It is a pang which is becoming as familiar as the weight of her baby.

“Oh, you are from Salerno!” Mirella is exclaiming, as she shakes Alba’s hand, “my brother worked there for a while before the war!”

“Yes, that’s right,” Emilio says, “what did you say his name was again?” he asks Franco.

“Vittorio De Lillo.”
Emilio shakes his head, “No, I never knew him.”

“Ah, he was a bit older than you,” Mirella says. “Perhaps he knew your families. He used to write us letters all the time, telling us about the wonderful people in Salerno.” Alba looks at Mirella. She can understand this woman’s attempt to make some sort of connection in this foreign country, but she’s apprehensive about where this particular conversation might go.

“Vittorio De Lillo,” Alba says slowly, as if she is poring through all the names in Salerno. “No, I didn’t know him.”

“You’re sure that he didn’t work with your families?” Mirella asks, “Your name is Canella, is that right Emilio? Alba, what is your father’s name?”

Alba stands there, aware of Emilio’s eyes on her, aware of the priest walking behind Franco and Mirella. From here she can see the crucifix on top of the church. She looks down. The gold cross Serafina gave her for her Confirmation is winking in the early morning sun.

“He wouldn’t have known my father,” Alba says. Her gaze drifts off to her boys, chattering to their friends. It would make no difference to them, they didn’t know the man. “My father died shortly after the Great War,” Alba continues, “before I was born.” As Emilio stares at Alba, she looks directly at Mirella.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Mirella whispers. She leans forward as if to put her hand on Alba’s shoulder, but then she looks at her husband.

“Terribly sorry,” Franco says. “Come Mirella, let’s go and get the children.”

“It was lovely to meet you.” Mirella steps forward and kisses them both on the cheek. “Piacere.”

“Piacere,” Alba and Emilio echo, as they walk away.
“Don’t say it, please Emilio, don’t say it.” Alba looks up at her husband.

“But Alba . . .”

“Please, caro,” she says, looking into his warm brown eyes. “It’s much easier this way.” She walks towards the boys, Emilio following behind her.
seventeen

As they walk through the streets of Fremantle on a Saturday afternoon, shopping bags hanging from their wrists and Emilio’s cautious hand at her elbow, Alba appreciates, once again, how foreign this place is. There is no one here to lead Alba around, to show her where to buy the freshest fruit and vegetables, or how to read the bus schedule. She hadn’t been ready for the peculiarities of Fremantle with its large open roads, the low, flat buildings and pale blue sky. The buses here look like beetles with their curved green roofs and squat cream bodies, the streets are made of bitumen rather than cobblestones. She hadn’t been prepared for the sparseness of the town, the different foods in the stores. They’ve been here for weeks and Alba has not yet found a store which sells pasta. She’s had to make it all by hand, sauce too. Paolo has been asking for sausages, but Alba won’t buy the pink ones they sell at the butcher’s. She breathes in; even the sea smells differently here.

Marco and Paolo have already reached the park. Paolo wriggles into the seat of a swing as Marco tries to climb into the other one.

“Attenzione Marco!” Alba calls. From here the thick black chains of the swing look heavy, menacing. The gaps between the links would be just big enough to ensnare a little finger. “Paolo! Help your brother get into the swing!”

Around her, people turn to stare. She forgets how quiet these Australians are. Alba turns and keeps walking, her head bent, her hand skimming the large jacket she wears to conceal her pregnancy. She’s nearly six months pregnant now; soon she won’t be able to leave the house at all. When they reach the park bench, Alba sweeps the leaves off the painted surface before sitting down. She looks forward to these Saturday afternoons, after the grocery shopping has been negotiated with stilted
English at Henderson’s Store. Alba has been trying to learn English at home during the day. She pulls the windows of the flat open so that she can hear the English conversations of her neighbours. She tunes the little blue radio and listens to the lunch-time serials, trying to follow the dialogue that comes whining out of the Bakelite wireless while she sweeps floors, folds laundry, darts socks and scrubs the bathtub. In a notebook she tries to write the English words she hears, and sometimes she gets the boys to correct the spelling for her when they get home. When they are alone in the flat, Alba will encourage the boys to speak in English, but when Emilio walks in the front door, they all lapse into Italian. Emilio works with so many other Italian men that he doesn’t feel the need to learn English. For him, English is like a train ticket, something which he uses to get by, something which he can discard later. Alba worries that he doesn’t know enough English, but he holds his hand up whenever she mentions this. Basta! he says, Italy is our home, Italian is our language. I don’t want the boys to forget where they are from, Alba.

“Un bello giorno, eh?” Emilio plucks his tobacco from his shirt pocket and starts rolling a cigarette. Unlike Alba, he always knows how much tobacco to put into the paper; it never hangs out the end, as it does when Alba rolls a cigarette. Emilio’s cigarettes are shaped like perfect white pipes, narrow and surprisingly firm. They never fall apart, they are never damp from too much saliva. Alba likes watching his face as he rolls the cigarette. Such a small task, yet he wears such an intense look of concentration.

“Want one?” Emilio asks, offering Alba the cigarette. Alba shakes her head, the more heavily pregnant she is, the more the smell of cigarette smoke makes her gag. Emilio lights the cigarette, breathes it in and exhales the smoke through his nose.
“Papà! Papà! Can you give me a push?” Marco is finally sitting on his swing, though his legs dangle a few inches from the ground. Paolo has already gotten himself up into the air. Emilio places the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and goes over to push Marco.

Alba watches as her boys move back and forth on the swing set, human pendulums. Paolo is inching higher and higher. He knows when to hook his knees underneath him, and when to straighten his legs. Marco is watching Paolo, although when he watches too intently, his own swing starts to rock from side to side, and Emilio has to grab him, bring him back to the centre and push him again.

Today it is mild enough for Alba to slip her cardigan off. She places it on her lap to hide her stomach, and holds her arms up to the sun. Emilio comes and sits next to her.

“Still so warm, isn’t it?” Emilio says as he sits back down.

“Mmm,” Alba’s eyes are closed, her face is tilted to the sky. “I cannot believe it is already May.”

“I wonder what winter is like here?”

“I cannot imagine. All I know is that it will be our first winter without snow.” Emilio is quiet. Opening her eyes, Alba sees that he is rolling another cigarette. “That will be strange, won’t it Emilio?” Alba remembers walking through the Centro Storico in the shadow of those mountains dusted with snow. The scent of warm chestnuts baking on large iron pans. Alba would sometimes buy a bagful; she would clutch the tip of the bag with her gloves, and shield the chestnuts with her coat so that they would still be warm when she got home. She imagines chestnuts will be just one more thing she has to learn to live without here.
Alba looks at Emilio puffing on another perfectly rolled cigarette. There is something in his demeanour that doesn’t seem right. He seems to tap the cigarette with too much force when he ashes it, and he seems to suck on it too slowly, as if he is trying to inhale more than tobacco.

“Emilio? Did you—”

“Alba, I need to speak with you.”

“Oh.”

“It’s about the house,” Emilio says, and Alba knows that he is not talking about the flat in which they live now. The house Emilio is referring to is the one they have been speaking of since they boarded the boat in Melbourne. More than Fremantle or Western Australia, it has been their destination. A house with large airy rooms, and one of those curious front verandahs, and a backyard in which Emilio can plant fruit and vegetables and herbs. This is what they have both been looking forward to. They talk about it all the time within the confines of their flat. The boys are so excited about the prospect of beds and shelves for their things. Maybe even a room each.

“What about the house, Emilio?” Alba asks, keeping her voice level.

“Well,” he sucks on his cigarette and exhales slowly. “I’ve been speaking to some of the men at work, you know, just asking about prices, about good areas in which to live, that kind of thing.”

“And?” Alba nods. They’d walked past a beautiful house for sale on the way over here. Alba had paused in front of it. She had pointed out that the front windows would open up to a view of the sea. *That would be lovely,* she said, *being able to see the sea from the living room or the bedroom.* Emilio nodded before leading her away. *Buona,* he had agreed. *Buona.*
“Well,” Emilio exhaled again. He is looking ahead at the boys on the swings. “It seems that houses here are a little more expensive than I had realised.”

“Oh.” Alba feels a sharp pain at the side of her stomach. She slips her hands into the soft woollen folds of her cardigan, her fingers finding the small round buttons.

“I mean, we can still buy one.” He leans over and there is a rustle of paper as his elbow brushes the paper bag in which the fruit has been packed. He reaches under the cardigan for her hand. “But I’m afraid that we will only be able to afford something similar to what we are in now. We could get something a little bigger somewhere else, but it would be in a not so nice neighbourhood. A proper house,” he squeezes her hand “the kind that we have been looking at, would be more expensive.”

Alba has a sensation of tumbling. The world looks distorted for a moment, as if she is looking at it from a different angle.

“You mean we haven’t enough money,” she whispers.

“I’m afraid not cara, not for the kind of house we want.”

“But what about all your wages? What about the money Letta gave us before we left?”

“Alba, there isn’t nearly enough for a good deposit. Houses are dear. Besides,” Emilio squeezes her hand. “I had to use quite a bit of money to get us over here. Travelling from Melbourne was not cheap.”

Alba pulls her hand away.

“You regret leaving Carlton!”

“No,” Emilio shakes his head. He stubs his cigarette out on the side of the park bench. “I don’t regret leaving Carlton. What other option did we have?”
Alba swats away a fly. She can see Regina languishing in her house. How she must stroll through the rooms now, all restored to spacious order. Her daughters in their own bedrooms, no fold-out cots in the sleep-out. On the day they left, Regina had stood on the front verandah and waved good-bye. And Alba had waved back, so secure in the idea of her own future house. She had thought that she and Emilio would only be renting for a few months before they would be able to buy a home of their own.

“So how long, Emilio?” she asks, “how long before we will be able to afford the kind of house we want?”

Emilio has both hands splayed on his knees. He is sitting up straight, still staring at the boys.

“Well the rent is cheap where we live now, so maybe a year, a little less perhaps.”

“A year!” Alba is stunned. “But Emilio, we cannot live in that place for another year. The baby will be here in three months, God willing. There’s not enough room in our bedroom for a crib!”

“I know, Alba, I know.” Emilio’s voice is low, either because he doesn’t want the boys to hear, or because he is worn out. Alba winces as she listens to him. “Maybe I can get a second job. You know, they are always looking for cray-fishermen. I can work some nights, maybe even Saturdays.” He scratches his chin. “We could save more money that way.”

“No Emilio. You can’t. You are working long hours as it is. It wouldn’t be right.” Alba doesn’t want to tell him about how lonely she would be if he was away from the flat anymore than he already is. “So what should we do?”
“I’ve been thinking that we should rent a bigger place. Something with three bedrooms, a large yard. We can hardly stay where we are. Not with the boys on the sofas, not with the baby on the way.”

“And we can afford to do that?”

“We can. Of course it would mean that it would take longer to save enough for a deposit on a house of our own.” Emilio runs his hands up and down his legs, as if he has been running and his muscles ache.

Alba doesn’t want to believe that they have to keep renting. How will she tell her mother? Telling her they were moving to Fremantle was difficult enough. Writing the letter about the baby was even more difficult. Of course Violetta sent a cheery telegram from both of them, but Alba couldn’t make out her mamma’s voice in any of the bubbly words. Aurelia sent a letter, full of congratulations and a request for a photograph as soon as the baby is born. Maybe she wrote, I could save for a while, and come and visit in a year or two. That would be nice, Alba thought, as she folded Aurelia’s letter and placed it back in the envelope. She likes to imagine this, Aurelia here with all three children around her. Of course she couldn’t visit for more than a year, not when her daughters still live in Salerno, but there is something so comforting about the words that Alba keeps the letter on the little table beside her bed. Alba has spoken to Serafina, Violetta and Aurelia a few times since they arrived in Fremantle, but her mother sounds stiff each time Alba brings up the pregnancy. When Alba complained about how difficult it had been, trying to understand a doctor who only spoke English, Serafina had hissed, Well what did you expect, Alba! Then Serafina had said something else, something about Alba not being back in Salerno next year. Alba cannot remember promising this, but Serafina had been insistent. You said you’d be
back in a year or two, Alba. Now how will you manage that with a little one, eh? Will Serafina smile triumphantly when Alba tells her about renting a house, perhaps say something like, I told you how difficult it would be, Alba. Or, worse still, will the news make Serafina depressed, will it be just another disappointment to think about on those long evenings she spends alone at home? Of course, Alba could keep quiet about the house, but Emilio and she would never lie to Aurelia.

“I’m so sorry, cara.”

It is Alba’s turn to reach over the bags of vegetables and grab Emilio’s hand.

“It’s not your fault, Emilio.”

“I really thought we could do it. Now I feel as though I have led you over here for nothing.”

“That’s not true, I’m glad to be here.”

“Should I look for a house to rent then?”

Alba rests her right hand on her belly. She forces a smile.

“I think so.”

They sit there for nearly an hour, Alba and Emilio. They sit and watch as their boys move from the swing set to the see-saw, and back again. As he calls “Andiamo!” to the boys, Emilio’s hands are once again splayed on his knees and her own are tucked into her cardigan again.

Alba carries anger home that afternoon. She does her best not to let it show, but it flashes through her on unexpected occasions, such as the next morning when she found Paolo’s vest tucked under the sofa. When she confronts him with the garment, he recoils.
“I’m not wearing that,” he says, his arms folded into stubborn angles. “I feel stupid wearing it.”

“But it’s getting cold,” Alba argues. The wool is soft between her fingers as she holds it out to him. “Winter is almost here!”

“No one else wears them,” Paolo says.

“That’s not true. I wear one, so does your papà, and so does Marco.”

“Well no one else at school wears them.”

“That’s probably because they don’t have such good vests!” She is waving the garment at him now.

These vests were store-bought in Naples, a gift from Violetta. *It’s a fine clinging wool*, Alba remembers Letta saying as she stretched one of the vests. *It’s too much,* Alba protested, as Letta shook her head and thrust three more packets into Alba’s hands. Alba knows what these vests cost.

Paolo is rolling his eyes. Alba’s hand tingles, she itches to slap him, but she holds back. She feels these days that she has to pause before she acts, as if she has to turn on a tap of sorts, and let out an acceptable measure of her anger. Now she throws her hands up. The vest goes up with them: a dirty white flag.

“Va bene, Paolo, but come July you will wear it.” She turns and marches over to the draw-string bag and tucks the vest inside.

A lot of this anger, Alba knows, comes from her inability to call her mother and tell her about what has happened. And for the first time Alba realises that there was something almost elegant in the way that Serafina refused to explain, in any real sense, the move from the cavernous house by the sea to the cramped house in the hills. She begins to understand how the walls of the little cottage would have
reminded Serafina each and every day of just how much she had lost. Alba remembers
the rage which seemed to course through Serafina as she walked through the cottage.
She can see Serafina’s rage in her own movements now: in the way she dumps the
laundry basket on the table, the way she flicks the sheets before she makes the beds,
the way she slaps the sofa cushions with an open palm. Alba is not angry at Emilio,
even her anger at Regina has lessened somewhat. No, the person Alba is really angry
at is her father. It is by his careless design that they are here, stuck in such a small flat
in such a foreign place. When Alba and Serafina walked into that house that day in
April 1940, they didn’t just walk into smaller rooms, thinner beds. They stepped into
another life, one in which nothing was certain anymore.

Alba thinks about this often in the long hours of her days, amidst the sounds of
foreign speech, the chug of cars outside her window. She wonders if her father has
heard about where her life has taken her now. He would have, of course, from
Violetta. What does he think about it all, Alba wonders? She can picture him now,
sitting at his desk, his hand on the drawer in which he keeps his cheque-books. He
would have shaken the impulse away. She wonders how he will feel to hear that his
daughter will have to rent a house. He must have known, Alba thinks, that this might
be how her life would go. Will he exhale that long sigh that seems to come from the
pit of that well-fed stomach of his when he hears the news? Or will there be
something else; a twitch of his moustache, perhaps, or a short, sharp gesture, as if
swatting a fly away?

Alba remembers the last evening she spent with her father. She was only to
spend a few more nights in the big house, but Alba had no idea of that as she excused
herself from the dining table. She knew her father was leaving for business the next
day, but these trips were over soon enough. She thought he would come back through the front door in a few days, his suitcase in one hand, his jacket slung over his shoulder. And so Alba left the dinner table, eager to test out something she’d read in a book. She was going to brush her hair a hundred times; she’d been planning it all through the evening meal, picturing the way she would alternate between the left side and the right, so that her hand didn’t grow too stiff. Once in her room she’d changed into her night-dress, pulled on her robe, and sat in front of her mirrored dressing table. She pulled her hair from the tight plait and watched as it frizzed out about her head. Her brush was heavy, silver, and she began to brush ten strokes to the left, then ten to the right. She was almost halfway through when she thought she heard footsteps. The passageway from the corridor to her bedroom was a long one. It wasn’t Gianni, the steps were too purposeful, too heavy. It must have been her father. Alba remembers wondering what he was doing. He seldom visited them in their rooms. Alba laid her brush back onto the dressing table; placing it on the lace doily so that she could hear where her father was going. The footsteps came closer, then stopped, apparently outside her bedroom door. Alba stood up, waiting for the smart rap of his knuckles on her door. The knock never came, and after several long moments, the footsteps receded. At the time she thought he must have been worried about disturbing her. He may have thought she was asleep. But he would have seen, wouldn’t he, the light under her door? Alba could have opened her door herself, she could have called after him. Instead she sat back down and resumed brushing her hair. There is something about the certainty of those brush strokes, the way she kept on going, which Alba cannot bear to recall. There had been, in the deliberate flex and stretch of Alba’s arm, no apprehension that things were about to change.
When she thinks back to the meal that evening, the forty-five minutes or so before she waved good-night and went upstairs, Alba can recall only a few things. Her mother was missing from the table, but that was common enough back then, though now Serafina’s absence at the meal suggests all kinds of things to Alba. There had been conversation, but Alba cannot remember it. No doubt her father had quizzed them about their lessons. He loved to quiz them; he liked finding out what they knew and what they thought they knew but actually didn’t. So, he would say, resting his elbows on the table, his left index finger tapping impatiently against his right one, *tell me what you have learnt today.* And she and Gianni would recite, in turns, whatever their tutor had taught them. Alba cannot recall her answers, or his questions that last night. But she is certain that they’d had their French lesson that day, because Alba had read about the girl who’d turned her curly hair straight by brushing it one hundred times in one of the French books Madame Toulouse had brought. So when she kissed her father goodnight before going upstairs, she’d probably pecked his cheek lightly; she’d probably hurried from the room too quickly.

Where were they then? The hints of things to come? Had there been a slow increase in arguments between her mother and her father that Alba hadn’t noticed, or simply refused to see? Had the last few months been blighted by late-night arguments in some faraway part of the house where the children wouldn’t hear them?

In the flat, Alba sits on the sofa, the one which Marco sleeps on at night. She rubs her hands over her face. From here, the sound of her father’s footsteps in that corridor has taken on an echo that she is sure she has imagined. The corridor was not that long, her bedroom not that far from the staircase. Looking back, she cannot be certain that she didn’t plant those footsteps there herself, that she hasn’t imagined
them because the alternative is still too painful to bear: what if her father had never
hesitated, not even for a moment, about what he did? What if he watched as she left
the table for the last time, and didn’t feel the need to say a thing?
It is her first day alone in the house that they have just rented, and Alba does not know where to begin. Not since she lived with her father has Alba been able to call such a spacious house her home. Serafina’s two-bedroom cottage could fit in the back half of this house; even Aurelia’s home could sit cosily in the backyard.

Alba goes to the kitchen sink and opens the window over it. How old is this house, Alba wonders as she wobbles the catch loose and pushes the window up. She looks at the brass lock on the window, the skirting boards ten inches deep above the dark wooden floors, the high ceilings that are no longer in style. She guesses that it must be about thirty years old. Nearly the same age as her and Emilio. Certainly more modern than any of the houses in Salerno, yet old in this place where new houses are sprouting up all around them. Alba walks into the sleep-out. Such an odd room, she thinks, a kind of blank space leading off to the toilet, bathroom, and large laundry. Too big to be a corridor, yet too separate from the kitchen, the living room and the three bedrooms to be of any real use. Her backyard is large and empty, save for a washing line, a rosemary bush and several tall trees. In Italy Alba could guess how old the olive trees were by looking at the breadth of their trunks, but she has no idea how old the eucalyptus trees in her backyard might be. Certainly they are tall, but they are also stringy and pale. Alba is surprised that the Fremantle wind has not snapped these fragile trees in two.

Alba wonders what her mother would think of this house. She tries to imagine Serafina sitting at the table, her straight back resisting the curve of the cream vinyl kitchen chairs. Serafina would sniff at the warmth of the cream paint. It’s almost yellow, Alba! She would say, throwing up her hands. Mio Dio, you cannot be seduced
by what is in fashion, because that way the colour becomes out of date and you find
yourself having to paint the walls again. You will be like a dog, forever chasing its own
tail. Alba knew her mother would loathe the light blue refrigerator, and if Serafina
were ever to open her cupboards she would shake her head in disgust at Alba’s
crockery. She would be horrified by the very notion of blue plates and bowls, would
click her tongue at the sight of Alba’s pink tea-cups.

Alba waddles into the living room and lowers herself onto her new sofa. She
cannot imagine Serafina sitting in here. She would hate the soft blue-green of the
cushions, Alba thinks, she would see it is as frivolous, childish. But Alba loves the
modern furniture in this house, loves the feeling of being surrounded by new things.
Marco sometimes stands behind the cream dining chairs pressing his finger onto each
of the studs as he talks to Alba while she cooks or washes dishes, and Alba cannot
believe how well these chairs with their new wooden frames match the table which
the previous owners had left behind. Emilio had suggested selling the table and buying
a whole new dining set. But Alba had fallen in love with the long wooden table with
the softly curved edges. She didn’t want a formica table like the one Regina had; there
was something so impermanent, Alba had thought, about that patterned plastic.

Over the fireplace across from the sofa are the photos Alba carried over here in
her trunk. On Mirella’s advice, Alba had caught the bus into Perth and bought new
frames from Boans a few weeks ago. There is a photo of Serafina, the black and white
emphasising the severity of her face. Next to Serafina there is a picture of Aurelia,
sitting at the kitchen table and looking up from her sewing. There is a smile on her
face, a delight in looking up and seeing her son behind the camera lens. On either side
of these pictures Alba has put up photos of Violetta and her girls, and Maria and
Giulietta with their families. A small creased photo of Emilio’s father in his war uniform sits in a squat silver frame at the end of the mantlepiece. His face is like Emilio’s, except that it looks more severe. His lips are pressed into a thin smile, and the hat shields his eyes so that Alba cannot make out his expression. In the middle of the mantlepiece is a large vase made from Murano glass, a gift from Violetta. Its blue and green swirls remind Alba of the mountains and the sea back home.

Alba stands up and goes over to the fireplace to peer into all those faces she has left behind. She picks up the photo of Serafina. She remembers the day this picture was taken. She’d been packing in her room at Aurelia’s house, and she’d lined up her favourite photographs on her bed. Scanning the faces, Alba had realised that there was not one picture of her mother. Flicking through her picture album, she had been unable to find a single photograph of her mother looking into the camera. In pictures of Easter lunches and Christmas days, Serafina would be standing at the back of the photograph; most of the time she would be looking away from the camera unlike everybody else. And she always seemed to be missing something, a hand out of frame, her body sliced off at the shoulder.

Alba had been hoping for a picture of Serafina smiling into the camera that August morning. Alba had knocked on the kitchen door as Violetta locked the gate behind them. Violetta’s camera was slung over her shoulder in its brown leather case. Alba was nervous about what Serafina might say when she saw the camera.

Serafina opened the door and stepped back to let her daughters inside. They bent to kiss their mother on the cheek. Alba saw her mother’s eyes dart to the camera as it swung from Violetta’s shoulder.
Serafina scowled. Alba recalls this clearly, though she cannot remember what her mother was wearing. Inside, three cups of coffee were on the table, maybe even a plate of biscuits. Serafina fixed her eyes on the camera. She had something in her hand, a creamy wedge of provolone wrapped in waxy paper. She pushed it across the table towards Alba.

“I bought this yesterday. It’s fresh, smell it,” she urged as Alba lifted the package to her nose, “I wasn’t sure if Aurelia had any in the house.” Serafina sat back in her seat and sighed. “And who knows whether you will get cheese like this over there.”

They had been eating at Serafina’s house more often than usual in the last few weeks, and every time they had finished a meal, Serafina would clear the plates away with a grunt. *That’s the last ravioli you’ll ever taste*, she would say as she piled the dishes into the kitchen sink. The last gnocchi, the last tortellini, the last risotto con funghi, the last lasagne.

Alba had taken the cheese, even though part of her wanted to push it back towards her mother. She stuffed it into her handbag, wondering how she was going to broach the subject of the photograph, when Serafina spoke.

“Violetta, why have you brought that camera with you?”

Alba looked at her sister, she cleared her throat.

“Mamma, I was looking through my picture album, and I couldn’t find a nice photograph of you . . .” Serafina humphed. “I mean it would be lovely to have a nice big photograph of you. Something I can take with me.”

Serafina snorted as she brought her cup down onto the saucer in front of her.

“Why do you need photographs Alba? All your memories are here.” She tapped the
side of her head with her finger. “I do not understand this obsession you young people have with photographs.”

Alba looked at Violetta watching their mother.

“Oh come, mamma,” Violetta said, “you’ve seen all the photographs on display in my house. It’s a lovely way to have those people you love best near you all the time. My ragazzi get so excited when we take out the camera.” Serafina had muttered something then, but Alba cannot remember what.

“Come on, mamma,” Violetta stood up, “let’s go and find something lovely for you to wear for the picture.” She snapped her fingers, her gold bracelets slid down her arm. “Quick, quick.”

Serafina had looked at Letta. “Violetta,” she pronounced every syllable slowly, “I don’t have time to drop everything and parade around for you. I have things to do this morning. I haven’t checked the chicken coop for eggs yet, I wanted to bake some ricotta and there are all those tomatoes to be pickled before it starts to get too cold.”

“Fine,” Violetta had said. “You tell us when we should come back and do this and we’ll come back.”

Watching her sister, her arm outstretched, her shoulders squared, Alba realised how very different they were. Was it years of boarding school, those years where she had lived far away from Serafina, which allowed Letta to stand up like this, clicking impatient fingers at their furious mother? As Violetta swung the camera back over her arm, Alba looked down at her handbag. She could see the lump of cheese poking out over the tip of her bag. She looked up.

“Please, mamma, this is important to me.”
Serafina had grumbled something or other before standing up and untying her apron. Alba sees it now. She remembers the light-blue apron falling in a heap on the table as her mother marched out of the kitchen, Violetta walking behind her. Looking at the crumpled blue apron in front of her, she’d wondered why asking her mother for anything always filled her with such guilt.

Alba puts the picture back onto her mantlepiece. If she didn’t have this photograph, would she remember the blouse Serafina was wearing, or the way her hair was pulled tightly away from her face, as if she wanted to hide the thick grey coil? This is the photograph Alba ended up with: Serafina standing in the living room, one hand on the side table, the other hanging down by her body. Alba and Violetta had tried to coax Serafina outside into the sunshine.

“Allora, mamma,” Violetta might have cooed, “Let us get a picture of you in front of your house. The flowers are still out.”

“No.” Serafina had shaken her head. Alba knows that her mother would have hated the idea of standing on the dusty road in front of that house. She would have been wary of passers-by looking at her, wondering why on earth she was so dressed up. No, Serafina wanted to be photographed inside. She wanted to sit at the kitchen table.

“Mamma mia! Not the kitchen! We want this to be a portrait, a little more formal. If you won’t do it outside, then we will have to do it in the living room.”

Alba remembers her sister directing her mother, her hands flying through the air, the camera in its leather case bumping against her chest. Alba was relieved that she was not the one prodding her mother into place, that she could watch all this from the sidelines, that she was not behind the lens or in front of it. She could not bear the idea
of being in the photograph with her mother, standing or sitting side by side, smiling into the camera while her mother sat silently enraged beside her.

It was better like this, more fitting, Serafina alone in her house. Violetta had opened the curtains, then closed them, then opened them, just a little, while Serafina stood upright waiting for her daughter to stop fussing.

“Smile,” Violetta would have instructed as she brought the camera up to her eye, “mamma, smile.” And Serafina would have stretched her lips into a kind of grimace, her eyes wide open, trying not to blink.

“Now look into the camera,” Violetta would have said. Alba remembers what happened next very clearly: her mother had stared into the lens, but just before Violetta managed to take the photograph, Serafina looked at Alba, who was standing to the left of her sister. Her eyes had flickered onto Alba and rested there as the picture was taken.

Alba stares at the photograph on the mantlepiece. Serafina is not smiling, the grimace is gone from her lips, but her eyes are dark, concentrated. Yet even now, Alba cannot make out the look on her mother’s face. She cannot read what is behind her expression. As Alba turns way from the mantlepiece, she wonders why these memories persist. Everything she has worked so hard to move away from, all the things she has tried to forget, are so vivid now. She sits on her sofa and pulls the rug over her lap, tucking it around her belly. When the baby comes, Alba thinks, these memories will stop. When the baby comes I’ll be too busy to remember all this.
It has been six weeks since the nurse placed the bundled baby in Alba’s arms in Woodside Maternity Hospital in East Fremantle. The nurse had stayed by the bed as Alba pulled the blanket down a little, so that she could see the point of her daughter’s chin. The nurse looked so young in her white cap and her pinafore over her blue dress. She looked at Alba, opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again before stepping forward and touching Sofia lightly on her forehead. Then she placed her hand on her own chest, and smiled. Alba smiled back. This nurse had been there during the birth. She and Alba had communicated with expressions, hand gestures, with the few words of English that Alba knew. But this is what Alba remembers when she looks back on her daughter’s birth day: the way that woman had held her hand over her heart, tilted her head and smiled. It felt like a benediction. It felt as though Sofia was being blessed.

The other thing Alba remembers from this day is the fear. It travelled like electricity through her body. The women around her spoke a different language; not just English, but the hushed sterile tones of the maternity hospital. What if something went wrong? Who would be able to communicate this to her? She had clutched the steel frame in between breathing and pushing, and she’d tried to understand what the women were saying.

Alone at home, Alba tries to remember the nurse with her hand over her chest, and standing with Emilio outside the nursery as the nurse leaned into Sofia’s crib and brought her towards them from behind the plated glass. The baby’s eyes were closed and one of her hands was bunched into a fist. Emilio had gazed at his daughter. He lifted his fingers up to the glass slowly, as if recognising someone he knew a long time
ago. *Pupa*, he whispered. He looked at Alba, then back at their baby. *Pupa*, he repeated, his palm against the glass.

Yet something of the fear has remained with Alba. After six weeks alone at home with the baby, she feels the loneliness of the large rented house more keenly than before. In the maternity clinic the week after Sofia was born, people came and went all the time. People shook her hand, smiled as she put Sofia to her breast or wrapped her up in blankets to sleep in the crib by the bed. Here in the house, it is just the two of them. Alba can’t help thinking that if she was in Salerno, her baby would have been born into the warm days of summer, instead of the cold of winter. If Alba was in Salerno, the house would be crammed full of visitors. Violetta would be there every day, biscuits in one hand, Claudia and Laura’s baby clothes in the other. Gianni and Stella would have been there at least once a fortnight, Emilio’s sisters Maria and Giulietta would have visited every couple of days. Not to mention Serafina and Aurelia, always hovering in the background. When Emilio is at work and Paolo and Marco are at school, Alba is utterly alone with her baby. There is no Aurelia here to take the baby from Alba’s arms when she won’t stop crying, no one to gently push Alba to bed for a rest after long nights of interrupted sleep. How will she do this, Alba wonders, how will she be enough for her children now?

Of course they all know, back in Salerno, about Sofia’s birth. There is a telephone in this house, and Emilio used it to call his mother and Violetta the day after Sofia was born. It’s a strange little thing, the squat black telephone, older than Regina’s. It sits on a small table in the entry way. The table is curious too, it has a curved cream cushion built into it, as well as two shelves for telephone books. Alba is glad of the telephone, especially with the baby in the house. She has the number of
the maternity clinic and the hospital written in black ink, the corner of it poking out from beneath the telephone. Emilio’s work number is scrawled onto this piece of paper as well. All the other numbers Alba has are for people in Italy.

It is afternoon when the telephone rings; the boys have just clambered through the front door, and Alba is about to kiss them. The three of them look down the hallway to the little table. This is not an everyday occurrence, the ringing of the telephone. It will probably be Violetta. She has been trying to place a call for a few days now. Nevertheless, Alba looks at her eldest son. He, of all of them, has the best English, and he walks with a shrug of his shoulders to the little table and picks up the black receiver. Alba lifts Paolo’s schoolbag as he sits on the small vinyl cushion. What does he have in here, it’s so heavy. She carries it down the hallway as Marco heads through the door and into the kitchen. Paolo has the receiver rammed to his ear, before he says in English, “Thank you, that would be fine.” He places his hand over the mouth of the receiver. Where did he learn to do this? The gesture seems so adult. “It’s Zia Letta,” he says, “I told them that you would take the call.”

“Grazie,” Alba says as she takes the receiver from Paolo, “there are sandwiches on the table,” she whispers as Paolo picks up his bag and leaves the room.

“Pronto?”

“Pronto?”

“Pronto! Violetta!”

“Alba! Come stai?”

“Good Letta, we’re good. How are you? How is mamma?” Alba leans over, shutting the door to the rest of the house.

“Tutto bene qui, we’re all fine. How are you? How is the baby?”
“She’s good, Letta. She’s sleeping at the moment. I just put her down.”

“Oh how I wish I could be there!”

Suddenly Alba can’t speak. An image of Violetta flashes in front of her, as though someone has opened a door and Alba is looking into Violetta’s living room. Letta is wearing a summery dress. She’d be leaning against the wall, perhaps looking down at her painted nails or glancing over at their mother on the sofa.

“Alba? Pronto?”

“Sorry, Letta,” Alba breathes. “I’m still here.”

“You sound different, Alba.”

“Scusa?”

“You sound tired,” Violetta almost shouts down the line. “Is the baby keeping you up at night?”

Alba clears her throat. “She’s not really settled yet. She seems to want to feed all the time.”

“Poverina. I don’t know how you’re coping over there, by yourself.”

“It would be nice to have you around.” It’s all Alba feels comfortable admitting. “It’s been six years since I’ve had an infant. I’d forgotten how small they are, how much they need you.”

“You’ll be fine, Alba. You are a wonderful mother. Aspetta, before I forget, I’ve sent a parcel. I don’t know how long it will take to get there. But we wanted to send you some things from home. You know, some things for Sofia.”

“Oh Letta, grazie. You didn’t have to do that!”

“Well, what’s done is done. Just make sure you send us some photographs when you have them.”
“I will, Letta.” Alba pauses. “She’s so beautiful. Really. Like Marco when he was born, but with longer eyelashes and more hair on her head.”

Violetta sighs. Alba hears it this time, travelling the length of the telephone line.

“Alba, I better go, mamma is here and she wants to speak to you.”

“Arriverderci Letta. Thanks for calling. Give Laura and Claudia a big, big hug for me.”

“I will, and you kiss those boys for me. And that little girl! And take care, Alba.”

“You too.”

“Ti passo mamma.”

Alba imagines Serafina drawing herself up, the telephone placed precariously in the palm of her hand.

“Pronto?”

“Pronto! Alba?”

“Mamma! How are you?”

“Ah, non c’è male. So so.” Alba can see, as if it has happened in front of her, the shrug of Serafina’s thin shoulders. “How are you Alba? How is the bambina?”

“She’s fine, mamma. I put her to sleep half an hour ago, and she’s—”

“She’s sleeping all right then?”

“She’s up a bit at night, but we have the crib in the corner of our room, so she’s not far away when she starts to cry. The boys’ room is down the hallway, so they don’t hear her. It’s one of the good things about this house, so much room here. More than enough really.” Serafina doesn’t say anything. Finally, she clears her throat.
“That’s good Alba,” Serafina says. Alba pictures a scowl on her face. There’s a clipped quality to her mother’s voice. As if Serafina has somewhere else to be. As though Alba is holding her up with her talk of rooms and cribs.

“Mamma,” Alba says, “are you all right?”

“Of course, Alba.” There it is again. As if Serafina is talking to her daughter while trying to watch a pot of pasta over her shoulder. “Is the baby putting on weight?”

“Yes, she’s doing very well, just like the boys.” Alba pauses. “Is it getting cold there now?”

“A bit at night. The days are still hot.”

“And your health is good, mamma?”

“Of course it is.”

Alba bites her lip.

“How are the boys Alba, how are my nipoti?”

“They’re well,” Alba says, and relief sweeps over her. “Shall I call them?”

“Please.”

“All right, mamma, take care.” Alba opens the door. “Paolo, Marco, Nonna Fina wants to talk to you.” Alba hears the skids of kitchen chairs on wooden floors, the sound of bounding footsteps. “Quiet!” she hisses as they round the corner. “The baby is sleeping.” She places the receiver back to her ear. “Mamma, the boys are here. Allora, ti passo Paolo. Ciao, ciao.” Alba hands the receiver over to her eldest son and walks into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Alba sits at the kitchen table; in front of her are two plates of cutlet sandwiches. Both have been bitten into, one is almost half-eaten. Through the door she can hear the boys speaking. Their voices are excited, happy. Their enthusiasm must carry
across that long-distance connection. What do they hear when they speak to Serafina? It’s hard to imagine that she speaks to them in the same halting tones she uses for Alba. Or maybe she does, maybe she always has, but they are too full of their own news, too young, too blameless to hear it. This distance between us, Alba thinks as she places her index finger to a plate and lifts a crumb to her mouth. How much gets lost, confused or misinterpreted in all that space between her and her mother? And what should she do with all the terrible silence in each conversation they have? Her head feels heavy, and for a moment she would like to lean over and lay her head on the wooden table in front of her.

The boys come back into the kitchen and finish their sandwiches before going outside. They know they only have a few hours before it gets too cold and she calls them in. Alba goes to the refrigerator and pulls out a bowl of mince. She’ll make meatloaf for dinner tonight. As she cracks open two eggs, she can see the boys out in the back garden. What games do they create for themselves? Pirates or maybe Romans commanding regiments of soldiers? Something which keeps their small bodies moving, anyhow; something which revolves around invisible things she cannot see.

* 

After the boys are in bed; after the dinner dishes have been washed and put away; after Sofia has been bathed, clothed, fed, burped and put to bed; Emilio lights the stove. Alba goes to the cassapanca, which sits against the wall in the sleep-out. It is covered with a lace doily, one which Aurelia made, and Alba has placed a vase on top. She puts these things on the floor gently and rummages in the wooden box, even though the thing she is looking for sits on the top, folded in plastic. Alba likes the feel
of the old things from Salerno in this box. The ones that look as if they don’t belong in this house. Or the ones that are precious or old and need to be locked away. Taking her hands out of the depths of the box, she lifts out Marco’s christening gown. She shakes the doily as she puts it back on the cassapanca. Still kneeling, she takes the gown out of the plastic and holds it up. Still so white and soft.

She goes back into the kitchen; Emilio has placed a cup of coffee by her sewing basket.

“Ah,” he says as she sits down, “Marco’s christening gown.”

“I was going to adjust it a little, for the baby.” Picking through her sewing basket, she finds the pale pink ribbon. She lays the christening gown on the table. It looks so big. The satin is already trimmed with fine Italian lace. It would be suitable, just as it is, for Sofia. But Alba has been imagining a little row of pink flowers, sewn across the chest.

“A little bit of pink,” Alba says as she lays the ribbon onto the gown, “for Sofia.”

Emilio nods. “I suppose I should speak to the priest then,” he says, “arrange a time for her christening.”

Alba nods, takes a sip of coffee.

“There are a few men from my work I’d like to invite. Franco and Mirella obviously. And Salvatore, Eugenio and Agostino and their wives. They’d be glad to come.”

Alba nods again, her finger on the ribbon. She could attach the flowers with green thread. There is a green thread in there somewhere, a nice pale one with a hint of blue.
“We’re going to have to ask someone soon, Alba,” Emilio says. “Sofia needs Godparents.”

Alba finishes her coffee before she lifts her head and looks in his eyes. “We don’t know anyone here, Emilio.”

“Of course we do. We always stay back and talk to Franco and Mirella after church.”

“But Emilio, that’s just . . . I don’t know,’ Alba throws her hands into the air, “that’s just conversation.” She thinks of her boys. Paolo’s Godparents are Violetta and Enzo. Marco’s are Gianni and Maria. What does Alba know about Mirella, other than she has two sisters who live in Pescara, that her eldest son Antonio has just gone back to Italy for the first time in ten years? Oh, and that raw fennel gives her indigestion, but cooked fennel or fennel seeds go down without a problem.

“Alba,” Emilio reaches his hand across the table and covers hers with his. “Who else is there? Really? Who else could we ask?”

Emilio’s hand on Alba’s feels like a reproach, and she pulls her own away.

“Emilio, you know I haven’t been able to go out. I’ve been pregnant ever since we’ve been here. It wouldn’t have been proper, going out in my condition. You know that.”

Emilio shrugs his shoulders. “We go to Mass every weekend.”

“Yes, Emilio, we go to Mass.” And yes, Alba has seen them. That small group of Italian women, three of them, about her own age. Lately she has smiled at them as she walks past, and returned their greetings after Mass. Alba would like to talk to them but something holds her back. They look perfect, somehow, this group of women. So at ease with each other. So complete.
They do not need her.

Emilio is smoking a cigarette, this will be his last one before bed. First a coffee, then a cigarette. Just like in Salerno. He is looking at her through the smoke haze.

Alba looks down at her empty coffee cup. She thinks of Regina, of her semi-circle of friends. It is that memory which holds Alba back from the three women outside the church.

“So, I’ll ask Franco and Mirella.” Emilio ashes his cigarette in the clear glass ashtray before easing back into his chair. He says this easily, as if they have already agreed, as if there has been no hesitation.

Alba nods.

“Fine.”

“They’ll be so honoured Alba, they really will.”

“That’s fine, Emilio, really.” Though she finds that she cannot look up at him.

She keeps her fingers on the ribbon.

“I’m not blaming you, Alba,” Emilio says as he stands up. Alba busies her hands; she is searching through her sewing box again, looking for the pale green thread.

Emilio kisses her forehead.

“Are you coming to bed?”

Alba looks up.

“Yes, I’ll put these away and be there soon.”

“All right.” He touches her lightly on the head. “I understand, Alba, I do. It’s not your fault.”

He picks up the coffee cups and saucers, and his hand skims hers. He will place the cups and saucers in the sink, and it will be her job, as it is every night, to wash
them, to empty out the caffetiera and see the percolated coffee swirl like a dust cloud before slipping down the drain.
The day that Rosalia knocks at Alba’s front door is the kind of gusty spring day that reminds people it is not yet time to wrap up winter woollens, or to store thick blankets in the cupboard. Alba has been sewing up the holes in Marco’s new school socks. She had to send him to school this morning wearing a pair of Paolo’s; the stitched heel sticking up from under his black shoes, an extra piece of elastic under each knee to keep them from falling down over his ankles. Alba hears the knock and stands up, wiping her hands on the front of her dress. She doesn’t know who it could be, there is no one who visits except Mirella and Franco on Sunday afternoons. As Alba approaches the front door, she closes the door of the bedroom where Sofia is deep in her after-lunch sleep. She runs a hand through her hair, tucking the loose strands behind her ears. Smoothing down the front of her dress, she peers out of the tiny hole in her front door, and is relieved to see that a woman is standing there.

“Who is it?” she calls in a tentative voice, her nose inches from the surface of the door.

“Mrs Canella?”

“Yes.”

“Our sons know each other from school,” the woman outside calls. Alba opens the front door and the woman smiles. “I hope I’m not disturbing you, but I heard you had a baby, and wanted to congratulate you.” Alba has seen this woman before at St Patrick’s Church. She is in her thirties, Alba guesses; she has blonde hair and hazel eyes and although she is speaking English, Alba knows that this woman is not Australian. She is taller than Alba, and she is wearing tan leather gloves and carrying a bulging handbag. Australians don’t dress like this. Especially people in Fremantle.
Alba has seen them, shivering their way through winter in thin jackets and light woollen jumpers, as if sure that the blistering Australian sun is going to warm them at any moment. This woman speaks with an accent, but it doesn’t sound like the Italian that Alba grew up with.

“My name is Rosalia Di Tuillio,” the woman says, offering Alba her hand. “If you are too busy I can come back another time.”

“No, Signora please, come in,” Alba steps back to let the woman in. “Di Tuillio,” Alba says as she leads Rosalia down the corridor to the large kitchen, “are you Italian?”

“Si,” Rosalia laughs, “how quickly our names give us away!”

“Accetata un caffe?” Alba asks, pulling out a kitchen chair and motioning to Rosalia to sit down at the table.

“Ah grazie, Signora.” Rosalia takes off her gloves, unbuttons her dark coat and folds it over the side of her chair. She reaches into her handbag and pulls out two small parcels.

“I knitted this for your bambina.” She places a parcel in Alba’s hand. “It’s just something small,” she adds with a wave of her hand.

Alba takes the parcel slowly. “Oh really, Signora, you didn’t need to bring anything!”

From the creases of brightly coloured paper Alba pulls out a baby blanket. It is white, with pink roses knitted into each of the four corners, and hemmed in pale yellow wool. Alba brings the blanket up to her face for a moment. It is so soft. Alba folds the blanket and places it in the wrapping paper on the kitchen bench. She does this with her back turned, so that Rosalia doesn’t see her tears. As she turns back
around Alba says, “This is such a lovely gift. Really. You must have spent so long
knitting it.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, Signora. I have three boys, so I’ve never been able to knit
anything with roses for them.”

“It’s beautiful,” Alba touches her hand to her breastbone. “Thank you.”

Rosalia smiles. She places another parcel into Alba’s hands.

“This one is just a cake,” she grins, “I remember that I never got to bake when
the boys were babies.”

“That’s true. Thank you!” Alba puts the cake down carefully. For a moment, her
hands feel as though they don’t belong to her body. She watches them as one turns
the knob on the stove, as the other hovers over the gas burner, match lit.

Rosalia stands behind Alba at the stove. “If you give me a plate I could cut the
cake while you do the coffee.”

“Of course.” Alba walks over to the glass-covered cupboard that holds all her
best china, and pulls out two espresso cups and three blue china plates. She goes to
the drawers and pulls out teaspoons, forks, and a knife for the cake. How unfamiliar
this procedure has become. Alba switches off the caffetiera, she hears the sound of
cutlery on china behind her. It has been so long since she shared a cup of coffee with
another woman. She used to do it every day in Salerno.

Alba takes two small cups of hot black coffee to the table. She goes back to the
pantry. If she were in Salerno, she would have one or two packets of Gentilini biscotti
in here, or some of Aurelia’s ricotta torte, but all she has are two packets of Milk
Arrowroot biscuits. She opens one and puts some on a plate.
“I’m sorry,” Alba says setting down the biscuits. “I haven’t baked in such a long time, and my boys just love these.”

“Mine too! They coat them with butter, and stick them together.” Rosalia grins, she stirs some sugar into her coffee. “I really hope you don’t mind me dropping in on you like this, Signora,” she says, the small teaspoon clinking against the side of her cup. “It’s just that I’ve seen you at St Patrick’s, and when my boys told me that you just had a baby, well, I thought that I should come and visit.” She puts her spoon on the saucer. “And please call me Rosalia.”

“Then you must call me Alba. And thank you for visiting. This torte looks delicious.”

“This is just a crostata di maremellata. It’s one of the cakes from home I can actually make here. Strawberries are in season now, so I used those; but, really, you can fill this with anything: peaches, plums, apricots.” She slices the torte and places a slice on each plate. “Usually I would make a panmeino, it’s one of my favourite cakes. It’s from Lombardia, where my mother was born, but it’s difficult finding all the ingredients here. Especially the elderflower and cornmeal. Sometimes my mamma includes a few packets of dried elderflowers when she sends a parcel from home.”

“You must be from the north then.”

“Trieste.” Rosalia sips her coffee.

“This is lovely.”

“Grazie. Whereabouts in Italy are you from?”

“My husband and I are both from Salerno.”

“Really? Salerno! I have never been there. I thought we might get the chance to go through on the way here, but our ship stopped in Sicilia instead.” She smiles at
Alba, her long fingers adjust her hair clips. “Imagine that! We come from opposite ends of Italy. But of course it explains why you have such lovely dark hair!”

Alba lifts her hand to her hair, a few curls have come loose, and she tucks them behind her ears. She wishes she’d had time to brush her hair or powder her face. She opens her mouth to apologise, to say something about her housedress, but as she does, Rosalia cuts another piece of cake and puts it on Alba’s plate. It’s done with such confidence that Alba expects to hear Rosalia imploring her to eat, eat. Alba’s hand drops back into her lap, and she doesn’t say anything about the house dress or her unpowdered face. Instead she listens to Rosalia. Rosalia and her husband, Giorgio, have been in Australia for over eight years and have three young sons. Neither Rosalia or Giorgio have family here, but she has two good friends from Florence, Anna and Pina, who she meets every week for lunch.

Rosalia leans forward, fingers entwined, her elbows propped up on the table. “So, Alba,” she says, “how do you like Fremantle?”

“It seems like a nice town, but it’s so different from home. In Salerno I had everything I needed. Ricotta, olives, prosciutto, pasta. Here it is so difficult to find these things. My mother used to say,” Alba bites her lip, “she used to warn me that the food would be different, but I had no idea it would be so different.”

“Oh it’s another world!”

“I mean, I never imagined not having basil, or bocconcini, or roma tomatoes. Those were everyday things to us, like water, or, I don’t know, farina or milk. Being from Campania we had pizza everyday; you could buy mozzarella anywhere, prosciutto too.” Alba is laughing now. “The first time I made pizza here, I used Australian cheese.
It was awful. Awful. None of us would eat it. We had to peel it off and eat the pizza plain.”

Rosalia is laughing too. “I know what you mean, I really do. Nobody warned me. If I had known then what I know now, I would have paid double to send over another cassapanca filled with mortadella, provolone, pine nuts, polenta. I would have brought seeds for every vegetable I could think of. And Giorgio would have sent over cases of wine, olive oil and vinegar.”

“Emilio too! He can’t stand the wine here.”

“It’s getting better though,” Rosalia sips her coffee. “Now at least there are places like Golden West in North Perth which sell pasta. There’s also a place called the Re-Store; it used to be just fruit and vegetables, maybe bread and butter, but now they stock olive oil, cheese, some cold meats. There’s an Italian butcher’s on Lake Street, Torre’s. Here we go to Watson’s Butcher’s on High Street, it’s not as good, but it’s all right.” Rosalia straightens up in her chair. “I’ll have to take you to Perth one day, we’ll catch the bus and go and get some food.”

Alba leans forward, “I’d love that, Rosalia, I really would.”

“Oh, speaking of things from home.” Rosalia pulls her handbag towards her and takes out a tin of Felce Azzura. “My mother sent me three tins last time; I thought you might like one for your little girl.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t!”

“I insist,” Rosalia presses the tin into Alba’s palm.

Alba takes the powder; she unscrews the lid and lifts it to her nose. This time when the tears come, Alba doesn’t turn away.
“Grazie, mille grazi.” She wipes her yes and sniffs it again. “I haven’t smelt this for nearly a year.” She screws the cap back on, and puts the tin on the table. “It is so odd; the things that you take for granted are the things you most miss when you get here. When Sofia was born, I didn’t know what powder to buy. A nurse gave me a tin of Johnson’s, but it doesn’t smell like this.”

“For me it was soap.” Rosalia pats Alba’s hand. “It didn’t matter what kind; for bathing, for washing clothes. Nothing was as good as the soap I had in Trieste.”

Rosalia looks at her watch. “Oh no, I better get going, I have to go to the store before I pick up the boys from school.”

“Here, I’ll just wrap up the rest of your torte for you to take home,” Alba says.

“Don’t be silly, the rest of that torte is for you and your ragazzi!” Rosalia smiles. “I’m counting on you tell everybody at church how delicious it was!”

Alba laughs as she leans forward to kiss Rosalia on the cheek. “Thank you,” she says, “I am certain my boys will love it.” As Alba steps back, she sees a brooch on the collar of Rosalia’s jacket. She stares at it. It looks old, and is made of little chips of coloured glass, all crammed together into a mosaic of small flowers. A posy of blue, red and white flowers sits encircled by a border of orange flowers blooming with yellow petals. Alba reaches her hand towards it, as if unsure the brooch is actually there.

“This is beautiful,” Alba says as she pulls her hand away.

“It was my grandmother’s. She was from Venezia.” Rosalia flips up the collar of her jacket to look at the brooch. “I’ve always loved it, so Nonna gave it to me just before we left Italy.” Rosalia lets go of her jacket collar and adjusts the straps of her bag on her shoulders. “You don’t see jewellery like this here, either,” she sighs.
“No,” Alba forces a smile, “no I suppose you don’t.” Alba touches her left hand to her collar bone. She clears her throat. “Thank you so much for the blanket Rosalia, and for the powder. So sweet of you.”

Rosalia squeezes Alba’s hand. “You are very welcome.”

“Would you like a peek at Sofia before you go?” Alba asks as they walk down the hallway.

“It’s all right, let her sleep. I’ll come back another time. I’ll see you in Church on Sunday and introduce you to Pina and Anna. And we can arrange a day to go to Perth.”

“I’ll clean out my refrigerator!” Alba waves as Rosalia bundles herself against the wind and walks briskly down the street.

Alba closes the door and steps back into the hallway. That brooch had been so familiar. Alba grimaces as she remembers the way her hand had stretched out to touch it. It was such an impulsive, child-like gesture.

Where had she seen that brooch? It wasn’t one of Aurelia’s. Alba knows Aurelia’s jewellery as well as she knows her own. It wasn’t one of Violetta’s pieces either. All Violetta’s jewellery was gold and in the latest styles. That old brooch would have been too dull to catch Letta’s eye. No, Alba must have seen that brooch on her mother. But when? And where was it now? Alba closes her eyes: she can see her mother in front of her, but it is the mother she knows now. The sixty-four year old mother. The memory of that brooch does not fit in with this picture of Serafina with her lined face and the clothes which seem to droop down her long frame. Alba used to clean Serafina’s room, taking a broom to the hardwood floors, wiping a cloth over
Serafina’s dressing table and night-stand, but she cannot remember ever seeing this brooch in her mother’s small house on the hill.

Alba sits down on her sofa and tucks her feet underneath her. There was something so instinctive in the way her hand had moved towards Rosalia’s collar. Alba knows exactly what the surface of that brooch would have felt like. The tips of her fingers tingle with the memory. The brooch she remembers was surprisingly smooth, given all those shards of cut glass. It was like skimming the surface of a rock.

It was in her father’s house, she realises, it was during the time they all lived there, though Umberto might have been in Switzerland by then and Violetta may have been away at school. Alba remembers the feeling inside the house. Funny, she thinks, that a house as big as her father’s seemed shrouded in darkness. Alba can remember the echo of her footsteps on the marble floor. Walking into her father’s house became, over the years, like walking into a church. Not because it was a sacred place, but because it was full of things that Alba was not allowed to touch, and because of the way her father’s voice boomed through the walls, with the absolute authority that Alba had only ever witnessed in priests.

As she thinks about the cool walls and the darkness of her father’s house, Alba can see herself standing in the hallway by the front door. She was young, maybe Paolo’s age. It was winter and the house was colder than usual. She could see her breath in front of her as she hopped from one foot to the other. Serafina was kneeling, buttoning up Alba’s jacket, her hands crawling up towards Alba’s neck as she twisted buttons into holes. Basta! Stop that! Serafina hissed as she struggled with Alba’s top button. Alba stood still. There was something pinned to her mother’s dress. Alba reached her hand towards it. The brooch and its intricate shards of colour were
beautiful. Alba ran two fingers over the surface, wondering if the spiky bits of colour would be sharp to touch. Serafina smacked her hand away. *Alba, I am trying to get you ready for Church.* Alba can remember that her hand reached once more for the brooch and she pressed her fingers down on it, feeling the grooves on her skin.

Serafina wrapped a thick scarf around Alba’s neck and stood up. Alba can see herself peering up at her mother as Serafina slipped her coat on, the brooch covered in a swish of material. Alba tries to remember her mother’s face, but the image will not come. All she sees is a stretch of navy blue wool, climbing up towards Serafina’s face. Yet she can still recall the scrape of the brooch in her fingers, still feel the sting of Serafina’s hand on hers.

In her living room, Alba looks at the clock which hangs over the fireplace. In Salerno, Serafina would have closed her windows against the cold. She might be sweeping the floor, or drinking a cup of coffee, perhaps dunking a biscuit in that slow, methodical way of hers. This is how Alba sees her mother, silent and alone in the house. Does her mother remember the brooch at all? Did Serafina misplace it or did it break? Alba cannot see either of these things happening. Serafina has always been careful with her good possessions.

The brooch would have stayed in her father’s house, Alba realises. It would have become another one of those things that Serafina left behind. A relic from a different life, another untouchable thing.

Alba gets up. She smoothes down the front of her dress, walks into the kitchen and picks up the tin of Felce Azzura. Twisting the lid once more, she sniffs the scent of the powder. Home.
Today Alba will usher her guests into her house, and today she will forget that she and Emilio do not own this house. She has been tidying the rooms all morning and she feels as though the house belongs to her. It is November, and they can all smell summer in the air. Paolo is excited; he’s never had his birthday outside before. His birthdays in previous years have taken place in Aurelia’s house, usually with rain running in rivulets down the windows and lashing the roof, as it had on his eighth birthday. His birthday last year had been a hasty affair, taking place as it did a few weeks before they had to board the ship for Australia.

And here they are, a whole year and half a world away. Walking through the house, Alba cannot believe that this son of hers is nine years old today. There is something special about being nine; wedged as it is between the carelessness of eight years and the sudden seriousness of ten. Nine, Alba thinks, is the first year that you can glimpse in the child’s face the adult that he will become.

Alba remembers her ninth birthday, more than any other of her childhood birthdays. They were all still living in her father’s house. Letta and Umberto were home from Switzerland and the house seemed full of people. Yet Alba cannot name all the faces. Federico’s family must have been there though, Alba thinks as she slices the pizza. Violetta would have been sixteen the year Alba turned nine, and Violetta occupied a very different world. She was engaged, or promised at least, to that gangly boy. At eighteen or nineteen, Federico was still a boy, his body still lean, a smile always on his lips. So he would have been there, his family too, though Alba cannot recall their faces in the crowd. Who else was there? Umberto would have brought
Genevieve with him from Switzerland, though Alba cannot remember Genevieve’s face then, either.

One thing Alba can recall clearly is the dress she wore that day. A soft light blue, with a patterned overlay. It would have been made of chiffon or fine silk. She remembered that the dress swished around her, that the skirt seemed to bloom from her small waist because of the netting she wore underneath. It had been the first time since her communion that she wore such a skirt. She remembers the sleeves too, like little balloons puffed out at the shoulder, neatly drawn in and trimmed with lace at the hem.

Thinking back now, Alba realises that the dress must have been store-bought. She can still see the label stitched into the back of the dress, to the left of the long silver coloured zip. Serafina would never have bought her such a dress. No, back then Serafina made all Alba’s clothes, as well as her own. Even Alba’s hats and gloves were made by Serafina. Serafina had an eye for cut and colour, and was so familiar with Alba’s small body that she knew exactly what styles and shades would look best on her. Although Serafina sewed with a huff, as though it was a chore, Alba could tell even back then how much her mother loved it. Her enjoyment was evident in the way she cut the material, one hand keeping the fabric steady, the other guiding the scissors; in the way she held the different colours up to each other; and in the way she would take slow, careful time over rosettes and buttons.

It must have been such an insult, then, Alba’s party dress. A dress bought from a store. A dress which, looking back, Serafina could easily have made.

Who bought this dress for Alba? Was it her father? Alba has trouble with the image of this tall man in a store of girls’ clothes. An aunt, perhaps, or was it her
nonna? Was her father’s mother alive back then? Alba thinks she must have been; she tries to remember this woman’s face, but all she sees is the word ‘nonna.’ She would have been large, if she was like Alba’s father; she would have taken up space. She was the kind of woman who always wore hats and gloves. There was a musty scent to her clothes, as if they were very old, or she stored them in dark cupboards with lavender for too long. She died young, this nonna Alba can hardly remember. Years before Alba left her father’s house. The dress most likely had been bought by Letta. It would have been paid for by Alba’s father, and carried by train from Switzerland to Italy. Alba tries to remember the stitching on the label. But all she sees is a looped letter in gold thread. The word will not come.

What Alba remembers the most about this birthday, apart from the swish and swirl of her party dress, is sitting at the table with a cake before her, and behind it, rows and rows of faces distorted by the light of the candles. She remembers being picked up. Two hands encircled her torso, big hands; and she went up, up in the air, her skirt ballooning as she came back down, as the owner of the hands placed her on his lap. She remembers leaning back into her father’s chest (who else would those big hands have belonged to?) and resting there. In that moment, Alba felt both completely safe and utterly happy.

There are times when Alba cannot bear to think about this day. Something in her always wants to shake this dumbly happy girl out of her stupor. But Alba leaves her there, her younger self, her back curved into her father’s stomach. It is, after all, a nice image. Besides, Alba’s young face is looking forward, and not back at her father. She couldn’t describe the expression on his face if she wanted to. So where was Serafina, Alba wonders. She searches the coloured blur of the faces in her memory.
Surely her mother’s face would have been easy to recall. But her mother wouldn’t have been in the happy crowd. She cannot remember her mother standing beside her either, as she leant forward to blow out the candles. Perhaps she was off to one side, watching the scene from the edge of the room, or perhaps she wasn’t there at all. She could have been in the kitchen already; her arms plunged up to the elbows in hot soapy water.

Alba shakes the image away. What she wants for Paolo today, more than any extravagance or fuss, is that feeling she had as she went up in the air and back down onto her father’s lap. That arc of happiness and safe return. After a year of trying to arrive somewhere, Alba feels that she finally might be able to give her eldest child this gift.

Emilio has been busy outside. Chairs have been placed on the back lawn, the record-player has been set up in the sleep-out. He has blown up green and blue balloons and tacked them to the back of the house and the shed. Alba has travelled to and from North Perth twice this week buying olives, salami, cheese and pasta at The Re-Store and Kakulas’, and new clothes for her family at Boans in the city. She bought Emilio a hat, shoes for Paolo, and a pale yellow dress for Sofia. She’d looked everywhere for this dress: Boans, David Jones, even some of the smaller shops. She’d considered having the dress made; she didn’t have time to sew it herself, not with everything else she had to prepare. But then she’d gone back to Boans and she’d found it, hanging stiffly on a rack towards the back. She’d picked it up and examined it as Sofia slept in her pram, her head lolling to one side, a tiny bubble of saliva in the corner of her pouting lips. Alba held the dress up to her baby’s cheek. The yellow looked beautiful against her daughter’s dark hair. Bright sunflowers were stitched
along the hem, a petticoat of lace made the dress puff out so that it looked like a frosted cupcake. Alba had turned the dress inside out. The stitching wasn’t too bad, but the lace was stiff. *Cheap,* she thought as she rubbed the lace between her fingers. Lace here wasn’t like lace at home, where there were so many patterns, so many textures. But Alba still had some lace she’d brought over from Salerno, and this stiff lace could be easily unpicked and replaced. As Alba moved her fingers over the seam where the lace was stitched to the dress, she noticed a saleswoman staring at her over the rim of her spectacles; her mouth puckered, her eyebrows furrowed in a frown. Alba smiled at the woman and quickly turned the dress the right way round again. She’d buy it and replace the lace at home. She didn’t want this stiff material scratching against Sofia’s soft legs.

Alba had been so busy lately. At least once a week she met with Rosalia, Anna and Pina for lunch. The women would take turns cooking and hosting these get-togethers. They would eat something light: a pasta with ham and peas, sometimes cutlets with salad. Last time Pina had made gnocchi and the women scolded her for going to too much effort.

It has become easy, taking Sofia with her to these women’s houses. There was relief in being amongst other mothers that Alba had not felt since leaving Salerno. Whenever these women met for lunch, there were four pairs of ears to listen out for the wail that might come as Sofia woke. If Alba was biting into a slice of pizza or a wedge of cake, there were other women who could go and fetch her baby for her. Pina had a three-year-old son, and Anna had a two-year-old daughter. In maybe six or nine months Sofia would be able to sit in the play pen with Anita and Tomi, exchanging toys, rolling balls, joining in their baby babble.
These women and their families would be coming over at four o’clock this afternoon, as well as Franco and Mirella and Salvatore, Eugenio and Agostino and their wives. Alba is still preparing things. Rosalia had offered to come over earlier and help, but Alba had waved away her offer and the offers of extra food. Alba felt that she wanted to hold this party for these women who had been so extraordinarily kind; almost as much as she wanted to do it for her son, who deserved a party after this last, difficult year.

*

Some hours later, they are all outside. Alba thinks how blessed they are that they have been given this sunny day for Paolo’s birthday. She is sitting on a chair by the shed, Sofia on her lap. Rosalia is refreshing people’s glasses. They are all here, Rosalia and Georgio and their three children; Pina and Anna and their families; Franco and Mirella. When did Paolo get so handsome, Alba wonders as her son tilts his head to receive a kiss from Pina. He is smiling shyly as he takes the gift she offers. It is an unexpected smile. He looks so like Emilio now. Alba can see it in the shape of his jaw, the line of his cheek, the long dark lashes which frame his eyes. The baby shifts in Alba’s arms. Mamma mia, she can remember when Paolo was this small. She remembers looking at her firstborn and wondering what his future might bring him. Paolo goes to the small table and puts Pina’s gift there. He will be a tall man, Alba thinks, as he walks over to where Marco is playing with a cluster of boys. She listens to them as she passes by on her way to put the baby down for a little while. It is incredible, the way he effortlessly slips from Italian into English and back again. The children are all speaking two languages at once and are hardly aware that they are doing it. We do it too, Alba realises as she leaves Sofia in her cot and heads outside
again, my friends and I at our lunches, my family and I in our house. Perhaps some things sound better in Italian, others in English.

It is getting late in the day, the sun is sinking languidly towards the horizon. The cake has been cut. *It’s just like I remember*, Paolo exclaims as he comes back for a second slice, wiping chocolate and custard from his mouth. If he were a bit younger, Alba thinks, he would crawl up into her lap and fling his arms around her neck. He might kiss her cheek, his custard-covered lips leaving her face sticky. Something shifts in Alba’s chest. Paolo is too old to do this now, too self-consciously aware of his growing body, of the way he looms over his younger brother and infant sister. He has, already, a sense of the space that should exist between his mother’s body and his own.

Alba hears the telephone ring. *Sofia*, she thinks, standing up. Emilio is closest to the back door.

“*I’ll get it,*” he calls as he opens the screen door and disappears down the hallway. Alba sits back down, her ears pricked for Sofia’s wail. She looks at her watch; it is almost six-thirty here, so it would be about half past eleven in Salerno. It is probably her mother and Violettea, calling to wish Paolo a happy birthday. Alba stands, she is about to go and get Paolo, when Emilio opens the screen door. He is looking straight at Alba. She looks into his eyes and feels as though the two of them are in a very long, very dark tunnel. The chatter of children, the low murmur of the adults’ conversations fade away. Emilio is standing there, his hand on his chest, his jaw hanging open as though invisible hands are pulling his face downwards, distorting his features.

Alba brings her hand to her throat. She can smell something. Her mother’s cherry tart. She remembers the wedge Serafina gave her the night before she left for
Australia. It had become squashed in her handbag. She’d found it that first afternoon on the ship and shared it with Emilio and the boys, sitting on the deck and eating crumbs from the napkin Serafina had wrapped it in. She’d had to empty her bag and hold it upside down over the railing, beating the last of the crumbs into the sea. It hadn’t made much difference; the bag had smelt of cherries all the way from Salerno to Melbourne.

Now the rich scent is all around her. She feels as though she is being engulfed by it. Emilio is walking towards her now, his footsteps fall slowly, one in front of the other. His hands are held out in front of him, waiting to grasp Alba’s hands. The smell is getting stronger now, she can almost taste the tang of slow-cooked cherries, and Alba knows. She doesn’t need to hear the words he whispers hoarsely into her ear as his arms encircle her. She doesn’t need to hear Violetta’s howl over the telephone line after Emilio leads her inside, his arms still around her. Alba knows that her mamma is dead.
Alba went to Cottesloe last week by train to buy a small table. She wasn’t sure what she wanted; she only knew that it couldn’t be larger than three feet long or one foot wide. Going through the furniture store, she looked at marble-topped tables with copper legs, at dark jarrah tables, at antique mahogany tables imported from England. Serafina’s table, the table Alba bought, was sitting in a dusty corner of the store. It had a smooth wooden top, the colour of the wood back in Salerno, and four short legs which curved slightly. It looked a little worn, as if it had been forgotten for years, while other more stylish pieces of furniture came and went. Alba did not know if it was the hue of the wood, the solidness of the legs, or the forlornness of the little table that made her point it out to the sales clerk. She opened her purse and counted out the pounds, shillings and pence at the cash-register. On a piece of paper she wrote her address and signed her name. Mrs Emilio Canella. How odd, Alba thought, as she handed the slip of paper to the manager, that a name can say so much and so little about you. Here, in this humid furniture store in Cottesloe, Alba’s name suggests first and foremost that she is foreign. But there is nothing in those three printed words to show that she recently lost her mother. As the man gave Alba the receipt and the slip of paper with the delivery time written on it, she thought about her mother’s body, now entombed in the cold earth of Salerno. Alba looked at the form she’d just signed. As the manager stacked it with the other receipts on a spike, she wondered whether he could see her grief in her handwriting. He looked at Alba as she stared down at her name. *Are you all right Ma’am? Can I get you a glass of water?*
No, Alba insisted. I am fine. She slung her bag over her shoulder and grasped the handle of Sofia’s pram. Thank you, she said as she pushed her daughter out of the store and back into the November sunshine.

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Five days later, Alba kneels by the newly delivered table in the corner of the living room. She pushes it so that it sits squarely by the walls. She runs her fingers over it. There are a few small scratches, like tiny grooves on the surface.

Alba stands up. There is some walnut oil in the shed. She checks on Sofia before going outside. The baby is sound asleep, one thumb stuck in her mouth, the other hand flung up by her head. Incredible, Alba thinks, this baby will grow up hearing Serafina’s name, but will always think of her as something other than a real woman. The outline of a person. She will gain her own idea of Nonna Fina by hearing stories, by looking at photographs. She will have little understanding of what Nonna Fina meant, or what kind of Nonna she actually was. Paolo and Marco remember Serafina now, Paolo much more clearly than his younger brother, but how long until their memories faded or became less clear than the picture of her still sitting on Alba’s mantlepiece?

Alba walks back into the cool of the house, the tin of walnut oil in one hand, a clean cloth in the other. She kneels down by the table and applies the oil in smooth circles. She presses the cloth into the scratches until they are soft and faint beneath her fingertips.

Alba goes to the mantlepiece and picks up Serafina’s photograph. Serafina’s expression seems even harder to read now. If only the picture were larger, so that she
might peer into her mother’s eyes and guess what she had been thinking as Violetta pressed the button on the camera.

If she could have that day again, Alba would have walked up to her mother as she stood unmoving by the sofa. She would have wrapped an arm around her mother’s shoulders and, maybe, if she’d been able to work up the courage, placed her cheek by her mother’s cheek. *Smile, mamma,* she would have said as they stared into the camera together. And afterwards, Serafina might have clutched Alba’s hand or pressed her dry lips to Alba’s cheek.

Alba carries her mother’s photograph to the small table. She places it on a doily, a circular piece of creamy lace which Serafina had crocheted as part of Alba’s glory box. On the sofa, other things are waiting to be placed next to the picture of her mother. A bottle of holy water, a statue of the Virgin Mary which Alba had brought over from Salerno. A small enamel placard with the Hail Mary written on it in Italian, its edges embellished with tiny orange and yellow roses.

When Alba had spoken to Letta on the phone after the funeral, she had asked her sister for some more photographs, or anything else that Letta might find in Serafina’s house. Alba had always imagined that she would be the one who would have to go through Serafina’s house and decide what to do with her mother’s things. What would become of Serafina’s dresses, her good coats? Her crockery might go to Gianni or even Aurelia. Letta wouldn’t take it, nor would she take her mother’s linen. Alba had asked Letta to send over one or two of the tablecloths Serafina had stitched herself, and if it wasn’t too expensive, her mother’s bedspread. What else would there be in that house? A few pieces of jewellery, the crucifix above her bed, her awkward furniture? What would happen to those everyday things? What would Letta keep and
what would she throw away? What might Letta find as she went through her mother’s
drawers and cupboards? As Serafina could neither read nor write, there would be no
books, no letters. Would there be deeds to the house? Who owned Serafina’s house
anyway? Would Alba’s father take possession of it, or did Serafina bequeath it to
someone?

All Alba knows is that anything that was hidden before will remain hidden now.
Serafina lived inside her house the way she lived her life. Everything extraneous will
be long gone. The only mementoes Serafina kept were bomboniere and a few
religious statues. Alba imagines the house empty of all Serafina’s things, swept bare,
with the doors and windows flung open. How many boxes, Alba wonders, will her
mother’s life fit into?

Looking at her mother’s picture now, Alba remembers her mother’s dry hands,
the taste of her osso buco and tangy gremolata. She remembers the warmth in
Serafina’s eyes as the children walked into her house. The way her mouth stretched
thin when Alba told her about Australia. Not many memories of Serafina during Alba’s
childhood remain. All those years when they lived together in their father’s large
house are a haze to Alba; they run into one another like a filmstrip at the end of a
movie.

Alba gets up and goes to the kitchen. A small vase of red roses is on the bench.
The roses are from her garden and she has picked the most perfect ones for this
arrangement. She takes the vase and places it beside her mother’s photograph. She
sits on the floor in between the table and the sofa; leans her head against its wooden
armrest. She breathes in the scent of the flowers. They are the first roses she has
grown in Australia, blood red roses that remind her of Salerno and the flowers she kept on her dressing table in Aurelia’s house.

Alba lights the candle she has placed on the other side of Serafina’s picture. Looking at it, she realises that there are things that she’d like to remember and things that she wants to forget. If she could, she would erase the last few months in Salerno, all those guilty hours she spent in her mother’s kitchen. The arguments about Regina; that map. The bitter black cups of coffee sipped in silence. Serafina sulking, her hands slicing the air in anger. Alba watches the flame as it spits and flickers, casting light and shadow onto Serafina’s picture. Is this all that remains, Alba wonders, when somebody dies? Who will remember her now that she is gone, and how? Will she be remembered by Alba’s father? Which memories will Letta keep? Which memories will Alba herself hold onto, and which can she let drift away?

She remembers her mother at the low kitchen bench in the house in the hills, making zabaglione, the way every part of Serafina’s body seemed to move as she whipped the eggs and sugar. She remembers the purposeful way her mother would tousle Marco’s hair, as if she was trying to find his scalp beneath all those dark curls. She finds herself recalling times when Serafina seemed to forget her bitterness at Alba’s leaving, placing her hand on Alba’s forehead to check for fever, tucking stray hair away from her face. Perhaps, Alba hopes as she stares at her mother’s photograph, perhaps all the dark days can finally be put to rest.

Yet even now Alba feels the same inconsolable emptiness she felt on her last morning in Salerno, and after Violetta’s last telephone call. She had hoped that by laying these things out on the table, she would be able to keep her mother real and
close to her, but it’s no good. She closes her eyes against the photograph, the roses, the prayer and Mary’s helpless upturned palms.

Alba is back in Salerno. The mountains are in front of her and the sea swells behind her. Alba sees her mother, wrapped up against a cold which goes beyond wind and rain and sleet. Her mother is hugging herself, as if for warmth. Her face is so white; was Serafina’s face ever that pale? Alba stays where she is, although she wants to run across the wooden deck and hold her hands out to her mother. Serafina walks towards Alba, and all the noise of the docks fade away: the chatter, the sobs, the good-byes. All Alba can hear are her mother’s footsteps. Serafina is a few metres away. Alba lifts her arms, ready to receive her mother’s embrace, but at the moment where their hands should meet, when Serafina’s bare fingers should touch the tips of Alba’s, she is gone. Alba is alone once more, her hands reaching out for something which is no longer there, her lips forming a goodbye that will not be heard.
Exegesis

The Other Side: Using fiction to explore the resources and limitations in writing about women’s lives.
By way of an introduction . . .

Some months ago, I was digging in my garden. I wanted to get away from the glare of my computer, and I went outside to distance myself from the ideas of history, memoir and fiction which had been bothering me that week. I pulled up a plant which I wanted to plant elsewhere. As I tugged it out of the earth, I realised that something was caught in its roots, an old ragged piece of cloth, thin, and hessian-like. As I pulled this thing out of the ground, I heard a kind of wooden tinkle; several small bones came tumbling out of the cloth. I scooped them up. They were rust-coloured, and looked like they had been buried for many years. The bones appeared to have been from a small animal, a cat, most likely. The ragged thing must have been the blanket in which it had been laid to rest. I called out to my neighbours, and they came and peered at the small bones, the thin cloth. We talked about where the bones may have come from, how long they might have been there.

This event was an ordinary enough occurrence, but I thought about it all that afternoon. Not just about the bones, but my reaction to finding them, and, most significantly, my instinct to call over my neighbours. Why did I want them to witness my tiny excavation? They hadn’t lived in my house; this was no pet of theirs. Why was I grateful to have them there, next to me, as I examined these bones? I recall being struck by the bareness of the bones, which in themselves didn’t tell me much. I couldn’t know, for instance, whether this creature had had a good or bad life, or even how it might have died. I remember that the blanket struck me as tender, and gave the only clue that this may have been a well-loved pet. Looking back, maybe this is not quite true; the cloth was so thin that it might have been a rag, something easy to reach.
for. Yet, the fact that my neighbours and I were there, witnessing what had once existed and was now lost, mattered very much.

“I need to bear witness to an uncertain event,” Anne Enright writes in the opening pages of her novel *The Gathering* (2007): “I can feel it roaring inside me, this thing that may not have taken place” (1). Enright’s novel is about love and loss; more specifically it is a family story, filled with speculations and memories which the narrator painstakingly re-constructs. The narrative ends with a version of the ‘truth’ about the ‘uncertain event’ which may have caused the narrator’s brother to commit suicide. Yet the narrator’s need to ‘bear witness’ to such an event is a sentiment I understand.

In “The Other Side of Silence,” and now in this exegesis, I am interested in answering the following questions: What are the different ways fiction might be used to write about the life of a woman from the past? How might we write about such women, taking into account the constraints by which these women’s stories have been forgotten, omitted or displaced? And what are the implications of foregrounding such silences in the writing and reading of narratives?

In their article “Hystorical Fictions,” Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn state that:

The closing decades of the twentieth century and first years of the new millennium have seen a growing trend towards historical fiction in women’s writing. (137)

Writers as diverse as Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Forster, Kate Grenville, Maxine Hong Kingston, Drusilla Modjeska, Carol Shields, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Rebecca Wells and Jeanette Winterson, to name a few, have all written fiction about
women’s lives set in the past. These novels about women’s historical lives encompass the infamous, such as Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), as well as the ‘ordinary,’ such as Poppy in Drusilla Modjeska’s fictional memoir (*Poppy* 1990). They also range from novels located in recognisable historical settings (*Morrison’s Beloved* 1987), as well as those which oscillate between the past and the present (*Byatt’s Possession 1990*, and *Tan’s The Joy Luck Club 1989*). As Clara Tuite writes, “Historical fiction is not simply fiction set in the past. It is marked too by an engagement with the present and the future,” (*Companion to Women’s Historical Writing* 245). Tuite’s definition of historical fiction is useful for the purposes of this exegesis, as it encompasses those texts I found the most critically engaging: contemporary novels preoccupied with the past.

**Women, Fiction and History**

As a reader, I wondered if such stories about women (especially characters such as those created by Tan) were hidden somewhere in my own family history. I began searching my family tree for an interesting woman from the past. When I found such a woman, I also learned that I was not to speak of her. This sanction on telling the stories of women’s lives, because of shame or fear of giving offence is not unique to my experience. As Maria Simms writes of her own PhD experience:

I set out, if not quite in high spirits at least with interest and hope, to write a postmodern, feminist novel for my

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PhD. Through a postmodern playing with notions of truth and historicity I intended my novel to join others in the process of re-inscribing women into the narratives of history . . . (“Fictional Fears and Guarded Facts” par.2)

However, Simms is unable to gain access to the historical woman in whom she is interested. This inability to find the facts about women’s lives and the way this has affected writers’ capacity to write about women is not a new problem. For Virginia Woolf, women’s absence from the discourse of history has contributed to their silence, or misrepresentation, in literature. She suggests that women’s history lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed in old drawers, half-obliterated in the memories of the aged. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure—in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women. (Collected Essays Volume Two 141)

She argues too that “The history of England is the history of the male line, not the female” (141). The absence of women writers, women’s distortion by or omission from literature is, for Woolf, a result of their absence from history. This lack of historical information about women is still true of some women’s lives today. Simms, unable to write about the life of her historical subject, decides instead “to write a crime novel.” Yet she laments this situation:

I do wonder about the novel that might have been had I continued with the original idea of writing a fictional history/biography, and there remains with me an uneasy sense of having allowed myself to be silenced as women
were in the past. (“Fictional Fears and Guarded Facts” par.23)

The uneasiness which Simms expresses is easy to understand especially given the trend, in the texts cited above to ‘recuperate’ history, and to highlight those who have been sidelined by traditional historical discourse.

Although part of me was eager to take the scraps of what I had found and weave a story out of it anyway, there were ethical considerations to confront; there were people in my family who would be angered, embarrassed or ashamed if I hit upon the ‘truth’ with my narrative. And I was mindful of the fact that many women’s stories are not told, either in empirically based discourses like history or biography, or even in fiction, due to this very lack of available historical information about women. As such, I was reticent to write a fiction which filled in the gaps about a woman’s life, as I felt it would gloss over the very real difficulties in finding information about a woman from the past.

Leaving aside what I could not know, and therefore what I could not write, I wondered why it was so difficult to find information about women from the past. I began to look at the epistemological reasons for why I could not write the story that I had intended to write. For Liz Stanley and Ann Morley:

‘Knowledge,’ feminist social scientists, historians, scientists and philosophers have demonstrated convincingly, is . . . a socio-political product, in a context which most knowledge-producers are white middle-class ‘first world’ men. This ‘knowledge’ emanates out of these men’s view of what the ‘facts’ are. (The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison 66)
As a result, Stanley and Morley contend that lives and experiences of women have often been misrepresented and misunderstood in “extraordinarily gross ways” (66). Rather than using fiction to fill in the gaps about what I couldn’t know about my historical woman, then, I decided to write a creative text which would explicitly acknowledge the existence of these gaps and silences, thereby reminding the reader of the epistemological problems encountered in the very process of researching and writing women’s stories. Moreover, I already had an interest in the different ways silence, absence, and contradiction could affect a text. Some years ago, I completed an Honours dissertation in which I argued that Samuel Beckett’s fragmented or absent stage bodies were more ‘present’ precisely because of their fragmentation. In other words, by erasing the body on stage, Beckett paradoxically draws attention to it. My dissertation on the Beckettian body gave me an interest in the concept of silence, and a theoretical base (poststructuralism) from which to explore it.  

I decided then that if I couldn’t write the story which recovered a woman’s life from the past, I could at least write about the way in which a woman becomes silenced in, and by, her culture. Writing a fictional text in which the characters don’t want to disclose the details of their past, was, I felt, a powerful way to overcome my theoretical and personal concerns, and to tackle the issue of silence. As Trinh Minh-ha writes in Woman, Native, Other: “Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing.” She warns that “Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or more point given to the silencers” (83). In writing my creative text and this

accompanying exegesis, I was interested in finding narrative strategies which could articulate women’s stories from the past, bearing in mind the problematic/s in finding out about such lives.

The subject of women, history and literature is a large and often contentious one. Recently, in Australia, there has been much critical and popular debate about the respective roles of fiction and history, and the capacity of these genres to write the truth. Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (2005) has sparked fierce debate about the role of historical fiction in popular culture, and has raised questions regarding the respective rights of novelists and historians when it comes to writing history.\(^3\) However it is not the purpose of this project to enter this debate. Nor is it the purpose of this exegesis to relativise the genres of history and fiction, or to privilege one discourse over the other. Nonetheless, with Linda Hutcheon, I would argue that to “write of anyone’s history is to order, to give form to disparate facts; in short to fictionalize” (*The Canadian Postmodern* 82). This relativisation of discursive truth is also evident within the field of history as well as the social sciences. For instance, Joan Wallach Scott argues that, due to poststructuralist discourse, and in particular, Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, the historian is unable “to claim neutral mastery or to present any particular story as if it were complete, universal and objectively determined” (*Gender and the Politics of History* 7).

Of course, a poststructuralist feminist analysis, such as the one which Scott provides, is only one way to examine how women’s stories have been omitted or

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marginalised in mainstream narratives. Mary Eagleton writes that contemporary feminist theorists, such as Judith Butler (1993, 1990), Rey Chow (1998, 1993) and Donna Haraway (2003, 1991) have rearticulated subjectivity from specific gender, racial, ethnic and class perspectives, to examine how subjectivity is embodied (A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory, 2007). Questions about what kind of feminist theory should be employed for textual analysis remain, and are still being debated, and Eagleton argues for a plurality of theoretical approaches for feminism. Moreover, she suggests that poststructuralist feminism is still engaged with critiquing notions of historical truth and can “construct other histories” and examine “the processes of institutional change” (A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory, 6). As such, poststructuralist feminism, by questioning the epistemological assumptions used to produce and institutionalise knowledge, provides the most relevant framework for this dissertation. And while questions are still being asked about the place of history in literature, exploring them is not the central aim of this project. This project, rather, is preoccupied with exploring creative narrative strategies which can articulate a woman’s life in fiction, bearing in mind all that cannot be disclosed about her past.

Structure of the Exegesis

This exegesis consists of three chapters, and focuses on the reading of several key texts which, variously, inspired my writing of “The Other Side of Silence.” These texts and their particular narrative strategies gave me critical and creative insights into writing a fictional piece in which I could highlight some of the ways women’s stories might become silenced. In my reading I noted two distinct approaches in the ways that contemporary authors wrote about women’s stories.
The first approach is the topic of Chapter One. Many of the writers mentioned above (Morrison, Tan, Atwood, et al.) adopt a ‘recuperative’ strategy for writing about women’s lives from the past: they have used fiction to tell stories about women whose narratives have previously been omitted from or distorted by historical discourse and dominant cultural ideologies, albeit to differing degrees. Recuperation (of journals, letters and novels by women) was important for feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s. Toril Moi categorises Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) as “a veritable goldmine of information about the lesser-known literary women of the period” (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 56). The recovery of women’s stories is important for Morrison and Atwood, as they are focussing on real women (Margaret Garner and Grace Marks respectively), whose lives have been well-documented in mainstream history or popular culture. As such, they are interested in *re-writing* these ‘infamous’ women’s lives from feminist, race and class-conscious perspectives. These texts provide an alternative reading of those women’s lives, and also give the cultural context in which the stories had previously been articulated.

In *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), however, Tan is writing about the kind of woman I was interested in writing about: an ordinary woman who might leave no trace in archival or historical discourse. Tan’s novel explores the possibilities of writing a woman’s story in fiction. The novel is wonderfully evocative, and set against the dramatic historical back-drop of the Sino-Japanese war. In Chapter One, I read Tan’s novel against Margaret Forster’s memoir *Hidden Lives* (1996). Forster’s memoir details many of the problems in researching and documenting ordinary women’s lives, and comments on the lack of archival information about her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, as well as examining the ways in which families guard their
secrets. Forster’s experience suggests that stories about women cannot always be recovered and, in fact, are actively being silenced. In writing fiction, I did not want to gloss over the difficulties in finding information about women from the past. If I was going to write about a woman’s life, I wanted my creative text to emphasise the epistemological problems in uncovering her story.

Chapter Two examines the different narrative strategies which more directly influenced the writing of my creative text. Writing at the same time as Tan, Morrison and Atwood, Carol Shields explores the lives of ordinary women (and men, as in Larry’s Party [1997]) in her fiction, though her project is emphatically not a recuperative one. Shields’ work, and in particular her novels The Stone Diaries (1994) and Unless (2002), use poststructuralist strategies to disrupt the conventions of the traditional realist text. My interest in Shields’ narrative strategies was, no doubt, a result of my interest in the poststructuralist work I encountered when writing my dissertation on Beckett, which drew on the work of Jacques Derrida. As well, and as Catherine Belsey writes:

One of the most potentially liberating effects of poststructuralism for feminism is that it enables the feminist reader to uncover the discursive production of all meanings, to pinpoint whose interests they support and to locate the contradictions which render them fundamentally unstable and open to change. (The Feminist Reader 18)

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Throughout *The Stone Diaries* and *Unless* Shields pays specific attention to the kinds of
gaps, silences, contradictions and omissions in women’s stories, which have
traditionally rendered them unknowable, and therefore, unwriteable. Shields exhibits
a dissatisfaction with traditional realism, and her texts exemplify scepticism about the
capacity of realist conventions to articulate the lives of women. Shields creates
situated narrators, further problematising the idea of objective or impartial narrative
voices. In addition, both *The Stone Diaries* and *Unless* refute traditional closure, which
is at odds with the trajectory of recovery and reconciliation in the texts of writers such
as Tan.

In Chapter Three I turn critical attention to the writing of my own manuscript.
This chapter examines how the various texts discussed in Chapters One and Two have
helped in writing my own creative text. I document the changes in my approach to the
narrative and structure of “The Other Side of Silence,” which has been directly
influenced by my exegetical project. It is important to note that the creative and
exegetical components of this dissertation have interacted with one another through
the drafting and re-drafting processes. As a result of reading of Shields’ work, and
through my engagement with writers such as Woolf, Trinh and Morrison, I was able to
experiment with and explore what cannot be known in the lives of my fictional
characters. Silencing certain parts of the mother Serafina’s story in “The Other Side of
Silence” seems a more credible way to write about such a woman, given the
constraints in finding out about women’s stories from the past. Furthermore, the
troubling of Serafina’s daughter Alba’s memories destabilises her position as a
disinterested narrator. Alba’s subject position is made clear by her desire to forget the
past, and her fragmented memories are reflective of what she chooses to remember
and what she would rather forget. Thus, even though the ‘scandalous’ or ‘shameful’ aspects of Serafina’s life are not revealed in “The Other Side of Silence,” they haunt the narrative nonetheless.

The title of my creative work, “The Other Side of Silence,” is taken from a quote by George Eliot which Shields uses as an epigraph in Unless:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.  

These lines hint at the other kinds of narratives which can be told when certain aspects of women’s stories are suppressed. Eliot’s words also indicate the possibilities and potential for giving fictional voice to previously untold narratives.

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Chapter One: Women’s Historical Fiction

Telling stories

“Let me tell you a story,” Trinh Minh-ha writes in Woman, Native, Other, “for all I have is a story” (119). My project was motivated, at first, by a desire to write a narrative about a woman, a real woman, whose story had been suppressed. I wanted to tell the story of a particular woman in my family’s history, a woman I had only heard about in hushed tones, whispered conversations. A woman whose past, it seemed to me, was so terrible that nobody wanted to speak about it anymore. As a young student of feminism and literature I couldn’t understand why I shouldn’t know or be able to speak about this woman’s life. I also felt that if I didn’t write about her life, I would be participating in silencing it. Instead, I wanted to take her out of the shroud of silence under which she’d been hidden, and write a book based on her story. A biography of sorts, I suppose, a cradle-to-grave account of her life. I felt that by doing this I would be validating her life, that I would be suggesting that her life was worth writing about. A life worth knowing.

However it was the knowing of this woman’s life that became my first problem. No one would talk about her. And anyone who did know the story seemed fearful of telling it. Of course this made her story all the more interesting to me. What had this woman done? What could she possibly have done to deserve this shame which worked its way down through the successive generations? Unable to garner much information about her anecdotally, I set out searching for her in archives. But here again, I was met with silence. There seemed to be no records of her anywhere, no way in which I could trace the facts of her life.
I gave up then the idea of knowing this particular woman’s story, though I still wonder about her. I turned my attention to the other boughs of my family tree, to my husband’s family, to my friends’ families. And whenever the whiff of scandal or intrigue surrounded women from the past, there was a general reticence in talking about them. I was confronted with silences at every turn. Nobody seemed to want to speak about the women who went before them, and it wasn’t because these women were dull or hadn’t done anything interesting. Not at all. It was because these women were too interesting, and had done a great many things, things that it would be too impolite (though the official word was ‘disrespectful’) to talk about now. In Carol Shields’ Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Stone Diaries*, the narrator, Daisy Goodwill Flett, muses on this silencing:

Men, it seemed to me in those days were uniquely honoured by the stories that erupted in their lives, whereas women were more likely to be smothered by theirs. Why? Why should this be? Why should men be allowed to strut under the privilege of their life adventures, while women went all grey and silent beneath theirs? (122)

It seemed to me that no matter how far we are from the past, or how ‘liberated’ our culture might be, certain kinds of shame do not transcend cultural boundaries. But, I protested to those who were insistent on keeping things quiet, the same rules for women don’t apply today. Illegitimacy and divorce, for example, are no longer taboo in our culture. No, was the reaction from those around me. No, too, the historical records seemed to echo. I was finding that, as Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest: “History is something that cannot be eluded, is always there and also here; although
we do not repeat it directly, we nevertheless live in its consequences in every moment” (“Hystorical Fictions” 138).

Living in these consequences was frustrating for me, not only as a feminist, but also as a writer. Here I was, surrounded by all these potentially interesting stories, and all of them were still actively being silenced. I must admit, part of me wanted to defy all these people who were hushing up these stories. A rather large and angry part of me wanted to lay bare the few bones I had uncovered and invent the rest based on what little information I had been able to obtain. But, the worried whisper went around me: what about respect? And I felt that I had to respect the dead, as well as the living, especially those people who felt they had so much to lose if somebody exposed the ‘truth.’ The desire to tell a story did not go away, though I realised that I had to change the way that I approached the telling of this particular story.

Biographical fiction, with its basis in factual information, was no longer available to me as a writer. My archival searches proved that I was not going to find the kind of information I would need to write such a story. I decided against writing about the woman in my family for ethical reasons, which meant discarding the anecdotal information I had found. Simms writes of her struggle to write biographical fiction about Lucy Osburn:

Contemplating the difficulties, I could see why A.S. Byatt chose to fictionalise all her history and biography in *Possession: A Romance*, as did Eco in *The Island on the Day Before*. (“Fictional Fears and Guarded Facts” par.20)
I decided, instead, to write fiction. And this made sense: fiction was, after all, the first place I had encountered the kinds of women’s stories I was interested in and, as a discourse, fiction has played no small part in telling stories about women’s lives.

From the 1970s there has been a surge in the writing of women’s lives by contemporary female authors. For example, Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Forster, Kate Grenville, Maxine Hong Kingston, Drusilla Modjeska, Carol Shields, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Rebecca Wells and Jeanette Winterson to name a few, have all written fiction about women’s lives.⁶ These narratives range from the re-examination of the lives of infamous women (such as Margaret Garner and Grace Marks) to the unearthing of ordinary—but previously untold—lives of women. As Carolyn Heilbrun writes, “since about 1970, we have had accounts of lesser lives, great lives, thwarted lives, lives cut short, lives miraculous in their unapplauded achievement” (Writing a Woman’s Life 26). Historical fiction in this exegesis refers to writing about the past from a contemporary perspective, (such as the works from those authors listed above), rather than fiction by ‘historical authors’ (Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë). Indeed, Heilmann and Llewellyn assert:

For women, historical fiction offers them and their female characters a means of reclamation, a narrative empowerment to write women back into the historical record. (“Hystorical Fictions” 144)

⁶Novels such as Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); A.S. Byatt’s Possession: A Romance (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990); Margaret Forster’s Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir (London: Penguin, 1996); Kate Grenville’s Lilian’s Story (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985); Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (London: Allen Lane, 1977); Drusilla Modjeska’s Poppy (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1990); Toni Morrison’s Beloved (London: Vintage 1987); Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club (New York: Putnam’s, 1989); Rebecca Wells’ The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997); and Jeanette Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry (London: Bloomsbury, 1989) either represent or discuss notions of women’s history.
In writing about a woman’s life in the past, it seemed like fiction was a way in which I could do so without having to count on biographical fact. Although I soon found out that choosing how to tell this woman’s story was a complex problem, especially when looking at the different ways writers represent women’s historical lives in fiction, and their various reasons for doing so.

Thus, in this chapter I will examine how feminist criticism addresses the ways in which women have been forgotten by, omitted from or had their experiences distorted within the disciplines of literary studies and the humanities, as well as within history and the social sciences. Using Morrison’s *Beloved* and Atwood’s *Alias Grace* as examples, I will illustrate how fiction has been used to rewrite or re-examine stories about well known women from the past. Drawing on Tan’s novel, *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, I will also examine how fiction has been used to recuperate the lives of women whose stories have previously been untold. Contrasting Tan’s fictional project with Margaret Forster’s memoir, *Hidden Lives*, I will argue that the recovery of ‘ordinary’ women’s lives in Tan’s fiction carries with it the assumption that such lives can be recuperated, which is at odds with Forster’s attempt to find out the facts about her mother and grandmother’s past.

“looking about the bookshelves for books that were not there . . .”

There, of course, are precedents for fictionalising women’s lives in the past, and Virginia Woolf provides an early example in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn.” In this short fictional piece, written in 1906, Woolf tells the story of a respected historian Rosamond Merridew, who is known from Berlin to Cambridge for her work. Rosamond comes upon a house in the village where she is staying, and the owners
John and Betty, show her portraits of John’s ancestors. Rosamond describes how the owner of the house gives detailed descriptions about the men, while “Their wives and daughters at length dropped out altogether” (247). To Rosamond’s delight, she is shown several journals, and asks to borrow the one belonging to Mistress Joan Martyn. The rest of the ‘story’ is taken from this diary, of the young, unmarried Joan. In “Biography as Microscope or Kaleidoscope?” Liz Stanley suggests, that Woolf wrote “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” to fill in the gap which she perceived in women’s historical lives before the twentieth century. As Stanley points out, “There were overpowering intellectual and political reasons for calling these two fictional women into existence” (19). Woolf had looked for, but not found, a voice from a woman in the past:

Not finding one, and being even then a redoubtable woman who had no truck with simplistic conventional distinctions between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. . . she made up not one but two in her fictitious review, by the fictitious reviewer (19)

As one of the twentieth century’s most prolific writers, Woolf spent many years critiquing the way in which women have been (mis)represented both by historical, as well as fictional, discourses. In A Room of One’s Own (1929), she laments the lack of information about the ‘typical’ Elizabethan woman. She posits that such a woman “never writes her own life and scarcely keeps a diary; there are only a handful of her letters in existence. She left no plays or poems by which we can judge her” (44).

Woolf continues to examine this lack or absence:

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7 Woolf writes about these gaps, omissions and distortions in greater detail in A Room of One’s Own (London: Hogarth, 1929).
But what I find deplorable, I continued, looking about the bookshelves again is that nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century. I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that. Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty one; what, in short, they did from eight in the morning till eight at night. (45)

Woolf’s interest in the lives of ordinary women is evident throughout A Room of One’s Own, and it is a theme she explores in much of her fiction, such as Mrs Dalloway (1925), The Years (1937) and The Waves (1943). It is interesting to note that fiction was the strategy Woolf used in her review of the diary of Mistress Joan Martyn, and fiction is still a strategy deployed by many feminists interested in representing women’s historical lives.

The absence of women in historical discourse which Woolf noted as early as 1906 was significantly redressed by feminists within the discourses of history and the social sciences in the 1970s. As Lyn Pykett observes:

Like many more recent historians, Woolf attempted to add women’s voices to the conversation of culture and to recover the lost or hidden histories of women. Indeed, in ‘Women and Fiction’ and A Room of One’s Own Woolf seems to have set the agenda for much of the Anglo-American feminist literary history of the 1970s and 1980s. (Engendering Fictions 102)
In *Gender and the Politics of History*, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott notes that the titles of some of the books that launched the women’s history movement in the early 1970s explicitly conveyed their author’s intentions:

Those who had been “Hidden from History” were “Becoming Visible.” Although recent book titles announce many new themes, the mission of their authors remains to construct women as historical subjects. (17)

In *Woman, Native, Other* Trinh suggests that as a result of the sexism inherent in what she terms ‘capital H History,’ the “re-writing of history is therefore an endless task, one to which feminist scholars have devoted much of their energy” (84). And within the field of social sciences, Stanley and Sue Wise suggest that:

The most simple and in many ways the most powerful criticism made of the theory and practice within the social sciences is that, by and large, they omit or distort the experiences of women. (*Breaking Out Again* 13)

Yet in the 1970s the rise of social history and the advent of ‘her-story’ turned a spotlight on those women’s lives that had been largely omitted from, or left unrecorded in favour of what historian Scott cites as the ‘maps and chaps’ version of history (*Gender and the Politics of History* 9). She argues:

the ‘her-story’ approach has had important effects on historical scholarship. By piling up the evidence about women in the past it refutes the claims of those who insist women had no history, no significant place in stories of the past. (20)

With the advent of social history and her-story came the re-evaluation of certain documents, such as journals and letters, which were once deemed too subjective to be
included in historical discourse. Much of the recuperation of women’s lives within
history and the social sciences in this period were written as biographies, as well as
“chronicles of feminist movements, and the collected letters of female authors”
(Gender and the Politics of History 15). Stanley is particularly notable in the field of
biography for her work with Ann Morley on militant suffragette Emily Wilding
Davison. Stanley’s work on biography, and her formulation of auto/biography was
initially controversial, not because of the subjects she chose to write about, but due to
the manner in which she wrote these biographies. Some mention will be made of
Stanley and Morley’s poststructuralist approach in The Life and Death of Emily Wilding
Davison (1988) in Chapter Three of this exegesis.

At the same time as Scott, Morley and Stanley were questioning how to write
women back into history, the issue of the absence of women in history was also being
addressed within literature and literary history. The fictional recuperation of women’s
historical lives that Woolf began writing about in her ‘review’ of Mistress Joan
Martyn’s diary in 1906, gained momentum in the 1970s, and its popularity is still
evident today. In The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory
(1985), Elaine Showalter identifies three distinct approaches to how women had been
represented—or misrepresented—within literary history. She states that: “In its
earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary
practice,” citing the stereotypical portrayal of women in fiction as either angelic or
monstrous (5). Showalter goes on to explain that

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8 See Ann Morley and Liz Stanley, The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison (London: The Women’s
The second phase of feminist criticism was the discovery that women writers had a literature of their own, whose historical and thematic coherence, as well as artistic importance, had been obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture. (*The New Feminist Criticism* 6)

Showalter herself was crucial to this phase of feminist criticism which was concerned with the recuperation of fictional texts written by women in the past. Belsey and Moore suggest that Showalter’s earlier text, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) “is perhaps the most influential of the accounts of women’s writing in its difference from men’s” in early feminist criticism (*The Feminist Reader* 7). By extension, theorist Toril Moi writes that

> It is in no small part due to Showalter’s efforts that so many hitherto unknown women writers are beginning to receive the recognition they deserve; *A Literature of Their Own* is a veritable goldmine of information about the lesser-known literary women of the period. (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 56)

The “third phase” of feminist criticism that Showalter identifies in *The New Feminist Criticism*

demanded not just the recognition of women’s writing but a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study, a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experiences. (8)

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Showalter suggests that this epistemological approach to feminist criticism is influenced by “French feminist theory,” whose poststructuralist preoccupations were evident in the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes (The New Feminist Criticism 9). As Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore write:

it is possible and politically fruitful to appropriate poststructuralist theories of language, sexuality and subjectivity for feminism, even if those theories have no declared feminist interests. (The Feminist Reader 12-13)

Moreover, the radical rethinking which Showalter identifies as an issue of “French feminists,” was, I would suggest, already evident in the fiction and criticism of modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf. In Modernism, Memory and Desire (2008), Gabrielle McIntire suggests that inherent in Woolf’s writing (and particularly evident in A Room of One’s Own) is “an early feminist lament for the effaced and invisible that precedes 1970s, 1980s, and still-ongoing valorization by half a century or more” (189).

For Showalter there is a significant difference between the second and third phases of feminist literary criticism:

Whereas Anglo-American feminist criticism, for all its internal differences, tries to recover women’s historical experiences as readers and writers, French feminist theory looks at the ways ‘the feminine’ has been defined, represented, or repressed in the symbolic systems of language, metaphysics, psychoanalysis and art. (The New Feminist Criticism 9)

Showalter defines the project of Anglo-American feminist criticism as a recuperative one, whereas I would suggest that French feminist criticism is concerned with epistemology. Derrida’s work on the logocentric nature of language, the binary
structures on which meaning is predicated, and the importance of difference in constituting meaning was particularly useful for feminist writers who were interrogating the epistemological foundations of meaning and language.\textsuperscript{10} Writers such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are well-known for their interpretations of poststructuralist theories.\textsuperscript{11} Yet a feminist poststructuralist approach is not limited to the works of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, as writers such as Alice Jardine, Gayatri Spivak, Catherine Belsey, Jane Moore, Toril Moi (to name a few) have utilised various aspects of poststructuralist theory to restate feminist problematics.

Showalter’s distinction between Anglo-American and French Feminist approaches is a useful one, as it highlights the different approaches one could take in not only reading, but also writing, fiction about women from the past (a concept I explore more fully in Chapters Two and Three of this exegesis). Yet, it is worth noting that Showalter’s criticism of Virginia Woolf’s experimental fictional style in her earlier text \textit{A Literature of Their Own} has drawn much criticism from feminist literary theorists.\textsuperscript{12} The basis for this criticism is, as Moi writes, Showalter’s assumption in \textit{A Literature of Their Own}


\textsuperscript{12} Responses to Showalter’s criticism of Woolf have appeared in many texts of feminist criticism; two of the most notable are Mary Jacobus, \textit{Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism} (London: Methuen, 1986); and Toril Moi, \textit{Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory} (London: Routledge, 1985).
that good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify. (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 7)

Pam Morris, in her book, *Realism* (2003) elaborates on Moi’s position:

Moi argued that experimental writers like Woolf challenged the conventional, common sense binary division of gender inscribed in the language system. Her fiction, like that of other avant-garde writers, aimed to shatter the façade of empirical reality; thus it undermined the status quo of power structures far more radically than any amount of grimly detailed representation of women’s suffering and exploitation. (43)

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Moi suggests that Woolf practises what might now be termed “deconstructive” writing. Woolf, Moi argues, “exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning” in a manner presaging Jacques Derrida (9). Moi also states that Woolf’s work exhibits “a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (9).

Paradoxically, Moi suggests that the early work of Virginia Woolf shares many of the characteristics which Showalter cites as the third phase of feminist literary criticism in *The New Feminist Criticism*.13

As a result of the developments within both the social sciences and literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, the historical fiction written by women in the subsequent decades was rich and varied. The mid 1980s through to the late 1990s, in particular, produced novels as diverse as Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Morrison’s *Beloved*,

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13 Woolf’s use of ‘deconstructive’ writing, to borrow Moi’s phrase, and its implications for the realist text, are further discussed in Chapter Two.
and Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, which were all engaged in re-writing the past from marginalised perspectives. These marginalised voices were not only the voices of women, but also the voices of ethnic minorities (in the case of Tan) and African-American slave-women (in the case of Morrison).  

I was drawn to Morrison’s work because of her effort to redress the past within fiction, and her 1987 novel *Beloved* is an excellent example of this kind of re-writing. Clara Tuite writes that *Beloved* is “widely regarded as the most significant historical fiction by a contemporary woman author” (247). *Beloved* is based on the story of a real slave-woman, Margaret Garner, who killed her child in order to ‘save’ her from slavery. As such Morrison’s novel is offered as a different version of the past, a version which places Garner’s almost inexcusable act within the larger context of the brutality of slavery. As Heilmann and Llewellyn write:

> When Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved* she was reclaiming an experience that had hitherto been written and documented largely by white men or ‘official history.’ In giving the protagonist of the story, especially the women, a voice, Morrison was using the evidence provided by partial and partisan history even as she undermined its right of narrative and cultural supremacy. (“Hystorical Fictions” 142)

*Beloved* begins from Sethe’s point of view, already giving the reader an account that radically differs from the kind of ‘official history’ Heilmann and Llewellyn refer to above. Sethe, an ex-slave woman, is haunted by her past; firstly as a slave at Sweet Home, and secondly by killing her baby daughter shortly after escaping Sweet Home.

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14 Nicola King suggests that *Beloved* is significant to “the recovery of African American history” *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP 2000) 150.
Sethe’s haunting takes the physical form of Beloved, a young woman who mysteriously appears outside of 124, Sethe’s emancipated mother-in-law’s home. Gradually Sethe, her daughter Denver and finally Sethe’s lover, Paul D, realise that Beloved is the incarnation of Sethe’s daughter: the daughter she killed eighteen years earlier, in an attempt to save her from slavery. Beloved wreaks havoc in Sethe’s life; she craves all of Sethe’s attention and seduces Paul D. Beloved finally demands so much of Sethe’s time that Sethe loses her job and the family’s source of income. Consequently, Sethe begins to starve as Beloved grows larger; eating portions of Sethe’s food, her belly already large with Paul D’s baby.

(Sethe) sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded without a murmur. (250)

Denver begins to realise that the relationship between Sethe and Beloved has become one of guilt and blame. “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (251). Denver leaves the home to work, and in re-joining the black community she is able to seek help for her mother. The black community recognises Beloved for what she is: a ghost determined to make Sethe pay for her death, and they confront Sethe and Beloved at 124. During this confrontation Sethe sees a white man coming up the road on a horse, and is reminded of the day she killed her daughter. But instead of turning on Beloved or Denver, Sethe tries to attack the white man instead. Sethe’s ability to turn her anger outwardly at her oppressor (or in this particular case, a symbol of her oppressor), rather than at her children—who, like Sethe, are already victims—is the catalyst for the disappearance of Beloved.
Morrison states that she had a specific purpose when she wrote *Beloved*: “Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to re-appropriate it” she remarked in an interview (“The Anxiety of Authenticity” 149). It is important to note that Garner’s story was a springboard for the fictional world which Morrison creates in her novel. Much of what Morrison writes in *Beloved* is imagined. As Maria Margaronis writes, Morrison gives “the fictional Sethe a better future than the historical Margaret Garner’s” (“The Anxiety of Authenticity” 158). In doing so, Margaronis argues: “Her imperative is to imagine the past in a way that might be useful to the future (“The Anxiety of Authenticity” 158). Not only does Morrison give Sethe back her lover, her daughter Denver, and her freedom, but she writes the story in such a way that readers may view Garner’s shocking actions with empathy, rather than simply with the horror typically associated with infanticide.

Morrison’s fictional retelling of Margaret Garner’s story could be read alongside many novels from the 1980s and 1990s which sought to re-present women from feminist, race- or class-conscious perspectives. Another salient example of this kind of re-writing is Margaret Atwood’s novel *Alias Grace*. In this text, Atwood re-writes the story of the infamous Grace Marks, who was convicted of being an accomplice in the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his house-keeper, Nancy Montgomery. Public opinion about Grace’s innocence (or her guilt) was divided for many years. She was characterised, Atwood tells us in the ‘Afterword’ to her novel, simultaneously as a temptress, the instigator of the crime, or an unwilling accomplice (*Alias Grace* 538). Atwood points out that the many characterisations of Grace are not aided by the fact that Grace “gave three different versions of the Montgomery murder” (538). As in *Beloved*, *Alias Grace* provides the reader with different
possibilities for Grace’s ‘motivations.’ Like Morrison, Atwood has fictionalised many of the events in her novel though, as she tells us in her ‘Afterword,’ she has used fiction only “where mere hints or outright gaps exist in the records” (542). Significantly, much of Alias Grace is told from Grace’s point of view, giving the character a voice she wouldn’t otherwise have had. Atwood’s version of Grace’s story problematises those prior versions as typical of their time, a time when working-class servant women like Grace were marginalised and consequently deprived of a ‘credible’ voice in their culture. Atwood herself has written that

The past no longer belongs only to those who once lived in it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it. (qtd in Niederhoff 82)

Atwood gives the reader a different story about Grace and, in doing so, throws into question all the stories about Grace which came before.

What both these novels indicate is that different versions of history can be rewritten through fiction. In Alias Grace and Beloved, Atwood and Morrison are writing about women who have already been written about; and both authors are concerned with re-writing these culturally shared stories from marginalised perspectives. Both writers give plausible reasons for their heroines’ actions, which force the reader to review the reputations of Grace Marks and Margaret Garner. Atwood focuses on the traumatic relationship Grace had with her father, and later with Mary Whitney (a fellow servant); Morrison contextualises her story within the brutality of slavery in the late 1800s. Both novels give voice to those who have been spoken of, yet who were given little opportunity to speak for themselves. As Sixo, one
of the slave men from Sweet Home states “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (*Beloved* 190).

**Lady Sorrowfree, or The Kitchen God’s Wife**

As influential as *Alias Grace* and *Beloved* have been, my specific interest was on the lives of ordinary women, women more like my unknowable ancestor. As such I was intrigued by the novels of Amy Tan, focussing as they do on the lives of women from the past who have not achieved the notoriety of Grace Marks or Margaret Garner. I was also interested in Margaret Forster’s memoir *Hidden Lives*, as it documents the very real problems associated in trying to research these kinds of lives.

The following discussion will focus primarily on Amy Tan’s novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, and Margaret Forster’s memoir, *Hidden Lives*, as both these texts are trying to recuperate women’s histories, yet do so in different genres. Forster’s text is a memoir, and so is based on biographical ‘fact,’ whereas Tan’s text is fictional, and therefore can ignore or rearrange biographical fact for arguably more coherent fiction. The disparity between these genres illuminates, for me, one of the central problems in writing women’s history. Tan’s novel is a wonderfully rich journey of a woman overcoming the silence that she has used to obscure her past from her children and coming to ‘full voice.’ Forster’s memoir, in contrast, tantalises us with snippets about her grandmother’s life, only to have the full exploration of that life silenced by her mother.

When read against/alongside one another these texts highlight many of the problems which occur in writing about the lives of women.

*The Joy Luck Club* is Tan’s first, and arguably her best known, novel. The popularity of Tan’s work, particularly amongst women, suggests that there is
something powerful in the way she represents women and articulates their stories.\textsuperscript{15} The Joy Luck Club was the first book by Tan that I read and, as a reader, I was more interested in the stories of the mothers and the grandmothers than I was in the stories of the daughters, women closer to my own generation, sharing many of my own preoccupations. The older women all seemed to have remarkably interesting lives; many experienced traumatic events at a young age, which allegedly made them stronger and more self assured as they grew older and were able to make sense of their pasts. These stories are narrated to their daughters in the last part of the text.

As Marina Heung writes in her article “Daughter-text/Mother-text”:

\begin{quote}
For the mothers, story-telling heals past experiences of loss and separation; it is also a medium for rewriting stories of oppression and victimisation into parables of self affirmation and individual empowerment. For the Joy Luck mothers, the construction of a self in identification with a maternal figure thus parallels, finally, a revision of the self through a reinterpretation of the past. (\textit{Feminist Studies} 607)
\end{quote}

The mothers use stories of their own pasts, including stories about their own mothers, to reach out to their daughters: by revealing the past, the mothers and daughters are able to change the future. These revelations are interesting as they consist of the kinds of women’s stories that have been omitted by or forgotten within our culture. Although the central character Jing-Mei’s own mother, Suyuan, is recently dead, the revelation of her mother’s past by her Joy Luck Aunties enables Jing-Mei to travel to

\textsuperscript{15} Much critical scholarship has been written about Tan, and I would direct readers to several texts: Bella Adams, \textit{Amy Tan: Contemporary World Writers} (Manchester UP: Manchester, 2005); Harold Bloom, ed., \textit{Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club} (Chelsea House: Philadelphia, PA, 2001); and E.D. Huntley, \textit{Amy Tan: A Critical Companion} (Greenwood Press: Westport, CT, 1998).
China and meet the sisters she never knew she had and, symbolically, reconnect with her mother by finding her mother’s lost daughters. Tan’s other novels, The Kitchen God’s Wife, The Hundred Secret Senses (1995) and The Bonesetter’s Daughter (2001), also explore this thematic of overcoming silence, of one generation of women reaching out to the next.

*The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Tan’s second novel also garnered critical, as well as popular praise: “in some cases,” E.D Huntley writes, “from writers who found it more appealing than they did, *The Joy Luck Club*” (12). *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is of specific interest to me as it is factually based on the life of Daisy Tan, Amy Tan’s mother. In her ‘book of musings,’ *The Opposite of Fate*, Tan tells us how her mother had to deny that the events depicted in *The Joy Luck Club* had happened to her. “While I was writing my second book, she made sure to give me some motherly advice. ‘This time,’ she said, ‘tell my true story’” (211). Tan writes that “some of the events in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* are based on my mother’s life; her marriage to ‘that bad man,’ the death of her children, her fortuitous encounter with my father” (211), but admits she has changed some of the events and characters in her mother’s story.

*The Kitchen God’s Wife* differs from the *The Joy Luck Club* most significantly in its narrative structure. The novel consists of two narrative voices, that of Pearl Louie Brandt and her mother Winnie. Both narratives are told through first-person voices, and both are given two sections of the book, beginning with Pearl and ending with Winnie. In the first two chapters we learn that Pearl has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and she has kept this condition a secret from her mother for seven years. Pearl fears that her mother will not understand the complications of MS, and will take this illness as a sign that their family is fated with bad luck. As Pearl states:
When I was first diagnosed, I said “Ma, you know that slight problem with my leg that I told you about. Well, thank God, it turned out not to be cancer, but—” And right away she told me about a customer of hers who had just died of cancer, how long he suffered, how many wreaths the family had ordered. . . . Then when Cleo was born, without complications on my part or hers, I again started to tell my mother. But she interrupted me, this time to lament how my father was not there to see his grandchildren. And then she went into her usual endless monologue about my father getting a fate he didn’t deserve. (28-9)

Pearl has been unable to tell Winnie about her MS, and as a consequence dreads spending time with her, especially if their extended family is around, as a few of them are aware of Pearl’s illness. Pearl’s Aunt Helen, who also knows of the MS, and who has recently been diagnosed with a benign brain tumour, is convinced that she has not long left to live. Helen tells Pearl that she can no longer keep the secret of Pearl’s MS from Winnie; “How can I fly to heaven when this is weighing me down?” she asks (36).

Chapter Three begins in Winnie’s (Jiang Weili’s) voice. She too has a secret, which she has been keeping from her daughter, a secret which Helen has kept and colluded with for many, many years. Now ‘that bad man’ to whom Winnie was once married is dead, and Helen wants to reveal the secrets of their shared pasts. Winnie is outraged by Helen’s decision to reveal everything that she has worked so hard to conceal. Helen argues back:

“I am saying now that Wen Fu is dead, I want to correct everything before it’s too late. No more secrets, no more lying.” Why was she talking this way? She wanted to
expose everything!—my past, my marriage to Wen Fu, everything I worked so hard to forget. (79)

Helen, with her tumour weighing heavily on her mind, wants to unburden herself of her past, and in doing so must also reveal Winnie’s. She realises the need for Winnie to tell the truth to her children herself and gives her until Chinese New Year (the same deadline she has given Pearl) to do so. Helen’s illness thus becomes the impetus for confession, a very powerful tool in the realist novel. As Pam Morris suggests in Realism (2003), the realist text is dependent upon the idea of the revelation of empirical truth/s (9). This idea of the attainment of truth and therefore, closure, is the basis for many realist novels and one which Tan utilises effectively.¹⁶

The revelation of Winnie’s life story begins in the next chapter, titled “Ten Thousand Things,” in which she begins telling Pearl the shameful secrets of her past. She begins with the unusual circumstances surrounding her mother’s death, circumstances she cannot remember as she was only a small child. Winnie goes on to tell Pearl how she was then sent to Tsungming Island, to live with her father’s younger brother and his two wives, Old Aunt and New Aunt. The narrative follows Winnie through her upbringing to her marriage to Wen Fu, whom Winnie refers to throughout the novel as ‘that bad man.’ The narrative continues through Winnie’s abusive and unhappy marriage, her struggles to assert herself against her husband in a deeply patriarchal culture, her fight for survival during the war and the loss of her three children, events which Pearl has never heard about before. Pearl hears how her mother met Jimmy Louie, the man who was her father, and struggled to leave Wen Fu and China behind and move to the United States. This section of the narrative goes on

¹⁶ Tan’s adherence to realist narrative strategies is explored in further detail in Chapter Two.
for 333 pages, without apparent interruption from Pearl. Though readers are reminded that Winnie has a listening audience throughout her apparent ‘monologue.’

“Can you imagine how innocent I was, how strong my innocence?” (151), “And now I will tell you when all my luck changed, from bad to worse. You tell me if this was my fault” (236). Questions like these indicate that Pearl is apparently still there, listening to her mother’s story.

Winnie’s narrative ends with her arrival in America, and reunion with Jimmy Louie. At this point Pearl’s narrative recommences and she asks her mother whether Wen Fu or Jimmy Louie was her real father. Winnie tells Pearl that:

“When you were born, I tried to see whose yang you had. I tried to see your daddy. I would say, Look, she has Jimmy Louie’s smile. I tried to forget everything else. But inside my heart I saw something else.” She touched my cheek, tucked a loose strand of hair around my ear.

“You looked like Mochou. You looked like Yiku. You looked like Danru. Danru especially. All of them together. All the children I could not keep but could never forget.” (399)

As Pearl begins to understand the brutality of her mother’s marriage, her struggle to survive and the courage it took for her to rid herself of ‘that bad man,’ fall in love again and move to a new country, Pearl feels that the time has come for her to reveal her own secret. And even though Winnie reacts in the manner that Pearl feared, Pearl realises that her mother’s outrage was tearing it all away—my protective shell, my anger, my deepest fears, my despair. She was putting all this
into her own heart, so that I could finally see what was left. Hope. (402)

The novel ends on this redemptive note. By revealing the truth, both mother and daughter gain a deeper understanding of one another, as well as insight into their own characters. This conventional realist pattern of confession and reconciliation is evident through Tan’s oeuvre, and most significantly in this novel and in *The Joy Luck Club*. These texts hint very strongly that if the past is revealed then shame can be overcome, relationships can be healed and mothers and daughters can be a source of strength for one another. This is indeed an attractive pattern, as it intimates that by knowing our past, and the past of those who came before us, we are able to comprehend our own lives more fully.

As with *Beloved* and *Alias Grace*, a feminist reading may be made of Tan’s novels as they tell stories of women who have not been represented by ‘official’ discourses such as history. Huntley writes that, in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Winnie “reclaim(s) the self that has been silenced” (110). Yet, embedded within this story is the problematic notion that Trinh articulates in *Woman, Native, Other*. Trinh argues that a common misconception of history is that “the Past, unrelated to the Present and the Future, is lying there in its entirety, waiting to be revealed and related” (104).\(^1\)

My own frustrated research into the life of my lost relative prompted me to question some of the underlying premises inherent in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. Particular among these is the notion of confession, which allows for the recuperation of hitherto unknown pasts, and the way in which the older female characters are able to lay bare the bones of their lives. This approach suggests that

\(^{17}\)Trinh’s formulation of history will be picked up on in Chapter Three.
well-kept secrets are only ever temporary, and that information about such ordinary women’s lives can be retrieved. While I enjoy these stories, and believe that confession can and does occur, I am sceptical of the way that, for example, Winnie overcomes the shame of her past and speaks of the events which have silenced her for years. In the novel, it is implied that Winnie does not hide any of the details of her history in her confession to Pearl. In examining my own family tree, and reading about women who research the lives of so-called ordinary women, I found that the limits which a culture imposes are not so easily traversed, and that many women’s lives are not so easily recuperated.

More Hidden Lives

The difficulties I faced in being able to access the facts about my lost ancestor made me sceptical of the relatively easy way Tan’s fictional characters find out about the truth; however, it must be admitted that the revelation of the truth in Tan’s narratives is what makes them appealing to the reader. In Hidden Lives, Margaret Forster faces similar constraints (to my own) in writing about the women who came before her. In her memoir, Forster portrays the life of her mother Lilian yet, try as she might, she cannot fully account for the life of her maternal grandmother, Margaret Ann. Hidden Lives begins with four scenes, one set in 1936. Her maternal grandmother, Margaret Ann Hind is visited by a stranger, a woman. She receives the guest in the privacy of her bedroom, an awkwardly too-familiar space for ‘company,’ and so her daughter Lilian (Forster’s mother) is curious about who this woman may be. The woman leaves the house and Margaret Ann does not leave her room for eight hours.
When Margaret Ann did come down she never once referred to her visitor or anything that had been said. Nothing. No explanation whatsoever. And Lilian, remarkably, never asked a single question. She was too afraid of her mother’s evident distress to pry. . . . Almost three months later (Margaret Ann) died quite suddenly, and throughout that period there was unhappiness about her which never seemed to lift. (5)

After Margaret Ann’s death, her three daughters, Lilian, Jean and Nan are visited by another woman who enquires about Margaret Ann’s will. When the daughters ask this woman who she is and why she would believe that Margaret Ann would leave her anything, the woman replies that she too, was one of Margaret Ann’s daughters. After reading Margaret Ann’s will, the daughters see no mention of anyone but themselves: Lilian, Jean and Nan.

No need for panic. No need to revise the revered character and conduct of the good, the wise, the kind, the gentle, the honest, the almost saintly Margaret Ann, their beloved mother. (11)

However, for Forster, these two events propel her to dig beneath the surface of her grandmother’s life. In her memoir, Forster tries to recount the life of Margaret Ann. In doing so she attempts to identify both the first female visitor and the ‘alleged’ other daughter. Forster’s mother Lilian, however, is reticent to divulge much about her mother’s life. The incident with the woman who approaches them after the funeral deeply affects Lilian, who suspects that her mother had an illegitimate child. As a result, she is largely unwilling to talk about her mother’s life.
After her mother’s death in 1981, Forster “felt freed from the taboo [Lilian had] placed on any attempt to unravel the background of Margaret Ann” (13). Searches through archival records found that Margaret Ann was herself the illegitimate daughter of a servant girl: “How pathetic, I thought, that all the mystery was to hide this banal fact. How ordinary, how disappointing” (13). It is evident that Forster does not feel the shame about Margaret Ann’s illegitimacy that her mother and grandmother obviously felt so acutely. Born of a later generation, where women could choose whom they wanted to marry, rather than whom they needed to marry (to ensure either a financially secure future or a better social status), Forster acknowledges that she does not bear the same cultural shame as her mother and grandmother. Born in a different era, “my chances, my lot, my expectations, born as I was into a working class family . . . were always a hundred times better than my mother’s or grandmother’s” (306). Heilbrun echoes this sentiment:

In our own time of many possible life patterns, it is difficult to grasp how absolutely women of an earlier age could expel themselves from conventional society (that is, all society) by committing a social, usually a sexual, sin. *(Writing a Woman’s Life 49)*

For Forster, her grandmother’s story indicates the much larger problem of representing these kinds of women’s lives:

sometimes beneath the stories lurks the history of more than the ordinary person. Sometimes their stories are the stories of thousands. My grandmother’s story seems to me representative in that kind of way. (13)
Forster goes on to investigate the two visitors: the woman who caused her grandmother such evident distress shortly before her death, and her illegitimate child. She can find no information about the former, but through an archival search of birth, death and marriage registers in Carlisle—the town in which her family lived—she finds a birth certificate.

Immediately it was there: to Margaret Ann Jordan, general domestic servant, aged twenty-three, on the 12th of April 1893 a girl, named Alice, born in Wetheral, the village Tom [Margaret Ann’s husband] took his girls to, but where Margaret Ann would never go. No father was named. (48)

Using Alice’s birth certificate Forster begins to search for more details. She finds that Margaret Ann and Alice lived in such close proximity that Alice “could hardly have failed to use the same shops as her mother, walk the same route to town, board the same trams. And yet still after 38 years she was not acknowledged” (91). Forster wonders:

What had kept Alice from declaring herself? What kind of agreement had been reached? Margaret Ann’s confidence living all those years in Bowman Street had been extraordinary. (99)

Even more surprising for Forster is that her grandfather, Thomas Hind, Margaret Ann’s husband and father to her three ‘acknowledged’ daughters, was present at Alice’s wedding. Forster is left wondering whether or not Thomas could have been Alice’s father, but decides that this cannot be. “I don’t think Thomas Hind was Alice’s father,
but perhaps this is because I don’t want to. Tom was always described to me as a kind and gentle man who loved all children . . .” (49).

Unable to reconcile the disparate images she has of Margaret Ann—those arising from her research into Alice’s life and Lilian’s account of a God-fearing and loving mother—Forster concedes that her grandmother’s life will remain a mystery.

Theories, informed speculative ideas, play a part in all biography but, in the case of the Alices of this world, there is virtually nothing else after the meagre official records have been scrutinised. (107)

The section devoted to Margaret Ann’s life ends two pages after this and readers, along with Forster, are left trying to make sense of these discrepancies in Margaret Ann’s past, especially in relation to Alice. Forster then turns her attention to the relatively straightforward account of Lilian’s life, concluding with the realisation that she will never fully understand her grandmother’s relationship with her illegitimate daughter. She speculates that to answer these questions would be

the stuff of fiction–so tempting to invent a history for Alice, to imagine a plausible explanation for my grandmother’s apparently callous treatment of her and be then able, graciously, to forgive her . . . but it is not my grandmother who needs to be forgiven. It is the times she lived in, those harsh times for women . . . (306)

Forster, a well known writer of fiction as well as biography, does not succumb and invent a history for Alice in Hidden Lives. She has written fictions about family secrets in The Memory Box (1999); and she has more recently written a fictionalised ‘diary’ in
Diary of an Ordinary Woman (2003).\textsuperscript{18} Hidden Lives displays an awareness of the
generic boundaries of memoir, and Forster does not find out anything about Margaret
Ann’s relationship with Alice within the text. Thus, Forster’s text does not exemplify
the trajectory of revelation or reconciliation prevalent in Tan’s texts (or even in
Forster’s own fictions); instead, Forster’s text turns a critical eye on the cultural
conditions that fostered such secrecy within her family.

These two texts, Hidden Lives and The Kitchen God’s Wife, are salient examples
of the disparate ways that the different genres of fiction and memoir are able to treat
the complex issue of silence regarding the lives of women. Distinct as these texts are,
they share many similarities. Firstly both texts are matrilineal narratives. The Kitchen
God’s Wife is based on the story of Tan’s mother. It is, as Tan writes in her book The
Opposite of Fate, a memoir disguised as fiction, (108). She reveals that

Some of the events in The Kitchen God’s Wife are based
on my mother’s life. . . . But with apologies to my
mother, I confess that I changed her story. I invented
characters who never existed in her life. . . . I took her to
places that do not exist . . . with those imaginary details in
place, I can honestly say the story is fiction, not true.
(211)

Like The Kitchen God’s Wife, Hidden Lives is also a matrilineal narrative. Forster sets
out to uncover and record the true story of her mother’s and grandmother’s lives.
Both texts entice the readers with the lure of secrets and the expectation of revelation.
In Tan’s realist novel, the reader is not disappointed: the truth about Winnie’s past is
revealed and consequently, mother and daughter forge a stronger bond based on their

\textsuperscript{18} This recalls for me Woolf’s fictional review of Mistress Joan Martyn’s ‘diary.’
new understanding of one another. Similarly, Forster lures the reader into the mystery of that day in 1936, the woman in black who was received in the overly familiar space of Margaret Ann’s bedroom, as well as the possibly illegitimate Alice, questions about whom pepper the text. Although small details about Alice are found—her birth, marriage and death certificates are obtained—the particulars of her life remain a mystery. Even more mysterious for Forster is the ‘saintly’ Margaret Ann’s treatment of this illegitimate daughter. The relationship between Margaret Ann and Alice remains unknowable within the genre of memoir, as Forster depends on scant archival information in describing their lives. Thus Forster is denied any happy ending: no secrets are shared in an attempt to bring mothers and daughters closer together, and a deep rift is evident between Forster and her mother, Lilian, at the close of the book.

Although each of these texts begins by exploring secrets, they differ in how these secrets, how these inter-generational silences, function. In Tan’s novel, all is revealed; the truth is told and closure is achieved. In Forster’s memoir, readers are reminded of the ways in which history silences the lives of women, and how, due to social constraints, women themselves become complicit in the silencing of their own stories. Tan is able to use fiction to recover a past that might otherwise remain silenced. The novel concludes with the deification of the Kitchen God’s wife. Winnie believes that it is the wife, who suffered through her marriage, rather than the finally-repentant Kitchen God, who should be remembered. She places a woman in the altar usually reserved for the Kitchen God and christens this woman Lady Sorrowfree. She is, as Winnie states “a goddess that nobody knows. Maybe she doesn’t exist yet” (413). Forster’s text, by contrast, illuminates the gaps and silences in her grandmother’s story and illustrates, from her present-day vantage point, a
conservative era in which the rules of proper behaviour for women were rigidly defined.

Yet when contrasted with *Hidden Lives*, Winnie’s ability to reveal her past, and thereby transcend the very powerful women-should-be-seen-and-not-heard adage of pre-war China strikes the reader, or struck *this* reader as implausible, to say the least. Winnie’s revelation is unusual when set against *Hidden Lives*: especially considering that Forster’s work is set in Britain at around the same time. When read alongside *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Forster’s memoir frustrates the reader in its inability to find out the ‘truth’ about Alice, and by extension, the ‘truth’ about Margaret Ann. Forster herself returns to these questions many times within the text, but she is unable to achieve the same kind of closure as Tan does.

As much as I enjoy reading Winnie’s story, I mourn for the loss of Alice’s story, as well as the loss of Margaret Ann’s. As a reader I have been inspired by Tan’s matrilineal narratives, but, as a would-be writer my research process turned out to be more like Forster’s: a labyrinth of dead ends, minimal archival information and silences. I knew I wanted to write fiction, but I wanted my fiction to reflect the very real problems I had encountered in the process of attempting to research women’s lives. The tension between these two texts has given me pause for thought and prompted me to ask further questions. Both these texts could be classified as feminist texts, as they both highlight the lives of women, especially those women who have been denied a place in ‘historical’ discourse, yet they do so in such different ways. Tan ‘fills in’ the silences about women’s lives, while Forster points out the cultural and epistemological conditions under which such silences flourish.
Tan’s narratives initially inspired me to reclaim the woman from my family’s past, as her texts give readers positive stories about women overcoming their patriarchal conditions. Therefore they can be read alongside *A Literature of Their Own*, as Tan, like Showalter, provides readers with positive images of women. Yet, through my own writing, I have come to realise how shame silences certain stories, and that information about some subjects can be difficult, if not impossible, to locate. Tan’s work does not seem to reflect the complexities of finding out about women’s lives that is evident in *Hidden Lives*, and it was these complexities I was interested in exploring in “The Other Side of Silence.”

The over-arching question—the one which I have been trying to address both creatively, and now, exegetically—is how can fiction be used to write about the lives of ordinary women? In particular, is there a way to write about such women, taking into account the very real constraints imposed on telling these women’s stories? In my own research, I was frustrated by the active silencing of these women’s lives, yet I was interested by these silences: not only by the stories that lay behind them, but by the act of silencing itself, the process by which a woman’s life from the past was unavailable to us in the present. Once I decided to write fiction, I decided to approach my fiction in a different way to Tan. There would be, in my story, no confession, no reconciliation, no recuperation. There would be no ‘filling in’ of the gaps and silences. I still wanted to write within a realist framework, so I suppose, in one sense, I wanted to allude to something that might have happened, that could have happened. I was still following in the tradition of writers like Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood, whose work offered us different versions of women from the past. But I wanted my project to draw attention to the gaps and silences and contradictions about
a fictional woman from the past, without glossing over what could not be known. I
began to wonder how it might be possible to write a historical novel about an ordinary
woman and not ‘fill in the gaps’ of her story.
Chapter Two: Carol Shields and the Critique of Realist Fiction

In the last chapter I suggested that Tan’s fiction *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, although a thoroughly engaging text, was at odds with my own experience in trying to find out about an ordinary woman’s life. In Tan’s novel, Winnie and Pearl struggle from silence to voice, telling stories that have previously been suppressed. As Bella Adams writes, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* helps to ensure that experiences other to and, for that matter, ‘othered’ by official narratives, are brought into history, no easy task given that ideologies operating in China, Japan and America work hard to appropriate such experiences. (Amy Tan 75)

Certainly novels like *Beloved*, *Alias Grace* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) sit comfortably alongside Tan’s novels in their willingness to write from the margins. But it is the relative ease with which Winnie reveals the truth to Pearl that is so attractive. Tan writes her narratives about the past in such a way that they suggest that the reader, too, may have similar stories in their past; it’s simply a matter of mothers and daughters sitting down together and being candid about their lives. Admittedly, Helen’s sense of her own impending death, and her wish to enter heaven freed from all the lies of the past, are extraordinary circumstances, but not ones which always provoke such candour (as Forster illustrates in *Hidden Lives*). We all have families, we all come from somewhere; Winnie’s story, Tan’s novel intimates, could be any one of our mothers’, grandmothers’ or great-grandmothers’ stories.

Yet what happens when there are gaps in our family histories that cannot be resolved by anecdotal or archival information? In *Hidden Lives*, Forster illustrates the limits of these kinds of research, especially, I would posit, in relation to the lives of women. There are, for Forster, no death-bed confessionals, no commands by sick relatives to tell the truth. Whereas Tan’s narrative, by contrast, with its relatively easy recovery of the past, put me in a double bind of sorts when it came to writing my creative manuscript. Although her experience, her ‘real life’ experience, was a command to ‘tell the story,’ mine wasn’t. This prompted me to explore alternate solutions to the problems I sketched earlier. Like Simms, I intended to write a “feminist novel for my PhD” (“Fictional Fears and Guarded Facts” par.2). Yet, given the real constraints in finding out, and being able to speak about, my lost ancestor, I felt that if I wrote a historical fiction which ‘filled in’ the secret or shameful aspects of her story, I would be glossing over the problems I had encountered in researching her life. My determination to write the story, or a version of it, was borne from a fear (which Simms also expresses) in colluding in the silencing of certain kinds of women’s narratives. Simms, unable to use the information she has retrieved, decides, instead, to “write a crime novel” (“Fictional Fears and Guarded Facts” par.20). Simms’ dilemma, like Forster’s and like mine, seems an all too common problem in writing about women’s lives. Carol Shields refers to such problems as ‘prohibitions’ and states:

> Enormous quantities of stories—perhaps the finest stories of our culture—have been lost to illiteracy or lack of permission . . . a prohibition placed on the story teller—most often: ‘Woman hold thy tongue!’ (Carol
In an attempt not ‘to hold my tongue’ I began to think about other ways in which I might write about a woman, like my relative, whose story had become lost. The differences between Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife and Forster’s Hidden Lives—steeped as the latter is in biographical fact—prompted me to examine more closely the part which genre plays in the telling of certain stories and the suppression of others. Inherent in Tan’s work is not only the assertion that these kinds of stories about women can be told, but an adherence to generic conventions which enable the telling of them.

In this chapter I discuss some of the problems associated with the realist form (which Tan uses to great effect in The Kitchen God’s Wife), and examine how different narratives have influenced the story I eventually told in “The Other Side of Silence.” Many writers, from James Joyce to Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett to Maxine Hong Kingston, Carol Shields to Yann Martel (for example) have challenged, and subsequently enlarged, the concept of the realist text. \(^{20}\) Shields’ work is of particular relevance to me as she focuses on the lives of ordinary women, and her writing project is emphatically not recuperative. Therefore, this chapter will focus on two novels by Carol Shields, The Stone Diaries and Unless, paying attention to the ways in which these novels highlight the lives of ‘ordinary’ women without placing emphasis on

searching for, or revealing, the ‘truth’ about them which traditional realism typically demands. Both novels employ poststructuralist strategies to tell the stories of the protagonists, and, at the same time, question the epistemic or ideological concerns which have marginalised particular women’s lives. I will focus specifically on Shields’ last novel _Unless_, as it remains the most influential text in my writing of “The Other Side of Silence.” _The Stone Diaries_ addresses some of the problems I faced in writing my own text; for example, it foregrounds the difficulty in articulating women’s lives, and advocates the preferential use of a subjective voice. However, it is primarily concerned with the ways in which the central protagonist narrates her own life story, and this kind of autobiographical structure was not one I chose for the writing of my own creative text. Through my reading of _Unless_, by contrast, I was alerted to ways I might tackle the issue of silence. Shields’ use of a situated and personal voice for her character, Reta, is significant, as are the problems she explicitly addresses in the writing of women’s lives within the narrative. It was Shields’ use of a focalised narrative voice to comment on a silenced character in _Unless_ which was to prove to be influential in the writing of “The Other Side of Silence.”

As I indicated in the previous chapter, _The Kitchen God’s Wife_, like much of Tan’s fiction, fits within the conventions of the realist text. Morris suggests that traditionally realism has been viewed as a “representational form” which was concerned with the “close artistic imitation of social reality” (Realism 4-5). Thus, Morris argues, the term has been linked with notions such as mimesis and verisimilitude (5). As well, and as Catherine Belsey points out:

Classic realism is characterized by _illusionism_, narrative which leads to _closure_, and a _hierarchy of discourses_
which establishes the ‘truth’ of the story. ([emphasis in original] Critical Practice 70)

Tan’s novel adheres to the trajectory of this kind of narrative: closure is attained by the end of the novel, and is made possible by the characters revealing their stories to one another. Furthermore, Winnie’s story is represented as a truthful account of her history; she is telling Pearl the story of what actually happened. By extension, and as Morris suggests:

the realist plot is typically structured upon the epistemological progress of readers and principal characters from ignorance to knowledge, and characterisation normally focuses upon the highly individualised inner subjective, self-development of rational understanding and moral discrimination. (Realism 28)

The attainment of some kind of truth or revelation and the development of the character are viewed as fundamental goals of the traditional realist text. Similarly the reader is provided with a definitive truth at the text’s end, unlike the more open-ended work of writers like Shields and Woolf. Morris suggests that this is because the realist text “coincided with and aligned itself to the modern secular materialist understanding of reality” (3). Belsey’s account reaffirms this position:

Classic realism, still the dominant popular mode in literature, film and television drama, roughly coincides with the epoch of industrial capitalism. It performs . . . the work of ideology, not only in its representation of a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, but also in offering the reader, as the position from which the text is most readily
The validation of empirical knowledge in classic realism has troubled many writers, in particular Woolf, whose problems with the realist form informed several of her texts, both non-fiction—“Modern Fiction” (1919), “Women and Fiction” (1929)—and fiction—Mrs Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927).

As I mentioned in Chapter One, as a writer, Woolf was concerned with the ways in which women were absent from historical discourse and this concern is evident in A Room of One’s Own. Woolf also experimented with ways of writing women back into historical narratives—her review of Mistress Joan Martyn’s diary, was one such instance. As McIntire suggests:

[Woolf’s] yearning to make an inscription where there has formerly been only a blank, and to demand a space for the unwritten, therefore stand at the root of both her feminism and her impulses to think historiographically.

(189-190)

Woolf later turned her critical attention to fiction, and in doing so, examined how the form of the classic realist text had suppressed, omitted or distorted the lives of women. Her essay “Modern Fiction” provides one of the earliest feminist critiques of realist fiction. For Woolf, the problem with the realist form is that it does not accurately represent reality as it is experienced. She writes:

Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this...
varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit,
whatever aberration or complexity it might display, with
as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?

(*Collected Essays: Volume Two* 106)

She suggests that reality cannot be “contained any longer by such ill-fitting vestments as [novelists] provide” (*Collected Essays: Volume Two* 105). The structure of the novel is dependent on certain conventions, and Woolf suggests that the author is “constrained, not by his [sic] own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him [sic] in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest” (*Collected Essays: Volume Two* 106). The critical attention which Woolf paid to the novel, and to realism, has been well-documented by feminists, and her work is still enormously influential today. Indeed, as McIntire asserts:

> It is time, then, that we think of Virginia Woolf not only as author and feminist polemicist, but also as an important modernist thinker of time, memory and history whose refusal to privilege the status of public events and moments of national or cultural display anticipates postmodernist revisionist histories. (190)

In Chapter One I suggested that Woolf’s writings pre-empted the feminist shifts which gained momentum in both literary and historical criticism, as well as creative writing in the 1970s and 1980s. Woolf’s focus on interiority (rather than on the “status of public events and moments of national or cultural display” [McIntire 190]) is another way in which she critiques traditional notions of realism to illustrate how they have suppressed women’s experiences.
In critical practice, Morris uses the example of *Mrs Dalloway* to show how Woolf breaks with the conventions of realism prevalent in her time:

‘plot’ is encompassed in a single day and resolves no mysteries, leaves the future of the lives presented in the story as uncertain as at the beginning, and refuses the reader any objective knowledge of the main protagonists that could form the basis of moral or epistemological evaluation. Put in technical terms, the novel refutes closure: nothing and no one is summed up in the writing as a coherent truth that can be known. ([emphasis in original] 15)

While the departure from the classic realist form which Woolf advocates is prevalent in many contemporary texts, many are still written within realist parameters, such as those fictions by Tan. Other writers, such as Morrison in *Beloved*, use narrative techniques including multiple, and sometimes contradictory, points of view (Sethe’s, Denver’s, Paul D’s) and non-linear narratives to tell their stories.21 This disruption of the traditional realist text has allowed writers, as Moi suggests, “to shatter the façade of empirical reality” (Morris 43). Moi also indicates that such writing—Woolf’s especially—“undermined the status quo of power structures” (Morris 43). This is particularly true of *Beloved* as this text provides an alternative version of Margaret Garner’s story which had previously been narrated by “official history” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 142).

Poststructuralist discourse, in particular the aspects of Derrida’s work mentioned in Chapter One—the examination of the logocentric nature of language,

21 Arundhati Roy utilises this to great effect in *The God of Small Things*. 
the binary structures on which meaning is predicated, and the importance of difference in constituting meaning—is particularly useful for feminist writers interrogating the realist form.22 It has provided feminists with a language to describe the variations and departures from realism which Woolf practiced. As I suggested in Chapter One, feminist critics have appropriated the “poststructuralist theories of language, sexuality and subjectivity for feminism” (The Feminist Reader 12-3). This is particularly true of Shields who has deftly utilised poststructuralist theories in her novels to find other ways of writing about women’s lives. Shields is concerned, as Atwood and Morrison are in their respective texts (Alias Grace and Beloved), with giving marginalised women a voice. But Shields does so without filling in, or glossing over, the gaps and silences in her female characters’ lives. Like Woolf, Shields seems to push these realist boundaries, and prompts the reader to examine the ways in which these more traditional genres of writing continue to silence women’s stories. As Woolf suggests in “Women and Fiction,” for women writers:

The novel will cease to be the dumping-ground for personal emotions. It will become, more than at present, a work of art like any other, and its resources and limitations will be explored. (148)

Shields has also written about the “resources and limitations” of telling women’s stories in a culture dominated by what she has defined as “the narrative arc . . . of rising action—tumescence, detumescence—what some feminists call the ejaculatory mode of storytelling” (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 35). She expresses a desire to find other ways to speak about women’s narratives:

If postmodernism has proved a synthetic discourse, unanimated by personal concerns, at least it has given writers a breath of that precious oxygen of permission, and more important, time to see in what ways the old realism—the mirror of the world—has failed us. It was perhaps, not real enough. (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 34)

Throughout both *The Stone Diaries* and *Unless*, Shields exhibits a concern with the ways in which the realist novel cannot always meaningfully represent the lives of women. This concern with the generic limitations of the conventional realist form is shared with others within feminist literary theory. As Morris argues:

There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels never give us life or a slice of life, nor do they reflect reality . . . realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents. ([emphasis in original] 4)

In rejecting conventional realism, Shields’ work provides the reader with alternative ways of narrating a story, ways that may be read as more credible or more authentic. In particular, *The Stone Diaries* utilises postmodernist narrative strategies—shifting points of view, an unreliable narrative voice—to point to the ways in which adherence to conventional realist form may silence certain kinds of stories and, by extension, certain kinds of lives.
The Stone Diaries

The Stone Diaries was published in 1994—around the same time as Morrison’s Beloved, Atwood’s Alias Grace, Tan’s The Kitchen God’s Wife and Forster’s Hidden Lives—and the novel shares many of characteristics which makes these texts relevant to my own narrative. The Stone Diaries has attracted a plethora of critical attention, winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It has simultaneously been labelled as autobiography, auto/biography, fiction, and metafiction. It is a novel impossible to characterise effectively. As Nino Ricci writes:

Structurally the book is a dog’s breakfast, a hodgepodge of recipes and letters and epigraphs and floating snippets of conversation and reflection; with a shifting point of view that, in defiance of contemporary fashion, is forever flitting from character to character . . . (“A Tribute to Carol Shields” 172)

The Stone Diaries comprises ten chapters ranging from ‘Birth, 1905,’ ‘Childhood, 1916,’ ‘Marriage, 1927’ all the way to ‘Death’ (the date for which is not given). This structure hints at a relatively straightforward account of Daisy Goodwill’s life; from her birth in Manitoba, through to her disastrous first marriage, her falling in love. . . . However, this description of the text implies a chronology, or linearity, that doesn’t exist in this novel which self-consciously resists the structure indicated by the chapter titles. The

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Shields’ other most critically examined works include her novel Swann (1996), and Larry’s Party (1997) for which she won the Orange Prize for Fiction.

novel oscillates between first- and third-person perspectives, a technique which
further destabilises the narrative’s consistency. As Shields has commented:

it was my intention that everything should be filtered
through the consciousness of Daisy Goodwill. Many other
voices are what she imagines people are thinking or
saying about her . . . (“Contemporary Literature” 347).

In Chapter One the reader is faced with the dilemma of working out who is narrating
the text. This chapter provides an account of Daisy’s birth, beginning with third-person
narration, but ending with first-person narration. Daisy describes the events preceding
her own birth in vivid detail. She writes of her mother (Mercy) cooking a Malvern
pudding:

It’s something to see, the way she concentrates, her hot,
busy face, the way she thrills to see the dish take form as
she pours the stewed fruit into the fancy mold, pressing
the thickly cut bread down over the oozing juices . . . (2)

In this chapter, the narrator describes events and reveals details about her mother
which Daisy could not have reliably known or remembered. Mercy dies giving birth to
Daisy; and the reader is told no one else is in the kitchen as Mercy cooks the Malvern
pudding. So how does Daisy come to know these details of the day of her birth? How
does she know of the pain in her mother’s swollen stomach (or that Mercy tries to
remedy this by eating buttered bread sprinkled with sugar? [2]). The narrative voice
moves from a third-person, omniscient voice to a first-person voice in this chapter.
The use of the omniscient voice here is interesting. Omniscience in narrative, Rimmon-
Kenan suggests, can be defined by
Familiarity, in principle, with the characters’ innermost thoughts and feelings; knowledge of the past, present and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied . . . and knowledge of what happens in several places at the same time.

(Narrative Fiction 95)

This is certainly true of this chapter in which the narrative details not only Daisy’s mother’s thoughts and feelings, but also those of their neighbour, Clarentine Flett. The switch from an omniscient to a first-person voice (for no apparent reason) is one of the ways in which Shields confronts the reader with a dilemma of how to make sense of (or question if they can trust) the narrator. Is this scene more, or less, real because it may have been imagined by the narrator? And what are these ‘imagined’ scenes doing within this apparently quasi-autobiographical structure?

Nevertheless, throughout The Stone Diaries the reader is given some details about Daisy’s life, although they are told in fragmented, non-linear and often contradictory manner/s. The reader is informed that Daisy travels to the States with her father, gets married, has children, gets a job ‘outside the home,’ ages, becomes ill and begins to die (or so the reader is prompted to believe by the chapter heading “Death”). The text introduces the main characters in Daisy’s life-story: her parents’ neighbour, Clarentine Flett, who along with her son Barker, cared for Daisy as a child; Daisy’s father, Cuyler Goodwill; and her school chums, Labina (Beans) Anthony and Fraidy Hoyt. However, The Stone Diaries tends to omit certain events which would traditionally be defined as critical to Daisy’s experiences, foregrounding instead those that might be read as insignificant in the writing of a life. Seemingly trivial incidents are described in great detail: for instance, Daisy’s cooking of a jellied veal loaf is given
more than three pages (157-160), while, by contrast, her marriage to Barker Flett is described in one relatively short paragraph (153). The account of her first wedding, rather than focusing on Daisy and her husband, Harold Hoad, concentrates instead on her father’s speech, and recalls in great detail another speech delivered by Cuyler at Daisy’s graduation ceremony (80-86). The traumatic death of her first husband is skimmed over, as are the circumstances of her marriage to her second husband and birth of her three children; yet twenty pages are given over to letters written in response to Daisy’s newspaper column, “Mrs. Green Thumb” (205-225).

By thus subverting the chronological ordering and prioritising typical to the traditional realist narrative, the text provokes questions of how a life like Daisy’s can be narrated. As Winifred M. Mellor remarks:

The manipulation of narrative technique in the text draws attention to the way women are silenced by the restrictive modes of certain genres. (“The Simple Container of our Existence” 97)

*The Stone Diaries* refutes the narrative conventions of traditional realism, suggesting to the reader that it is these conventions, with their emphasis on action, revelation, truth and closure that have led to the silencing or marginalisation of women’s stories. Shields approaches her narrative differently to Morrison, Atwood and Tan, for example, who use marginalised perspectives to give their female characters a voice. Shields, like Woolf, disrupts the generic conventions of realism to show how genre can silence, or misrepresent, certain stories. In “Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Dairies*” Wendy Roy writes: “Shields has described her fictive autobiography as a comment on women’s silencing and on their erasure from the centre of their own
lives” (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 138). By extension, critics have read the non-chronological, non-linear and contradictory narrative of The Stone Dairies as a deliberate attempt to emphasise how narratives steeped in traditional realism silence so many women’s stories. Shields ruminates on this question in her essay “Narrative Hunger”:

For a life does not unfold in chapters—you may have noticed this. A life does not have an underlying theme, yet we seem to believe a novel must. A life does not build slowly but steadily to a climax. A life is rarely restricted to three main characters. In life, a new character may enter the scheme in the final pages, but in fiction, we have declared this an offence against aesthetic order. (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 28)

In critiquing the realist plot, Shields points out its limitations. Moreover, she has argued that, as a genre, realism is, “not real enough.” (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 34). The disruption of chronological order is not simply a way of subverting the genre, but points to a different and, theorists have argued, more authentic way of recording a life. As Morris argues:

Although time is often thought of as a one-way linear flow from past towards the future, our actual empirical experience of temporality is much more complicated than this. Frequently our current actions are determined by participation of their future effect and by memory of previous events. (107)

The disruption of chronology within the novel points to the way/s in which the realist text often misrepresents ‘actual’ time for the sake of chronological and coherent
narratives. One only has to consider *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and imagine how long Pearl was allegedly sitting and listening to her mother’s story to realise how incredible it is that Winnie’s story would be narrated in this way.

Thus, *The Stone Diaries* through its very structure, as well as its narrative voice, explicitly addresses the difficulties in recording life-stories within fiction. As Daisy states: “The recounting of a life is a cheat, of course; I admit the truth of this; even our own stories are obscenely distorted” (28). Throughout it is obvious that, as Stanley suggests, the auto/biographical enterprise is an artful one “which select(s) shape(s) and produce(s) an unnatural product” (*The Auto/Biographical I* 4). I would suggest that the novel also illustrates the artfulness of realism as a genre as well. Daisy goes into detail about this at several points in the novel, most memorably (for me) in her chapter ‘Love, 1936’:

> Maybe now is the time to tell you that Daisy Goodwill has a little trouble getting things straight; with the truth that is. (148)

She goes on to say that

> a childhood is what anyone wants to remember of it. It leaves behind no fossils, except perhaps in fiction. Which is why you want to take Daisy’s representation of events with a grain of salt, a bushel of salt. She is not always reliable when it comes to the details of her life; much of what she has to say is speculative, exaggerated, wildly unlikely. (148)

The narrative continues in this vein for quite some time, chastising Daisy’s representation of her first mother-in-law, Mrs. Arthur Hoad, alerting us to the fact that
she has omitted ‘important matters’ such as her private schooling. By emphasising her subjectivity in ‘recounting’ her life story, Shields confronts the reader with a narrative–subject who is acutely aware of how she positions herself in the text. Daisy tells us that “Daisy Goodwill’s perspective is off” (148), and in the same passage goes on to criticise the manner in which she represents the events of her life:

Furthermore, she imposes the voice of the future on the events of the past, causing all manner of wavy distortion. She takes great jumps in time. . . . Sometimes she looks at things close up and sometimes from a distance, and she does insist on showing herself in a sunny light, hardly ever giving us a glimpse of those dark premonitions we all experience. And oh dear, dear, she is cursed with the lonely woman’s romantic imagination and thus can support only happy endings. (148-9)

Paradoxically, the way in which Daisy articulates her own story is, in a sense, highly credible. Very rarely do we think in coherent patterns or along chronological lines suggested by the realist mode. Winnie’s ‘monologue’ in The Kitchen God’s Wife, presented as a coherent and chronologically consistent narrative, without a peep from Pearl is decidedly conventional. The way that Daisy narrates her story to the reader, is, I would suggest, far more authentic. Daisy questions her ability to narrate her life story truthfully and, by doing so, Shields undermines the realist text’s dependence on what Morris terms as “the epistemological progress of principal characters from ignorance to knowledge”(28). Nonetheless, if Daisy were not to narrate her life, Shields seems to suggest, no one else would: “Still, hers is the only account there is, written on air, written with imagination’s invisible ink” (149).
The final chapter of *The Stone Diaries* emphasises the various misinterpretations of Daisy’s life by those closest to her. Questions remain about the impact of her first husband’s death on Daisy, and the nature of her relationship with Jay Dudley, the editor of the newspaper in which Daisy’s “Mrs. Green Thumb” column appeared. The chapter goes on to list all the organisations Daisy has belonged to; all the houses she has lived in; a list of her wedding lingerie as well as a shopping list, a to-do list and a list of the books she has read. It also gives us fragments of her eulogy, recipes, invitations and snippets of conversations about Daisy’s death by those closest to her. While Daisy is being defined by her remaining family, the narrative slips in and out of first-person “I’m still here . . .” (352). As Dianne Osland writes in “*The Stone Diaries, Jane Eyre*, and the Burden of Romance*:

> At the end of her life, Daisy may not be at peace, but neither has her tongue been stilled, and, to the extent that Daisy makes this story her own, she becomes a woman who makes things happen, in the process restocking the narrative cupboard by redefining the parameters of a tellable life. (*Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction* 105)

The non-linear narrative, the refusal to pay attention to so-called ‘significant’ events, and the disruption of closure all indicate ways in which Shields’ novel challenges and enlarges our idea of fiction to include the stories about ordinary women that are typically omitted, marginalised or silenced.

This novel has certainly been significant in thinking about how I might narrate a life of a woman from the past. The emphasis which Shields places on the ordinary events in the novel is a particularly striking feature of the text, which critiques the
“narrative arc” which Shields has referred to as being restrictive for women writers. The foregrounding of an ordinary woman like Daisy is a powerful statement about the importance placed on particular lives in novels, and one which Shields explores more fully in *Unless*. Shields’ privileging of certain events in Daisy’s life, and not others, suggests that the importance traditionally placed on the realist novel to provide action, revelation and closure has silenced certain kinds of lives. Not only is Shields giving a marginalised woman a voice, but her disruption of the traditional conventions of realism prompted me, as a writer, to think about the other ways I might begin writing a text about a woman’s life.

**Unless**

While Shields’ last novel has not received the same amount of critical attention as *The Stone Diaries*, the reviews for *Unless* have been plenty and varied. Rachel Cusk writes that “*Unless* is a formidable meditation on reality: it takes the vessel of fiction and hurls it to the floor” (*New Statesman* 47). Cusk also comments that *Unless* is a book that speaks without pretension about its strange and singular subject: the relationship between women and culture, the nature of artistic endeavour, and the hostility of female truth to representations of itself. (47)

Kate Sterns’ remark that the “important bits have been left out” (*Queen’s Quarterly* 338) is, I think, the point of this text, which critiques the emphasis on action and resolution of conventional realism. *Unless* also poses challenges to the realist text, although, unlike *The Stone Diaries*, it does so from within a recognisably realist

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25 In “How to be Good” Elaine Showalter writes that “*Unless* is formally less complex than [Shields’] earlier novels, notably the brilliant and inventive *Mary Swann* (1987)” (*London Review of Books*) 13. In her review “How Goodness Is,” Kate Sterns writes that within the novel “there is a sense that important bits have been left out” (*Queen’s Quarterly*).
framework (much like *Mrs Dalloway*, *The God of Small Things* and *Beloved*). Whereas *The Stone Diaries* provides the reader with a whole range of information about Daisy, given in an apparently random order, *Unless* is narrated through a situated character who orders information for the reader. Like Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, *Unless* is a matrilineal narrative, but one inverted, since the life of the young daughter is the focal point of interest for her mother, rather than the other way around.

The first-person narrative of the text belongs to Reta Winters, a mother of three, scholar, translator and writer of fiction. This central character is (like Shields herself) concerned with writing fiction about women, and commenting on “the resources and limitations” (“Women and Writing” 148) in writing about women’s lives. At the book’s beginning, Reta states that she is “going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now” (1). Her eldest daughter Norah, a young university student, has ceased her ‘normal’ life, to sit on a Toronto street corner wearing a cardboard sign with the word GOODNESS scrawled on it. It is a situation that is at once ordinary and extraordinary: “This isn’t such a big deal, a kid taking a season out on the street. It happens” (214), says an acquaintance of Reta’s. Yet the behaviour of her eldest daughter deeply affects Reta. The absence of Norah pervades every aspect of Reta’s life, and much of the narrative of *Unless* is concerned with Reta’s attempts to come to terms with Norah’s silence. Norah refuses to explain her actions to anyone. She does not speak in the present tense of the book, save for one word at the book’s end. Thus most of the narrative of *Unless* is preoccupied with Reta’s speculations about what has caused Norah to take this stance.

Reta is unable to influence Norah’s behaviour; she has tried talking to her, she has tried to grab her by the hand and pull her to safety, but to no avail. As the book
progresses, and Norah remains seated on her street-corner, placard around her neck.

Reta turns her attention to the culture in which Norah has taken such an apparently submissive stance:

> I thought of my three daughters and my mother-in-law, and my own dead mother. . . . Not one of us was going to get what we wanted. I had suspected this for years, and now I believe that Norah half knows the big female secret of wanting and not getting. . . . Imagine someone writing a play called *Death of a Saleswoman*. What a joke. (97)

Reta begins to suspect that Norah’s behaviour may have been caused by a growing awareness of the limitations placed on women in contemporary culture; Norah is, after all, a student of linguistics and feminism, not unlike her mother. Danielle Westerman, the French feminist academic whose work Reta has been translating for years, believes that Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity . . . in doing nothing, she has claimed everything. (104)

Reta rejects this notion at first, “I don’t want to think Norah is concerned with power or lack of power . . . she’s in a demented trance of some kind, and any minute . . . she’ll snap her fingers and bring herself back to life” (104-5). But Danielle’s suggestion of Norah’s powerlessness stays with Reta, and she begins to see evidence of it all around her. She writes a letter (the first in a series of many which she does not send) to the editors of a magazine in which a course in the ‘Great Minds of the Western Intellectual World’ is offered. Reta objects that, not only are all the advertised ‘great minds’ men
(Galileo, Kant, Hegel, Bacon, Newton, Plato, Locke and Descartes), but that the Faculty of this course comprises nine men and only one woman. She suggests that this advertisement expresses

a callous lack of curiosity about great women’s minds, a complete unawareness in fact. . . . My only hope is that my daughter, her name is Norah, will not pick up a copy of this magazine, read this page, and understand, as I have for the first time, how casually and completely she is shut out of the universe. (137)

As the season changes into autumn, and Norah remains seated on her street-corner, Reta begins to write the sequel to her first novel. It is something to distract her from her continuing worry, a place to which she can escape. Yet the world of fiction does not offer the retreat from the questions about women and power, goodness and greatness that now occupy so much of Reta’s mind. As an author, Reta, along with several other women writers, is classified as one of

the miniaturists of fiction (who) rather than taking a broad canvas of society . . . find universal verities in small individual lives. (247)

Reta understands that, in the world of fiction, there exists a hierarchy in which women writers and, by that association, women themselves, are often viewed as ‘unimportant.’ In response to her classification as a miniaturist of fiction, Reta argues that the focus on ordinary lives, to which so many of her female writer

Shields has often been classified as a miniaturist of fiction. “Early on in my career,” she says . . . “the critics called me ‘a miniaturist,’” said that I wrote ‘women’s books,’ ‘domestic novels,’ as if that were a lesser thing. But I knew then as I know now that the lives of women are serious and interesting” Maria Arana, ed., The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003) 373.
contemporaries are accused of limiting themselves, is of great significance, especially since readers and writers are themselves.

‘small individual lives’ [who] apprehended the wide world in which they [swim], but their gaze [is] primarily locked on . . . how each separate person makes sense of all that is benevolent or malicious. (248)

Reta returns to the question of Norah, whom she believes:

has been driven from the world by the suggestion that she is doomed to miniaturism. . . . She can have ‘goodness, but not greatness,’ to quote the well-known Dr. Danielle Westerman. (248)

These views about the place of women’s fiction are also reiterated in Reta’s fictional manuscript. Arthur Springer, Reta’s new editor, believes that Reta’s current manuscript is bound for greatness, and so wants to make the male character the resounding voice and ‘moral centre’ (285) of the novel. Arthur believes that the female protagonist, Alicia, is unable to carry the weight of the book’s meaning on her feminine shoulders, “She writes fashion articles. She talks to her cat. She does yoga. She makes rice casseroles,” he says dismissively (285). He goes on to say:

The reader, the kind of serious reader that I have in mind, would never accept her as the decisive fulcrum of a serious work that acts as a critique of our society. (286)

Arthur wants to rename the novel Bloom, “it gestures toward the Bloom of Ulysses, Leopold Bloom, that great Everyman” (282). Arthur also wants to change Reta’s pen name for the new book to ‘R. R. Summers,’ a gender-neutral name, yet one which Reta feels hints at a male author. However, for Reta it is crucial that Thyme in Bloom retains
its primary focus on Alicia. Despite Arthur’s insistence that the novel deals with the universal and somehow has managed to go “beyond the gendered world” (282), Reta’s manuscript is specifically about a young woman who is learning to reject what her culture offers her. “But . . . Alicia is thinking quite hard about gender, at least in her own spacey way,” (282) Reta argues. Her protests echo those of Woolf in “Women and Fiction”:

Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears to be insignificant to a man, and trivial what is important to him. And for that, of course, she will be criticized. (Collected Essays: Volume Two 146)

Arthur’s desire for Roman to occupy the moral centre of the novel is not only reminiscent of Woolf’s assertion, but also points to the roles which men and women have traditionally occupied within fiction. In Thyme in Bloom Reta decides that Alicia cannot marry Roman, that the sequel cannot have the happy ending she had originally intended. Given Reta’s current circumstance, the clichéd happy ending is too convenient, and not authentic. I would suggest that Shields is also drawing our attention to the ways in which marriage has been traditionally viewed in realist texts as the ultimate (romantic) goal for the heroine.\(^{27}\) Alicia’s rejection of her fiancé is also indicative of Reta’s ongoing struggle (as a writer) to find a different position for young women in the world.\(^{28}\) By having Alicia reject Roman, Reta is searching for a different

\(^{27}\)Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813) (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) is perhaps the most widely known example of this.

\(^{28}\)One could posit that Winnie’s marriage to Jimmy Louie saves her from her previous marriage, as well as saving her from war-torn China in The Kitchen God’s Wife.
place for the heroine of the realist novel, one which she has not traditionally occupied within genres such as popular fiction.

It is at this point, when Reta refuses to make Roman the focal point of her book, that Norah disappears from her street-corner. Tom, Reta’s long-time partner and Norah’s father, phones Reta as she is immersed in a discussion with Arthur, to alert her to the fact that Norah has been admitted to hospital with pneumonia. It is here that Reta finds out, via a department store video-tape, that Norah had witnessed a young Muslim woman setting herself on fire in protest some months earlier. Shortly afterwards Norah had abandoned her studies, moved out of the flat she had shared with her boyfriend, and had taken up residence on the street with her sign. However, this is merely given as one possible reason for Norah’s silent protest. The narrative of Unless ends with only a brief scene between Reta and Norah, and the text never singles out a motivation for Norah’s behaviour. The reader, like the narrator, is left wondering:

My own theory—before we knew of the horrifying event—was that Norah . . . had awakened in her twentieth year to her solitary state of non-belonging, understanding at last how little she would be allow to say . . . and it may be that I am partly right and partly wrong. Or that Tom is partly right and partly wrong about his theory of post-traumatic shock. Or that Danielle knew from the beginning. We’ll never know why. (309-10)

Reta’s joy at being able to once again be near Norah, and to be a part of her life, is compounded by her triumph with her novel. Arthur Springer withdraws his editorial suggestions on Reta’s second book, after her first book is re-examined “by none other
than Dr. Charles Casey, the octogenarian dean of humanities,” and the latter pronounces it “a brilliant tour de force” (318). This of course is a partial victory; Arthur has no doubt been satisfied by a man’s opinion that a woman can be the ‘moral centre’ of a novel. Yet it is a victory nonetheless, as it gives Reta the freedom to highlight the life of her heroine, a task that has become ever more important to her, given her recent musings about the fragile place women occupy in fiction, and in culture.

One of the most striking elements of *Unless* is that it is the silence around Norah which provides a hook into the narrative of the text. It was impossible for me to read this novel without wondering why Norah is sitting on a street-corner, why she is silent, why she wears a sign with the word **GOODNESS** written on it, and whether or not she will return to her ‘normal’ existence. Rimmon-Kenan suggests that a ‘gap’ in narratives (such as Norah’s silence in *Unless*) always

enhances interest and curiosity, prolongs the reading process, and contributes to the reader’s dynamic participation in making the text signify. (129)

Moreover, Norah’s silence can be read as a plot device, not unlike the four scenes Forster entices us with at the beginning of *Hidden Lives*, or the ultimatum Helen issues to Pearl and Winnie in *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. However, Shields, as I have already mentioned, does not give the reader a conclusive explanation for Norah’s silence. Throughout the novel Reta speculates on a number of possible reasons for her daughter’s silent protest. Perhaps it was the result of Norah’s argument with her English professor about *Madame Bovary* (217). Or, as, Tom believes, that Norah is
suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. What is evident at the end of *Unless* is that, unlike Tan, Shields is not going to provide the reader with a definitive explanation for Norah’s silence. Shields resists the temptation of giving us the story of Norah’s life thus far, and although some insights are given into Norah’s past they do not answer questions about Norah’s situation. Like Tan, Shields has the opportunity to reveal the mysteries which remain about Norah’s behaviour; after all, in the book’s final paragraph, Norah is “recovering at home . . . and shyly planning her way on a conjectural map” (320). And we must not forget that this is a fictional world, a place in which anything, within realist limits, could happen, where facts could be revealed and closure attained once and for all.

Yet I believe this resisting of closure is not incidental. Reta is, after all, a scholar, a reader of Derrida (4) and translator for a French feminist academic. By setting up the silence of Norah and refusing to fill it with words of explanation or resolution at the text’s conclusion, I believe that Shields’ novel can be read as a critique of the importance of reaching a singular conclusion, or meaning, that is the goal of much realist fiction. Reta does not reveal the cause of Norah’s actions, and in refusing to do so the text implies that such ‘truths’ are unattainable due to their subjective, rather than definitive, nature. In fact, the very title of the novel suggests a liminal space, a friction between knowing and not knowing. As Reta muses:

> Unless is the worry word of the English language. It flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it, but

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29Reta reflects on Tom’s diagnosis: “Well, he is a doctor. The idea of diagnosis and healing comes naturally to him, a rhythmic arc of cause and effect that has its own built-in satisfactions, and how enviable, to me, this state of mind is” (264). The cause and effect Reta mentions here recalls for me the conventions of realism, and indicates to me, once again, the inadequacy of these conventions in adequately portraying some women’s narratives.
everything depends on its breathy presence. It’s always there, or else not there. (224)

Unless can be read as a valorisation of the subordinate clause which that term ushers in. The text lurks at the periphery of knowing: it hints, speculates, suggests. The riddle of Norah is never solved. Interestingly, Norah’s silence holds a certain power over the book. Her behaviour affects many people. Reta’s grief is clear from the opening lines of the novel; her mother-in-law Lois has stopped speaking, and her other daughters are similarly affected: “Natalie is sleeping badly. Chris is falling behind in math” (162). Reta also observes at dinner that Tom’s “hands are shaking. When did that start?” (171). Norah’s silence directly influences the behaviour of those who care about her, or those who encounter her. Shields’ text thus unpicks the binaries of activity/passivity, speech/silence to illustrate how Norah’s inaction is a form of action, her silence a form of speech. Furthermore, the absence of a singular reason for Norah’s (in)action, significantly disrupts the realist convention of closure.

By refusing conventional resolution Unless rejects the traditional trajectory of the realist novel and does not provide the reader with the kind of reconciliation or recuperation which Tan offers in The Kitchen God’s Wife. Given Norah’s refusal to explain her actions, Reta’s narrative is the organising principle of the story. As such, Reta can be read as the reliable narrative voice. Rimmon-Kenan suggests that:

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of a fictional truth. (100)

The story of Unless is, as I have mentioned, focalised through Reta’s perspective. However, the reader is also aware that Reta is implicated in the story; her grief
influences the way she views Norah, and is evident in the way in which the narrative consistently returns to the question of Norah and her placard. At one point in the novel, Reta tells Danielle that:

I sometimes don’t believe what I write. I can’t rely on my own sallies and locutions, my takes on the immediate and devastating circumstances. (227).

Reta also worries that she is “constructing a tottering fantasy of female exclusion and pinning it on [her] daughter” (227). The highly personal tone characterising Reta’s narrative paradoxically grants authority to the text. Reta is seen as a trustworthy narrator; most evidently in her ability to question her account of events, to change her mind and to speculate. In a particularly bleak moment, Reta suggests that all women have been

    displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. (270)

But on the next line she writes “The cry is overstated; I’m an editor after all, and recognise purple prose when I see it” (270). Yet the prose remains; it is not edited out of *Unless*. Even as Reta tidily wraps up the narrative strands of her manuscript *Thyme in Bloom*, she knows that:

    It means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel’s thin textual plane; make that five seconds; make that the millionth part of a nanosecond. (318)
Unless ends without giving the reader the kind of definitive closure which, for example, Winnie provides at the end of The Kitchen God’s Wife. Rather, the question of Norah’s silence remains unanswered, and Shields uses this gap to tell other stories about women and marginalisation. Importantly, the preferential use of the subjective voice indicates how narrative strategies that strive for objectivity and impartiality may continue to silence certain kinds of lives. I would suggest that Shields’ fictional text addresses the epistemological concerns that have continued to silence women’s lived experiences, and prepares the reader for different kinds of stories.

The significance of both The Stone Diaries and Unless is the way they both challenge the traditional realist text and its reliance on confession, reconciliation and closure. The foregrounding of lives and experiences such as Daisy, Reta and Norah’s can be read alongside those drawn attention to by historical fiction writers, such as Morrison and Atwood. Like these writers, Shields gives readers different interpretations of women’s narratives. Unlike Tan, however, Shields does not use fiction to fill in the gaps and silences which occur in researching ordinary lives. Instead, the fragmentation, omissions and distortions which The Stone Diaries and Unless offer provide narratives which prompt the reader to reflect on the place of women in culture. Both The Stone Diaries and Unless assert that traditional forms of realism do not adequately portray the world in which we live. By doing so, both texts reject the mimetic quality of conventional realism, and Shields, in her fiction, is able to explore the “resources and limitations” (to cite Woolf) of realist fiction.

One of the most salient aspects of Unless for my own writing project was the way in which Shields handles the ‘problem’ of Norah’s silence, and never gives the reader a conclusive reason for it. Instead Shields writes around the silence; the novel
is not stifled (in the same way Forster’s text is) by all that cannot be known about Norah, but, rather, Shields explores throughout her text, the stories which are generated by Norah’s silence. By not telling the story of Norah’s motivations, Shields not only encourages the reader to create the ‘meaning’ of the text, but the subjective nature of the narrative voice hints at an inability to arrive at the kind of closure which the traditional realist text relies upon. The focalisation of the text through Reta’s perspective highlights the partiality of narrative voices and, in doing so, reminds the reader of how subjective narrative truth actually is. By refuting the literary conventions of conventional realism, Shields provides the reader with a more credible view of reality.

In “Modern Fiction” Woolf asks, “Is life like this?” “Must novels be like this?” (106). In Unless the reader gets the sense that Shields herself is grappling with precisely these questions. Shields’ concern that realism is ‘not real enough’ is evident in both these novels. As Chiara Briganti writes:

Shields has thought long and hard and has succeeded in making the epistemological implications of life writing a solid and serious concern of her fiction. (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 176)

In the case of my own narrative, I felt that I couldn’t reveal the particulars about my fictional character’s past, especially if they were the reasons her story would have been silenced in the first place. Shields’ work has prompted me to think about the ways I might tell such a story without falling into the realist trajectory of confession and closure. “The Other Side of Silence” has been motivated by a desire to illustrate, within fiction, how certain narratives about women become suppressed, while all the
while illuminating the indefinable complexities of these marginalised women’s stories.

The attention to silence, the foregrounding of an insecure, speculative narrative voice and the refusal of closure in Unless provided me, as a writer, with other ways to think about how I might tell a woman’s story in “The Other Side of Silence.”

Throughout Chapters One and Two, I have suggested that many stories about women have been suppressed or deemed ‘untellable,’ not only through the lack of adequate historical information about women, but also by the conventions of the classic realist text. The recovery of the past that Tan emphasises, while having positive implications, adheres, as I have argued, to the kind of realist devices that have highlighted certain kinds of lives at the expense of others. Conversely, writers such as Woolf, Morrison, Atwood and Shields have interrogated the realist form in order to write about different kinds of lives within fiction. Significantly for me, shame is one of the possible causes which has impeded the telling of certain kinds of stories. In Chapter Three I will address the questions which I faced in writing “The Other Side of Silence,” namely, how might I tell the story of woman’s life which had effectively been silenced? How could I do so without depending on those traditional realist devices (which Tan uses so well), but that are reliant on confession and reconciliation? How could fiction be used to illustrate that the particulars of a woman’s life were unknowable? And, importantly, how might I write a text without delving into what would typically be seen as the most significant or textually dramatic aspects of her story?
In Salerno . . .

When some time in 2006, I decided to set part of “The Other Side of Silence” in Italy, I immediately thought of Campania, a region about two of hours south of Rome which boasts both the splendour of Capri and the Amalfi Coast, as well as the threat of Vesuvius, and the shadowy, menacing streets of Naples. I’d been to Naples once before, a day-time excursion with my family. The place had imprinted itself on my consciousness: its proximity to Pompeii, the beauty of the coastline and the feeling that, any second now, we might get mugged. It was in Naples that I entered my first catacomb and was confronted with human relics—smooth skulls and white bones. In Pompeii, whole bodies were preserved by the lava which burnt them alive, caught in their last moment of movement: either cowering for protection or trying to reach up through the ash that would fix them in this helpless pose for centuries. There are no photographs of our trip to Naples; my cousin had advised us against getting our cameras out. The only pictures of my time there were taken within the well guarded perimeters of Pompeii. When, five years after this trip, I was thinking of where to set my novel, how could I not set it in Campania, this region that was at once full of light and dark: from the blue and white of the Tyrrhenian Sea, to the bodies in ash, the human bones?

In 2007 I visited Salerno, a town I had never been to before, a town half way between Capri and Naples. It was because of its proximity to both the beauty of the Amalfi Coast, and the dark thrill of Naples that I chose to set my novel here. Needless to say, I wandered through the town, my visitor’s lenses firmly in place. The Centro
Storico (‘the old centre’) most resembles the cramped back alleys of Naples, but it is surrounded by newly erected buildings which hem in the old piazzas. The Centro Storico is also overshadowed by the Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, a long stretch of road closer to the sea. Parts of the Corso are newly paved, and lined with trees in wooden boxes, and the street boasts huge shops on either side, featuring expensive Italian brands: Furla, Max Mara, Alessi.

Being part-Italian, I have dark hair and olive skin. Italian was the first language I learned, so I can speak it without an Australian accent (although now my vocabulary is very limited). Despite these shared traits with other Italians, I was obviously out of place in Salerno. Like the people in most of the Italian villages I have visited, the people of Salerno respect the ritual of the evening passagiata. The stores re-open and the people emerge, in loafers and linen trousers, hair and make-up immaculate, to walk up and down the street, maybe buy a slice of pizza or a gelato, or perhaps go into a few stores. The evening passagiata is a curious thing; one suspects (and I certainly did, from my ‘other’ed perspective) that the passagiata has less to do with gelati or enjoying the weather and more to do with seeing or being seen. In t-shirt and shorts, hair frizzy with salt-water, backpack on my shoulders, it was obvious to me, and to the townspeople, that I was not a local. I felt underdressed, as if I had walked into a cathedral and not realised that a priest was at the pulpit, giving Sunday Mass. All the same, the younger people, those used to tourists, seemed to overlook me. It was the older people’s reactions I was interested in, particularly those women who I imagined to be around Serafina’s age, women who didn’t grow up with tourists traipsing through their village. The looks I got from these older women were scorching.

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30 This translates to ‘promenade,’ but for Italians, it simply means going for a walk.
their gazes went, distaste etched on the lines of their faces. At those moments, I felt almost as though I was Serafina, ashamed of how I looked, embarrassed that I hadn’t gone to the pensione and changed into something more appropriate for evening. I remember this shock of recognition vividly. Walking down the Corso dressed as I was, it was obvious that I had failed to conform to certain social mores—I feel compelled to point out that I had not brought my good clothes with me to Salerno; that they had been left at my cousin’s apartment in Rome. In leaving my good clothes in Rome, I must have had certain expectations about Salerno, not to mention my role there (as researcher, rather than tourist). In not dressing appropriately for the passagiata I was identified, and forced to identify, as not being Italian enough. So, just like Serafina, I was seen as more different from, than similar to. And I can recall not only the embarrassment and shame, but also the strange sensation of seeing through my character’s eyes. At this point, I was close to completing a full first-draft of my novel, so I was aware that the creative text was very much on my mind as I walked through Salerno. However, looking back now, I wonder if the shock I felt was not simply that of being an outsider, but also as recognising myself as a writer. The character whose eyes I was seeing through was one of my own invention, making the experience even more bizarre. It was with relief that I boarded the train to Rome the next day, walked through Termini and into the hustle and noise of those busy streets outside the station, thrilled at the anonymity I was afforded in being just another tourist.

**The Story So Far . . .**

Throughout this exegesis I have relied on, not only the novels of Shields, Atwood, Morrison Tan and Woolf, but, also, what the writers themselves have said about their work which I have sourced through interviews, essays and critical texts.
This focus on writerly intention has been significant to my understanding of these various authors’ fictional works. Of course, it is possible to enjoy texts such as *Beloved*, *Alias Grace*, *The Stone Diaries* and *Unless* without knowing the writer’s motivation in writing them but, for me, these texts are politically or ideologically motivated, and knowing this has helped in my understanding of why and *how* these texts were written. In addition, and as Sara Mills suggests, for feminist writers, there are problems in forgetting about the author in discussions of creative texts, particularly where gender is concerned. She writes:

Much structuralist and post-structuralist work, in particular the work of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, has attempted to show that the author is of no importance in the discussion of texts; that the author is effectively ‘dead.’ However, many feminists would disagree with this type of theoretical position, since the gender of the author is of vital importance . . . (*Feminist Readings/ Feminists Reading* 75)

Similarly Stanley asks the reader to “consider what the denial of authorship actually does” (*The Auto/biographical I* 16). She posits that the ‘death of the author’ was a very convenient death for the beneficiaries of this philosophical viewpoint. Stanley contends:

At the very point when—due to the activities of anti-colonialism, the black movement, the women’s movement, the gay movement—‘the author,’ the authoritative source of all that excludes, is named and has an accusatory finger pointed at him, the author at this very point conveniently dies. (*The Auto/biographical I* 17)
Stanley goes on to argue that the poststructuralist ideas which encompass the ‘death of the author’ should be used by those who have been marginalised, and I would say that writers like Shields and Morrison, for example, have done this effectively. My aim in analysing my own writing process in this chapter, therefore, is not to guide the reader in an understanding of what my text ‘means.’ Rather, I am trying to pay the same critical attention to my impulses as a writer, as I have done with writers such as Forster, Atwood, Tan, Morrison and Shields, and to show how the fictional texts I was most influenced by have led me to write “The Other Side of Silence.”

This chapter therefore examines how the ideas and insights of my exegetical work have influenced the writing of my creative text. McIntire suggests that Woolf wanted to “make an inscription where there has formerly been only a blank” and to “demand a space for the unwritten” (189-190). Similarly, my project has been guided by a desire to tell the story of a woman’s life which would have otherwise been silenced, as well as to draw attention to the various silences which still haunt women’s narratives.

**Fifty Ways to Leave Your Mother: Which Story?**

“[W]here history says little,” Anna Laetitia Barbauld wrote in 1810, “fiction might say much” (Tuite 248). It is only after writing both the creative novel and this accompanying exegesis that I have come to understand the complexities of Barbauld’s statement. Fiction might say much more about women’s history, dealing as it does with imagination rather than fact, but it also might not say as much as I had previously imagined. In writing my creative text, influenced as I had been by a range of writers, I had to make significant choices in narrating my female protagonists’ lives. When I first
started writing the text, I was still interested in the idea of reclaiming or recovering a portion of the past that would otherwise remain forgotten. My initial approach to the narrative had been, I suppose, modelled on Tan’s work. For my text I had envisaged two main characters: a questioning granddaughter and a brittle older woman, one who clutched her secrets to her chest with bony fingers. This old woman would have been draped in black shawls whether it was summer or winter; and she would speak in such a commanding voice, that her granddaughter, let’s call her Isobel, would find herself tongue-tied in her grandmother’s presence, unable to ask the questions she most wanted answered. Isobel knew she wouldn’t be able to pry into her grandmother’s life in Australia, not without her grandmother finding out what she was up to. So I decided to send Isobel off to Italy, to the town where her grandmother was born and to try to find the answers which this formidable woman did not want her to know.

This idea was dismissed soon after I began. It relied too heavily on confession: the confession of neighbours, far-flung relatives, townspeople. They would be telling on Isobel’s grandmother, blabbing her secrets. No, no, no. Plus there was the problem of Isobel, with her notebooks, her maps, and her insistence of finding out the truth (which, thanks to Woolf, to Stanley, to Scott, to Forster and to Shields, I saw she would not be able to find). Besides, Isobel loved her grandmother, she really did; and she noticed vulnerability in those thin shoulders, in the way her grandmother pulled her shawls tightly around her body, as though her she was trying to prevent herself from spilling onto the ground. Isobel didn’t want to hurt her grandmother, even though she couldn’t understand why her grandmother was so insistent on keeping her secrets to herself.
And so Isobel was taken off the plane; she did not get to see the shape of Italy jutting into the Mediterranean from her window seat; she wouldn’t be able to step onto Via Cavour or Via Nazionale in Rome, and experience that sensation, unsettling because the feeling was so strong, that she’d been here before. Isobel was saved her futile trip to a village in Italy, where she would never have found enough answers to satisfy her curiosity about her grandmother’s history anyway, and where she would have felt guilty every time she opened her notebook and recorded what someone had said. However, she also missed out on eating pizza in Campo di Fiori, and having her first taste of gelati in Trastevere.

My concern with this story was not only that it had been done before—this idea of the contemporary narrator looking to the past—but that there were problems in this narrative’s insistence on (and therefore, validation of) finding out the ‘truth’ about Isobel’s grandmother. This led me back to the problems identified in Chapter One: that information about women such as Isobel’s grandmother is difficult to find, and is often distorted. Trinh suggests that there is a problematic inherent in thinking that history is unrelated to the present, that it is available as a whole to “be revealed and related” (104). Similarly, in Memory, Narrative and Identity: Remembering the Self, Nicola King suggests that there are two main approaches to remembering the past. She suggests that Freud has likened one model to an “archaeological excavation” which “assumes the past still exists ‘somewhere’ waiting to be rediscovered” (4). King goes on to define the second mode of remembering as “one of continuous revision or ‘retranslation,’ reworking memory-traces in the light of later knowledge” (4).31 In writing fiction, I could, of course, fill in the gaps and silences in Isobel’s grandmother’s

31I will pick up on this second model later in this chapter.
life, but here again, I would be subscribing to those ideas, especially the notion of finding truth and attaining closure, which are vital to traditional realist texts, but, which, at the same time, stifle many women’s stories. I remembered, as Susan Strehle suggests, that:

fiction is “the document’ and “the agency of cultural history,” both reflecting and normalizing what culture has created and acting as an agency of ideology. In this sense, much is at stake in the representation of women . . . in fiction. (Transnational Women’s Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland 27)

I wanted to portray my characters as credible, recognisable figures, and so revealing the secrets of my characters’ pasts did not seem an effective way to write their stories. I also had to consider the grandmother’s narrative. Could I really have this guarded woman narrating part of the text? All she would want to say is “I don’t want to talk about it,” perhaps giving some commentary about Isobel’s latest haircut, and demanding why, why she should insist on wearing those awful jeans.

Starting Again: A Second Attempt

In Woman, Native, Other Trinh emphasises the necessity of highlighting the silences and omissions in women’s narratives. She states

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or one more point given to the silencers. (83)
I decided to maintain a certain silence around the life of my historical character. In doing so, I suppose I was trying to pay attention to the ‘little things’ while all the while pointing to a larger silencing. In A Room of One’s Own Woolf laments that, of the daily rituals of an ‘ordinary’ woman’s life, “Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie” (85). I began to question some of the underlying premises of those fictional texts that told women’s stories, especially the notion of confession prevalent in Tan’s work. Confession is an interesting literary device, one which prompts the revelation of long-suppressed secrets. In writing about The Kitchen God’s Wife Huntley argues that

In writing Winnie’s life, Amy Tan exposes the layers of silence under which are buried the forgotten stories of women like Winnie—like Tan’s own mother. As Winnie recounts her story in the novel, she shapes and thus reclaims her life, breaking the long silence that has marked her existence . . . (105)

I argued in Chapter One that Winnie lays bare the bones of her life in a way which suggests that well-kept secrets are temporary at best, and that these secrets can be retrieved and recorded. However, confession, while undoubtedly an effective narrative strategy, was not, I felt, always plausible. It also hints at the archaeological model of excavation, which Huntley suggests is evident in The Kitchen God’s Wife, and which has been problematic for feminist writers. I was concerned that if I wrote a novel which followed that convenient trajectory of confession and reconciliation I might perpetuate the myth that women’s lives can simply be re-traced and revealed, glossing over the fact that many women’s histories cannot be written or spoken about.
I also did not want to ignore writers such as Woolf, Forster and Stanley who articulated the specific difficulties of trying to research and record women’s histories.

In her 1919 essay, “Modern Fiction,” Woolf writes that in new novels “the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is on something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline becomes necessary” (108). Woolf suggests that in changing emphasis (that is, in changing narrative content), the writer also has to change form. The attention which Woolf pays to the liminal or the marginal has, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, drawn critical interest from contemporary feminist writers. For example, Pykett argues:

It would be wrong to see Woolf as wishing simply to recuperate the Arnoldian project of seeing things steadily and seeing them whole, but there are a number of occasions on which she seemed to express a preference for a fictional method that would (as it were) see the fragments of experience in all their fragmentary and evanescent detail and yet still see them whole. (98)

Other women writers have followed Woolf’s example of fragmentation, situated narrators and a lack of formal closure in telling women’s stories. As Trinh writes of The Woman Warrior:

What Hong Kingston does not tell us about her mother but allows us to read between the lines and in the gaps of her stories reveals as much about her mother as what she does tell us about her. This, I feel, is the most ‘truthful’ aspect of her work, the very power of storytelling. ([emphasis in original] Woman, Native, Other 135)
Hong Kingston’s text dramatically breaks with the conventional realist form, and by doing so, she is able to narrate a version of her mother’s story through “the gaps.” In not providing the reader with a linear or chronological narrative, or a reliable (or even easily identifiable) narrative voice, Hong Kingston is nonetheless able to illuminate her mother’s life.

My second approach to my own fiction was influenced by this idea of fragmentary detail. Wendy Roy writes that The Stone Diaries “emphasizes the inadequacy, and yet the necessity, of portraying a woman through gaps in her life story.” (Carol Shields: Narrative Hunger and the Possibilities of Fiction 124-5). Like The Stone Diaries, Unless also questions what is relevant or important when writing about a woman’s life, while commenting on what kinds of information can be garnered from such a life. I was also interested in the lack of formal closure in that text. Unless critiques notions of both confession—which Tan’s texts rely upon—and closure—which conventional realism typically demands. In doing so, the novel questions the epistemological grounds for arriving at the kind of empirical knowledge which the realist text usually provides.

In addition, Shields’ narrative technique in Unless was also influential in this second approach to my fiction. I could see the benefits of focalising my own narrative through a single perspective. I imagine that I was still thinking about Isobel’s grandmother (“I don’t want to talk about it”). I was interested in the way in which the character of Reta managed to say so much about Norah, when Norah said so little. Inspired as I was, I decided to write a fictional text that would illuminate a woman’s life without revealing everything about her past. I chose to take the perspective of Alba, a young Italian woman who, throughout the narrative, would only reveal information
selectively about her mother, Serafina. The story would begin with Alba on a boat bound for Australia, leaving her extended family behind in the small village of Salerno. My intention was to keep Italy firmly in the past, thereby keeping Alba’s life there shrouded in mystery. But although Alba was the eyes and ears of the narrative, it was Serafina’s life I wanted to pay attention to. Serafina, like Isobel’s would-be grandmother, was the character whose story hinted at something dramatic in her past, something not recognised by the church, which kept all civil records at that time. Serafina, then, became a character who was seen only through other characters’ eyes. This worked well in theory, and worked with the poststructuralist theories I had been researching. I was not using fiction to recuperate absences in women’s lives, nor was I supposing to know too much about the kinds of lives to which I had no archival access. Of course, Alba’s journey to Australia was a common enough trip in the 1950s, one that was not too difficult to research. In *A Changing People* (2004), Loretta Baldassar writes that “thousands of Italians . . . [immigrated] in the immediate post-World War II period” (268). But how accessible would information be about a woman like Serafina? Especially given that neither common-law relationships nor divorce, for instance, were recorded by the church. This was exactly the kind of life I did not want to presume to know too much about.

Confined by having one voice, and by only being able to see Serafina through Alba’s eyes, my narrative began to stall. I became less interested in Alba and the relentless inching forward of her new life. I realised that by denying Serafina a voice, I had become preoccupied with the miniscule details of Alba’s day-to-day existence.

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Hours spent researching which kinds of Italian cheeses were available in Western Australia in the early 1950s made me realise that I was falling into a mode of realist narration which I had wanted to avoid. Of course, I wanted to credibly portray what life had been like for Italian migrants in Western Australia, but this focus on the factual furniture of my characters’ lives was taking me away from the initial impetus of the novel. It became increasingly difficult to bring in recollections about Serafina, and my text seemed to be more of a historical account of migrant women in Australia than anything else. In fact, and as Nancy K. Miller writes, I was finding out that “the plots of women’s literature are . . . the plots of literature itself, about the constraints the maxim places on . . . rendering a female life in fiction” (The New Feminist Criticism 356). Even though I wanted to maintain some silence around Serafina’s life, I found that I had the wrong kind of silence. The idea of not being able to unearth the ‘facts’ about Serafina’s life was evident in this version of the creative text as well, although, perhaps, in a more subtle form than the situation between Isobel and her grandmother. I realised that, even in this draft, there existed the implicit belief that the ‘past’ was still intact somewhere (in this particular version, the past was in Italy, and still remained ‘a mystery’). Given the emphasis on the situated narrator, and the assertion (from Trinh, Woolf, Shields, Morrison and Wendy Roy) that women’s lives can be portrayed despite the gaps and silences, I decided that I had to approach Serafina’s history in a different way. The silencing of Serafina’s story was still very much the crux of my text, but I wanted to creatively explore different ways of writing about her past.
Back to the Motherland: Putting Serafina’s Narrative in the Text

I made a decision then to set the early part of the narrative in Italy, thereby allowing Serafina a voice within the text. The focalised third-person narrative used for Alba’s retelling of the past, could, I realised, also be used by Serafina’s character for her own version of the events of her life. Most of the texts I have discussed thus far have relied on first-person narration: Tan’s novels brim with I’s; Forster introduces the first-person voice when she herself becomes a subject in her memoir; Shields’ novel Unless focalises the narrative through Reta’s perspective to great effect; and the first-person pronoun sometimes surfaces in The Stone Diaries as well. Perhaps more surprisingly, Stanley, a sociologist and biographer, employs first-person narrative in many of her texts, which allows her to highlight the inconsistencies in or lack of information about her subjects’ lives, as well as to speculate about why such gaps appear in women’s histories. In her biography of militant suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, written with Ann Morley, the authors refuse a ‘cradle-to-the-grave’ account of Emily’s life, and also resist definitively answering the question of what motivated Emily’s death. ³³ It is, however, a satisfying text, as the first-person narrative voice is able to comment on the epistemological problems in researching women’s lives.

By selecting third-person narration for Alba and Serafina, I was still employing personal and partial voices for these characters: the reader knows at all points which character is narrating the text. But I was trying to indicate a larger silence. ³⁴ This emphasis on the subjective voice also allowed me to write each character’s

³⁴I also employed third-person narration for the prologue, but this voice, like Alba’s, is a questioning, speculative voice.
recollection of events differently, which had interesting implications for the text. If I had used a first-person narrative for Alba and Serafina, I fear I would have fallen into the narrative practice of ‘telling’ the reader what each character was suppressing; by using the third-person, I felt I was better able to ‘show’ the different ways each character tells (or, more often than not, doesn’t tell) their story.

Since I wanted to include Serafina in the narrative without suggesting lives like hers were traceable in any archival, historical sense—or even reachable through the back alleys of history (those ways in which we traditionally find out about women’s lives)—I made sure to eradicate all diaries, letters and family stories, the kind typically passed down from one generation to the next. It was easy to suggest that Serafina was illiterate, given the time in which she was born, her gender and her lower-class status. I obscured details about Serafina’s past, especially those events one wouldn’t be able to find out when researching the life of such a woman. Instead I chose to focus on the relationship between Serafina and Alba, and the way in which their incomplete memories might evoke for the reader a sense of all that cannot be known.

This version of the creative text, like the final version, starts at a point of friction between mother and daughter: Alba is moving to Australia; she is leaving her mother, her sister and her extended family and embarking on a ship for another country. At this moment in history, Alba’s trip is fairly standard; many Italians migrated to Australia between the 1930s and the 1970s. World War I and II had devastating effects on Europe, and particularly affected places like Salerno, which were already impoverished. As Baldassar writes, the Italians who migrated after World War II were:
mainly labour migrants, primarily from peasant-worker backgrounds, [and] were motivated by economic and/or political imperatives. (*A Changing People* 268)

It made sense for Alba to travel to Australia in 1952; it wasn’t an extraordinary journey. But Serafina, with the full weight of her past pressing down on her every day, a past which she and Alba share, senses that Alba’s trip to Australia is not just about Emilio finding more work, or about getting away from a village ravaged by the effects of war. The difference with Alba’s journey, Serafina suspects, is that Alba is not going to Australia; rather, she is running from Salerno.

By setting the creative text in Italy in 1952, I was creating three distinct historical ‘moments’: the present perspective from which the contemporary reader might read from, as well as the ‘present’ of the text (1952), and a more distant past (which the characters recall in the narrative). By including Serafina in the ‘present’ of the text (1952) I was able to call her past into question in a way I wouldn’t have been able to do if I had used only one narrator. Therefore, the memories of individual characters (Alba and Serafina) became the means by which I could challenge the notion of a history laying in wait to be exhumed (as happens in Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife*). Furthermore, I realised that there was a significant difference in the way that these two characters experienced their memories. I wrote Serafina as a character who hugs her injustices to her chest; they are always there, right under the surface of her skin. Every slight, every insult is remembered, and these memories often dictate her actions. Her shame, after all, is what leads her to accept Alba’s marriage to Emilio, even though his family is nowhere near as prosperous as Violetta’s husband’s family.

By contrast, in the first draft of the text, Alba longed to be free of her memories, and I
did manage to make the character extraordinarily free of them, suppressing them every time they popped up in bad dreams or through a sister-in-law’s ugly comments. Alba was, in the early drafts of the story, a character intent on looking forwards, and there was a great deal, in Western Australia, to occupy her mind. She had to grapple with a whole other language, as well as a lack of food like zucchini, roma tomatoes and provolone, not to mention pasta and Italian sausages, which she would now have to make by hand. Never mind that she was pregnant, and had to think about giving birth to her next child in a hospital where no one spoke Italian. Mamma mia! There was more than enough for the character to think about. Yet Alba’s focus on the future was, as mentioned above, provoking me to explore the particular difficulties facing Italian migrants in the middle of the last century. No doubt this is a fascinating topic, but it was not the point of my text. Early feedback on my manuscript also indicated that if Alba was so intent on moving away, the text might carry more weight if the reader knew a little more about what she was moving away from.

**Remembering Reluctantly: Revising the Second Draft**

Given the inclusion of Serafina’s narrative, I decided to re-write significant portions of the creative text, with the intention of forcing Alba to remember events in her past, even those episodes she would rather forget. Even though the narrative follows Alba to Australia, consequently depriving Serafina of a voice in the latter part of the text, Serafina is still present in Alba’s memories. Alba’s inability to forget the past strikes me as reminiscent of the way in which writers (notably Woolf) articulate the past in their novels. As McIntire suggests:

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35In the creative manuscript I have used the Italian spelling of zucchine for this vegetable. Here, I have spelt the word as it known in the Australian vernacular.
The effects of recollection and the remembered historical on the familial, individual and communal are central subjects of almost every one of Woolf’s novels. (187)

McIntire also posits that writers such as Woolf (and T.S Eliot):

Write out a past that can never be mastered, that is always ajar, and open to both re-inscription and re-experience—open to the supplement of perpetual (re)turn . . . (7)

By including Serafina as a narrator in the early part of the text, I was able to not only draw a distinction between how these characters remembered, but to show the discrepancies between the memories themselves. Also, the past became more prevalent in the text, and was thus open to the kind of “re-inscription and re-experience” which McIntire mentions. In addition, in this version of the text, memory is also congruent with King’s definition, cited above, “as one of continuous revision” (4). Although “The Other Side of Silence” moves in a linear trajectory, the frequent analepses (or flashbacks) serve to destabilise the notion of narrative chronology, further emphasising the role that the past plays in the present lives of these two characters.

These discrepancies are illustrated by the various ways the characters remember episodes in their shared past. It is important to note that neither Alba nor Serafina ever disclose the reasons for leaving Alba’s father’s house, yet both characters recall the events surrounding the expulsion. For example, early in the text, Serafina remembers the day that she was struck by a tomato, thrown by a small child.

Serafina had stumbled in through the back gate of her new home, went straight to the tap by the chicken coop
and washed her face, neck and the top of her dress. Taking her handkerchief from her bag she blotted her pale blue collar with fast, furious hands, her short breaths stabbing at her chest, the coppery taste of humiliation in her throat. . . . When she washed the bright orange mandarins and placed them in a small bowl on the table, Alba got up from a chair in the living room where she had been doing her sewing. Serafina hastily wiped her face and slung the tea-towel over the damp shoulder of her dress as she heard her daughter approach.

“Have you finished hemming your skirt yet?” Serafina had demanded, the shame of what had just happened scraping her throat so that her voice came out ragged, sharp. Alba stepped back. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 34)

The narrative doesn’t reveal what Serafina has done to provoke such a reaction, but indicates that she is ashamed, rather than angry at what has happened. Consequently, the incident is not discussed between the two characters. Alba doesn’t question her mother about her damp dress, and Serafina doesn’t explain it. The narrative implies, perhaps, that because of the size of the village, what happened to Serafina would become common knowledge soon enough. Yet neither character speaks directly about the incident. This next excerpt follows the first and is again written from Serafina’s perspective:

So much time has passed between that day in the markets and this moment now. Yet the memory persists, predatory as the black and white cat she shoos from her chicken coop night after night. It was the memory of that day which had caused Serafina to kneel by her bed and
give thanks after Emilio Canella had asked for Alba’s hand. She had not heeded the village rumours that Enzo Canella was planning to leave for Australia and his younger brother was sure to follow. Back then it had seemed such a small price to pay to have Alba married.

As the train moves into another cavernous black tunnel through the mountains, Serafina wonders how she could have believed that having Alba move so far away was a sacrifice she could make. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 35)

Fifteen years have passed since the day in the markets and this one. Now Alba is grown up, with a husband and two children of her own, accepted for the most part into the society from which her mother was outcast. The reader is informed that the incident in the market takes place shortly after Serafina and Alba have been exiled from Alba’s father’s house (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 33). The memory of this day indicates a larger, more painful event, which neither character speaks about. For example, in Chapter Three, the narrative is focalised from Serafina’s perspective and the character remembers one of the last evenings before they leave Alba’s father’s house. She recalls:

Listening to the sound of her children and their father at their evening meal as she scrubbed pots and pans in that huge kitchen of the house they lived in back then. There had been no sounds out of the ordinary. Serafina had been poised for a shriek, a sudden scraping of a chair from the table. Raised voices. But there was nothing. He hadn’t told Alba then, she’d thought, scrubbing the inside of a pot with vicious intensity. One more thing he had left for her to do. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 21)
Serafina then approaches Alba’s bedroom in the big house. She reaches forward to knock on the door, but cannot do it, nor does she ever explain to Alba the reasons why they have to move.

Later in the text, I return to the memory of this night, but this time, the event is focalised through Alba’s perspective. In her, rather extended, memory of the night, the character focuses on seemingly insignificant things; the conversation at the dinner table, the French lesson she’d had that day, her desire to brush her hair one hundred times in an attempt to make it straight. Alba also recalls being in her room and hearing footsteps coming towards her door. She assumes that these belong to her father. All these years later, Alba does not question to whom those footsteps might have belonged, but she does question whether or not she actually heard them, “Looking back, she cannot be certain that she didn’t plant those footsteps there herself, that she hasn’t imagined them because the alternative is still too painful to bear” (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 146-7). Alba needs to believe that her father wanted to say good-bye, and so the footsteps loom largely in the memory of this evening. However, earlier in the text, it is suggested that it was Serafina, rather than Alba’s father, who approached Alba’s door that night. Yet, given both Alba’s desire to imagine her father wanted to address the incident, and Serafina’s later refusal to explain why they have had to move, Alba cannot imagine that it might have been her mother outside her room. King puts this process of modifying the past poignantly:

We long for a time when we didn’t know what was going to happen next—or, conversely, to relive the past with the foreknowledge we then lacked. (2)
King goes onto suggest that trauma may inhibit characters from experiencing their memories fully. In “The Other Side of Silence,” Alba is unable to recall the last night she spent with her father without wondering: “Where were they then? The hints of things to come?” (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 146). Conversely, she expresses grief over her ignorance on that evening:

There is something about the certainty of those brush strokes, the way she kept on going, which Alba cannot bear to recall. There had been, in the flex and stretch of Alba’s arm, no apprehension that things were about to change. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 145)

In writing accounts of the last night in Alba’s father’s house from both characters’ perspectives, I have tried to emphasise that the meaning which might be created from past events is necessarily fragmentary, contradictory and partial, given the situated narrative positions of these two characters.

Furthermore, in writing the scenes described above, I was trying to illustrate the painful nature of the episode for both the characters. This is congruent with my earlier suggestion that shame about the past suppresses certain stories from ever being narrated, or results in the emergence of other stories, differently positioned. Take, for example, the way in which Beloved’s murder is recounted in the novel. The event is narrated in three voices, from three distinct points of view (the white men’s, Stamp Paid’s and Sethe’s). The version of the story the reader might take to be the

36It is important to note that a large body of work has been written about trauma narratives, especially in regards to culturally recognised events such as the holocaust or the enslavement of African-American people. See Richard Kearney, “Remembering the Past: the Question of Narrative Identity” Philosophy and Social Criticism 24 (1998): 49; Nicola King, Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self (Edinburgh: U of Edinburgh P 2000); and Angelyn Mitchell, The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction (Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP 2002).
most credible (Sethe is the protagonist and most of the narrative is told from her point of view) is the most vague. As she sees schoolteacher’s hat, Sethe recalls:

Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. (Beloved 163)

The traumatic nature of the event has shaped the way in which Sethe remembers it, and also in the way she relays it. “I stopped him” she tells Paul D, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164). King suggests that narratives such as Beloved

Recognise that some events cannot be fully reconstructed or integrated into a coherent story, that something in them will always resist recovery or ‘passing on.’ (24)

Destabilising Alba, Disremembering Serafina: The Speculative Voice in the Text

The word ‘disremember’ is used by Toni Morrison in Beloved, and has interesting connotations for the ways in which characters remember or are remembered (or not remembered, as the case may be). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Shields employs the speculative voice in her novels The Stone Diaries and Unless to hint at what the characters cannot know for certain. In my own text, Alba and Serafina are portrayed through what they choose to reveal, as well as by what they suppress. The speculative voice I had used for the prologue, which I wrote before I began my PhD, became an important device for the destabilising of the idea of a single, definitive ‘truth’ within the text. As she looks back, Alba begins to question
her memories. Take for example, her uncertainty about the day she and Violetta went to take a photograph of Serafina.

Alba puts the picture back onto her mantlepiece. If she didn’t have this photograph, would she remember the blouse Serafina was wearing, or the way her hair was pulled tightly away from her face, as if she wanted to hide the thick grey coil? (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 152)

This event takes place shortly before Alba leaves Salerno, and yet, Alba has trouble in recalling the specifics of the day. Moreover, as the text progresses, the more uncertain Alba’s memories become.

Thus, not only is Alba questioning her past as the story progresses, and by extension, Serafina’s past, but Alba’s constant speculation means that she is unreliable in providing the kind of truth which conventional realist texts depend on. Alba’s account, just like Serafina’s, is highly subjective, but the character begins revising her history by editing her memories to make them more palatable. Serafina is thus doubly removed from the narrative: not only by her daughter’s migration to Australia, but by the ways Alba chooses to remember her and, by implication, forget her. As Daisy reminds us in *The Stone Diaries*, “a childhood is what anyone wants to remember of it. It leaves behind no fossils . . .” (148). Alba’s childhood is largely forgotten as the character cannot reconcile the disparate images of her happy childhood with the sudden exile from her father’s house. This can be read in the second-to-last chapter, in which Alba remembers her ninth birthday. She fumbles over the details of her dress, the guests at the party, the whereabouts of her mother, but she clearly recalls other aspects:
She remembers being picked up. Two hands encircled her torso, they would have been big hands; she went up, up in the air, the skirt ballooning as she came back down, as the owner of the hands placed her on his lap. She remembers leaning back into her father’s chest (who else would those big hands have belonged to?) and resting there. In that moment, Alba felt both completely safe and utterly happy. There are times when Alba cannot bear to think about this day. Something in her always wants to shake this dumbly happy girl out of her stupor. But Alba leaves her there, her younger self, her back curved into her father’s stomach. It is, after all, a nice image (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 161)

Due to the ‘unspoken’ and ‘unwritten’ events in her past, Alba became a character who recalled things seemingly reluctantly and hazily, but she also—because of the shame associated with her past—sometimes edited her own recollections. As King writes, some protagonists

reconstruct their lives according to the interpretations they have now placed upon them, whilst also attempting to maintain the illusion of their earlier ignorance to the outcome of events. (23)

In writing this scene, I wanted to suggest the possibility that Alba revises her memories. She decides to remember this day in this particular way, because she is thinking of her own son’s birthday. Although the character still feels bitterness towards her father, Alba leaves him in her memory of that day. The manner in which Alba reflects on the past and edits her memories has repercussions for her in the present, as well as implications for the future.
Perhaps the most poignant example of Alba’s desire to remember people and events in particular ways is seen in the last chapter of the creative text. After learning of Serafina’s death, Alba builds a shrine for her mother. Alba surrounds the photograph of her mother with a plaque bearing the prayer, the Hail Mary, (written in Italian), a statue of the Virgin Mary, some candles and fresh roses. As she looks at the picture of her mother Alba wonders, “Who will remember her now that she is gone, and how?” (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 183). Alba’s desire to forget certain things and to remember others is hinted at in this chapter:

If she could, she would erase the last few months in Salerno, all those guilty hours she spent in her mother’s kitchen. The arguments about Regina; that map. The bitter black cups of coffee sipped in silence. Serafina sulking, her hands slicing the air in anger. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 183)

She focuses instead on more benign memories of her mother:

She remembers her mother . . . making zabaglione, the way every part of Serafina’s body seemed to move as she whipped the eggs and sugar. Alba remembers the purposeful way her mother would tousle Marco’s hair, as if she was trying to find his scalp beneath all those dark curls. She finds herself remembering times when Serafina seemed to forget her bitterness at Alba’s leaving, placing her hand on Alba’s forehead to check for fever, tucking stray hair away from her face. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 183-84)

Alba expresses a desire to be able to shut out the more painful memories. Alba hopes that, with Serafina’s passing, “all the dark days can finally be put to rest” (“The Other
Side of Silence” ms 184). By having Alba sort through her memories at the end of the text, I indicate that perhaps the character wants to forget about certain elements of the past she shared with her mother, and, as such, I suggest that this might have a bearing on how Serafina might be remembered in the future. Serafina, then, may very well be the woman in the prologue of “The Other Side of Silence,” the one who is not mentioned:

in polite conversation or in hushed tones. There is no rustle of her name in thick leather books bound by the weight of history, or in the small stifled pages of old diaries. (“The Other Side of Silence” ms 5)

Thus, Alba as a character is an unreliable witness to the past, yet, like Daisy in The Stone Diaries, she is the only witness left at the text’s end. The creative text, set as it is in 1952, intimates that certain stories about Serafina might not be passed on. And even if they are, they would be retold by partial narrators, who are also implicated in her past.

Thus, even though the particulars of Serafina’s past, events so significant to provoke the expulsion from Alba’s father’s house, are not written anywhere in “The Other Side of Silence,” they still haunt the narrative. The text leaves space for the various interpretations of what may have happened in Serafina’s life, and it is for the reader to decide what these events could have been, or even if they need to be speculated about. Inevitably a sense of loss permeates the novel—most obviously, the loss of Serafina’s history. I have illustrated throughout this exegesis that the absence of Serafina’s history is not incidental, but is a result of the epistemological problems encountered when researching certain women’s lives, as well as the constraints placed
on female stories by the realist form. The reader expecting a realist narrative will be frustrated by the concealment of Serafina’s history and the lack of closure which this produces. In a sense, the reader’s frustration at this loss neatly mirrors my own frustration at the loss of my ancestor’s ‘real’ story, which I described in Chapter One.

In acknowledging that some stories about women remain hidden, or cannot be articulated, I was compelled to write a different kind of story. Yet, I hope, what Serafina has done, or has not done, in her past is less significant to the text. Rather, one of the manuscript’s preoccupations is showing the effects or repercussions of the unmentionable events on both the characters. The ways in which Alba chooses to remember certain incidents and forget others has an enormous impact on how Serafina is characterised in the latter part of the text. She becomes silenced, not only because she is absent, but also through the ways in which her daughter remembers her (or chooses not to).

I came to the work of King and McIntire relatively late in this project, yet their insights have been integral to my analysis of my own work. McIntire suggests that Woolf “frequently complained that “History” is radically misrepresented in traditional modes of writing about the past” (187). For Woolf, the idea of ‘wholeness’ in writing a life story was a patriarchal notion, and one she resisted in writing about her own life (McIntire 150-51). I could see from my series of false starts, that even within creative writing, a writer needs to think differently when trying to articulate women’s lives. By including Serafina in my creative text, I was able to come closer to my theoretical aims. If I had left this character in the past, as I had originally intended, I would have been suggesting that the past is a place that can be reached, if only one has the right tools. I
would be adhering to the notion of excavation, which implicitly leaves so many women’s lives buried. In using memory to help structure the narrative, however, I have illustrated how remembering is a creative endeavour; that the past can be articulated in fragments, and that its inconsistencies arise from each character’s distinct version of events. By giving up on the notion of presenting a complete, fictional history for my female protagonists, I have been able to critique how problematic that notion is, both theoretically and creatively.

Returning to the story in the first pages of this chapter, I can see how my lost ancestor has vanished—substituted or displaced, as she is now, by a fictional character. When I was walking through Salerno last year, I was thinking of Serafina, of the ways in which she had been ostracised in the town in which she grew up. I was not, like Isobel, looking for the truth, but looking through the eyes of my character. In leaving behind my lost ancestor, I am not suggesting that the lives of real women should not be researched, documented or articulated, nor am I suggesting that fiction can stand in for historical discourse. Rather, I am signalling how letting go of the desire to ‘know’ the past, has given me greater creative freedom in writing about it. As I cast my memory back to that day, to the moment of seeing Salerno through Serafina’s eyes, I see myself moving forwards, leaving behind an old idea, and walking, somewhat uncertainly, towards a new one. After all, as Tuite suggests, “Arguably . . . fiction and history are not engaged in finding the truth but in meaningful ways of remembering the past” (248).
Conclusion

I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion . . . [the] future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it. My theory being that the event practically does not exist.  

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What I identify most with in these lines is Woolf’s articulation of something which is there, but is also not quite there. The woman she speaks of, the life “which shall all be told on one occasion,” is likened to the “fall of the flower”: a seemingly insignificant event, which is noiseless and, at the same time, both final and potential. Woolf also captures here the quietness of this woman’s life, the fact that it “practically does not exist.” Her implied concerns about the fragility of women’s lives and their (mis)representation/s in cultural narratives are as pertinent today as they were when she was writing.

One of the most salient discoveries of this project has been that researching and writing about women in the past is fraught with difficulties. These difficulties have arisen both from a lack of salient information about women, as well as from the textual demands of conventional realist narratives. As a writer it has become more important to try to write these narratives, to try and work with the silences, omissions and distortions about women in the past, and to do so in creative ways. For me, it was critical to write a text which foregrounded some of the ways in which these silences

have persisted in the lives of women. Fiction has already been prolific in offering us interesting stories about women in the past: Winnie’s struggle through an abusive marriage and the Sino-Japanese war, and the narratives about Sethe and Grace Marks which prompt the reader to rethink dominant narratives about such women in culture. Writers like Shields have provided the reader and writer with different ways to narrate women’s lives, suggesting that even if information about these women is incomplete, stark or fragmentary, these lives should be told and told imaginatively. In fact, Shields suggests that the telling of these lives in such a way is actually more credible, more satisfying.

Shields’ fiction has been enabled me, as a writer, to think about telling stories about the past. In the Introduction, I mentioned Anne Enright’s novel *The Gathering* as a recent example of a novel which problematises the ideas of fact and fiction, history and truth. In trying to articulate an incident from the past the narrator suggests that “History is such a romantic place . . . [if] it would just stay still, I think, and settle down. If it would just stop sliding around in my head” (13). Although the narrator expresses frustration at not being able to recall the past wholly or coherently, she hits upon something which has become central to my understanding about history: that it does not stay in one place, that as we recall events we are complicit in (re)creating them. This enables us, as readers and writers, to rethink women’s stories and, subsequently, articulate them in different ways. What I like about Enright’s novel is that it does not fill in the gaps and silences. Rather, it is loaded with speculations, and memories, which the narrator painstakingly re-constructs, questioning them as she goes. Enright’s narrator looks at the events in her family’s past through the lens of her
brother’s recent death. Only by examining the past through the present is she able to
hit upon the narrative that most makes sense to her.

Despite the difficulties in writing about women’s historical lives in fiction, I am
at least hopeful that there are new texts being written that self-consciously
problematis the possibility of narrating historical experiences and events objectively.
By examining the ‘resources and limitations’ of writing fiction, which Woolf refers to,
and which I have used in the title of this dissertation, I have come to a different
understanding of what these terms might signify. Rather than being stymied by what I
had previously viewed as ‘limitations’ (the silences, distortions or unspeakability of
women’s lives), I have come to view these as rich, challenging and promising
resources. As such, both the creative text and this exegesis endeavour to highlight the
alternative ways in which women’s lives might be re-examined or re-imagined within
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