

School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts

**"The Homecoming": A Novel
and
"Time, Self and Metaphor in Illness Stories": An Exegesis**

Rosemary Winifred Stevens

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Declaration:

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Rosemary Stevens:

Date:

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Abstract

This thesis comprises a creative work in the form of a novel, and an academic exegesis. Together they address the question of how narrative representations of time can be used to reconfigure a selfhood undermined by temporal disruption due to illness. In view of the fact that narrative is traditionally defined by temporal succession and causal relationship, it becomes problematic when both are distorted. This thesis examines temporal perception in illness, its effects on the self and the role narrative plays in reconfiguring the self. In short, it addresses the question; how might the ill protagonist tell their story when they have, quite literally, lost the plot?

In my novel, *The Homecoming*, a breast cancer diagnosis acts as a catalyst for change for Helen, a middle-aged woman, whose mother, Vera, has recently suffered a stroke. The reconciliation of mother and daughter through their illness crises forms the central theme.

The exegesis analyses autobiographical and fictional illness stories for relationships between illness, self and temporal representation, with particular emphasis on the form of the novel. My main focus is on metaphor and its ability to effect or negate self-change in the sufferer. I argue that, on the one hand, when metaphor is striking and original it serves as a temporal bridge to reunite the emergent self with aspects disassociated through illness. On the other hand, dead or clichéd tropes undermine efforts to integrate the present health crisis with one's former and therefore future self. My conclusion is that metaphor acts as an important transformational medium, not only for the illness protagonist (whether memorial or fictional), but also for the reader.

Contents

Declaration:.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Contents	v
THE HOMECOMING	6
CHAPTER 1	7
CHAPTER 2.....	42
CHAPTER 3.....	96
CHAPTER 4.....	135
CHAPTER 5.....	179
CHAPTER 6.....	218
TIME, SELF AND METAPHOR IN ILLNESS STORIES.....	247
Introduction	248
CHAPTER 1: Background	254
CHAPTER 2: Metaphor in Illness Memoir.....	265
CHAPTER 3: Metaphor in Fictional Narratives of Illness	289
CHAPTER 4: Flow and Illness Narrative: George's Story	306
Conclusion	319
Bibliography	326

THE HOMECOMING

CHAPTER 1

Helen closes her eyes against the tears and the beginnings of a tension headache, her shoulders twitching against the unaccustomed heaviness of the coat.

“Good job you’re flying Emirates,” Kate said on the phone. *“That way, someone can pick you up from Birmingham.”*

‘Someone’, Helen presumed, meaning Kate or Roger.

But when Helen checked her mobile at Dubai, there was a text message from her sister.

Can’t make it to airport. Will meet at S Junction. Text me. Kate.

And it sounded simple enough. Yet it has taken Helen over an hour to get from the airport to New Street Station, just the other side of Birmingham. A skittering sound announces a cascade of white letters settling into once familiar names. Coventry. Wolverhampton. Stafford. The Stourbridge train is scheduled for platform one and the wind knifes under her collar as she stands in its draught. She draws her case in, pressing her jelly legs against its weight as she clutches at the handle, mentally beaming a message to her mother:

Wait for me.

The tannoy buzzes with static and the tracks become song lines, channelling the train, exactly as she remembers, and she almost expects to feel her mother’s hand, checking she’s safe. Helen never thought to ask if Mum squeezed and released Kate’s hand on the other side. All she sees now in her mind’s eye is a pair of leather gloves gripping the pushchair with Roger in it. Like all mothers, Vera was an octopus, as Kate is now. Helen, who is not a mother, marvels at the things she took for granted.

Helen hauls her suitcase up the steps and into the nearest compartment, where she realises too late she is facing the wrong way. And so, she will be dragged backwards through the names of all the places she’s forgotten.

The train moves off. Stops and starts, then slows out of the tunnel, jolting to a stand-still with a hiss of air. Under Helen’s feet the floor vibrates to the thrum of the engine.

OLD HILL.

Not an official stop, but just a pause in the scenery.

This is the Black Country. To the untrained eye, it could be a suburb of Birmingham. But Helen knows the difference. The air is dense and muffled, with a barely audible static, like an old film. This is where she went to school. There are banks of weeds, tall grasses, clumps of thorny brambles. They must be blackberries. In memory she can still taste their tartness with that powdering of dust embedded in the fruit.

LYE.

The train does not stop here either and the name is gone in a flash. Helen knows what comes next, but dare not look. And yet as the train crosses the track, she cannot help herself. The sign on the signal box reads “Stourbridge Junction”. Her stomach does a somersault. There is the house, perched on top of the hill; one in a row of similar others, a mirror image of the house next door. To her childish gaze, her parents’ dormer window always winked and Roger’s window smiled. Helen looks at the plain brick house with the brown tiled roof, the cream garage door and black drain pipes. The windows flash, opaque. Her mother is not there.

Kate switches on the lamp and the shadows lift, stirring the familiar nick-knacks and furniture to life. A sense of vitality issues from the brocade curtains, exactly as Helen remembers, with everything more or less in place. She feels jetlagged and the small talk irritates her.

She hears the sound of a car on the drive, headlights searching the room, the wrench of a handbrake, followed by Roger’s springing step; the idiosyncratic rattle of his key. The door catches and resists and their brother bursts in. By which time Helen is in the hall, unprepared for the sight of his sunken shoulders and the feel of something coming in through the door with him. The cold front that blows from the east, insinuating itself like a sword under the threshold. He grins, throwing out an arm as he moves towards her, his gestures once liquid with a natural ease she envied, now disconnected and stiff. She opens her arms in greeting but when their frames clash in a brisk hug, she is overwhelmed by his grief.

“I’m so sorry about Julia.”

You and Julia, she meant to say. About the estrangement and the bitterness – the children. She'd written, of course, spoken on the phone since it became official.

"So sorry it..."

...didn't work out, was the lame remark she was going to make, but he cuts through.

"Lovely to see you, Hel."

Words lacking emotion. He smiles an old smile that doesn't quite fit.

"How was Bristol?"

"Bristol was alright. But the M5..." He rolls his eyes. "Mind you, had to laugh. There was this bloke – after the turnoff for Worcester. In a Porsche."

He drops his voice, picking up a hint of their dad's Black Country accent on the word "Porsche". Helen struggles with his histrionics that override the pain she sees in his eyes.

"So, there we are at the traffic lights, me in the old Fiat, the bloke in the Porsche – suede jacket, sunglasses. Sunglasses!"

Yet Roger's performance is so convincing she begins to doubt herself. Perhaps it is her own grief that she reads into his grimace instead.

"Any road up," he says, the vernacular growing stronger, "this bike pulls up between us – leather jacket, helmet, gloves – and he starts revving up, flexing his legs, feet pushing against the tarmac."

Roger demonstrates, but Helen can hardly take it in, reminded as she is of her own estrangement and bitterness left behind in Perth.

"So there they are, engines firing, eyeing each other and the minute the lights change, they're off – way past the speed limit."

Helen's eyelids grow heavy and his voice becomes wallpaper for the deep fatigue she feels in every bone and muscle.

"Well, off I go, working me way through the gears and, a course, round the bend – guess what – a police van, flashing lights, a couple of cops, notebook in hand, taking down the details."

He holds her gaze for the first time, his voice levelling out.

"The rest of us, all just tootling by, pretty much bumper to bumper."

She shifts from one leg to the other, aware of a sharp pain under her arm.

“Let’s go and sit down,” she says, “Kate’s here.”

As if on cue, Kate appears from the kitchen with a plate of sandwiches and they follow her into the lounge, where they stand, leaning in towards each other at a safe distance under the light fitting.

“How was your trip?” Kate asks.

“Oh, Bristol was okay, apart from the drizzle, but the M5...”

“Like a beer?”

Kate rummages under the sideboard where the drinks are evidently still kept.

“Oh, ta.” He takes a draft from the dimpled glass she places in his hand, licks the trace of foam from his lips.

“Had to laugh, I was just telling Hel, this bloke, some Smart Alec in a Porsche...”

Helen’s neck aches from looking up at him and her legs are tired. She flops into the Princess chair behind her. After a while, Kate joins her in the armchair opposite and when Roger has finished his act, he sits down too.

“Went to *The Pig and Whistle* the other day.”

They gaze with him into the hearthrug, remembering, following old pathways, deep lanes that lead them down formula conversations. Helen can hear herself supplying the exact phrases her mother always used, virtually word for word, in the pauses Roger leaves for the express purpose. She has the eerie sense of being back in a conversation they’ve all had before. After all, she thinks, we’re sitting in the same room where we sat day after day, year after year, Kate in her normal spot next to the TV and Roger on the settee as usual, except that Helen is not sitting next to him. She realises she’s sitting in Vera’s chair and for a moment wonders if she should move.

For surely Mum will come and join them any minute now; will walk into the room, light yet substantial to the point of permanence. “Pop in”, the way she’d been popping, nipping and dashing for as long as Helen can remember. And even though Dad had been dead for the past five years, surely Dad too would stroll in with that same easy gait Roger always had – mild, grinning, his black overcoat swinging from his shoulders – out for a walk with the dog. Helen pictures Scotty, a hand-me-down of charcoal rug, with his

teddy bear eyes and bright pink tongue, dashing in and out of Dad's trouser legs as he stepped over and around him with unrehearsed precision.

They are not talking about the fact that Mum is in hospital and won't be coming back. Not talking about the stroke or the reason for Helen's trip all the way from Australia; the need to sort through the house and deal with all the "stuff".

"Have another drink," says Kate.

"Or a sandwich?" says Helen.

"Finish them off," they say.

Cheese and tomato with a hint of onion, just the way Dad liked them.

"I love onion," Roger begins in a thick Black Country accent and they know without him needing to elaborate that it's a take-off of Mrs. Blunt, the cleaner lady they all grew up with. They also know what's coming next. Except he doesn't bother this time. They can hear Mrs. Blunt's voice as if it were yesterday and fill in the blanks for themselves:

"But it's so unpleasant for other people!"

It is Mum's story and they imagine her emphasising the *ps* up close in your face, the way Mrs. Blunt did on the one occasion Mum served her lunch.

The grandmother clock winds up to strike the quarter hour; a mellow dong, followed by a polite wheeze and a whirring of cogs. It makes Helen start, but the others take no notice. She settles into its persistent tick, tick, tock, staring with her siblings into the hearth, puzzled as to how the person she knows herself to be in Australia has somehow slipped through her fingers.

A bank of wheelchairs stencilled with the words "St Joseph's Hospital" partially obstructs one of the double doors. Undeterred, Kate pushes on the functional side and Helen follows in her wake.

"Getting a bit run down," says Kate, which Helen thinks is an understatement.

Helen tenses against the smell of rancid floor polish, barely disguising the undercurrent of Dettol and urine. She tries to ignore the rows of beds, men *and* women, one with tubes running through an arm and nose, another

barricaded in by a cot. Finally, she steels herself to view the crumpled figure in the corner, whose faded cheek Kate now kisses.

On the opposite side of the bed is another visitor whom Helen vaguely recognises as Mrs. Cox, the cleaner Mum currently employs. She wears a shabby coat and a pinched expression.

“Remember I said Helen was coming from Australia?” says Kate, stroking Mum’s hand.

Vera’s eyes swivel towards Helen, who receives their fear and is immobilised. She wills herself to soften and smile. Above the bed, a sign announces a name she never answered to; Veronica Harper.

“I remember you,” says Mrs. Cox, fixing Helen with her brown, bead eyes. “You married that Italian out in Australia.”

Helen flinches and tries to refocus on Mum. The last person she wants to discuss right now is Mark.

“Helen’s flown all the way from Perth,” says Kate, drawing up a couple of chairs. “Twenty-four hours, isn’t it, from door to door? Arrived yesterday.”

She distributes her remarks seamlessly between Mrs. Cox and her mother and sister.

“She’s not talking yet, but we have to keep up the conversation. It doesn’t matter what you say. Apparently it helps her neural pathways.”

Vera opens her mouth like a fledgling beak, exposing white spittle in the cracks at either side. She closes it again, her Adam’s apple lodging in her throat.

“I was with ‘er when it ‘appened,” says Mrs. Cox.

“Thank goodness you were,” says Kate.

She turns to Helen.

“It’s early days,” she says reassuringly, but her eyes look strained.

Helen squeezes her sister’s hand.

“Well, I’d best be off,” says Kate.

Helen’s jaw drops.

“School,” she says. “I’ve got a class at 10.00. Pick you up later.”

“Later?”

“After tea.”

“Fiveish?”

“Probably closer to six, after I’ve got the kids organised and that.”

Helen stifles a panic attack. Aren’t they old enough to organise themselves?

“What about lunch?” she says.

“They bring lunch, of course, don’t they, Mum? Not that Mum’s on solids yet. Oh, that reminds me – almost forgot.”

And she extracts a brown paper bag from her basket and hands it to Helen.

“Sandwiches.”

“Oh, that *is* kind,” says Helen.

“And some lemon drizzle cake for elevenses.”

Kate produces a polystyrene dish containing a yellow slab encased in cling wrap. Then she rises, leaving Helen with the sandwiches in one hand and the cake in the other, fumbling to negotiate a hug. Her sister kisses the air next to Helen’s cheek and heads off down the ward with business-like tread.

“I’d best be getting along an’ all,” says Mrs. Cox.

She gets up and lays her hand on Vera’s, the joints of her fingers settling on the bones of the other. Vera holds her in a pleading gaze, like a prisoner. Neither of them speaks and neither averts their eyes as a strange knowing passes between them.

Vera stares after Mrs. Cox who falls in behind one of the orderlies pushing a trolley and is slowly towed down the aisle out of sight. Helen stares with her, searching for a sign; something to help bridge the gap after all these years with only phone calls and letters to fill in the blanks. A hesitant light forms briefly around a mass of cloud, and Helen imagines Dad peering at them through the cracks. He would know what to say.

As if by some tacit agreement, their eyes slide towards each other, grey on grey. And for a moment, their pain unites. Helen feels her mother’s tears confused with her own, the weight of them behind her eyes.

“The garden’s looking trim,” she says, taking the initiative.

Helen listens to herself rabbiting on in the same infuriating way their mother had, her distress amplified by guilt for having such thoughts, annoyed

with herself for not knowing how to find the remote control to quit the program. She is irritated by Vera's stubborn gaze; her silence every bit as elusive now as the former self-effacing silliness and flippancy. She sees Mum in the kitchen, tap dancing to jazz on the radio, heels and toes clicking on the tiles, her whole body swinging in tune to the music. It was a gift, like the throaty whistling that would burst from her as she stood at the sink. Yet in between were the long and troubling silences.

"I've gathered up the pears," she says, her voice going on without her, understanding with a shock why her mother talked like this, worse still, that she is hard-wired to pick up where Vera has left off.

The papers arrive and the lady with the tea trolley. Would Helen like a cup of tea? And a biscuit?

"Marie biscuits, Mum. Your favourite."

Or was it ginger nuts? Her mother always kept some in the pantry. Helen noticed a half-eaten packet there this morning and pictures the jumble of jars and bottles, packets and tins jostling for position on the shelf, condiments and plastic bags, all in a muddle. Would she tackle the pantry first? Or maybe leave it till last. Her mum won't be eating any sort of biscuit now; she can't chew or swallow, and has to drink her tea from a plastic baby cup with a straw.

Meanwhile, opposite, there is a flurry of activity, nurses massing round a young man in a white coat, examining a patient. Helen prepares to pounce. Could that be the doctor? The minute he has finished, she strides towards him.

"Excuse me. I'm Helen Harper, Vera – er Veronica Harper's daughter."

Just above his breast pocket is a badge, which Helen reads surreptitiously, keeping her eyes otherwise on "Simon Jones, Registrar."

"We're waiting for a brain scan," he says with only a trace of a Midland accent, impossible to say whether Birmingham or Black Country. Otherwise, fairly upper-middle class. She can't get over how young he looks.

"I see," says Helen. "How long is that likely to take?"

He wrinkles his forehead apologetically.

"Well, you see," he begins, "there is only one machine for the whole of the West Midlands and it's not at this hospital."

Naturally, she thinks.

“So, when is she scheduled for a scan?”

“Well, she’s been scheduled several times already.”

Helen waits for clarification.

“But, unfortunately, due to emergencies...”

He stresses the last word.

“I see,” says Helen. Then something occurs to her.

“Isn’t Mum an emergency?”

“Oh, she’s high on the priority list,” he counters.

“So, when *exactly* do you think....?”

“We’re probably looking at Wednesday.”

It’s Monday now, Helen thinks, that can’t be bad. She asks what seem like futile questions about what constitutes an emergency and is amazed to learn of the carelessness of the average British citizen. The registrar’s shoulders twitch as he explains the duress of the system and, without actually saying so, Helen understands Vera is old and, therefore, not an emergency. There are young folk doing daredevil stunts on motorbikes, trades people toppling from terrible heights, children from play equipment, rugby players almost trampled to death in the scrum. Her imagination informs her of all the possibilities he implies and she almost feels embarrassed to be asking about her mother, who, after all, is in her eighties. What is the likely prognosis? Could he hazard a guess? She understands his unwillingness to say, understands that Mum’s on medication to thin the blood, which Helen ascertains to be Warfarin.

Her mother is dozing now and Helen moves her chair closer to the thin light of the window. She pictures the West Australian spring so recently abandoned; Cottesloe Beach and the Indian Ocean, blood-red bottle brush against forget-me-not skies. Biblical fingers pierce the cumulus, streaming through branches, casting themselves whole against the grey lino; the broken wings of autumn leaves etched for a brief moment on the hospital floor. She wishes she had brought her sketchbook.

The smell of réchauffé potatoes infiltrates the ward, followed by a general stir of activity. Helen glances at her mother and their eyes meet.

“Lunch,” she says, brightly, and then remembers her mother is not able to tackle solids. What will she have?

It turns out to be something liquid sucked through a straw at the right side of her mouth – her good side. The nurse cranks the bed into an upright position and supervises to make sure she doesn’t choke. It is painful to watch and Helen wonders if her mother finds it humiliating. It is impossible to tell from that silent look but at least their eyes now rest for a moment in each other’s instead of drifting away like clouds.

Helen is glad of the sandwiches Kate has prepared and settles into the afternoon, surprised at how quickly time passes. She wonders if Kate remembered her penchant for tuna and tomato or whether it was just a coincidence. The bread is soft and springy and the crusts have a wholesome after-tang which Helen finds comforting.

Helen can hear the nurses throwing remarks at the patients, at each other, but can’t understand a word they’re saying. She recognises the familiar sounds acquired in childhood; knows the rhythms like the rocking of a cradle yet can’t make out a single word. Her mother understands, of course, but can’t speak, whereas Helen is mute through loss of language. Together they listen; she and Vera, both outsiders in their own way, her mother from Birmingham just a few miles away and Helen from overseas.

“Am you me sweet’art?” says the nurse with the pink-tipped hair.

She perches on the edge of the bed next to a florid man in striped pyjamas, who blushes a deep shade of puce. She puts her arm around him and he grins.

“Is it moi turn next?” the thin man in the next bed wants to know.

The purple man and his thin companion amicably hurl abuse, flirting with the nurse, who flirts back, her legs crossed, exposing a handsome thigh. They’re calling her “ma wench” now, both men and a third, who’s joining in. Other nurses squeak past and are drawn into the fray.

“You’ll be out of ‘ospital in no toime!” says a dark eyed nurse.

“No time” thinks Helen is this timeless banter; the rise and fall of a constant tide, coming in and going out like breath. Playground voices return to her:

“Who’s it?”

"I bin."

"Thee bist?"

"Ar".

In her best cursive Helen copied down: *I am, you are, he is, we are, you are, they are*. The Queen's English. But they all knew the dialect, which was never written down: *I bin, thee bist, 'e bin* (as well as *'er* and *it*), *we am, you am, they bin*. They knew when to use which, of course. But according to one of Roger's anecdotes, locals are still confused as to why the sign in Merry Hill reads "Toys R Us", instead of "Toys Am We".

At ten past six Kate arrives and they leave together, retreating back down the same aisle of beds that heralded them earlier. Except that it seems like a long time ago now and Helen feels a sudden sense of panic at the thought of leaving. Would her mother be alright? What would Helen do now back at the house without her for company?

"You'll have dinner with us, won't you?" Kate says. "And you can always come and stay. I can make up a bed in the spare room."

"Dinner would be nice, but I'll sleep in the house."

"Which room?" asks Kate.

They gaze straight ahead, the yellow light from the street lamps sliding over their knuckles and face, plunging them both into a blue twilight pause before the next wash of colour lends their skin and clothes a jaundiced glaze.

"In Mum's room," she says, "I want to get up in the morning and sort through some of her things."

This morning there is an eerie silence and the lack of birdsong. It is the first thing that strikes Helen after the disorientation of waking in her mother's bed. She thinks of Vera depressed by different blankets under the same sky and feels like a thief, who has stolen another woman's life. Slowly, the day lifts into a lesser gloom, revealing a bank of cupboards pressing in on her like the thigh bone of a dinosaur. They loom, these cupboards, ordinarily white but now detaching themselves in ghostly grey.

Still in her pyjamas, she opens a cupboard door, or more accurately widens it a crack, for it is permanently ajar, having given up the struggle to contain the overflow that is her mother's wardrobe. Helen stands before the

shelves, built like a series of square wooden boxes reaching to the ceiling. She pulls out jumpers, remembering some; the pale blue turtlenecks and brass buttoned cardigans. Others belong to the gap in their relationship after Helen moved overseas. Here they are in a state of disrepair, waiting to be dealt with, all layered in archaeological order, the most recent on top or squeezed around the sides. In a matter of minutes, she is working her way back through the years.

As she works, vigorously now, she is aware of those shooting pains travelling into her armpit; probably a blocked lymph node brought on by the cattle class conditions of the flight. She should go for a walk; swing her arms a bit; drink more water. Helen's fingernails catch on something. It is a midnight jumper with a sequin trail of feathers in peacock blue and green. A vision of her mother comes to her, standing in front of the oval mirror above the dressing table, bending with one knee behind the other, almost in a curtsy, trying to fit her hairdo into the limits of the frame. Helen can see her now in a tight-fitting, fantail skirt of dark lurex with a million little fires igniting as she moves. A night sky lit by a thousand milky ways. The sequins shimmer in Helen's hands; emerald and turquoise, silver and bronze. It is worse for wear now. Should she take it with her to the hospital when she goes in later; ask Mum what she wants done with it? After all, it would be a talking point, at least for Helen, and Vera can always nod or shake her head, if she can't manage a word. She surveys her mother's clothes scattered over the carpet and is overwhelmed. Perhaps she'll wait for Kate this evening. Together they'll sort them into piles, some for the charity shops and others for rags. Some to keep, if their mother wants.

The empty shelf with its unvarnished wood emits a hint of camphor and dust. Helen stands on tip-toe with a cloth to wipe it down and discovers some paperwork; a bundle of letters, secured by a now faded ribbon. She pulls at a frayed, pink edge, spilling letters onto the rug. The writing appears as a younger, more hesitant, version of Dad's, with less of a forward lean. He rarely wrote to Helen, and most of the "correspondence" comprised a letter at Christmas enclosing a bank draft with a brief message. It was difficult to read and made her think that if she could just get hold of the first stroke and tease it out, she could have straightened those words to make sense. In fact, if she

could have found that thread somewhere deep inside and pulled it, perhaps he too would have unravelled just a little and been more accessible. *"I'm sure you can make good use of this. All the best, Dad"* was the general gist of it. No chit chat and nothing frivolous to accompany the gesture.

She reties the ribbon and puts the letters aside for Vera to sort through later when she's out of hospital. The bedside clock says 9.46. Time for a shower.

"We've had a shower head installed over the bath," her mum had said on the phone a while ago now. *"Quite modern, really."*

Helen dances around beneath sharp needles striking her back in alternating pulses of heat and cold. Despite repeated attempts to adjust the dial, she can't seem to regulate the temperature. Soaping herself up, a violent stab brings sudden tears to her eyes. Exploring the area, she feels a distinct, hard lump under the left breast. She gazes up at the shower head with its turquoise surround, water pooling around her feet on the rubber mat. It will be a cyst, similar to those she's had before. She will phone for an appointment with the doctor some time, just to put her mind at rest.

As she passes the phone in the hall, though, it occurs to her that she might as well ring now to get the ball rolling; they're always booked up days ahead. She sits down and leafs through her mother's address book, frowning at the curling pages, wondering whether to try, *d* for doctor, *m* for medical or *b* for Broadbent. Scraps of coloured paper fly out, landing on the rug, the backs of envelopes dancing with Vera's haphazard scrawl. She finds the number under *e* for Emily.

At first, there's nothing till next week, which is as she suspected, just as well she's not dying of something.

"Mrs. Harper?" The receptionist's voice cuts in through the background commotion and static. "There is actually a cancellation at 2.00 this afternoon."

Helen is momentarily taken aback by being referred to as her mother, but quickly realises the woman means her.

"Yes, that'll be fine," she says.

It's a bit of a nuisance, having to see the doctor so soon; she was hoping to tackle the dining room this afternoon. Maybe she'll start on it after

breakfast. She sips her tea, pondering the mug in her hands, thumbs meeting over the word *Paris*. Helen has seen Vera with her fingers looped through the handle, exactly like this, staring at nothing. She muses over its pavement café scene picked out in shades of olive and parchment under a burnt sienna awning; lonely colours, not quite flowing together. Slightly off centre, two slatted chairs keep their distance from the wrought iron table, from each other. She thinks of Mark back in Australia and wishes she had not left her painting things with him in Toodyay. But there's no way she's phoning to ask for them.

Helen munches on her toast, contemplating her next move. A lawnmower coughs into life with a dental grind before settling into a dull drone delivered to her in snatches of wind. The dark oak sideboard throbs against the wall. On an impulse, she tugs at the metal rings of the nearest drawer, which finally yields in a couple of brief hiccoughs to reveal several Manilla folders. She pulls them out, none of them labelled, containing cut-outs from women's magazines and old newspaper articles, some dating back to the 1960s and beyond. Helen is appalled. She is not a perfectionist, but doesn't like things to get on top of her, and has an indexed system at home. Perhaps she takes after her father.

She makes a pile of the fashion magazines. Mum hasn't bothered with herself much these last few years. But there was a time; back in the days of the peacock jumper. Helen, too, has let herself slip. How did that happen? On the backs of empty envelopes are deft sketches of pert little hats with Robin Hood feathers and finger-waved hair. Helen can see her mother now, one hand clasping the phone to her ear, the other doodling on the back of envelopes, paying out platitudes, usually to Gran.

"Oh, dear...no...well, naturally, you wouldn't. Dear me..."

Under a pile of old serviettes is a secretary's notepad, mostly blank, except for the pencilled outline of an evening gown, a fur stole and a pair of sandals. There are bottles of Quink ink in turquoise and midnight, pens and pencils, yet not a single paintbrush, nor paints, nor sheets of thick A3 paper, cloud-white, textured, the way she likes. Helen gazes out across the lawn at the almost human way the pear trees lean and twist, grasping at sky with outstretched arms. The way the clouds mass and disintegrate. She places

the notebook on the button-backed chair by the window. This is where she will sit when the sun turns to wine, trying, the way she so often has, to capture that tension between evanescence and substance.

She picks up the next file, which contains handy hints for slimmers, quack remedies for whooping cough and piles. The Miracle of Garlic. And what's this? A Health Expo at the newly opened Birmingham Exhibition Centre, which is going back a bit. Expand Your Horizons: Discover New Ways To Better Health & Happiness. For information call Prasada Jones. She scans through the plethora of promises: "Reclaim Your Power", which Vera had underlined along with "Meditation, Exercise and Laughter", plus "Psychic Clearings". Did she phone and book a place? Dash up to the station and hop on a train? With a friend? (She can't think of a likely candidate). By herself, then? Helen tries to picture her mother with flowing skirts and gypsy blouse, but can't get past the Marks & Spencer's image. Spasmodic church goer, staunch member of the Town's Women's Guild. Perhaps it was a passing interest. Or a way of keeping up with the times, like fashion.

On her way to the bin, she stops to answer the phone.

"Mel!"

"I wasn't sure of the time difference. Is this a good moment?"

"It's great to hear your voice," says Helen, sliding into a chair.

"How's your mum?"

"Not good, Mel. The whole of her left side paralysed and no speech yet."

"You poor darling," says Melanie. "Good job your siblings are there."

"Yes," says Helen with a wobble in her voice, her eyes misting. "How are things at work?"

"We miss you, and that's for sure."

"Did we get that extra meeting room?"

"It got knocked back," says Mel.

A flash of heat surges through her.

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Try telling that to Jeremy."

"I'd go straight to Prof Horton and bypass admin altogether."

“I know you would,” says Mel. “But Ian’s already struggling to fill your shoes and I’m in no position....”

“Tell Ian to talk to the Prof. He’s a decent guy. Do you want me to email him?”

“No, no. You’ve got enough to think about,” says Mel. “We’ll sort something out.”

Helen sighs.

“I’ll phone again next week,” says Mel. “We’ll both have better news by then, for sure.”

Helen replaces the receiver and stares at the phone. Then she picks up the papers and dumps them by the kitchen bin. She returns to the sideboard, pulling on the second drawer, which bursts open, hanging like a speechless tongue. She turfs out letters, notes and papers by the handful. She has a good mind to drive over to Kate’s and send that email to Horton. A couple of golf balls roll into the vacuum created by the absent paperwork. They must be Dad’s. And now she has stabbed herself with the sharp end of a golf tee. Helen squeezes her eyelids against the tears. It is not the meeting room she’s angry about or admin; it’s the thought of Mark swanning around on campus with Jessica.

She strides into the kitchen in search of bandaids, sucking on the blood. She will get on the internet and do a search under “senior librarianship positions”; there are bound to be plenty in Perth. Winding the tape around her finger, she is interrupted by a tap on the window and looks up to see her brother grinning at her from the other side of the glass.

“Roger!” she says, opening the back door.

“Thought I’d pop by in me lunch hour and see how you’re doing. Any chance of a cuppa?”

She glances at the clock. Ten to one already.

“What a lovely surprise,” she says, unhooking a mug from the tangle on the stand. They wait side by side next to the tea pot, which sits like a mother hen on its cork mat beneath the striped woollen cosy.

“What about some lunch?” she says. “I’ve got yesterday’s bread and a tin of tuna. Or I could do you a fry up.”

“Sandwiches are good,” he says, easing into a chair.

Helen's sudden rush of enthusiasm evaporates into a flash of irritation. Why is she bustling about all of a sudden, exactly like her mother, making sandwiches? She's glad he didn't ask for a fry up. She fishes a loaf out of the breadbin and without a second thought, her hand feels for the breadboard in the space between the cooker and the corner cupboard.

"I was wondering if you might have a spare computer knocking about the place," she says, sawing at the bread.

"I'll see if I can fix something up for you," he says.

They lapse into silence. Helen wonders if she should ask whether he's seen much of the children, but hesitates to broach a painful subject. Best not to enquire. It's hardly as if she's on speaking terms with her own ex.

"Looks like you've started on some of Mum's stuff," says Roger, eyeing the papers by the bin.

"The sideboard," she says.

"Ah," he says, brushing the crumbs from his jumper. "Let's have a look."

Helen follows him into the dining room, where they are greeted by the bevelled mirror. Who is that middle aged couple surprised in its frame? She sees her father standing there, short sighted, neck pressed forward in that inquisitive manner, nose leading the way. But it isn't their father and he isn't wearing the customary crew-necked pullover, his shirt collar peeping over the top. The confident, square shoulders collapsed, instead, with disappointment. She sees again Roger's grief, and suddenly her mother's too. For there also in the mirror is another woman, not her mother; someone with a similar slope to the shoulders and the same springy hair, but for the colour – she must go to the hairdressers – and her father's nose.

Roger, too, seems a little taken aback; whether because he has seen the drawer or spotted himself in the mirror, she can't say. This mirror, which has seen so much, recorded endless mirth and meals, the unwrapping of Christmas presents and the New Year's *Dashing White Sergeant* when all the furniture was pushed against the walls to create a dance floor.

He grabs hold of the drawer and drops it on the floor.

"Let's get a piece of newspaper and tip it all out. That way, we can salvage bits we want to keep and the rest can go."

“What a good idea,” she says, amazed how practical he has become, and runs into the kitchen for a copy of the Daily Mail.

“Oh, I remember this,” says Roger, exhibiting a hinged letter opener. “Totally impractical. The minute you applied it to an envelope, it folded up!”

“Here, let’s try,” says Helen. “Maybe it’s improved with rust.”

They grab hold of an airmail letter and try it against the unopened end. True to form, it collapses before making any impression on the corner.

“And that’s another thing,” he says, “it’s blunt!”

They laugh; it always was.

Roger picks it up and presses the hinge to his upper lip, the two metal sides drooping to half past six. He raises the other arm and goose steps round the dining table before tossing it onto the newspaper. There is a moment’s silence and Helen fancies that Roger too feels sad to see it go. He turns the letter over and looks at Helen.

“It’s from you,” he says.

She studies the postmark and Australian stamp with its burst of bush flowers, all red spikes and yellow froth. Of course, it’s already been opened years ago. She feels homesick – for the land, perhaps, with its sense of space. Certainly not for Mark, but more the empty place she wanted him to fill.

Roger hovers with the letter over the pile.

Helen is tempted to lift it from his fingers and put it on one side – just out of interest, to see if it contained some clue about her relationship with her mother then, or with Mark.

“She might want it,” she says, feigning indifference, “I’ll ask.”

“If you ask her about every little thing, she’ll want to keep it all,” says Roger in a moment of sense that surprises Helen. There she was feeling the strain of her siblings treating her like an adolescent and yet Roger, it would seem, has moved on too. Well, naturally, she thinks, he’s forty-two!

“Yes,” Helen sighs, “you’re right.”

“There are so many letters,” he says.

“Maybe we should just keep one or two.”

“Chuck the lot,” he says with finality. “She’s probably forgotten about them anyway.”

After Roger has gone, she checks the time. Good Lord! 2 o'clock! That's okay; it will only take fifteen minutes to walk, at most. And, anyway, they always run late. As she strides down the drive, she chuckles over her brother's interruption, which has lightened an otherwise onerous task.

She opens the door of the doctor's surgery, surprised somehow that it still gives directly onto the street. She is equally shocked by the waiting room – smaller than she remembers – more squalid, with its orange and brown flecked carpet and grubby, plastic toys. An elderly man with a balding dog and a heavily pregnant woman sit in opposite corners. Helen picks up one of the well-thumbed magazines. She settles in, adjusting to the suspension from time and place evoked by the strip light and the lack of windows, the directives to vaccinate against the flu, have a pap smear, donate blood. The receptionist is barely visible behind the brown box in which she is barricaded, so that Helen does not at first recognise her own name when it is called. Besides, she was expecting the doctor to announce herself in person.

Dr. Broadbent peels off her spectacles and peers at Helen with large, hazel eyes. Does Dr. Broadbent recognise her, she wonders. Helen is still irritated at having missed her at the hospital.

Emily Broadbent gazes with that opaque stare, suggesting her mind is on other, probably more important, things. She's waiting for Helen to say something.

"I found a lump in the shower this morning," Helen says, adding when she realises how ambiguous this sounds, "under the left breast."

Dr. Broadbent rises.

"Hop up on the examining table and I'll have a look at it."

That lump is definitely sore, thinks Helen as Dr. Broadbent's sausage fingers press and prod.

"How long have you had the lump?" she asks, as though speaking to someone behind her and Helen almost wishes her mother was there to answer for her.

"I only just noticed it," she says, suppressing her irritation. What a stupid question. *Oh, months, I just thought, now that I'm here, with time on*

my hands... Then, again, did it really just erupt this morning like those pesky teenage pimples she remembers?

“Hm,” says Dr. Broadbent.

Should Helen mention the shooting pains?

“I’ll send you off for a biopsy,” says the doctor.

“Do you think it’s a cyst?”

“We’ll discuss it next week when the results come through,” she says.

“I wouldn’t get too excited about it.”

The aluminium ladder creaks under Helen’s weight as she descends with a maroon-coloured box, emblazoned with the words; *Hotter Comfort Concept Shoes* in white lettering. It is full of photographs, some housed in their original Bonusprint covers with families sporting swimwear and tans. Older images spill from square manila envelopes, of a quality you can’t buy anymore, their triangular flaps still unlicked. Helen sits down on the floor next to her mother’s bed and shuffles through them. The snapshots appear in no particular order, so that one moment Vera is aged about six, book-ended by parents on Margate Beach, and the next is pictured as a young mother herself with a babe in arms. It is hard to say who the baby is, but the toddlers are mostly Kate, of whom there are multiple snaps.

Here is one of Roger, aged six months, propped up in the corner of the utility suite, wearing hand-me-down knitwear and a look of surprise. Next, he is pictured between Helen and Kate, apparently bewildered to find himself again in grey and white matt finish. Kate sits with an eager forwardness, her plaits tapering to grey tartan bows. Helen’s hair is cropped short and she leans sympathetically towards her brother in a gesture of commiseration.

The accuracy of the photo lies in its ability to capture the dearth of colour and the silent misery from which Helen hoped to save her younger sibling. Although, this was probably a personal projection, Roger being such a sunny child. The greyness seemed all-pervasive, creeping like fog around ill-fitting doors, infiltrating her imagination and freezing all thought.

Out of this drabness, lucidity pools like a clear spot rubbed through the pane of memory. There she is sitting on the third step from the bottom surveying the hall, trying to decide whether or not to step down into it and

walk through the house. Opposite is a door with a circular stained-glass window, forming a ship with sunset sails under a jaunty sky. It is a forbidding door, save for the glass boat in which she has sailed into the house of pale green carpet; or so she imagines.

Helen shuffles through more photographs. There is one of Granddad wrapped like a parcel in a trench coat. The selfsame photograph perhaps that prompted his remark; *“That coat foreshortens me.”*

“No it doesn’t, Cedric,” came Gran’s swift reply, *“you are short!”*

And for clarification she added; *“You look like a car park attendant.”*

Here they are again; both grandparents, smiling this time as though the best of friends in the front room of the old house Helen hardly remembers because she was only four when they moved. Or it might have been at Uncle Noah’s because in those days all houses seemed to follow the same design. They all struck chill in the same way and smelt of gravy and carbolic. And they all had dog-leg corridors leading to the kitchen. The one place of refuge where Helen sees herself seated on a stool, legs outstretched before the wide open mouth of an oven, gargling blue flames.

These are the rooms that inhabit her. In her imagination, they are always there, but she can choose not to go inside very often. Mostly they remain closed. Helen surveys the photographs scattered over the bed. She’ll have to come back to them later, if she wants to see her mother before the appointment.

As Helen emerges from the lift at St Joseph’s, she spots the registrar and hurries to catch up with him.

“Excuse me,” she says, “I wonder if you’d had Mrs. Harper’s results back yet.”

His face remains bland and impassive.

“The blood tests show high cholesterol,” he says.

“I see,” she says. “Did the brain scan show anything?”

“Ah,” he says, glancing at the floor. “Unfortunately, we’ve had to reschedule.”

Helen inhales, feeling the tightness under her breast.

“When is she due now?”

He thumbs through his notes.

“She’s down for Friday.”

Helen’s chest deflates.

“Right,” she says and braces herself for the double doors.

Mum lies with her mouth open, lightly snoring, head tilted to one side.

Helen sits beside her, clutching a bunch of chrysanthemums. She is annoyed with herself for not having asked what they are doing about Mum’s cholesterol. Was Mum stressed? She never let on when they spoke on the phone. Then again, they had both been trained to stick to the facts. Yes, Helen was enjoying apartment-sitting; she had a lovely view of Cottesloe Beach. No, she didn’t think she and Mark would be reconciled. What about Roger?

“He’s good company,” Mum had said. “Nice to have someone in the house again.”

It had been no trouble, she insisted, apart from his washing, which was getting her down. And the extra cooking. Plus, he did get a bit het up from “talking” to Julia, and there was only Mum to hear about it. But; where else could he go? Anyway, he was setting up on his own next week.

Vera’s hair, always so lush in photographs, clings to her skull in thin wisps. The curls are still there, the bulk of it a faded fox, but a band of pure white lies flattened against her scalp. Mum would not like to see herself like this. Should Helen ask about a hairdresser? But the idea of colouring Mum’s hair seems futile and the dye would surely seep into her brain. What can she do?

“Ah,” says a familiar voice. “I thought I’d find you here.”

Helen turns to her sister.

“Where else would I be? Apart from at the house?”

Vera exhales with a groan. Helen straightens up, observing intently to see if she will breathe again. Vera’s chest falters and then collapses. It is all very troubling. She’s frowning now; dreaming, perhaps.

“I just popped in on my way from school,” says Kate, taking a seat. “She’s aged a lot,” she whispers. “Lost weight. I’m going to ask someone about her diet.”

Vera’s eyes fly open.

“Mum!” says Helen.

Their mother stares wide-eyed, showing no sign of recognition. Then she blinks and a look of puzzlement flits over her face, quickly followed by fear.

“It’s all right, Mum,” says Kate, “it’s only us.”

Vera’s gaze wavers between her two daughters before settling on Kate. Her eyes brighten for a moment and she rests back against the pillows.

“Helen’s brought you some chrysanthus,” says Kate.

Mum parts her lips, mouthing with intense concentration, but no sound ensues and she shakes her head, frustrated. Helen finds herself mentally mouthing with her, willing her to speak; the effort of it brings a lump to her throat.

Kate hauls the nurse for a vase; it’s Liz, with the pink-tipped hair.

“Ooroit?” she says.

“Yes, Mum’s alright,” says Helen, “but I just wondered – could you tell me where to find a vase?”

“Them’s lookin’ a bit droopey, eh?” she says, taking the flowers. “Oi’ll be roight back.”

“Just a minute,” says Kate. “What are you doing about Mum’s diet? She’s losing weight.”

Liz cocks her head, adjusting her weight.

“It’s a bit of a problem when they cor eat solids,” she says. “Although ‘er is on pureed food now.”

“I was wondering about some fortified drinks,” says Kate.

“Leave it wi’ me,” she says, and disappears with the flowers.

Helen smiles at her mother but Vera looks away. Kate fusses with the bedcovers.

After a while, Liz reappears with the chrysanthemums in a vase and confirms that their mother will be on fortified drinks from now on.

“Excellent,” says Kate.

Vera drifts in and out of sleep.

“I’d best be off,” she adds.

“Me too,” says Helen. “I’ve got an appointment.”

“Having your hair done?” says Kate. “Good idea. That’ll make you feel better.”

Helen reads the notices as she queues behind a pensioner at the reception desk. Takes a seat. The walls are papered with signs.

VACCINATE NOW, it says in blue letters above the lady opposite with the elephantitis bandage. It is hard to say whether the dull plaster-of-paris smell emanates from that leg or from the general medical environment.

Helen wants to stop reading these directives, but her mind reaches for them like a poultice.

NOTICE TO PATIENTS: Please do not blame the receptionist for the appointment system used in this practice. They are following your doctor's instructions. Dr. J. Crabb, Dr. E. M. Broadbent, Dr. R. L. Swift.

“Miss Harper?”

She had clearly stated “Ms” on the form, but never mind.

Dr. Broadbent sits behind her desk, florid with health – one could even say fat – expensively dressed, if a little drab. The gold band with its sapphire and diamond cluster sit tight on her finger.

Dr. Broadbent comes round to the patient side of the desk, sits opposite Helen and lowers her head a fraction, facilitating a grave look.

“The pathology results show the presence of some necrotic material, which would suggest cancer.”

Necrotic material.

Is that what she said?

There is a suggestion of necrotic material.

Helen already feels mummified. And yet, all along there was this nagging suspicion; so why is she in shock?

Dr. Broadbent is talking about a referral to a specialist. A surgeon. What does it all mean?

“The best in his field.”

What field? Helen wonders. Cancer? Surgery? Breasts?

“I’d like you to have an ultrasound,” she says. “And I’ll get these results sent on to Dr. Griffin. He’ll interpret the ultrasound together with the pathology results for you. The receptionist will give you his details.”

“The specialist?”

“Dr. Griffin, yes.”

Helen appreciates Dr. Broadbent being straight with her, appreciates too the lack of fake compassion, the referral to the specialist. But there is that smugness, the satisfaction with her own candidness, gained through experience with other patients; preparing them for the worst, which Dr. Broadbent does so well.

“Maria Fenton is a very experienced pathologist, and quite intuitive,” says Dr. Broadbent.

So, they’re all intuitive and the odds are she has cancer. And yet Dr. Broadbent says until the tumour has been excised, they will not know for sure. And that the ultrasound will throw more light on the situation. So, there is hope, then? Or is it doubt? Either way, she can’t bring herself to voice any of this to Dr. Broadbent, who is already signing the referral and rising from her desk in readiness for the next appointment.

On the way out, a red heart flashes at her from the wall; it is being squeezed by a blue hand: If you think you are having a heart attack, don’t hesitate. Fast action can save your life. Dial 999 now. NHS direct 0845 4647.

Helen dream-walks up the Hagley Road, past the rugby boys, their mud-quivering movements spooling behind iron railings in the manner of an old film. She is glad to be on foot and not have to cope with traffic right now or the stiff gears of her mother’s car.

She lets herself in by the front door, amazed to find herself already here, sits on the bottom step in the hall, contemplating the phone. Everyone will be at work; there is no one to ring and she doesn’t have the heart for more photographs.

“Bloody O! That’s got to be the last thing you need.”

Helen’s hand shakes as she grips the receiver; waiting for Melanie to fill the silence.

“So, what sort of a lump?”

Helen feels around the offending area with tentative fingers, bracing for the sharp sting that is already a familiar part of her landscape.

“It’s pretty small – like a pea – very sore.”

“It sounds like you’ve caught it early, whatever it is.”

She can hear Melanie breathing on the other end of the line.

“Not much you can do, I guess, till tomorrow. What kind of specialist is it?”

“A surgeon – specialises in breasts.”

“Oh, yea – some bloke, I suppose.”

“I think so, yes,” says Helen.

“Is there anyone who can go with you? What about your sister?”

Helen observes her fingers gripping the pen she hadn’t realised she was holding. She has outlined the v on the back of an envelope in strong black lines, making a groove in the paper.

“Honestly, Mel – I’m fine – especially now I’ve spoken to you. More than likely it’s a cyst and in any case I can always have it cut out if it’s – you know – not benign.”

“Exactly,” says Mel.

Helen puts down the pen.

“Just as well you don’t have big knockers or you’d never have found it.”

“Can you imagine me with big knockers!” says Helen, laughing. “I’d be like the proverbial barmaid who fell over but didn’t hurt her nose!”

Now they’re both giggling.

“It’s enough to give anyone a bloody lump in the breast,” says Mel.

“What with your mum in hospital and everything.”

Helen knows exactly what Mel means by “everything”.

“Remember to take time out for yourself,” says Mel. “Do some painting or something.”

“It’s a bit complicated here,” says Helen. “I know I should, but – it’s hard to explain. Back in Perth I feel kind of together – even when I’m falling apart, if you know what I mean.”

“You’re the most together person I know,” says Mel. “Maybe give that house sorting stuff a break. I mean – what’s the rush?”

“Perhaps. Then again, it does provide a focus – takes my mind off other things.”

“Well, don’t overdo it. Call me tomorrow after your appointment, okay?”

Helen stands in the hallway, light flooding in through the east window. She can see the open-tread stairs leading to the loft beyond the landing, and recalls the sense of spaciousness and quiet up there. She hasn’t been in the loft since she and Mark slept there the last time they came here; perhaps a decade ago now. It was where all the teenage parties were held. She heads up the stairs, drawn by an almost magnetic curiosity. She knows there are books up there. A veritable library; and it might make the ideal artist’s eyrie.

“I’m not tackling any of the books in the loft,” her mother had said a couple of years ago now. *“I can’t manage those stairs any more.”*

And, in truth, they do look forbidding. What kind of books will she find? Something to distract her from the impending visit to the surgeon perhaps.

The stairs creak with each tread and, looking down, she can see the hall table and the telephone a couple of floors below. She keeps her sights on the loft door, which does not yield easily because of the metal weight installed as a fire precaution. Helen surveys the floor to ceiling books; the special cabinet made to house the Encyclopaedia Britannica and, behind it, the late sixties wallpaper they all thought so modern then, with its abstract geometry of olive and mustard scrolls. On top of the cabinet, Roger smiles at her across the decades with dimpled grin through a curtain of shoulder-length hair. There is an entire gallery of snapshots, all in black and white, covered in a thin veil of dust. The room feels stuffy and Helen clammers onto a desk to open one of the windows. She can see the pear trees below, the steps and the rockery and the whitewashed building that serves as a shed. She gets down and dusts herself off. What a strange desk; she has never seen it before.

She kneels down to open the front panels, which hinge back to reveal a series of small compartments and shelves, where her mother keeps things of evident importance. More spiral-bound notebooks full of shorthand, interspersed with sketches of models; tall, slender pencil lines, suggesting 1940s skirts and jackets, evening gowns and hats. They are stylishly

executed, including the pencil wisps of hair forming elaborate curls. Some appear as idle doodles, others are more complete.

Behind the notepads at the back of the desk lies a deeper layer; a dark interior containing a jungle of papers and envelopes, the ubiquitous family photos. There are broken pencils and perished rubber bands. Really, her mother is not tidy. She feels a rush of energy with the irritation and directs it towards the chaos. Sheaves of paper spill onto the floor. More notebooks. Helen stacks them into a neat pile, then reaching back inside the bowels of the desk, spies a dark slab of something. She pulls it out. The leather cover has aged, revealing orange cracks along the side. There is a lock, now rusted. It breaks in her hand. She brushes away the pollen of dust this creates, and an envelope falls out – an aerogramme containing a small French stamp.

The letter is addressed to Véronique Shaw at the Birmingham address; her Great Aunt's house. On the back is the name J.-C. Le Clos, and an address Helen can't quite decipher. Would her mother want to keep it? She puts it to one side.

The writing inside the book is a tighter, more rhythmic version of the scrawled notes she finds scattered around the house on the backs of envelopes and odd scraps of paper – shopping lists and reminders of things to do. Pot the geraniums. Phone Helen – fancy having to remind herself to phone her own daughter.

Each entry is dated mostly 1947 and '48. The name Langon appears next to the date and, occasionally, Bordeaux. What could this mean?

Langon, September 25th 1947.

What pleasure it gives to write what I see: the net curtains casting floral patterns against the counterpane and wooden floor. It is a plain room, cool and still, with a single chair in the corner made of dark wood and raffia. Yet, to me it feels quite magical, especially at dawn when light slides through the shutters in horizontal stripes, cherishing the wash-stand and the hand-knotted rug. I lie here with my head against the bolster, imbibing the tealeaf scent of sheets, whilst the clock beneath me tick-tocks, tick-tocks, dreaming

away the hours. One would think this irritating, but I like it as much as the peace that exudes from the bulging walls, and the creak of floorboards.

At night I fall asleep to the rhythms of this clock, knowing in my dreams the quarter-hour and how quickly the half-hour catches up with it; how long before the three-quarter mark arrives. When midnight strikes, I try to count, and counting, fall asleep, awakening to six chimes and the distant echo of church bells. Everything is timeless here, the days punctuated by cock-crow and the swish, swish, sweep of Madame Le Clos' broom. Jean-Claude is not here today, for he has caught the Bordeaux train to start a new job in the city, and will not be a mechanic like his father.

Oh, dear diary, did I tell you how happy I am with Jean-Claude? How I love the way his parents take such care to pronounce the full name every time – Jean-Claude, Jean-Claude, Jean-Claude. Soon we will be married.

Helen's heart falls out of rhythm and her mouth hangs open. She reads on, incredulous.

I have seen a dress, worn only once by Belle Richards' cousin, who married at the end of the war. The fashions haven't changed for all that and I can have it altered to fit. This means I can save my coupons for the veil bespoke for me by Thelma at the milliner's in Kinver, and the suiting material from Rackham's. Madame Le Clos is handy with a needle and says she will help me make it into a going-away outfit.

How will it be to live here, instead of Birmingham, after we are married? Will I, too, sweep the floor each morning with long and rhythmic strokes? Will I carry buckets into the yard to feed the hens the way Madame Le Clos does? Will he expect it? I do not know any more than I know why I feel so at home here, or why I like the concentration on food, the slow domesticity; cycling into Langon on the bicycle and returning with greens fresh from the markets each day. Will the novelty wear off?

Helen glances up at the desk; at the photograph of her parents standing on the steps at St. Mary's, where she, herself, was confirmed. Her father's feet

cast firm shadows on the paving as he leans protectively towards his bride. They are smiling directly at her.

Stepping into the foyer of the Dudley Memorial Hospital, Helen is bathed in light from lofty windows. It is a sharp contrast to the cramped gloom of St Joseph's, and a good sign, she tells herself. Everything will be okay; the specialist will tell her it's benign, and she will feel foolish for wasting everybody's time. She will buy new shoes and take Kate and Roger out to lunch. Be more proactive about Mum's situation.

But, as she sits in the waiting room with her magazine, staring at Angelina Jolie's plump, pillow lips streaking the page, she feels uncertain. What is he like, this specialist? Is he young or old? Bearded, handsome, bespectacled? She needs to know so she can prepare herself to meet him. Should she be sympathetic towards him, this man who must break the news? If it *is* bad news. She abandons *Women's Weekly*, focusing instead on the fading blue of Monet's *Lilly Pond*. At least they have art in this establishment, which is more than can be said for St. Joseph's.

"Mrs. Allwood?" A gaunt figure rises from the corner and smooths her crumpled skirt. Ah, he *is* young. And so is the woman. Helen's heart flutters uncertainly and tears smart in her eyes; what is the story of the young Mrs. Allwood? She imagines her in a tight kitchen with a brood of children. Helen is not attached, she's middle aged. Who will miss her if anything happens to her, apart from Kate and Roger, perhaps? And, of course, Mum.

She tries to picture Mark getting the news in Toodyay. But, unless she tells him herself, no one else is likely to. *Will* she tell him? Would he still care? Surely, their joint past must count for something. Helen tries to comfort herself with the memory of Melanie's voice over the phone yesterday morning, and her down-to-earth response.

Her eyes blur over the glossy pages of *Good Housekeeping*, the faultless pastries and potted preserves. The truth is, she is nervous and can feel herself fading out, the way she would as a child at school when Miss Skelding barked instructions at them and she would take it personally. She reminds herself she is a well-travelled woman; a senior librarian at a top

university; the best in WA; she has finally had the guts to leave a dysfunctional relationship. She can cope with this.

By the time it's her turn, and Miss Wilkins, Mrs. Cuthbert and the old woman who has clearly already had a mastectomy, have all trundled through to Dr. Griffin, she couldn't care less about his age. Emboldened by boredom, she marches in and sits to face him squarely. Pleasant face, no wrinkles, intelligent eyes.

"Just pop behind the curtain and take off your top and we'll have a look at that lump, shall we?"

Her mouth goes dry. There is no option to say, "*no, let's not.*"

She feels like a small child, told to sit in the corner at the front of the room, or like Fred Kettle, who was paraded before not only his classmates but the next class too, his mouth taped up with sticking plaster.

Her hands shake as she peels off her woollen jumper and unhooks her bra. The marks from the elastic are painted against her skin. She had not expected him to examine her. Wasn't it a question of simply discussing the pathology results and the ultrasound? Why doesn't someone warn you about the procedures, so you know what to expect? Helen lies down. There is not even a sheet to cover herself with. Soon, he is behind the curtain with her, looking her in the eye and flashing the even, white teeth before fastening his gaze on her defenceless breast. She stares at the ceiling, pretending to notice its lack of cracks and blemishes, the standard cornices, which are exactly the same as cornices everywhere, including the Cotteloe apartment. But she barely sees them, sees instead the blankness of her own mind cast up on the ceiling, the same mind more or less exactly that was cast up on the ceiling of schoolrooms, where she would stare helplessly, pleading with the paintwork for inspiration, or some kind of *deus ex machina* to ride down from the heavens and rescue her. To wrest her, in those days, from the spitting voice of Miss Skelding, who wanted to know what three times nine was all about. And worse, what about nine times nine or eleven or six? For she had a way of randomly pouncing with the very one you didn't know.

She feels Dr. Griffin's surprisingly gentle hands expertly feeling around the side of her breast. The tears spring to her eyes and she can detect the exact size and shape of the lump that he feels, somehow sensing the

message his fingertips convey to his brain. The powerful brain that knows all the numbers upside down and backwards, for it is this kind of brain that triumphs always over hers, which is mushy and vague. Staring now at the whiteness of the ceiling she realises with stark clarity that, despite almost half a century of living, she still feels powerless in the face of authority.

She is distracted by the voice of the specialist. He is saying something and, although he says it so personally and kindly, she cannot hear the words. But knows from his tone that he knows, as she does, that it's cancer. And that she will be in good hands with him. He'll take care of her. He doesn't say any of this, of course, she's quite sure. And yet he does. He says it with his eyes.

Soon, she is dressed and back in the chair, the safety of the desk between them – blond wood, a paperweight, a quill shaped biro (featherless) like a black dart in a bull's eye, attached by a chain of silver beads.

He has some papers before him and she understands he is talking now about the ultrasound and pathology results Dr. Broadbent forwarded on to him. She catches the words, "atypical hyperplasia." Helen isn't a straight-talker herself, but whereas she knows the family protocol of speaking in riddles, she is unable to decipher these medical semiotics. Is he saying he really doesn't know? That only surgery will reveal the answer? Which is what she understands he recommends. He is a surgeon, after all. What else could he suggest?

With her clothes on, she can look at him gravely with equal lack of expression, playing the game. She can pretend there are options – surgery or no surgery – although she knows she *will* have the surgery – what else can she do?

"It doesn't feel like cancer," he says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Until we operate, we won't know for sure, however."

Helen wants to hug him. It doesn't feel cancerous!

A blank computer screen sits at his right elbow. He flicks it on and fiddles with the keyboard. She remembers hands like that; square hands, blond hairs, freckles. And the way the tears welled in Josh's eyes before he buried his face in them after she said she was leaving for London. She was

ambitious; eager to get on; despised his helpless sobbing. She has done it all now. Seen everything. Regrets nothing. Most of all, she has been *independent*. Josh was too comfortable; too fond of his football and beer. She had outgrown all that. Doesn't know why she thinks about him now. They were just students at the time. And yet, something about his eyes – she can almost feel them watching over her – were they actually green?

“So, Miss Harper.”

She is appalled to hear herself say, “Call me Helen.”

He can fit her in for surgery next week. She doesn't want it to be this fast, she needs time to think. But fast is good, that way there is no time to think. Just get it done and pretend it never happened. Why does she feel so anxious? He doesn't think it's cancerous.

He is nice and kind and she wants to collapse into him. Do all his patients feel this way? The minute she has walked out of the room, his mind will be on golf, or picking up the kids from school, or dinner, or something. Does he play the cello? Why did she suddenly wonder that? Because of his fingers and the way they felt over her skin, practised, yet sensitive.

She is not attracted to him, the way she was with Mark – or Josh. It's more a dad thing. She wants him to care and agrees to book herself in for next week. It will be a turning point, she tells herself; a scare that will lead to a new lease of life. Now she must tell her siblings – and Mum.

Her hands still tremble as she fronts up to the receptionist with her Visa card. This woman, of an indeterminate age, is the antithesis of Dr. Griffin – whose name doesn't suit him at all – she wants him to be called James – and maybe he is. This woman has unnatural hair, like bleached wood, with the texture of shavings. These wood shavings look as though they have haphazardly dropped from above without her realising and she conducts the Visa transaction as though she looks perfectly normal, her pendant earrings flickering with slight irritation as she swipes the card with a violent stab. Her lips are thin and orange. She won't smile, Helen already knows that – probably has yellow teeth.

“Breast cancer!” says Kate.

She studies the fine powdering of chocolate dimpling her cappuccino; picks up the spoon and draws the froth into a thoughtful swirl.

“He says it doesn’t *feel* cancerous,” corrects Helen. How come Kate always misconstrues everything? She’s speaking plainly enough, isn’t she?

“People get over it,” she says. “These days. It doesn’t have to be a drama.”

Her voice is firm.

“Just do what the doctor says. Have the surgery.”

Kate looks her in the eye, irises flickering slightly.

“They don’t know for sure that it is cancer,” says Helen. “Won’t know until after the surgery.”

“You need to know,” says Kate.

“Everything okay?”

The waiter’s voice comes from a long way off and yet he is standing at their table; impossibly young, his hair catching the light at wayward angles; a bale of sunlit straw.

“*Of course,*” is the response she is programmed to make, were it not for the sudden flare of light forming a halo around his head, and the blurring of his face; his mouth sliding over words.

And Helen knows that everything is not okay; that surgery is the start of a slippery slide she doesn’t want to take.

“Can I get you anything?” the waiter says, a fleeting look of concern edging towards bewilderment.

Helen searches his eyes. Are they hazel? Or green? She scans her mind for something she saw on the menu, desperate now to detain him. She parts her lips to ask about the crudités and dips.

“No, thanks,” says Kate, speaking for them. “We’re fine.”

The waiter’s eyebrows arc and settle.

A creak on the wooden boards marks his retreat. Helen hears the wind gathering from the east around the building, the way she remembers as a child; and the moaning that would send her diving under the blankets to wait out the storm.

She is startled by something soft against her hand. A limp, white object forms as her vision clears; it’s Kate proffering a tissue.

Somewhere in the corner of the restaurant near the window an abandoned child is crying. She cannot bear it. Why don't they take her out?

Yet, when she looks, there is only a pot plant. It must be the other corner. But there is just the waiter, hand behind his back, leaning deferentially towards a silver-haired gent, who is cupping a hand to his ear.

Why couldn't she understand what Josh was saying then? And how was she to know that natural ease would never come again?

Helen fumbles with the tissue, staring at her hands, incredulous. They are wet with tears.

CHAPTER 2

As she feeds coins into the machine, Helen rehearses what she might say to her mother: *I won't be in for a couple of days*. She checks the fee structure above the machine, even though she knows it by heart. *I'm having an operation...* It says the first thirty minutes are free and Helen considers moving the car every half hour, but decides on the usual all day five pound parking instead. It is costing her a fortune coming here every day.

With a clunk and a grinding of cogs, the machine spits out a ticket and Helen marches to the car with it flapping in her hand. *I found a lump in my breast the other week*. Of course, it was the right thing not to say anything earlier; it would only have been confusing. But with the progress Mum's made over the last few days, she really should tell her. She manages to display the ticket and slam the door before the wind whips it off the dashboard. Then again, will Vera notice if Helen drops off the radar for a bit? Her mother's car has been making odd noises and she thinks of suggesting one of the others takes it into the garage while she's having surgery.

Her heels clip-clop over the asphalt in rhythm with her heart. She cheers herself with the simple phrase; "Rice Crispies", which turned out to be the first thing Mum said. Not "I'd like to change my will," "my leg's hurting" or "I've had a word with your dad in a dream." Nothing like that. Just the words on the cereal packet unscrambling in a moment of lucidity.

"Show 'em yer party piece, our Vera," one of the nurses said.

And, after some guttural sounds at the back of her throat, she had managed to repeat it.

"Watch out!" said the nurse, *"Er'll be comin' on in leaps and bounds now."*

Helen is heartened to see that Vera is sitting up today with less of a sideways lean.

"You're looking very bright this morning, Mum."

"I'm sick of soup," she says.

"And you're speaking well."

"I've told them, I like lamb chops."

"I daresay you can progress to something like that soon."

"Can you take me home?" she says.

"They want you to get some movement in your leg first."

Helen is distracted by the noise of the double doors, creating a doppelganger effect as they swing to and fro.

"Roger will be in soon," says Helen.

"How's Julia?"

Helen doesn't like to tell her they've split up. They have told her, of course, many times. But five minutes later, she's forgotten. Kate says the medical advice is to keep bringing her back to reality. But Helen doesn't have the heart to upset her all over again. It doesn't make any sense, and besides, it's easier to go back to the past with her mother; to pretend Roger and Julia are still living together in Hereford with the girls.

"I have my tired days," says Vera. "Then I can't talk so well. Words, you know, escape me."

"Well, you're doing incredibly well today," says Helen.

The doors go *thud, thud* again and this time it's Roger with something wrapped in orange paper.

"Roger!" says Mum. "What is it?"

"A pot plant," he says, kissing her cheek.

"I know that," she says, "but what's it called?"

"A viola, isn't it?" says Helen.

"Can't say it," says Mum.

"How you doing, our Hel?"

He sits down next to her.

"Fair to middling," she says, mimicking one of his favourite expressions.

"Well, that's better than bad," he says. "Lookin' forward to the op' tomorrow?"

She indulges him with a look.

"How's Julia?" Mum asks.

"Had to laugh," he says, ignoring the question. "Yesterday, I think it was – evening – I was down at the rugby club."

Vera looks bewildered.

“How are Caroline and Nina?”

“Oh, the girls are all right,” he says. “You remember the old Nissan hut?”

The doors collide out of sequence – bang...pause; Helen is waiting for the thud. The cry of a rook fills the moment and she glances out the window to find herself on a level with the crown of an elm tree. After what seems like an eternity, the doors sigh shut and the rook flaps off on a mournful note, which reminds her of the crows back home. It weighs on the wire of her mind. Her breast feels sore and those painful sensations in the pit of her arm are getting worse. Unless she’s imagining it. She could swear it’s the fear that exacerbates everything, but she can’t seem to relax.

“We’re doing it up for the hockey lads,” says Roger, looking from his mother to Helen and back again.

She can see the verandah of Mark’s parents’ house pegged out like a pinafore with a frill of bleached wood stepping up to the front door. She can see Mark’s old room with its paint-stripped furniture and the rug smelling of dust; hear the buzzing of an insect trapped between flywire and window. She sees the kitchen and Mrs. Marretti flaying tomatoes in a menacing wordlessness, the tops of her arms flapping like wings.

And the flywire door, its grubby paintwork clutching at the loose mesh, which curls back on itself in patches to admit the flies. Helen is back in the Marretti household, the dark underworld of oak furniture and shuttered windows. This door is attached to the frame by a sagging spring, which holds it ajar for a couple of minutes before giving up and collapsing with a sigh against the frame. This muffled bang that goes off with monotonous regularity as Aldo paws his way in and out startles no one. Mr. Marretti shuffles to and fro at intervals with his homemade wine or on his way to the toilet. Mrs. Marretti waddles back and forth on her arthritic pins, for what purpose Helen is never sure.

“Any road,” says Roger, “all that rain, sprung a leak in the roof. ‘Hey, Jerry,’ I says, ‘fetch me summat – you know, to catch the water, like.’”

Mark was the silent type, tall like his dad; gentle with animals and wood. She had never seen him lose his temper, but she had heard Mr. Marretti late at night, banging around in the kitchen, smashing glass and

shouting at his wife; defensive now and plaintive. Helen had learned from his drinking habits when Mr. Marretti was winding up to let off steam, moving from chianti to blackcurrant liqueur, then something strong and viscous; innocent as water. On the third day, he would erupt while Helen quaked in her bed, afraid of the door exploding and Mr. Marretti's body crashing after it.

The next morning the house appeared in order, with not a trace of broken glass, the customary aroma of coffee drifting through the house, and Mrs. Marretti swathed in her navy housecoat, grilling bread. Beyond the flywire door was her husband, devotedly tending the vines, offering wine and water in the evening with a Giaconda smile.

Mark said it was just his father's way.

His way of what? Helen wondered.

"I'd like a lamb chop," Vera says, looking at Roger.

"What sort of summat?" he asks, and I says, 'you know, a receptacle.' Anyroad, off he goes and takes a while to come back. I looks at 'im and 'e says, 'I can't find none of them respectables nowhere.'"

Helen laughs nervously. If only she could let go – be a bit more like Roger, perhaps. She feels the strain in the muscles of her face from the effort of smiling and notes the tension in her brother's eyes.

"You know," she says, "the first day or so, I couldn't understand a word anyone was saying in here."

"Oh, that's hardly surprising," he says. "They don't talk like this out in Australia, I'll be bound."

He pronounces the word, "Orstraylia."

"Well," he continues, "they don't talk like this the other side of Birmingham!"

"Nor even *in* Birmingham," she says with a laugh.

"I'd like to go home," says Vera. "I'll come with you. In the car."

"Not today," says Roger. "Got to get that arm working first. And your leg."

He pats the blanket covering her thigh and leans over to kiss her.

"Best be on me way," he says. "You take care now."

"She's sitting up well, don't you think?" says Helen.

"Oh, not 'alf," says Roger.

“And what do you think about her speech?”

“Terrific,” he says, stepping past Helen into the aisle. “At this rate, she’ll be eating lamb chops before you can say Jack Robinson.”

“I’d like a lamb chop,” she says.

“I’ll bring one in next time,” says Roger, “Best of luck for tomorrow,” he adds, looking past her.

He backs towards the doors with a comic wave, turning a fraction of a second before one of the orderlies comes bustling through with a trolley. Helen smiles and wave back, then turns to her mother, who looks anxious and preoccupied. There doesn’t seem much point in mentioning the op now.

“It’s so good of you to be here,” says Helen.

“You go and check in and I’ll save you a place,” says Kate.

She gives Helen that dependable look that Jane and Ken must find so comforting; indeed, Helen almost feels like one of Kate’s children, being shepherded through the complex network of corridors and lifts that constitute the Dudley Memorial.

Helen is alert with that early morning wakefulness she associates with Christmas when she and her mother would head off to church before tackling the turkey, the snow phosphorescent with moonlight. Everything seems surprised under the down lights, with not a single shadow finding a place of rest. There is no music, the TV screen blank. She strides up to the desk, almost excited, feeling united with Kate in a way she hasn’t since her arrival, united too with the other patients, despite the mystery of their precise predicament.

She sees with sharp clarity the gawky adolescent, head tipped back against the chair, eyes closed, a pained look on his face, his mother folding and refolding his track suit top on her knee, picking lint from it, turning it over, sighing. The air buzzes with static, people speak in hushed tones. She is amazed how many there are having day surgery. Her chest tightens, but it feels good to be doing something – the right thing, for sure.

The receptionists waltz around each other, poring over paperwork and charts. A middle-aged woman glances up, her hair scraped into a disposable hat held by hairgrips.

Helen announces herself in a voice less convincing than she'd hoped.

Busy as she is, the woman hands her a white form with pink and yellow duplicates. Helen has provided so much information already, surely they can't need more. She sits down next to Kate and starts on the forms.

"Next of kin," says Helen, looking expectantly at Kate.

"You can put me down," she says.

Next of kin, she thinks.

"Dr. Griffin is one of the top specialists in breast surgery," says Kate blithely under her breath.

Helen frowns into the forms.

"I was talking to one of the mothers at school – her cousin had Dr. Griffin. Apparently, he did a very neat job – hardly any scarring."

Helen thinks of saying she won't be showcasing her breasts, but asks instead:

"Did she get over it?"

"Well, that was ten years ago and her cousin's still going strong."

Helen signs the form; checks the faint outline of her name on the duplicates.

"Pity he doesn't operate on dogs," says Kate, with a sigh, which Helen knows is a reference to poor old Paw Paw.

"But you've got Brandy now," says Helen, not wanting to get into doggy talk this early.

"I hope they don't keep us waiting too long; I need to walk her before school."

"I'm sure Brandy will be fine."

Kate uncrosses and recrosses her legs.

"She gets very tetchy without her morning walk."

"I'll just take these forms up to reception."

As she hands her signature over, her exuberance fades; the nurse in question seems every bit as distracted as the others. She sits down next to her sister again. One or two people have been called and have disappeared behind the blue curtain. Helen hopes, for Kate's sake, there won't be too much of a delay. On the other hand, she had been looking forward to this time together, without the distraction of Jim or the children; without Brandy.

The minute Kate volunteered to drive her to the hospital, sit by her side when she came round and take her back home later, Helen was ready to sign on the dotted line.

“I would have taken the day off,” says Kate, “but it’s very difficult getting relief teachers.”

“That’s okay,” says Helen, “there’s no point in your hanging around, anyway. Once I go through, you may as well go.”

“I managed to catch Dr. Broadbent yesterday,” says Kate, and for a minute Helen imagines them discussing her breast, and wonders why they would.

“She was talking about Mum being discharged.”

“That’s wonderful news,” says Helen. “And so lucky I’m here to look after her.”

Kate gives Helen her teacher’s impatient look.

“We need to have a discussion with Roger after your op’,” she says. “There are all kinds of ramifications to be considered.”

Helen is not sure what all these ramifications are, but says that sounds like a good idea.

“I’ll come back around three.”

“That should work out,” says Helen.

“Helen Harper.”

The nurse frowns into the crowd, scanning the air on which her name hangs.

“I’ll see you later,” says Helen, rising.

Kate looks up at her with a pinched expression.

“You take care,” she says.

Helen is led to a small cell where she is instructed to hand over her personal belongings and to exchange her clothes and shoes for a shapeless gown. She is given a key to a locker where she can store her things, but she must hand this over to reception too. They will put a name tag on it, the same name she has clamped onto her wrist and ankle. Now she will know who she is if she wakes up with amnesia. The kit comes with a see-through shower cap, which she places over her hair. Then, every scrap of identity is stashed away in the locker and in one instant she becomes a “patient”.

Helen is asked to hop up on a trolley and is wheeled away, which strikes her as a bit melodramatic. She can feel the rubber underneath the top sheet. It makes her feel like a very small child.

As she waits in a darkened cubicle behind drawn curtains, Helen learns the meaning of the word “patient”. The curtains are grey with thin stripes interrupted by some detail, like forget-me-nots. She gets to know these curtains pretty well. What is she waiting for? The nurse had said something about an anaesthetist, she thinks. Helen wishes she could see Dr. Griffin and know for sure that he is the one who will be operating.

In here there are no windows and she has no idea what the time is, whether a storm is brewing (as had been forecast), or whether, indeed, there is a life out there, with people going to work, catching buses, shopping, huddling inside cafes for warmth. She wishes she had brought a book.

Without warning or ceremony, the curtain parts and the space is filled by what Helen can only think of as a bikie. Do they call them that in England? He has a sandy beard stuck to the middle of his chin, the rest of his jaw showing only light stubble. The beard straggles towards his chest in the manner of a Chinese elder. He is bald – brazenly so – his pate seeming to glow belligerently in the meagre light, as if to say, “so I’m bald, so what?” And Helen decides he is probably bald by choice, the way Kojak might have been. His neck is thick and muscular with a red and blue patterned neckerchief occupying his open shirt. He has on a white medical coat, which merely acts as a frame for his bulging shirt, black jeans and wide, buckled belt. He wears a single earring, pirate style. Maybe he has wandered into the wrong cubicle.

“Dr. Pilger. I’m your anaesthetist.”

His name tag reads Dr. J. Pilger. Jack, thinks Helen.

He jams a clipboard against the side of his waist and looks at the white form held there.

“Fasted, have you?”

“Er, yes.”

He is about to tick her off, pen poised.

“Except for a glass of water.”

He looks at her wearily and his chest fills with air.

“Half a glass,” she says, hastily.

“Hm. We might have to delay the op, for an hour or so.”

It was a very small glass, she wants to say, but thinks better of it. He returns to his clipboard.

“Any allergies?”

She hadn't thought about this. She says, “no,” a bit hesitantly, remembering the trouble she's always had with dentists. There is something that makes her terribly ill, but she can't remember what it is – the preservative, she thinks. She always gets over it, though, eventually.

A few more questions about the form she's already filled in at reception – next of kin and that sort of thing. Why must they keep asking that?

“Any questions?” He wants to know.

She already feels anaesthetised and can't think of any.

He thrusts the clipboard in her direction.

“Read and sign where indicated below, please.”

She begins to read, feeling her hackles rise. This mumbo jumbo of words is legalese for *you can kill me, if you like, and I won't complain*. She hesitates, looks up at him, feeling ridiculous in her see-through cap and anonymous gown. His belt and stomach are level with her eyes, but she keeps her attention on his face.

“So, should anything happen to me under the anaesthetic, I absolve (she is about to say “you” but thinks better of it) the hospital from all responsibility.”

His expression is as inscrutable as his Chinese beard.

“We can't proceed with the operation unless you sign the form.”

Helen knows in a flash that this is a mistake; that she's here under false pretences. This operation, her compliance with the doctor and the surgeon, with Kate and Roger, who encouraged her to go ahead with it; it is all part of an agenda to make herself feel she belongs. She is only conscious of this now. Her mind leaps forward; above all, she had hoped to score a whole day of being fussed over and pampered, with her sister taking the day off, and Roger promising to visit afterwards. She almost feels like having a tantrum. Is it possible for an adult to be this childish?

So, it's a mistake.

Strengthened by this insight, she feels unintimidated by the beard and belly, the belt and earring, the cold, grey eyes.

"This glass of water," she says, "how will that affect the operation?"

"We'll have to schedule you last," he says without emotion.

Oh, yes? How about I discharge myself, right now? She thinks.

She's angry. It feels good to be angry. It makes her feel more in touch with herself. She looks at him, assessing things. Okay, she realises, inexplicably, she does not want this operation. But neither does she believe she will die under anaesthetic, and has never been one to make a fuss.

"What time, then?" she says.

"When did you drink the water?"

"Six o'clock this morning."

"That's all right," he says, almost amiably now. "A good four hours should do it. We'll schedule you for 10.00."

"Is there a library in the hospital?" she asks, "any good books?"

"I'll see what I can do."

After he has gone, she feels strangely bereft and acutely aware of a sense of helplessness. She feels like a chrysalis, wrapped up in this absurd gown under tight, white covers, a rubber sheet beneath her, on a trolley with wheels. Has anyone died on this trolley? She wonders.

By the time they call her, she is engrossed in a copy of *The Reader's Digest*, which she hasn't read since she was a teenager, and then only surreptitiously. Her mother was a fan, and there were always a few copies on the shelf, along with those dreadful Mills and Boons. In here, she can read things like this with impunity: there is no sense of time, or place; only a feeling of suspended identity. She doesn't even have to bother remembering her name, as she has tags on. And if she reads that name, which she doesn't, the letters would somehow be affected by all the other names that have shared these tags. They don't mean anything. So, she can read *The Reader's Digest* and enjoy it. It's really not bad. She never knew that creepers grew to the left around trees, and that shells, too, have a natural inclination towards the left side. Everything, it seems is weighted towards the left. This piece of exciting research connects up with something she heard on the radio the other day, about Yin and Yang. That it's always *Yin* and *Yang*.

Not *Yang and Yin*. Yin is left, feminine. Isn't that interesting? She thinks about her left breast. It occurs to her, a propos of nothing, that all her life she has just been going through the motions.

Dr. Griffin appears through the gap in the curtains. She's quite accustomed to being in here now and is slightly put out by the interruption.

"Sorry about the delay," he says, "we're running a bit behind."

Helen doesn't know what this means.

She is relieved to see that he, too, is wearing one of those see-through hairnets, except that his is green to match his gown. She feels more on a level with him like this, both of them in gowns and silly hats. The sensible conversation they are having about the procedure, which she can't quite take in, seems surreal because of their fancy dress. She notices the freckles on his arm.

The anaesthetist helps wheel the trolley into the operating theatre. He is not wearing a cap, which gives him a certain advantage, Helen thinks. But, then again, he is bald. Dr. Griffin is chatting to her pleasantly. The pale walls of the corridor, the strip lights and the faint odour of warmed food tinged with disinfectant lend a strange edge to the scenery rushing by – nurses and patients, a window, a watercolour painting of flowers.

Once in the theatre, Dr. Griffin and Dr. Pilger turn serious. This is scary. Jack has a syringe in his hand and is pointing it towards the ceiling. He has on rubber gloves.

"Slip your gown off your shoulder, will you?" he commands, and roughly wrestles her out of it, baring her left breast. Yes, it is the left breast, she thinks. Strangely, she doesn't feel exposed. This is all too grave for that now. There is something cold pressing against her hand together with a pressure that's getting unbearably hard.

"That's a bit uncomfortable," she says, "and cold."

Ether cold. The walls swim away from her and the voices grow distant. She has lost control of her mouth.

The face of the clock is huge and the numbers clear. Even so, she can't tell the time. Why is she staring at a clock, when she thought she was having an

operation? Then, she realises it's over and she's in some holding place, waiting to come round.

Helen is hauled up from the depths of a fog that seems to invade not just her mind but her whole body. The bed is shaking. She opens her eyes a crack, expecting to see the walls and the roof collapsing in on her. But it is her head that is swimming and not the room. She swivels her eyes towards the window and now the room spins too. Instead of the familiar Norfolk Pines, Helen makes out a blurred vision of a different tree altogether, its Mickey Mouse silhouette now also familiar. She is in her old room in Stourbridge, not the Cottesloe apartment. And the movement of the tree seems to be both outside the window and inside her head.

She closes her eyes, sinking back into the pillows, and feels an intense burning beneath her breast. That's when the present comes flooding back to her. She is here in the family home; she has had an operation. The tumour is gone. She tries to sigh with relief, but the soreness under her breast brings home to her the reality she couldn't face earlier. She has had a brush with death.

Thwack, thwack.

That tree is definitely shaking.

The sound jars her head and travels all the way down to her neck and shoulders, which feel tight and knotted. Her tongue feels swollen and cleaves to the roof of her mouth. She had not expected to feel like this and cannot understand what has happened. Yesterday, she was elated, waking in a small but pleasant room in the hospital, feeling fine.

"Any nausea?" the nurse had asked, proffering sandwiches.

There was none and she had hoed into the chicken sandwiches with relish, savouring the softness of the bread, complemented by the succulent meat, the crispness of lettuce.

Helen's stomach heaves at the thought of them now.

"Now, you're welcome to stay with us," Kate had said as they sat in the Mazda, Kate at the wheel. *"You don't have to go back to Red Hill on your own."*

"I'll be fine," Helen had said. *"I feel tip top."*

And so Kate had run her back to the old house at the top of the hill.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" she had asked.

"No, no, I'm fine," Helen said.

She phoned Roger.

"I'm great. I feel really great. No more tumour."

"Fantastic," he said. *"I'll pop by after work tomorrow. Do you want anything?"*

In her exuberance she went outside into the garden and tackled the roses, angling the secateurs this way and that, snipping above the tiny red dots that marked the potential new growth for next season. It felt good to snip all the woody ends and dead twigs and she imagined herself as the surgeon, cutting away the dead patch in her breast. How interesting that she could not tackle this job before and now it felt like the most natural thing in the world. A reflection, no doubt, of her new tumour-free status, which in any case was probably benign. But, as the surgeon said, best to have it out; it could become cancerous and they would know from the biopsy anyway if it was malignant. Either way, it doesn't matter; she's had it removed.

But this morning, her tongue lies swollen in her mouth, a piece of dead wood, like a trap door making it difficult to swallow.

Thwack, thwack, crash.

The tree comes down. Helen winces.

She turns her head to look at the bedside clock, but cannot make sense of the digits. There is a twelve and a four, plus five, but it takes her a while to unscramble the hour. Can it really be lunch time? She eyes the blue flagon half full of drinking water. The matching glass next to it. But before she can muster the effort to reach it, her eyelids fall and she is dragged back into sleep.

When she awakes, the room is dim and the patch of sky formerly occupied by the tree now bears down on her. The window is filled with cloud, grubby, dank; it might be drizzling. Helen hears footsteps on the stairs and through the fog in her brain vaguely wonders whether to be alarmed or not. She looks again to the naked stretch of window formerly occupied by the tree. The door swings open and in walks Roger, camouflaged by a floral bouquet wrapped in lurid cellophane.

“So, you’re in your old room then?” he says skirting the empty bed that was once Kate’s, and in a couple of bounds plonks himself down on it, smiling at her from behind the flowers. For a moment, his face becomes confused with the offering and he appears to be wearing a lime green ruffle. His eyes are pink carnations, winking from white crenellations. Behind the smile and the flowers, Helen sees the real Roger, the worry lines on his forehead, the tightness round the eyes.

“Taking it easy, are you?” he says. “Why not? After all, you have had an operation.”

Helen nods. Her head still aches.

She thinks back to another time when she felt this rough. It was after a dental visit. She almost didn’t think to mention it next time, but when she did Dr. Bryce said, *“That’s not a normal response. It sounds like an allergic reaction – probably the preservative.”*

Since then he had used a preservative-free anaesthetic and she had had no more trouble.

“I think I might have had an allergic reaction,” she says.

“Oh, you’ll be alright by tomorrow,” says Roger. “Good idea to rest up and take it easy. Do you fancy a bit of pizza for dinner? I could nip out and get some.”

Helen’s stomach rises. She shakes her head, then winces against the pain.

“Brought you some flowers,” he says.

She nods very gingerly.

“Lovely,” she says. “Thank you.”

He searches the bedside table for somewhere to put them. Something to put them in, perhaps. It is crowded with books, a blue ceramic lamp, the flagon and glass, the bedside clock. He hovers with them for a moment awkwardly before resting them on the floor.

“Don’t fancy pizza, then?” he says, standing up and ambling over to the window, where he stands, hands in pockets frowning at the gap where the tree once stood.

“I see the tree’s gone, then,” he says.

The light catches his face, deepening the furrows etched into his cheeks.

“Ever since that chap moved in,” says Roger, “he’s systematically eradicated just about every living thing.”

He rocks back on his heels.

“I noticed a tin of spaghetti in the pantry the other day,” he says. “How about some spaghetti on toast. I think it’s Heinz. You used to like that, didn’t you?”

He turns to face her. She shakes her head gingerly, then gives him a watery smile.

“Talking of which,” he says, a glimmer in his eyes, “I heard on the news the other day that they’ve had to recall the Alphabet Spaghetti.” He pauses and she looks at him with interest. “Al Qaida have been planting explosives in them.”

“How terrible,” she manages.

“Oh, yes,” he says. “If one of those tins goes off, it could spell disaster.”

His mouth flickers into a smile as he catches her eye.

She smiles too, despite herself. He is only trying to cheer her up.

“Sounds like Kate,” he says. “Or someone.”

They hear the front door bang shut. Helen flinches.

They hold each other’s gaze as they listen to their sister’s footsteps on the kitchen tiles. The light has all but faded and by the time Kate finds them, they are shrouded in gloom. She flicks the light switch and the room fills with a stark glow, all the knick-knacks and half-sorted junk suddenly caught out in their disarray.

“Having an early night?” says Kate. “I though you’d be up and about. It’s only just gone five.”

“I didn’t feel so good today,” says Helen.

“A reaction from the anaesthetic,” says Roger.

“Nonsense,” says Kate. “You were fine yesterday. And you said yourself, you didn’t vomit.”

“Probably might have been better if I had,” says Helen.

“I thought you said you pruned the roses.”

It occurs to Helen that she must have been on a high from all the drugs yesterday; elated too that she had faced the dreaded surgery and come through; was free of the lump.

"I...yesterday...I did...but today..."

As she searches for the words to articulate this insight, they evaporate, lost somewhere in the fog of her mind, which closes over the very thought, so that she can't remember now what she was going to say. This is how it must be for Mum. She must remember to be more patient next time.

"Well, anyway," says Kate. "It won't do any harm to rest up. An operation is a big thing. I remember when I had back surgery for that disc, I couldn't move for a couple of days. Had to wear a brace. Mind you, that was a big operation. I didn't feel drugged, though."

Now Helen has no thoughts, her mind a complete blank. But there is a sensation in her chest and behind her eyes; it is difficult to identify.

"I've brought soup and a roll. Tomato soup. You used to like that. It's home made."

Tears. Helen thinks it is tears; or at least that watery feeling she identifies with her early years before they even moved to Stourbridge. That sensation behind the eyes, swallowing down into her chest and silently weeping all the way to her legs, which feel cold, even under the bedclothes.

Kate has drawn up a chair next to Roger who is seated at the bottom of the bed now, three-quarters of his body angled towards their older sister. Helen views the hunch of his back, a side view of his face.

"Ken's doing well with his rugby," says Kate.

"Oh, yes?" says Roger, genuinely interested.

Kate nods and sighs, savouring the moment.

"He's been selected to represent West Midlands for his age group."

"The under fourteens?" says Roger.

"Under fifteens," corrects Kate.

"Crickey, yes. He's growing up, isn't he?"

Kate sits there enthroned like a queen. Roger stretches out his legs and folds his arms high up on his chest, fingers clasped under his armpits, considering this news.

"That's very good," he says. "I bet Jim's pleased."

“Oh, Jim is over the moon,” she says.

Helen struggles to picture Jim “over the moon”. The lugubrious, balding Jim with the baleful eyes. She can’t feel the tears any more, just a general numbness; a familiar weight pressing down on her from the inside.

Lying here in the same room, gazing at the pear trees under moonlight, still sick, Helen feels submerged by the weight of history. She was a sickly child and life went on around her. There was nothing to be done. She listens to the creaks and tickings of a house releasing memories from plasterwork and cornices, carpets and wood. The smell of toast returns to her; meat casseroles and cake; Roger hammering out the theme for *Robin Hood* on the piano, before sliding into a Brahms’ lullaby. She hears her dad, issuing instructions on his way out the door; the peal of laughter. These are the webs that bind her, gossamer fine, yet firm.

She lifts her head, collapsing back again into the pillows, unsure whether the vision of her mother framed in the doorway was a dream or reality. Except that Vera is in hospital and no longer fits the youthful image of the woman standing on the threshold of the bedroom, frozen in time. Yet in memory, as in the dream, Vera stood there, the folds of her blouse tugging at her breasts; as she stared at the blood-stained tissues littering the floor like a flock of plundered doves.

Helen closes her eyes and shifts her head away from the door, trying to make sense of the dream. The memory of the haemorrhage following the tonsillectomy and the shock of her mother’s absence, despite the physicality of her grey skirt and crossover blouse. Her emotional absence. She reaches for a glass of water, sipping at it to dispel the numbness and the aching sense of loss. For it feels as though her mother just left; when in truth it was Roger and Kate. Either way, her bones feel heavy and her mind fog-bound. She takes another sip and remembers the rest of the dream.

This time, Helen is sitting at the top of the slide in the Mary Stevens Park, her legs cold against the metal chute. She is contemplating the puddle at the bottom as it flares and dims with the shifting pattern of clouds. In the dream, Vera stands next to the slide, gazing into the middle distance, her headscarf defying the wind. It flaps under her chin and behind her head like

flags. Helen wants to let go, but is scared. Yet the next moment is rushing towards the pool of light with the wind in her hair, the slide curling around to contain her as she tunnels on. She feels the light flooding into her heart, speaking to her in a wordless silence. And then she stops, puzzled; unable to move forwards, unwilling to go back. Why won't they let her in?

And Mum is not by the slide anymore but coming in through the bedroom door, shadowing Dr. Cargill, whose face is florid with worry; his bulbous nose marked with purple veins, which spread out over his cheeks and nest in his ears. He comes at her with a needle and Helen screams, pulling the sheets over her head as she slides under the bedclothes. In the wake of the scream, she hears voices – Vera and the doctor.

"We mustn't overexcite her. She's very weak."

She hears the word "ice-cream". Vera will drive to the country for free-range eggs; make the ice-cream herself. Helen drags herself back from under the blankets and gives Dr. Cargill a triumphant stare. She will not have the blood transfusion.

Helen forces herself to think of Melanie; the two of them laughing together as they stride down Marine Parade with the wind in their hair. She must escape this room and reach the loft, where her mother's notepads and pencils beckon with their brief sketches and unfilled pages. Her temples throb with each step and the mustard stair carpet makes her stomach rise. She pushes against the door, feeling the roughness of its cheap quality wood, its resistance against the metal weight designed to keep it shut.

The air is less stale since she gave it a good airing the other day and although the room strikes chill, she is glad to have left one of the transom windows open. Helen forces herself to take a deep breath and then kneels before the desk. The sight of it reminds her of her mother's diary and her stomach forms angry knots. How come Vera never spoke to them, not just about the relationship, but this whole French episode? Why so secretive? But then why fret over one of her mother's failed relationships? Some romance that would never have worked out in the long run. As she wrestles with the strange configuration of doors, which take all her strength to open, Helen realises she is more hurt than angry. That her mother never let on she too knew what it was to be broken-hearted.

"We're fine."

That's what Helen always said when her mother phoned. And yet, Mum must have known it was a lie because she registered no surprise when Helen finally spilled the beans about her and Mark.

Here are the notepads and the pencils Helen sharpened just the other day, although it seems like an age now. She sits on a low chair in the corner with the stack of notepads and pencils, a cushion on her lap to achieve the right height. She flicks through her mother's drawings until they peter out, then places the lead tip of a pencil onto a pristine sheet. With eyes half-closed she begins to sketch. These are not the wisps and swirls of Vera's hand, but dark, angular shapes. The black tin Mark used for survival in the outback, about the size of a book of psalms, but less thick, weighing almost nothing. Is that what she has drawn? She tries to capture the worn look, its edges showing silver under the matt, black surface. This tin contained mysteries of survival; a black plastic sheet folding to a square of next to nothing. She draws that too. Multi-purpose. You could lie on it at night to protect yourself from the ground. But, most important of all, you could collect the morning dew. There was a collapsible tumbler especially for the purpose. She sketches it. And the stock cube for soup; chocolate; a whistle and a light; a piece of string; a flare and matches; and the tea bag. All these things fitted neatly into the square tin, which could be carried in a pocket. The margin between life and death. Helen has no such tin.

Tired now, she views the sketches. They look like nothing but angry lines; dark blocks of lead filling the page. But she is pleased with their cut and thrust; their firm presence on the paper; no longer inside her.

She secretes the notebooks deep inside the desk. The diary is there on the top shelf where she left it. What else does it say?

Langon, 3rd October 1947.

Today we cycled to the Café-Bar du Sport in Langon. I sat on the handlebars and Jean-Claude peddled behind, whilst Madame Le Clos waved us off.

Monsieur Le Clos stood next to her with his arm around her shoulders, as the two of them watched, smiling from the steps. Henri's blue beret is so much a

part of him that it seems almost molded to his head, and the blue dungarees so accustomed to his shape that they are more him than he is himself. As we cycled down the hill, me waving and Jean-Claude concentrating on balancing the bike, the imprint of his parents remained in my mind, including that of Jeanne's floral overall holding her solid form in place.

I could feel J.-C.'s breath warm against my neck, his nose buried in my hair.

"Watch where you're going!" I said to him "Regarde!"

I am not so adept in the language yet to say it the way I would like.

"I am looking," he said, "always looking straight ahead – at you."

"And I am looking," I said, "straight ahead – tout droit."

"You are the eyes for both of us," he said, and how right he is, for straight ahead I saw the gentle slope, the curving lanes with their stone walls, and the shuttered houses. I am the eyes for both of us and see straight ahead down the road, which curves gently around the hills, flattening out towards the town. I can see far ahead to a future bright with promise.

At the Café du Sport, we dismounted, laughing and kissing, which makes the locals smile, for here, unlike in Birmingham, they understand. Arellette came towards us as soon as we sat down, wiping her hands on her small, frilled apron, offering a warm smile and a promissory plat du jour.

"The cassoulet," she said, marking the air with forefinger and thumb by way of recommendation. "With the baguette and wine, what more could one desire?"

We nodded our approval, and she made a brief note, bringing us swiftly to the serious business of the wine. The café was busy as usual, but Arlette and Jean-Claude pored over the list, marking each entry with a studious finger, as though no other clientele existed. The atmosphere remained relaxed, for everyone understands that wine and food is a grave affair and they too will be blessed with time and attention when their turn comes. Besides, what else is there to live for, apart, of course, from love?

We ordered the Malbat, which Jean-Claude knows is cheap but always good.

Arlette kissed her fingers.

"Très bon," she said. "Très, très bon."

The room grew merry with steam. Who was that woman in the mirror, with glowing cheeks and auburn hair, smoothed in a roll under the nape of her neck? Did that spark in her eye belong to me? And the dark-haired man, who kissed my cheek, my neck, my arm all the way to my fingertips? Who was that woman beside him? She almost looked like me, and more so perhaps than I have ever looked before. There they were caught in the frame, misted over with fumes from cigarettes, the warmth from the food and the steam from the cafetière. There they were waiting for the man with the accordion to spread out his bellows at the appointed moment; an intuitive moment that everyone anticipated but did not know precisely. Even the accordionist waited, sipping his wine, imbibing his food, his heart on the pulse of the clock. And when the moment came, he fanned out his instrument; a peacock tail, one minute demure and silent, sweeping the mute earth, and the next spread into the full flush of life. The in-held breath had notes hidden behind thin slabs of ivory and liquorice keys. Then his fingers tapped on the buttons and the whole room filled with sliding, rushing notes, riding up and down my heart, all hearts; every single one in the room.

Jean-Claude's arms were at my waist and mine were round his neck as we rose to our feet with the others in the room, our feet moving to the tapping pulse of the accordionist's fingers, and the sweep and wheeze and sigh of the machine. We swirled and smooched and stepped, and England drifted far, far away.

I will marry this man and we will come to the Bar du Sport over and over again. Young and old, lovers and friends; we moved as the music moved us; we swayed and danced until it was time to mount the bicycle and, giggling, wobble our way back up the hill to where Monsieur and Madame Le Clos would be waiting up for us. If not, they would hear us giggling through the door, crashing into the frame, kissing, step upon step until we were embraced by the tick, tock, heart-stopping, steady beating clock.

The windscreen wipers of her mother's car go thud, thud, thudding like an anxious heart-beat, fighting against curtains of rain. The minute they part, another liquid veil obscures the road ahead. Helen's head burrows deeper into the hunch of her shoulders as she frowns through fresh rivulets. The red

tail lights of the car in front spangle in her vision and she applies the brakes again. She should have visited earlier; but tells herself she honestly wasn't up to it. Will the others have said anything? Narrow brick buildings press in on her. These roads were not built for cars.

The minute the hospital walls heave into view, Helen's stomach turns over; she can't decide whether it's worse visiting her mother in this drab establishment or the flash, new Dudley Memorial on her own behalf. Dashing through the rain, her left foot catches in a puddle, filling her shoes and soaking the edge of her trousers. It makes her want to burst into tears.

But Vera appears bright this morning.

"I'm writing again," she says, as though it were only yesterday since she last saw her daughter.

"Oh, isn't that fantastic!" says Helen, relieved to see for herself the progress Kate reported.

"Had a dream. Can't remember it now. Wrote it all down in that notepad Kate gave me. Have a read of it," she says.

Helen reaches over to the bedside table. It's a spiral bound secretary's pad like the ones at home; easy for her mother to flick the pages and write one-handed. Helen frowns at the angry scrawl of loops surging across the page. It is unintelligible.

"Tell me what it was," says Vera, looking at her expectantly. "I can't remember now."

"I'm having a little difficulty reading it," says Helen.

"You need glasses," she says. "You're about that age. Go and see...whatsisname... the op...you know."

"Optometrist," says Helen.

Helen turns the page; the next one is worse, the loops collapsing over onto each other like fallen skittles. She closes the book with a sigh.

"Did I tell you I found some of your old notepads in the desk upstairs? And a diary. I've brought it in. I thought you might like to look at it – bring back a few memories."

"Not throwing out any books, are you?"

"No," she says, "not until we check with you. We've made a list of the ones we thought you'd like to keep – it was Kate's idea."

“Ah, Kate,” says Vera and smiles.

Helen pulls out the faded leather book from her bag.

“Can you read if I find your glasses?” she asks.

“Had a look at the papers this morning.”

“That’s wonderful, Mum!” says Helen, sifting through the contents of the bedside drawer.

“I don’t like that Camilla,” she says. “Wears the wrong hats.”

Helen helps thread the spectacles over her mother’s ears and Vera looks at her with a faint smile, a frequent indicator of one of her more blank moments, enhanced by the thick lenses. Helen props the diary against the thin supports of her mother’s thighs and encircles her waist, so they can read it together.

Vera hesitates, runs her hand over the pigskin leather; her fingers are nothing more than bone and sinew flexing under a layer of skin. Helen feels her mother’s ribs trembling under her fingers and her own heart quickens as Vera studies the first page. Each loop is firm and confident; a dance of turquoise ink, each letter well formed.

“I can’t read it,” she says, agitated. “Letters, all back to front. Whoever wrote this was all over the place.”

“You wrote it, Mum. You must have been about nineteen at the time.”

“Well, it’s not making any sense.” She says. “There are...” she searches for the word, “...gaps.”

Helen takes the book with trembling fingers.

“You’re squashing me,” says Vera. “I can’t breathe.”

“I’m sorry,” says Helen.

She settles her mother back into the pillows before retreating with the diary, tracing her fingers over the raised surface which blurs in her vision. Vera’s hand slackens on the covers; her glasses slide on her nose and a faint gargling sound issues from her throat.

There is a flurry of movement and she glances up as her sister arrives, fresh-faced and half buried under a scarf and coat.

“Don’t get up,” she says. “Such a lovely scene; the two of you fast asleep together. Feeling better now?”

Kate gives her sister a peck on the cheek.

Helen says yes, and doesn't bother to explain that she wasn't asleep.

"What have you got there?"

"An old diary of Mum's I found in the loft."

"Oh, she won't want that," says Kate, waving a gloved hand.

Kate goes over to Vera and plants a kiss on her forehead.

"Have you been reading?" she says. "You've got your glasses on."

"Have I?" says Vera.

Helen reaches for her bag and returns the diary.

"I've written something out on that notepad," says Vera. "Have a look."

"Ah," says Kate. "Some things you want us to bring in for you? Good idea."

She unzips her bag and fishes inside for her spectacles, before picking up the notepad, studying it with a frown.

"What does it say?" she asks, bewildered.

"Can't you read it?" says Vera. "It's plain enough."

"The writing's a little uneven," she says.

"You can fetch the stuff for me next time you come in," their mother says.

"I thought you said it was a dream, you'd written out," says Helen.

Kate flicks to the back of the book and closes it again.

"I'll bring you a clean nightie tomorrow," she says, "and some Pond's Vanishing Cream."

"That's it," says Vera, smiling. "That's my girl."

Kate draws up a chair next to Helen and regards her with tear-filled eyes. Helen reaches out to her and squeezes her hand.

"Cuppa?"

The tea man stands next to his trolley with the air of one offering tunes on a barrel organ.

"I know," he says, raising a finger as though testing the air. "Milk, one sugar."

He lifts a glazed pottery cup from the trolley, throws it into the air and catches it again before sliding a saucer from an adjacent pile and setting the cup on top.

Vera stares wistfully into the distance.

"I could have had him," she says.

Helen stares at her mother.

"The man's offering you a cup of tea," says Kate.

Helen wants to ask who it was she wanted. Was it the young man who signs his name J.-C. on all the letters? The Jean-Claude of the diary?

"But it wasn't him I wanted," she perseveres.

Then she remembers Vera's mug; the one with the Parisian scene she has brought with her to jog her mother's memory.

"Would you mind pouring it into this?" she says, proffering the mug.

"Course not," he says.

Helen watches the tea froth over the milk, the man's masculine grip around the slender mug seeming oddly out place.

"Here you are, Mum," she says, handing Vera the mug.

"Why can't I have one of those green cups?" she says, "with the saucer."

"I thought you'd prefer the mug," says Helen.

"I don't like mugs," she says.

"But it's your own mug."

"Don't be ridiculous," she says. "I don't drink out of mugs."

Helen grits her teeth. Her chest feels tight and she is aware of the unhealed wound under her breast.

"I won't drink that," Vera says.

"It's okay," the man says. "I can pour it into the regulation cup."

He tips the tea from a dangerous height in a smooth brown stream straight into a cup without spilling a drop. He hands Vera the tea, then picks up another cup.

"Milk, no sugar?"

"A cup of tea would be most welcome," says Kate.

He hands the mug back to Helen and pours them both a cup in the same green crockery before trundling on with his trolley.

"So, who do you mean, 'could have had him?'" says Kate, irascibly.

"What, the tea man?" says Vera. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"No," says Helen, raising her voice. "The man you mentioned!"

Her mother sips her tea; it steams up her glasses, giving her a vacant air.

“I like a cup and saucer,” she says.

Helen steps into the lift and feels very small; there is enough room for a double bed, and the pallor of her face in the huge mirror reminds her to tell Dr. Griffin about the anaesthetic. Ask him what it was exactly so as to avoid it next time. Not that there will be a next time; she is never doing *that* again. Besides, clearly everything is all right because she hasn't heard from him during the fortnight since the lumpectomy, and the visit is just a formality.

There is a different receptionist this time and she waves Helen to a seat near a young woman huddled in the corner with her boyfriend. There are no other patients, so she is not expecting a long wait.

On the top of a dishevelment of magazines is *Heritage*, in surprisingly good condition considering it is the December-January issue and it is now the following October. On the front cover is a picture of Warwick Castle rising amidst lush broccoli trees and pasture. Between her and the castle is the river, caught with eddies and swirls of current that make her want to wade right in and swim to the drawbridge. She remembers this castle from her last visit when Mum became animated at the sight of all the dahlias still in bloom and the last of the roses, all of whom she knew personally by name. It was one of those rare occasions when Mum and Dad seemed in perfect harmony. Could it have been the last time she saw her dad?

“Miss Harper.”

Helen glances up to see Dr. Griffin standing in the corridor. She is glad he is smiling and she, too, reciprocates as he opens the door in a gesture of welcome.

And now he is so charming, she decides not to mention the ill effects of the anaesthetic. After all, it wasn't his fault; she should have mentioned she is allergic.

“How have you been?”

His eyes are the same sapphire blue she remembers, exaggerated perhaps by the pale blue shirt and navy tie.

“I felt unwell – the anaesthetic, I think. But I'm alright now.”

Dr. Griffin picks up a piece of paper from a file already open on his desk and begins to speak about the pathology results. The one word she can make sense of is “carcinoma”.

“So, it *was* or it *wasn't* cancerous?” she says.

“Yes, it was a cancer.”

And he proceeds to say something about the type of cancer, but none of it means anything to Helen.

“Good job I had it out, then,” she says.

Dr. Griffin continues to regard her with a pleasant expression. He has a piece of paper before him which bears the printed outline of a female body; it is a very perfect, non-descript sort of body, like a cartoon. It begins just below the breast and finishes at the neck. A headless body with stubs for arms in the manner of a Greek statue, but there are breasts, two of them, shaped like test tubes, each with a nipple caught in its bulb. The nipples are relatively life-like. Dr. Griffin turns the drawing to face her, so that he is now regarding it upside-down. He has his silver pen in his hand and is pointing to the six o'clock point of the left breast; the same spot where her lump was.

“Incompletely excised,” he says and the phrase glows like twin pearls strung onto an otherwise dark rope of sounds.

“You mean...” she stops. No, she cannot quite relate the words to their meaning. Part of her brain understands the implications of this, but cannot communicate it to her lips. Because she does not understand.

Dr. Griffin perseveres; he is very patient and fetches another, this time, blank, piece of paper from a drawer, which he places on top of the truncated model. He draws what looks like a fried egg, but which even Helen can see is meant to be a breast. He sketches a circle under the nipple and then, to Helen's horror, draws a tributary branching off to the left and marching towards her lymph glands; for she realises this model is meant to be her.

“The pathology results show an incomplete excision.”

Why can't he just say, they didn't get it all? That *he* didn't manage to cut the whole thing out?

“There is still cancer left in my body?” she says. “How much?”

“It is hard to say, exactly, which is why further surgery is recommended.”

“Further surgery? You’re recommending further surgery?”

The end of Dr. Griffin’s nose tugs slightly as he speaks.

Chemotherapy. It is a distraction. He smiles on the word “radiation”.

“So, Dr. Griffin,” she says. “I just want to make sure I understand what you are saying. There is still cancer in the breast. You don’t know how much. You’re suggesting another operation in order to cut it out. You don’t know how much to cut out.”

Helen imagines Dr. Griffin gouging out a large cavity in her breast, or perhaps he is even thinking of a mastectomy. She must get clear. She must find out what exactly he plans to do. He is still speaking in response to her question, but she is too busy thinking of more questions and can’t take it in.

“What about my lymph nodes?” she asks.

He looks at her in surprise.

“Will you need to remove lymph nodes?”

“It’s hard to say,” he says.

Why is it all so hard to say? And then another voice, coming from deep down in her belly begins to speak, as though it had understood far more than she herself has absorbed.

“Why are you recommending chemotherapy and radiation on top of surgery?”

Now Dr. Griffin is in his element. She has broken through. He gesticulates with his hands, points to the decapitated goddess on the page; the Greek unfortunate without arms or belly, legs and feet. She understands that even further surgery cannot guarantee the removal of all the cancer; that it may have spread; that the radiation will target the specific area of her breast and the chemotherapy will act like tanks to gun down the enemy, even if it has gone into hiding.

Helen stares at him. He is pleased with himself. This is his field and he is having a field day. Her brain clears. She sees the blond wood desk; veneer. The computer screen; blank; the clouds outside the window and the leafless trees, the plush carpet, his wedding band.

“If my lymph nodes are infected and you need to remove them, what are the possible consequences?”

Dr. Griffin’s turquoise eyes form wide circles, the pupils, dark holes. He is caught in the spotlight of her gaze.

“Goodness,” he says, “you do have a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“It is my body, after all.”

Underneath the desk, Helen’s hands are shaking. Her lungs are made of water, weeping tears of helplessness down into her trembling legs and toes. And yet, at the same time, her spine is straight as a lightning rod and her feet grounded.

Dr. Griffin scuttles to the bookshelves behind her, reaches down a dull tome and returns to his desk, where he leafs through until he finds the page he wants. He turns the book upside down for her benefit, so that she is left facing a series of photographs – all of them women – shot from above the waist, their naked breasts in full view of the camera. Except that these women have arms, some swollen and others held in tight elastic tubes. Each has her face averted from the cameraman – for some reason Helen imagines it’s a man. They have old-fashioned hairstyles, these shamefaced women who are depicted here in black and white.

He turns the page, there are more women, some with distorted shaped breasts, some like Amazons, with one breast only. There are bras, peeled back to reveal artificial padding – a ghost breast to match the real one that’s left.

Helen gets the picture.

She looks at Dr. Griffin, who is waxing on about the advantages of the English climate and the need for long sleeves most of the time, which hide the bandages and deal with the oedema – the inevitable swelling that remains after the lymph nodes are excised, never growing back for as long as she lives.

Helen’s throat feels parched, so that her heart, which is trying to leap up into it, is forced to hammer awkwardly in her chest. Her jaw slackens; will she burst into tears? She clears her throat, chokes. He rushes to the tap, offers her a glass of water. She swallows, gulping at it; feeling its cool downward rush. She takes a breath, not wasting words on polite protocol.

She must seize the phrase flashing across the screen of her mind; and she must do it now.

“So, what I need from you,” she says, her voice quavering, “is the pathology results. All the details you have. I need to think about it. Get a second opinion.”

He pushes himself up from behind the desk, his tie slightly awry now, revealing the top button of his shirt. It is not done up and she can see the Adam's apple ricocheting around as he picks up papers and ushers her out through the door.

Helen stands between the reception desk and a vacant chair. Should she sit down? She stares at the Van Gogh sunflowers, hideous inside their blond wood frame. No, she will stand here and wait. Dr. Griffin speaks in a low voice to the receptionist, who is nodding and striding over to a filing cabinet. She opens it with a scrape of metal, extracting papers. Why is she doing this, if Dr. Griffin already had the papers in front of him at his desk? Helen waits for the surgeon, who turns, his expression almost mild, apart from the crows' feet etched at the corner of his eyes.

“The receptionist will give you all the details you need,” he says. “You can make another appointment when you're ready.”

“Thank you,” she says. “If I need to, of course, yes.”

She collapses into the chair, confused now at her sense of loss over Dr. Griffin's receding figure and the blank future that awaits her.

Helen stares through the windscreen at the bark of the plane tree, an x-ray image of Dr. Griffin forming out of its olive and brown patches.

“Give yourself a day or two to think things over,” he had said before retreating into his room. *“There's no immediate hurry to book yourself in.”*

Without thinking, her hand finds the gear stick and she backs out of the parking bay, the reflection of ragged leaves distorting against a clouded sky. She turns onto the main road and finds herself following broken white lines. They flash and blink, occasionally running into long, continuous arrows. If she just keeps following them, something will occur to her. Cars drift by. People. A man with a beard, hunched shoulders and faded jeans. A woman pushing a pram with a toddler at her side.

Helen's mind is flushed with a nervous energy, her skin with pins and needles. She does not know where to go from here. Cannot see beyond those eyes; that voice. At the back of her mind, Helen has the sense there is something. But what?

She wants to get on the internet and check out her condition. See how long she has to think things through. If only Roger had managed to fix up that computer. Perhaps there's an internet café somewhere. But the sick feeling in her stomach tells her she can't face other people.

She will go back to the house and phone Kate; have a cup of tea; ask if she can use her computer. She'll explain the situation. Kate will understand.

On an impulse, she drives straight to Kate's house and finds herself poised on the steps of the front door, staring at the paintwork, formerly a bright green. Here and there cracks have formed in the grain of the wood; ancient blisters, burst and curled back against themselves like dry lips. Her mind grabs hold of the details as though her life depended on them.

Helen's knock is followed by a *yap, yap, yap* and a howl, then the thud of feet down the stairs. The door swings back to reveal Jane's eager face. She looks very fetching with her hair in plaits, a smudge of mascara accentuating the dart and flash of her eyes.

"Aunty Helen!"

Yap, yap, woof.

"Brandy! Get down. Brandy, here girl, here".

Brandy ignores Jane's instructions, sneezing and snuffling round Helen's legs. Helen gives her a tousled rub round the ears and she rolls over to expose her belly, pink as a pig, white hair sprouting from miniature teats. Helen tickles her chest, welcoming the dog's limpid eyes and open grin.

The house vibrates with a monotonous thumpa, thumpa, thumpa rhythm overlaid with Dr. Who effects and an occasional high-pitched wail and wraith-like voice. Jane's body bounces in time with the music, the uniform skirt hitched unevenly so that it bobs as she walks, revealing gazelle-like limbs. Brandy bowls along beside her, all wagging tail and taut limbs.

"Cup of tea?" she asks, her head still marking time with the now jungle beat pouring from the study door.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at school?”

“It’s a free.” Jane winks.

Free what? Helen wonders.

“Study break – sort of,” she elaborates, looking sheepish.

Helen eyes the yellow and blue tartan tea cosy half-cocked over the teapot. Of course, Kate will be at school. No free periods for her.

“A cup of tea would be good.”

“Cool,” says Jane and lifts the cosy to expose a brooding earthenware pot.

The pair sit opposite each other sipping tea.

“Don’t let me interrupt your studies.”

Helen’s mind has been washed clean by the insistent thump, thump and the complicated rhythms issuing from the nearby room. The tea is lukewarm, but welcome.

“So, no school today, then,” she adds.

“I’m going in later.” Jane glances sideways. “We’ve got tests coming up.”

“Already?”

“Yea. Crazy.”

She giggles and then a smile spreads over her face.

“Come and have a listen to my latest mix.”

Helen follows her into the study, still clutching her mug of tea.

Jane bends over the computer screen and clicks on the mouse. A flash of red underwear is revealed beneath the regulation skirt.

“This is a remix,” she says.

Helen is not sure what a remix is. She stares at the screen, which morphs into what look like heartbeats on a cardiovascular machine. She realises the jagged red lines of the graph pitch and trough according to the squealing voice and space-age effects, whilst violet dashes dictate the relentless, mesmeric beat.

“Cool,” says Helen, for want of anything better. She likes Jane.

“What’s it called?”

“It’s Trance,” she says. “I haven’t given it a name yet.”

“Oh, so you made this up yourself?” She wants to say, “composed” but realises this is not the right word.

“Na, the way it works is you take other people’s stuff and remix it. So, this is three different pieces and I’m pasting them together to make my own mix.” Her eyes glow with excitement, “I’m going to send it in to a competition.”

“Oh, wow,” says Helen.

“Here – have a listen.”

She hovers with the earphones over Helen’s head.

“That way you can really get all the effects.”

This is the last thing Helen wants. She imagines all that disjointed racket attacking her lymph nodes.

“Maybe...another time,” she says.

Jane looks blank.

“You in a hurry?”

“Well,” Helen says, “um, I actually popped by because I wondered if I could use the computer.”

Jane brightens at once.

“Oh, yeah, course you can. Do you want to do a search?”

“Yes,” says Helen, “a search – exactly.”

“Maybe I can help?” she says, her face eager.

“Oh, I can probably manage. I’ll just Google something.” And then, she adds, quickly, “as long as I’m not keeping you from your studies.”

The corner of Jane’s mouth turns up. She winks again and sashays out of the room.

“I’ll have to cut the music, though,” Helen calls after her.

“It’s okay,” she shouts back from the kitchen, “I’ve got stuff on my laptop.”

Helen can hear it as she types in: *atypia papilloma*. A picture of what looks like Darth Vader looms up at her from the cover of a CD abandoned next to the mouse.

“Atypia”, it would seem, is less threatening than “malignancy”, according to one website. She refers to the path results again. Her eyes glide over words, most of which sound sinister to her; *scattered calcs in density*,

firm fibrofatty tissue; infiltrating ductal carcinoma, grade 2, with up to 12 mitotic figures/10hpf. And the conclusion plainly states: incompletely excised.

Her hands shake as she folds the details back into the envelope. Now what? She will check alternative approaches. But where to begin? A shower of pins and needles drains her of energy and she feels light-headed.

Brandy wanders in and settles herself on the floor.

Helen types in: "Alternative Cancer Approach" and, to her surprise, a list of websites appears:

Scholarly article for alternative cancer approach.

That sounds respectable, Helen thinks.

How I survived Cancer.

CancerFightingStrategies.com.

And, in the right margin:

Chinese Herbs for Cancer: Chen Pi (Tangerine Peel) formula for natural cancer support with Traditional Chinese Herbs is a well-balanced formula combining the most formidable cancer-fighting type herbs known.

Brandy stirs at Helen's feet, lifts an inquisitive ear and casts her a look, which makes Helen want to bury her face in her fur. No wonder Kate is so obsessed with the creature.

A half familiar tune embroiders itself over the laptop beat. Just before it stops, Helen scrambles for her bag, retrieving her mobile phone.

"How's it going, our kid?"

"Roger!" she says.

"Just checking you're okay. Hello? Hel, are you there?"

"Yes, yes, I'm here."

But she feels unreal, her voice distant.

"How did it go with the surgeon?"

In the background Jane's laptop emits what sounds like the wail of tyres skidding on wet roads.

"It was cancerous," she says.

There is a pause and Helen can hear white noise coming down the phone – traffic perhaps or static. She stares at the toast crumbs on what must be Jane's empty breakfast plate.

"Good job you had the surgery, then," he says.

“Yes,” she says, “but...

“Shall I pop round this evening? Pick up some fish and chips?”

“No – I mean, yes – come round. Not sure about the fish and chips.”

“Balti, then. There’s a great place in the Lye.”

“Roger, I’ve got breast cancer.”

“You’re breaking up,” he says. “I can’t hear.”

“Breast cancer!” she says again.

“I’ll pop round this evening,” he says. “Tell me all about it then – you must be in a dead zone.”

She hears his phone click off.

“Aunty Helen!” says Jane.

Helen turns to see Jane standing in the doorway.

“What? Did you say you had breast cancer?”

Helen begins to shiver, as the reality hits home.

Jane comes over to her.

“What are you looking for?” she says, her eyes darting from her aunt to the computer and back again.

“I was just checking – you know – see if there’s anything less drastic than surgery and radiation...chemotherapy.”

Jane slaps her hand over her mouth, her eyebrows arching in horror.

“Oh, my god!” she says. “Aunty Helen! Is that what they’re telling you to do?”

Helen nods, unable to speak, her eyes swimming with tears.

Jane’s eyes fill with tears too; it doesn’t help.

Jane searches the desk, patting frantically at the drift of papers, peering under books, until she discovers her cell phone.

“I know,” she says, frantically punching the keypad.

“What are you doing?” says Helen. “Don’t ring your mum, will you? I need to tell her myself.”

Jane shakes her head, dismissing the idea.

“Hi,” she says. “Sharon. You remember you told me your mum had a brain tumour?”

Helen shakes her head at her niece; she doesn’t want the whole neighbourhood to know.

“Yeah, right,” she says. “Can you call me back?”

Jane pauses with the phone in her hand.

“My friend’s calling me back,” she says.

“Jane, I need to sort this out for myself.”

“Don’t worry – it’s alright,” she says, tetchily.

A sound like cymbals shatters the air, building up with orchestral intensity. Jane pounces, interrupting the tune and slaps the phone to her ear.

“Yeah. Oh, hi. I’ll pass you onto my aunt.”

Jane thrusts the phone at Helen.

“It’s Sharon’s mum. She knows this place where they cure you of cancer. It’s best if you talk to her direct.”

Helen opens her mouth in dismay, but Jane shoves the phone at her, nodding vehemently, her eyes insistent.

Helen takes the phone and raises it to her ear. The voice of the unknown woman is already speaking, but Helen can scarcely take in what she’s saying.

“I’m so sorry to trouble you,” says Helen. “I don’t even know you.”

“Look, I know exactly what you’re going through,” says the woman. “I was diagnosed with a brain tumour year before last. I had surgery. Knocked me about something dreadful and it only grew back. In the end, they couldn’t operate any more. But I found this place in Clent. That was over eighteen months ago and I’m still going strong.”

Helen listens intently.

Ker-boom, ker-boom, ker-boom comes dancing down the corridor.

“Have you got a pen and paper?”

Helen scours the desk for a scrap of paper and Jane obliges by whipping a yellow leaf from a post-it block. She hands her aunt a stub of pencil.

“It’s called Pi-Tech,” says the woman.

Helen’s not sure that she likes the sound of that.

“I don’t even know your name,” she says.

“Rita. Here’s my number. Call me any time.”

Helen mounts the steps, keeping her eye on the note flapping in the breeze. It is held to the door by a single drawing pin and has curled in on itself. She smooths it out.

Back in Ten Minutes.

Above it, a discreet sign announces *Pi-Tech*. She winds her scarf round her neck and sits down on the step to wait. She is surprised to see her mother's car parked under the spreading oaks, until she realises that, of course, that's how she got here. There it is; Dinky toy red. There are other cars too; all of them Matchbox size.

She looks up the hill towards *The Four Stones* pub, where she imagines most of the vehicles' owners enjoying a beer over lunch. She has no clear idea about this *Pi-Tech* outfit; who these people are or what they do. But the flat, Midland tones of Kaleb Smart felt reassuring on the other end of the line.

"It's best if you come down. I can see you straight away."

Her preoccupations are disturbed by movement in the distance, crystallising into a figure coming from the direction of the pub. His hair is tossed by the wind, legs bending in a springing gait. Before long, he is at the foot of the steps, his hand on the pillar, and with a light swing, is scampering up towards her.

"Hello," he says, wresting a key from his pocket, "you must be Helen."

"Mr. Smart?"

"Kaleb."

He holds the door open for her, its bell clattering merrily, and ushers her towards an upholstered chair. He then strides over to the countertop and lifts a hinged section of it, so that he is able to pass through to the other side. Helen settles into the cushions, whilst Kaleb swivels himself into position, eyes twinkling. Helen is not sure whether this is due to the effects of the pub lunch, a measure of good humour or enviable health.

Behind him are shelves neatly arrayed with bottles and jars. To his left a large poster depicts a shark swimming towards them through a sea of cobalt bubbles. In bold letters above its many rows of teeth, a slogan reads:

Throw Yourself To The Sharks!!

"So, you mentioned this morning that you'd had a diagnosis."

Helen shows him the path results. He leans back in his chair, pursing his lips as he reads.

“How did you hear about us?”

“A friend recommended you. Her mother was being treated for a brain tumour here.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what treatment have you had to date?”

Helen explains about the lumpectomy, the incomplete excision and the surgeon’s recommendation of the chemotherapy, radiation, surgery cocktail.

“So,” he says. “I’ll describe some of the products on offer here and how they work. I’m not a medical practitioner, you understand, my background is in biochemistry.”

He regards Helen openly. There are so many questions in her mind, she hardly knows where to begin.

“Let me explain,” he says, resting his arms on the countertop. “About fifteen years ago, I was diagnosed with inoperable cancer – melanoma.”

His voice is unmodulated; down-to-earth.

“Well, I started casting around for something, and decided to investigate the shark cartilage.”

Helen rests her arms on the counter too and leans in towards him.

“Very interesting creatures, sharks. Been around a lot longer than we have – over 400 million years.”

Helen can’t remember how long humans are supposed to have been around but is prepared to be impressed.

He produces a diagram, to which he applies the end of a gilt-tipped pen.

“The shark cartilage acts to cut off the blood supply, starving the tumour, which then shrinks.”

Helen studies what look like fragments of broken biscuit floating above a severed vein.

“Did this work for you?” she asks.

His eyes widen.

“Oh, yes. When I went back for tests two months later, they couldn’t believe I was the same man. Tumours – all shrunk to the size of a pea!”

The room feels warm and Helen peels off her scarf.

“Of course, I kept on with the treatment until they were all gone.”

“And how long did that take?”

“About three months.”

She undoes her coat and hangs it on the back of the chair.

“Any side effects?”

“Oh, no, none whatsoever. Well, I just went back to my normal life; thought no more about it. Then, of course, folks start asking; what did I do? People with cancer, and then friends of friends, you know the sort of thing. Well, funny thing,” he says, lowering his voice, “some folks got better and others didn’t.”

As they ponder this conundrum, the phone rings.

“Hello, *Pi-Tech*.”

Helen can see a postcard from Tokyo on the shelf above Kaleb’s head partially obscuring a large leather-bound tome. She is just pondering the fine Japanese script when a chill wind announces the arrival of a substantial woman in a voluminous coat. She helps herself to a seat at the other end of the counter, nodding in acknowledgement of Helen.

“It should have arrived by now,” Kaleb is saying, riffling through some papers on a metal spike.

He places his hand over the receiver and shouts through an empty space next to the shark poster.

“Greg!”

But the space remains void. The receiver clasped to his trouser leg, Kaleb marches to the door and shouts again, before resuming his conversation.

A short man with a mop of white hair and a walrus moustache takes his place with unhurried ceremony opposite the new arrival.

“What can I do for you, my lover?” he says.

Kaleb, meanwhile, puts down the receiver and returns his attention to Helen, picking up seamlessly where he left off.

“So, I started to get interested, see, and embarked on some serious research; the causes of cancer; the type of environment in which it thrives, and so on.”

His eyebrows knit together and dance.

“Don’t the medical profession know about this?” Helen asks.

Kaleb glances down at the papers on his desk, his brows becalmed.

“Ah, yes, well. Let’s just say it’s not in their interests to know. I mean, if you were a surgeon, would you be recommending shark cartilage?”

“I see what you mean,” she says.

The voice of the woman opposite invades their conversation.

“So – the doctor – ‘e says to me: ‘Mrs. Weston,’ ‘e says, ‘it’s not good news.’ You know the way they talks. An’ I says to ‘im, ‘well, let’s ‘ave it, then.’”

“What I found,” says Kaleb, undeterred, “is that a multi-faceted approach works best.”

“Multi-faceted?” says Helen.

“Yes, as well as the shark cartilage, which cuts off the blood supply to the tumour, an aerobic environment also adversely affects the tumour’s ability to survive.”

For a split second, she thinks of Melanie back in Perth, and the aerobics session she endured with her. All that bouncing around to frenetic music and loud instructions.

“Aerobic?” she says. “You mean, oxygenated?”

“That’s right.”

“A course,” says Mrs. Weston, and pins Greg with a challenging stare. She makes sweeping movements with her arms, encompassing the whole room.

“A course, I already knows what he’s goin’ to say, like, coz I’ve ‘ad this condition for a while, see.”

“And how do you keep your system oxygenated?” Helen asks.

“Ah!” says Kaleb, clearly delighted with the question. He pivots sideways to pluck a series of pamphlets from a dispenser, and with pen in hand, proceeds to point out a few key phrases on the information Helen now has before her.

“Mrs. Weston,’ ‘e says, ‘you’ve got leukaemia.’”

“We can help with the oxygen,” says Kaleb, travelling backwards on his roller-chair to relieve a small bottle from the shelf, which he displays deftly on the counter.

“These oxygenating drops taken three times a day in water will do the trick.”

“Well, a course,” says Mrs. Weston in an operatic voice, “I says to ‘im, ‘oh, yes? And ‘ow lung do you think I’ve got?’ And ‘e says to me, ‘about two to three year.’ And I looks at ‘im and says, ‘does that mean on top of the seven I’ve already ‘ad since the *original* diagnosis?’”

“So,” says Kaleb, unperturbed by the crosscurrents, “we recommend that, as well as the shark cartilage, you take the oxygenating drops, plus B17.”

“Well, as yo’ con imagine,” says Mrs. Weston, pausing for effect, “e doesn’t know what to say.”

Helen sneaks a glance at Greg, who looks dazed.

“I see you’ve got that tea then,” says Mrs. Weston, nodding at an artful arrangement of packets left of Greg’s ear.

“Do you know it?” says Greg.

“Know it?” she says in her best baritone. “Kept me going all this time – till I got onto you lot. Didn’t know you could get it anymore.”

“I haven’t tried it,” says Greg, “but it seems very popular.”

Helen wonders if it contains B17.

“B17?” says Helen. “You mean vitamin B17?”

“That’s right.”

“What are the best sources?”

“Ah, well,” says Kaleb, “we find it advisable to take a supplement.”

And before Helen knows it, he has a bottle of the stuff in his hand.

“How much is all this likely to cost?” she says. “It sounds like a lot.”

“Oh, yes,” says Kaleb, looking her in the eye, “The prices are all marked on the leaflets. What I suggest is that you take them away with you and study the information. Give it some thought and if you have any questions, you can give me a buzz or come in. No need to make an appointment.”

“Right,” says Helen, “so I’ll go away and think about it, then.”

“I would,” he says. “No need to rush into anything,” and then adds, “there are a couple of other things.”

Helen drops one of the leaflets.

“Let me get you a bag for the pamphlets.”

“Thanks,” says Helen.

The phone rings again and this time Greg answers it. Mrs. Weston leans across the divide that separates them.

“What ‘ave you got, ma luv?”

“Er, breast cancer,” says Helen.

Mrs. Weston winces. “Very common,” she says, “like an epidemic!”

“And you have leukaemia?”

“Oh, I’ve ‘ad it for years,” she says with some pride.

“You look well on it.”

Mrs. Weston draws her chin into her several others.

“Oh, well, I knows what I’m about, see,” she says, and, leaning across to Helen once more, adds in a theatrical whisper, “and I swear by this tea.”

The phone rings yet again, and Kaleb materialises, swinging a brown paper carry bag.

“Hello, *Pi-Tech*.”

“You won’t go far wrung wi’ this lot,” says Mrs. Weston, placing a hand on Helen’s knee. “They knows what they’re about.”

“You’ve been coming here for a while, then?”

“See,” she begins, hands poised as though before an orchestra, “doctors and that; they’re not what they used to be.”

She sucks in air, and the swell of her mohair chest reminds Helen of a pouter pigeon.

“Specialists,” she says. “They’re all *specialists* these days.”

Helen is drawn into Mrs. Weston’s spell.

“Tek my son, Jacob, for example. No end of trouble with ‘is adenoids. Ear, nose and throat specialist. Minute he walks through the door, ‘e’s na more ‘an...*a nose!*”

Helen pictures Jacob, his Cyrano de Bergerac protuberance preceding him into the specialist’s rooms.

“A nose, entering the building! Instead of our Jacob.”

Helen had imagined aright.

“I’ve filled a couple of flagons,” says Greg, breaking the spell.

"This 'ere water," she says to Helen, "Pi water. Japanese. You make sure you get onto it. It's *energised!*"

The last word sings.

"Sorry about that," says Kaleb, putting down the receiver. "Now, where were we?"

"You were fetching something to put the pamphlets in," says Helen.

"Ah, yes," he says, handing over the bag. "All made from recycled materials. Now. It is also critical to keep your system alkaline."

"Alkaline?" says Helen.

Kaleb produces a photocopied booklet entitled, quite simply, *Acid and Alkaline* by some complicated name Helen can't begin to pronounce.

Someone from the Macrobiotic Foundation of Oroville, California.

"This is important," he stresses.

Helen leafs through the booklet. It looks very involved with tables of foods, diagrams and pages of explanation.

"It's all quite simple," says Kaleb.

She hesitates with the booklet in her hand.

"You can keep it," says Kaleb, cheerily. "I'll put it in with the other pamphlets. Oh, and some details about the immune system," he says snatching another page from the stand. "We have a very good range of products to help with that. You'll need to think about it all for a bit."

"What do I owe you?" Helen asks.

"Oh, nothing," says Kaleb, visibly taken aback. "We don't charge for the consultation."

Helen's coat flies open as she rushes up the stairs, her footsteps echoing unevenly off the concrete. It's almost 6 o'clock and her mother will be worried. Why didn't she phone when she got back from the surgeon's rooms? Or after her visit to Pi-Tech? Her scarf slips from her shoulders, flowing in a crimson trail down the stairs and she feels the cold band around her neck.

Tap, tap, tap. The steady tread of another pair of feet holds her immobile and she watches hypnotically as the grey hat bobs into view above the charcoal woollen shoulders. The man has reached the scarf. His downward gaze shifts from the steps, gloved hand on the rail, as he pulls

himself up in an abrupt shuffle. The man lifts his head at an angle, shoulders and torso moving in unison, as though welded together.

“Is this your scarf?” he says.

The old man bends with difficulty to pick it up, folding it carefully and pressing it against his chest as he takes the next few steps towards her. She is surprised by the lightness of his eyes, the smallness of the pupils under the glare of the overhead lights. He offers her the scarf, which she takes and drapes carefully over her neck and shoulders.

“That’s it,” he says and his voice is that of her granddad, whose phrases arrived as though turned by the wind or ploughed into furrowed fields. A Black Country voice – not the strident tone of the nurses – but a rural burr of times gone by.

“That’s it,” he says, “best guard against the cold. There’s a nip in the air.”

He makes for the door and it is a while before Helen realises he is holding it open for her.

“Ward D4?” he says.

“Thank you.”

She is about to ask him who he has come to see, but he has already turned towards a grey shadow in the corner, which Helen presumes is his wife.

Helen looks to the top right hand corner where her mother was yesterday, but in her place is a florid man in striped pyjamas. She casts around, panic-stricken, and then spots a white flag of surrender flapping at her near the entrance; Vera’s fragile hand. Tears well in her eyes and her heart falters.

“Mum!” she says, pulling up a chair, “you gave me a fright.”

Her mother opens her mouth and closes it again, contorting her lips in wordless effort. Helen reaches forwards with both hands and cradles her mother’s fingers. She can feel the bones, as delicate as a bird’s, beneath the skin. There is the rush of emotion again. She closes her eyes, resting her cheek on the back of her mother’s hand. Tears begin to fall and Helen knows Vera will feel their moisture seeping into her flesh. Vera strokes her daughter’s hair with her free hand, over and over, gently. Helen had not

wanted this; to break down in front of her mother; she had wanted to be strong. But it had been a big day and it is a relief to cry. Helen wishes vaguely that she had drawn the curtains, worries that others will see, but there is just the man opposite, who was so kind just now, and the other patients, absorbed in their own personal misery. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. The only thing of importance is her mother's hand soft against her hair, her mother's strength, which she has never considered before, and her own vulnerability, which feels strangely welcoming.

Vera's hand grows heavy and Helen realises Mum has lapsed into sleep. Every now and again Vera's body jerks and the hand starts up again. Finally it stops and Helen is left pinned against her mother's chest, listening to her heartbeat, like a baby. Helen becomes aware of a presence behind her and, easing her head, spies a polished shoe, black with well worn creases. The same shoe belonging to the gentleman who opened the door for her just now.

"No need to get up," he says.

But Helen is up now, straightening her coat and standing before him.

"You must be Vera's daughter," he says.

"Do you know my mother?"

"Oh, yes. I know Vera alright." he says, extending a hand. "Ted Braithwaite."

"I'm Helen," she says, taking his hand.

"Your mother and my sister, Josie, over there," he says, indicating the bed opposite. "Best of friends in their school days."

The woman opposite is wearing a face mask hooked up to a series of bottles and tanks, her dentures grinning from a tumbler beside the bed. A sign above reads: R J Butler. Nil by mouth.

"Heart attack," he says. "Pneumonia. One thing after another."

"I'm so sorry," says Helen.

"What about your mom?"

"A stroke," says Helen. "She's improving slowly. We're hoping she can come home soon."

He looks away, shaking his head.

“Terrible business,” he says. “Our mother had a stroke. I came over the other day when I saw the name. She didn’t say much. Not sure if she recognised me.”

“Some days she does very well – you can have a conversation. Others not. Even on the same day, it can vary.”

“She were a beauty, your mother,” he says with a far away look in his eye. “A real red-head. Turned a few heads an’ all.”

Helen senses the man appraising her; no Helen does not have her mother’s flaming hair, has not been known for turning heads.

“Had the temperament to go with it,” he says, fondly. “Very impetuous.”

He glances at Vera slumbering amongst the pillows and raises his hat.

“I’d best be off,” he says. “Tell your mother I’ll come and chat to her again next time I’m in. You take care now.”

Helen watches him go, the broad shoulders of his coat tapering to his trouser cuffs like the wings of a stately angel. She feels grounded now and settles into this soft time of evening with the bustle of the ward becalmed, keeping vigil over her mother. She relives that moment of blind panic after Pi-Tech, scrambling for a foothold on the bridle path, which delivered her to the Mary Stevens Hospice. Multiple rows of windows met her blank gaze, one of which must surely represent the ward where she was born. For in a previous incarnation, this hospice was a nursing home. Helen sees herself sobbing under the souging branches of the yew; broken graves littered at her feet, but cannot access the fear she felt. A deep breath wells up from the bottom of her lungs. She has no idea what to do.

Vera stirs in her sleep, smiling and frowning by turns. She whimpers, and then on an almost fearful intake of breath, opens her eyes. She appears oblivious to her surroundings and Helen dare not announce herself for fear of causing a shock. Vera pins her with an anxious stare. A tear hovers in the corner of her eye and Helen reaches for the box of tissues.

“It’s alright, Mum,” she says.

Vera’s eyes flicker over Helen’s, as though reading something written there.

“A place,” she says. “I’ve seen this place.”

Helen nods but says nothing; clearly her mother has been dreaming.

Vera concentrates.

“Sunshine,” she says. “I can see it on...I don’t know...some sort of surface – like a wall.”

“It sounds like a nice place,” says Helen.

Vera grows animated.

“They’re waiting for me,” she says.

“Who is waiting?”

Vera considers this and a serious expression plays over her features.

“I don’t know,” she says. “There’s the baby to consider.”

“What baby do you mean?”

Vera looks at Helen, incredulous.

“The baby!” she says.

Helen decides to go along with this fantasy.

“Are you worried no one will look after it?”

“I can’t go,” she says.

“Would you like to go?” says Helen, following the script as best she can, even though it breaks her heart.

“Frightened,” she says.

Helen strokes her hand.

“We will miss you, if anything happens, Mum, but we’re not babies any more. We will cope.”

“I don’t know,” says Vera, slurring her words now, tears oozing from the corners of her eyes.

Helen offers her tissues and helps her mother blow her nose.

“It’s good to cry,” says Helen.

“I’m very tired,” she says.

Helen adjusts the pillows and her mother surrenders to them. She still looks troubled.

“I’d like to stay,” she says with sudden resolve. “Go back home. Spend time in the garden.”

“And so you shall,” says Helen. “I can help you get settled.”

Vera smiles.

“That will be nice,” she says.

"This place that's waiting for you. It will still be there," says Helen.

Her mother looks more content now.

"A gentleman came over while you were asleep. Said he was a friend of yours. Ted Braithwaite."

"Ted," says Vera. "I haven't seen him in years."

"He said he came over the other day to say hello."

"No," she says. "He never."

"He's here visiting his sister, your friend, Josie – just over the way there."

Vera's jaw drops.

"Josie!" she says. "Ooh, it must be twenty years or more."

"She's had a heart attack," says Helen. "And pneumonia."

"Well, I never," says Vera.

"The man says he'll drop by again for a chat next time he's in."

"I don't mind," says Vera.

"Did you know him well?"

"Not so well."

Vera inclines her head towards Helen and lowers her voice.

"He was sweet on me," she says.

Helen smiles.

"He seemed like a nice man."

"Oh, there's no harm in Ted," she says. "Heart of gold."

"Did you fancy him?"

Vera laughs.

"No," she says. "He made me an offer, though."

"What, proposed to you?"

"A thoughtful lad. Just his way of helping out, I don't wonder."

"How would it help, if you didn't love him?"

"That's what I said."

Vera ponders the bed sheets, her head gently nodding.

"Of course, I knew your dad already," she says. "But your gran was opposed to me. Well, you know that. Mind you, Dad was determined, so we met in secret. It was all very romantic."

Vera smiles at the memory.

“Were you happy with Dad?” asks Helen.

“Of course!” she says.

“How old were you when Ted proposed?”

“Said he was in love with me. I would have been twenty.” Vera laughs. “It was his mother I liked – if it wasn’t for her, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Helen is at a loss to know what to say. Vera turns to her daughter, a grave expression on her face.

“Mrs. Braithwaite, she put me up for a time. She had a relative in Malvern, owned a boarding house. I worked at the hospital as a receptionist.”

“You never told us you moved to Malvern,” says Helen.

“It was safer there,” says Vera. “From the bombing and that.”

“But there wasn’t any bombing after the war, surely?”

Vera shrugs. “It’s a lovely place,” she says. “Wonderful air. I used to take you there after your operation, remember? You were so sickly.”

“Yes,” says Helen, stroking her mother’s hand. “It is a lovely place. We must go there again, together. Soon.”

Helen replaces the receiver, remembering now that Melanie is away on a conference in Canberra. She gazes up through the stairwell towards the loft. There are sketch books up there, or lined notepads that could serve as such. But it is the thick texture of paint she craves, and above all, colour. She returns to her shopping list, scribbling ART MATERIAL in bold at the top, and then frowns as she checks the alkalinity booklet from Pi-Tech. Oranges, it appears, are acid-forming. She strikes them out.

Lemons.

She’s okay with lemons.

What about bananas? She sighs. Kaleb’s booklet conflicts with the information she googled at the internet café this morning. Plus another source suggests additional factors, such as ripeness, freshness and the presence or absence of chemicals. Anyway, Helen likes bananas.

She abandons her list in response to the sound of a key in the latch, and heads down the hall, knowing exactly who to expect.

“Just thought I’d pop by,” says Roger. “You weren’t answering your phone last night.”

He steps into the hall and makes for the kitchen, where Helen brews him a cup of tea.

“How d’yer go with the specialist yesterday?”

“Dr. Griffin?” she says, feigning nonchalance.

She hands him his mug, then joins him at the table.

“It was cancerous.”

Roger swallows his tea, digesting this information.

“Good job you had the op’, then,” he says, eyes still on the mug.

She steadies her tea against the table, waiting for the rush of pins and needles to subside.

“He says they didn’t get it all. *He* didn’t get it all.”

“Oh,” says Roger, looking at her now.

“Yes,” she says, “so, I have to decide what to do next.”

“What does he think you should do?”

“More surgery. Chemotherapy. Radiation.”

Roger blows out air.

“Christ!” he says.

She feels his eyes boring into her. She has scarcely ever seen him look so serious. If she weren’t so anxious, Helen would almost relish this moment, with Roger unmasked without a joke to pull out of the hat.

“I’m scared,” she says.

“I bet you are,” he says, his voice rising. “I’d be scared. When does he think...I mean...”

She takes a breath, eyes fixed on Roger, as though to anchor herself.

“I...I don’t think I can face it.”

“No,” he says.

He keeps his gaze steady.

“What does Kate think?”

“I’ll phone her this evening.”

They sit in silence; the only sound that of Roger swallowing his tea.

“I’ve been looking into...alternatives.”

The word hits the space between them, awkward and wrong. Roger looks away.

“I mean, you know, options. I’m looking at options.”

He looks up.

“What other options are there?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m looking into it.”

“What does the surgeon think?”

“I’m not discussing it with the surgeon.”

“Who are you discussing it with?”

“Well, you’re the first one, really.”

She smiles weakly. He smiles back and nods.

“You let me know, won’t you?” he says. “You know, I mean, you need to be careful.”

“It’s just that I need to be well-informed.”

“So, you haven’t ruled out the idea of surgery and all that, then?”

“Oh, no, of course. I said to Dr. Griffin, I’d get back to him. I need to think about it.”

“It’s scary, alright,” says Roger, “I’ll grant you that.”

He takes another sip of tea, studying the floor tiles.

“Mind you,” he says, “you can’t do nothing. I mean, you have to do something.”

“Yes.”

His eyes flicker over hers and she sees his own fear. He wouldn’t want to lose her, any more than she would want to lose him. Something tells her not to mention Pi-Tech, however. It sounds too much like a pantomime.

“If you want me to come with you anywhere, or help with your research.”

Helen’s heart leaps at the idea.

“Yes,” she says. “Actually, there is a place I’m too scared to go to by myself. It’s the Corbett Hospital, a Dr. Crouch.”

“A second opinion, eh?” he says, brightening.

“Yes,” she says, latching onto the phrase. “A second opinion, exactly.”

Helen rests against the chair back. Yes, this feels like familiar territory. If they can continue to couch the eccentricities of her explorations, the

unpredictability of her instincts in this formal language, they should manage to find a way through.

“Do you want me to do your shopping?” he asks, eyeing her list.

“No,” she says. “I like walking. It helps me think. Thank you, though.”

“Okay,” he says, rising. “You let me know about that chap at the Corbett, won’t you?”

She watches Roger reverse down the drive, waving until he is out of sight. Then, she too sets off, willing her legs to be strong; not to buckle under her as she studies the patchwork of asphalt interrupting the pavers. There was a time when she knew every paving slab and road repair along this route. Rivulets of slime course down the sandstone walls and she has a sense of swimming underwater. The holly bushes overhead conspire with the fir trees opposite to create a crypt of cover. She has not yet decided if she will swim with the sharks.

Helen’s feet retrace the sad, grey miles trudged as a child to the bus depot from where busloads of brown-clad children were delivered to the playground; a macadam field with white marks forming runways for the landing craft of aliens. The teachers must have come by sputnik; or so Helen thought. Try as she might, though, she could not learn their language, honing instead her invisibility skills; those who didn’t suffered the cane, which hung in Mrs. Jacque’s office. She had seen it on the wall – and the marks on Fred Kettle’s hands – red stripes she imagined mirrored on his bottom. This time, she will not take the road with no name to the bus station; she will keep on the straight all the way to Waitrose. She will buy lemons and survive.

Helen yanks a trolley from the line of clinging others behind the chrome rail and wheels it purposefully towards the section marked “organic vegetables”. She handles the tomatoes, which Kaleb says are acidic. She sees yellow bell-shaped ones, acid-free, biodynamic, places them in her trolley, along with apples, broccoli and carrots. Helen’s spirits rise and her head begins to clear. Hummus, goat’s cheese, sunflower greens, alfalfa sprouts. She piles them all into her trolley, transferring them to her rucksack at the checkout.

Guided by a picture firm in her mind of the art shop on Bell Street, Helen turns right. It is a grey day, but not actually raining and the cold is

enlivening. But the grim tenement houses go on interminably, their red brick facades weeping soot, with only a single picture window breaking the monotony. The window is obscured by a pall of net curtains; inconceivable to imagine it was ever a shop. She feels caught, as though in a recurring dream, eternally searching and failing to find what she's looking for. The roar of traffic on the ring road pulls her up with a start. Helen teeters on the curb, casting around for shelter, for a fine, soaking drizzle has set in.

Opposite is the Crystal Leisure Centre – sport and recreation, pool and sauna, cafeteria, crèche. A wave of warm air entices her in through the automatic doors, which open to the smell of chlorine and concrete. Helen wonders vaguely if they might run art classes here, but the noticeboard is full of advertisements for share accommodation, yoga equipment and bicycles for sale. The receptionist is busy with a tracksuited man, whose face is ruddy from exercise, his hair a shock of spikes, so she wades through the turnstile – lime green and tubular – and takes the stairs in pursuit of an arrow announcing the Aquamarine Lounge and Bar. She could order a toasted tea cake, apple turnover or custard slice, a mug of coffee, tea by the pot, or herbal plunger. She could sit by the bubble gum machine and watch from the plate glass window where a waterfall cascades onto mothers and toddlers in the splash pool below. Instead, she walks through the swing door at the far end as though in search of the ladies, which hovers at the back of her mind as a pretext, although she could easily wait till she gets home.

On the left is a door with a round porthole framing a bald figure in loose, white trousers and silken top. He pivots on one leg, hands massaging invisible currents of air, which appear to billow through his blouse and subside with a sweep of the legs. He steps into space, crouches wide, describing a graceful arc with his arms before rising, weightless as a swan. Helen stands transfixed by his serenity and the repetitious sequence of gestures. A group of acolytes of both sexes and all ages, shapes and sizes, mirror his stance as best they can. Helen is struck by the individuality of each. It is not the movement that unifies, but the concentration with which they follow the invisible thread of the master, gathering flowers from an unseen field, filling a cask of emptiness.

“You can troy it, if you loike,” the receptionist says. “And if yer does, yer can book in.”

CHAPTER 3

“Bloody O!” says Melanie.

“I know,” says Helen. “It’s not what I expected.”

“Shit, no!”

“I’m terrified, Mel. I think it’s the thought of the treatment, to be honest, more than the cancer.”

“If it were me,” says Mel, “I’d be just plain scared – end of story!”

“The thing is I have a history.”

There is a pause on the other end of the line.

“A bad experience with my tonsils.”

After another pause, her friend ventures:

“But cancer’s hardly the same as tonsillitis!”

“And besides,” says Helen, “how will I handle chemotherapy when I can’t even cope with anaesthetic?”

“But what else can you do?”

Helen inhales.

“I thought I’d check out a few alternatives.”

There is a brief silence.

“Like – what?” says Mel.

“Well, there’s shark cartilage and a radiowave treatment I’m looking into. I don’t know what else yet. It’s difficult without proper access to the internet.”

“I could do a search for you,” says Melanie.

“Would you?”

Helen listens to the rhythm of her friend’s breath.

“Better still – why not come home and deal with it here?”

“What, and leave Mum? I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“God, Helen – you’ve got cancer!”

“It’s not an aggressive tumour, apparently. Dr. Griffin thinks as long as I check in for surgery between now and Christmas...”

“Oh, I get it. So, you’re thinking; why not look into complementary medicine in the meantime?” says Mel.

“Something like that.”

Helen doodles on a diminutive pad, half-filled with her mother’s notes and sketches. It helps her think.

“Didn’t you try something once for your migraines?” she says.

“Acupuncture?” says Melanie. “Yes. It was brilliant. But I don’t know about cancer.”

Helen pencils around the underside of the curves she has made, working them over and over. Has she too been reduced to drawing breasts?

“I’m so confused,” she says, “and I’ve only been to Pi-Tech.”

“Where?”

“Oh, it’s a bit complicated,” she says, abandoning the pencil, her mind now a blank.

“What about the Bach remedies?” says Melanie.

“I don’t even know what they are,” says Helen.

“They’re similar to bush flower essences.”

Helen, who knows nothing about this either, is at a loss for words.

“They work on the emotional picture,” says Melanie.

Helen lets out a mournful sigh, then adds, “I’m thinking of working on my immune system.”

“So you can cope better with the onslaught of all that chemo and stuff?”

“Maybe – I’m not sure.”

“Is there someone who can go with you to these places? Your sister, perhaps?”

“My brother’s coming with me this morning.”

“That’s good to know. I mean, I’m sure there’s lots of great stuff out there. But you want to watch out for quacks. You’re very vulnerable right now.”

Helen lets out another sigh.

“The thought of this...this merry-go-round of practitioners,” she says. “it stresses me out.”

“So, who is this bloke we’re going to see?”

Roger keeps his eyes on the road ahead.

“Dr. Crouch,” says Helen.

He comes to a halt at the roundabout by *The Plough and Harrow*, gives her a quick glance.

“So, just a G P or some kind of specialist?”

“A radiologist,” she says.

“I thought you weren’t keen on radiation,” says Roger.

“Neither is Dr. Crouch,” she says.

Roger frowns into the traffic and Helen realises there is no need to be so cryptic with her brother; after all, he has taken the morning off to accompany her to the Corbett Hospital.

“Dr. Crouch was the top radiologist at the Dudley Guest,” she says.

Roger turns down the corners of his mouth, impressed.

“According to his website, he was distressed about the damage caused by high doses of radiation. This was some time ago – twenty years or so, I suppose. I don’t know that things have changed much since then.”

“So, what’s he doing practising at the Corbett if he used to be head of Dudley Guest?”

“There’s been some controversy over a German machine he introduced. It’s a radiowave treatment and doesn’t have the harmful side effects of radiation, and yet it seems very successful with cancer.”

Roger turns into Vicarage Road and parks the car in a side street.

“I remember reading something about that in the papers – a while back now. What’s it called?”

“The Tronado machine.”

“Oh, yes, there was a right hoo-ha about it.”

“Anyway, poor old Crouch got demoted.”

“Drummed out of the Brownies,” says Roger.

“He practices here now in Stourbridge. I thought it would be worth checking him out.”

“Good idea,” says Roger.

Roger sits with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped, head bowed, staring between his feet. Helen shuffles in her chair, then reaches for a copy of *Health Lines*, featuring a serene figure in a white leotard striking a yoga pose. Retrieving the magazine, she senses movement on the other side of

the corridor, and turns to see a pale young woman languishing on a trolley. It has a metal cover hinged back to allow the girl room to rise, which she struggles to do, her long hair streaming like weights behind her. Finally, she swings her legs into a seated position on the edge of what Helen now realises is the Tronado machine. The girl's hair flops over her face, pitching her forwards as though too heavy to bear. Two sets of arms rush towards the patient as she teeters precariously; the parents, no doubt, focused on this slip of a girl, their hands now at her shoulders. Helen returns to her chair.

Is this how *she* will feel after the treatment? And who will there be to comfort her? Her father is dead and her mother is in hospital with only one good arm because of the stroke. And, in any case, does she want to feel like this? Her thoughts are interrupted by the appearance of a man with dishevelled grey hair, whose fierce eyes glower at them beneath a tangle of eyebrows. His jacket is worn and hangs badly from once broad shoulders, now as weary as the jacket itself. His trousers have old-fashioned turn-ups; they could do with a press, but his shoes are respectably polished.

Helen and Roger follow Dr. Crouch into his room and sit awkwardly on dining room chairs drawn up to a corner desk. The door is closed, yet Helen is aware of it behind her back. She knows nothing of feng-shui, but feels the room is all wrong.

“How did you hear about the Tronado machine?”

Dr. Crouch pins them with an alternate stare and Helen appreciates the fact that he includes them both.

“My brother has read about you in the newspapers and I've checked your website.”

His stare lingers long enough for Helen to comprehend his deliberate intake of breath. Roger has read about him in the newspapers; that puts Crouch on the wrong foot. Helen has seen the website, which balances the situation somewhat.

“Who is the patient?” he asks, and then clarifies. “Which one of you has cancer?”

“I do,” she says and a faintness comes over her.

He opens a desk drawer; it has the heavy rumble of a filing cabinet. He extracts three sheets of paper, all of them green, each containing different sets of instructions. He hands them over.

“So, can you tell us something about the Tronado machine?” says Roger. “How does it work and what are the side effects?”

“You don’t need to know how it works,” he says, “unless you’re a scientist.”

Roger concedes with a bow of the head that he’s not.

“If you follow my instructions,” he says, “there’ll be no side effects.”

Helen is too intimidated to ask about the procedure and is thankful to Roger for broaching the subject.

“What are your instructions?”

Dr. Crouch points to the second sheet of paper.

“As you’ll see,” he says, “several sessions will be required. At least six, possibly up to thirteen. The treatment involves radiowaves – not to be confused with microwaves.”

He pauses; allowing them time to absorb this information.

“So, we won’t go trying this at home, then,” Roger says with humorous inflection.

“What type of cancer is it?” says Crouch, ignoring the remark.

“Breast cancer,” she says.

“Which breast?”

“The left one,” she says.

“Huh,” he says, “feminine side. What treatment have you had to date?”

“Surgery,” she says.

He looks at her with gruff sympathy.

“Which explains why you’re looking for further treatment.”

Helen blinks at the man.

“The problem with surgery is that it only works if it’s complete.”

He pauses for effect.

“Exactly the same as rabbit shooting.”

The siblings gaze at him mutely.

“Provided you shoot the entire population of rabbits, you eradicate the problem.”

The corners of his mouth ease slightly.

“What does the microwave treatment do?” asks Roger.

Dr. Crouch spares him a glance.

“It’s a radiowave treatment and it’s all in the information I gave you.”

Helen does not know what to ask next. Their mutual silence proves a good ploy, however, as Dr. Crouch continues.

“The body cannot withstand long exposure to radiowave treatment, hence the need for several appointments. Sessions last for a few minutes only and you’ll need to book twelve sessions in advance. A gap of about three days is optimal between sessions. Now,” he says, “one thing is vital.”

He turns to Helen.

“You must eat at least three ounces of red meat immediately prior to each session.”

“Will chicken be okay?” she asks.

His eyes pierce her with irascible force.

“Red meat and only red meat,” he says.

“Why the red meat?” asks Roger.

“Without it,” he says, fixing Helen with a stare, “your glucose levels will be low and you risk brain damage.”

“What about the cost?” she says.

“The fees are set out on page three. £1,300 for the full twelve sessions. You get a refund if less. Are you a National Health member?”

“Yes,” says Helen.

“In which case, you’ll be entitled to a £500 rebate.” He peers at them through tangled eyebrows. “I cannot charge less. As it is, all costs are kept to a minimum.”

Helen nods, appraising the sparse surroundings, his shabby suit. This man must have been through a lot.

“And are you very booked up?” she asks. “I mean, when might we, er, I, start the treatment?”

“You can talk to the receptionist about that,” he says. “Generally, you should be able to get an appointment within the month. Is it an aggressive tumour?”

“Not very,” she says.

“Study the details first. If you need further instruction, you can phone. My number is there at the top of each page.”

“Thank you,” says Helen, rising from her seat.

“Thanks very much,” says Roger and extends a hand, which Dr. Crouch yanks briskly before walking them to the door.

“You’ll be able to make a decision on the information provided,” he says, then adds: “Avoid the use of mobile phones. They’re the worst thing for anyone with cancer.”

And he disappears into his room.

“Bloomin’ marvellous,” says Roger when they get back to the car. “No decent parking at the hospital and then some idiot slaps a ticket on your vehicle.”

“I’m so sorry,” says Helen. “I’ll pay the fine.”

He screws up the paper and stuffs it in his pocket.

“No you won’t,” he says and puts his arm around his sister’s shoulder. He hugs her to him. “The important thing is to get you well,” he says. “This is peanuts compared to the Tronado machine.”

They sit side by side in the car, staring at the naked branches of trees, the sky, washed white with cloud.

“An interesting character, Crouch,” says Roger.

The restaurant is filled with a pleasant fug and a reassuring murmur of Midland voices, the low, flat tones – nothing excitable – and yet Helen senses the quiet thrill of the shoppers, who have taken time out from the mundane to gossip with friends. Nearly all are women, apart from some of the waiters – and of course, the proprietor, Giuseppe, who might grace them with his presence later.

“What will you have?” says Kate.

Helen gazes at the menu – tomato and basil soup, jacket potato, Mediterranean salad, pork pie...then the print joins up and merges into shadow. She can hear Kate’s voice merrily piping on.

“The cannelloni is nice. Of course, Giuseppe is Italian, so it’s all genuine.”

Helen continues to hold onto the menu with both hands, head lowered. Her breath is tearful and shallow, the way she remembers as a child at school when everyone was reading out and it was getting closer to her turn. It dries out her throat and she can feel a nervous cataract of tears building behind her eyes. She reminds herself it's very kind of Kate to take her out to lunch.

Helen can't think what she will have. She is trying too hard not to think of the shameful scar hidden inside her "c" cup and the sharp twist of pain she would have expected the surgery to have thwarted. Helen feels cheated; Dr. Griffin said nothing about the after-effects. Nothing. As she sits here now, the menu trembling in her hands, that spirited exchange with the surgeon that took her so by surprise now weighs on her like the dark five o'clock spot beneath her left breast; the black hole through which all hope has vanished.

"I'll have the baked potato," she says. "With salad."

Kate seems not to notice the slight quiver to her voice.

"They're always good," she says, which Helen knows is code for "you always play safe."

There is the smell of mashed potato that takes her back to the hospital, where their mother lies folded under the covers like a crumpled leaf, parchment thin. Shouldn't they be visiting her right now, instead of having lunch?

"I'll have the cannelloni," says Kate and the waitress scribbles on her pad, nose almost touching the page.

"So," says Kate, and Helen knows that her turn is coming, that she'll have to read out from her song sheet soon. "What have you decided?"

Helen is not ready for this yet. Aren't they English? Aren't they supposed to skirt around the topic until at least the dessert or coffee? The fact is, things aren't so clear cut as she had hoped and Helen doesn't want to say anything – not to Kate anyway – until she's decided on a course of action.

"Are you coming to stay with us or not?"

Oh, so that's it, thinks Helen. And she realises in that instant that Kate assumes Helen will go along with Dr. Griffin's recommendation, which is the same "one size fits all" package offered to all cancer tourists. Helen prefers to think of herself as a traveller. She has, after all, moved away from

Stourbridge, lived overseas, flown to the far end of the earth and settled in Australia. Where, of course, any specialist would offer the exact same deal. She feels caught. And now, here she is back on home turf as if having travelled nowhere.

“It’s so kind of you to offer to put me up at your place,” she says.

Kate waves a hand over her face as though brushing off a fly.

“Don’t be ridiculous – I’m your sister. I won’t hear of you staying at Mum’s on your own. See how badly affected you’ve been by this first operation? To be honest, it’d be much easier if you stayed with us, instead of having to keep driving over there with meals and things, checking in on you. When are you booked in?”

Helen feels the air rushing into her lungs and that flash of indignation again – the same one that precipitated her to find the calm and steely words that sent Dr. Griffin scurrying to his book shelf for the information she demanded. *“What are the possible side effects of further surgery?”* And, of course, there is the confusion of Pi-Tech and the plethora of other options she now realises is available.

The waitress arrives, juggling two plates and some extra cutlery.

“Cannelloni?” she says.

“Ooh, yes, please,” says Kate.

Helen eyes the jacket potato, skin crisped like the hide of an elephant. Will the knife be sharp enough to hoe through it? Perhaps she should have had the cannelloni.

“I thought after Christmas,” she lies. “Dr. Griffin says it’s not an aggressive tumour and I have time on my side.”

Kate shovels a hearty forkful of pasta into her mouth, dabbing delicately at the tomato oozing from the corner of her lips, rearranging the serviette over her lap again as she munches contemplatively. She picks up her knife and fork, poised either side of the plate, wrists resting on the tablecloth as she regroups. Helen is grateful that she keeps her eye on the food and does not look at her directly.

“I would have thought,” she says, her eyebrows inching slightly up her forehead, “you’d want it all out of the way before Christmas.”

Kate relaxes her shoulders and turns her eyes on Helen. They are soft now, the same khaki-hazel as their dad's.

"It's so good of you..." Helen begins again, and is arrested by that sudden turning in Kate's look that recalls their father's; the one he reserved for wayward pupils at school and, the three of them when it came to homework.

"I know how busy you'll be, what with Christmas approaching," she continues. "All the extra stuff at school – concerts and that, nativity plays, tests. And then the children and everything. I thought, after the new year, you know..."

Now the knife and fork are on the plate, freeing Kate's hands – and in particular, the dreaded forefinger – to do their work.

"Really, Helen, you're my sister. You've got breast cancer. You need the surgery now. And then there's all the chemo and radiation. It's going to take time. You need to get onto it. Never mind about Christmas – the children are old enough – Jane can be quite helpful – when she chooses. And Ken, well he's fourteen, for heaven's sake!"

"You have so much on your plate," says Helen and she can feel the outrage seeping into her butterfly belly, getting trapped in her lungs; that Kate always assumes she knows what's best for her.

The pain in her left breast needles at her, not huge, according to Dr. Griffin, and yet assuming dark proportions in her mind. Even now, she can't help picturing those wayward cells multiplying and spreading like an evil hand to clutch her entire breast and run its fingers down into her liver. Didn't their maternal grandmother die of liver cancer – at 45? Isn't Helen about to turn 45 next year? Who was this grandmother they never knew and has she come back to haunt the family through Helen, to make herself known to them, the way she made herself known to their mother, abandoning her at the age of eleven? Poor Vera. How come they never really paid attention to what it must have been like for her at age eleven to lose her mother? And now that she thinks of it, wasn't Helen that age when she nearly died? How would Vera have felt about that?

"It's good to be having this conversation," says Helen, clutching onto her cutlery and looking Kate straight in the eye. Hers are a pale, innocent

grey, just like their mother's and no one ever suspects what goes on behind them. "Now that you reassure me how you feel; and that you genuinely don't mind my moving in with you, I'll talk to Dr. Griffin."

Kate smiles on a warm intake of breath. She too holds onto her cutlery and doesn't touch Helen. Helen smiles weakly back, expecting relief. But she knows she can't keep putting Kate off like this; putting off a decision, although she suspects she has already made one.

Helen savors at the skin of the jacket potato; it's hard going and the salad takes a lot of chewing. She envies Kate's plate, the pile of cannelloni rapidly and neatly dispatched, with only a small mound remaining.

She won't have more surgery; she knows this now. She won't have the chemotherapy; or the radiation. But what *will* she do?

There is a sense of energy building in the room, a cloying heat, the square-framed sash windows milky with sweat. Helen's throat tightens. She wants to break down and cry, pictures herself resting her forehead on her arm and sobbing uncontrollably, the way she has been taught not to from the start. The potato skin sticks in Helen's throat.

"We can make up a bed for you in the spare room," says Kate, ploughing white, clean lines across her plate with a piece of bread. Helen watches it stain with the remnants of tomato sauce. Why is she so resistant to the idea of moving in with Kate? But of course it isn't Kate so much as Jim. The silent, balding Jim. Whatever does Kate see in him? And then there's the silent, hirsute Ken. Helen ploughs on through her salad, the oak leaf lettuce springing back from her fork, each time she successfully manages to spear it. Of course, there is also the lovely Jane. She bites into a surprise of crunchy capsicum. Except that there is also Jane's "music", which would counteract any healthful programme Helen might consider. She abandons the potato skin. And then, there's Brandy, whose constant yapping drives her insane.

So, another decision has been made. She will not move in with Kate.

"Everything okay?" It is Giuseppe, a charcoal ring of hair framing a polished pate, thick slugs of eyebrow overscoring black pips for eyes, a too-long nose, satisfied lips and low-slung tum. He clasps his stomach with

hands dangling from short arms, rocking back and forth on polished patent shoes.

“You enjoya you meal?” His accent is a delightful mix of remnant Italian with Midland vowels.

“Ah, Giuseppe,” says Kate, leaning back against the chair, ruddy cheeked. “The cannelloni...” and to Helen’s surprise, her sister kisses the tips of her fingers. “Magnificent, as always.”

Giuseppe beams, shifting his head on its rusty hinge towards the newcomer. “And the jacket potato?” he inquires.

“Very crisp,” says Helen. “Lovely salad.”

He nods and sighs.

“Good, good. And dessert, ladies? Coffee and tea?”

“Ooh,” says Kate, spoiling to be tempted.

Giuseppe lowers his voice to a whisper. “May I recommend the steecky dayt pooding?”

“I think I could be persuaded,” says Kate. “What about you, Helen?”

“I might just go for the apple pie with cream.”

“You can’t go awrung wid dat,” he says. “The usual cappuccino for you?”

“Oh, go on then,” says Kate.

“I’ll have peppermint tea,” says Helen.

Giuseppe retreats with a conciliatory nod.

“Now,” says Kate. “We need to discuss Mum.”

Helen’s shoulder blades tighten. Haven’t they already discussed “Mum”? Hasn’t Helen been seeing Vera on a daily basis? Apart from when she felt so ill after the anaesthetic. She can see for herself that their mother is coming along.

“We’re going to have to think about a plan of action for after the hospital.”

“Well, she can come back home,” says Helen. “I’m thinking of taking long service leave.”

Helen’s heart quickens at the thought. Why not? After all, she is owed six months.

Kate proffers the big sister smile.

“It’s not just the stroke,” Kate says. “Mum has been going downhill over the last twelve months.”

“A bit forgetful,” says Helen. “Yes, I’ve noticed on the phone.”

Kate’s eyes flicker, calculating perhaps how to phrase things.

“It’s more than that, Helen. It’s dementia.”

The word ricochets around Helen’s skull like a squash ball. Dementia. Of course, she knows – vascular dementia. Isn’t that what the registrar said?

“But it’s just the very early stages, isn’t it? And it’s only been a month since the stroke. She’s getting over it – you said so yourself.”

“I didn’t exactly say ‘getting over it’, says Kate. “Yes, they’re pleased with her progress. Gaining her speech a little. But she still can’t move her arm or leg. The whole of her left side is affected.”

Helen clenches her jaw. Of course she knows that. But she’s having physiotherapy, isn’t she?

“I can look after her at home,” says Helen.

“Helen,” says Kate and heads begin to turn, blue rinse permed heads, bespectacled, middle aged women are looking at them. Kate swallows, lowers her voice, leans in towards Helen.

“There’s no way Mum is ever going back to live in that house.”

“That house” is where a part of Helen still dwells, even when she’s in Perth. She grew up in “that house” and staying there now feels oddly comforting, despite their mother’s absence.

“It’s not just the house,” says Helen. “It’s the family home. It’s well... it’s all the stuff in it!”

“Stuff!” says Kate and again heads turn. Kate pulls back, her eyes searching the damask linen for the words.

“Mum’s a terrible hoarder. And lately – well, it’s alright for you all the way out there in Australia – but for the rest of us – well me and Roger, we have to deal with it.”

Helen can’t see how Roger and Kate have to “deal with” their mother’s stuff. When it is her, Helen, who has flown all the way over here to clear out the cupboards and drawers. Isn’t she doing this, almost single-handedly? There is little evidence of Kate or Roger having laid a finger on anything.

“How is it a problem?” she asks.

Kate draws breath, her colour rising.

Giuseppe appears with the desserts, mincing past the round posy-decked tables towards theirs with two puddings held theatrically aloft.

“Therea you are,” he says, placing Helen’s dish carefully before her, for which she is grateful. But the way he ladles the sticky date pudding dish onto Kate’s mat, sliding his hand slowly from underneath, like a loving parent fondling a child’s bottom, fuels what Helen is beginning to recognise as jealousy. Yes, that’s the word. Jealousy. And wasn’t Kate always the daddy’s girl Helen so wanted to be? Just because Kate was good at sport and, despite her father’s patient efforts, Helen simply didn’t have what it took.

“Keep your eye on the ball,” Dad would say. And Kate did. Kate had always had her eye to the ball. Always knew how to allow plenty of room for the forward swing, whereas Helen was anxious, rushing up to it, exactly the way Dad said not to. She had no room to manoeuvre and the ball flew past her ear. Above all, she could see Dad’s patience wearing out.

“Roger and I go round there regularly – on a weekly basis – just to help out with meals,” says Kate.

“And is that such a big deal? What would I give to see Mum on a regular basis! And, in any case, aren’t I here now to save you the inconvenience?”

Kate glares at her.

“I just want to look after Mum,” Helen says lamely. “To do my bit. Spend time with her in her twilight years.”

“It’s twilight, alright, for Mum,” says Kate. “And besides, Helen, for heaven’s sake! You aren’t well yourself. You have cancer! How the blazes are you going to look after anyone, when you can’t even look after yourself!”

“Oh, so that’s it, is it?” says Helen. “You think I’m incapable of looking after myself...”

“And I’ll have you know I’ve been onto Mrs. Cox about the cleaning. I can’t believe you told her you’d deal with it yourself. You are so...unrealistic!”

Helen opens her mouth and closes it again, gasping for air.

The heads are no longer turned in their direction. Which is a worry. The heads know that it is a ding-dong argument and they are savouring

every last morsel as they linger over coffee and dessert, storing it all up like squirrels. People know them. And they know the heads. It's very insular here.

Helen spoons half-heartedly at her apple pie, removing the cream to the side. How Kate can eat that thing with all the rage swirling around inside her, Helen can't imagine. But *she* won't grow a tumour, not Kate. Helen glares at her sister attacking the pudding, feels the dark stab in her breast; and the shameful, sticky question of this filthy disease which she does not know how to tackle.

But she won't knock the ball back; oh, no, not Helen. Silence has always been her best defence.

Helen's legs propel her down Victoria Passage, delivering her too soon to the bottom of a flight of steps skirting a whitewashed wall. They lead to a door with a sign announcing Pilates, Acupuncture, Body Balance. She hurries on, feeling her sister's gaze hot on her back, and takes refuge in a quiet snake of the alley by the health shop window. A pyramid of Bronnley soaps and Biostrath bottles register but vaguely on tossing waves of thought.

She has cancer, and is under Dr. Broadbent's care – the same Dr. Broadbent who is overseeing their mother, and who has sent her to the top specialist. And she likes Dr. Griffin, who has done his best to excise the tumour and made such a neat job of her scar. So, when he offers to book her in for more surgery and a further cocktail of treatments, why doesn't she take hold of the opportunity and sign in? Kate is even offering to look after her until she is well again. This, Helen realises, is the way Kate sees it.

She waits for her heart to slow, and then retraces her steps towards the space outside Giuseppe's where she and Kate stood minutes before. Helen stops short, eyeing the concrete stairs, her hand striking cold as she feels her way up the rail towards the door. It opens onto a midnight carpet and long white corridor. To her right is a reception area with an unmanned desk and two pale sofas guarding a table of chrome and glass. Helen sinks into the suede cushions, squeezing her eyes against the tears. An image of Kate's face appears; the deep furrow between her brows suggesting the concern Helen could not decipher earlier.

"Helen Harper?"

A slender man in dark jeans and a crew-necked jumper stands before her. It must be the receptionist.

"I'm afraid Mr. Chan has been called away unexpectedly and I'm filling in for him."

He extends a hand.

"I'm Paul."

Helen blinks and he blurs. She blinks again, almost willing his face to transform into that of the wizened Mr. Chan with the long, fine beard she had expected.

"I left a message on your answer machine," he says, and his hand drops. "I didn't have a mobile number."

Helen stares at the imposter, his wayward hair and light brown eyes.

"I was out. And came straight here," she snaps.

He smiles awkwardly.

"I couldn't find your file," he says. "Is this a first visit?"

"Yes."

He proffers a clipboard, which she doesn't take, so he rests it on the table.

"If you wouldn't mind filling in a few details," he says.

She catches his eye as he straightens; his expression earnest, or is it wary? He walks over to the desk and checks the appointment book. Helen tries to concentrate on her form, which keeps blurring in and out of focus. Kate's finger wags in her peripheral imagination; the arch of her eyebrows; the frown.

"How are you going to look after Mum, when you can't even look after yourself!"

Or words to that effect.

Helen sniffs, the weight of her body sinking deeper into the settee. She pens in tonsillitis under "childhood illnesses", liver cancer under "maternal grandmother". Then, there is her paternal grandfather's sudden heart attack. Her mother's stroke. She writes it down, feeling like a traitor for supplying this too intimate, too recent, raw fact.

Paul comes over to her. This man with the boyish face, even though she gauges him to be early to mid-forties; this man who has usurped the

place of the wise and gracious Mr. Chan. He nods deferentially when she hands over her history, gesturing with it towards the door. She hesitates and he goes on ahead, leading her to a narrow room containing a massage table, two sparse chairs and a desk with a row of brown bottles exuding a strange mix of scents. Something astringent with an edge of sarsaparilla. The room is lit by a weak bulb behind a frosted dish suspended on a long chain from a distant ceiling. There is also a triangle of daylight framed by a dark sweep of curtains.

Helen takes the chair he offers, while he half-sits, half-leans against the massage table, his outstretched legs crossed at the ankles. He wears casual, suede shoes, neatly laced, and appears poised as he studies her details, lingering a fraction too long over the form. She shifts in her chair, aware that the room has gone strangely silent, although it was already silent before. He looks up, and she sees an intelligence behind the pleasant exterior.

“I see you have written breast cancer as the reason for your visit,” he says.

Helen feels faint. Stupid. Unsure whether she is here because of the cancer or the hope – no, the hunch – the conviction – that by entrusting herself to Mr. Chan – that somehow this would be healing. For she realises now the issue is not the cancer; but something deeper that gave rise to it in the first place. She sees the clipboard abandoned on the massage table, his hands placed either side of his hips, lending an awkward shrug to his shoulders as he assesses the situation. She swallows back the tears.

“I – er – yes,” she says.

He speaks slowly, calmly and with some authority.

“There are several ways in which acupuncture can help,” he says. “Are you receiving radiation or chemotherapy?”

“Not yet,” she manages.

“Acupuncture is very effective in mitigating side-effects like nausea and vomiting. It also helps with pain management.”

Nausea. Vomiting. The words echo in her brain. She is aware of tears dampening her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s been an emotional day.”

“Of course,” he says, and is on the chair beside her offering tissues.

She swipes at her cheeks and chin but it is as though a dam had burst and her eyes gush with tears.

“A mistake,” she blurts.

He murmurs something inaudible due to the sobs she can no longer contain.

“Coming here...should have realised.”

“If you don’t feel up to it, we can make another appointment. Mr. Chan will be back next week,” he says.

A wave of emotion rises from the pit of her stomach, unleashing itself with alarming passion.

“It’s good to let it out,” he says.

She gives herself over to the tears, which have assumed a life of their own.

“My sister,” she sniffs. “Over lunch...my sister and I...”

He nods.

“An argument.”

“Oh,” he says.

Her chest shudders.

“In Giuseppe’s.”

“Ah.”

He proffers more tissues.

“Well, if you were going to have an argument,” he says, “Giuseppe’s would be the place.”

She stares, open-mouthed.

“You’d have an argument in Giuseppe’s?”

His eyes are soft; and she catches again that light behind them. An expression she can’t quite place.

“If I met someone for lunch there,” he says. “I might end up throwing something. Probably at Giuseppe.”

Helen weakly reciprocates his smile, then sobs into her hands with renewed vigour.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That was unprofessional of me.”

Her chest heaves in a series of snuffles.

“Un...professional,” she stammers, “is probably what’s needed right now.”

She raids the tissue box again.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” he says.

She nods.

Helen blows her nose and pats at her face with the tissues, aware of him moving about the room; the click of a kettle, the rush of steam, and then the mug on the desk beside her with its meadow scent.

“Green tea,” he says. “With jasmine.”

“Oh,” she says.

“It’s very uplifting. Especially with the jasmine.”

The liquid runs over her tongue, warm and smooth, delicately floral with a subtle aftertaste. Her mind clears. There are no thoughts; simply the relief of empty space.

“I’ve seen you at tai chi, haven’t I?” he says.

She appraises him anew.

“I’ve only been twice,” she says.

“The tai chi will be good for the cancer,” he says. “The deep breathing brings oxygen into the system; and the movement strengthens the nerves.”

“I do feel it’s doing me good,” she says.

“You could also try Chinese herbs,” he says. “Mr. Chan will be able to prescribe a specific formula for you.”

“Will it help with the cancer?”

“There’s a Chinese tradition of using herbs for cancer.”

Helen feels her heart lift. She takes another sip of tea.

“It’s very nice,” she says.

“If you like, I can find a packet for you. There’s also a general formula for cancer, which I could order to tide you over till you see Mr. Chan.”

She looks into his eyes and is drawn into a well of stillness.

“Yes,” she says. “I’d like that.”

“I know he’s a fuckwit, but I still think you should phone.”

The words arrive from half way round the world against a squabble of cockatoos. Helen pictures them dripping from the Norfolk pines in the

pomegranate glow of evening. But the voice is so clear, it is as though her friend gazed with her at the autumn leaf trembling on its twig. Helen opens her mouth for the usual flippant banter, but the laughter dies in her throat.

“You need to tell him, darl,” says Melanie.

“I haven’t spoken to him in months!”

“He’d want to know about the cancer. And you *are* still technically married.”

“Only just,” says Helen.

“At least phone him,” says Melanie.

Helen sucks air through gritted teeth.

“Is he...?”

“Look, he is still with *her*, yes. I can’t see it lasting. I mean, the age discrepancy, for one thing,” says Mel.

“I know how Mark looks to a younger woman,” says Helen. “The father figure – he can be charming when it suits him.”

“It’s all pretty ludicrous,” says Mel in disgust.

Helen rests her head against the wall and closes her eyes.

“Hel, listen. What are you going to do about the cancer?” says Melanie.

She snaps her eyes open and her legs turn to water.

“I...I don’t know,” she says.

“Hel, listen to me.”

Helen’s heart pounds in her ears as she braces for her friend’s advice.

“Don’t let your fear of medical treatment drive you into inaction.”

Helen opens her mouth, but there are no words, no thoughts, just a long, silent scream.

“Hel?”

Helen clings to the phone, absorbing the static between them.

“Are you there?”

“I can’t think straight,” she says.

“Can you paint, then?”

“Not yet. I can’t settle.”

“Perhaps just give it a try,” says Mel. “Or what about some tai chi? That settles you, doesn’t it?”

Under a wedge of roof where the dormer window meets the garage Helen finds a standard lamp with a broken foot, a wireless trailing plaits of brown flex, a waffle iron blighted by mildew, and a tea chest. There is also a Teasmade resembling a chemistry experiment with rubber tubes, Pyrex jug and cream enamel pot. The tea chest is made of rough bark with a foil lining that has preserved its contents surprisingly well. And Helen is glad because she recognises them as distant echoes of her teenage self: *Chinese Brush Painting*, the art prize scored in her final year at school. Third prize; which explains why the book is buried here along with her tentative hopes and small ambition. And now her "O" Level art folder with the painstaking image in black and white of a Geisha with elaborate hair and padded cummerbund.

It is the strangest feeling to see this early interest in oriental art, which developed later during a visit to Hong Kong, where every building and boat, brushstroke and stone was placed with aesthetic precision. She can still see those black cats hanging on the gallery wall; quick, deft marks, red darts for tongues, and eyes that looked through you. The next day she returned, resolved to buy the pair, only to find two blank spots on the wall where they had been. The cats still haunt her, their feline musculature and ebony fur suspended in space, yet insinuating shadow, and pulsing with more life than any European cat she had ever seen on canvas. She wanted those cats but after two decades of looking, still hadn't found them. In her attempts to reproduce them Helen had grasped only that this was an art learned from the cradle. The art of walking, moving, seeing. How gauche she felt striding down Queen's Road, large and ungainly, compared to the whispering shadows of movement looming through morning mist on Victoria Peak. Shadow boxing they called it. Tai chi. How odd it has taken her all this time to rediscover it.

Helen looks out of the window. From this angle, kneeling before the shrine of her old self, she sees only the tips of holly leaves, black and leathery, and the blood-red berries of the winter that is almost upon her. The rest is sky, filled with cloud and a diminutive, lone bird, beating its wings against the wind. Seeing the bird and the sky, she understands something that has hitherto eluded her.

In her Cottesloe apartment among an eclectic assortment of art books is a rogue edition. One of Mark's on Chogyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Master, who once held up a blank sheet of paper with a neat "v" etched in the centre.

"What is this?" he said.

"A bird," someone said.

"A bird flying in the sky," said another.

But no one else saw it as "the sky with a bird in it".

There is no cache of crayons, after all. No trove of paper or pastels, but her mind is becalmed, the restless tossing transmuted into a dark stillness pooled in her belly. Mark is there. Melanie is right; she should phone him.

Helen's hand trembles as she keys in the number she once knew by heart but now has to look up in Mum's address book, under "H" for Helen. There is no mention of Mark. This Helen no longer exists. She replaces the receiver, breaking into a sudden sweat. Why should she phone him? What's it to Mark if she's dying of cancer? She'll try again tonight; he'll be up with the dogs at 6.00.

Helen traces a finger over a curlicue of blond wood decorating what she now realises is a drinks' trolley with bottle-sized circles cut into the ledge where her foot rests. They are half-obsured by directories and out-dated copies of the *Stourbridge Chronicle* and *Black Country Bugle*. She remembers her mother regaling her with the news fresh from a holiday on the continent.

"We bought a drinks' trolley in Padua."

And she went on to describe the charming shop vendor, who dismantled and packed it, plus the crucial detail that clinched the deal:

"...and, what with your dad being in a co-operative, holiday mood...I'm touching it now."

She must have sat in this very spot speaking to Helen, who still lived in Toodyay then.

"It's in the hall, in place of the piano," she said. "It's beautiful."

Perhaps it is; yet it looks out of place here with its marquetry scrolls under polyurethane gloss, its gilt wheels and matching handle. It reminds

Helen of Venice. She closes her eyes and feels again the descent into the underworld that was the refectory on Giudecca Island. The sight of the youth hostel rising out of the misty waters more than compensated for the lumpen companion she had acquired on the Paris train. He came from Kent or London and spoke in trailing sentences punctuated by *"know wo' I mean?"* In memory, the refectory rolls out of the cooking steam like the bowels of a ship in fog, trestle tables and benches looming under opalescent light. Amidst the smell of straw and the sting of cheap wine, she saw a tall man rise and keep on rising, his broad back and the folds of his shirt disappearing into shadow at his waist. She wanted to paint him; the three-quarter face like a gibbous moon, the long nose and eyelashes, casting lines on his cheeks. He rose from a sea of students, of whom he was clearly in charge. That first sighting of Mark is emblazoned on her mind like a Titian portrait.

There are pools of memory. The sight of him in the Piazza San Marco. One of Mark's students had "stolen" his wallet and Mark gave chase. Helen recognised the youth, having made his acquaintance the night before in an attempt to learn more of his teacher.

"Give it to me!" she yelled and, to her surprise, the student dropped it to her in a rugby pass.

Helen sees herself in slow motion, dodging the crowds, the sound of Mark's feet closing in on her, his panting breath.

"Ladrone! Ladrone!"

Did he really think her a thief? She could tell from the laugh in his throat, he was playing the game. But how to explain this in patchy Italian to the Venetian police who stopped in their tracks?

Yet the carabinieri just threw up their arms.

"Bella!" shouted the first.

"Bellissima!" the second.

They kissed their fingers in her direction and she almost stumbled. No one had called her beautiful before.

"Il suo portamonete?" she gasped, proffering the wallet, her back pressed to the wall.

"Ah, parla Italiano, la bella," he said, and his eyes danced with questions.

Mark's fingers closed over the wallet and she released her hold. When he spoke, it was with no trace of an Italian accent.

"The English thief surrenders."

"I thought you were Italian."

"Australian-Italian."

It all seemed so exotic.

Over the next twenty-four hours, the telephone appears to crouch in the stairwell, sleek and black like Cerberus, waiting to snare her on her way to the front door and back. At every moment of the day she must face its inert buttons and predatory ring tone, the accusatory antenna. She begins to wonder if there is such a thing as phone phobia. Helen refuses to call Kate, who should surely be the one to take the initiative after the Giuseppe debacle. As for Mark, she knows this is something he will not do.

Evening comes, the clock chimes ten and still she does not dial Mark's number – or Melanie's. She frets in an agony of indecision, which seems somehow fused with her inertia over the cancer. Why doesn't she bite the bullet and try the shark cartilage? The Tronado machine?

The bell clatters as Helen opens the door. She is greeted by Kaleb who waves cheerily and waggles his eyebrows at her.

"So, you're back," he says.

"I studied the material," she says, draping her coat on the back of the chair, "and had one or two questions."

"Fire away," he says, "it's wise to be well informed."

Kaleb sits with his hands clasped on the desk, elbows splayed to form a triangular space into which Helen concentrates.

"Well, firstly, I'm wondering – would it work to combine the shark cartilage with conventional medicine?"

She looks up.

"I mean, if I *did* decide to go ahead..."

Kaleb arches an eyebrow, but his twin remains impassive.

"Surgery won't have any impact on the shark cartilage," he says, dropping the vagrant brow. "Chemotherapy and radiation will counter any

benefits of the program, however, so, you do need to decide between the cartilage and the medical approach.”

Helen’s heart betrays a flutter of excitement.

“And can I combine your program with other alternative modalities?”

“No need for that,” says Kaleb. “With the nutritional supplements and oxygenating drops, ours is a complete program.”

Helen’s shoulders ease.

“What about...the emotional picture?” she asks.

“Oh,” he says. “You’re thinking of the rollercoaster emotions associated with chemotherapy – the fatigue and vomiting.”

He leans back in his chair.

“Our clients feel well. So, no need to worry on that score.”

“I appreciate that,” she says. “Still, being diagnosed with cancer...well, it’s a brush with death, isn’t it? Things come up.”

“I believe I’m right in thinking that yours is early stage breast cancer?”

“That’s right” she says.

“Non-aggressive?”

She nods, enthusiastic.

“Well, then,” he says. “You’ve no cause to fret. We’ve never had a fatality in your category.”

“I’m still finding it an emotional time,” she says. “And my mother’s in hospital with a stroke.”

“Ah,” he says, raising a finger. “I expect they’ve got her on Warfarin.”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” she says.

He shakes his head, tut-tutting, and wheels himself backwards on his chair, plucking a bottle from the shelf before returning to face her.

“Ginko Biloba,” he says, pointing to the label. “It’s a natural blood-thinner made from the leaves of a Chinese tree. Much better than rat poison.”

“I’m not sure how the doctors would feel about that,” she says. “Or Mum.”

“Personally, I wouldn’t discuss it with the doctors,” he says.

Helen’s neural pathways jam as she considers how they might substitute the one for the other without consulting the doctors.

“Coming back to the emotional picture,” she says. “A friend mentioned the Bach Flower essences. Do you know anything about them?”

“Ah,” says Kaleb, and pulls open a drawer. He produces a thick wad of visiting cards secured by an elastic band, which he removes before fanning them out.

“Carmichael,” he says. “That’s your man.”

He hands her a sky blue card with a rainbow in the corner: “Kevin Carmichael. Naturopath, for Optimal Health”.

“Our clients find Kevin excellent for a general check up, and he specialises in the flower essences.”

“And how long should it take on the shark cartilage? You know, I mean, in order to get well.”

“Three months,” he says. “You’ll be fit as a fiddle in the New Year if you start now.”

“I’d like to do that,” she says.

A blast of cold air grabs at Helen’s shoulders and she turns to see a Pakistani woman in harem pants and matching wine silk shawl partially obscured by a navy coat. Her hair is greying at the temples and when she speaks, there is a flash of gold in her teeth.

“Pi-Tech?” she says in an authoritative voice.

Kaleb rises to his feet.

“Yes, yes, come in,” he says.

The woman makes a regal entrance, spearheading an entourage of family members; a younger woman in flowing turquoise chiffon and a small boy wearing dark trousers, brushed cotton shirt and v-necked pullover. There is also a thin man, a similar age perhaps to the turquoise figure, dressed in a khaki Nehru suit. He follows the party like a shadow to the seats that Kaleb offers at the other end of the counter. Kaleb pings on the desk bell and Greg appears to take his place opposite the party.

“Now, where were we?” says Kaleb, returning his attention to Helen.

“About the shark cartilage,” says Helen, “I’d like to monitor myself whilst on the treatment. Is there a doctor you can recommend who is sympathetic to this approach? Someone who can refer me for tests and check my progress?”

“Best to stick with your own doctor,” he says. “People feel more comfortable with someone they know.”

Helen is just picturing Emily Broadbent’s thin lips and fierce eyes, when the phone rings.

“Hello, Pi-Tech,” says Kaleb.

Helen tunes into the murmuring voices of the new clients, from whom the words; “cancer”, “biopsy” and “shark cartilage” surface amidst the tinkling of bracelets and the flashing of rings. The young boy sits quietly attentive, whilst the thin man who appears to be the patient remains detached, as though the proceedings had nothing to do with him. From her emphatic gestures, Helen surmises that the matriarch in the maroon robes will be the one to decide. Greg meanwhile sits behind a serious array of bottles. He points out one or two details on the pamphlets and Helen gleans that it is a first visit. The matriarch turns to the turquoise woman, who might be her daughter, and together they consult the thin man, who listens with a pinched expression. He shakes his head, which could mean “yes” in their parlance. Helen relaxes into the babbling voices. Perhaps it will be a family decision after all. Greg fetches a couple of paper bags and packs the products into them. The women’s tongues vibrate like the strings of a sitar accompanying the rise and fall of their vocal chords.

“Cartilage products,” says the turquoise woman, her head wobbling in tandem with her tongue.

“That’s right,” says Greg. “Together with the immune boost tonic and the oxygenating drops.”

They are all speaking the same language.

“Sorry about that,” says Kaleb, replacing the receiver. “You were saying?”

But the phone rings again and he spares her an apologetic glance before picking up.

Helen gazes past him through the window to the top of a large chestnut tree, half-denuded of leaves.

“Shark cartilage, yes, yes,” says the Pakistani matriarch. “All the products. Everything.”

A leaf clings to the tree by a thin wrist, its yellowed fingers outstretched against the hammering wind. Didn't she hear on the radio the other day about a woman who turned to meditation as a way of healing the self, refusing all cancer treatment? What does that mean, "the self"? And did the woman find healing, even though she died?

"Sorry about that," says Kaleb.

She throws him an insipid smile.

"You were asking about doctors, weren't you?" says Kaleb, opening the drawer a second time and revisiting his pack of cards. "Ah," he says. "Dr. Fayre. She's very good."

She is aware of the family seated next to her; the sense of unity between them, and of Greg at the till. Money is being exchanged.

"Now, were there any more questions?" says Kaleb.

She bites her lip.

The question is, does she still want to be here?

"I'd like to go ahead," she manages.

The doorbell jangles again and in bursts a man in a tweed hat and overcoat, swinging a briefcase. Kaleb raises an arm in welcome and in a flash is on Helen's side of the counter, where the two men lock in a vigorous handshake, grinning at each other. The new arrival places his briefcase on the countertop and snaps open the brass clasps.

"Excuse me a minute," says Kaleb, and turns to Helen.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"I'd like to start on the program," she says.

"Why not pop back after you've seen Carmichael?" he says. "It won't take a tick to make up the products."

Kaleb returns to the suitcase, eyes lit with wonder like a child on Christmas morning.

Products! she thinks. That's all they think about! And Kaleb has no more understanding than Dr. Griffin when it comes to feelings. She is not a machine to be fixed!

Helen retrieves her coat, bracing for the chill. Then she turns, almost tangling with the Pakistani family, who hold the door open for her, so that she

exits empty-handed. She descends the steps in a daze, the animated voices behind her competing with the clink of bottles and the rustle of paper bags.

“I know it sounds silly, but...I just don’t know if I still want to be here,” says Helen.

“Of course you don’t fuckin’ want to be there,” says Mel. “You need to come home and deal with it here like I’ve been saying.”

Helen straightens up. She pictures the pair at *Van’s* in Napoleon Street ordering bagels and coffee against the hubbub of voices and the throb of music on the warm Cottesloe air.

“That’s not what I meant,” she says. “But you’re right, I always feel so much more alive in Perth.”

“It’s that bloody Mark, isn’t it?” says Mel. “Not wanting to face him on campus with friggin’ Jessica.”

Helen’s shoulders creep towards her ears.

“I can’t face work any more,” she says.

“You wouldn’t be at work,” says Melanie. “You’d be on sick leave.”

Helen catches sight of her mother’s face through the open door of the lounge, smiling from a silver frame on the mantelpiece.

“I’ve...put in for long service leave,” she says.

“Good idea,” says Mel. “That way you’ll have heaps of time to rest up and get well.”

“Mel, I’m not ready to come back yet. I need to sort myself out first.”

Helen hears a motorbike backfiring down Marine Parade outside their apartment block.

“You’re getting to sound like some of those New Age wankers,” says Mel. “Which reminds me – did you get onto the Bach Flower essences?”

“I’m seeing someone this afternoon.”

“Good,” says Melanie. “It’ll help you through some of the confusion. I mean, God, anyone would be in a tizzy – you’ve got cancer. You can’t be expected to think straight.”

Mr. Carmichael’s body remains firmly aligned to his desk as he spares Helen a glance.

“What can I do for you?” he asks.

She detects a slight Australian accent.

“I’ve had a few health issues,” she begins.

He regards her with a bored expression.

“What specifically?”

“I just don’t feel well,” she says. “I feel drugged all the time, and it’s over a fortnight since the anaesthetic.”

“What anaesthetic?”

“I had a lumpectomy.”

“Benign or malignant?”

“Benign. I mean, malignant.”

He closes his eyes and inhales.

“I’m not a cancer specialist.”

“I was recommended to you by Kaleb from Pi-Tech,” she says. “He said you’ve trained in the Bach Flower remedies.”

Mr. Carmichael reaches for a sheet of paper, addressing it with a pen as he speaks.

“What sort of emotions have you been experiencing?”

Tears smart behind her eyes, sending a confusion of messages through her brain. She opens and closes her mouth. Mr. Carmichael cranes his neck in her direction.

“Fear of death?” he suggests.

Helen’s heart falls out of rhythm.

“Perhaps the opposite,” she says.

He puts down his pen.

“Fear of...life?” she replies.

He sighs, then sends his chair sliding back on its wheels as he gets up and strides over to the opposite corner of the room. Helen remains glued to her seat. He fiddles with what looks like a television screen and then pulls open a drawer into which he speaks.

“Come over here, will you?”

She sits down on the chair next to his, both of them facing the screen. It is blank. Mr. Carmichael (call me Kevin), has produced a small weapon, which he now rests on a clean tissue.

“Give me your middle finger,” he commands and she tentatively offers her right hand.

He wipes the finger with a piece of cotton wool dipped in something and then drives the short, stubby needle into her fingertip.

“Ouch!” She says, jumping.

“It can be a bit sharp,” he says. “It doesn’t bother most people.”

“I wasn’t expecting it,” she says and he looks at her as if to say, what did you think I was going to do with it? She feels stupid.

Without ceremony, he grabs her bloodied finger and presses it onto a glass slide, which he then places carefully beneath a microscope.

The screen now springs to life, revealing iridescent slugs that wriggle against the grey backdrop of the screen. An entire galaxy of strange constellations sparkles before her. Mr. Carmichael does something to the microscope and the picture changes.

“You see that?” he says, pointing.

A cluster of grapes has appeared amidst globes of other fruit, hanging in space.

“You’re low in iron,” he observes.

Helen’s spirits lift. It’s exciting to see her own blood, alive with patterns and movement.

“How can you tell?” she says.

He explains about the role of iron in aiding the clustering effect. The grapes in her blood drift and miss, colliding here and there, but resisting the image of ripe bunches hanging heavy on the vine.

“That’s exactly how I feel,” she says, “sort of occasionally connected but vagued out a lot of the time.”

“You’ve been fighting a virus,” he says, twisting a knob on the microscope.

“I do feel as though I’ve been struggling with something,” she says.

They are back to the original picture now, the one with the constellations shimmering like an outback sky.

“See that?”

Helen gazes at the amoeboid shapes gliding amongst the stars.

“Those are white blood corpuscles,” he says. “Your body has called them into play to fight the virus. See?”

She nods, impressed.

“An unwanted invasion,” he says, and turning to her, adds, “I expect you’re not good with boundaries.”

“I’m very good at those!” she says indignantly.

“I don’t mean erecting fences,” he says, pleasantly. “I mean knowing when to say ‘no’.”

“If you’re looking for boundaries,” she says, “I’d appreciate it if you’d exercise more of a professional attitude and keep your personal comments to yourself.”

But Mr. Carmichael has returned to his microscope.

“The white corpuscles are coping with the infection,” he says. “But your immune system’s down. I’ll give you something to boost it.”

The screen blurs, and then refocuses.

“Ah,” he says and points. “There’s your problem.”

She sees only random patterns.

“Those lines,” he says.

An intricate meshwork of filaments reveals itself. She’s amazed she didn’t spot it before. Delicate webs of web but no wool ray out, some like fans; all haphazard, yet beautiful in their randomness.

“That’s scar tissue,” he says. “On the liver.”

Helen feels a mixture of shock and relief. No wonder she had felt so unwell all these years.

“You’ve had hepatitis,” he says and switches off the screen.

“When I was fourteen,” she replies. “I’ve never felt well since.”

Helen thinks about the persistent jaundice and bloating. About the weight that fell on her after the hepatic fever; that sense of something sitting on her, like an invisible giant. She had often thought that if only she could shake this demon, her mind would clear, her body lighten up. She might even become the person she thought she was underneath. Yet medical tests had revealed no apparent problem. Why had she not pursued her conviction that something was amiss? Perhaps because of her fear that she might be a hypochondriac.

“*We all have a cross to bear,*” her gran would say, which is a more likely explanation.

They move back to Mr. Carmichael’s desk, his body positioned once more at a 150 degree angle. Her chair is placed flush against the wall and she has no option but to face the three-quarters of him on offer. To the left of his balding head, is a four year-old’s drawing of a purple stick figure with a half moon grin. It has clusters of crayon indicating hair and she sees that it matches the blond frizz in the photo of the Pear’s Soap child that has the same colouring as Mr. Carmichael. Underneath the picture are the words, “I luv you dady.”

She’s beginning to think she might get to like him, after all.

“What’s your libido like?”

“I beg your pardon?” she says.

“Your libido. How is it?”

Helen flushes. What’s it got to do with him?

“Your problem is the liver; it is a major organ and affects many vital functions, including the hormones.

“I see,” she says. “I do have a lot of trouble with my cycle.”

He looks at her now with interest; Helen thinks, almost with respect.

“Were you a precocious child?”

“Oh, give over!” she says.

“So, how did you get hepatitis?”

He is still looking at her in that quizzical way.

“I just seemed vulnerable to infection,” she says. “No one else in the family got it.” Helen squirms under his gaze. “I had tonsillitis all the time as a child,” she adds, defensively now. “And had my tonsils out – like everyone did then. But I haemorrhaged badly and nearly died afterwards. Maybe – without the protection of tonsils – you know, perhaps my liver was at risk...”

It doesn’t sound convincing and she glances sideways at the desk, where a second photograph of the young girl looks up at her shyly. Next to her is a boy, perhaps a couple of years older, with straight brown hair and serious eyes. There are other family shots too, but no sign of the mother.

“You seem like the type of frigid individual who *would* have problems with the liver,” he says.

Helen feels her colour rise.

"I'll thank you to keep your personal remarks to yourself!"

"Health is a very intimate thing," he says. "You can tell a lot about a person from their health."

"I'm not your ex-wife!" she snaps.

"And I'm not your father," he replies.

They regard each other fiercely, neither of them giving ground. Helen begins to detect a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"One thing I like about Australians is their straight talking," she says.

"Ah, you picked up on the accent," he says.

"I live in Perth," she says, "but grew up here. Since becoming embroiled in the family dynamics, I think I'm reverting to an earlier version of myself. It's bad for my health."

"If I could develop a prophylactic against family dynamics," he says drily, "I'd be a millionaire."

Helen smiles, despite herself.

"But then, wouldn't life be boring?" he says.

He proceeds to draw liver diagrams. How come every man she consults resorts to the drawing board? He busies himself with coloured pencils and she takes in the blond hairs on the back of his hand. She thinks of Dr. Griffin and his fried egg sketch of a breast. Her breast with the incompletely excised cancer, the only mark on the blank face of a clock. Six o' clock. Evening. Almost the exact same time it is now, only later. Time is running out.

"The liver is a major organ," he says. "Yours lets the toxins back into your system."

He scribbles purple arrows targeting the gut.

"Typical cancer picture," he continues, matter-of-fact. "Suppressed anger. That's what's showing up in your responses. And your liver too. Some Bach remedies will help, plus a good liver detox."

He gets up and peruses his shelves, where a regiment of bottles stand in pleasing order.

"This is a liver detox product," he says, returning with an armful of supplies. He slaps it down in front of her and she leans forward to inspect it.

“One tablet three times a day before meals.”

He produces yet another bottle.

“This will also help the liver – twice a day.”

“Before meals?”

“Doesn’t make any difference.”

He goes on; this one to boost the immune system, this one for the hormones, that one to help digestion. Iron tablets. She feels bamboozled. It must show, because he says:

“Don’t worry, I’m writing it all down.”

But she does worry – she worries about the cost. Yet it has to be done. Something has to be done if she wants more out of her days than this half-baked living death. It seems fitting that there is a price, even if it is only money.

“That will be £120. 85, plus the consult at £60. Make it £180,” he says, handing her a bill “See you in a month.”

“Should I start to feel better soon?” she asks.

“You’ll feel a lot worse at first,” he says. “The liver will need to detox for a time.”

The handles of the plastic bag cut into Helen’s fingers, but she is reluctant to switch to the other hand for fear of stressing her left side. She should slow down, yet hurtles on regardless towards the distant speck of her mother’s car. Dumping the bag in the front passenger seat, she turns on the ignition, staring at the dark slab which any minute now will become a digital clock. Six-twenty! She turns the key again, but after straining for a few seconds, it chokes and dies. Helen’s chest tightens, sending pins and needles into her toes and fingers.

It’s okay, she tells herself. Wait and try again. But the Worcester Road will be busy at this time of night. How could she have got so caught up with Mr. Carmichael? How could a half hour appointment mushroom into almost an hour? Helen closes her eyes, inhaling in an attempt to locate the chi and banish the rising panic. What is this all about? It’s only tai chi. If she drives there directly, she will be on time. But these brief moments when her efforts to harmonise body and breath outweigh all other concerns; this is the

highlight of her week. She tries a third time, and finally the engine coughs into life. But her hands tremble as she reaches for the gears; she is not familiar with this part of town.

On impulse, Helen does a u-turn, emerging triumphant opposite the gates of the Mary Stevens Park near the *Plough and Harrow*. The indicator blinks and flashes, blinks and flashes, but the cars speed by, one after another. She edges forwards, smiling hopefully into the windscreen of a white Toyota. The woman accelerates aggressively before braking behind a four-wheel drive.

To her right is a snake of double white lights all the way down the Worcester Road. She looks to her left, where a bright red trail climbs up the hill and disappears into the sky. Helen is distracted by a sudden flicker. Someone has stopped to let her in. She flashes in response and lurches into the traffic, joining the slow crawl towards the crossroads. Helen had hoped to have a bite to eat before tai chi, but there is no question of that now. There was no question of it by the time she left the naturopath's. There is a sinking feeling in her stomach, which could be hunger or nerves. Probably both.

A trail of brake lights flares and subsides, rippling down the hill towards her. She is part of a chain slowly crawling somewhere; it could be anywhere. Helen fiddles with the radio, but finds nothing but news programs at this time of evening. The radio screeches and squeals as she manipulates the orange marker, scrambling the voices from different stations into some strange sort of bird language. Finally, there is music, but it is the usual four-beat, up-beat jangle of sounds she can't stomach right now. She eases the handbrake and lets out the clutch, inching towards the foot of the hill, then pulls on the brake again. The movement bothers the tender place around her breast and underarm. She pictures the tiny cancer seed inside the tissues, more than one no doubt, massing and releasing, following blue tributaries; the blood veins that will carry them to the lagoon of her armpit, where they will swim through the rest of her body, targeting the liver she and Mr. Carmichael hope to assuage and heal.

And she is exacerbating the situation by straining with her left hand on the radio tuner, desperately trying to find some music that will settle her down. An orchestral swell crackles hopefully, glimmers and fades. She

releases the handbrake again and is now on the hill itself; the traffic lights must have changed and there is movement. She breathes in, not the full, easy breath that Mr. Chan has taught her, just a nervous gulp, clutching at air. But she has found what she wanted; a violin concerto, marred only by the occasional hiccup of static. Helen eyes the brow of the hill; it is a long way off.

The violins rise and rise, taking her nerves with them before crashing dramatically. It is less calming than she had hoped. Why can't she just give up on the idea of tai chi? Go home and do something sensible, like eat? She is hungry, after all. Light headed. Yet, the panic persists, exacerbated by a sense of helplessness. She has been here before, sitting in the back seat of the old Ford, her mother next to her, Dad at the wheel. Helen could feel the tension mounting in her mother, the jaw clenched tight under her head scarf, see her mother's eyes blinking repeatedly, which they always did when she was agitated or brewing something to say. Mum wore the brass buttoned navy jacket, which filled and collapsed with her breath.

"We'll be late for Helen's exam!" she said.

Mum stared straight ahead, blinking furiously, her lips forming invisible words as Dad ignored her.

Helen's arms were a mass of goose bumps. She had on her black leotard and pale pink tights. She could have put on her ballet shoes if it would have saved time, but they were new and she didn't want to dirty them on the pavement when they got there. If they ever did get there.

"We were waiting for you," said Mum. *"I said – no later than 10.00!"*

But Dad wasn't listening; he was messing with the knob on the radio. Helen could see his left shoulder inching towards it, his neck and ear extending as low as possible without releasing his grip on the steering wheel. His eyes were mostly on the traffic ahead which was far more congested than Helen had hoped. Than perhaps her father had bargained for. It was then that the veins in her temples began to tighten in tandem with the rush of static issuing from the radio as the vertical red line ran over a million foreign tongues; breathless squiggles of sound from distant planets. Finally, her dad froze, then straightened up. He had found something and Helen knew it would either be jazz or sport.

Ooh, wasn't that a lovely shot? I think it's going for the boundary. Yes. That'll be a four.

A light patter of applause punctuated Helen's nerves.

"There must be some other route we can try!"

Helen didn't like that gravelly tone to her mother's voice.

"Give me the map book!" said Dad, his voice now equally terse.

"Here," said Mum. *"See if you can find a side road where we can turn off."*

There was silence from the radio, except for an intake of breath. Helen was sure it wasn't hers, as she was having difficulty breathing at all.

Dad stretched his arm through the crack between the front seats, waiting for the book to be placed in his hand. Mum jabbed it at him and it fell to the floor. Helen reached for it, but her mother got there first.

"Look what you're doing!" she said.

"I'm keeping my eyes on the road," said Dad with exaggerated patience.

"Well, there's no need," said Mum. *"We're not moving!"*

A light drizzle began to fall and Dad switched on the windscreen wipers, whose squeak set Helen's teeth on edge. She could see the car clock ticking away red minutes. There were only ten more to go before 11 o'clock. Even Helen at age nine knew it took more than ten minutes to get to Worcester.

The sound of kettle drums interrupts Helen's reverie. She is not heading for a ballet exam, just a tai chi class, and it's okay to be late. She is halfway up the hill now. She'll decide what to do when she gets to Old Swinford. She inhales but still her lungs clutch at stale air, afraid to let go.

Helen remembers a tree-lined street on a grey day. The parked car with her dad at the wheel, still listening to the cricket, despite the fact that rain had stopped play. She remembers her mother's hand on her back, urging her over the road, and the calm stately woman who led Helen from her mother to the exam hall, where all the other girls stood waiting in silence. She remembers the questions she could not hear; the theory she had swatted over but could no longer recall. The tears of helplessness lodged in her lungs.

By the time Helen arrives at the Leisure Centre, she feels strangely calm. The clock behind the reception desk confirms 7.25; she is almost half an hour late. Yes, she is hungry and should have had dinner, but she can eat later. All she can think of is Mr. Chan; his liquid movements and aura of peace. She mounts the steps and pushes her way through the double doors to the Aquamarine Bar and Lounge, where a pleasant murmur issues from a casually-clad scattering of clientele. She marches purposefully to the doors at the far end and emerges outside the tai chi room, where she peers in through the round portal. But it is not Mr. Chan at the head of the class. It is a much younger figure, gesturing beyond the track-suited shapes blocking her vision. Of course, Mr. Chan is in China. How could she forget that? Helen hesitates, pulls back. *You have come all this way*, she tells herself. *You are here now*, and she slips in quietly to take her place at the back of the room, gathering herself behind closed eyes.

The lean figure bends and sways with an ease that settles her. She lowers her gaze, mirroring the shadow-sense of his movements as she lifts her arm, the left underarm and breast still tight. What of those cancerous seedlings now? Dropping her breath into her belly, she pictures light flowing through her system, oxygen. That's the key. Helen shifts her weight to the right, sweeping her arms floorwards in a graceful arc, attention on the tan tien, the central point between belly button and pubic bone, seat of energy and power. Her breath slows, harmonising with the movement as the sequence takes over and her worries subside. With each gesture she is aware of a magnetic pulse ebbing and flowing from the teacher. This time she looks. It is Paul.

CHAPTER 4

Helen manoeuvres the hot water bottle onto her stomach, and its faint warmth seeps through to her. She feels bloated; fogbound by nightmares she can't quite shake; the image of a pumice stone, allowing the toxins back into her blood stream. Her brain is wrapped in spider webs, her tongue a parched lizard. Yet, she has only been on the liver tablets for a couple of days.

Familiar nick-knacks form in the alcove opposite; a china milkmaid in a sky-blue frock and flaxen plaits, an olive goblet her mother called the custard cup, a paisley dish. She knows these things by heart, imbuing them with a constancy she does not actually feel. In truth, without the blush of memory, she can see only blurred shapes in the pre-dawn light. Her mind drifts towards yesterday's phone conversation.

"We're all set for the house blitz on Sunday," Kate had said. "Roger's coming and Jane. Have you ordered the skip?"

Yes, Helen had ordered the skip. And of course she appreciated Kate organising everyone. There was no apology. No mention of their recent contretemps over lunch. Kate's voice was brusque and businesslike, making Helen doubt the entire Giuseppe debacle, and even her existence in Perth, which took on the surreal sense of some other life in a parallel universe. She props herself against the pillows to sip at a glass of water. What is that square shape occupying her old desk?

"It's an old work computer," Roger had said.

Kevin Carmichael had requested a daily record of her feelings, as well as symptoms, and it occurs to Helen that it might be easier on the computer.

A health journal, Kevin called it.

Helen said she didn't keep a journal. Mr. Carmichael said to drink lots of water and Helen can feel her head easing sufficiently to allow movement. She wanders over to the computer and switches it on, purely for the novelty. As she waits for it to fire up, her eyes fall on the clay figurine balanced on the cable, which Roger must have used as a paperweight. A spark of promise flashes over the black screen and then a wallpaper sky appears. Her spirits

lift. Perhaps it *would* help if she tried to nail what it is she's feeling. But where to begin?

The Chinese ancient is sitting on my internet connection, she writes. Which might explain the blizzard in my brain. I found him in the Oxfam Shop in High Street, holding a terracotta serpent. Having discovered I was born in the year of the snake, it seemed too much of a coincidence.

The keyboard clatter induces another headache and she casts around for a pen. It is not the slipperiness of biro or leaden loops of pencil she is after though, but the thickness of a brush with its firm bristles dabbing colour on space. Helen pauses, aware of the vague patch in her forehead.

I think I might be hungry, she types.

But the thought of organising breakfast overwhelms her.

Breakfast. The message is getting through, but the prospect of descending the stairs to make the complicated mix of grains, seeds and fruit weighs on her. If only there were someone to help. Perhaps she will lie down again. But the minute she does, she feels guilty. The feeling takes her back to primary school, where all natural instincts were scotched and pain was encouraged. She is not so sure this is useful anymore.

Helen sees the raised veins on the back of her hand as she reaches for another glass of water. Behind closed eyes, another hand of a similar age is reaching for a metal spoon. It has a swan-slender neck with an inverted arrow at its throat, announcing the generous bowl of the spoon itself, yellowed in patches where the silver has worn off. For a fleeting moment, she sees it as an image of her own throat.

Helen can see the spoon next to her on the dinner table at school. It is her neighbour's spoon; the boy with the ginger hair and bulbous knees. From her position near the end, Helen can see up Miss Nugent's nose. This is not difficult; it is an up-turned nose with a rhino point. Miss Nugent has dark eyes and lines underneath her chin, which run up her cheeks to the retrousse nose. Helen can see the lines operating her mouth as it snaps open and shut like Pinocchio.

"Stop tawkang!" she says.

Helen knows in the moment before Miss Nugent does it that the woman is about to be violent. She does not expect violence but understands

Miss Nugent's need to assert authority. Someone has been talking, murmuring over the clatter of knives and forks. Miss Nugent sweeps up the spoon and bangs it on the table. Helen can see that the slender neck will bend, is already bending. Miss Nugent beats her metal weapon over and over. It echoes through the dining hall.

"Stop taw kang!"

The bulb of the spoon hangs limp at the end of its broken neck.

Helen is aware of how ridiculous this makes the teacher look, yet no one laughs. Because there is the horror of the spoon, damaged now beyond repair. Later, when Miss Skelding is on duty, she berates the children about the matter of bent spoons. The children remain silent. Miss Skelding will find out who has been bending them and *woe betide!*

This is what Helen learned at school.

But now she must unlearn. She can see what it's doing to her liver to be incensed and, at the same time, silent. What it must have done to her tonsils not to speak out. Didn't her dad have trouble with his tonsils when he was young?

"We're having her tonsils out," she had overheard her mother say to Gran. Helen knew from her self-satisfied expression what Gran thought about this, but was too busy processing the news about the tonsils to know which to be upset about most. Gran did not think very highly of Helen, and it was perhaps at this moment that she realised that. Helen was always sickly and performed only averagely at school. She was always ill and would not make the "fine, big woman" Gran favoured. Helen was David's daughter and, David being a disappointment, was unlikely to produce offspring that were any better. And besides David had married Vera, who wasn't a fine, big woman either and, moreover, came from Birmingham. All this Helen knew at this moment but she could not access the pain of it. For one thing, there was no point in upsetting the constancy of things. Her very Helenness depended on the stability of all the furniture staying exactly where it had always been – the Miss Nugents and all the other teachers angry in their navy polka-dot dresses and sensible lace-up shoes.

This news of the tonsils coming out was a shock. She overheard several conversations – to Mrs. Blunt, the cleaner, who took the news in

respectfully – and other selected friends of her mother’s. Helen felt it was a shameful thing, since everyone else in the family was allowed to keep theirs. But she was removed from feeling the shock because it sounded as though they were talking of someone else and did not refer to her directly until the eve of the operation. Helen was told she would eat ice-cream afterwards; that going to hospital was special, but she didn’t like the word “hospital”, which reminded her of “spittle”, and hence Miss Skelding’s voice.

Helen opens her eyes. The sun has struggled to the level of the pear trees, where it shines weakly through a pall of cloud. She must have dozed off. She eases herself from the bed, switches off the computer screen which has gone onto snooze mode, and puts on her dressing gown. The worst thing about the fogginess, the aches and pains is the confusion they bring and the anxiety; that familiar childhood wallpaper.

She will just take it step by step; ease her way down the stairs. She hangs onto the white rail, the sheen of the paintwork worn by all the years of hands, mostly her mother’s, holding on. As a child, she would jump and skip, touching the rail only lightly once or twice. The hall floor feels solid beneath her feet. Something about the time it takes her to do the simplest things now that she’s ill makes her oddly grateful. Grateful for the stair rail, the herringbone floor with its intricate lengths of wood making the pattern that sustained them all these years. Helen watches oats and sunflower seeds float on a wave of almond milk.

She takes another liver tablet. “Best before meals,” it says on the bottle. She savours the nutty flavour of muesli, studying the contents of her bowl as though reading the tealeaves. Underneath all this anxiety and turmoil, the tears and helplessness, is anger. It is this that she fears as much as Miss Nugent’s battered spoon.

“Natural burials,” says Roger. “Why would Mum bother to cut out something on natural burials?”

“Who knows,” says Helen. “Same reason she keeps all these 60s fashion articles, I suppose.”

Jane springs to her feet and studies the fashion pictures.

“What do they mean, ‘natural burials’?” she asks.

“Good question,” says Roger.

“They’re, you know,” says Kate. “Burials that are, well...natural.”

“Yea, like what?” says Jane, hair flopped over her face, thumbs and fingers punching out a text message.

“Something green,” says her mother. “Good for the environment.”

Roger pushes his spectacles back up his nose, studying the extract.

“Sounds very interesting,” he says. “This company’s been going since 1961 and offers a range of options.”

They all look at him with interest.

“Well,” says Roger, “there are shrouds to choose from.”

“What’s a shroud?” asks Jane.

“You know!” says Kate, “you did a project on the Turin shroud in form one.”

“That was ages ago,” says Jane. “I don’t remember that!”

“It’s a sort of sack,” says Helen

“Ugh!” says Jane, “like a body bag, you mean?”

“Well, I’m sure they’d be very respectable sacks and, get this,” says Roger, “you can choose a cardboard coffin to go with them.”

“It sounds ridiculous,” says Kate. “I can’t imagine Mum entertaining such an idea.”

“Ooh, I don’t know,” says Roger, “she was always very environmentally conscious.”

“Was she?” says Jane.

“Well; she liked gardening,” he elaborates.

“And, of course there was all that compost,” says Kate.”

“The entire contents of Mum’s fridge were a bit bordering on compost,” says Roger.

“Cup of tea anyone?” shouts Kate, who has given up on the conversation and marched through to the kitchen.

“Yes, please,” says Roger.

“I suppose you’d like a herbal?”

This remark is addressed to Helen.

“Lemon and ginger, thanks.”

Roger tosses the cutting onto the rubbish pile. Jane retrieves it and sits on the floor to study it.

“What about these?” says Helen. “Letters dating back to the 1970s.”

“Oh, chuck ‘em, I’d say,” says Roger.

“This is amazing,” says Jane. “You can get recycled coffins.”

“Let’s ‘ave a butchers,” says Roger, “I missed that.”

“Yea, you put the cardboard coffin inside and then...oh, no, it’s too gross...you read it.”

Roger frowns through his spectacles, perched on the end of his nose.

“Very practical,” he says. “Then you whip the body out of the cardboard box and use the coffin for somebody else.”

“Why would Granny have cut something like that out of the newspaper?” asks Jane.

Roger rolls his eyes.

“A passing phase,” he says and moves onto the letters. “Half these people are dead by now,” he observes. “Here’s one from Uncle Noah – I never thought he wrote letters. Ooh, and look, there’s some from you, Hel.”

“Well, I’m not dead – yet!” she says.

“Do you think Granny was interested in this for Grandpa?”

“Interested in what?” says Kate.

“Natural burials, dur!”

“Don’t ‘dur’ me!” says Kate indignantly

“It says here there are hemp coffins. Well, your Grandpa liked a bit of a smoke, he might have got off on one of those,” says Roger.

“Perhaps we should ask Mum if she’s genuinely interested in this type of funeral,” says Helen.

“Granny’s not going to die!” says Jane. “She’s just had a stroke, that’s all.”

“No, but we could ask if that’s what she has in mind, ultimately. After all, Dad wanted to donate his body to science,” says Helen.

“Except that they didn’t want it in the end,” says Roger.

“Maybe Mum was thinking that if Dad’s body went to science and there was no grave, then hers could be feeding the roses. You know how she loved roses. Well, still does,” says Helen, catching Roger’s eye.

“That makes sense,” says Roger. “Apparently it is better for the environment. It says a natural burial takes place in a shallow grave. There are more microbes there than six feet under.”

“Sugar, anyone?” says Kate, “although I expect you’d prefer honey,” she says to Helen.

“Just the lemon and ginger, thanks,” says Helen.

“Anyway,” says Jane, her face lighting up with the glow of an incoming message. “I think Auntie Helen’s right; we should ask Granny. See what she’d prefer.”

“This whole conversation is absurd,” says Kate. “Clearly Mum would want to be buried somewhere respectable.”

“Like where?” says Jane.

“Next to your grandpa. In Saint Mary’s!”

“Well, that’s quite enough of that,” says Roger, tipping the lot into a cardboard box. “Who’d like to help with the pantry?”

“I will,” says Jane.

“I’ll just pop upstairs and have another go at the loft,” says Helen.

Kate frowns into her latex gloves, easing them over her fingers as she makes for the kitchen.

From the loft window, Helen has a bird’s eye view of the garden with its irregular swathe of lawn and the path Dad laid shortly after they moved here. She remembers her excitement at the term “crazy paving” and the idea you could use any shape or size in the most haphazard ways to make a path. Most of all, she remembers helping. It was one of those rare moments when her father’s clear focus and energy fused with her own more diffuse absorption. This gave her a sense of something larger, if somewhat elusive, guiding her towards the oddest shapes that somehow placed themselves in the spaces as required.

Helen turns to the desk, now a mess of leaflets on alternative health practices, including the Tronado machine. Perhaps at heart she is no tidier than her mother. She studies Dr. Crouch’s notes: “When the control mechanism fails or breaks down, cancer results, arising from the uncontrolled

cell becoming autonomous. A normal cell fulfils its normal function in its correct place in the body.”

Was Helen fulfilling *her* normal function in the world? The family?

The leaflet continues with some rigmarole about the left and right breast, the suppressed feminine and masculine, and a suggestion, if Helen reads this correctly, that she herself might be damaged, if not yet dead. She sighs. Is this another inference to breast cancer sufferers as resentful, repressed and over-nurturing? She lets it fall and picks out another at random. On the reverse side is a feature on sound therapy. She toys with it, if only for the perverse satisfaction of deriding its jargon and sci-fi claims. But just as she is about to consign it to the rubbish pile, she is arrested by the final paragraph: “When a missing frequency in a person’s voice is played back to them, the effect can be powerfully healing.” The article speaks about the beauty of the individual’s response system in the brain being activated to take care of the body’s healing. It mentions cats, and their ability to heal themselves by purring, which reminds Helen of her mother’s fondness for cats. She pictures Sheba; the way she would leap onto your lap, a wave of ebony fur clawing at your thighs, her eyes deep slits of contentment as she settled into a deep and sensuous purr. Stroking Sheba, Helen would feel herself surrender to the vibration rippling through her hip bones and spine until she felt in touch with an inner knowing. It was generally Mum’s lap that the cat inhabited. Since Sheba died, Mum has definitely gone downhill.

But what is Helen thinking? All this reading of quack alternatives is affecting her sanity; preying on her vulnerability. That’s what these complementary therapists do, she thinks; they’re just creating a market like everyone else, including the drug companies. And when you’re ill, you’ll clutch at any straw. It’s all very depressing.

In a corner under the window between desk and bookshelf a roll of art paper lies coiled in Ryman’s packaging. Next to it is a box of poster paints still unbroached. Helen’s breast scar tightens and a bitter taste gathers in her throat. She turns away, addressing herself to the lesser evil of Vera’s desk, but is aware of the silenced muses and their accusatory eyes. She peers inside the dark interior of the desk, trying to intuit her mother’s original intention. Unless, of course, there was no intention and this is just what has

happened to Vera's mind. There are letters stuffed behind blank pads of writing paper, shopping lists mixed in with unused envelopes, scraps of writing, ledgers and vanilla folders. Everything is everywhere. There is even another lipstick. Why Vera lived in a perpetual state of siege, Helen couldn't imagine. Nor why she kept emergency supplies of everything, including the ten lipsticks Helen had unearthed to date, all in the same shade of "tango" and all purchased from Boots the chemist. Helen is going to have to admit that Kate was right about the dementia.

The church bells rise and fall in drifts on the air as Helen works her way back through the body of the desk, exhuming samples of Vera's handwriting, changing through the ages. Towards the back of the bottom shelf, her hands alight on a letter addressed to Vera at the flat in Pedmore where she and Dave began their married life. The post mark reads 1952. And yet it is addressed to Miss Shaw. The envelope is yellowed with age, the penmanship a pale river now. Inside, the letter is equally faded, but still legible.

Dear Miss Shaw,

Thank you for letting me read your short story: "Still Life". I like it very much and gladly offer a few comments.

- 1. It is out of the common, not modelled on familiar and conventional types of the short story, but refreshingly original, both in theme and in treatment.*
- 2. The characters are (unavoidably) hastily sketched, yet vividly portrayed. The use of French phraseology lends authenticity, whilst the temptation to overdo the technique has been successfully resisted.*
- 3. You have been guided aright in making the leading character the one who has the least to say and is already dead. The fiancé, Julien, does not*

appear until the middle of the story, and then only as a memory. But he interprets all that has gone before and dominates all that comes after.

Helen turns to the next page, but it appears to be missing, and she is left with the concluding comments on page three:

7. *There is a touch almost of magic in the skill with which you conclude the story. The parents of the deceased and Sarah, bride-to be pose for the final picture. Neither Sarah nor the parents allude to the absent fiancé and son. Yet he is there, uppermost in the minds of all three characters – and in that of the reader also.*

8. *The story may not make an immediate popular appeal; but I judge that it will commend itself to persons of discriminating literary taste and judgment. You must not be surprised, therefore, if you meet with some disappointment in finding a publisher for it. But you have a decided gift for authorship, and must diligently cultivate this, even if, at first, you are discouraged by repeated rebuffs and lack of recognition.*

Yours sincerely,

R. H. Coats.

Helen searches the envelope for the missing page, but it is not there. She glances at the bookshelves. Where is the story now? Was it ever published? The epistolary details lodge in Helen's chest like flints of stone. Could it be based on truth?

"Morning coffee!"

Roger's voice reaches her from the hall.

"Coming!" shouts Helen.

She folds the letter back inside the envelope and places it almost reverently in a now empty drawer in the top right hand corner.

She descends the stairs, stepping over an array of packets, jars and tins on her way to the kitchen.

“Looks like you’re preparing for a mammoth jumble sale,” says Helen to the seat of Roger’s pants deep inside the pantry.

Jane sits cross-legged holding the door open with Brandy in her lap.

“Helping Uncle Roger,” she explains.

Brandy’s tongue lolls from her mouth, alternately curling and flopping in tandem with her eyebrows as she grins at Helen with a quizzical expression. Helen bends down and feels the wetness of the dog’s nose on the tip of her own.

Kate appears in the hall, wearing a turban.

“Coffee’s getting cold,” she says.

“Mum, what the heck is that?” says Jane, pointing to her mother’s head, as she takes her place at the kitchen table.

“It’s a scarf,” says Kate.

“A scarf! Yea, I can see that! But what’s it doing on your *head?*”

Roger helps himself to a Chelsea bun and waits for someone to pour the coffee.

“Your dad and I are going out tonight and I’m preserving my hair for the occasion.”

Kate pours Helen a cereal beverage and coffee for everyone else, fetching the milk from the stove. Helen hates milk heated in a pan, especially with the skin formed over it like that. She gets up in search of soy milk.

“There are some doggy drops over there,” says Kate, indicating a packet on top of the fridge.

“Oh, no thanks,” says Roger, biting into his buttered bun. “I’m trying to give them up.”

Brandy sits expectantly on her haunches and lets out a series of barks. Roger smooths back the skin between her ears and smiles at her exaggeratedly.

“I wouldn’t trust anything from that pantry,” he says, his eyes level with hers. “They’re likely to be dodgy drops.”

“I bought them this morning from Tesco’s,” says Kate with dignity.

“Mum, how come Uncle Roger is so *juvenile?*”

“You might end up juvenile too,” he adds turning to Jane. “It’s in the genes.”

Kate offers Helen a Chelsea bun, which she refuses.

“Watching your diet?” Kate asks.

“I just don’t fancy a bun,” she says.

“If you think these health diets are going to cure cancer, you must be dreaming.”

“I’m still looking into it,” she says.

“Oh, come on, Helen,” says Kate. “You’ve had ample time to make a decision by now. It can’t take *that* long to check out a few alternatives. And besides what could there possibly be in Stourbridge?”

“There are a few options,” she says, evasively.

“Mardie’s mom’s a homoeopathic doctor or something,” Jane offers, thoughtfully.

“Really?” says Helen.

Kate’s nostrils flare.

“Honestly, Helen, you do worry me at times.”

“Well, then” says Roger cheerily, casting an eye over the contents of the Parish Magazine. “Here’s just the thing for you. It says here – and I quote – ‘don’t let worry kill you off – let the Church help’.”

“That’s so corny,” says Helen, but her shoulders shake and once she starts laughing, it is difficult to stop.

“What’s funny about that?” says Jane.

“Ignore them,” says Kate. “They’re just being *juvenile!*”

The loft feels strangely silent, the only sound being the rustle of paper, as Kate discards the first sheet and stares into her lap at the other. The day is already giving up its struggle, although it is only half past four, and the electric bulb casts a weary pall over the bookshelves and photographs. A younger version of Kate looks out in hope over the tops of their heads towards a schoolboy Roger framed in the opposite corner. Kate’s hands trail grey ivy and the buds of black roses. Helen finds herself looking at the photo without registering it as a wedding portrait, indeed, only half conscious that it is Kate at all. Her husband resembles no one Helen recognises; just a faded ‘70s youth with luxuriant hair, belying the true nature of the balding, bespectacled Jim.

After what seems like an interminable spell, Kate drops her hands to her lap, still holding onto the edges of the last page. She stares straight ahead.

“What do you make of it?” says Helen.

Kate looks down at her lap and then at Helen.

“I had no idea Mum was interested in being a writer,” she says. “Did you?”

“She often had her head buried in a book – that’s all I knew. But nothing literary or anything,” says Helen.

“No,” says Kate. “Just cheap romances and thrillers.”

“But she must have been a decent writer,” says Helen, “to get a letter like this.”

“She was obviously trying to emulate that Mills and Boon style.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Well,” counters Kate, pulling herself upright, “it must have been a love story – quite dramatic, by the sound of it.”

Kate waves her spectacles in the air for emphasis and then drops them on the end of her nose, scanning the letter.

“The parents of the deceased and Sarah, bride-to-be pose for the final picture...”

“And before that,” says Helen, “it speaks about the fiancé being already dead.”

“How did she manage to cook up such an idea?”

“I’m not so sure she did ‘cook it up’. The story is set in France,” Helen begins.

“We don’t know that,” says Kate. “The name Julien and the reference to French phraseology could mean anything. Besides, Mum wasn’t that familiar with France – she only went there on holiday. Clearly the story is fictitious.”

“There’s something else I’d like you to read,” says Helen, getting up and walking over to the desk.

Helen weighs the diary in her hand, its leather cover worn to a lighter shade of tan where her mother must have fingered it over the years. Helen

has the sense that it has been looked at often and it gives her a feeling of reverence, the way her bible did as a pious twelve-year-old.

“I found this first,” she says. “I’d like you to read a couple of entries, to see if you think they cast light on the letter.”

Helen finds the place for her and Kate takes the book. Most of the pages remain blank, with only the first dozen or so filled with a much more vigorous version of Vera’s hand.

“She had better writing then,” Kate remarks.

A spotlight comes on from the Ambulance Station over the wall, followed by the sound of a garage door grinding open to admit the ambulance. The jagged outline of holly leaves is thrown against the window, falling on the carpet in diluted form. Helen watches its subtle shadow waver in the wind and then disappear abruptly as the sensor light clicks off.

Kate looks thoughtful as she scans the pages, her head bent over her knees, shoulders hunched in concentration. Helen cranes her neck to read with her.

“10th April, 1948, Langon

Today M. Le Clos and Jean-Claude came back from the woods with an ominous-looking sack. I was shocked when I saw its contents, or at least, part of me was. The other side of me that is becoming French simply marvelled, as did Mme le Clos and Danielle.

“Oh, la la!”

Out onto the kitchen table tumbled the grey feathered balls, and the word “grives” was tossed on the air. I looked it up later – thrushes – a word I could not bear, for it seemed too cruel to see them lying there, their necks broken, feathers ruffled, eyes like dark seeds above their dead beaks. But, using the word “grives” and sitting down at the table with everyone else, it was possible to pull out all the feathers, one by one; the thin grey fluff protecting their naked bodies, which were no bigger than foetuses. As I sat there between J.-C. and Danielle with M. and Mme Le Clos opposite, all of us concentrating on the task at hand, I settled into it a little. But each time I found one of those tiny lead pellets, which I had to remove, I wanted to cry.

Jean-Claude had been so animated as he came in, ruddy-cheeked with his father, Henri.

“Oh, you should have seen it. Bang, bang. Just like that. One minute flying in the heavens above, the next asleep on the grass.”

“Yes, the old rifle is not bad.”

We sat over the task companionably, the way we do at this very table during breakfast when we sip bowls of thick, black coffee, dipping in slabs of white bread, grilled on the hot plate and spread with prune jam.

By late afternoon, Sally, the dog, came sniffing at my leg, only to be shooed away as we continued to pluck, feather by feather. I had a horrible suspicion that we would be eating these tonight. Sure enough, the tiny bodies were strung onto wooden skewers and roasted in the oven. Mme Le Clos then set about making a special sauce for them. As with the frogs' legs, it will be the sauce that counts, for there can hardly be any meat on these delicate bones to sustain us. Yes, the war is not long over and meat is hard to come by – but still.

There was not much kissing and cuddling as we ate the grives, which offered so little sustenance. Even the Le Clos, perhaps, felt some remorse. We drank our wine and only afterwards over coffee did we resume something of our customary merriment.

I cannot love these people any less because of these strange customs. Even so, I ask myself, where do I feel most at home? Here, where I can speak or not speak as the mood takes me, and where silence speaks warm volumes? Or there, in Birmingham, on the horsehair chairs in front of the black-leaded grate, wrestling with overcooked apples and congealed custard?

“What do you think?” Helen asks when Kate looks up.

“These are probably her working notes for the story,” she says, her voice matter-of-fact.

Helen opens her mouth but no words come.

“It makes sense,” says Kate. “These notes are written a couple of years before the letter. She was obviously developing her characters and the setting.”

“You’ve read too much fiction.”

“As an English teacher, I can tell you, Helen, these diaries are too well written to be just journal entries. She was obviously working up towards a story. Maybe she intended it to be a novel, or something.”

“You’re right about the writing. Some of it is quite good. And she must have had talent to elicit a letter like that from a manuscript assessor.”

“Didn’t she have a poem published once?” says Kate.

“But it was just one of those anthologies where you have to buy copies to see yourself in print. I remember Mum telling me on the phone. Sounded pretty shonky to me,” says Helen. “It was a few years ago now.”

“I didn’t take much notice at the time, either. Thought it must be some fly-by-night outfit, as you say,” says Kate. “Maybe the anthology is on the shelf.”

“I’ve hardly scratched the surface of the books as yet.”

Helen turns to her sister.

“But how come we never knew this side of her?”

“Oh, well; can you imagine Jane thinking of me as an effective teacher – or even as a person in my own right?”

Kate smiles over the idea.

“Children never think of their parents as real people,” she says.

“No, I suppose you’re right.”

Kate hands the book back to Helen.

“Why don’t we take it to the hospital?” says Kate. “It might stimulate a discussion. She’s quite good when she talks about the past.”

“I did take it in,” says Helen. “But she couldn’t concentrate on it.”

“Well, then,” says Kate. “We can take the letter; ask her about her writing career, or whatever it was.”

“Hardly a career,” says Helen.

“But still,” says Kate, brightening. “It’ll probably get her talking and anything’s better than those inane ramblings one normally has to endure.”

Helen is just contemplating a second bite of her sandwich, when the doorbell rings. Perhaps Kate has forgotten something, although more likely she would phone; it is a good half hour since her sister left.

“Paul!”

“I hope you don’t mind my calling. Especially on a Sunday,” he says. “Your herbs arrived yesterday and it occurred to me I could drop them off. Save you a trip into town.”

“Please, come in,” she says. “Let me take your coat.”

“I won’t stay,” he says, peeling off the coat.

“You must be busy with Mr. Chan away,” she says.

His cheeks are ruddy with cold and he seems a little breathless.

“Would you like some green tea?” she says, ushering him into the lounge. “I’m enjoying it very much.”

“Only if you’re making some,” he says, setting a paper bag down on the floor.

“I was just having a sandwich, to tell you the truth.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he says. “I came by to explain about the herbs. Why don’t I give you the low-down and then bugger off?”

He reaches for the paper bag and pulls out a small pink packet decorated with Chinese script.

“These are called black pearls,” he says. “It’s a general formula for cancer. You take twelve morning and evening away from food.”

“Twelve?” she says.

“They’re very small,” he says, flashing her a smile.

She smiles too.

“Will they conflict with any other supplements?”

“It depends what you’re taking,” he says.

“I’ve just started on a liver detox.”

“It should work well with anything that supports the liver,” he says.

She studies his face; the aquiline nose and smooth skin.

“It’s very kind of you to drop by,” she says.

“I was on my way back from a workshop in Belbroughton and was passing by. I live just around the corner in Castle Grove.”

“Oh, so we’re neighbours,” she says.

“Yes,” he laughs.

“Could you eat a sandwich?” she says.

He hesitates.

“Unless of course there’s a meal waiting for you.”

“Only if Max has gone all domestic on me,” he says.

“Max?”

“My dog, Max,” he says.

Helen lets out a nervous laugh.

“Let me get the sandwiches,” she says.

“I don’t want to gatecrash your supper.”

“I can easily make some more,” she says, dancing towards the door.

She returns with her hands full of plates and cutlery, and Paul jumps up to relieve her of the sandwiches.

“Perhaps it’s easier if we sit at the table,” she says. “Except that it’s full of junk.”

“We could push it to one side,” he suggests.

“Is Mr. Chan due back soon?” she says, sliding the papers and files to the end of the table, as Paul sets the food down in the newly created gap.

“On Monday,” he says. “Tomorrow.”

She dishes out the plates and serviettes, whilst he picks up the sandwiches, offering her first pick.

“So kind,” she laughs, and his mouth flickers into a smile. “I’ll get the tea,” she says.

“Can I help?”

“No, no,” she says, staying him with her hand.

She sets the teapot down on a cork mat, the mugs on smaller ones.

“I should apologise for being so emotional the other day,” she says.

“If you can’t be emotional after a cancer diagnosis, it’s a bad job,” he says.

And there is that earnest look again.

“I think I was rude as well,” she says. “I didn’t mean to be.”

“You were upset,” he says. “Have you made it up with your sister?”

“Oh, we haven’t discussed it. But we’re on speaking terms, if that’s what you mean.”

He nods and addresses himself to his sandwich.

“I’m surprised I haven’t seen you around before,” he says.

“I’m over from Australia. My mother’s in hospital with a stroke.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he says.

Helen pours out the tea.

“You must be missing your family over there,” he says.

“I don’t have any,” she says. “My family’s all here.”

They eat in silence, punctuated only by the ticking of the lounge clock. It winds up to strike the quarter hour before settling back into its steady rhythm.

“If you ever need a lift to tai chi,” he says. “I can pick you up. I know parking can be a problem and I have to come past here anyway.”

He digs his wallet out of his trouser pocket and extracts a card, patting his chest in search of a pen.

Helen reaches for one next to the Pi-Tech pamphlets and he writes a number on the back of the card.

“That’s my home number,” he says. “My mobile and work numbers are on the other side.”

“I might just take you up on that,” she says. “I always get in such a tangle on the ring road.”

Kate presses the button, now blank from wear, and the lift doors shut. An ominous silence is interrupted by a clang and a series of clicks as the two sisters are heaved through the bowels of the building. Helen’s stomach slumps, rising again as they are unleashed onto the second floor.

“There!” says Kate, mirroring Helen’s relief.

Jane greets them at the top of the stairs, flushed from her exertions.

“I’m coming with *you* next time,” says Helen. “That lift gives me the willies.”

“The building’s being demolished soon,” Kate says chirpily. “Everything’s moving to the Dudley Memorial.”

Helen pictures Dr. Griffin’s manicured hands on his pale oak desk. It was a shock to hear his voice this morning on Mum’s answer machine. Was she ready to make a booking for more surgery? Anything further she needed to discuss? Helen had not returned the call. What could she say – that she was thinking of putting it off until after Christmas? What with Mum’s situation and everything. But then why should she have to explain herself? Even so,

she longs to entrust herself into someone's care; so as not to be left struggling on her own with the responsibility of it all.

Jane unleashes her voice on the corridor.

"This is the rhythm of the night...the ni..ight...oh yea..."

Helen is about to compliment her on her singing when Kate cuts across.

"Jane! Stop that. You'll disturb the patients"

"But the acoustics are so cool in here!"

"Only one hour," warns Kate. "And then straight back for your homework."

"It's only English," she says. "Don't you *want* me to come?"

Helen had only seen Jane at the hospital once before.

"*That's not Granny,*" she had said. "*That's someone else's old dude.*"

"And put that iPod away."

Kate wags her finger at her daughter, who simply shrugs.

The double doors sigh as they push through into the ward and Helen's own health concerns recede as she inhales the smell of old people waiting to die. It is a busy night, the staff flustered by visitors. Vera is being attended to by a large nurse bursting out of her eau-de-nil shift. She is adjusting the angle of the bed head.

"There you am," she says brightly. "Said you'd 'ave visitors, didn't oi?"

The nurse, whose nametag says "Pat", grabs a chair from the adjacent cubicle where Mr. Morgan, A. G. lies sans guests gazing at the ceiling.

"How are you, Mum?" says Kate, leaning over to kiss her before sinking into the chair.

"I'm all right," she says.

"Granny's talking!"

"I've been telling you that," says Kate.

"Er's doing reeely well," says Pat. "Gets muddled with 'er words sometimes. 'Ad a breakthrough this morning. Show 'em yer stuff, our Vera."

Pat sits down on the bed, almost tipping Vera onto the floor.

"Remember, what yer said at breakfast?"

Vera's lop-sided smile morphs into bewilderment.

“Er said ‘porridge’. An’ considering ‘er’s ‘avin’ difficulty with ‘er ps, ‘er’s making progress.”

Morgan, A. G. gives a throaty yodel.

“Talking of which, this gent needs the bed pan.”

Pat steers her bulk in the direction of the dividing curtain and, with a deft flick of the biceps, whisks it shut.

Kate unzips her bag, producing the manuscript assessment report.

“I don’t think Mum’s up to this now,” says Helen. “Especially if she can’t remember breakfast.”

“It’s her short term memory that’s affected,” she says. “This goes back a long way. And it will do her good. Remember what the speech pathologist said about engaging her brain?”

Kate takes a breath.

“We found this letter in the loft,” she says. “It’s from an editor, dated August 1952. Not long after you were married.”

“Who’s getting married?” says Vera, a pained expression on her face.

Helen tugs on Kate’s sleeve, shaking her head with a warning look.

“Clearly this person thinks you had talent, Mum,” says Kate, undeterred. “It’s in response to a short story you must have sent in for assessment,” Helen adds. “The letter is very complimentary. We wondered if you still have a copy of the story somewhere. We wouldn’t want to throw it out accidentally.”

“Attic!” says Vera.

“You mean loft?” says Kate.

“Attic! Above the shop!”

Helen feels chastened by the ferocity of her response.

“We’ve been in the loft sorting out the books,” says Jane.

“Stop bouncing on Gran’s bed!” says Kate.

“God, you’re grumpy this evening,” Jane counters.

Kate makes a mock swipe at Jane and the letter falls to the floor.

Helen picks it up and folds it back into the envelope.

Vera closes her eyes and presses her temples with her good hand.

Helen wonders if it’s too much for her with three of them visiting at the same time.

“When can I go home?” she says.

“Not yet,” says Helen. “They want to get some more improvement in that arm and leg.”

“You’re at home,” she says. “You can look after me.”

“There are some other letters here,” says Helen. “Roger and I found them in the sideboard. We wondered if you wanted to keep any.”

“I don’t know of anyone who’d write to me now,” says Vera, eyeing the bundle of correspondence.

“Where *is* that letter?” says Kate. “I put it down here somewhere.”

Jane looks at Helen who points to her bag, placing a finger over her lips. Jane’s eyes dance above the puce fingernails clasped to her mouth.

“Do you want to keep any of those books in the loft?” Helen asks.

Vera nods emphatically.

“No nodding,” says Kate. “Remember you need to practice your speech – the pathologist said.”

Pat reappears from the next door cubicle with an extra chair and Jane perches on the edge, stretching her legs out in front.

“Pat,” says Vera, reading the nametag.

“Fantastic!” says Pat. “That’s one of the words ‘er’s been practising. Pat, pet, pit, pot, put, pie, patty.”

“Oh, cool,” says Jane. “I’m going to practise with Granny.”

Vera repeats after Jane:

“Pet, pet, pat, pat, pot, pot...”

Pat plumps up the pillows and straightens Vera’s slump.

“Ave to mind yer *ps* and *qs*, eh, our Vera?” she laughs at her own bosom-wobbling joke and is still chuckling to herself as she bustles down the ward.

Vera smiles past Helen’s shoulder and when she turns, Helen sees Roger ambling down the corridor.

“How you doin’, our Mum?” says Roger.

“I’m all right,” says Mum, beaming at them all.

Jane vacates her chair for her uncle and sits back down on the edge of her grandmother’s bed. Kate bites her lip.

“Ah, I see you’ve got the letters,” says Roger. “Did you want to keep any?”

“Kate tells me you’re getting married,” says Mum.

Roger looks from one sister to another.

“Well, no-one told me,” he says.

“Am I invited?” Vera wants to know.

“Oh, I don’t see why not,” he says.

Vera’s milky eyes drift towards the window opposite.

“Your dad hasn’t visited,” she says.

“Dad died five years ago,” says Kate. “We all went to the funeral, remember?”

“What funeral?” she says.

“We should ask Granny about cardboard coffins and stuff,” says Jane.

“No, no,” says Kate. “Don’t confuse her.”

“Well, I dunno,” says Roger, “it’s something to talk about. It can’t be more confusing than the conversation we’re already having.”

Kate stares him down.

“We’ve been clearing out the drawers in the dining room cupboard,” he says.

“Have you?” says Vera.

“We found a newspaper cutting – something you’d cut out of the newspaper.”

“Oh, give over,” says Kate.

“Natural burials,” he says.

“Oh,” she says.

“We wondered, if you had thought what sort of funeral you’d like, where you’d like to be buried and all.”

“You’ll have to ask Dad about that,” she says. “He’ll want to organise it.”

“Dad’s not here,” says Kate, “he’s dead.”

Vera’s eyes grow wide and her jaw begins to tremble.

“Why didn’t someone tell me?” she says.

Helen sighs.

“Would you like to be buried next to Grandpa?” says Jane.

Kate shakes her head vigorously and Jane shrugs.

"I'd like to be buried in France," says Vera.

Now it's Roger's turn to shrug; he does it in the French style.

"Pourquoi pas," he says.

"I see you've got some nice flowers there," says Kate.

"Car...what do you call it," says Vera.

"Carnations," says Helen.

"I like them," says Vera. "I'd like bedding plants all along that border," she adds. "Marigolds and petunias."

"Lovely," says Helen. "I'll see what I can do."

"It's not time for bedding plants now," says Kate.

"Are the bulbs up yet?"

Kate closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, while Jane surreptitiously replugs her earphones. Roger looks at Helen, his eyes full of sad mirth.

"Like pushing water uphill with a fork," he says.

Because Master Chan always speaks through an interpreter in class, Helen is curious to see how they will get on in this new situation.

"Tlowzer, off," he says. "Sock off. Bla, undo."

In response to her blankness, he swings his arms deftly behind his back and pretends to fiddle with bra hooks.

"Undo; kip on," he says.

"Ah," she says, "unhook the bra. Don't take it off."

His face lights up as he backs towards the door, half nodding, half bowing.

She lies down on the massage table and covers herself with blankets. An electric fire radiates a pleasant warmth from the solid oak fireplace. The walls are papered in cream and gold, the floor carpeted in deep blue pile. Each time someone passes in the corridor, the floorboards creak. Helen adjusts to the subtle fragrances she can't quite place; something calming and floral overlaid by woodiness – sandalwood and frangipani, she thinks. Heavy curtains are drawn against the grey day; she feels safe inside this womb-like

space, the piped music, faint and classical, half-familiar but difficult to pinpoint.

The doorknob turns and Master Chan materialises silently at her side. He must have made a pact with the boards beneath the carpet, or know them so intimately as to avoid the loose panels. His eyes are small and Helen is unprepared for the way they bore into hers; she feels known and loved. It brings tears to her eyes. He understands this and mirrors her response back to her, relaxing his whole body into a grateful sigh. Then, he closes his eyes, as though receiving messages from beyond.

“Hm,” he says and places a hand over the blanket in the region of her navel.

“Nice and lelex.”

His voice is soothing.

He takes Helen’s wrist and weighs it gently in his hand. She closes her eyes, giving herself over to his feather touch. Here is her arm with its sinews and veins, held like a bamboo flute to the lips of a musician, his fingers caressing the notes. He nods in that way he has, as though bowing, and moves to the other side.

This side feels different. She is aware of how tense her muscles are, how tight her breath. Master Chan, meanwhile, has entered another realm and is listening to the music of her body. She feels herself drawn into the space with him. What a cacophony! An image of her paternal grandmother comes to her, the corners of her mouth turned down against the half moon of her chin. The extra flesh, held against the throat, the sloping shoulders. She feels this woman, lodged in her liver, commanding attention, to the exclusion of the pancreas, which can’t get a look in, the gall bladder and the intestines. What an unhappy family lives within this cage of bones! It has usurped the place of her heart.

Master Chan releases her wrist and lays it gently against the blanket. He moves to a side table and when he returns, gently uncovers her legs, swiping a spot on the top of her feet with a cotton swab. She feels a tiny prick against the skin and a sharp tweak. But it is no more painful than the east wind claiming a patch of skin with an icy fingernail, and equally enlivening. The same sensation is repeated on the other foot, then the inside bulb of

both knees. The right knee does not like the sensation, especially when he twiddles the needle to connect with the flow of chi. Then there is an instant release, which runs right through her and she feels herself relax. More needles are positioned; inside her wrists and between her breasts. Now she understands the need to loosen the bra. His hands are light, but firm, warm and deft. She feels at peace.

He covers her with the blanket and indicates, almost comically, that she must relax and let go. Marcel Marceau would have been proud of his weightless rendition. Silently, he exits the room and she settles into her environment; the soft, reedy music, the creamy walls and the warmth. Above her is a brass light fitting and in its globe she sees a small head on a white pillow, a doll's body, long under the pale blue blanket. Here she is, viewing herself upside-down, curtains parted in a "v" behind her head, letting in the light.

On the wall opposite is a watercolour scene of a Mediterranean harbour bathed in late afternoon sun. Eyelash shadows form out of awnings and balconies, and the masts of boats send dark fingers down narrow alleys. These are the streets she associates with Mark. She sees his tall figure; the back of him in a white shirt and dark trousers disappearing through the narrow pass between Social Sciences and the Law Department. An arrow of light strikes the mini-skirted youth next to him, her hair the exact colour of Helen's when she was that age. Anger swells in her belly, causing the needles to strain against the blankets and sharpening the pain in her breast. The scene blurs behind its sheet of glass with its superimposition of the blue-curtained window, and she succumbs to the weight of her body. She hears the strains of Massenet's *Thais Meditation*, and now it is her father she sees exiting the front door clad in cricket whites. How she had longed to see him at Miss Albright's School of Dancing, equally vital, instead of the hunched embarrassment she remembers. There he is, skulking behind the other parents, who eagerly applaud their offspring, swanning in tulle and flounce.

He says something but all Helen hears are thoughts spoken in her father's accent; something about *the chains that bound me*. An image of Jack Marley from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* floods her mind. She feels the needle tighten between her breasts and her stomach contract.

“When I first held you in my arms, I felt all choked up. I couldn’t speak.”

What were these chains that bound him? And what did he want to say? Helen wants to ask him about the tonsillitis he suffered in his youth. The great, toxic ulcers in his throat; quinzies they called them. But he took his tonsils to the grave, while she had to have hers out.

All the tenderness she burned for as a child and youth flows to her now in waves. Her body shudders as she struggles to let it in. But she feels angry and her jaw tightens. Why couldn’t he have broken those chains?

She feels again her father’s hand stroking the back of her head as she sat at his feet on the floor, watching the rugby on TV. She didn’t like the hysteria of the commentators, the hypnotic swell and trough of the chanting, the muddled bandages and missing teeth; shadow men scudding over threads of intermittent light. Her father’s hand felt strange against her hair; this hand accustomed to the grip of cricket bat or rugby ball, a glass of beer. He would stroke her hair, lifting it at times from her neck, to pull long strands from underneath, persistent, eager. She never responded, continuing fixedly with her book, uncertain whether to be glad of his wooden touch or not. It gave her power to ignore him, the way, perhaps, she felt ignored by him.

“I couldn’t tell you,” he says.

What couldn’t he tell her?

She feels his love in showers of golden rain, running over her cheeks and soaking into her ears. She is hot and wants to move, but is aware of the needles, like Lilliputian ropes, pinning her arms against the blankets.

When she opens her eyes, Master Chan stands next to her in the place where her father stood.

He eases the blankets from her and offers a box of tissues.

“I didn’t see you come in,” she sniffs.

“Cly is good,” he says, simply.

She dabs at the tears.

“I must have fallen asleep.”

“Sreep, arso good,” he says.

He removes the needles, wiping her flesh with an astringent sting.

“No hully,” he says, “take time.”

He disappears from the room and she lies back against the pillows, strangely purged.

Mr. Chan is waiting for her in reception with a paper bag full of herbs. He nods and smiles as the receptionist explains she must boil two tablespoons of the contents in a litre of water for twenty minutes. This will last her for two days if kept in the fridge. She is to drink the mixture four times a day.

“For cancer,” he says with a bow.

Helen taps out the number; remembering each digit by heart now without needing to check. There is no agenda. She is phoning to tell Mark she has cancer. That’s all.

“Mark. It’s me, Helen.”

Here is the silence she expected; the air sucked in. She takes command, exactly as planned.

“I’m phoning from Stourbridge.”

“You want your stuff,” he says.

“Mum’s had a stroke. She’s in hospital.”

Nothing. She reminds herself she’s talking to Mark. Compassion was never his strong point.

“How are you?” she says.

“Okay.”

“Listen, I’ve been diagnosed with breast cancer.”

The air seethes with hesitation. Or perhaps it’s his breath? It’s the usual bad line from Toodyay.

“What are you going to do?” he says.

“I’ve had a lumpectomy.”

Helen pauses – perhaps for effect or out of habit – then checks herself. She does not mean to manipulate.

“I’m not having chemo or radiation and I don’t want more surgery.”

The words begin to gush. She stops; forces herself to endure through the silence. Then slowly his puzzlement dawns on her; if she’s already had surgery, why would she need all this?

“The surgery wasn’t a complete success; they didn’t get it all,” she says.

“Oh.”

She waits.

“I’m sorry.”

Helen lets out a breath; closes her eyes against the tears. All she ever wanted was for Mark to apologise.

“White Crane displays wings.”

Helen is used to the interpreter’s voice, but the words still sound strange in a North Country accent. She is also distracted by the intermittent flash of the strip light, and lowers her gaze, but the carpet is red with a bright blue detail that flares out of the corner of her eye as she moves. She can feel a headache coming on.

Helen tries to focus on Master Chan, who twists and steps, shifting his weight, arms trailing like a silken scarf. When he turns his head in her direction, Helen feels her spirits lift, imagining that she too sees beyond the turquoise wall, through the yellow portholes into the night sky. Past the pavements, spot-lit with halos, the ring-road and the traffic.

She has stepped away from Paul. Was that deliberate?

“Welcome to the Stourbridge Institute,” he had said as he offered her the plastic device he had just used to activate the barrier.

She had felt flummoxed and feigned ignorance that he was actually gifting her with a free parking pass right in the heart of town.

“What is this place?” she had asked.

And her heart sank when he said:

“A social club. You can come here for a drink or a meal. I also play snooker and bridge.”

Helen had to concede this might be an improvement on rugby and cricket, but still.

“Horse stance.”

She bends her knees.

“Here,” he said. *“Put it in your bag. I’m allowed a spare one.”*

“Isn’t there someone else you’d rather give it to?” she asked and then felt like a fool when he turned to her, smiling, and said.

“Who else would I give it to?”

And his hand moved towards her hair. She felt flustered.

“We’d better get moving,” she said. *“Or we’ll be late.”*

Slowly, the repetition of movement takes over and she settles into the breath, quieting the mind road. She focuses on the air warmed by her nostrils and imagines the cancer flowing out with it – not the cancer, so much as something fluid and dark that lies behind it. She feels herself becalmed; her mind in a state of suspended observation. Helen is sure the Chinese herbs are doing her good.

The entire class pivots on one leg, each in their strange variety of sweat shirts and pants; distinct, and yet at the same time united.

“Okay,” says Allan, “take a pew by the wall. Master Chan will demonstrate the next series.”

Helen sits on the floor and rests back against the panelling. Paul comes over to join her.

“Have I offended you?” he says in a whisper.

She shakes her head but stares straight ahead.

“You would tell me, wouldn’t you?”

She glances up at him. He smiles sheepishly and she finds herself smiling back.

“We must concentrate,” he says. “There’ll be a test afterwards.”

“You are silly,” she whispers.

Mr. Chan assumes the horse stance, head firm on his shoulders, gazing at a point beyond his raised arms, which appear to float on air. She is struck by how much presence he commands, even without moving and when he does, it is with slow-motion grace, as though his body were wired with elastic. She feels herself leaning towards Paul, their heads almost touching, aware of his arm, surreptitiously circling her waist.

“Come and look at this,” says Helen, ushering Paul into the dining room. She pulls at the sideboard drawer, which after much effort eases open a crack, and then flies out, almost tipping its contents onto the floor.

“Hm,” says Paul. “A sideboard with attitude.”

“You wouldn’t believe how much stuff Roger and I have already chucked out.”

They survey the interior, inhaling the shared moment of sour wood varnish engrained with decades of dust. There are spiral bound notepads now neatly stacked on one side, faded drink mats, a packet of doilies and a stack of letters, including some airmail ones.

“Are these the letters you mentioned?” he asks.

“Some of them,” says Helen. “There are more in the loft.”

She disappears into the kitchen drawn by the simpering wheeze of the kettle.

“Perhaps you’d prefer a beer?” she shouts, thinking back to their conversation in the Institute car park.

“Actually, a beer would be great,” he says.

When she returns, Paul is seated at the dining table angling an airmail letter under the light.

“The ink’s a bit faded,” he says.

“Do you read French?” she asks, placing his glass on a beer mat.

“I’ve been going to night classes for a couple of years now,” he says.

“Otherwise, just school French.”

Helen sits next to him with her cup of tea. She considers pouring herself a glass of wine, except it’s bad for the cancer, as well as her liver. Paul frowns through his glasses.

“You know,” he says, “this is more than a pen friend.”

“I know,” she says. “They’re billets doux, aren’t they?”

He looks at her, his eyes softened by the lamplight.

“They are,” he says.

“Come upstairs,” she says. “There’s something I’d like you to see.”

“An attic,” he says.

“We call it a loft.”

Helen fishes the diary out from the desk and they sit down on the sofa together.

“I don’t think Mum would mind,” she says.

He holds her in his gaze.

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know, but I’d actually like your opinion.”

He smooths his hand over the page she has marked for him.

“October 15th 1947,” he reads. “Langon.”

He pronounces it “Lon-gon”, the last consonant almost mute.

“Is that how you pronounce it?” she asks.

“I imagine so,” he says.

This evening I sat next to J.-C. opposite his sister, Danielle, who is just twelve years old. It is hard to imagine her blossoming into any great beauty at this stage, what with that gap in the middle of her smile, the brown plaits and straight fringe. Jean-Claude has the same straight hair like Monsieur Le Clos, and I like the way it sticks up at odd angles, giving him that boyish look. M. and Mme Le Clos presided, as usual, over the small, square table, whose centrepiece tonight was Mme Le Clos’ famous rilette; that fatty duck paté, which I imagined I would loathe so much, but for which I am actually acquiring a taste. To me, it has now the flavour of happiness; rich and generous like this land. Even though the war is not long over, there are always ducks, chickens and a rooster in the yard, which means an abundance of speckled brown eggs, which Danielle and I beat into bright yellow froth for the omelettes. There is no ham – not yet – and so we go out into the garden to gather thyme and rosemary to make the omelettes aux herbes.

Jean-Claude caught the train to Bordeaux again this morning. I knew he would be back by evening, and yet for some reason this time I am in despair, perhaps because it is a Saturday; I don’t know. He speaks no English and my French is rudimentary. I fretted about what I would do without him and how I might communicate with his parents and sister. Sensing my distress, M. and Mme le Clos announced a trip into the countryside in search of mushrooms. There was no need for words; first, the baskets were produced – huge panniers, the cane worn grey with use – but serviceable. Then, they showed me how to distinguish between the cèpes; the large, flat type, and the button mushrooms. I have never been partial to cèpes, finding them too slippery on my tongue, like the skin of toads.

Tonight, after Jean-Claude's return, we sat down to a plate of cèpes and mushrooms, omelette aux herbes and oysters. I thought about the mushrooms, which at home we would eat for breakfast with bacon and eggs, grilled tomato and fried bread, all gobbled down without comment, or at least so it was before the days of rationing. But here, we think nothing of cycling out some distance past La Réole to spend all afternoon beneath the shade of gnarled cork trees, grubbing among the long, wet grass for fungi. We smell the earth, inhale the air and feel the dewy grass brushing against our legs. We pick each one tenderly, showing it to each other, or simply absorbing its beauty for ourselves: the pink, pleated underside, the bone-like top, the ragged stem, dark earth still clinging to it. Some varieties have dark brown pleats beneath, which leave charcoal stains on our hands. We move about in the undergrowth contentedly united in our quest.

And now we eat them, fried in butter. Where has Mme le Clos found butter? No doubt she knows someone, swaps eggs perhaps or foie gras. The only accompaniment is wine, which we sip slowly, offering the occasional comment, invariably devoted to food. Next come the omelettes, cooked to perfection, with every last ounce mopped with crusts of bread, which are almost stale now by the end of the day, yet perfect for absorbing the bright yolks.

By the time the oysters are served, I am leaning up against Jean-Claude, who has his arm around me. We kiss whenever the moment takes us. M and Mme Le Clos look into each other's eyes with the same twinkle, born perhaps of the wine, or the fresh air absorbed during the mushroom gathering. They do not kiss, but Mme Le Clos rests her arm against her husband's shoulder as she teases him. He smiles that broad smile, deepening the lines that crease his cheeks and unsettling the breadcrumbs caught in his moustache. She brushes them off for him and he laughs. Then it is Danielle's turn to be hugged. No one is left out, for I, too, am hugged and my hand stroked by Mme Le Clos as she does her round of the table, adding dishes, one after the other. M. Le Clos is a little more shy, but he smiles at me, at J.-C. and at Danielle as he tips more wine into each glass.

Tonight there are oysters, which is a rare treat. Perhaps a customer has gifted them to M. Le Clos at the garage for some work. I don't know and,

in any case, no one asks, or if it is discussed, my French is not up to comprehending. They show me how to eat oysters but, being English, I find it difficult to tip my head back.

“Further! Further!” they shout. Tilt your head right back, like this – regarde!” *And M. Le Clos reveals the full length of his neck from collarbone to chin.*

“Let it slide down the throat – savour the taste.”

I try it, but it tastes like seawater, and they laugh at me, although not unkindly. Mme Le Clos slaps her thigh with her hand as I attempt to swallow the white, wobbly flesh whole without wincing. I always end up coughing or sneezing because the lemon juice and pepper get up my nostrils, for as everyone knows, there is no other way to ingest them, apart from with that tart, citrus tang.

“This one moved!” *I say. “On dirait que ça bougeait!” One would say that it moved. They don’t think this strange, so I add, joking, “One would almost say it is alive!” And I laugh.*

M. Le Clos looks at me over his spectacles, those warm, brown eyes just visible beneath the eyebrows.

“But of course they are alive. How else would one eat them?”

I am shocked. And then realise that, of course, they are teasing, the way they always do.

J.-C. turns a younger version of the same eyes on me.

“Of course, they are alive,” *he says. “Didn’t you know this?”*

“This way, they are fresh,” *M. Le Clos explains.*

“Frais, frais,” *says Mme Le Clos.*

If I could say it, I would add, “You can’t get much fresher than that!” This is no laughing matter.

All of the adventures here relate to food, but the main adventure is being here, living inside another language, remolding my brain into different ways of thinking. These ways seem natural and strangely familiar, as if they had always been there waiting to blossom.

When there is silence here, it is companionable, and the conversation homely, as we display our affections lavishly and spontaneously. Here we sit, night after night together under the dusty lampshade, squeezed in around the

table, with no pictures on the walls, and no carpets, the only adornment being a single, gnarled vine, polished into caramel knots. It rests on its side, just big enough to accommodate the bottle of wine that makes love to it on the top of the sideboard. This crimson wine, invisible beneath the deep green glass, waits for the day we will be married. This wine is from 1923. It was a good year; the year Jean-Claude was born and it was laid aside, according to the custom, twenty-four years ago, the day he was baptised. On the opposite wall, above the glass cabinet, a similar snake of vine holds another bottle, dating back to 1935. This one waits for Danielle.

“What do you think?” Helen asks after Paul hands her the diary.

“It’s the same person,” says Paul. “The same name”.

“Jean-Claude,” says Helen.

“They must have been engaged. ‘*Quand tu viendra ici pour les noces,*’ that’s the phrase he used in his correspondence. ‘When you come here for the wedding. It is the most tender and beautiful letter,’ he says. “He’s talking of their wedding, I’m sure.”

“What could have happened?”

“She must have broken it off,” he says.

“Or perhaps he did.”

“It doesn’t sound likely from the tone of the letter,” says Paul.

“A pity we don’t have any of hers,” says Helen. “I might tackle her about it. She’s often quite lucid when she talks about the past.”

All day long the parcel has throbbed at her from the hall table, and now Helen feels the weight of it in her lap. She examines the bold script, separate worlds colliding with the old Stourbridge address forged in Melanie’s hand. She snips through plastic, scissors flashing in the light, and out falls the notebook she had requested, stabbing her in the thigh. Good, Melanie has found her sketch book. The sight of its dark cover overwhelms her, sending waves of nausea from the pit of her stomach. She gets up and paces between the lounge and dining area. Her breath is tight and her focus honed to the corner cabinet with its crooked teardrop handle. She bends down to straighten it, then pulls, its tarnished metal giving an edge to her teeth. Inside is a green

bottle, its lower quarter dulled by the dregs of a dark liquid. The top resists her grip, emitting a fine powdering of sticky dust as she unscrews it. *Tesco Finest Manzanilla*, the label reads. As in a trance, Helen follows the well-trodden trail of carpet to the sideboard, her hand reaching for a tulip-shaped glass with floral etching. She pours the syrupy liquid, its sweetness mingled with the sourness of yeast.

Helen sets the glass down on the polished table under the alabaster lamp and sinks again into her father's chair. As well as the sketch book, Melanie has included the slim journal Helen wanted. She ponders the foreign cover in shades of green, framing a headless rider made up of squares, then lifts her glass, rolling the liquor in her mouth until the edges of her tongue curl in revolt. Helen is not partial to sherry, and there are better options; the Beaujolais and Shiraz, but she fears the temptation of a full bottle. Besides it is not as though Mum will miss the sherry; she won't be making trifles any more. Inside the journal a timetable proclaims, *Orario delle Lezioni*, followed by the days of the week in Italian. Beyond this are the tiny ruled squares, where her nineteen-year-old cursive details the Venice experience; her first sighting of Mark and the joys of youth. As it turns out, "detail" is precisely what's lacking. She is appalled to discover the entire Milan debacle relegated to a few meaningless lines.

Monday 5th April Milano 1977

Santa Maria delle Grazie typical early renaissance – by Bramante the last supper by Michelangelo is also there, but it was locked and we couldn't see it.

The notes are light on punctuation; the tense variable, but it is the gaps Helen finds disturbing. By "we", she means her male companion, "*Nigel is boring*", indicating his depressive effect. Helen's mind slides into a sherry haze as she turns the page in a glow of optimism. But her spelling is no better in Venice and, apart from a few atmospheric, the main action is missing; the emotional details; a pivotal experience reduced to the following:

After supper – very good – went for a walk with Nigel, before going over to the main island. Sat in a café in a little backstreet and ordered some wine, really delicious – “Santa Rosa” – red wine, worth remembering. We all felt tiddly and dashed through the streets gayly. I feel so happy and I love Venice so much. To-day was a wonderful day.

This marks the definitive moment when she ditched Nigel for good, catching the vaporetto alone, in order to “coincide” with the Australian party. It was Mark who ordered the Santa Rosa, and there was a lot more to this gay dash through the streets, innocent as it was. She had fallen in love.

Helen forgives her early literary failures; she was just nineteen; a similar age to her mother when she kept her diary. She takes another sip and picks up the sketchbook, the purple one, dating back less than half a decade, although it feels like a lifetime.

There are halting words in coloured ink; images in pastels, charcoal and lead. These trigger memories. How excited she was to be pregnant and how close she felt to Mark, his hand on her belly at night. She is drawn to her sketch of an abalone shell, equally suggestive of a foetal spine; a question mark; an ear. Did they know she was pregnant then? She imagines the shape, half-buried in sand and Mark’s fingers digging it out. They marvelled together at the pearlescent bone; the perforations skirting its rim. Helen imbibes the sickly liquid, turns another page, and then another, until she comes to the delicate sheets of tissue protecting the charcoals. Words are scant, but the shadowy strokes speak volumes. This one is entitled *Ultrasound*, and forms part of a wave series. Images progress from the ocean’s swell to star and cuttlefish, reworked into sonar waves, ballooning skull, a hand unfurled in greeting. They bring tears to her eyes.

There are pastel landscapes; blood sun plummeting over the ridge; its spine knotted into her womb; a bed sheet slung between trees; the rising moon, hammocked in her belly. The next series depicts lightning flashes clawing at cloud. It is called *The Storm*. She remembers the rain that flattened the crop, coursing over the tin shed roof, chasing rust into gutter and ground. She hears it now in place of the apologetic patter of English weather, painting the bark of the pear tree black. It recalls the sapling pear,

hooked over the grave, questioning. All these visions fly from the pages as she loosens the cover's hold. Why did she ask Melanie for these books?

She pours another glass, flicks another page; sees her mother's name written there and rails against it. Where was her mother when she lost the baby? It was as though she came in dream only. Yet, Vera must have been there because she remembers Mark painting the spare room. Helen might have been touched by this gesture of truce between husband and mother, had she not felt so numb. What was Mark doing painting a room when the only one that mattered now was bare?

Helen leafs through another page of her life. It is dark outside; she has forgotten to draw the curtains. Here is a sketch of her mother, back turned against her at the sink. She remembers her mother and Mark, the two of them on the distant shore of the cooking island, bending over the entrails of some chicken. Helen is angry. Has been angry all this time without knowing it. Here it all is etched between the covers of the book, together with verses written in navy and green. They are bad poems. She cannot write like her mother. Not poems at all, but the curmudgeonly ramblings of a post-natal woman, whose hormones are all at sea.

Helen weighs the book in her hands, then hurls it at the television, scattering photo frames and ornaments in its wake. It sprawls with broken spine among shards of pottery and glass. She sweeps the sherry glass after it, its contents spilling onto the rug. A scream rends the air and Helen's mouth hangs open; her throat burning with the aftertaste of sherry. She collapses back into the chair and sobs, nursing her head in her hands. What has she done?

"With the herbs, no drink," Mr. Chan had said. *"Alcohol bad for cancer."*

His eyes pierced hers, as they do now in memory.

Why did she drink the cooking sherry? The vilest drop in the house? Helen surveys the destruction; the shattered glass and bronze spillage on the pale green rug; the scrunched papers and maimed images of the Australian life she has abandoned, together with her dead child. Amidst the shattered sketches and debris, her mother's face looms through the broken frame, her eye gouged by a scar. Helen stares, almost senseless with disbelief. She must clean up, but stiffens at the thought of any more cleaning, tidying,

ordering and sorting. What is the point if her mother never returns? And if Helen dies of cancer? Which she knows now she will; all those rogue cells sated by alcohol. A slow tear rolls down her cheek and hovers at her jaw. She stares into her hands, receiving the libation already drying up and tightening her skin. At the bottom of her grief, like a stone weight, sits a question unexamined until now: what if she never sees Australia again?

Helen has slept badly, and perhaps has a hangover. She circles the hospital car park several times before homing in on a young mother with pushchair. The woman moves in slow motion, releasing the infant, whom she entertains with a banana, before lovingly securing the child in the back. She proceeds then to fold and store the perambulator, smiles cheerily, having finally spotted Helen behind the wheel, and waves the keys, gesticulating imminent departure. Yet it still takes her an eternity to manoeuvre out of the bay. Helen is dismayed not to have brought the exact change, and as she fronts up to the reception desk, is in no mood to be trifled with.

“Excuse me,” she says.

The receptionist fiddles with a keyboard, eyes stolidly glued to her screen.

“Now,” she says, at length. “What seems to be the matter?”

She is a well-built woman, sporting a badge with the words *Reception* in red.

“I need change for the machines.”

Reception’s torso, which has remained at a sideways angle to Helen, returns to her screen.

“There are change machines,” she says.

Helen inhales noisily.

“They don’t work.”

From the placid fury of fingertips comes an irritated clicking, but Reception’s face remains stony. She speaks into her computer:

“There are others.”

“You call this a hospital!” says Helen. “What if it was an emergency, I suppose you’d let the patient die before issuing them with change!”

The woman's perm remains helmeted; intact, as she swivels to face Helen.

"That's what the Emergency Department is for."

She is very nicely spoken.

Helen glares, but the woman's eyes don't flicker.

"There is a value card," she says.

"What sort of value?" snaps Helen.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How much?"

"Twenty-five pounds for ten tickets. You can renew the card at the newsagent," she says with a nod in the direction of the aforementioned shop.

Daylight robbery, thinks Helen, but buys one anyway and marches towards the car park, trusting an inspector has not already pounced.

Helen is still breathing heavily as she approaches her mother, who stares through and beyond her.

"How are you today, Mum?" she says, struggling to pull up a chair.

Vera tugs agitatedly at the sheet, mumbling.

"I've brought something to read to you," says Helen, "if you feel like it."

"What is it?" she says, quite distinctly.

"It's a journal. Nowhere near as good as..."

Helen stops herself. She has not been able to have any meaningful conversation with Mum about the loft diary, despite having brought it in to show her. And Helen knows that this whole exercise of asking Melanie for the book and her decision to read excerpts to Mum is all part of a ploy to discuss Vera's writing. Perhaps also, in her present mood, it is part of a personal vendetta.

"It's not very good. It's written around the time of your last visit."

"Oh, all right," she says.

But as Helen reads from the journal, she is aware that what she has written skirts around the issue of the stillbirth in similar ways to the Italian diary. How can she bemoan the fact that she feels emotionally abandoned when she can plainly see she has emotionally abandoned herself? There is one bit, though, that strikes a chord, and her voice quavers as she reads it.

Something about the look of the child – a boy, as Vera said it would be – peaceful and plump. The cord unbeating as she waited in vain for his cry.

“No!” says Vera, and she pulls herself up. “That’s not how it was.”

Their eyes meet, yet do not connect.

“He was alive and screaming – like a monkey – purple in the face. With that shock of hair. And those eyes, looking at me. Exactly like his father.”

“What, Dad?”

“Reproachful,” she says. “I’ll never forget that look.”

Vera screws up her face, tears squeezing from her eyes. She begins to shake, wringing and releasing the sheets in a one-handed gesture until her good hand lies limp and helpless next to its twin. Helen grabs the tissue box, showering her mother with its contents, dabbing at her face and hands. Vera balls one of them and stabs at her eyes; frets another to shreds. She stares at Helen with the pleading look of the drowning.

“I would have kept him,” she says and bows her head. “But I couldn’t. Not then.”

Helen offers more tissues, helps her mother to blow her nose, mopping at eyes and mouth. Vera’s body slumps and she breaks down, crying. Helen cradles her head in her shoulder.

“Wassa matter, luv?” says an orderly.

Helen waves her away, shaking her head.

“You lets me know if you needs summat,” she says and draws the curtains.

Vera inhales violently, the pain caught in her throat. Eventually, the silence breaks into sobs and Helen feels her mother’s grief soaking her own skin.

When Vera finally raises her head, she stares at her daughter with eyes washed clean.

“We hadn’t meant to,” she says. “Saving ourselves for the honeymoon. San Sebastian.”

She dismisses the name with a shrug.

“Going back on the train next day. To Birmingham. Get ready and all that. I can see him on the platform. Waving. We held each other. Kissed.

Arms around his neck. Not a tall man, Jean-Claude, but ooh, he were handsome. Dark hair. Olive skin.”

Light shines in her eyes as she relives the memory.

“We held hands through the window and the train moved off.”

Vera’s voice cracks. She sniffs.

“We were happy, though. Blew kisses. Watched his arm waving and waving like he were polishing a mirror. It tooted and he were lost in the steam. That’s when his arm fell. I did see that – or imagined it – I dunno. It was the last I saw of him.”

Her mouth goes slack.

“Next time...”

The words slur and she breaks down sobbing.

And Helen is there on the edge of the bed, her shoulder a pillow for her mother’s grief. She offers tissues, but Vera is beyond tissues. She wrings them in her hands, bunching them into a ball, dabbing at her eyes, her chest heaving as the memory pours out of her.

“What could I do?” she says. “It was the shock of it, see.”

Helen’s own hand trembles as she tries to stroke her mother’s arm. She can feel the tears soaking the neck of her jumper, hear the nurses’ plimsoles squeaking up and down the ward; the visitors’ voices coming and going. Vera pulls away then and stares at her hands.

“That spring, when we walked through the fields. There was a wood near the Garonne. Warm already – humid – it was only May. Bees buzzing. Never forget that sound.”

Helen’s buttocks remain welded to the bed as she too stares into her mother’s hands.

“He had taken his shirt off by then, tied it round his waist. Beautiful honey skin, grove of hairs dark on his chest. Light of the sun on him. Well, we hadn’t planned to but, of course, what with the bees droning...we were to be married next month. Lay there together in the grass. There were butterflies – gold and orange, black markings – flitting, landing, taking off again. I wore a blouse. I helped him with the buttons. I don’t remember how we undressed – clothes, they just fell to the ground. All I know is, next thing, there we were in the grass, naked.”

Vera cries, silently now.

“What happened, Mum?”

She opens her mouth wide and for a terrifying eternity, no sound comes out.

“Killed! That’s what happened!”

Vera sits bolt upright, tears staining her face, her eyes huge and staring.

“In the war?”

Helen had not meant to ask but the questions pour out of her.

“Not the bloody war,” she says bitterly. “Survived all that. Taken prisoner by the bloody Germans.”

Helen has never heard her mother swear before. It frightens her. And yet, there is a force to her vocal chords that falls on Helen’s ears like music.

“He escaped. By the time I met him, all that was over. The war and everything.”

“Did he visit you in Birmingham?”

“Killed,” she says again, ignoring the question. “Driving to meet me from the train.”

Helen’s hand flies to her mouth and she stares into the abyss of her mother’s face.

“We were to be married within the week,” she says. “I threw my bouquet on the coffin.”

There is anger in Vera’s voice. Helen holds her now, feeling her mother’s tears warm against her neck. She has no idea how long they remain like this.

“Oh, Mum,” says Helen. “I am so, so sorry.”

Helen feels the sincerity of her own words, spoken woman to woman. And yet, she wrestles with an emotion she dare not define. Not betrayal, she tells herself. The word “jealousy” lies crouched in her belly, but she can’t look at it. Not now.

“I remember that field and am glad of the memory,” says Vera, almost to herself. “How could it have been wrong?”

Helen feels the tears in her own eyes. Her mother’s voice echoing in her mind. *How could it have been wrong?*

“It’s okay,” says Helen.

Vera looks at her daughter, matter-of-fact.

"I couldn't keep the child," she says. "Your dad wouldn't let me."

Helen is stung by this last remark. She looks away.

"It's okay," she says, refocusing on her mother. "It's not your fault."

Vera's face crumples anew and the tears flow freely once more. When she looks up, it is as though she has come to her senses. She stares at Helen for what seems like a long time, and Helen stares back. Some understanding passes between them, although Helen cannot say what it is.

"Who are you?" her mother asks.

"I'm Helen. Your daughter."

"I thought you were a friend," she says.

"I am a friend," says Helen.

"Then, you won't tell, will you?"

A sudden look of childish fear scuds over her face.

"Of course not," Helen says.

Vera stares blankly into the grey curtains and Helen sits with hands frozen in her lap. A trolley grinds past, wheels squeaking ever louder, diminishing as it passes. Vera's skeletal fingers on her right hand work at the sheet, grasping and releasing. The left hand lies limp, with a worn spot showing where the wedding band used to be. Her lips remain sealed.

Helen shifts her gaze to the bedside cabinet; its yawning, yellow grain invades her like a scream. Invisible voices drift through the ward.

"Ow yer doin'? All roight?"

The sing-song voices.

Inside the drawer, inert as a coffin, lies the brown leather diary that belongs to her mother. She will not read it again and doubts that Vera ever will.

CHAPTER 5

Dr. Laura Fayre winds a long strand of hair behind her ear and swivels in her chair, her knees almost brushing Helen's. It is a much more intimate setting in this establishment, comprised of two semi-detached houses in the suburbs. On the lawn behind Dr. Fayre, visible through the window, is a small plastic slide and brightly coloured play equipment. Laura Fayre's demeanour is mildly serious.

"The ultrasound shows a small mass near the site of the excision," she says.

Helen's stomach drops.

"It doesn't necessarily mean anything sinister," she continues with a suggestion of a smile, and Helen's heart flickers towards a tentative hope. But she knows from the doctor's measured tone not to risk optimism. Dr. Fayre frowns by way of confirmation.

"We'll need to do a biopsy."

Dr. Fayre types a brisk command on her keyboard, sending the printer into action. She autographs the page it produces with a brief squiggle and hands it to Helen.

"It's a fine needle biopsy," she says, "and not particularly invasive or painful."

And then her features take on that pleasant expression Helen found so reassuring last time during their first meeting.

"Now, remind me what exactly you're doing by way of treatment."

"I'm taking Chinese herbs and some other supplements to boost immunity and help cleanse the liver."

Dr. Fayre nods – with some enthusiasm Helen thinks – and her hair flops over her shoulder. She flicks it back

"And how long have you been on the herbs and supplements?"

"Almost a month."

"Hm," says Dr. Fayre.

Helen bunches her toes inside her shoes.

"What if the cancer has spread?" she asks.

“Well, then we would have to consider surgery and radiotherapy; even chemotherapy.”

Laura Fayre’s expression is grave and her words have a distant echo. Helen struggles to stay in her body; to hear the doctor out.

“But let’s take it one step at a time and wait for the biopsy results.”

“I could speak to the herbalist,” says Helen. “He might want to adjust the mixture.”

“Yes,” says Dr. Fayre. “Why not do that?” She regards Helen thoughtfully. “This must be very stressful,” she says. “How are you coping?”

Helen wants to articulate just how high her stress levels are right now when Dr. Fayre reaches for her hand. Helen’s eyes fill with tears. She blinks them back, drawing strength from the doctor’s touch.

“I have felt more relaxed of late,” she admits. “The tai chi helps.”

“Anything that helps you unwind will be beneficial,” the doctor says. “And remember you can phone any time if you have concerns.”

The warmth from Laura’s hand seeps into her own; her heart steadied by the doctor’s gaze.

“Thank you,” she says. “Thank you.”

Helen can’t settle in the house; she needs to walk and all she can think of is Paul. If she hurries she will catch him before he sets off with Max. She scurries over the lawn, jumping off the low wall onto the service drive, the way she used to as a girl. The landing jars her, jabbing at the underside of her breast. She slows to a more dignified pace, guiding herself by lamp lit pools all the way to Castle Grove. Within minutes Paul appears in response to the doorbell with a half-eaten piece of toast in one hand and Max’s lead in the other. Max greets her with a broad grin and a lolling tongue, his tail wagging vigorously from side to side. He nuzzles into her coat and she runs her hand over his glossy flank.

“Fancy a walk?” says Paul. “We were just setting off.”

His expression changes. “What’s up?”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course,” he says, and she steps into the hall.

Max stands in the doorway, grinning and eager, hind quarters wagging. Paul whistles for the dog to come in and places the lead firmly on the hall table. Max drops his head and lumbers into the lounge, his eyes forming triangles of disappointment, accusingly trained on her. Helen takes the leather recliner and Paul sits opposite.

“I had the ultrasound results,” she says.

“Oh,” he says.

“Not good,” she says. “There’s a mass to the left of the excision.”

He frowns.

“It’s not conclusive” she says. “But still ...”

“What did the doctor say?”

“A biopsy ...and if it’s not looking good after that ...”

She closes her eyes, giving her weight over to the chair as though it were suddenly too much to bear. Paul kneels beside her and she rests her head on his shoulder. She feels his hand on her hair, then cupped around her back as she weeps softly into his neck. He reaches for tissues, which she presses to her face.

“Let me get that fire on,” he says. “You’re frozen.”

And it’s true; her teeth are chattering, her body numb.

Max gives a whine of protest as Paul disturbs his position on the hearthrug on his way to the gas fire. Soon a row of blue flames licks at a convincing slab of coal, gradually warming to orange and gold.

Paul sits cross-legged on the floor beside her. “How averse are you to the medical options?” he says.

She searches his eyes. “Terrified.”

He nods, taking this in.

“I bought some alkalinity test papers from the chemist on my way home,” she says. “And when I checked, my system is still too acidic. I don’t understand it – I mean, my diet is practically vegetarian now. And I thought the herbs would make a difference. Maybe it’s my liver.”

“It might take a while with the herbs,” he says.

“But, do I have that kind of time?”

They regard each other, his eyes, thoughtful.

“Perhaps you’re right – maybe I should just bite the bullet and take the conventional path like everyone else.”

Her face crumples and she swipes at her eyes with a tissue.

“I didn’t say I thought you should go for the medical option,” he says.
“Not just yet, anyway.”

“Perhaps I should try the shark cartilage, after all.”

Paul’s eyes twinkle in the firelight.

“I know,” he says, “what about vegetable juice?” It’s a great way to keep the system alkaline.”

“I don’t know anymore,” she says, shaking her head. “It’s exhausting.”

“Not a full blown juice fast,” he says. “Just incorporating juices into your diet.

He heads for the kitchen.

“You take it easy,” he says. “I won’t be a tick.”

She gazes at the flames, listening to their faint flicker and wheeze as they flash and weave around the black coal. She hears the click of a switch and the deep rumble and whirr of a machine, followed by the throaty slur and grind of vegetables running through a juicer. He moves about on the other side of the workbench with purpose and vigour.

“There,” he says, spearing the juice with a straw.

She holds up the glass to admire the ruby liquid, and when she takes a sip, its fruity burst explodes on her tongue.

“Ginger?” she says.

“Ginger, carrot, apple, beetroot, celery and lime,” he says.

“Lime!”

“It just lifts it I think,” he says.

She looks at him and a smile blooms on her lips.

“I’ll bring the juicer over for you,” he says. “That way, you can have one every day. It’ll make a difference to your ph levels.”

“But what about you?” she says.

“I don’t use it in winter,” he says.

She feels the glow of the juice warming her insides as Paul clears up and packs the juicer into a box.

But will it shrink the tumour? she wonders.

Helen presses her buttocks against the bathroom tiles and spreads her knees wide. Having decided on a belt and braces approach, it has taken only a few days to get used to the routine, and she already knows how to spoon-riddle the mixture into a thin roux. Not too thin, though, but not so claggy that it won't squirt smoothly through the syringe. Kaleb never batted an eyelid when she queried the instructions.

"We find it best to administer the mixture rectally," he had said. *"That way, it's absorbed directly into the system."*

And, of course, at Pi-Tech no conversation is sacred. Mrs. Westwood was always willing to share her illness experiences, which were legion.

"Don't stint on the aloe vera gel," she had said, adding as an aside: *"Otherwise, you'll know about it."* And she winked.

But really, there was nothing to it. And it didn't take long.

"You need to keep the mixture in your system at all times," Kaleb said, *"which essentially means administering it every eight hours."*

Mrs. Weston confirmed this. It was people like Mrs. Weston who gave Helen heart. And the eclectic Pi-Tech clientele in general.

"Never felt better," Barry, the man with terminal cancer said.

It was a comfort that he was still well a full year after finishing his treatment. Helen wondered why he still came back. He said it was for the supplements to keep his immune system in tip-top condition. Or maybe it was for the adulation he received from others, and the sense of purpose he gained from offering advice.

"They cor understond it down at the 'ospital," he said. *"Not a single tumour left."* And he sucked on his gums. *"I told 'em. It's the shark cartilage. But they teks no notice."*

Helen enjoys these quiet moments with her legs against the cool tiles, a towel under her pelvis, gazing up at her toes, the heated towel rail emitting a pleasant warmth from the adjacent wall. A bit like yoga, really, she thinks, all that blood rushing to your head. Why, she could swear her wrinkles were smoothing out and her brain clearing. She slides her legs down the wall and rolls over. There is just room between the towel rail and the toilet. And then,

curling into a foetus, she allows herself another minute or two for the blood to settle.

Helen pillows her head in the terry towelling mat, losing herself in the beige and white colour scheme. Then, she cleans the equipment in the wash basin. It is that simple. She tidies up, imagining the white paste sending shark signals through her system; deep sonic booms scuttling through her blood veins all the way to the breast. It was very helpful having the picture on the desk at Pi-Tech, the one with the red and blue blood vessels feeding into what looked like a lump of excrement, but was meant to be a tumour. In each subsequent image it morphed from an innocuous hazelnut to an amorphous shape like the caricature of a ghost with outstretched arms and bulging head. The next image showed what happened when the shark cartilage swam across the arteries, breaking the connection to the veins and causing the swelling spectre to disintegrate. It was then reabsorbed or simply died off. Helen is not sure which. Either way, she enjoys these moments three times a day when she communes with her body and finally feels in touch.

“Soul time,” Melanie said. *“Just what you need.”*

That afternoon, resting with her legs up the wall for the second time that day, Helen becomes aware of a dark sensation. She is about to gloss over it when curiosity stays her and she becomes very still. She takes in full breaths through her nose, the way Mr. Chan had demonstrated, filling her belly, exhaling slowly. Soon, Helen experiences the sensation of standing before a dark cave. At first, she imagines it is empty. Then, she sees that the walls are covered in bats. She has always been scared of bats or any dark bird, ever since a seagull flew at her as a young child when the family caught the ferry to the Isle of Wight. Silhouetted against the sun, the seagull looked dark and menacing and Helen was terrified of it getting caught in her hair. She remembers screaming uncontrollably, while her mother tried to calm her and Dad shooed the bird away.

Lying on the carpeted floor of her mother’s bathroom with her eyes closed and the blood flowing towards her head, Helen cannot easily flee the gathering sense of terror. Her heart begins to beat in her ears. But in this position, up-side down, the fear is held at a sufficient distance to allow her to

approach this cave and view the bats. They are blood clots, and she is gazing up at the inside of her womb.

Her womb is weeping. She had never thought of her uterus as an entity in its own right with feelings of its own. She feels them now in her chest, as though a stone had rolled from her belly down into her heart.

Tears gather in her eyes and quickly turn to sobbing. This dark cave – home to her child for a full nine months – still mourns its loss. Not only has Helen not allowed herself to grieve properly, she has cut herself off from this part of her body completely. Blamed it, even, for her sorrow.

Helen slides her legs down the wall and lies with her knees drawn up to her chest. She feels as though she has just given birth to herself and the dead child. And yet she is fully formed. Safe. She lies there, breathing, consciously directing the breath and her awareness into her womb; she is simultaneously the mother, the child and the cocoon that held and nurtured it. It is a timeless space, where thoughts and feelings weave themselves into a silent language. She is trying to understand it. It speaks in images, pregnant with meaning and part of her understands their significance, although she could not explain it.

The tears are no longer purely those of grief, but are tinged with compassion for herself, and for her uterus, which she has cursed each month, especially since the stillbirth, when the cramps and headaches have been so bad. Lately, she has blamed the liver for its inability to process oestrogen. Blamed the build up of harmful oestrogens for the cancer.

Now she sees that the bats clinging to the walls of the cave have eyes – small, red eyes, full of fear. She tells them that evening is here and they are free to go, and then watches as they drop from the roof of the cave and take flight. She is not scared, but relieved instead to see them spread their wings. Now when she looks up, Helen sees that the walls are lined with amethysts. Later, she will paint this image.

As Helen approaches the doors of St Joseph's, she sees a tall figure in a dark coat and hat. She watches him, shoulders hunched, making his way across the car park. She would know that stately bearing anywhere and with recognition comes the impetus to catch him before he vanishes into the night.

“Excuse me,” she says.

But the man continues on doggedly across the tarmac.

Helen runs ahead and then slows down so as not to cause alarm.

“Hello,” she says and he pulls himself up with a start.

“It’s me, Helen – Vera’s daughter.”

He steadies himself, straightening up, innocent in his surprise.

“Well, well,” he says. “I just popped across to see how your mother was going. Not very talkative this evening.”

Helen feels the chill under her collar. She should not keep the old gentleman standing here in the cold.

“I wondered,” she says. “Could we go for a coffee? I would love to talk to you.”

“Coffee?” he says, startled, his nose and cheeks pink with cold.

“Or tea.”

She bites her lip. At this hour, he is probably heading home for an evening meal. He works his jaw, as though ruminating a response.

“Well, I daresay I could spare a few minutes,” he says and together they turn towards the ramp at the hospital entrance.

Their footsteps echo unevenly as they proceed down drab corridors of jaundiced light towards the cafeteria. Ted pushes against the door, struggling to hold it open for her, a gesture she had intended for him. But her shame is quickly replaced by relief at not offending him, as he proudly holds it ajar. He ploughs ahead, selecting a table near the wall at a safe distance from the coffee machine then pulls out a chair, which Helen accepts. She feels gauche and ridiculous. Ted casts around for the menu.

“I think it’s all written out on the blackboard up there,” she says, nodding in the direction of the counter.

He removes his hat, placing it on the table, before manoeuvring his body in the direction of the blackboard and searching his inside coat pocket for spectacles. A large woman in a navy housecoat is busy filing her nails behind the food cabinet, ignoring them.

“What will you have?” says Helen. “There’s English breakfast, Earl Grey...I think it’s self-service.”

He rises and she stays him with her hand.

“I’ll get it,” she says.

“Oh, well. English breakfast, then. Milk no sugar.”

“Anything to eat?” she asks.

“No, thank-you,” he says. “I’ve got my dinner waiting at home.”

Helen manages to rouse the assistant from her manicure and returns with two paper cups with plastic lids.

“I’m sorry about the cups,” she says.

He graciously accepts the tea without comment, prising the lid off before taking a cautious sip.

Helen imbibes the taste of plastic peppermint – very hot.

“I’m sorry to hold you up,” she begins. “I know it’s dinner time and you’ve probably already been here most of the afternoon. But, I wanted to ask you, as someone who has known my mother since her schooldays. She says things...I’m not always sure what’s true or imagined.”

He looks at her through a tangle of eyebrows.

“I can’t say I knew your mother all that well. I may have mentioned she was best friends with my sister, Josie.”

Helen waits; she is not in any hurry.

“I was slightly older – very shy,” he says, smiling at the thought. “I didn’t pay too much attention to them, really.”

“But you did know my mother. As a schoolgirl, I mean, and later – after the war.”

“Josie kept in touch. Saw each other in the early days when they both had youngsters. Well – that would be you and your siblings. Then Josie moved away to Harborough Magna, the other side of Coventry. They didn’t see each other often after that.”

“Mum tells me she moved to Malvern to escape the bombing in Birmingham,” says Helen.

She observes him carefully as he considers this question, for it is a question, and he seems to appreciate that.

“It were after the war, if I remember correctly,” he says.

“I’m told she worked there in a hospital”

“The Mercy, I believe,” he says. “That’s right.”

Helen feels her hands against the corrugations of the cup. She wants to know why Vera moved to Malvern. How long she stayed there. Whether she knew Dad then. When she came back. At this moment, sitting in front of Ted, politely enduring his tea, Helen cannot remember why she needs to know all this, nor can she explain her sense of urgency. All she knows is that she cannot ask. She too sips her tea.

“Mum talks about a trip to France. Do you know anything about that?”

He nods thoughtfully and there is a light in those whisky eyes.

“Ah, now that was Josie’s doing,” he says.

“Really?”

“Ah, yes. That’s quite a story, and I don’t suppose you want me to bore you with it all now.”

“I’d love to hear about it,” says Helen, trying to temper her eagerness.

“Josie’s young man – Fred – well, of course, he’s dead now. Wartime sweethearts. He was one of the lucky ones who came back. Joined the RAF and was shot down near the south of France.”

Ted’s eyes are bright as he settles into his tale, warming to his captive audience of one.

“Managed to get away to some village. Thanks to the kindness of a family there that he did survive. Took him in and hid him. He were returned here – I don’t know how. War ended shortly after, so he never went back. Anyroad, Fred, well naturally, he wanted to see them again; thank the family. Josie went with him. They went over on the boat, then by train. It was quite an adventure. Well, your mother – being Josie’s best friend and all, she went along with them.”

“Ah,” says Helen. “So that’s where she learned to speak French.”

“Well, they’d already learned some French at school, but of course, they became quite proficient over time, especially your mum.”

“So, they found the family, then?”

Ted’s face lights up.

“Oh, yes. They had a grand old time. Welcomed like royalty. Josie still talks about the food – the things they ate – things we never heard of. The wine – of course, it was the Bordeaux region, you understand.”

“Oh, I see,” says Helen. “That explains a great deal.”

He smiles into the table.

“Yes, oh, yes – they had a grand old time.”

“So, this family,” she says. “Were they called Le Clos?”

“Oh, no,” he says. “Some unpronounceable name – Man..something.”

“They had a son?” she says.

“Yes, that’s right, a son. Similar age to Fred – they had a lot in common.” He shakes his head. “Very brave. Involved in the Resistance.”

“This son – if you don’t mind my asking – he wasn’t killed in the war, then?”

“Oh, no,” he says. “Wounded, like Fred, but he survived.”

“What was his name?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he says, frowning. “I can’t remember.”

“It wouldn’t have been Jean-Claude, would it?”

Ted turns his eyes on her, startled.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “No. Some other name. I can’t recall. But I’m certain it wasn’t that.”

“I found letters,” says Helen. “Lots of airmail letters from someone in a town called Langon. His name was Jean-Claude.”

He looks at her, glassy-eyed, his spine taut. He shakes his head and reaches for his hat, which he replaces on his head. He hunches over his tea and takes another sip.

“Do you know anything about this – pen friend?” she asks.

“Nothing more than your mother’s willing to tell,” he says, eyes firmly fixed on the cup.

Helen’s mind swirls with unanswered questions. Surely Mum and Dad had already met before the end of the war. They married in 1951. Why did Vera travel to France without Dad? Why did she move to Malvern? Clearly it had nothing to do with the bombing. Helen thinks of the baby. More than likely, that was the reason.

“Well,” says Ted, pushing the cup to one side. “I’d best be on my way. It’s been nice talking to you.”

He looks tired, his posture stooped.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” he says.

“Thank you,” she says. “I’m actually on my way to see Mum.”

“Right-oh,” he says, raising his hat. “I’ll wish you a good evening, then.”

He turns and heads for the exit and she follows. Again, he pushes on the heavy door, wedging it with his body as she squeezes through. They walk back down the corridor, their footsteps out of rhythm. She wants to apologise for pelting him with questions; for prying into something he is reluctant to divulge.

Helen climbs the stairs. She feels the weight of Ted’s shoulders under her own coat, his sorrow conflated with her own personal grief. She hauls herself up on the handrail, arriving breathless in the corridor, where she stares down the double doors. The sick feeling in her stomach is not just about the cancer; it’s about Mum. Did she love Dad or not? Or were they living a lie? She closes her eyes, steadying herself against the wall.

Vera is asleep, which is hardly surprising with only an hour to go before the end of visiting time. But her mother is not at peace. Helen studies her bone structure beneath the fine tissue of wrinkles. Could she paint this face from memory? The sharp nose with its deep line above the bridge, knitting the brows together. The severity of that expression is familiar; domestic. She pictures her mother in profile, darning a sock or studying the crossword. But there is one moment that stands out in her mind; Vera entering the bedroom in Toodyay, frowning, her hands obscured by foliage.

Helen lay there, feverish, the fan strafing her hair and skin.

“I don’t want flowers,” she remembers saying.

But, instead of a bouquet, Vera proffered cabbage leaves.

“Wrap these round your breasts,” she said, her eyes filled with tears. *“It will ease the worst of it.”*

As though anything could ease the cruel irony of breasts overflowing with milk for a dead child.

Helen looks at her mother now, at the same pinched features; then she catches her breath. Vera knew first hand the physical intensity of this burning grief. She too would have been engorged with milk when they gave away the baby.

Roger rings the doorbell, unleashing a miniature imitation of Big Ben chimes and a spate of yapping. Kate's voice is audible in the distance commanding Brandy to silence.

"Jane! Ken! One of you – answer the door!"

A few more thuds and bangs follow and then the door flies open.

"Hi," says Jane. Two large horse tails sprout silkily from one blue and one red scrunchie at either side of her head. She is not wearing make-up this time.

"Aunty Helen!" she exclaims as though they hadn't met for months.

"Uncle Roger!"

They each give her a hug and follow her down the hall. The stairway is lined with neat piles of papers and books and other paraphernalia, including a chewed rubber ball. Kate appears flushed from the kitchen, her hair accidentally fashionable in steam-spikes. Helen proffers a bouquet of mauve lisianthus and Kate's eyebrows arch in surprise as she plants an air kiss by Helen's cheek.

"You can go straight through," she says and then shouts up the stairs, "lunch is on the table!"

"Jim!" says Kate to the grey flannel legs under the newspaper. "Offer them a drink!"

Jim unfolds himself, abandoning the Daily Mail to the carpet. It lands next to the birdcage, setting off a tweeting of budgies, edging up and down their perch like a couple of penguins. The electric light shines through what remains of Jim's hair, catching on his frontal pate.

"What do you want to drink?" he says, expressionless.

"A tonic water would be nice."

Jim frowns.

"Or a mineral water. Either will be fine."

He turns to Roger who requests a beer, bringing a subtle flicker of relief to Jim's features.

Kate bustles in from the kitchen bearing a casserole dish between a quilted oven cloth.

"Ken!" she shouts over her shoulder. "Lunch!"

“How are the pigeons?” says Helen as Jim returns with a bottle of Batham’s Best. She has only ever known him discuss two topics; West Bromwich Albion and his carrier pigeons. But Jim disappears into the hall, apparently deaf to her question.

“Can I do anything?” she asks.

“You sit there,” says Kate, relieving herself of the casserole. “And Roger, there. Ken!”

She unties her apron and flings it expertly through the doorway onto a kitchen stool.

“Where *is* everyone?”

“Jane’s gone to the shop for some tonic water,” says Jim in a monotone.

“Oh, she shouldn’t have done that!” Helen protests.

“That’s what I said,” he replies.

His dull tones and the lack of eye contact accentuate Helen’s sense of unease, which is not aided by Ken, who collapses onto the chair next to her with a sigh.

“Hi, Ken,” says Helen, amazed how much he has grown since she last saw him.

Ken combs back his lank tresses with irritated fingers, elbows claiming the table.

“Manners!” warns Kate, plunging a spoon into the bubbling lasagne. She deftly dollops six portions onto separate plates, which are passed around the table.

“Help yourself to vegetables,” she says, digging a serving spoon into a pile of Brussels sprouts. “Glad you could both come.”

The remark is made without a hint of gladness.

Ken casts his eyes ceilingward with another hair flick, pelvis sliding into a deeper slouch.

“I don’t know when the last time would have been...”

Helen hears herself parroting from her mother’s “lovely family all together” repertoire.

“...when we were all...” she trails off lamely.

“Did you watch the game on Saturday?” Roger asks between forkfuls of lasagne.

“Oh, ar,” says Jim.

“That young ‘un – Mears.”

“Got some speed on ‘im,” says Jim.

The front door slams, precipitating Brandy into a fit of barking.

“Shut up!” yells Ken.

Jane appears fresh-faced, canvas bag clinking with bottles.

“I don’t want much,” she says on her way to the kitchen.

“Classic goal,” says Jim. “In the last two minutes an’ all.”

Jane’s pig tails swish from side to side as she bobs into the dining room with a fizzy glass of tonic, ice and lemon. She places it on Helen’s drink mat with a flash of teeth and dimples, which quickly morph into a frown.

“Mum! That’s way too much!”

Kate ignores her.

“I’ve spoken to Dr. Broadbent,” she says.

Helen nearly chokes on a Brussels sprout.

“Keep this up,” says Roger, “and they’ll make it back into the premier league.”

“She doesn’t think it’s good for Mum’s morale to be in hospital overly long. Plus, they need the beds.”

“Dr. Jay, the ward doctor, says there’s a bit of movement in her leg now,” says Helen.

“That reminds me,” says Kate. “There’s a meeting with Dr. Jay next week. I think we should all be there.”

“Right-oh,” says Roger. “Give us a bell when you know the details.”

“Dr. Broadbent thinks the next step is a halfway house,” says Kate.

“Sounds like Nan’s been doing drugs,” says Ken.

“Don’t be so gross!” says Jane.

“A sort of rehab place, you mean?” says Helen.

“It’s amazing what they can do with rehab,” says Roger. “Had a chat with the physio down there the other day. Very interesting. At first, apparently, she couldn’t see the left side of the page – only the right.”

“What page?” says Jane.

“Any page,” says Roger. “But now she can – apart from the extreme left margin.”

“What’s she doing being a physio if she can’t see properly?” says Jane.

“He means Gran – idiot!” says Ken.

Jane pokes her tongue out at her brother.

“She can sit up now too,” says Helen, “support her arm better.”

“Dr. Broadbent says there shouldn’t be a problem getting her into a halfway house.”

“Apparently,” says Helen, “you can get a nurse to come to the house several times a day to help with showering, toileting, meals and that. And then, if she makes good headway, she can go to a day care centre – they’d pick her up and everything. That way Mum can get to meet other people, do activities and things. It’s very stimulating for them.”

“I know the service you’re talking about,” says Kate. “They have to come and assess the house first. Obviously, as soon as they see that steep drive and the steps, they won’t let her stay there. And then there’s the stairs. No downstairs shower. Besides, she’d still need someone with her the whole time.”

“You’re forgetting, there’s me,” says Helen. “Mum keeps saying she wants to come home.”

“Helen!” says Kate. “Even if Mum did come home and you stayed with her, it’s only for six months. You’ll have to go back to Australia eventually.”

“But think how much more she’d improve in a familiar setting. I mean, she’s been there for forty years. People really deteriorate at her age if they lose their home. And all her belongings – the memories they hold, the house and garden. You know how much she loves the garden.”

“There’s certainly a lot of belongings and things,” says Roger. “And, in any case, Hel, there’s your own health to consider.”

“Precisely,” says Kate.

“Oh, it’s so sad,” says Jane. “Granny *belongs* in that house. It won’t be the same if someone else lives there.”

Kate sighs.

“Well, these places get booked up and we need to think about it. What I’m suggesting is that we put her name down. We can always cancel if it turns out she doesn’t need it.”

Helen views the pile of mince at the side of her plate, swimming in tomato and oil; she hadn’t yet mentioned her vegetarian aspirations.

“I thought you said there wouldn’t be a problem getting her into a halfway house.”

“A nursing home,” says Kate. “I’m talking about after the halfway house.”

Helen can’t bring herself to repeat the phrase, *nursing home*. She considers the remains of her lasagne. She has eaten the pasta and braved the sprouts, the indigestible creamy topping. But she doesn’t know how to dispose of the mince and tomato. It looks acid-forming.

“Well, that’s all a bit down the track,” Roger says. “I don’t suppose there’s any hurry. And, besides, like Helen says, Mum’s making progress. She’d be happier at home.”

“And what happens when Helen goes back?” says Kate.

“Mum will be in much better shape by then,” says Helen. “And besides it won’t take that long to sort out some regular home help.”

Kate lets out another sigh.

“We’ll have to be guided by the experts. And I’m just telling you what Dr. Broadbent says. It’s the dementia, Helen. That’s not going to improve. I think we should at least make some enquiries.”

“Mum! You’re so cruel!” says Jane. “How would *you* like it if *I* booked you into a nursing home the minute you got old?”

She jumps up and rushes to the door, where she turns theatrically. “Without your permission!”

She slams it and storms up the stairs.

Kate rises, shaking back her hair and gathering up the plates.

“Blackberry and apple tart, anyone?” she says.

“Only if there’s custard,” says Ken.

“Of course, there’s custard!” says Kate frostily. “There’s *always* custard!”

Jim acquiesces with a nod, while Roger gives Kate the thumbs up sign.

“I don’t feel hungry,” says Helen.

“There, now,” says Kate, briskly stacking the plates, “we’ll talk about it later.”

The rattle of cutlery and irate footwork can be heard from the kitchen above the pet shop twitter of caged budgies.

Helen checks herself in the bathroom mirror, satisfied that the scar is fading, the lump much reduced; above all relieved that the fine needle test delivered a normal result, even though Dr. Fayre warned this was not unambiguous.

“We still need to follow up with an ultrasound in three months,” she said.

And yet her breast feels tight. Exploring further, her fingers find a raised lump, more pronounced than the original one; less round and contained, the shape of a spreading hillock. She stares into the mirror and her mother’s eyes stare through her as though she were a ghost; the two of them still imprisoned inside the grey, hospital curtain. Helen’s breath freezes and her body goes cold and clammy.

She grabs her dressing gown and hurries to the phone. Damn! What has she done with the number? In the drawer; in the dresser in the dining room. Why did she put it there? On a scrap of paper, together with some other details. A sense of her mother passes through her mind like a brief visitor, as she makes for the dining room and wrestles with the drawer. Why does nothing work properly in this house? Her hands shake as she lifts the drink mats and a wad of paperwork, discovering the scrap of envelope with the number exactly where she knew it would be. For a fleeting second, she understands Vera’s method. Why does one remember the oddness of secret places and not the chronology of a filing system? This is the reason – for there is a reason – if she had put it in a file, she would not know whether to look under *k* for Kaleb, *p* for Pi-Tech, or *c* for cancer.

“Kaleb? Oh, I’m so glad you’re there.”

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Helen. Um...look...I...the lump.”

“Yes,” he says in a manner so slow and considered that she begins to calm down.

“Just now, this morning, after I got up. It felt uncomfortable. And when I felt it...it, well, it seems to have grown. Or maybe not the original lump – another one. It’s a different shape and it’s definitely larger...I’m almost sure.”

“I see,” he says. And have you been keeping up with the shark cartilage?”

“Yes.”

“Three times a day?”

“Yes.”

He draws breath.

“I see, well what sometimes happens is that the area swells as the blood supply diminishes.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” says Helen. “Why would it do that?”

She begins to think this man is a quack, after all. Can almost hear Kate’s clucking satisfaction, the chin pulled in, exactly like Gran, with the “*told you so*” look in her eye.

“Let me explain,” he says. “Some people do find that the cancer site swells as the oxygen supply is cut off.”

Helen hangs on his every word, not for the sense it makes, but for the lifeline of his presence on the other end, and that even tone of voice.

“What should I do?” she asks, feeling more sane and centred.

“Why not wait over the weekend,” he says. “Keep up the shark cartilage and the other nutrients. Rest and stay calm – try not to get stressed. More than likely, the lump will subside. If it hasn’t done so by Monday, I’d recommend making an appointment with your doctor.”

“I see,” she says.

“Just to put your mind at ease,” he continues.

“Okay,” she says. “So, you think it will settle down?”

“More than likely,” he says.

“Thanks,” she says. “I’ll let you know how I go.”

But she is worried and the thought of an entire weekend trying to ignore the tight swelling every time she moves is too much for her. She

rummages through her purse, remembering the appointment card, which she hasn't yet transferred to the drawer.

"I'm afraid Dr. Fayre is away on leave until the eighteenth."

"The eighteenth!" Helen almost yells down the phone. "But that's almost two weeks away."

"I can fit you in with Dr. Catchpole on Monday."

"Oh, no, don't worry," says Helen.

Helen sits staring at the phone, unable to move, and then her stomach twists with the sudden realisation that she will have to resort to Dr. Broadbent. She closes her eyes, desperately trying to think of another option, aware of the minutes ticking away. It is Saturday morning and if she wants to see a doctor before Monday, she must act quickly. She riffles through her mother's address book. It seems natural now to find Dr. Broadbent's number under *e* for Emily.

Helen is in luck; the doctor will see her at the end of her morning session about 12.00 o'clock in the Amblecote surgery. As she replaces the receiver, she begins to shiver. Whether from cold or fear, she cannot say. Her stomach turns over at the thought of Dr. Broadbent. Helen checks her watch. It is not yet 10.00. What will she do until noon? She breathes into her lungs, trying to ease the tension, and thoughts of Mr. Chan infiltrate her mind; thoughts of Paul. Isn't there a class on a Saturday around this time? She grabs the car keys from the dish in the hall. If she parks at the Institute, she will only miss the warm up. But when she gets there, all the bays are taken and she is forced to drive around in circles until someone exits near the gate. Helen listens to the ticking of the engine, nervous now at the thought of barging in on a class she doesn't normally attend. She fights against the stale smell of upholstery, wondering whether she should turn around and go home. Except that she is more stressed than ever now and has finally found a parking bay, so it makes more sense to join the class. Her breath settles at this prospect and she locks the car, heading purposefully towards the Crystal Centre. Her sense of anticipation builds as she mounts the steps and waltzes through the cafe, past the steamy warmth of the food counter and in through the double doors at the other end, where she peers in through the porthole. There is Master Chan, cutting rhythmic swathes through the air with his slow

motion grace. Everyone is sitting with their backs to the wall, watching. It is a good moment to slip in unnoticed. She takes up a place next to the man in the green tracksuit; who shuffles sideways to accommodate her.

Helen faces Master Chan like everyone else, but her eyes swivel to the left and right. There is no sign of Paul. She shifts her head slightly and her heart falls out of rhythm. Is that him, shoulder to shoulder with that woman, what's her name? Sue. His head inclines towards hers, as she whispers in his ear. He smiles and nods. They look very comfortable together.

Master Chan strikes the horse stance, legs bent at the knees, weight evenly distributed as he traces the line of his hands, ruffling the air like a horse's mane. But it does not soothe her. She thinks of leaving, but cannot move; and in any case it would be rude to create a disturbance now.

There is a general shuffling and coughing, and the man next to her rises to his feet as everyone stands. Helen gets up, positioning herself between the green tracksuit and a blond woman in pink stretch pants. The woman flicks her hair into a top knot and smiles, but Helen is unable to move a facial muscle and simply stares in return. Soon, they are all mirroring Master Chan's movements, as he runs through them again. Helen feels like one of those beaded animals they used to play with as children, standing rigid until someone pressed the button underneath and their elastic limbs collapsed. She leans to the right.

"Weight on the right foot," says Allan, interpreting. "Transferring to the left, bending, sweeping, lifting, raising the right leg."

Helen closes her eyes against the confusion of impressions, the grating sound of Allan's voice; the forest of limbs, subtly out of sync. The energy throbbing from her right, where she cannot see Paul and Sue, but imagines them moving in harmony together.

"Coming for a coffee?" says the woman with the blond top-knot, whom Helen now recognises from the other class. Her name is June.

"I could do with something," says Helen, aware that it is hardly worth going home before her appointment.

"I'll buy you a pie," she says. "They do a lovely cheesecake an' all."
June's eyes round with enthusiasm.

“Go on,” she says, and Helen finds herself fronting up to the counter with her new friend. She declines June’s pie offer in favour of coffee, but the minute Helen hears the machine screaming hot milk into a froth, she feels guilty. Should she change that for a lemongrass plunger?

“Capuccino for me, an’ all,” says June.

Helen comments on June’s suntan, more for something to say, than out of genuine interest.

“Benidorm,” she says. “Fantastic! Lovely and warm – even now.”

Helen takes a draft of coffee, savouring the bitter-sweet liquid under the milky froth, the faint chocolaty powdering that sticks to her upper lip. She is glad she followed her instincts and didn’t order herbal.

“Fantastic!” repeats June. “And so cheap!”

Helen chokes and puts down her cup, as Paul walks in through the double doors, still chatting to Sue.

“No kidding!” says June. “You can buy chips and Coke for £2.50.”

“How wonderful,” says Helen flatly.

Sue makes for a table to the far right and Paul follows. Helen tries to concentrate on the delights of the Costa Blanca in autumn. After a while, she is aware of a disturbance in the air waves; an abrasive energy cutting a path to their table.

“Hi. Mind if I join you?”

Before she can say, “yes”, Sue insinuates herself into a vacant chair, leaning forwards on her elbows with an authoritative air, silencing June. Sue smiles, elongating the dimples into long lines at the side of her cheeks.

“I’m organising a walk for The Mary Stevens Hospice,” she says in a mellifluous tone.

“Oh, yes, where?” says June.

“The Pennine Way. Anyone interested?”

She turns her brown eyes on Helen, who considers the sleek hair and glossy fringe, the red lipstick and hooded eyes.

“I’m not very fit,” says June, indicating her spare tyre.

“It’s for charity,” says Sue. “If you can manage the tai chi, you’ll be fine.”

“Well, I’ll have to talk to Ron,” she says.

“I’ll give you a couple of forms. He might like to come too.”

June scans the form with a doubtful expression.

“We’re not free the week-end of the tenth,” she says, her complexion aglow with relief.

Sue turns a ruby smile on Helen.

“What about you?”

A sudden tickle claws at Helen’s throat. She eyes her coffee; the collapsing froth and cooling liquid. How can she explain about the shark cartilage? The juice regime? She can’t lug a juicer and a bag of carrots over the Pennines. And shouldn’t in any case be swinging her arms on a mountain walk.

“I’m not free either,” she says.

Sue gives her a long look.

“Paul’s doing it,” she says. “Perhaps you’d like to sponsor one of us.”

Helen stares at Sue, aware of her own mouth, unhinged, and the loss of muscular control to snap it shut. A freight load of questions hammer through her mind: *How long has Paul been friends with this woman?* She must have seen the two of them arriving together of late. *What does she think she’s doing?*

The look of satisfaction on Sue’s face provides a hint.

“I’ll leave you with a couple of sponsor forms,” she says, her voice oily smooth, and she rises from the table with all the grace of a tai chi master, slinging a long, leather bag over her shoulder.

Paul, meanwhile, who has been joined by Allan, raises his head in a cheerful grin at the approaching figure, who sits down beside him and crosses her legs. Helen studies her cup, the teddy bear biscuit with its arms held wide, flailing in a spillage of coffee, as she digests this vision.

“You should go,” says June.

“I can’t,” says Helen. “I’m busy on the tenth!”

“Not the Pennines,” says June. “Benidorm!”

“Ah, Miss Harper.”

Dr. Broadbent’s voice is business-like, her manner stern.

“What seems to be the trouble?”

To her dismay, Helen is returned to the emotional age of a pre-school child. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. She tries to swallow.

“Is it the breast?”

“Um, yes.”

“Do you need a referral?”

“A referral?”

“To the surgeon!”

“No!” says Helen, more violently than intended. “No. I am doing quite well, but I found another swelling in my breast.”

Dr. Broadbent levels Helen with a penetrating glare, slowly filling her chest cavity with air. It is amazing how such a large chest can keep on growing, and the woman’s stature with it. Helen does her best to hold her ground.

“Let me examine it,” she says.

Helen submits to Broadbent’s prodding, wincing with terror that these unkind digits of steel will trigger the cancer to spread.

“Hm,” she says. “It *is* swollen.”

Helen puts on her clothes and returns sheepishly to the chair opposite Dr. Broadbent, who is scribbling something down on a notepad.

“I suggest,” she says, after a vicious full stop. “An ultrasound and biopsy.”

“Right,” she says. “Thanks.”

Helen rips at the packaging, releasing coils of art paper onto the loft floor, her heart tight in her chest. She selects a single sheet and, with shaking hands, lowers it into the watery depths of the plastic tray. A bubble escapes from the underside, and then a lesser one, commuting to a thin stream. Helen presses harder, feeling the stiff edges of the paper yield, then, lifting, she waits until the flow becomes an erratic drip pulsing in her ears. She lays the sheet out on the towel covering her mother’s desk and hovers with her brush over the poster paints.

Already lumps are forming, their slopes feathering dry as damp troughs pool beneath them. She works quickly, daubing on red and watching as it spiders over the page, which soaks it up like the tongue of a thirsty cat.

She reaches for blue, uncaring of the bloodied handprint smearing the label, her breath regaining a sense of rhythm as royal rivers temper the picture's heat. Abandoning the brush, Helen presses her fingers to the raw paint, massaging with bare hands to achieve the exact shade of mauve she is after. Then, she steps back to scan the result for the hoped-for sign; the face or figure that invariably reveals itself. But nothing appears. She picks out another pot and dashes it over the surface, her heart torn between horror and glee as tributaries of tar make inroads into her red and blue fire.

Roger and Kate are already at the hospital when Helen arrives. She takes the empty chair next to Roger.

"They've just wheeled her off for some tests," he says in a loud whisper.

But Helen can't concentrate. She is disturbed by the absence of Vera's bed and the fact that they are all gathered around the cavity it has left with the curtains drawn, as though their mother were still there. Helen is also doing her best not to think of the swelling in her breast, which if anything seemed worse this morning.

The curtains part and Dr. Jayaraman appears in their midst. He wears a stethoscope over a short white coat, neatly-pressed trousers and well-polished shoes. He carries the obligatory clipboard nestled in the crook of his elbow securing notes, which he frowns at from time to time as he speaks.

"Your mother...is doing very well now."

Dr. Jayaraman pauses on the word "mother", rushing the end of the sentence in time with an accelerated head-wobble. Helen shifts in her chair, fighting against an undertow of distractions.

Hi, Helen. It's me, Paul. I'm sorry I didn't catch you at tai chi before you left. Give me a call.

A likely story! Helen had continued to ignore his calls. She grinds her teeth.

"All being well with these latest tests," he says, steadying his head, "Mrs. Harper can leave the hospital."

There is a silence as each of them struggles to pose the question they have so far managed to avoid. Roger is the first to speak. "Can she go home?"

After some elaborate neck movements, during which Dr. Jay also examines the lino exposed by the lack of Vera's bed, he says, "that depends."

There is another silence and they wait in anticipation of some explanation, which Dr. Jay appears to be developing behind closed eyes. He smiles. "She will need full-time care. If there is someone who can stay with her; keep an eye on her; she can manage."

Kate draws breath to speak.

"But," adds Dr. Jay with a twang of the tongue, "stairs, she cannot manage."

"Mum lives at the top of a steep hill," says Roger.

"Steep hills, no, definitely not."

"She can drive," says Helen.

Dr. Jay tut-tuts, shaking his head emphatically.

"Driving. No. She cannot drive."

"What about a driving test? She's been driving up till now," says Roger.

"Up till now, driving, not so good," he says.

"Not so good," mutters Roger. "Yes, having been with her to Tesco's a couple of months back, you could have a point. And I don't scare easily."

Kate sighs. "So," she says, "if Mum can't drive or manage the hill and the stairs...if she needs full-time care...Well, basically, Dr. Jayaraman, what you are saying is that Mum needs to go into a nursing home."

The word is out. It echoes around the curtained chamber, coming to rest in the gap left by Vera's bed. Helen inwardly weeps, but no one seems to notice.

"What options are available to us?" Kate asks.

"Options, yes," says Dr. Jay. "Many, many options."

He smiles brightly, relaxing his hold on the clipboard, which swings by his side like a cricket bat.

"If you care to go to reception, they can give you many options."

“Mum doesn’t have private insurance,” says Kate.

“National Health,” he says, turning slightly towards the gap in the curtains. “National Health has a range of options.”

“What sort of options?”

“Reception has all the details,” he says with a smile.

How long is Vera likely to have before she can be released from hospital? Helen wonders. Can she stay here until something else is arranged? Or go home in between? As long as Helen is there to look after her, of course.

“Trouble with the NHS,” says Roger, “is that it could take a while.”

Helen sprawls on her childhood bed, tears coursing over her cheeks, as she stares at the lightshade. The same one perhaps that swayed in and out of her eleven-year-old vision when she fell down the slippery slide. Except that this time there is no angel of light. Just the dark abyss glimpsed in the hollow where her mother’s bed had been. She can still see the three of them clustered round the gap, searching the silence for a word of hope.

Outside the window a brave bird flaps in the gathering gloom, and Helen’s thoughts fly with it to the southern spring she may never see again. The jacaranda trees in bloom, like that first time with Melanie, driving through blossoms in a mirage of mauve. From the tape deck *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* sent shivers down her spine as everything slowed, and Helen felt herself inside the music. They could well have been *on a boat in a river* moving through the streetscape in a psychedelic haze. And now, the fetid sweetness of blossoms mingles in memory with Melanie’s smile on the salt-gifted air.

A glimmer of sun tangles in the pear branches, then dies, triggering thoughts of her own insides; her lymphatic system with its dark tributaries and mistletoe knots. Helen’s eyes close as she feels the last ounce of will drain from her. What cruel fate has brought her to the same corner of the same room where she almost died before? Then, Helen felt the shame of failure. And now, when she had hoped to live, it’s too late. Why didn’t she act sooner? The tears pool in her ears and grow cold. She thought she had time.

It was a non-aggressive tumour, wasn't it? Yet no one mentioned the secondaries creeping up on her in the dark. Is *this* how it happens?

The cupboards loom like ghosts, filled with the junk of youth she thought she had left behind. Her old school boater, scrawled with felt-tip names and broken promises: "Don't forget me! Sarah." She wonders vaguely what happened to Sarah. Helen pictures Kate, with martyred stoicism, strewing petals over her grave. And Roger. She is truly sorry to add to his burden. The cancer has spread and no amount of alternatives has the power to stop it.

The sound of the doorbell cuts through. Helen lies pinned to the bed, alert and listening, the room bathed in the weak promise of morning. She is still fully clothed and her mouth tastes sour. The bell chimes again, and after the third time, she hears Brandy's yap, yap, yap, and Jane's voice, if she's not mistaken, telling her to "shush". Helen wipes the sleep from her eyes and drags herself from the bed, her mind washed of all thought.

"Aunty Helen!" says Jane "Shall I take Brandy round the back?"

"Oh, er, yes," says Helen.

"I've come to try out the juice, remember?" says Jane.

Slowly Helen's brain clicks into gear.

"Juice," she says.

"The vegie juice you said was going to make you better."

"Of course. I was just going to make some for breakfast," she lies.

"Come through."

"I'll come round the back" says Jane, restraining the dog. "Brandy's got muddy paws."

Helen scoops up the early morning post littering the floor, and dumps it on the kitchen table. She drags out the juicer and sets it up on the workbench, catching a glimpse of Brandy cavorting with a ball on the lawn. It gives her double vision and her head begins to swim. She scrubs half-heartedly at the carrots and passes them to Jane, who attacks them with the knife, its plastic handle hitting the board with an irregular clatter.

Jane tentatively feeds a wedge of carrot into the tube and it bounces back at her.

“Oh, my God! It’s trying to bite me!” she screams.

“Don’t throw it! Just guide it through gently,” says Helen. “it’s best with a few pieces at once.”

“Oh, wow!” says Jane.

“There. You’re getting the hang of it now.”

“Look at the colour!” she shouts. “All green and pink and slimy.”

“It looks even better when you stir it up,” says Helen.

“Shouldn’t we drink it from a straw or something?” says Jane.

Helen feels a trickle of life returning to her veins.

“Why not?” she says. “Do you know where Granny keeps them?”

Jane steps out to the pantry and Helen pulls the morning mail towards her, absent-mindedly shuffling through the letters. The large white envelope bears a Perth postmark. For a moment, she thinks of Melanie, but it looks too official with red marks from a franking machine.

“Found them,” says Jane. “Pick a colour.”

Helen watches as Jane sucks on the straw, eyelashes fluttering above her cheeks. She winces and then laughs.

“It’s weird,” she says.

“Haven’t you ever had vegetable juice before?”

“No,” she says. “It’s not as…” she takes another sip. “Not as…veggie-like, as I thought.”

“There’s an apple in it,” says Helen, “and the lime gives it a tartness I quite like.”

“Is it a recipe? You know, do you have a book with all different ideas and things in?”

“No. A neighbour lent me the juicer and said this was a nice combination. I’m experimenting.”

“What the people next door – I thought they were old.”

“No, Paul – the man with the dog – Max, you know.”

“Oh, the tai chi dude.”

“Yea, the tai chi dude,” she says her voice flattening out.

“You don’t sound too impressed,” says Jane.

“Looks like I’ve got a postcard from him,” she says.

“What does it say?”

"I don't know. I'll read it later."

"Let's have a look," says Jane, reaching for the card. "The Pennine Way. Looks a bit like Wales. What's he doing on the Pennine Way?"

"He's gone for a walk with some friends," says Helen.

"Anything for Granny?" she asks, scooping the pile towards her.

"Just some bills, by the looks," says Helen.

"Electricity and stuff," says Jane. "Well, I suppose you have to pay that now you're living here."

Helen sips on her juice, surrendering to the mellow feeling it brings, despite herself.

"This one's addressed to you," says Jane, turning over the white envelope. "It says Perth Mail Centre. You should open it."

"It's probably from work; just confirming long service leave," says Helen, easing open the envelope. "Did I tell you I'd been granted long service leave?"

"What's that?"

Helen's eyes fly to the logo on the letter head; she knows it instantly; the neat chain of letters: F G C, Legal Group.

"What's the matter?"

Dear Ms. Harrap, the letter reads.

"They've spelt my name wrong," she says.

"What, you've been working there all this time and they've got your name wrong?"

Beneath the error is the correct spelling: *M. G. Marretti & H. J. Harper*, underlined. Helen knows what it's all about.

"So, what's long surface leave?"

Helen takes off her cardigan, suddenly hot.

"Long service leave..." she says. "Long service leave..."

But she is thinking of the letter from the solicitors, enclosing records of a sealed copy of the words her eye ran over before she could stop herself.

Application for divorce, which you will note is listed for hearing in the Family Court on 26 November...

"Are you alright?" says Jane. "You've gone all vague."

"Yes, I'm...yes...I'm...I'm fine."

“Didn’t you get your long surface leave, or whatever?”

“Yes, yes, I did,” she says, blinking away the mistiness in her vision. “I can take six months on half pay.”

“Oh, cool!” says Jane. “That way you can stay here and get better and look after Granny.”

“Well, you never know,” says Helen, gazing out the window.

She watches Brandy stalking a ball, barking as she pounces and releasing it again.

“Are these juices making you better?”

“I’m not sure,” she says, faltering.

“I thought you could just take the shark cartilage, like Sharon’s mum,” says Jane.

“I thought so too,” says Helen, “but it seems more complicated than that. In my case, anyway. I’m kind of combining a few different things.”

“How long will it take before you’re better?” says Jane.

“I don’t know.”

“But they must know how long it takes.”

“Usually three months,” she says, blinking back the tears.

“Oh, well, in the spring then.”

“Yes, maybe in the spring,” says Helen.

“You should tell the doctor,” says Jane. “I mean, why don’t more people use shark cartilage instead of drugs if it works so well?”

“Not everyone agrees with it,” she says. “They’re worried it won’t work.”

“Why wouldn’t it work? It worked for my friend’s mum.”

Jane noisily drains the last of her juice through the straw. Helen lets the question hang.

“The FNA shows mild atypia,” says Dr. Broadbent.

“FNA?” says Helen. “Atypia?”

“The fine needle aspiration. The biopsy, of course.”

Of course. Helen feels as though she were back in school and clutches at her handbag. She is already in fear of the word “atypia” from the results of the original excision.

“What does atypia mean...exactly?” she ventures.

Emily Broadbent spreads her fingers over the paperwork littering her desk and leans forward. “It means that some of the cells look abnormal.”

Helen swallows.

“They may not be,” she says, peering over her spectacles, “but a more accurate biopsy is needed.”

“*Another* biopsy?” says Helen.

“A core biopsy – done under ultrasound. It involves a bigger needle and is much more accurate than an FNA, which gives only a small sample.”

Dr. Broadbent extracts a form from her desk drawer and Helen takes it with trembling hands.

“Now, let’s see,” says the doctor. “Which oncologist are you with?”

“Oh, um, I’m not with an oncologist,” she says.

Dr. Broadbent scrutinises her with a Lady Bracknell air. “That’s the cancer specialist,” she says. “You’re at the Dudley Memorial I take it?”

“Actually, I’m trying the shark cartilage treatment, plus a few other things.”

“When did you have the surgery?” she asks.

“On 19th September.”

“No, no,” says Emily. “The second lot of surgery.”

“I haven’t had any more surgery,” she says, her chest tightening under the strain of Dr. Broadbent’s interrogation.

Emily Broadbent sighs. “In that case, we need these results with the utmost urgency,” she says. “Make an appointment for early next week. The atypia in the FNA is especially worrying, and if the core biopsy delivers the same result, it will mean further surgery. And definitely radiotherapy.”

Helen wanders towards reception in a daze, her mind a knot of somersaults as she tries to gauge the distance between now and Dr. Fayre’s return.

Helen recognises the shape behind the frosted glass and hesitates before bracing herself to open the door.

“Oh, hello,” she says.

She does not invite Paul in.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you,” he says. “Are you alright? I’ve been leaving messages on the answer machine. And your mobile’s switched off.”

“I’m not sure how to check the messages on Mum’s machine,” she lies. “And I’m not using my mobile.”

He scratches the back of his head and looks at the floor.

“Can I come in? It’s awfully cold and you don’t want to be standing here with the door open half the night.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t,” she says.

“I see,” he says. “You’re not coming to tai chi, then?”

“It’s a bit early for tai chi, isn’t it?”

“I wanted to talk to you; I haven’t seen you.”

“Ah, yes,” she says, “you’ve been on the Pennine Way. How was it?”

“Look, Helen. Please, will you let me in?”

She sighs and steps back to let him pass, and he stands awkwardly under the light fitting.

“I’ve been meaning to return your juicer,” she says, indicating a box at the foot of the stairs.

“You decided against the juices, then?”

A look of concern ruffles his brow.

“I bought my own juicer,” she says. “A Green Power.”

His eyes quiver as he studies hers, which she knows are full of steel.

“Can I offer you something?” she says. “A cup of tea? Beer?”

He assesses her cautiously.

“Whatever you’re drinking,” he says, and she leads him through to the lounge.

“Are you okay?” he says.

“I’ll get the tea,” she says.

Helen’s hands shake as she unhooks the Paris mug, and then swaps it for a bone china one featuring a long-stemmed rose. His mug is larger; neutral with a geometrical design. She will offer him that.

He accepts the tea awkwardly, until she relieves him with the most diminutive of the nesting tables, so that he has to bend a little too low in order to use it. He sets the mug down, taking his time.

“You’re cross with me,” he says.

Fire flames from the pit of her stomach, leaving her cheeks hot. “You noticed?” There is that cutting tone again.

He looks away. “You’re upset because I went to the Pennines. That’s it, isn’t it?”

Upset! How dare he use the word, *upset*. Helen refuses to acknowledge his agency in the matter. To confirm his power. Especially as she has spent the last several days letting go of her attachment; the embryonic hope of a relationship. Of course, all he ever intended was friendship – clearly he already had *a relationship*. It was foolish of her not to see that. And of course, Sue was merely claiming him back. Helen’s cheeks burn with embarrassment and fury.

“Why shouldn’t you go to the Pennines?” she says, the note of irony still unquelled. “You’re a free agent, after all. You like walking, why should I care where you go, or with whom?”

He stares at his mug, inert on the polished table and inclines his head, nodding slowly, making her feel a fool. Now he knows she had hopes; absurd hopes; realises she didn’t know about Sue. Helen warms her hands against the mug, her fingers interrupting a delicate rose in bud. How could she have allowed herself to get caught again? After all the work she has done. The soul searching. Believing Mark had taught her everything she needed to learn. That and the cancer. She thought she was rounding a corner – reclaiming emotional and physical health. Never again would she make the same mistake.

“You’re crying,” he says.

Her hand goes to her face before she can stop it.

“I’m disappointed in you,” she says.

Who cares if she’s confusing disappointment with self as irritation with other? Or projecting again? Who cares, now that everything is lost?

“Look, I didn’t see you at tai chi that time. You don’t normally come on a Saturday.”

“No,” she says. “I could see you weren’t expecting me.”

“I only spotted you as you left. I’ve been trying to get hold of you ever since.” He inhales, his colour rising. “I’ve always wanted to walk the Pennine

Way again,” he says. “I did it once before with my father years ago. I’d planned to go again with a friend from overseas, but it never worked out.”

He looks at her, eager, innocent, like a schoolboy.

“So, needless to say I jumped at the chance. It was for the Mary Stevens’ Hospice – we raised quite a bit.”

Old people, she thinks. They’re raising money for the terminally ill.

“I had no idea it would upset you,” he says.

“You might at least have talked to me about it,” she says, recovering herself. “Not that it matters to me, quite honestly, what you do in your spare time. I appreciate the fact it was all in a good cause.”

“Helen,” he says.

His voice is soft, but not entirely calm. She detects an emotion in it that brings again the sting of tears.

“I enjoyed the walk,” he says. “Up to a point.” He pauses, looking at her. “On Sunday, the cloud lifted and I looked down on the valley; it was breathtaking, the river meandering through fields, the purple shadow of clouds.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” she says.

“It was snowing,” he says, “and I wanted more than anything to share that view with you.”

She bites her lip and looks askance; wary.

“Sue and I – we’ve known each other forever – we’re good chums,” he says. “She’s not my girlfriend – if that’s what you were worried about.”

A wave of emotion sweeps through her, unclenching her heart. She doesn’t trust it. She’s been here before. She swallows it down.

“I didn’t think she was,” she says. “Not that it matters.”

“I just wanted to clear up any misunderstanding,” he says.

“Yes,” she says, the steeliness creeping back into her voice. “So, now we know where we stand.”

“I’m not sure I do understand,” he says, simply.

“You’re friends with Sue – friends of long standing. We’re recent acquaintances.”

He studies her, sipping his tea, then puts it down again.

“I was wondering if you’re coming back to tai chi? If you’d like a lift?”

“Oh, tai chi,” she says. “I’ve been going to an afternoon class.”

“Which explains why I haven’t seen you,” he says.

He looks at his tea, disinterested, and does not reach for it.

“You’d best be going,” she says. “You don’t want to be late.”

He looks at her, surprised, his eyes moist. “You want me to leave,” he says.

“I’m just thinking of you…”

“Helen, cut that!” he says, rising. “I know when I’m not welcome.”

He skirts around the miniscule table, almost knocking the half-drunk cup of tea, and heads for the door.

“Wait!” she says, following.

He turns, stiffly.

“Your juicer,” she says, reaching for the box.

“Stuff the bloody juicer!” he says. “You can keep it!”

He bangs the front door shut and she is left there, clutching the box to her chest, her whole body trembling with chi.

Helen calls through the kitchen hatch.

“Coffee, Mrs. Cox!”

Marjorie Cox flicks a rabbit-ear of duster through a scroll in the oak dining chair, then glances up through a mop of curls.

“Elevenses,” says Helen, the quiver in her voice betraying her nerves. They sit at the far ends of the table opposite each other, the way Mum used to do with Mrs. Blunt when Helen was little. She steers her mind away from the impending biopsy and a gnawing unease over Paul, as she goes through the motions, offering Mrs. Cox a McVities chocolate biscuit. Marjorie dips it into her coffee, breaking the skin that has already formed.

“We were sitting just like this when it ‘appened,” says Marje. “Side of ‘er mouth went all droopy.”

She drags her hand down her left cheek, sending a shiver through Helen’s spine.

“Started slurring ‘er speech. That’s when I knew.”

“Imagine if you hadn’t been there!” says Helen with genuine horror.

“Just ran to the ‘all and rang noine, noine, noine.”

Marje stares as she relives the moment, lifting her cup halfway to her lips, then putting it down again.

“All the stress,” she says. “Too much for ‘er.”

They ponder this remark in silence.

“You mean the worry over Roger and Julia?”

She snaps out of her reverie and blinks at Helen.

“That as well, per’aps.” Mrs. Cox stares into her coffee.

“Marje, can you tell me, did Mum ever talk to you...about her past?”

Marje looks up through a wayward fringe as they consider each other for a moment.

“Mum says things,” says Helen. “Things that upset her...memories. Did she ever confide in you?”

Marje remains unflinching but mute as they assess one another.

“The other day,” says Helen. “She talked about...before any of us were born...a child. She was distressed – I don’t think it was a fabrication.”

Marje’s eyes mist over and she searches in her apron pocket for a handkerchief, pressing it to the left and right of her nostrils. She rests her hands in her lap and gazes at the halfway point of the table that separates them. When she looks up, her dark eyes have the intensity of a bird’s.

“It were a few months back now,” she says. “Agitated.”

She pauses for what seems like a long time.

“Very agitated,” she says. “I don’t say nothing, except to ask if everything’s alright. ‘Er tells me a man’s been in touch. Well, I don’t know what ‘er means, a course.”

Her eyes slide towards the floor tiles.

“Says it’s ‘er son,” she says, looking up.

Helen’s heart begins to race.

“Been adopted, see. Wanted to trace ‘is birth mother after all these years.”

Marje’s face remains impassive, matter-of-fact, but her eyes pierce Helen like swords.

“Didn’t know what to do.”

Helen urges Marje on with her eyes, unable to form the question on her lips.

"I says to 'er; 'well, it's up to you, a course.' But I says 'er might regret it if 'er lets the chance slip by."

She looks at Helen apologetically, her eyes filling again.

"I didn't know what to say for the best," she says, shaking her head. "I still think 'er done the right thing."

"Do you know if he came to the house?"

"Oh, no," she says. "They met somewhere in Birmingham. He come up from Stratford or somewhere. Met in a café."

Now Helen's eyes swim with tears as she struggles to assimilate the force of Marje's words.

"'Er were full of it after that," says Marje. "Excited. I never seen 'er so 'appy."

Helen thinks back over the months. Did Mum seem happy when they spoke on the phone? Certainly not excited. But, then Helen would have been caught up in her own domestic dramas over Mark.

"Did they meet again?" says Helen. "Do you know?"

"Once or twice," says Marje. "'E told 'er straight the reason why 'e got in touch. Been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer."

Helen bites her lip, incredulous.

"Doctors didn't 'old out much 'ope. Wanted to meet 'er afore 'e died."

"But where is he now? What happened?"

"'Er knew all about the cancer and everything," says Marje. "But I don't think 'er took it in."

Marje fidgets with her hands, then slides them back into her lap before braving Helen's eye.

"It were a shock when 'er got the news, see."

"The news?" says Helen.

"That's what brought on the stroke," says Marje with finality. "All the upset. That's what it was."

Helen stares at Marje, speechless.

"You're sure about this? You don't think she was making it up? I mean, the dementia."

"Oh, no, I don't think so," says Marje, shaking her curls. "I tried to say, 'ow would 'er feel if 'e died?' 'Er couldn't think about it. But a course..."

Helen holds her head in her hands, too numb for words.

“I’m sorry,” says Marje. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said. Only I think it’s better you know.”

“Yes,” says Helen. “It is surely better we know.”

CHAPTER 6

Dr. Fayre kneads the soft tissue at the side of Helen's breast.

"There's no sign of the swelling you mentioned," she says.

Laura Fayre moves to the underside of her breast and presses down on the scar.

"Can you feel that?"

"It's still tender," says Helen.

She gets dressed and joins the doctor at her desk. Laura swivels to face her.

"Well, I'm not sure what the swelling was all about, but there's no sign of it now," she says. "It could have been as a result of healing after surgery or hormones – they can be all over the place in the lead-up to menopause, and especially after an operation."

"I couldn't feel it anymore," says Helen, "but thought it best to have it checked."

"Absolutely," says Dr. Fayre. "With your history you are at increased risk of another breast cancer, so I'd much rather you come in than sit on something sinister."

She pauses.

"And whatever the cause, it was clearly benign as Dr. Broadbent's biopsy confirms."

Helen leans against the chair on a wave of relief.

"What we don't know, however, is the status of the existing mass."

Dr. Fayre gives her a sympathetic smile.

"At the risk of making you feel like a pincushion," she says, "I'd like a core biopsy of the site. That will give us a clear picture of what's going on."

Helen freezes; there is so much going on, and if this "site" reflects half the stresses involved, she shudders to think of its status.

"But didn't I just have a core biopsy?" she says.

"On the swelling, yes," Laura says. "But not on the original mass we saw on the ultrasound. And the normal result from the previous FNA isn't conclusive."

Helen stares into a silver vase spilling daisies, as though it were a crystal ball. She is aware of the doctor's movements reflected in its surface as she reaches for a form, circles the details, and signs it before handing it over.

"And you're persevering with the herbs?"

"Yes. I also decided to try the shark cartilage and drink lots of vegetable juice."

"Shark cartilage – that would be with Kaleb Smart, wouldn't it?"

"You know him?"

"I've worked with some of his clients. They're always very motivated," she says. "And so far they've done well."

Helen has the surreal sense she is not quite in her body.

"What about your energy levels?"

"I'm not so tired," says Helen. "But emotionally, things aren't as stable as I'd like. There's a lot happening."

"Ah, yes. Your mother's ill, isn't she?"

"She's had a stroke, and I'm going through a divorce, plus a few other things."

"Oh, dear," says Laura, and she looks at Helen with genuine compassion. "I am sorry to hear that."

Helen's heart flutters in her throat.

"If you'd like to see a counsellor, I can make some recommendations," she says.

She turns to her computer and types in a command, printing off a sheet of paper, and handing it to Helen. "Rest up as much as you can," she says. "And do whatever it takes to nourish your soul."

Helen takes the paper, her eyes misty with tears.

Helen struggles down the garage steps with the juicer and stows the box in the boot of the car. It remains there for several days, hidden from view, but she is aware of its slithering weight as she drives around. What did he mean, *keep it*? She told him; she already had the Green Power.

She turns right at the *Crabmill* into Rectory Road and creeps down the hill. She can see the lights on in Paul's front room and pulls into his driveway.

She fronts up to the doorbell, butting it with her forehead as she hangs onto the box.

“Ah,” he says, “Helen.”

“I’ve brought your juicer. And the activator.”

She tries to discern his mood, but his expression gives nothing away.

“You didn’t need to return them,” he says, relieving her of the box.

“Won’t you come in?”

“I won’t stay,” she says, fishing in her bag for the activator. Then she remembers she owes him an apology. “Yes, yes, of course,” she says.

She steps inside and follows him into the lounge, shadowed by Max, who nudges at her leg. Paul sets the box on the kitchen workbench.

“Well, at least sit down for a minute,” he says.

The gas fire remains grey, unlit, but the central heating is on and the house does not strike cold. He sits down opposite her in his usual chair.

“I’m sorry I was rude to you the other day,” she says. “I was upset. It was unfair of me – you were just being kind.”

“I accept the apology,” he says gravely, and looks away. “I wasn’t exactly civil myself.”

“It was warranted under the circumstances,” she says.

She sees his shoulders ease.

“I was worried about you,” he says. “Not worried – concerned.”

“Yes, it’s kind of you,” she says. “I appreciate it.”

He holds her in his gaze and she shifts uncomfortably in her chair.

“How are you?” he says.

“The cancer site might be diminishing – we’re not sure. I’m having another biopsy done.”

“It sounds encouraging,” he says, inching forwards.

“Yes. I hope so.”

She hears the flatness in her own voice.

“What about your mum?” he says, his eyes searching hers.

“She’s coming out of hospital at the end of the week.”

Paul rests his forearms on his thighs, looking up at her with moist eyes. Helen looks away.

“She’s being transferred to a sort of intermediate place while we wait for a vacancy in a nursing home.”

She studies Paul’s shoes and the creases fashioned by wear.

“That might not be such a bad thing,” says Paul. “It would have put a lot of strain on you if she’d been allowed home.”

She shrugs. “It’s not like I have much else to do.”

Max comes over and inspects Helen’s hand, which rests limply on the armrest. He works it over with a moist tongue and she appreciates his instinctive effort to enliven it.

“I know how difficult it can be trying to find nursing care these days,” says Paul.

“You do?” she says.

“Yes, my sister and I were faced with the same problem a few years ago. In the end, we had to put Mum into palliative care. It was very distressing.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” says Helen. “That must have been awful.”

Max sneezes and wanders over to Paul, who runs his hand through the dog’s fur, smoothing and rubbing. Max closes his eyes, tilting his head to allow better access to his favourite spot between the ears.

“I guess you’re hungry, old chap,” says Paul.

Max lets out a soft, pleading whine and Paul walks him over to the kitchen. Helen feels the weight of her lungs on her chest and closes her eyes. She hears the fridge door open and the sound of a metal bowl on the kitchen tiles, followed by a moist chewing sound and snuffles of contentment. She hears the click of the ignition and the whoosh of the gas fire coming to life; feels the tears stuck in her throat.

When she looks up, Paul is seated opposite, the light from the fire striking his cheekbone and jaw, casting the other side of his face into semi-darkness. His head is angled towards the light, his brow furrowed in concentration. In his hands is the globe of an orange. Helen watches as he pares away the skin. The knife fits in his hand as though it were an extension of it. He works his lips into a pout, reflecting the movement of the blade as he guides the fruit round and round. A spiral of orange peel trails towards the bowl clasped between his knees. Helen hears the slight rasp of steel against

pith; sees the electric fizz of vapour a split second before she catches its scent, tart and pungent.

She allows her body its weight as it moulds into the chair. Helen had hoped for something warming to keep the chill at bay; the herbal brew he customarily offers. But, by the time he seeks out her eyes with his and extends the segment of orange on the flat of the blade, her mouth is watering. She reaches for it, a half smile on her lips. After the juice fills her mouth in that first burst of sweetness, she gives a slow nod, watching and waiting as he bites into his own segment of fruit. He chews thoughtfully, his eyes shining in the glow of the fire, and she feels their brightness mirrored in hers.

The driver leaps from the taxi van and opens the rear door. He moves swiftly, pulling levers, releasing straps; nimble, the vehicle an extension of his body. A ramp slides out and the three siblings watch as their mother is regally rolled out in her wheel chair. In that instant she is not their mother, but a shrunken old woman wrapped in a grey blanket.

“That’s what brought on the stroke. All the upset. That’s what it was.”

Marje’s words. Words that have haunted Helen ever since, and which she has not been able to repeat for fear she will stir them to life in the saying. The taxi man wheels Vera adroitly through the gate and up the path. All three follow in silence. At the press of a bell, the glass door slides open and a woman appears in unfashionable slacks and a loose over blouse secured to her breast by a name tag. With her no-nonsense perm streaked with the wire wool beginnings of grey, she does not fulfil Helen’s ready-made image of the name, Melinda. But she is very practised with the wheelchair and trundles Vera briskly down the ramp and into the main lounge. Meanwhile, the taxi driver turns and is already out through the sliding door and halfway up the path.

The room is lined with geriatrics of indeterminate gender in various stages of decrepitude. On closer inspection, Helen notices the odd sign denoting sex; a ring-encrusted claw asleep on a plaid skirt, the oversized diamond preposterous on its gold band, cutting deep into an arthritic finger.

Brown, tartan slippers; the type their granddad wore. The bulb of a pipe peeping from a tweed pocket.

"It's only a temporary place," says Kate, "until a vacancy comes up at The Cedars."

A male nurse joins Melinda and together they grab Vera by the underarms, manoeuvring her expertly into a vacant chair diagonally opposite the TV, where a smiling woman in an immaculate apron demonstrates a plastic gadget. The camera pans in on a small tube with a bright green lid. The presenter's slender fingers slide it into the side of a lemon and she flips up the lid, squeezing and pouring pale juice into an awaiting tumbler. *The Clever Dick is easy to transport and so handy. No wastage.* Helen has to fight to keep her attention from the lurid colour, which is the only real colour in the room.

"Hello," says the woman seated next to Vera. Her hair is pure white and set in curls, framing a clean, pink scalp. "I'm Mrs. Tranter. I'm ninety-five."

She speaks clearly, despite ill-fitting dentures.

Vera stares into her lap.

"This is Vera," says Kate. "Mrs. Harper. She won't be here long."

Melinda says, "There's some paperwork." And Kate follows her down the corridor into the office.

There is a scraping sound near the window as an elderly gent levers himself up from his chair, hands gripping the wooden armrests. His posture impels him to stare floorwards, where his sights appear fixed in the manner of an Olympic athlete on a single goal. He remains poised for what seems like an interminable moment, then straightens a fraction and releases his grip. Slowly, he shuffles forwards with susurrating steps.

"Can I help you?" says Roger, taking hold of his arm.

The man cranes his neck awkwardly to look at Roger, an expression of mild astonishment on his face.

"I'm going to sit next to my wife," he says.

"Right-oh," says Roger. "Which one is your wife?"

He nods in the direction of a wizened figure collapsed beneath a crocheted shawl.

“There’s someone already sitting next to your wife,” says Roger.

But the man doggedly shuffles on.

Mrs. Tranter points out two vacant chairs at the far end of the room.

The husband views these with brief disinterest, still hell-bent on his chair of choice.

“Get out of the road!” says a bald man in a paisley dressing gown, whose view of the TV has been blocked.

But he won’t budge and several of the viewers are getting restive. One woman picks agitatedly at her knee blanket, head twitching. Mrs. Tranter springs to her feet, as though to intervene. Then, to Helen’s horror, the woman with the agitated fingers picks up a box of tissues and hurls it at Mrs. Tranter, catching her on the hip.

“Bugger you!” she retorts, picking up the box and hurling it back.

At that moment, Melinda reappears with Kate and swiftly takes charge of the situation, reinstating the tissues and fetching an extra chair. The shuffling man sits next to his wife and the inmates resume their afternoon TV. It’s Oprah Winfrey.

“We can take Mum to have a look at her room now,” says Kate.

Melinda produces a walking frame and they make their way slowly back up the ramp. Apparently, Vera will be sharing a room with Mrs. Tranter. The door swings open to reveal a large teddy bear on a lavender quilted bed. Vera’s bed is similarly quilted and the bedside table, unlike that of her roommate, is naked of accoutrements. The three children stand in the doorway behind Vera, watching Melinda demonstrate the in-built wardrobe, the bedside drawer and the mysteries of the radiator.

The screwdriver slips on the screw Helen is trying to manipulate, wounding her thumb.

“Shit!”

She sucks at it, but there is no blood; just the beginnings of a deep bruise. Helen squeezes her eyes tight against the tears and tries again, angling the tool this way and that in an effort to ease the stubborn hinge holding the window ajar. It is freezing in the loft, and dank. It doesn’t help that the handle is sticky, its once brown paint having decomposed on the garage

shelf, where Helen found the offending object in amongst a jumble of rusty nails and paintbrushes. She thought her father was tidier than this. But he was no handyman and perhaps the shoebox full of junk reflects his lack of interest, and the dearth of mathematical precision he applied to everything else.

Despite repeated efforts to relax her jaw, Helen finds herself gritting her teeth again as the screw remains firmly welded to the hinge. She groans and lets her gaze stray over fences and gardens, trees almost naked of leaves now, and the squat battlements of the church. It shocks her still that the spire is missing – toppled through lack of funds to set it straight.

Glancing down, Helen's eyes graze the artwork abandoned on her mother's desk, its violet borders still oozing from the spillage of angry paint dashed over it weeks before. She sweeps it to the floor with the flat of her hand, where it lies on the mustard carpet, framed by its cheap surround. She bends to pick it up, tossing it back onto the desk, then, wielding the screwdriver like a weapon, Helen attacks the thick, black paint. A mauve gash – not long, but deep – pulses from the page. She hesitates, then feeling herself coming to her senses, reaches out to explore the lips of the scar, its rough outline informing her fingertips like Braille. She moves closer, sitting now on her mother's chair, bending over the painting, screwdriver poised. Delicately, yet expertly, she directs her instrument to the left of the wound. She works quickly and instinctively, peeling back layers of black paint, at first roughly, then gently, watching as the bright black strips catch the light from the window.

Helen feels a dark knot of energy pool in her abdomen; a hot wave surging from her belly, directing her hand as it deftly chisels and shapes. Her fingers find no difficulty now as they grip the handle, which no longer feels sticky, but molded instead to her palm. She senses her father inside her, his confidence and cheer. What is she making? The screwdriver winks in the dull light as it sweeps and curves forming muscular shapes, then a streak like a snake slithering under rock.

Helen concentrates on the spaces growing out of the central mass, until the page is lit by a mauve sunset – or is it a sunrise? An Australian outback sky. And in the foreground, she feels sure, is a totem of sorts. She

keeps digging and scraping with her awl; this implement that transforms in her hand, until she knows to let go. Then, blinking, she steps back, adjusting her sights as the angry cloud disintegrates. In its place, crouched in a jacaranda haze, two sleek cats stare back, their amethyst eyes inquisitive and knowing. Their hot, pink tongues dart and flash, and their tails are raised in greeting.

“Yes, I don’t doubt that’s what Mrs. Cox *said*,” says Kate. “She’s scrupulously honest, but for goodness sake, Helen, don’t be ridiculous!”

“It’s hardly plausible,” says Roger. “I mean – well, you know what she’s like. Mum says stuff and half the time, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“But this was before she had the stroke,” says Helen.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” says Kate. “Mum’s been suffering from vascular dementia. I told you!”

Helen perches on the edge of the sofa next to the ticking clock, already doubting the conversation she had with Marjorie.

“But Mrs. Cox was visibly shaken – you could see,” she says.

“Well, of course, she was,” says Kate. “Anyone would be, if they believed all that rigmarole. Which I’ve no doubt Mrs. Cox did.”

Helen considers whether to say something about Vera’s confession, but it feels like a betrayal.

“Anyroad,” says Roger. “What difference does it make now?”

Helen stares at the carpet, trying to fathom what difference it does make, and whether indeed it happened at all. *Could* Mum have made it up out of an intense yearning for her long lost son?

“Well, this isn’t getting anything done,” says Kate, rising from the Princess chair and striding over to the corner cabinet in the dining room.

Roger stations himself by the window in response to the repeated beep, beep of a truck.

“That’ll be the skip,” says Roger. “I’ll just go and help him reverse.”

“I expect he’s done it before,” says Kate.

“But it’s awkward on that bit of drive,” he says, making for the door.

“Are you going to Grey Stones tonight?” says Kate tetchily over her shoulder.

It takes Helen a while to realise that it is she who is being addressed. Rattled, she comes over to Kate and picks up the box she had abandoned earlier. Kate frowns into the cupboard, scooping an armful of memorabilia into the box. Dominoes, Happy Families, bits of Lego and plastic fragments of cowboys and Indians, all tangled together in an errant piece of string. They land in the box with a thud.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you about Grey Stones,” says Helen. “Surely there must be somewhere better than that.”

Kate stares into the now empty space of the cupboard.

“Mum’s in the best place,” says Kate. “Grey Stones has a good reputation.”

“I’m not so sure,” says Helen. “You should have seen what happened while you were in the office.”

Roger returns, fresh-faced and whistling out of tune.

“Well, if you think you can find something better, you’re welcome to try!” says Kate. “I notice you both left it to me to do all the research.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” says Roger. “You said there was someone at church who had contacts, and that you’d arrange everything.”

“There has to be somewhere else,” says Helen. “It’s so...depressing.”

“Old people’s homes *are* depressing,” says Kate. “It can’t be helped.”

“I don’t believe that,” says Helen. “I’m going to make my own enquiries.”

Kate casts her eyes to the ceiling.

“For God’s sake, Helen,” she says. “Why do you always have to go against the grain? I don’t imagine there’ll be anything “alternative”, if that’s what you’re thinking. And besides, Mum wouldn’t like anything like that.”

“How do you know what Mum would like?” says Helen.

“Come on now, you two,” says Roger. “Let’s just get on and deal with all this stuff while we’ve got the chance. The skip’s here, after all.”

Kate picks up a duster and busies herself vigorously wiping out the cupboard. Helen feels again the weight in her lungs, the uncried tears, which she does her best to repress with an irritated sniff. At the sound of the doorbell, she springs to her feet, colliding with Roger, who drops the tissue box he has just been to fetch.

“Déjà-vu,” he says, picking it up off the floor.

Helen grabs the tissue he offers like a flag of truce on her way to the door.

“Paul!” she says. “I wasn’t expecting you!”

“I thought I’d give you a hand. Is it a bad time?”

“I’m not sure if this is ideal,” she says.

“You’re upset,” he says.

“Hello,” says Roger.

Paul peers round Helen’s shoulder to the smiling face waving at him from the hall. Realising she is caught, Helen steps back and extends a hand towards Roger.

“Paul, this is my brother, Roger,” she says. “Roger, this is Paul – a neighbour from round the corner.”

“Oh, do come in,” says Roger, “the more the merrier.”

And they exchange a vigorous handshake.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” he says.

“Oh, no,” says Roger with genuine warmth. “You’re most welcome. We’ve been sorting through Mum’s stuff for the past few weeks and we’ve got this skip for the day.”

“Helen’s told me all about your mother,” he says. “I know what you’re going through. My sister and I were faced with a similar task a few years ago. I completely understand if you’d rather be left to it.”

“Actually,” says Roger. “It’s a bit of a godsend your calling round. In more ways than one.”

Paul looks quizzical.

“Come upstairs a mo’, would you? There’s this old wardrobe up in the loft and I could do with someone to help me down the stairs with it. If you don’t mind.”

“No, of course.”

Helen can hear Kate rummaging through the drawers in the kitchen.

“I’ll follow you up,” she says. “I need to do some more work on those books.”

“Now how’s the best way to do this?” says Roger.

“I think if we tip it on its side and carry it lengthwise.”

“Yes, good thinking. You grab hold of that end.”

Their voices form a comforting background as Helen addresses herself to the bookshelves. There is a thump on the stairs and the sound of convivial voices. Helen marvels at the way men so easily connect over a task. Indeed, perhaps that is the only way they connect. And how they love nothing better than to be doing something physical and useful. Another voice issues from the stairs.

“Aunty Helen!”

“Jane! I’m glad you’re here,” says Helen, coming out onto the landing.

Helen watches the men wrestling the wardrobe down to the final bend in the stairs. Roger’s hair is thinning on top. Paul’s is darker and more abundant. Brandy yaps at them from the foot of the stairs as Jane skirts around them in a pair of low-slung jeans and a too-short jumper. White wires trail from her ears through a tangle of hair, uniting around chest level before disappearing into her back jeans’ pocket.

“Who’s that?” she says.

“A neighbour,” she says. “The man with the dog. Remember I told you?”

“What are we doing?” asks Jane.

“I thought we’d just sort everything into different boxes,” says Helen. “Children’s books, adult fiction, coffee table books – that sort of thing.”

Jane’s head bobs in tune to her iPod as she angles her neck this way and that, reading the labels.

“What’s Tantra?” she asks.

“Difficult to explain,” says her aunt with a shrug, unwilling to tackle the subject through a veil of trance, heavy metal or whatever it is Jane favours.

Helen discards a paperback into the throw-away box and picks up the bookmark to toss after it. Turning it over, though, she sees it is not a bookmark.

“Such a cool cover,” says Jane, running her finger over it. “*The Art of Tantra*.”

They stare at the cover together with its circles and hexagons in sage and black; ochre and cream; the balloon-like petals flanked by a series of dandelion seeds, like parasols in flight.

"I'd love a jacket made out of fabric like that," says Jane.

She flicks the book open and the two of them are confronted by the image of a black female nude kneeling within the contours of a large white Buddha. The two figures are united at lips and groin.

Jane gasps. She turns the page. Plate number six reveals a photograph of two voluptuous carvings copulating with serenity and grace.

Jane removes her earplugs.

"That's what Tantra is," says Helen.

"What? Sexual intercourse?"

"It's an oriental tradition. People saw it as a path to enlightenment."

"Weird! Fancy Gran being interested in *that!*"

"Oh, I think Gran had a broad range of interests," says Helen.

"Don't tell Mom," says Jane, her eyes wide moons.

"In fact," says Helen, "I think there was a lot more to your gran than any of us imagined."

Jane looks blank. She cranes her neck to view the bookmark in Helen's hand, turned now to reveal a photograph.

At first, neither of them recognises the woman in the picture; the natural ease of her body and the radiant smile. It is an old photograph, somewhere between sepia and charcoal. But Helen knows those eyes and that characteristic tilt of the head.

"Who's that?" asks Jane.

"I think it's your gran, when she was young."

"It can't be," says Jane. "What does it say on the back?"

"There's just a date: May 1948."

The man's hand drapes softly around her mother's shoulder, his head touching hers. He has dark eyes and short, cropped hair, picked out by sunlight filtered through spring blossoms. Something about the quality of light fills Helen with warmth and hope. The man's eyes are soft, his lips parted in a smile.

"It doesn't look like Grandpa."

"No, it wasn't Grandpa."

"Who could it have been?"

Helen ponders the date. She knows from another snapshot in one of the albums downstairs that her mother had already met Dad in 1946. There they were, evidently sweethearts, outside the Odeon on the Hagley Road, holding hands. And yet, there is nothing of the grace and flow of this later shot.

“Could you come and tell us which of the boxes downstairs wants chucking?” says Roger, poking his head round the door.

“The ones near the radiator are for the skip,” says Helen.

“You’d better come and have a look,” he says.

“I’ve got the kettle on,” says Kate, a little frostily, the minute she sees Helen in the hall.

It seems strange to see Paul, leaning against the drinks trolley by the phone.

“I’m sorry,” says Helen, “I should have introduced you.”

“We’ve met,” says Kate. “Paul’s been very kind. He’s been helping Roger with some of that stuff in the shed.”

Paul smiles, abashed.

“I suppose you’ll be wanting something herbal,” says Kate.

“I’ll come and get it,” says Helen.

“Like a beer?” says Roger.

Paul’s eyes light up. “I wouldn’t say no to a beer.”

“Isn’t it a little early?” says Kate.

“It’s after twelve,” says Helen.

“Well, bring it into the dining room, then,” says Kate. “You’ve earned it.”

They install themselves round the table and Kate offers Paul first pick of the sandwiches.

“There’s tuna, cheese and tomato, and chicken. Oh, and I made avocado and lettuce for you, Helen.”

Paul helps himself to a tuna sandwich.

“How do you come to know each other?” Kate asks.

“We met through acupuncture and tai chi,” says Paul.

“That’s when they stick needles in you, isn’t it?” says Jane.

Brandy sniffs at Paul’s trousers.

"Here!" says Kate, snapping her fingers. "Here, Brandy!"

"She can probably smell my dog, Max," he says.

"What breed is he?" says Kate.

"A Labrador-Collie cross."

"Labradors are cool," says Jane through a mouthful of sandwich. "My friend, Kirsty has a Labrador."

"Do you walk every day?" asks Kate.

"Try to," he says.

Kate offers Paul another sandwich.

"I vary Brandy's walks as much as I can," says Kate. "That way, she gets a variety of doggy smells."

"You don't walk her every day," says Jane. "I walk her a lot of the time."

"Sometimes," says Kate, "I drive her to Clent or Kinver. There are so many walks. She gets excited at all the different scents. And, of course, she gets to meet other dogs."

"I'm afraid I'm not so generous with Max," he says. "But I do take him a bit further afield on Sundays."

"You should call round with Max next Sunday," says Kate. "I could show you some of the tracks. It's lovely in autumn."

"What do you think of the beer?" asks Roger.

"It's a good drop," says Paul. "It wouldn't be *Little Creatures*, would it?"

"How did you pick that?"

Roger is visibly impressed.

Paul looks at Helen and they smile.

"I already offered him one the other day," says Helen. "One of the ones I brought from Perth."

"I got this one from Nicholls and Perks," says Roger. "I don't know if there's much of a difference."

"Well, it's very good," says Paul.

"You don't think of Australia as having decent beer, do you?" says Roger.

"It just goes to show how wrong you can be," he says, taking another sip.

“Aunty Helen brings me tee shirts,” says Jane. “*Rip Curl* and *Billabong*. They’re so cool.”

“Clearly a lot of good things come out of Australia these days,” says Paul. “Especially from the west.”

“How’s the chicken?” asks Kate.

“Delicious,” he says.

“Local produce,” she says.

“There’s some good stuff coming out of the Midlands, too,” says Helen.

Paul smiles into his sandwich.

The lighted windows of afternoon shops break against the windshield, staining Paul’s hands. Helen studies his angular profile, the tousled hair that no longer looks to her like a drowned kitten; or perhaps it does and that’s why it melts her heart.

“It’s a right turn here,” says Helen. “You’ll see a sign for Grey Stones just over the hill.”

“I hope your mum won’t mind a stranger coming to visit,” he says.

“Mum doesn’t always know what’s going on of late,” she says. “Don’t be surprised if she acts as if you’re not there.”

He parks the car before a wall trailing ivy and follows Helen through the security gate and down the winding path to the double doors. Helen scans the day room at the bottom of the ramp. There is no sign of her mother.

“She’s in her room,” Ed, the male nurse says.

“Is she not feeling well?”

“Just a bit tired, that’s all.”

Helen guides Paul down the narrow passage to Vera’s room. She knocks but there is no answer, so she pushes against the door and peers round it. Vera lies with her mouth open, her thin form making hardly a mound under the lavender quilt. Mrs. Tranter’s bed is vacant. It is covered with a shawl made out of crocheted red and purple squares with buttercup centres. There is more than one teddy bear today.

Helen sits beside her mother while Paul stands at the foot of the bed.

“Bring up a chair,” she says, indicating one in the corner.

“I’m all right here,” he says. “I don’t want to alarm her if she wakes.”

Helen strokes her mother’s forehead, relieved at the subtle warmth escaping her nostrils.

“A man’s been in touch...says it’s ‘er son.”

Mrs. Cox’s words continue to haunt her but Helen has found no way to broach the subject. And wouldn’t it break her mother’s heart if she did? She works her fingers lightly over Vera’s brow, massaging warmth into the cool, dry skin.

“Doctors didn’t ‘old out much ‘ope.”

When Vera finally opens her eyes, they stare unseeingly for a moment. Helen does her best to smile, reminding herself to stay in the present.

“I brought you a CD,” she says.

Her mother looks dazed.

“Talking Heads,” she explains. “Alan Bennett.”

Helen extracts it from her bag and displays it on the quilt.

“I’ll put it in the drawer for you. Roger’s bringing a CD player this evening.”

Vera’s eyes fall on Paul, seated now at her feet.

“Do you remember I said I’d met someone – a neighbour from Castle Grove? Well, this is Paul.”

“I’ve been expecting you,” she says, and he smiles.

Vera doesn’t say anything, but continues to regard Paul, who returns her gaze.

“These chocolate boxes are empty, except for one or two toffees,” says Helen, searching the bedside drawer.

“Can’t eat the toffees,” Vera says.

“Well, I’ll take them, then,” says Helen, and she offers one to Paul, who unwraps it and pops it in his mouth.

“Sweet tooth,” says Vera.

“You’re right,” he says. “One of my failings.”

“I’m keeping *them*,” says Vera, snapping at Helen.

“What, these?” says Helen, clutching an empty Cadbury’s Milk Tray carton and an equally vacant Thornton’s box.

“Yes, those,” she says.

“What do you need them for?”

“Don’t interrupt,” she says. “I’m talking to this young man.”

The corners of Paul’s mouth flicker.

“What are you planning to keep in them?” he asks.

“Cards and things.”

“You’ve got some nice ones, there,” he says.

Vera turns to look at them, surprised, apparently, to find them on the bedside cabinet.

“Lots of well-wishers,” says Paul.

“Those letters,” she says.

“What letters?” says Helen.

“Airmail...you know...envelopes.”

“There aren’t any,” says Helen.

“At home!” she says.

“Is that what you’re going to keep in the boxes?” Paul asks.

She offers a crooked smile.

“That’s right,” she says. “In the boxes.”

“I’ll bring them next time,” says Helen.

“And you can bring him too,” she says, nodding at Paul.

“I’ll come again,” he says.

“I’ll be ready for you next time.”

And then, just as they’re leaving, she calls after them, but the words aren’t clear.

“What’s that, Mum?”

She says it again.

“Jacko.”

Or something like that.

“We’ll be sure to bring those letters next time,” says Paul.

And she smiles.

“Mum has died.”

No preamble, nothing like that, just *Mum has died*.

Helen struggles to take in the news on the other end of the phone.

“They found her this morning,” says Kate. “She must have died in her sleep.”

Helen hears the effort in Kate’s voice; the will to remain business-like. This more than anything suggests a crisis.

“Oh,” is all she can say.

“I’m going over now,” says Kate. “After I’ve phoned Roger.”

“I’ll be there,” she says. “I just have to do a few things.”

The shark cartilage. Breakfast.

Helen is left with the long, mournful tone; the aftershock of words adrift from meaning. *Mum has died*. And after only two months in Grey Stones. She buries her face in her hands, but the tears won’t come. She straightens up. If Kate is going to Grey Stones, then so must Helen. She thinks of Paul but before she can reach for the phone, it bursts into song. It is not his voice.

“Dr. Fayre.”

“Are you sitting down?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got your results.”

Of course, she is waiting on the results of a biopsy.

“I know you’re coming in later this week,” says Dr. Fayre, “but I wanted to let you know. You’re in the clear.”

Helen’s jaw drops.

“There’s no sign of malignancy, and you can rest assured a core biopsy is highly accurate.”

The voice sounds faint; Helen herself feels faint.

“Hello? Are you there?”

“Yes, yes, I’m here,” she says. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I just wanted to put your mind at ease. We can discuss the details during the appointment. It’s excellent news, Helen.”

Helen feels as though someone had thrown something at her from a distance. She is too stunned for anything to make sense. And yet a caged hope flutters in her chest.

“Thank you,” she says. “For everything. For letting me know.”

"All thanks to you," says the doctor. "Your commitment and effort."

"Yes," she says, but the tone is unconvincing. Surely, there has been a mistake and they are discussing someone else's results; another person's efforts.

Helen stares at the wallpaper. Does that mean she doesn't need to take the shark cartilage any more? No more planning her day around the eight-hour schedule. And what about the other supplements? She sits there in a state of disbelief. She could phone Kaleb. Ask him what he thinks.

Tears begin to flow and the next thing Helen knows, her body is heaving and shuddering with sobs. How tense she must have been all this time. And yet she still cannot grasp what Dr. Fayre has said. She stares at the phone. Oh to hear the words in Melanie's vernacular; "*In the clear! Bloody O!*" So as to know it's true. But, more than anything, she wants to phone Paul.

Helen's hand trembles. She is in no fit state to talk to anyone. First things first. *Mum has died*. She climbs the stairs and opens the bathroom cabinet, where the shark cartilage powder is stored, the syringe and aloe vera gel. An overwhelming emotion sweeps through her. Is it sorrow? Relief? She sits on her haunches, pillowing her head on folded arms. *In the clear*. There is no need for the shark cartilage any more. She will get dressed. Have a piece of toast and drive to Grey Stones. Later, she will phone Paul.

Helen finds her mother's bed empty, the bedside table already denuded of objects. She is annoyed at having to hunt someone down to find out what they have done with her mother. Shouldn't they have been posted at the entrance waiting for her, as they probably were for Kate, who would have got here first?

"Miss Harper?"

It's Melinda.

"I'm sorry about your mother," she says. "It's very sudden and always a shock, I know."

The words sound genuine, although she must have said them a thousand times before.

Helen follows the navy slacks, the red and blue checked blouse down new corridors to a secret staircase into what might once have been the servants' quarters. Melinda slows at the foot of the stairs so that Helen can catch up, and they walk side by side at a dignified pace.

"Was it a heart attack?" Helen asks. "Or another stroke?"

"There'll be a post mortem, if the family would like it."

She passes through the grey door that Melinda holds open for her and there is their mother, covered in a blue blanket with a ribbon edge. Kate stands near the head of the table, holding Vera's hand; the left hand; the one Mum has not been able to flex for many months, stiff now, the wedding band circling her finger. Kate looks up and Helen's eyes fill with tears at the sight of Kate's grief.

Helen looks down at her mother's face; strangely smooth and unlined, already waxen. Should she touch it? The hair feels wiry and brittle and Helen wishes she had noticed if it was this way before. Her forehead is cold.

"When did you get the call?" Helen asks

"A few minutes before I phoned you," says Kate.

Melinda draws up a couple of chairs for them.

"I'll be upstairs," she says. "Take as long as you like."

They sit either side of their mother in a silence punctuated only by sniffles. And yet, there is a sense of expansion in the room. It reminds Helen of that time in the maternity ward of St Joseph's when she visited Kate and the newborn Jane. Helen studies her mother's profile. There is no question that Vera has flown. This is a bone cage only, draped with skin. But the marks of Vera's passing are written on that smooth, clear face. She looks younger; yet strangely wise. Has she found that sun-filled place she spoke of earlier? The love she knew? And is Dad there? Helen does not know the answer to these questions. All she knows is a stillness in her heart and, at its centre, a sense of joy that her mother is free from pain. Warmth spreads from Helen's chest and with it comes release. Tears flow down her cheeks and onto her hands. Grief and gratitude in equal measure. After some time, she turns to Kate.

“All that fuss about whether Mum should come home to live with me,” says Helen. “The worry about whether she would walk or not; how she would spend her last days.”

Kate sobs quietly into her handkerchief, which sets Helen off sniffing once more, overwhelmed by the realisation that she will never see her mother again.

This is how Roger finds them when he comes in, the two of them separated by the dead body of their mother, sobbing in unison.

“Right here,” says Paul, one eye on the map, the other on the road ahead.

Helen swerves into the narrow lane, simultaneously activating the windscreen wipers in place of the indicator, which as far as she’s concerned, are on the wrong side of the steering wheel.

“Whoops,” she says. And it does feel odd making a right turn from a left-hand drive vehicle. She cranes her neck at the blue plaque on the wall, its white lettering peppered with rust.

“Rue Girardoux!” she says, triumphant.

“Why the surprise?” he says. “Don’t you trust my map-reading?”

Helen’s stomach turns over. She had not expected to feel nervous.

“What’s the number?” she says, although she knows it by heart, having read the address so many times on the back of those airmail envelopes. Number twenty-six.

“Here!” says Paul. “On the right.”

Helen pulls over and together they stare at a solid construction with grey shutters and whitewashed walls. There is an arched door, its squares of glass asleep behind net curtains. It doesn’t look like a front door, and yet there is no other entrance visible.

Helen casts around for somewhere to park but it is a one-way street and narrow. They spy a plot of vacant land next to the house and turn to each other.

“Do you think anyone will mind?” she says.

“We’re foreigners,” he says. “We can feign ignorance.”

“In my case, it won’t be feigning either,” she says.

They stand before the door. Helen's legs feel weak and the desire to turn and flee is strong.

"Maybe this is not such a good idea," she says.

"We've come all this way," he says. "You wanted to do this, remember?"

She taps on the glass, rousing nothing beyond a lethargic woof. They wait and she raps again, harder this time on the wooden frame. A serious bark ensues followed by the sound of movement. The door hinges back and there on the step below stands an old woman peering up at them. She is a little bent, but sprightly enough, with abundant grey streaks in her wiry hair. She wears it pulled back into a neat chignon at the nape of her neck. She blinks up at them, her eyes as bright as a bird's.

"Qui est?"

Paul draws breath for the much rehearsed phrase, which comes out awkwardly, anyway. He explains that Helen's mother once lived in this house, in the days of the Le Clos family. The woman in question, Vera, died last year. They wanted to see the house.

"Mais, je m'appelle Le Clos, moi."

As she speaks, Helen notices the gap at the front of her teeth.

"Danielle?" she asks.

"Mais oui, c'est moi, Danielle Le Clos."

"Je suis la fille de Véronique," she says.

"Ooh, la, la!" the woman exclaims. "C'est pas possible."

And she places her hand on her heart.

"Entrez, entrez," she says and they step down into the tiled interior.

There is a ladder-backed rocking chair with crocheted cushion, a hand-knotted rug and a wizened sheepdog panting with effort as it swishes its tail.

The dog barks.

"Tais-toi, Ansel," says Mademoiselle Le Clos. She has a strong regional accent and neither of them can catch what follows, but understand from her gestures that they must not be concerned; the dog is harmless.

On the wall above the rocking chair, the pendulum of a clock marks off the seconds. Mademoiselle Le Clos looks from one to the other with small

piercing eyes and Helen feels as though she has forgotten her lines, unsure who she is meant to be.

“Venez,” she says and they follow her into an adjoining room.

She gestures for them to be seated and joins them at the opposite end of a square table. Is it the same one her mother wrote about?

“Vous avez voyager très loin?” she says.

“From Birmingham,” says Paul for simplification.

She raises her hands, animated. Does the name mean something to her? She says something, which Helen cannot follow. Paul says yes and Mademoiselle Le Clos rises.

“She’s offering us something,” Paul whispers. “I’m not sure what.”

She produces a jar and ladles what turn out to be prunes preserved in brandy into small glass goblets, accompanied by tiny spoons. Helen is unsure how to negotiate these, as the prunes are large and slippery. Her hand shakes and she can feel tears building behind her eyes. It seems rude to sniff and she swallows them down. Paul, meanwhile, seems to be managing perfectly well with his prunes.

“Très bon,” he says.

Perhaps emboldened by brandy, Paul says, “Your brother. Votre frère – Jean-Claude. Ami de Véronique.”

“Ah,” she raises her hands and casts her eyes heavenwards.

“We are very sorry,” he says. “Très triste.”

Helen feels the frustration of not being able to negotiate this delicate topic tactfully and hopes Danielle forgives them.

“Comment Véronique et Jean-Claude se...” Paul searches for the word.

“Comment ils se sont rencontrés?” she asks.

He nods, his mouth half full of prunes.

“I’m asking how her brother came to meet your mum.”

Helen observes their host carefully for signs of offence, but the woman is perfectly straight forward. She can see Paul straining to understand.

“Ah,” he says. “Votre cousin.”

“Oui, oui,” she says. “A Sauveterre.”

“Your mum came here with her friend – must be the one you mentioned – and they stayed at the house of Danielle’s cousin, Jules, in another village.”

“That’s exactly what Ted said,” says Helen.

“They met when Jean-Claude went there on a visit to his cousin.”

Helen’s eyes fill with tears and Danielle offers a tissue. She places her arm around Helen, closing her eyes and nodding in sympathy.

“Eh, oui,” she says, shaking her head.

“Ca fait longtemps,” she adds with a sigh.

Helen understands. A long time. Yes.

“Vos parents?” asks Paul

“Ils sont morts,” she says and elaborates. Paul translates the gist of it.

“Her parents have been dead for twenty years and more. She’s the only one left.”

Mademoiselle Le Clos studies the pair at length.

“Vous êtes en vacances?” she says.

“A holiday, yes,” says Helen. “En vacances.”

“Mariage,” says Paul.

“Ah!” she exclaims. “C’est la lune de miel!”

“Honeymoon – exactly!” says Paul. “La lune de miel!”

Mademoiselle le Clos throws her hands in the air.

“Vous devez manger ici,” she says.

It is not a question, but a command.

“She’s inviting us to eat here,” says Paul.

“Tell her we don’t want to impose,” says Helen.

“Vous serez les invites,” she confirms.

“I think it might be rude to refuse,” says Paul.

“Ask if she needs some help with the shopping or something, then” says Helen.

“Nous pouvons aider avec les achats?” he asks.

Danielle opens her mouth, aghast.

“Comment les achats!” she says, hands on hips. “On a tout ici. Venez voir.”

“She says there’s everything we need here. She wants to show us.”

Danielle leads them through the kitchen out into the back yard, where trellises of beans vie for attention with a feast of tomatoes, herbs and corn. Towards the back fence behind wire mesh a hen struts with a dignified air.

She hands them each an osier basket and then, bending, leafs through an umbrella of leaves, which might be spinach, and shows them a handful of snails. They hesitate and she laughs, exposing a row of gold fillings, and then places the snails with great care in one of the baskets. Ansel sniffs at a row of cabbage with passing disdain before settling for a patch of sun.

Danielle points to a rash of mushrooms.

“Champignons,” says Paul.

“Ce ne sont pas des champignons,” she says, “ce sont des cèpes.”

“She says they’re not mushrooms; they’re called something else,” he says.

“Cèpes!” says Helen. “I heard her – Mum wrote about them!”

She squats down beside the old lady.

“Here, let me help.”

“Oui, comme ça,” says Danielle, plucking a large specimen and laying it in the basket.

Helen follows suit; she can smell the rich earth and feel the sun, warm on her back. They quickly fall into an easy rhythm picking, brushing away the soil, stowing, then picking again.

“Allez-y!” she says with a nod of the head, directing Paul towards a patch of greens.

Helen hears the soft grunts of effort and smells the hint of perspiration issuing from their host. She too begins to perspire, but it hardly matters, engrossed as they are in the art of gathering.

Soon, both baskets are laden with greens and cèpes, tomatoes and capsicum, carrots, spring onions and, of course, the buried snails. Ansel rises and plods towards the back door, but Danielle stalks purposefully towards the fence where she opens a mesh gate, scattering the chickens. She waves her hand at the rooster, which bristles with umbrage, and dives for the hen house, rummaging under the straw to unearth a large brown egg.

The sight of the produce displayed on the kitchen table makes Helen feel as though she is part of a still life study from a previous century. Danielle runs water in the granite sink, while Paul carries the greens over to her. She hands him a tea towel and he pats them dry. Helen, meanwhile, sits at the kitchen table absorbing the atmosphere, listening to the two of them chatting, Danielle with a thick accent and Paul in halting French. She has no idea what they're saying.

Soon all three are seated at the kitchen table, Helen wiping the cèpes, Paul chopping carrots and Danielle beating the eggs into a fine, yellow froth. She unhooks a large skillet from the wall above the stove and there is a hissing sound, followed by the unmistakable aroma of melting butter. When everything is to Mademoiselle Le Clos' satisfaction, she ushers them through to the dining room, each of them bearing a dish piled with food; bread, salad and three neat rolls of omelette on a wide oval platter; plus a casserole of snails in garlic butter. They set them on the table and Danielle points to the top of the sideboard, where a dusty bottle of wine rests in a tangle of vines. At the opposite end of the sideboard another almost identical bottle dreams in a similarly varnished knot under its cover of dust.

"Celui-là," she says, emphatically, and positions a chair strategically beneath the bottle of her choice.

"Monsieur Paul, s'il vous plaît," she says, indicating the chair.

Paul obliges by stepping up onto the chair and reaching towards the gnarled wine stand. He takes both hands to the task, gently bringing the vine and its precious charge down towards his chest. He hands it to her before stepping down from the chair.

"Eh, ben," she says, "ben, ben."

Ansel comes to inspect the proceedings, eyeing the wine, tail wagging.

"Attendez," she says and disappears with it into the kitchen, followed by the dog.

When she returns, it is with the bottle opener in one hand and the wine in the other. She makes a centrepiece of the bottle on the table and they stand around it, admiring its dark green contours and mildewed label.

"Asseyez-vous," she says.

And Helen, who remembers this from school, obliges by drawing up a chair. Paul follows the bottle with his eyes as Danielle reaches for it and places it like a newborn in his hands.

“Chateau Yqueme,” he reads, “1923.”

Danielle nods and fills her lungs with a deep breath of pride.

“C’est un très bon vin,” she says.

“I know,” says Paul.

He turns to Helen.

“This is out of the top drawer,” he says. “Are you sure?...vous êtes sûre...?”

She nods her head vigorously.

“Oui, oui, c’est sûr.”

She hands Paul the corkscrew. He hesitates.

“Vous en avez peur?” she asks with wry humour.

“She’s asking if I’m afraid of it,” he translates.

But Helen is overcome with emotion.

“Why such a good bottle of wine for us?” says Paul. “It’s obviously some sort of heirloom.”

Danielle explains, confirming what Helen already knows from Vera’s journal; that this bottle was laid down at the birth of Jean-Claude and was reserved for his wedding day. She hears the name “Jean-Claude” tossed up like a refrain, and the word, “mariage”.

Paul looks at Helen, as he too remembers the journal.

“Now I’m really afraid,” he says. “J’ai maintenant vraiment peur.”

She laughs.

“Non, non,” she says, full of warmth. “C’est le moment juste.”

“She says the time is ripe,” he says.

“Une célébration,” she says and, taking the bottle from Paul, since he is dithering, she clasps it between her knees and puts out a hand for the bottle opener. They watch as she plunges it into the cork, twisting and turning, gentle, but firm. Pop! Out it comes, its three-quarter length stained a deep vermillion. The scent fills the room as she pours it into three plain glasses. Paul raises his and says:

“A Jean-Claude.”

“Et Véronique,” says Helen.

“A Jean-Claude et Véronique,” says Danielle, as their glasses meet over the table.

There is a momentary silence as they imbibe the liquid. Paul sets his glass down, gazing at it appreciatively and nodding.

“Cest bon,” he says.

“Eh, oui,” says Danielle, gazing likewise at her glass.

“C’est très bon,” says Helen.

They take another sip.

“C’est formidable!” says Paul, voicing Helen’s own sentiment as the glow of the wine courses through her.

“Ah, oui, c’est bon,” says Danielle. “Allez-y!” she says. “Mangez!”

And without further ado, she picks up the serving tongs and slides a roll of omelette onto three separate plates, handing them out and pushing the salad and mushrooms towards the couple, pointing a gnarled finger at the shiny escargots.

“Merci, merci,” says Helen.

“I think that means ‘no thank-you’,” says Paul.

“A Freudian slip,” she says, eyeing the snails.

“Mangez,” says their host, and she raises her glass once more.

“A Helene et Paul! Les nouveaux mariés!”

Helen raises her glass and Paul follows suit. “A Danielle!” they say.

She laughs, exposing the gap in the middle of her teeth. “Bon appétit!”

And they chorus in reply, “Bon appétit!”

TIME, SELF AND METAPHOR IN ILLNESS STORIES

Introduction

I have been so mauled by medical procedures, so sabotaged and made over, so thin and so fat, that sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being – even if the writing is aimless doodling that no one will ever read, or the diary that no one can see till I'm dead. (*Giving Up the Ghost* by Hilary Mantel, 200)

On reading Mantel's memoir, these words struck me with affirmative force; I too suffer chronic illness following clinical treatment, misdiagnosis and other diagnostic failures. I can also relate to her sense of loss, not only for a familiar self¹, but any self at all. In the aftermath of crisis, like Mantel, I turned instinctively to writing, partly to understand and assimilate those experiences, but also for a more existential reason; to “write myself into being”.

My writing often amounted to nothing more than “doodling”, to use Mantel's expression, or what Cardinal calls “scribblings” (*The Words* 225), but I found the activity both engaging and inexplicably restorative. This feeling invariably accompanied a shift in temporal awareness in which hours passed as minutes. I puzzled over how it is that when sick, temporal awareness is also distorted, with entire days being lost, or painful minutes stretching into lengthy hours. The real mystery, however, lay in the fact that whereas the timelessness of creative activity such as writing resulted in enhanced selfhood, that of illness led to a diminishment of self.

When diagnosed with breast cancer in mid-life, I had already developed a regular writing practice, enabling me to externalise events and feelings in something like Bakhtin's “indirect empathy” (Hunt and Sampson 53). Bakhtin also employs the term, “dialogic” to denote what Hunt and Sampson interpret as a reflexive or “metaphorical relationship with self”,

¹ I use the term “self” and its derivatives (selfhood, self-concept, etc.) throughout this exegesis for its existential implications, embracing Charmaz's “more resolute immutable self, less swayed by social forces” (104). The terms, “subjectivity” and “identity”, favoured by cultural studies for their cultural and historical emphasis, will at times also be used in context, however.

whereby writers adopt a simultaneously intimate and distanced stance towards their life material (52). My understanding of these terms, used in the context of fiction writing, is that character, setting and action become extensions of both the writer's lived experience and their imaginative life. In other words, these elements become metaphors for self (Tredinnick 186).

Ricoeur argues for narrative as an extended metaphor, whereby "multiple and scattered events" are integrated into an intelligible whole in much the same way that disparities cohere in metaphorical utterance (*Time and Narrative* Vol 1, x). The literature also establishes that the narrator and dominant narrative voice may also assume metaphorical representation (Morley 10; Ricoeur "Life in Quest of Narrative" 32; Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* Vol 2, 95-6). Ricoeur even goes so far as to suggest that the imaginary world of fiction is more real than the everyday life with which it is dynamically interlinked. This is because writer and reader may enjoy a virtual experience as they inhabit these fictional worlds in "*the mode of the imaginary*" (Boulter 91; Ricoeur "Life in Quest of Narrative" 27). Flow theorists propose that such reflexive states are conducive to a therapeutic atemporality (Perry 23; Csikszentmihalyi 49), confirming my own experience.

Upon recovery, and after an incubation period of some years, I felt ready to revisit the temporality-selfhood conundrum, whose mysteries had, if anything, deepened following the recent crisis. As a writer, researcher and teacher of creative writing, my interest focuses specifically on how narrative representations of time may be used to reconfigure the self in illness narratives. In considering how to approach this project, I studied autobiographical and fictional illness accounts, as well as academic literature spanning a variety of disciplines. These included literary studies with emphasis on metaphor, theories of self, illness narrative theory, narrative medicine and flow theory.

Following a close reading of key literary texts, including the theoretical works cited above, my selection of texts for analysis in this thesis comprises four memoirs, an autobiographical novel and two fictional narratives with illness themes. All offered potential models for my own creative production and also exemplified relevant aspects of theory. The autobiographical texts chosen for this study are Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail*

Eating (2010); Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly* (1997); Doris Brett's *Eating the Underworld* (2001); Inga Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye* (2000); and also Marie Cardinal's autobiographical novel, *The Words to Say It²* (1975, French edition; 1984, English edition). The two novels are Margaret Packham Hargrave's *A Woman of Air* (1996), and Paul Harding's *Tinkers* (2010).

Autobiographical illness accounts invariably make reference to the negative impact of temporal confusion on self-perception (Bauby 109; Brett 319, 328; Cardinal 16, 219; Clendinnen 15, 172). Many also attest to the urge to write in uncharacteristic ways following a health crisis (Brett 184; Cardinal *The Words* 215-6; Clendinnen 77; Mantel 200). Whereas the therapeutic effects of writing are acknowledged, none of these texts specifically addresses the question of atemporality as a healing component.

In reviewing the academic literature pertaining to my question, a gap similarly became apparent. For example, the effects of illness on the self have been the subject of many studies in a variety of disciplinary fields, including psychology, medicine, sociology, and cultural and literary studies, with temporality forming a lesser focus. The relationship between self and narrative has also been examined, for example in literary studies, neurology and psychology. In addition, literary theorists have investigated narrative strategies of time, and the role of reflexivity in the writing of fiction. Finally, psychologists have identified a correlation between altered temporal experience and self transformation during states of intense concentration, including creative pursuits such as writing. The relationship between a selfhood undermined by temporal disruption due to illness and the role of narrative strategies of time in reconfiguring the ill self has not been widely addressed, however.

On close reading of illness texts, and informed by theoretical perspectives, I noted a universal recourse to metaphor in expressing the illness experience. Particularly striking were the different ways in which figurative language was deployed to reflect the sufferers' relationship to

² This account was chosen predominantly for the physical, rather than psychoanalytical, nature of Cardinal's ailment; namely, a menstrual haemorrhage.

themselves and their environment. This appears to be sometimes a conscious act, and at other times not. The focus of this exegesis is on the role of metaphor in mediating the temporal dissonance commonly reported in illness. I argue that metaphor can assist or resist self-understanding for the newly diagnosed invalid. Applying theories from Aristotle to contemporary thinkers such as Sontag, Lakoff and Ricoeur, I examine how metaphor functions in illness memoir and fiction to effect or negate self-change in the sufferer. On the one hand, when metaphor is striking and original it can be seen as a means for the newly afflicted person to renegotiate their sense of self and world. On the other hand, dead or clichéd tropes may undermine efforts to assimilate the lived experience of illness, resulting in disempowerment. I further note that the impact of metaphorical thinking on the sufferer's sense of self and world is immediate, yet also reinforced over time through narrative. Metaphor may also be seen as a temporal bridge to reunite the emergent self with aspects disassociated through illness.

I observed several levels of metaphorical usage. Firstly, it may be used directly, for example to denote unaccustomed experiential particularity in terms of something concrete and familiar. An example from Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly* is the diving-bell image used to convey the weight, immobility and isolation of speechless paralysis.

Secondly, it may represent a reflexive stance, in which character and action become metaphors for the invalid herself. This reflexive aspect allows for Bakhtin's "dialogic" relationship, referred to above, between different aspects of ourselves, including the self in time. In this way, for example, Cardinal is able to imaginatively communicate between her childhood and sick adult self, with implications for a potentially healthy future self. These implications are perceived by Cardinal in the present and pave the way to actualising that potential:

Once again I was a little girl. Then when the image became obliterated and I again became a thirty year-old woman, I asked myself ... Why the boredom and embarrassment while facing my father? Who forced it upon me? Why? There I am on the couch,

keeping my eyes shut tight in order to retain my hold on the little girl. I was really her and me. (*The Words* 66)

Finally, symbolic association may be used singularly, but most frequently cumulatively as a governing metaphor in something akin to Chambers's "symbolic embedding" discussed in chapter three. A single image used to connote the invalid's plight – Bailey's snail and Clendinnen's tiger – becomes sustained when reflected in the title. Bauby's diving-bell takes on an extra dimension when juxtaposed with the butterfly image of the title to evoke the ever-present tension between physical incapacity and a mercurial levity of spirit.

The use of recurring images adds complexity, providing thematic unity and depth of character. In *A Woman of Air*, for instance, flowers symbolise the essence of each of the women representing the three generations spanning the twentieth century. Published in 1996, and winner of the inaugural Elle/Random House Fiction Prize, this novel presents the changing nature of Australian society through the lens of the second generation Daphne. Both as daughter and mother, Daphne's failed attempts to break free of the conventional strictures of the pre and post Second World War period are compounded by epilepsy. Daphne's story is told retrospectively from her deathbed as she sifts back through escapist fantasies, blended with painful memories, of now faded hopes of stardom. Clarissa loves the formal rose gardens reminiscent of the colonial heritage which binds her. Daphne, by contrast, rejects her mother's roses in favour of Australian bush flowers. Both personify extremes of "civilisation" and wildness. Only Ann Palmer, novelist and daughter of Daphne, achieves the balance between raw instinct and cultivated awareness. This truth is not overtly stated but implied by the title of her novel, *The Crimson Rhododendron*, in which she resolves her difficulties with her mother. Readers may appreciate the significance of the rhododendron as a flower both wild and cultivated, and thus reflective of Ann's more balanced nature. On another level they may also understand the implicit message, which forms the theme of Hargrave's novel, that only through art, and especially literary fiction, can the raw substance of life be interpreted, assimilated and transformed.

These studies have informed the creative production of my thesis; a novel entitled *The Homecoming*, depicting the healing transformation of a woman with a history of chronic illness, whose journey is initiated by an acute health crisis. My conclusion is that metaphor plays a key role in negotiating temporal disjunction for the ill protagonist, both memorial and fictional. Depending on whether metaphor is used consciously or unconsciously, with originality or as cliché, the sufferer's illness account may serve to reconfigure, reinstate or diminish selfhood.

In Chapter One I review the theoretical literature that frames my inquiry, summarising key research in the field of subjectivity and narrative with emphasis on temporality and illness. Chapter Two sets out to review and apply theoretical perspectives on metaphor to selected illness memoirs. Chapter Three comprises an analysis of metaphorical usage in selected fictional narratives of illness. I also discuss the relationship between reflexivity and flow theory in *Tinkers*. Chapter Four is devoted to an in-depth case study of George, the ill protagonist of *Tinkers*, and how metaphor theories combine with illness narrative and flow theory in clarifying the nature of his transformational journey. Chapter Five acts as a summary and conclusion, in which I relate the above research to my own creative production, a novel entitled *The Homecoming*.

CHAPTER 1: Background

The Self

This study takes place against debates concerning subjectivity as a fixed or fluid entity, with phenomenologist Martin Heidegger proposing a more fundamental self, in which time is inseparable from “Being” (Mansfield 177). From the standpoint of the creative writer, Hunt and Sampson propose a two-fold model embracing both a non-reflexive bodily self, which is innate, and a reflexive language-based self, the extended self (21).

In *How Our Lives Become Stories* Paul John Eakin offers a progressive model of selfhood, which he refers to as “an awareness in process”. He discusses the interplay between different “registers of self” with reference to psychologist Ulrich Neisser’s model of a five-fold self. The first two, present in the early stages of human development, are characterised by “direct perception, unmediated by reflexive consciousness of any kind” (Eakin 102). The third, or “extended self”, according to Eakin, is the one operating in autobiographical writing because it represents the self in time, capable of both memory and anticipation. Some theorists further propose that the core self is capable of monitoring and even interacting with the extended self, which serves more as recipient or observer (Brophy 151; Hunt and Sampson 20-1). Brophy argues that this position is particularly strong in the case of artistic pursuits such as poetry, whose sounds and rhythms may resist language in its usual linear flow, returning us to a permeable borderland between registers (Brophy 147-9). In an illness context, Garrett similarly notes the power of art, including poetry, to communicate the physical and emotional pain frequently deemed inexpressible. For Garrett, the embodied nature of illness forces sufferers into a world beyond language, affecting all aspects of self. However, through a poetic idiom – notably metaphor – pain is not only “translated” but transformed (19-20, 36).

Self and Narrative

The relationship between self and narrative has been widely recognised, with recent research in neurology and psychology supporting the notion of a dynamic interplay between the narrative process and the formation of self (Bruner 6-7, 13; Eakin124). In his essay “The Narrative Creation of Self”, Bruner compares a list of essential characteristics of the self (again, as composed by Neisser) with a list of essential story elements (Bruner 6-7), arguing that through narrative we “create and recreate” selfhood. In extreme cases, such as the neurological disorder “dysnarrativia”, the compromised ability to construct and understand personal narrative is linked to a reduced sense of both self and other (Bruner 13). Based on the premise of the self as culturally and socially constructed and with multiple, ever-changing narratives at its disposal, Bruner concludes that “the construction of selfhood, it seems, cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate” (13). This notion is borne out in autobiographical and academic literature in the case of chronically ill people who attest to a loss of identity when unable to confirm their experience through personal narrative (Frank 103-4; Mantel 200; Rimmon-Kenan 242-3). The problem is exacerbated by a disjunction between the “grand narratives” of medicine with their unifying views, and the unique experience of individual sufferers whose personal narratives do not fit conventional frames of reference (Frank 16, 139).

For Ricoeur, “narrative identity” is not dependent upon any preconceived or socially constructed ideal, being more fundamental in nature. In his view, only through the act of storytelling is the protagonist discovered to be who s/he essentially always was (Ricoeur “Life in Quest of Narrative” 32-3). This argument forms the basis of the “quest” prototype, also termed the “good” story, in Frank’s threefold illness narrative model (restitution, chaos and quest) (Frank 61-2).

Frank argues that reading or listening to stories is equally self-defining in that the recipient is changed through empathic testimony (Frank 143-5). Scholars further posit that an understanding of literary conventions aids not only the reader’s interpretation of texts, but also their ability to make sense of real life situations (Boulter 9; Charon 109-10; Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* Vol

3, 58-79). In *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*, for example, Rita Charon details how a study of the elements of literary texts, including metaphor, enables medical students to better “read” their patients. It also helps clarify their personal (and not merely clinical) insights through the use of figurative language (Charon 116, 221-2). Several theorists conclude that reading fiction is self-transformational (Boulter 96; Charon 54, 108; Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* Vol 1 53).

The Self and Time

Specific to an interpretation of self in relation to time is Heidegger’s seminal work, *Being and Time*.³ In Heidegger’s view, the very nature of human being (*Dasein*)⁴ depends on temporality, for we are the only creatures capable of reckoning with past and future, as well as present (Vanhoozer 43) and for whom “Being” is an issue (Heine 17). As discussed below, sickness foregrounds this position, as sufferers struggle for coherence between a formerly well self and a future uncertain self in the light of present incapacity and the looming spectre of death.

In response to the angst that besets us in the face of the abyss, Heidegger observes a common retreat into the mundane. Thus, in our “average everydayness”, we mostly conduct an inauthentic life of “now-time”, or “fallenness”, labouring under the illusion of time as an infinite series of “nows” (Dostal 155-6). By identifying with our own memories, beliefs, bodies and material possessions, a false impression of permanence and stability is created at the expense of authenticity (Zimmerman 245). Frank describes a similar outlook as “the world of busy pretense” (Frank 95).

³ *Being and Time* was published as an unfinished work in 1927. The project was never completed, nor did Heidegger succeed in satisfactorily developing a unitary concept of being (Dostal 166). The centrality of time in the phenomenologist project, however, has had a major impact on the development of philosophy, literature studies and the human sciences (Gregory 326).

⁴ The German word *Dasein* is commonly translated as “existence” or “life”, but literally means “being-there”. By breaking the word down into the components *Da* (there) and *Sein* (Being), Heidegger puts emphasis on the human experience as the site for understanding the nature of being (Korab-Karpowicz, [Martin Heidegger](#), 2001, internet, Available: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>, 5 May 2012.)

For Heidegger, “care” is inextricably bound up with notions of time and self, specifically the way in which we care for all entities constitutive of our world (Dostal 155-6; Zimmerman 243, 247). These three elements (care, time and self) mutually determine authenticity or inauthenticity, which are not fixed, but fluctuating states, depending on our mode of attention. In chapter five I argue that the ill protagonist, George, in Harding’s novel *Tinkers* exemplifies this hypothesis.

Heidegger moots that all phenomena are of potentially equal value and that the “self” is not an entity in opposition to other entities. Rather it is “the clearing in which entities (including thoughts, feelings, perceptions, objects, others) appear” (Zimmerman 242). This presents an important challenge to the dualistic, anthropocentric stance prevalent in Western culture that privileges man over nature, reason over feeling, mind over body (Zimmerman 240), and one could say by extension, the healthy over the infirm. Far from denoting absence, Heidegger argues, this temporal clearing is pregnant with possibility; it is not the chaos of nothingness we fear, but an opening to what might be (Zimmerman 245). Frank’s paradoxical proposal that quest grows out of a state of acceptance of (and even surrender to) the chaos of illness (126) resonates with Heidegger’s position that by facing the inevitability of our own death, we free ourselves from the “unreflective absorption” that binds us to everyday trivia, cutting us off from past and future (Dostal 156; Heine 44-5; Zimmerman 244). In his later essays, Heidegger describes temporal openness, or *Dasein*, in terms of “mutual appropriation” (Zimmerman 250). Again, with reference to *Tinkers*, I argue that this perspective denotes a more poetic, or metaphorical, relationship with oneself and one’s world.

Heidegger stresses that authentic being is none other than that which we “already always” are (Zimmerman 246). Frank and Ricoeur adopt a similar position, but add a moral dimension. Speaking of quest narrators Audre Lorde and Robert Murphy, for example, Frank writes: “Realizing who they always have been, truly been, each becomes ... the recreated, moral version of that self” (131). Heidegger’s model of authenticity privileges the future since past and present are interpreted in the light of its possibilities (Dostal 157; Heine 119-21). By recognising our birth potential and projecting

it forth, we not only revitalise the present, but take responsibility for our finitude. Thus, personal fate takes precedence over communal destiny because no one but the individual can assume the burden of his or her own mortal fate (Ricoeur, *Narrative Time* 178-9; Vanhoozer 45-6).

Heidegger's project has been criticised for its failure to satisfactorily demonstrate Being through an analysis of temporality (Dostal 164-6; Ricoeur, *Narrative Time* 184-5). Ricoeur even argues that the paradoxes of time cannot be resolved on a purely theoretical basis⁵ (Carr 169). Ricoeur agrees with Heidegger, however, that the illusion of everyday time as a linear sequence of "nows" obscures its true constitution as a more complex, multi-layered phenomenon (Ricoeur *Narrative Time* 166).

Self, Time and Narrative

Ricoeur's proposal is for a narrative solution with emphasis on emplotment as temporal mediator between cosmic, historical and subjective time (Ricoeur, *Narrative Time* 167). Ricoeur demonstrates how the everyday concept of time as linear is not entirely abolished, but superseded in stories by the configurational order of the plot (Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative" 22; Ricoeur, *Narrative Time* 174). Thus, an anecdotal series of events is transformed into a meaningful whole in which the beginning and ending reflect one another (Carr 170). In Ricoeur's view, stories – and in particular fictional ones – provide a prototype for life (Boulter 96). For Ricoeur, as for Frank, it is in the telling of the story, in which past, present and future cohere, that we discover our authenticity (Frank 61-2).

In a Ricoeurian model of human temporality, therefore, narrative theory provides a methodology for the transcendence of temporal experience from the limitations of linear "now-time" in favour of thematic unity, whereby "the end of the story equates the present with the past, [and] the actual with the potential" (Ricoeur, *Narrative Time* 182; Vanhoozer 44-5). Ricoeur's narrative model also raises Heidegger's individual struggle with death to the level of communication, which then becomes a social concern. Thus, through

⁵ Carr cites Ricoeur, who is speaking in the context of Augustine's theory of time.

stories, human experience and knowledge are transmitted between peers and intergenerationally, transforming a monadic practice into a dyadic one (Ricoeur, *Narrative Time* 184-5).

For psychologist Csikszentmihalyi a sense of connection (intrinsic and extrinsic) depends on the subjective experience of “flow”. Flow is a complex psychological state involving two apparently contradictory processes: differentiation, in which participants emerge with a strengthened sense of individuality; and integration, leading to a feeling of “union with other people, with ideas, and entities beyond the self” (41). Csikszentmihalyi moots that the successful combination of opposite tendencies creates a satisfying state that is potentially transformative (41-2). The reason for this, he argues, is that in order to maintain enjoyment, participants must continually challenge themselves to ever higher levels of achievement, eliciting increased efforts of concentration (74-5).

According to Csikszentmihalyi, almost any pursuit may lead to flow, including writing, whether in epistolary, journal or literary form (131). During flow the writer creates patterns of order out of otherwise random events and ideas, whose significance only crystallises during the writing process. This then enables the writer to clarify thoughts and better understand past experiences (131). Writing often proves therapeutic for these reasons, and also, Csikszentmihalyi suggests, because writing is conducive to the creation of a world in which the writer can “act with abandon, erasing from the mind the existence of a troubling reality” (132). Ricoeur argues for fiction as a complementary, rather than alternative reality, in which life and fiction continually interact, informing each other and changing not only the writer’s world, but the reader’s too (Boulter 96). Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi speaks of art as a potential source of flow for both artist and viewer (76).

Applying flow theory to fiction writing, psychologist and writer Susan Perry confirms Csikszentmihalyi’s stance that creative absorption leads to altered mind states in which awareness of both time and self disappears. Paradoxically, however, the writer emerges with a strengthened selfhood. Csikszentmihalyi concludes that flow is not dependent on external events but on an inner engagement, which allows for flow experiences even in the most extreme adversity, including severe and chronic illness (193). His perception

that “subjective experience is not just one of the dimensions of life, it *is* life itself” (192) is richly illustrated by Jean-Dominique Bauby’s moving account of life as a victim of locked-in syndrome, published in 1997, two days before the author’s death at age forty-four.

Perry observes an almost universal recourse to metaphor to denote flow, in which writers describe themselves as performing some fluid movement in space, such as “diving under water” or “surfing a wave” (26). Novelists also commonly report being aware of “multiple perspectives” and “balancing among pairs of opposites” (33). Other writers confirm the conduciveness of metaphorical language to embrace ambiguity and contradiction (Brophy 148-9; Charon 118-9). According to Perry’s survey, one of the motivations for writing includes the desire to make sense of the apparent disorder of everyday living (27). In his text *The Illness Narratives*, Arthur Kleinman confirms the significance of narrative order for the subjectivity of the sufferer:

patients order their experience of illness – what it means to them and to significant others – as personal narratives. The illness narrative is a story the patient tells, and significant others retell, to give coherence to the distinctive events and long term course of suffering. (49)

In this instance, narrative reflects its traditional function of creating order and hence meaning out of chaos.

Self, Time and Narrative in Illness

Inquiry into the effects of illness on the self in recent years spans many disciplines, including psychology, medicine, sociology, life writing and literature studies. A common view concerns the disruptive nature of illness, described by Susan Sontag as “the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship” (3). This is particularly pertinent when selfhood relies, for the main part, on professional and social status. On the other hand, narrative, individually and collaboratively formed, plays an important role in creating a

bridge between the former wellness and post-illness self (Cheshire and Ziebland 17; Hunt, Linda M 89; Garro and Mattingly 7; Williams 209-10), and can at times be instrumental in reconfiguring one's sense of self in terms of familial and social roles (Hunt, Linda M. 88-9). Whilst acknowledging its disruptive nature, recent research suggests that illness can also be a catalyst for experiencing selfhood in a broader, more quintessential sense (Frank 116-9; Garrett 7-8). Scholars make a distinction between pain and suffering (Garrett 8), and the lived experience of illness as opposed to medical diagnosis of disease (Kleinman xii, 3-6; Frank 5-7), with Garrett proposing that bodily pain afflicts "the whole of the self" (43). Garrett's term embraces physical, emotional, mental and also spiritual dimensions of self. This concept is key in distinguishing between medical definitions of disease and "cure", with their disregard for personal experience, and the significance of individual perspectives on illness and healing (Kleinman 3-6).

In his book *The Wounded Storyteller*, Frank emphasises the transformative power of narrative in mediating the illness experience, and identifies three narrative types: restitution, chaos and quest. In each case, different temporal perspectives are implicated, confirming Garrett's observation that "suffering is always bound up with human perceptions of time – past, present and future" (43). In the restitution model the plotline runs as follows: "yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again" (77). The reference point is to the past, with anticipation of a return to the former status quo, or habitual self. The second category, chaos, depicts the disruptive nature of illness, which undermines the sufferer's ability to function in the habitual way to the point where they no longer recognise themselves. Frank describes this as "a loss of the 'destination and map' that had previously guided the ill person's life" (1).⁶ In this state, language is unavailable to articulate the chaos and time stretches on in an interminable present, in which the sufferer finds neither meaning nor hope. The quest narrative emerges out of chaos and looks both backwards to the chaotic experience and forwards into a new future. At this point the impetus for

⁶ Frank borrows the term "destination and map" from a letter written by chronic fatigue sufferer, Judith Zaruches.

narration becomes all important. According to Frank, the transformative power of the quest narrative lies in its ability to serve as witness, primarily for the narrator, who is changed as a result. The community of witnesses – listeners and readers – is also affected by the story, however, adding a dyadic and therefore moral dimension. Frank posits the role of reflexivity as central to quest, whereby the breakdown suffered during the chaos phase becomes clear in the telling. In this case, narrative acts not so much to restore but to create memory (Frank 61) and even experience itself (Kleinman 49). My research supports the view that a reflexive – or, to use Hunt and Sampson’s alternative expression, “metaphorical” – relationship with self is key in promoting healing.

Not every illness narrator attests to a therapeutic outcome, however, as evidenced by Dinah Partridge’s account featured in chapter two, below. Likewise, sociologist Kathy Charmaz’s study produces mixed results. Charmaz interviews sufferers of chronic conditions over many years, focusing specifically on temporality and its effects on concepts of self in illness. Her concern is chiefly with management of illness, specifically time-management. Despite isolated references to cases where illness is reported as a catalyst for experiencing “a more resolute, immutable self” (104), any sense of transformation is largely overlooked, with most cases focusing on a return to a familiar self. In Frank’s terms, this attitude equates to “restitution”. Changes are mostly limited to “self enhancement”, a term denoting an acceptance or heightened appreciation of the present in the face of incapacity or death. This “intense present” often diminishes with the passage of time, however, as evidenced by Sontag in an essay published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1978, two years after her mastectomy: “That has somewhat receded now;...I don’t feel the same urgency. In a way, I’m sorry; I would like to keep some of that feeling of crisis” (Charmaz 149).

It is widely recognised that illness foregrounds the body (Charon 87-8; Frank 2-3; Garrett 46; Rimmon-Kenan 242), with literary theorists discussing the notion of embodiment as central to narrative possibility (Punday 15; Trombley 23), and some theorists proposing the circulatory systems of the body as a metaphor for the relation between author, text and reader (Punday 88-90). Indeed, many scholars acknowledge the vital interplay between

narrator as sufferer, and narratee as witness, in restoring a sense of self to the ill person. The witness role plays an especially important part in overcoming the sense of isolation imposed by illness (Charon 132-5; Clendinnen 15; Frank 1, 62-3; Kleinman 49), a sense that is often compounded by the alienating nature of the subject matter (Lorde 63-5; Rose 70; Woolf 194).

From a narratological point of view, Rimmon-Kenan proposes that it is the embodied nature of the experience that makes illness “an extreme test case” (244). Rimmon-Kenan discusses the challenge to illness narratives posed by the distortion of temporal and causal organisation with reference to diary entries by American sociologist Barbara Rosenblum, who later died of cancer. She observes that “the disintegration of the body disrupts not only Rosenblum’s sense of temporal continuity but also her capacity to construct causality” (242). Rosenblum describes herself as being “locked into the present, cut off from past and future” (242). Rosenblum’s situation is a classic example of Frank’s chaos narrative.

Rimmon-Kenan suggests that sufferers of severe and chronic conditions find creative ways to tell their story, often breaking the rules of narratology, which assume a linear conception of time. She proposes that the two-voiced structure of Rosenblum and Butler’s memoir *Cancer in Two Voices* is successful precisely because of the tensions between dual perspectives, and that the story exists in the gaps and silences between voices, rather than through more conventional narrative strategies (244). Brett’s and Clendinnen’s narratives similarly display tensions between disparate voices and genres, including poetry, myth, fiction, biography and illness memoir. In chapter two I argue that in Brett’s case the metaphorical handling of the different genres may in fact accentuate, rather than harmonise, the plurality of selves underscored by illness.

Garrett proposes that poetic language, and especially metaphor, is vital in mediating the illness experience (36). Others extol figurative language as an antidote to the “technology-laden atmosphere of hospital environments” (Fox 175). These views are discussed in more depth below in the context of the widespread use of metaphor in illness narratives. Also pertinent to illness stories is Punday’s proposal for imaginative – and not merely physical –

movement in fulfilling narrative's function as "a change in state over time" (189). In the following chapter I examine these perspectives in relation to selected illness memoirs.

CHAPTER 2: Metaphor in Illness Memoir

Metaphor ... is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars. (Ross 289)

For Aristotle, the combination of the “strange” or “rare” with normal usage lifts an idea above the mundane (Newman 6). Modern philosophers widely interpret Aristotle’s meaning to embrace not merely the descriptive or ornamental, but also the educational, in that by discerning resonance between two apparently disparate things, the viewer understands something new (Newman 7; Miller 375-400).

In Elisabeth Tova Bailey’s illness memoir *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, published in 2010, an errant snail in a pot plant becomes her saviour once the bedridden Bailey recognises her slow but steadfast companion as a mirror for herself. Bedridden by the sudden onslaught of a mysterious disease, Bailey’s memoir plots her gradual journey towards recovery and the role of the tiny snail that inspired it. Bailey’s fascination and increased erudition concerning the world of molluscs illuminate her discoveries about the human condition in general, and her illness trajectory in particular. The “rare” quality of the snail metaphor for both reader and narrator is its unexpected appearance in an enclosed room at a time when Bailey’s physical, mental and therefore narrative capacities are minimal. Her situation can be said to correspond to Arthur Frank’s chaos phase of illness in which the sufferer is still “*living* the chaos” and therefore “cannot tell [her story] in words” (Frank 98). The tiny, persistent snail provides just enough focus and movement to guide the patient back into life; Bailey’s reduced sense of herself as slothful and ineffectual is transformed in the light of the snail’s surprisingly rich and fascinating life.

For the chronically sick, such as Bailey, time and space contract, and with it one’s sense of embodiment and self, with life being experienced as an abstraction (Charmaz 236; Charon 88). Speaking of a chronic digestive ailment, for example, Garrett notes “the constant struggle” with time that

accompanies illness (50) and the impact it has on one's sense of self: "Since it was nameless and no one else recognized it I doubted its existence and wondered if I was imagining or creating it myself" (6). Hunt and Sampson argue that metaphor plays an important role in transforming abstraction into understanding:

Metaphor is not simply an aspect of figurative language, but a primary form of cognition, which enables us to make meaning through translating abstract bodily feelings into words. (21)

Petrie and Oshlag's study may go some way to explaining why metaphor can assist the invalid in rediscovering a sense of self. In their view, metaphor translates abstract concepts into concrete images, facilitating comprehension of a new topic, or tenor, when defined in terms of an already familiar "vehicle" (Petrie 600-2). On this basis, they hypothesise that metaphorical usage can be a catalyst for changes in our understanding of self and world (Petrie 579-609). Thus, we can see how in Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir the diving-bell image creates a bridge between his former able self and the new world of disability into which he is thrust. The weight of the diving-bell and the inability to communicate when deep underwater provide a reference point for an otherwise confusing mix of abstract impressions. The image also mirrors the psychological underworld to which he has been relegated. Firstly, the metaphor aids in his own cognitive processes and secondly it communicates that understanding to others. Through the blinking of one eye (Bauby's only means of communication following a massive stroke), he is able to record thoughts and impressions, which his patient scribe reads back to him, facilitating further reflection. Bauby's experience confirms psychologist Raymond Gibbs' observation that metaphorical (and indeed all language) interpretation can occur both instantaneously and over a prolonged period of reflective analysis (Gibbs 255-6). Similarly, for Bailey, even though her snail is externally encountered rather than figuratively conceived, its metaphorical significance crystallises over time through narrative reflection, observation and scholarship.

Newman construes Aristotelian theory of metaphor as not only bringing something to our attention, but as actually originating in perception. This involves active engagement (9). In Audre Lorde's case, it is the association of her post-mastectomy self with the Amazon women warriors of Dahomey that clinches her reclamation of identity as the feminist activist she potentially always was (Frank 129-30).⁷ The metaphor fits perfectly with Lorde's black-skinned, lesbian, feminist status and becomes what psychoanalyst Roy Schafer calls "the storyline of her self-story" (qtd. In Frank 130).

Referring to fusion theory, Ricoeur develops the notion of perception as metaphorical genesis; in other words, "seeing as" *creates* the relationship that coheres image and sense (my emphasis). He argues that it is an intuitive perception on behalf of the viewer that establishes the likeness, rather than the other way round (*The Rule of Metaphor* 212-3). For Ricoeur the "seeing as" is "half thought" (and therefore half-verbal) and "half experience" (or non-verbal); through metaphor the fullness of the non-verbal image joins with verbal thought to bring about understanding (*The Rule of Metaphor* 213). In the chaotic phase of illness when language is unavailable (Frank 98), the union of non-verbal experience with "verbal thought" through a concrete image can be seen as the first step in meaning-making. For Bauby, who is both paralysed and mute, his intuitive grasp of the situation coheres in the diving-bell image, as discussed above.

George Lakoff agrees that metaphorical thinking is more complex than mere comparison, and sets out to demonstrate the mechanics of the process via a system of mappings across conceptual domains (Lakoff 245). Lakoff observes that such mappings are "not arbitrary, but grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge" (245). Bauby's account appears to confirm this notion, for in applying the word "diving-bell" to "locked-in syndrome", he transfers the qualitative experience of deep sea diving to his own predicament, complete with a sense of heaviness, immobility, isolation and submersion. Here original metaphor is crafted by the individual sufferer

⁷ The initiation rites of the Amazonian women involved the removal of one breast to better facilitate their prowess as archers (Frank 129).

in response to a unique situation, confirming Aristotle's point that "[m]etaphor ... is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others" (Ross 289). It is "an intuitive experience-act" (Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* 213)⁸, with the sufferer playing an active role in an ongoing process of assimilation and expression. For Lorde, in perceiving the Amazonian woman's severed breast as an autonomous act, a shift is created in self-concept. Rather than thinking of herself as a compliant medical victim, she becomes a liberated woman, electing to display her loss as a badge of honour by refusing to wear a prosthesis.

For Ricoeur, metaphorical perception is an experience that defines us; "it is at once a becoming of expression and a becoming of our being" (*The Rule of Metaphor* 215). In his view, the poetic image can expand "consciousness" and stimulate "growth" (*The Rule of Metaphor* 213-5). For an invalid such as Bauby who is immobile and unable to speak, metaphorical perception provides the narrative momentum for self-reflexivity, which in turn leads to expansion and change. The initial insight of the diving-bell analogy gives rise to a second possibility, that of the butterfly, in which Bauby is free to indulge in flights of fantasy and imagination.

Some theorists define narrative as "a change in state over time", placing emphasis on the importance of movement (Punday 189). In *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, Punday proposes that, as well as physically, movement can also be represented perceptually and imaginatively (140-1). This aspect is fully exploited in illness narratives. For Bauby, as stroke victim, an imaginative twist converts the painful reality of the diving-bell into the more hopeful prospect of a cocoon, from which his butterfly mind hatches myriad possibilities: "There is so much to do. You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas's court" (13). Through flights of imagination and memory, Bauby can move through time in any direction he chooses. Besides a fantasy visit to his lover, the realisation of childhood dreams and adult ambitions, Bauby is free to mentally compose the "bedridden travel notes" (13) that become this remarkable memoir.

⁸ This phrase appears in philosopher Marcus B. Hester's work, *The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor* (180), and is quoted by Paul Ricoeur in *The Rule of Metaphor* (213).

In Clendinnen's case, the roar of a tiger in the neighbouring zoo suggests independence, keeping her emotionally attached to the notion of freedom beyond hospital confinement (an image that becomes an extended metaphor in the title *Tiger's Eye*). This mixed genre text, published in Australia in 2000, takes as its central focus Clendinnen's illness account of a rare liver disease, culminating in a liver transplant and recovery. For Clendinnen, the tiger's eye image serves "as defiance of exigency" (77) to escape the horror of the current crisis, rather than as a bridge between past and present. It also acts as a defence against the looming possibility of death. Whereas Bauby's butterfly imagination offers a similarly welcome reprieve from the stasis of illness, his diving-bell metaphor acts as a counterweight, keeping the author and reader grounded in the "really real" (Frank 17),⁹ the inescapable fact of permanent disability. Unlike Bauby's visions, Clendinnen's tiger presents not as spontaneous revelation, but is invoked instead by a fierce effort of will (184).

Tiger's Eye is a combination of historical biography, childhood memoir, fictional forays, and illness accounts written both as a reflective memoir and as a journal during the immediacy of crisis. At times, in grappling with the chaos of illness, the latter appears to anticipate Frank's quest narrative. Ultimately, however, I argue that *Tiger's Eye* demonstrates the power of restitution as a model for survival. According to Frank's definition, the restitution narrative seeks to reinstate the "status quo ante" (83), or as Clendinnen aptly puts it, "the retrieved self" (189). In Frank's view, the reinstated self can be based on fixed social constructs; an image of the pre-illness self projected forwards; or most commonly a mixture of both. The image Clendinnen professes to retrieve is that of "professional historian" (192) and "middle-class female pacifist and practicing atheist" (190). According to Frank, the goal of restitution is "cure", and the preferred medium, compliance with medical technology. For Clendinnen, this means a liver transplant and ongoing drug therapy. The tiger's eye of the title does not span the different genres, making its appearance only in the journal as a

⁹ This phrase is taken from the early twentieth century writer, William James, and used by Frank to denote the lived reality of experience.

symbol of willed survival. What appears constant across genres is the authorial agenda to select and control the images. A departure from this position can be identified in the hallucinatory narratives of the hospital journal, in which Clendinnen attests to having “played no conscious role” (246). During recuperation, Clendinnen subjects these to the analytical scrutiny of her profession: “Only by playing historian to my nightmares would I be able to negate their power” (189). The “nightmares” include World War One battle scenes depicting corpses clambering out of trenches and a blind stretcher bearer who turns out to be her father; blood-soaked bodies and burning flesh; a naked Chinese emperor; and a scrap of silk, flailing in the wind. Clendinnen toys with the notion of these as “communiqués from my dark interior” or “the cryptic history of the unknown self” before committing them to her journal in a bid to “detach myself from them” (189). Subsequently reflecting on these episodes during convalescence, Clendinnen further interrogates and ultimately “exorcise[s]” the scenes from what she dismisses as “the unauthorised version” of herself (189).

By contrast, the early post-operative journal entries convey Clendinnen’s vulnerability and the immediacy of her plight with a touching embodiment and honesty. For example, on the second night following her operation, she writes in her journal:

I am a naked worm, skinless, blind; I am a blind leach, I must find a body. I stretch and yearn towards every sound. Who’s there? Let there be someone. Control yourself. If I cannot see it is only because it is night. I am not blind, it is only that it is night. Please let there be someone. (175)

In Frank’s terms, this excerpt offers a rare depiction of the chaos narrative. It is rare because, as Frank points out, the very nature of the experience undermines expressive capacity. Here metaphor can be said to clarify an experience that almost defies words, and does so one might say for the sufferer-narrator as self-witness as much as for the reader. The short, interrupted sentences suggest the chaos that is still being lived, and yet the mere fact of articulation can also be seen to indicate a shift towards the quest

narrative. According to Frank, quest looks back to the chaos out of which it develops in a bid to understand the nature of that experience. At the same time, the quest tale anticipates the emergence of a new future from the ashes of the old. By this process, in Frank's view, the ill narrator discovers an authentic sense of self beyond that of familial, social and professional identity because such a narrative always entails confrontation with mortality. For Clendinnen, and most illness narrators featured in this exegesis, the restitution narrative never entirely disappears, but rather assumes a background position, sometimes breaking through into the foreground. This can be seen as the case in the lines, "If I cannot see it is only because it is night", which seeks to hold contingency and chaos at bay. The words that follow, "[p]lease let there be someone", bring this assertion into question, conveying instead the fear of isolation that is an integral part of sickness. The vulnerability and pathos expressed through striking imagery in the immediacy of crisis suggest an authenticity that wins our sympathies. We feel with Clendinnen in her powerlessness, estrangement and need for human contact, all of which are vividly conveyed by the blind, worm-leach image.

Journal entries immediately prior to the transplant are often equally evocative and fresh, notably when portraying her invalid struggles with language. She writes, for example, of the "ramshackle mansion of memory" with its half-open doors, and of words lying "like broken beads in an unlit corner" (168). Her depiction of the intensive care ward as an "underground spaceship" with its blank-faced clock is similarly unsettling (173). At times, such figures become objects of parody and intellectual analysis; for instance, the ward nurse who inhabits the spaceship, "flicks on clear plastic gloves, a little see-through apron, like a French sex-farce. What is she going to do? Ridiculous" (173). The use of judgements such as "ridiculous" and the imperatives, "STOP IT", "concentrate" and "control yourself" (173-7) interrupt the imagistic flow. This effect can be seen both as a reflection of illness confusion and as an attempt to wrest back control. As for the numberless clock face, Clendinnen questions whether the problem is merely a case of misplaced spectacles: "What have they done with my glasses? Why have they given me a clock?" (173).

The analytical frame of mind and humour create a welcome distance from the gruelling intensity of her situation, and a buffer against the prospect of mortality. Other strategies, such as the use of the third person singular in her childhood memoir, act as a self-confessed aid in creating a continuous sense of self out of fragmentation, and as part of a “conscious process of retrieval” (239). Her debut short stories appear therapeutic for two reasons: “writing fiction made me happy. It also relieved my fear of being trapped ‘inside’” (85). One could also view these fictions as “dialogic”, or reflexive, in that Clendinnen projects her fear of hospitals onto the young, male surfer-protagonists, who share her sentiments yet manage to avoid her fate. Noah, for example, clings to the freedom of windswept beaches, open skies and restless ocean, rather than address his worsening eye condition because he is...

shit-scared of hospitals, with half-arsed nurses bossing you about, making you piss in bottles and crap in pans, all metal and rubber and whooshing doors: no dope, no sex, no surf. (84)

The colloquialisms and slang can also be seen as another form of vicarious liberty, and even rebellion, in sharp contrast to the hospital confinement from which Clendinnen writes. When too ill for the demands of fiction, Clendinnen focuses on “folk metaphors” (168). These begin with themes of death, but are quickly subverted into the jaunty and bizarre.

The death knock. In at the kill. Over the hill. Snake in the grass ...
The cat’s pyjamas (cat dancing in butcher-boy stripes), the giddy limit (cat ecstatic, gyrating on a precipice). (169)

For the reader, the effect may be trivialised by cliché and the banal juxtaposition of mortality with the “resolutely gay” (169). Clendinnen, however, reports these images as “vivid, real, solid in a way that, increasingly, I was not” (169), and we may respect her resourceful use of imagery, whether clichéd or not, as an important mechanism for survival.

These strategies appear successful in pulling Clendinnen back from the brink and reinstating her old self.

Later, reflecting on her hospital crisis, Clendinnen questions the validity of her writing experience. She is troubled by the apparent incongruities between memory and fact, and equally perturbed by a perceived lack of moral dimension in her fictions. It may be that the confusion resides with the more spontaneous fluidity of being, emphasised by Hunt and Sampson as a mark of reflexivity. Frank's view of reflexivity, discussed more fully below, is that changes in detail and style are a confirmation of narrative truth, and more accurately reflect the developing relationship of the sufferer to their condition (20-25). Reflection, on the other hand, is distinguished by Hunt and Sampson as requiring no engagement with another (including oneself as other) and does not effect change in the person reflecting (although change may result as a consequence of those reflections). Mistrusting both fictional invention and memory (the latter being viewed as a slippery eel), Clendinnen immerses herself instead in "the reliable miracle of history" (221), which to her represents "the trout-gleam of truth" (242). Thus, she embarks on a biography of Mr. Robinson, an early Australian explorer. These pages are included in the text and mark a turning point where memoir and fiction are abandoned in favour of ethnographic biography.

On return home, in the words of a close friend, Clendinnen appears exactly as before: "How wonderful! You are yourself again" (188). Despite returning to her old life, including her profession as historian, however, Clendinnen admits to a disconcerting sense of insubstantiality, describing herself as "a shred, a nothing, a sliver of shattered silk whirling in the wind, without anchor or destiny, surviving only because the wind happened to drop" (188). It is as though in the aftermath of trauma Clendinnen feels bereft of authenticity, concluding that she, and all of us, are mere "physical constructs" (288), or fictions. Such a conclusion may recall Frank's cautions against "being captivated by the exclusivity of the restitution narrative" (94). In his view, when no other narrative is prepared, specifically one that embraces the inevitability of mortality and the universal world of suffering to which we all belong, then we become quintessentially unavailable to ourselves.

Tiger's Eye admirably demonstrates the strengths of the restitution narrative in that it holds at bay the chaos of illness, tipping the scales towards survival and away from death, or at the very least, severe impairment. Whereas the use of writing to exercise control in extremis is impressive and undoubtedly succeeds in pulling Clendinnen back from the brink, it may antagonise the reader. Critiquing an illness memoir, which could well be Clendinnen's, Dinah Partridge expresses incredulity that someone so severely sick is able to write at all immediately following surgery, let alone wrest back control by memorialising (134). The subject of severe illness trauma herself, Partridge is suspicious, and indeed angered, by an approach such as Clendinnen's, with its "childhood reminiscences, fictional excerpts, ongoing relations with parents and a concern for the impact of illness on one's career" (134). Above all, she finds the controlled and reflective tone alienating, especially given her own chaotic experience, which she describes as "a permanent present", a life-threatening situation which "destroyed my previous self" (134). Partridge is harsh on memoirists like Clendinnen who portray coherent self-representation with the aim of "reconstruct[ing] a self threatened by circumstance" (134). Partridge by contrast writes "to lay bare the experience to myself" (134), an aim resonant with Frank's quest narrative. Rather than assimilating the trauma, however, she hopes to put it behind her, or "insulate" herself from it (140-1). Her method involves producing an academic thesis in which she reflects on "the meaning of the writing process for the illness sufferer" (135).

The results of her "pathography" are validation of experience and enhanced self-knowledge. Conversely, however, the diminishment of self triggered by illness is reinforced by the bitterness, resentment and resignation mirrored back to her in the writing. In other words, her study ends in what Frank terms "narrative wreckage" (Frank 94). Partridge attributes this disappointing outcome to a lack of literary expertise on her part, concluding that the transformation reported by some illness narrators is due to superior writing skills. My suggestion is that the analytical nature of Partridge's study has not allowed for the poetic expression or metaphorising some scholars advocate as a necessary element of healing (Fox 65; Garrett 36).

For Garrett, “the telling and retelling of a personal story can either reinforce or change the narrator’s way of life and relationships” (187). In her view, poetic idiom, and in particular metaphor are crucial in mediating the illness experience:

When science, even social science, tries to eliminate metaphor from its language, it gives chronic pain sufferers little more than legitimacy for their pain. In all the arts, the power of metaphor to communicate experience makes healing possible. Through metaphor, if only for a moment, pain is simultaneously understood, accepted and transformed. (36)

Garrett’s position may cast light on the mixed results to which Partridge attests following her research; on the one hand her pain is legitimised, yet at the same time the hoped-for transformation is eluded. Both Partridge and Clendinnen can be said to use writing to think *about* their illness stories, as opposed to *with* or *through* them. According to Frank, such an approach limits narrative scope and therefore narrative identity:

To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyze that content ... To think with a story is to experience it affecting one’s own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one’s life. (23)

This distinction resonates with that of Hunt and Sampson regarding reflection and reflexivity, with the former involving “taking something into oneself – a topic, an event, a relationship – for the purpose of contemplation or examination” (4). Reflexivity, on the other hand, entails engagement, either with another or oneself as other, in which something new may emerge.

In her autobiographical novel *The Words to Say It*, Marie Cardinal, like Clendinnen, attests to the terrors of hallucinations. The French edition of this title appeared in 1975, with the English translation following in 1984. The book is considered a classic for its account of psychoanalysis, and is relevant to my study because of Cardinal's related physical ailment, a uterine

haemorrhage. Cardinal's hallucinations stem from a psychotic condition, rather than being drug-induced, for Cardinal rejects medical intervention in favour of psychoanalysis. The macabre nature of Cardinal's visions is similar to Clendinnen's, as is her initial reaction:

My own resistance was amazingly powerful ... It enlisted death on its side, in order to better guard the door. Death with its putrefactions; its stinking fluids, its decomposing flesh, its whitened skeleton from which dangled meat crawling with worms...(*The Words* 172)

Both authors recognise that their visions emanate from a dark, suppressed part of themselves: the unconscious. Both fear its power: that it will overwhelm, even kill them (Cardinal 151, 172; Clendinnen 184). But Cardinal sees that the apparent safety of the habitual "amputates" the imagination (*The Words* 268). Fearful as she is, Cardinal follows the path of instinct, rather than logic, and realises that, contrary to expectation, these images are not malicious but offer clues to meaning. Speaking of her analysis, she says:

It was a painful process at the outset because I distrusted myself. I had to make numerous inroads into the unconscious in order to convince myself that it was wild and free, yet incapable of malice. (*The Words* 175)

Cardinal's most harrowing and persistent hallucination consists of an eye watching her through a tube. It has the power to reduce her to a state of nausea and paralysis. She names it the Thing. With the aid of her analyst as witness over several years, this image reveals several layers of meaning, all of which have contributed to Cardinal's sense of madness and shame. It is simultaneously the birth canal, reminding her that her mother tried to abort her during the early stages of pregnancy; it is the paper spigot she constructed as a child to serve as a phallic symbol of power; it represents her power struggle with her mother as a four-year-old; and finally it is the eye of

her estranged father, coldly filming her toddlerhood bottom as she pees behind a bush.

The trail of images encompasses the themes that lie at the heart of Cardinal's identity crisis; that of power versus impotence; conditioning versus freedom, for as the final memory returns, she understands that, more than the rage it provoked in her, it is the adult reaction to it that cements her sense of shame and self-loathing. It takes many years for Cardinal to become fluent in the metaphorical language of her psyche, and a considerable gestation period before she is able to write about her experience. When insight does appear, however, it is like "several strokes of lightning, those luminous seconds during which the entire truth appears ..." (*The Words* 248).

The analysis which forms the basis of Cardinal's healing differs from the intellectual rigours Clendinnen applies to her visitations. Rather than reflecting on her story – or thinking *about* it – Cardinal enters a more reflexive, or symbiotic, relationship in which the narrative process illuminates and transforms her relationship with her former "mad" self. Ultimately, Cardinal comes to understand metaphor as the language of the unconscious with its multiple layers of meaning. She also learns to appreciate the danger of repressing an image before it is understood. By confronting the tube paranoia, Cardinal frees herself from the hallucination on which her psychosis was founded, and which had dogged her for the best part of her adult life. Speaking of her analyst, following the tube insight, she writes: "He had just helped me give birth to myself. I was just born. I was new!" (*The Words* 153). Her epiphany calls to mind the "narrative identity"¹⁰ unearthed in the telling which Ricoeur describes in terms of liberation from preconceived selfhood ("a narrator who believes he already knows who he is") in favour of a "*self* [that] is born" through narrative (Frank 61-2).

As discussed, Clendinnen, by contrast, is increasingly suspicious of imagination and doubtful of the confidence with which she depicts her younger self. In conclusion, she declares herself not only a fiction but "a

¹⁰ Narrative identity has been defined in terms of a story whose purpose is "to provide an identity to the doer" (Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 183). For Ricoeur and Frank, the quest tale is paradigmatic of such a story (Frank 61-2; Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 182).

ragbag of metaphors” and “a hank of memories”; a happenstance (188), the only reliable medium for truth being history with its solid base in fact.

An alternative position proposed by Frank is that narrative inconsistencies reflect a transformative relationship between the sufferer and their past, particularly in an illness context, as memories are assimilated over time (Frank 20-5). In such a case, rather than being synonymous with fact, veracity depends on faculties other than reason alone (Charon 132-3). Fox argues that metaphor is powerfully expressive of the human condition because of its ability to embrace an interplay of complex meaning (65).

When metaphor is generalised or clichéd, however, its effectiveness is compromised (Burroway and Stuckey-French 340; Frank 136; Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* 213). In his essay “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor” Lakoff argues for something more insidious than compromise. In his view, both academic discourse and everyday language are riddled with metaphors operating at an unconscious level. Such tropes have become stale and go largely unnoticed. Examples of medical “circumlocution” (Clendinnen 10) identified by Clendinnen include “by and large” (9) and “somewhere down the track” (12). Moreover, many common expressions are not even identified as metaphorical, nor do we appreciate the unexamined assumptions they carry.

Lakoff’s analysis of temporality reveals some taken-for-granted attitudes commonly expressed in illness texts. Time, he observes, is invariably presented in terms of spatial metaphor with the viewer taking a fixed, central position, the future stretching ahead and the past disappearing behind (Lakoff 217). This stance is typical of Frank’s restitution model as exemplified by Brett:

In the face of a life-threatening illness ... [y]ou crane anxiously into the future, trying to see if it is really there. You look behind you, trying to understand, examine the past. (185)

In her essay *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag highlights the unconscious use of metaphor as an indicator of negative social and cultural attitudes towards disease. In her view, these become so entrenched in everyday language as to assume literal and even authoritative meaning to the detriment of the sick

(66). The most common cancer metaphors are drawn from warfare, with patients seen as victims engaged in battle against an invading enemy (Sontag 64). When such violent images become entrenched in the popular and medical mind, they incite equal violence in treatment approach. A “counter-attack” is mounted, the body being “bombarded” with radiation or in the case of chemotherapy, targeted with toxins in chemical warfare (64-5). Among its damning effects on the cancer sufferer is the view of the disease as a death sentence (the very word “cancer” can precipitate death in Sontag's view) (6, 75), and – even more sinister – as alien invaders multiplying within the cells to replace “you” with the “non-you” (67-8). The immunological term, “non-self”, used in the 1970s and 80s to classify cancer cells (67) continues to haunt the popular imagination as a split between the real self and the alien “other”. During chemotherapy, for example, Brett produces her driver's license as a form of identity when out shopping and is immediately confused as to which is the real “me”. The one with the hair or the bald version wearing a wig? The incident draws attention to the fact that, despite going through the motions in the outside world, she has been transported to a parallel universe, inaccessible to visitors and friends (274). Even more problematic is the self-alienation that results from this split.

Scholars such as Gillian Rose, Frank and Sontag bemoan the dearth of language to articulate the illness experience outside of the conventional clichés and misconceptions (Frank 10; Rose 95; Sontag 3-4). Personal metaphors that fill this gap include Brett's notion of an outsider viewing healthy folk with her “nose pressed to the window wishing I could be in there” (Brett 48), and Frank and Sontag's different territories for the sick and the well, with passports issued to transit between the two, and even visas for those in remission inhabiting the borderland between (Frank 9; Sontag 3; Woolf 193). By extending this metaphor to that of colonisation by medicine of the invalid body, Frank confirms Sontag's position that cultural attitudes reflected in language assume a powerful authority in real life (Frank 10, Sontag 66). For Frank, the colonial metaphor drives the restitution narrative, which is itself an expression of modernist attitudes still current in medicine. This narrative adheres to a single plotline in which death and disease are conquered. Patient and practitioner conform to their prescribed roles, the sick

patient's job being to submit to the cure, which will return him to his former life exactly as before. The timeline is oriented towards a future cure, viewed as already here, and composed of the old self projected forwards. There is no room for the present of experience. The invalid remains voiceless, unrepresented and anonymous in a story told by medicine, for which the true hero is technology (Couser 21-2; Frank 13, 92). This is a version of the culturally preferred narrative whose genesis can be attributed in part to biblical stories, whereby the "good" person is rewarded for their trials and tribulations and the "bad" person punished by pestilence and disease (Frank 80, Sontag 38, 57-8). Such assumptions become part of a metaphorical thinking that further silences and disempowers the patient (Sontag 8).

In *Eating the Underworld* Brett's search for expression elicits three separate voices, that of the poet, diarist and fairytale guide, "Rachel", hence its subtitle: *A Memoir in Three Voices*. The book was first published in 2001 and portrays Brett's journey from ovarian cancer diagnosis, through treatment, remission, recurrence, further treatment and, until the time of writing, recovery and a revised understanding of self. Depending largely on the genre, metaphor may work both for and against her transformational intent, resulting in a tension between the poetic and the hidebound self, caught between personal insight and the grand narratives of medicine. In fairytale and journal Brett appears to struggle to free herself from the role of professional psychologist and what Frank terms "the language of survival" that forms part of her training. It is not that there is anything wrong with survival, of course; on the contrary, a desire to sustain life is both responsible and laudable. In Frank's view, however, when narrative identity is driven from without by a "unifying general view" that deconstructs mortality, the human experience in all its vulnerability and contingency cannot be part of the story (13, 95). Standard images prevalent in the prose sections, with Brett searching beyond illness for "light at the end of the tunnel", or peering back into the distance for the lost puzzle pieces of a former self, suggest a linear timeframe and a restricted sense of self. Thus, for Brett a complex personal story may be compromised by the goal of cure with its happy-ever-after ending. The view of a world divided into binary opposites of fairness and unfairness, victims and perpetrators, with "me" pitted against the disease, the

treatment, and the unfavourable odds (Brett 156, 270) may unwittingly exacerbate the tensions inherent in her already fraught situation.

Even though Brett claims not to consider radiation and chemotherapy as violent, the diarist voice appears beset by battle imagery, where she is in combat not only with the disease but even her own wayward blood count. For Brett has “walked into the wrong story”; one in which recurrence was not supposed to be part of the narrative, her anticipated due being reward for suffering instead. There are moments in Brett’s journal when genuine insight finds expression in original ways, drawing the reader and herself as primary witness closer to the core of embodied experience. When Brett and husband Martin go for a drive “in the middle of nowhere” shortly after her second spate of chemotherapy, they discover an electric power station and explore one of its towers. Stepping onto the mesh floor of the lookout, Brett freezes in horror, her focus shifting from the solidity of the steel mesh floor to the terrifying drop below. In one instant she perceives her tenuous existence (326). It is a striking image; an embodied moment encapsulating the fear and precariousness after the event that could not be faced earlier. In such instances, author and reader connect as we become both sympathetic to her plight and simultaneously reminded of our own vulnerability. At other times, however, Brett’s story may be undermined by an unwitting use of stock phrases and clichés:

Cancer has been the apple that expelled me from the garden. I used the image in a poem I wrote, long before I understood what I meant. I know now that when you partake of the fruit of knowledge, you have to bear the knowledge of both the dark and the light. It is what growing up is about – letting go of idealisation and innocence, and the recognition of your own truth, however complex and shadowed that may be. (393)

The generalised philosophising around a weak Garden of Eden metaphor holds at bay the sense of isolation and personal pain inherent in the situation. Such an agenda is understandable, even if unconscious, but what may

ultimately be withheld is an intimation of mortality, without which a sense of embodiment and authenticity may be eluded (Frank 85, 95; Heine 9).

It is Brett's poetry that saves her from the self-conscious angst of the diarist and the rational analysis of the fairytale. Here vivid imagery appears to lift an often terrifying cancer journey into a luminous plane, filled with wonder and hope. Autumn trees shed multi-coloured leaves, softening and ennobling the potential horror of hair loss; waiting room patients reach out and rise, "wingtip to wingtip" above rusty roofs; a pause at the top of a childhood swing becomes the suspenseful moment between life and death (252, 55-6, 159). Such images link Brett, and the reader, to the human community of suffering. They convey an intensely personal experience that has universal appeal; those of us who have not been diagnosed with cancer nonetheless know fear and pain, and the unexpected clarity they sometimes reveal.

In *The Words to Say It* Cardinal clearly indicates her awareness of metaphor's dual potential to free or imprison the self. Even a single word can be loaded with social and cultural baggage, representing a form of brainwashing (*The Words* 64, 242-3). These are handed down from generation to generation unquestioningly and it is only when psychoanalysis is almost complete that Cardinal catches herself transmitting to her own children these "dead words", weighted with the colonial values she no longer espouses. In line with Sontag's observation, words have contributed to her psychosis, with medical terms such as "fibromatous" (describing the state of her womb), reducing her to a trembling wreck (*The Words* 239). That is, until she understands the figurative power stored therein.

Words could become monsters...the SS¹¹ of the unconscious,
driving back the thought of the living into the prison of oblivion.
(*The Words* 240)

In Frank's lexicon, *The Words to Say It* offers a "countertextual reality", or quest narrative, a powerful post-modern, post-colonial response in which the

¹¹ The "Schutzstaffel", the paramilitary organisation operating under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party during World War II.

sufferer resists conventional idiom (11, 66). For, once Cardinal becomes more metaphorically and semantically aware as a result of her analysis, she is able to take control of words and phrases, which then become a matter of conscious choice. The words themselves now act as stepping stones leading from an old mindset into a new understanding of self and world.

Words could be giants, solid boulders going deep down into the earth, thanks to which one can get across the rapids. (*The Words* 240)

As she simultaneously gains in health and insight, the words formerly stumbled against when sick are rediscovered as an empowering tool:

Words could be vibrating particles, constantly animating existence, or cells swallowing each other like phagocytes or gluttonous corpuscles leaguering together to devour microbes and repulse foreign invasions. (*The Words* 240)

The above image turns on its head Sontag's notion of a virulent colonial invasion, with Cardinal reclaiming her health as her cells repel foreign attack. These microbial images perfectly convey the invisible work of the author on the psychological and emotional front. Undetected from the outside, the painstaking inner work now manifests itself in all its potentially repulsive, but animated glory. Understanding Cardinal's genteel upbringing, the reader may celebrate with her the shock and surprise of this apt, if unusual, metaphor. Moreover, Cardinal's counter story confirms Frank's definition of the quest tale as one in which the sufferer-narrator becomes "self-conscious[ly]" aware (Frank 63).

In reading *The Words to Say It* I find myself carried along with the author, as though it were my own insights being revealed freshly with each paragraph and turn of phrase. Even passages where the protagonist feels stuck are given narrative momentum through the use of rich and striking images:

Prostrate as I was, withdrawn into my own universe, how to find the words which would flow between us? How to construct the bridge which would join the intense to the calm, the clear to the obscure, which could span this sewer, this river filled with decomposing matter, this treacherous current of fear, that separated the doctor and me, the others and me? (*The Words* 3)

In this example metaphor provides the figurative motion otherwise lacking in the scene, and a vehicle for the interior world where the drama takes place. An imaginative bridge, not yet constructed, creates the narrative possibility noted by Punday. Even putrid water is filled with dangerous energy that enlivens the question; the mute stumbling block that threatens narrative flow.

Applying Ricoeur's thesis to Cardinal's images – be it solid boulders or bridges – all can be said to represent a “becoming of expression” for Cardinal in that their formation crystallises meaning, and with it the “becoming of being”. In this dynamic Ricoeur refers specifically to the reader for whom the metaphor provides direct access to the “origin of the speaking being” (*The Rule of Metaphor* 214). For proponents of self-reflexivity, when the metaphorist is the first reader or “witness” of their own “speaking being” the encounter has healing potential (Charon 139; Frank 137-8; Garrett 36).

Specific symbols such as those quoted above can be seen to reflect Cardinal's gathering insight into the cultural baggage that has obscured a more natural self. This latter is associated with her native Algeria and images of her child self swimming in the Mediterranean and running barefoot on the beach beneath a brilliant sun. North African nature symbols, including the flamboyance of flowers and the heady scent of cypresses, surface at crucial moments in the psychoanalytical process, juxtaposed with moments of dark despair, reminding Cardinal and the reader of an underlying wholeness, a solid base to which the author ultimately returns. Among such sustained images, that of the sea is strongest, with critic Alison Rice proposing that throughout Cardinal's oeuvre, the sea symbolises “the hope of eliminating borders, breaking down walls, and facilitating passage” (137). In the following quote, it heralds the pivotal moment when Cardinal's secret writing is witnessed

by her hitherto estranged husband. Through these notebook “scribblings” Jean-Pierre recognises his wife as the creative, vibrant woman of former times. In an instant, the “madwoman” of psychosomatic illness is swept away as the couple makes love for the first time in years.

Come, let’s look at each other, don’t take your eyes off me. We’re going to enter the waves. I know a stretch of white sand where you can’t get hurt, where you can just let yourself go. Remember, my sweet, my beauty – the sea is kind if you do not fear her. She only wants to lick you, caress you, rock you, carry you, let her have her way and she’ll please you even more. If not, she’ll make you afraid.

Catch the foam. Do you feel underfoot the sand sliding with the wave? Slide with it! Now, let the current take you back. Do a somersault! Dive! Let the water knead you, massage you.

Once we’re past the waves you’ll swim way out. Don’t take your eyes off me. I beg of you.

“There are passages here which bowl me over, they’re so beautiful, and I don’t know who wrote them. And yet it was you.”

Hush, don’t speak, the sea doesn’t like it when you don’t pay attention to her. Swim. Stretch out your arms and legs. Let go of your shoulders and hips...Do you feel that you are turning into a dolphin? (*The Words* 228-9)¹²

In this excerpt, the sea metaphorically resurfaces as an embodiment of freedom and power; the natural childhood inheritance Cardinal slowly reclaims through psychoanalysis and writing. Alison Rice observes that for Cardinal, writing becomes “a new Territory” in which she is able to

¹² “Stretch out your arms and legs. Let go of your shoulders and hips ...” These words are my own translation of the French edition (*Les Mots* 219) to compensate for an error of omission in the English version.

escape the confines of national and familial identity, and in particular the negative influence of her mother (137). The sea can also be seen to represent the assumption of a narrative identity unearthed as the story unfolds, a point emphasised by the sudden interjection of Jean-Pierre's comments. Additionally, the rhythmic motion of the waves and the swimmers' ability to flow with it beautifully captures the love-making act. It is also reminiscent of happier, pre-illness days when Cardinal introduced her suburban husband to the ways of the sea. Thus several layers of the past are reunited in the present and carried forwards. From here the future evolves as the effects of Cardinal's rehabilitation begin to manifest themselves in the real world with her secret scribbles being transformed into the award-winning novel *Ecoutez la Mer (Listen to the Sea)*.

The wave metaphor typifies the flowing style encountered throughout the text, and is indicative of the reflexive mode Hunt and Sampson describe in terms of entering into a fluid dimension of self, a relationship examined more thoroughly in chapter four below. This effect is enhanced by shifts in tense and perspective. The following excerpt, also quoted in the introduction above, serves as an example:

Once again I was a little girl. Then when the image became obliterated and I again became a thirty-year-old woman, I asked myself ... Why the boredom and embarrassment while facing my father? Who forced it upon me? Why? There I am on the couch, keeping my eyes shut tight in order to retain my hold on the little girl. I was really her and me. (*The Words* 66)

The result is to keep both narrator and reader simultaneously "here", in the now of the narrative moment – on the couch – and "here" in the authorial moment of the transformed self looking back on this time; and also "there" in the childhood moment when reflexivity and language were not sufficiently developed to make sense of the experience in terms of the psychological damage that would later result in mental and physical illness.

In order to engage with her former mentally ill self, Cardinal also employs the third person singular “she”. This creates a further distance between the “madwoman” and the reconfigured narrator self. As the novel progresses, the dynamic between narrator and madwoman evolves. This development can be seen to represent a significant aspect of her healing, a point which gains dramatic emphasis towards the end of the novel when the narrator speaks directly to the madwoman. She says: “It was me who pulled you out of there, my friend, I was the one!” (*The Words* 230). This remark is made in celebration of the forthcoming, and widely acclaimed, publication of Cardinal’s first work of fiction, despite the hitherto incongruous notion of herself as a writer. Together with the analysis, it is the writing which finally “pulls” her, the madwoman, “out of there”.

In externalising her experience, one could say that Cardinal enters into a reflexive relationship with the multiple aspects of selfhood retrieved both during analysis and in her writing. It is a lengthy process, involving seven years of therapy and a further period of “gestation” before she feels ready to embark on her autobiographical novel. These factors may give Cardinal’s work the perspective that grounds the narrative firmly in the sense of the renewed self, which Cardinal proposes is, nonetheless, an on-going process.

Thus, in Cardinal’s autobiographical novel metaphor can be seen to operate on at least two levels. Firstly, specific images – striking in nature – represent new insights, acting as “stepping stones” or “bridges” to lead Cardinal through layers of cultural conditioning towards the reclamation of herself as authentic, creative individual. Secondly, recurring nature imagery in its untamed state, and in particular the sea, acts as a cohesive force. Not only does this imagery accompany and link unique moments of insight, it may also serve to unify what Frank calls the “cast of varied selves” exposed by illness (67). The sea is at once an embodiment of love; it is the unconscious mind, treacherous and benevolent by turns when feared or respected. It also represents the writing process, which is instrumental in leading Cardinal from a place of alienation to one where she is able to swim against the tide of madness and ill health to embrace her own depths and live a full life. Finally, Cardinal’s narrative serves as an extended metaphor in the Ricoeurian sense of integrating disparate, temporally confused elements of her illness

experience into an intelligible whole. This is realised through the narrative form itself as reflexive medium, and underscored by shifts in perspective.

In the following chapter I discuss two novels, Margaret Packham Hargrave's *A Woman of Air*, and Paul Harding's *Tinkers*. In both cases, the recurrence of nature imagery may be compared to Cardinal's work in its role as a unifying force. In Hargrave's text, however, I argue that this effect is undermined by a change in focalisation, whereas in *Tinkers* metaphorical synthesis and shifts in focalisation successfully integrate different temporal dimensions.

CHAPTER 3: Metaphor in Fictional Narratives of Illness

In *A Woman of Air*, the theme of art (and especially literature) as a transformational medium is both overtly expressed through character and plot, and also reinforced by sustained nature imagery, with flowers assuming particular significance. In this regard, the novel can be said to fulfill narratologist Ross Chambers's definition of self-reflexivity. In other words, through character and action in tandem with metaphorical underpinnings, the work reveals its own situational relationship between author and reader. The novel portrays three generations of Australian women spanning the twentieth century. Clarissa, Daphne's mother, is associated with the formal European gardens of her colonial inheritance, whose flowers Daphne despoils, perhaps justifiably rejecting these values in favour of the wild. Daphne loves the river, which she navigates in a small boat, catching fish with her bare hands. She explores mangrove and bushland, whose native flowers she knows by heart, as well as the cave tattooed with the ochre handprints of Aboriginals.

The story begins in early childhood with Daphne's portrayal as spirited and rebellious. We quickly understand the retrospective nature of events, however, when the scene shifts to a palliative care unit in Sydney. The temporal distance is further delineated by a change in tense and the use of italics in the "present" hospice reality. Daphne remains perverse, it seems, yet her bitter tone evokes a poignancy and tension that contrasts sharply with the naive hope and energy of youth. The drama takes place mostly in the past and unfolds more or less chronologically, alternating with brief scenes set in the illness present. The latter depict the last moments of Daphne's decline, and act as reflections on her younger days, to which they are thematically linked. Whilst not being particularly innovative, this structure appears nonetheless effective in conveying an attitudinal shift, not only for Daphne, but also her daughter, Aida-Ann. This result is enhanced through an artful use of metaphor. At times, however, Hargrave's message may be too insistent and her use of irony overdone, with shifts in focalisation, albeit infrequent, creating a jarring effect.

In addition to its focus on intergenerational relationships, and those between reader and text, *A Woman of Air* can also be interpreted at another relationship level, namely, that between physical health, the natural environment and selfhood. These can be seen as symbolically interwoven, emphasising the link between physical and psychological elements. Daphne, for example, remains strong and healthy in youth as long as she maintains her connection to the Australian bush. Once immured on newly-cleared suburban land, however, her health deteriorates, developing into epilepsy as she chases the artificiality of stardom. With hindsight from the hospice, Daphne reflects on the abatement of her epileptic fits, which coincide with her domestic gardening venture. The garden transformation can be seen as a turning point consistent with the theme of self-development through art. This notion finds ultimate expression through Daphne's daughter, Ann (as she prefers to call herself) in relation to creative writing as a therapeutic medium. Other exemplifications that underscore this theme include Daphne's mother, Clarissa, and maternal uncle, Will, who suffer physical and mental decline in direct proportion to their compromised capacity to express themselves through music and painting, respectively. Whereas the death of mother and uncle are depicted as tragic cases, Daphne's end can be seen as a healing event due to her review, or "rearrang[ing]" of her life story. Daphne's transformation can be said to be linked to that of her daughter, Ann, with possible repercussions for the deceased Clarissa.

For both Daphne and daughter, Ann, healing consists in a reclamation of authenticity involving a reflexive engagement with an unresolved past. In Ann's case, this is achieved by transforming childhood trauma into fiction. For Daphne, it means a review of her life and a heuristic appreciation of the consequences of inauthenticity. When Daphne is diagnosed with epilepsy as a young mother, for example, she refuses to accept her condition, clinging to a fantasy image of herself as famous starlet. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that this whimsy begins as a projection of her own mother, Clarissa's frustrated dreams of fame, and further develops into a complex layering of imaginary selves. In this, Daphne conforms to Arthur Frank's "mirroring body" composed of a pre-illness image of self, embellished by further borrowings from popular culture (Frank 87). Such an outlook is typical

of his restitution model with its denial of the present in favour of a past ideal projected onto the future. In Daphne's case, the more she evades the authentic self and denies her own mortality, the more she is dogged by ill health. Finally, however, after repeatedly refusing to acknowledge the pain of "life's leavings", Daphne channels her artistic energies into transforming the dead remnants of her late husband's garden into a blossoming haven of peace in the suburbs. As a result of this creative act, the epileptic fits abate. Ironically this is the one act that earns her a measure of accidental fame.

This late development prepares Daphne for a more profound change, for which Aida-Ann is the catalyst. The following extract represents a turning point for Daphne, which ultimately matures into the final moment of reconciliation between mother and daughter during the last minutes of Daphne's life. In this scene the elderly Daphne is visited in the hospice by Aida-Ann and de facto Paddy as she lies dying of cancer. Daphne has never acknowledged Paddy nor recognised Aida's true worth, thinking of her as a spinsterish bookworm. She has also disregarded her daughter's wish to be called just plain Ann, preferring the more operatic Aida. As the couple arrives with Paddy bearing a bouquet, Daphne has an epiphany:

He is carrying flowers, an explosion of crimson and yellow, like fire.
Aida puts her hand in his and turns her face towards him. For an instant, the little jewelled brooch she is wearing flames in echo.
'Aida-Ann! Ann Palmer, I want to know you. Where have you hidden yourself?' (87)

Daphne knows the answer, as does the reader. From an early age Ann has had her head buried in books, seeking solace in literature. During this pivotal moment, the story can be said to shift from restitution to quest, with Daphne resolving to revisit her past: "I have no words now. But there are other words I want to sort, to rearrange" (87). In this scene the blossoms and fiery reflections of the brooch may be seen to embody the love and creativity Daphne has sought but failed to recognise throughout her life. For, as the reader well knows, Daphne has been looking in the wrong place, and completely overlooked their possibility in her bookish daughter, Ann. The

metaphor may well extend in the mind of the reader to suggest that the truth of human relationships, including passion and love, can be found in literature, a point underscored by the success of “Ann Palmer”, the novelist.

Daphne, however, has repeatedly refused to read her daughter’s publications or acknowledge her fame. She does not know what the reader knows; that Ann has resolved her early childhood issues, including the emotional absence of her mother, by reworking the raw material of life into fiction. The subject of Ann’s novel is forged from a traumatic childhood incident in which her best friend dies in an accident. One of the most painful aspects is her mother’s disregard for Ann’s feelings, due to Daphne’s own inability to face death. The title of her novel is *The Crimson Rhododendron*, a flower both wild and cultivated. This can be seen to imply that Ann has found the balance between wilderness and “civilisation”, transforming unassimilated life experience into meaning through art. Addressing an audience at a literary luncheon, Ann shares her view that everyday life is a fiction and literature a source of truth.

Such concepts are clearly beyond Daphne’s grasp, and yet in a moment of insight, she senses her daughter’s love for both Paddy and herself. Ann holds no grudge towards her mother, as the reader knows. Indeed, by refusing to take on her mother’s fantasies, including the name Aida, Ann has broken the cycle of co-dependence reaching back to her grandmother, Clarissa, who filled Daphne’s head with false hopes and dreams in compensation for her own artistic and personal failures. These themes can be said to unite in the flame coloured flowers, not wild but carefully cultivated, reflecting in Ann’s brooch; itself the work of an artisan’s craft. The warm colours pass between the lovers, igniting Daphne’s heart and mind into a recognition of her daughter’s name and all that it symbolises, including her identity as creative writer. Above all, Daphne recognises Ann’s love for her and the reader recognises the creative processes that unearthed it.

In this novel past and present are focalised through Daphne as first person narrator, with two exceptions, in which she is physically absent but still very much of central concern. In both cases the shift is towards a third person omniscient view. In my view, the most problematic of these features

Ann Palmer as celebrity author at the ladies' literary luncheon, discussed below. Changes in focalisation can be an effective device, allowing for multiple perspectives, as for example in Paul Harding's novel, *Tinkers*. In *A Woman of Air*, however, this strategy may undermine the reader's allegiance to the protagonist, creating a sense of intrusion – and even manipulation – whereby we are made aware of an authorial agenda that may run counter to our own reading of the text. Thus, a feeling of ambivalence towards Daphne may be engendered, compounded by Hargrave's frequent portrayal of her as the subject of parody.

Daphne's lack of interest in books, and ignorance of literary convention, for example, finds her repeatedly undone by a naivety that persists well into adulthood. A particularly tragic-comic moment occurs when Daphne answers a newspaper advertisement, only to discover to her chagrin that the establishment in question is a bordello. Overwhelmed by her own stupidity, Daphne nonetheless complains to the Madam, whose response emphasises Daphne's sad lack of metaphorical insight: "Our ads have to be carefully worded", she said, 'but they often catch out one or two who can't read between the lines'" (147). The humour is produced in large part by temporal distance, which the reader takes as an indication of the elderly Daphne's wry attitude towards a more youthful self. Other characters also receive parodic treatment, however, including Aida-Ann on the occasion of the literary lunch. In this scene the sudden change into the third person omniscient perspective may create a narrative distance that further facilitates the irony, this time directed towards both novelist and devotees. Even the term, "celebrated author" can be interpreted ironically, with Ann appearing "poised", and one might even say excessively so, as she opines on fiction in relation to everyday reality.

Authors are often asked about the extent to which their work is autobiographical ... is the novel autobiographical? Perhaps; perhaps not. Where do memory and fiction merge? I believe that what we perceive as reality in our day-to-day lives is as much a fiction as it is the concrete reality we delude ourselves into believing it is. (126)

The speech appears self-conscious, portraying Ann as a mouthpiece for Hargrave's views, which I believe are more subtly communicated through her use of imagery and structural dynamics. The effect may be to distance the reader from a character who until now has been portrayed in a serious light, often at the expense of her more frivolous mother. This outcome may be accentuated by an added layer of comedy directed towards the genteel society women, who seem as much preoccupied with their own ephemeral image as with the famous novelist. Lipstick fades as it is transferred to damask napkins, a Ferragamo shoe is scuffed and expensive stockings snagged. By the end of the scene, Ann herself is implicated in this farce: "the celebrated author [...] now noticed that she had a ladder in her stocking. Black stockings, too" (130).

The reader may appreciate that such mundane concerns are intended to illustrate the very point Ms Palmer is making, which in turn mirrors the theme of Hargrave's novel. In other words, literary fiction can be a reflexive medium by which we may come to terms with, and transform, the unprocessed stuff of daily life into a creative synthesis. However, the unsympathetic treatment of even minor characters can reduce them to the level of stereotype. This alienating result appears accentuated by the added distance created by the change in focalisation, and may be especially problematic in the case of a major figure like Ann.

The problem is largely retrieved, however, in the following scenes with a return to Daphne's perspective, initially as mother of the ten-year-old Ann prior to and immediately following the death of Ann's friend. In this section and the following hospice reflection, we see the discrepancy between mother's and daughter's viewpoints, and our sympathies return to the much maligned Daphne, who in the present of illness can no longer speak or justify past actions.

Indeed, in the first hospice scene, we understand that Daphne is not only mute, but emotionally incapable of responding to Aida's uncharacteristic declaration of love:

What does she want me to say? What would I tell her, what words would I use, if speech was still possible? (5)

In the ensuing pages, Daphne's story unfolds, and with the last breath she finds her voice, answering her own question. It seems a fitting end, with each honouring the other in a symbolic recognition of Ann's name:

'Dear Mum, hold my hand,' she is saying. 'It is your Aida-Ann'.
My voice sounds clear above the turmoil of ghosts in my head.
'Ann Palmer. Ann__' (198)

A Woman of Air portrays the notion of literary fiction – and indeed all art – as an important transformational medium for author, protagonist and reader. Through creative expression, unassimilated experience can, in Daphne's words, be "sorted and rearranged" to create meaning. In this regard, Hargrave's novel can be said to fulfill Chambers's definition of self-reflexivity in that its explicit point is implicitly confirmed through figural embedding. In *A Woman of Air* nature – especially floral symbology – serves to clarify the relationship between three generations of women, as well as that between Daphne's younger and more mature self. The reader may also appreciate the correlation between psychological and physical health as reflected environmentally, whether through nature in its untamed, cultivated or suppressed, and even abused state. The analeptic structure and effective deployment of metaphor, in my view, redeem any unsympathetic character representation resulting from shifts in focalisation and the potentially alienating effects of irony.

In Paul Harding's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Tinkers*, shifts in focalisation and tense, together with sustained imagery and a creative disregard for grammatical convention, combine to produce cohesion and flow, rather than fragmentation. Whereas the protagonist, George, is at times the subject of irony, it is gently applied with an endearing result. Like *A Woman of Air*, *Tinkers* is similarly self-reflexive, addressing the relationship between author, text and reader through direct action and innovative metaphorical strategies. Using the frame of Paul Harding's novel *Tinkers*, I

show that a reflexive or “metaphorical relationship with self” (Hunt and Sampson 52) leads to what psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi describes as flow, and that when the narrator is in flow, s/he enters a zone of “no time” and “no self” (Perry 26) conducive to growth and change (Csikszentmihalyi 65-6). I argue that for the illness narrator, the temporal shift away from linearity in both reflexive and flow states appears key in determining a healing outcome.

Firstly, I introduce the novel and its use of metaphor in general before focusing more directly on reflexivity and flow. These aspects will then be examined in chapter four through the protagonist George’s illness as an exemplification of the human search for meaning through narrative identity (Ricoeur “Narrative Time” 183). This discussion entails an analysis of the switch from what I call “literal” to “metaphorical thinking”, which creates movement and flow, and distinguishes the quest narrative from restitution and chaos (to use Frank’s terms). Such a shift involves a change in temporal, and therefore self, perception. As we shall see, George’s story depends for completion on that of his deceased father, Howard, whose narrative is gradually unearthed as George falls into a coma shortly before his demise.

Breathtaking imagery in this novel lifts the ordinary lives of its players to extraordinary heights. Moreover, the power of metaphor to reverberate on many levels simultaneously gives structure and coherence to what may otherwise be considered a plotless tale. The role of metaphor in achieving thematic unity is especially important in *Tinkers* where the protagonists are limited in their capacity for action through illness or death. What is at stake for George and Howard pertains to existential questions, rather than concrete goals. Namely, can George reconcile his fragmented past – and in particular the memory of his father – before he dies? Will he be able to achieve authenticity, or the narrative truth that the quest tale demands? The reverse side of these considerations depends on Howard’s rehabilitation – indeed, his return from the grave – as a result of his son’s memorialising, and the reader’s role in following the trail of imagistic clues embedded in the novel.

Tinkers is a novel about relationships at a filial, intergenerational and universal level, as well as between writer, text and reader, making this a highly self-reflexive work, and confirming the emphasis Chambers places on

the double-meaning of the word *relate* (Chambers 4): that is, “stories *relate* speakers to listeners in an act of communication they constitute” (Chambers xv). The stories of the two protagonists, George and his long-dead father, Howard, interweave, setting up a resonance that is further underscored by two additional narratives, George’s eighteenth-century clock manual, *The Reasonable Horologist*, and Howard’s nature journal. In all four narratives, recurring images present varying angles on the relationship theme. In particular, clock and nature imagery, associated with George and Howard, respectively, become increasingly complementary as the estranged father and son journey towards a mysterious union. Other recurrent metaphors involve a mosaic of tiles, and light and shade. Allusion is also made to a fifth text, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s nineteenth-century novel *The Scarlet Letter*, whose setting, nature and religious references inform our reading of *Tinkers*.

In *Tinkers* complex patterns of iconic resonance across narratives – sometimes concordant and sometimes discordant – serve to unite different temporal and physical dimensions: a rogue clock spring cutting into George’s adult hand instantly becomes his twelve-year-old finger savaged by the teeth of his epileptic father (20). The flashback triggers an image in George’s mind of Howard as a broken clock, which George keeps trying to fix. This association is not overtly expressed – or even consciously understood by George – until his final moments when he realises it was not Howard who “was like a spring in a clock when it breaks and explodes when he had his fits”, but *he*, George, who resembled a clock (184).

The above flashback is preempted by a detailed technical instruction in *The Reasonable Horologist* concerning the refitting of a broken clock with a new spring. In this extract the “patient horologist” is presented as an almost god-like figure controlling time, connoting both the power of the industrialist figure (associated with George’s self image), and a poetic sense of the Creator-cum-horologist. This latter may be construed as a modernist parody of the Romantic ideal with which Howard is linked. In the first instance, the horologist deploys “brass logic” to dispel “the imps of disorder” (17) and in the second, devises mechanisms to emulate nature in the guise of metallic leaves that fall as autumn strikes, “strew[ing] themselves about the lower part of the clock-face” (18). The additional comment that “Mr. Newton himself

could not have sat beneath a more amazing tree” (18) deepens the irony. Thus, through metaphorical resonance across narratives, the reader appreciates what George does not, that by mending clocks not only is he trying to fix his broken relationship with his father – somewhat futilely on the material plane – but there is a further hidden agenda. George is trying to fix time, which psychologically stopped at Christmas dinner 1926 when he first witnessed his father in the midst of a fit and was bitten for his pains.

The intricate use of metaphor as the dominant cohesive structure makes demands on the reader that become increasingly rewarding as new insights are gained. According to psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, it is precisely such a dynamic that initiates and maintains what he defines as flow (75). In his view, the capacity to match increasing complexity with corresponding increments of attention ensures an expansion of consciousness, growth and discovery as participants become absorbed in their activity (73-5).¹³ Moreover, the flow state applies to practitioners and viewers alike (76).

During flow states Csikszentmihalyi notes that “consciousness is unusually well ordered” (41). Proponents of flow also observe a loss of self-consciousness (in that one is free from self-preoccupation), and an altered sense of temporal awareness (Csikszentmihalyi 65-6; Perry 3-6). According to psychologist and educator Susan Perry, the flow experience can only be fully conveyed through metaphor (23-5). In her study, for example, writers describe being transported to another time and place, and often even another dimension free of the self (Perry 26). This portrayal bears similarities to Hunt and Sampson’s fluid dimension of self referred to in the context of reflexivity (52). Quoting Jerzy Kosinski, they write: “This new dimension exists only in the writer’s consciousness; within it the elements of reality no longer obey the earthbound laws of gravitation; the minutiae of time and place cease to be important” (40).¹⁴

¹³ Csikszentmihalyi’s research over more than two decades focuses on diverse activities from religious ritual and the creative arts, including writing, to surgery and sport.

¹⁴ Jerzy Kosinski: “Notes of the Author on *The Painted Bird*”, 201.

It is argued that because readers must critically and imaginatively engage in the fictional world “*as if*”¹⁵ it were real, they are changed as a result (Boulter 94-97; Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* Vol 1, 64-71). These changes influence our creative responsiveness to the vicissitudes of life (Charon 109-14; Grenville 155-63). For example, Ricoeur relates the ability to correlate the beginning and ending of a story to the human capacity to recognise in our own past the potential we might realise in the future through present action (Ricoeur “Narrative Time” 165-86). As discussed below in the context of George’s illness journey, the skills involved in understanding metaphor are comparably demanding and equally transferable to real life situations (Charon 139).

For Csikszentmihalyi complexity consists not just in differentiation but integration or cooperation between parts (41, 240). Thus, complex states are conducive to growth and development when each component is in touch with all the others (41). In the following analysis, I aim to demonstrate that metaphorical resonance between all four narratives in *Tinkers* initiates a sense of flow that unites the work at a thematic level. That is, through recurring images, particularly those pertaining to clocks and nature, the reader is able to translate one narrative into the terms of another, so as to build what poet and academic John Fox refers to as “a complete picture” from what may otherwise appear fragmented. In Fox’s words:

Rather than words strung together in a logical and linear way to explain a point of view or describe something, metaphor *instantaneously presents a complete picture.* (65)

Intertextual reference to *The Scarlet Letter* further enhances this layered effect. Readers familiar with the latter will appreciate the social, cultural and religious implications for *Tinkers* of their shared New England setting. For example, the extreme consequences of puritanical dogma depicted in *The Scarlet Letter* (and which are not overtly stated in *Tinkers*) are a strong influence on George’s mother and Howard’s first

¹⁵ This phrase is italicised by Ricoeur for emphasis, and quoted by Boulter.

wife, Kathleen. Indeed, her view of her husband's epilepsy as shameful in the eyes of God and community ultimately drive Howard from home in defiance of her plans for his committal to an insane asylum.

Other allusions include the Romantic view of nature as expressive of human sensibility, with illness judged on the other end of the scale as deviant. Thus, once Howard frees himself from the clutches of his overbearing boss, and his wife, Kathleen, reestablishing a new life where work and his primary relationship reflect his true worth, his epilepsy symbolically abates. For George, on the other hand, sickness manifests itself in a variety of conditions from heart attacks and Parkinson's disease to kidney failure and cancer. The implication here is that George is out of touch with both the natural environment and his own inner nature. As such he typifies the modernist stance that finds voice in Frank's restitution tale.

These thematic undercurrents are common to all four narratives (George's and Howard's, the latter's nature journal and the former's clock repair manual), and are articulated less through direct action than vivid imagery, including horological feats of engineering and wilderness scenes. In Howard's narrative, wild men feature in varying degrees to imply proximity to, or alienation from, authentic nature, including Native American Indians, some of whom are well acculturated to Western ways, others less so. Most interesting among the "savages" is Gilbert, a white, educated man we may therefore associate with George. And yet his choice to live as a hermit, and the silent meditations he and Howard share, align him more firmly with Howard. This natural bond is emphasised by the gift from Gilbert to Howard of an autographed copy of *The Scarlet Letter*, in turn donated to Gilbert by fellow student and author Nathaniel Hawthorne himself. The transmission of this prized edition from Howard to George, who in turn bequeaths it to his grandchildren in his last moments, can be construed as a figurative expression for the notion of intertextuality. Thus, allusions to *The Scarlet Letter* not only speak of, but also demonstrate, the relationship between author, text and reader. One may further infer that Gilbert's reversion to the wild is as a result of his reading of Hawthorne's novel. *Tinkers'* largely memorial events and recurrent imagery therefore suggest the power of literature to change lives long after the author's death. *The Scarlet Letter*

features at an allusive level as a self-reflexive comment on *Tinkers'* own design to “*relate* speakers to listeners in an act of communication [it] constitute[s]” (Chambers xv).

In *Tinkers* the posthumous effect of Howard’s nature journal on the dying George picks up on this theme of intertextual relationship. George’s grandson, Charles, discovers the journal in the attic and reads it to his grandfather, whom he believes to be the author. This mistake is not without irony, given the stark contrast between George’s mechanical mindset and Howard’s Romanticism. The error is also poignant in that the journal proves instrumental in the spiritual union of father and son. Through Charles’s reading, the rhythms of Howard’s voice and stunning poetic imagery accompany George into a comatose state, where the two souls meet:

Cosmos Borealis: Light skin of sky and cloud and mountain on the still pond. Water body beneath teeming with reeds and silt and trout (sealed in day skin and night skin and ice lids), which we draw out with silk threads, fitted with snags of fur or bright feathers. Skin like glass like liquid like skin; our words screeved the slick surface (reflecting risen moon, spinning stars, flitting bats), so that we had only to whisper across the wide plate. Green drakes blossomed powder dry among the stars, glowing white, out of pods, which rose from the muck at the bottom of the pond and broke open on the skin of the water. We whispered across the galaxies, Who needs Mars? (45)

This journal entry in the early part of the novel coincides with George’s drift in and out of consciousness. The blurring of boundaries between water and sky, depths and heights, stars, fish, birds and galaxies all suggest the Heideggerian concept of “mutual appropriation”, whereby all phenomena coexist interdependently (Zimmerman 250). It is also indicative of the flow between narratives, further enhanced by *The Scarlet Letter* references. The conflated imagery also mirrors George’s hallucinatory illness state, which in turn approaches Howard’s heightened sense of awareness during the onset

of a seizure. In both cases father and son experience the elements turned upside down as the ravages of time and nature overtake human endeavour.

In the opening pages, for instance, the hallucinating George is confused to find himself peering up at the night sky in broad daylight through broken floorboards, apparently deposited in the basement among broken clocks. The metaphorical implications of this underworld descent into frozen time are lost on him, however, as he struggles to take stock of a life hitherto considered only in pragmatic terms.

Howard's epileptic fits are similarly striking, being described as a door opening onto "unbounded darkness" (46), from whence he is fed a "diet of lightning" (47). At other times, he is depicted "in a fugue state" (73) bordering on ecstasy. Howard's quotidian narrative is less dramatic than George's but equally poetic, and filled with images that echo those of the nature journal:

Howard felt as though he were walking through a kaleidoscope ...
Sky and earth were now where they belonged, now side by side,
now inverted, and now righted again in one seamless, silent
spinning ... foxes padded over clouds and stepped back onto the
forest floor without a pause; and thousands of tadpole tails
flickered down from the watery ceiling and then sank back to their
muddy nests. (143)

A further obvious unifying factor between narratives is the fluid style of the writing, paying little heed to grammatical or syntactical convention, focalisation or tense. Whereas the tone of the different narratives may vary, the stream of consciousness style is common to all, reflecting the flow mentality variously described in metaphorical terms as "floating" (Csikszentmihalyi 40), or as a "gush" of words (Perry 25). This style draws the reader into the same flow state, where time and space collapse into one another, and a dimension of "no time, no self, and perhaps, no rationality" is broached (Perry 25). Journalist Jay Parini describes the novel's effect as follows: "the mind twists and turns through time, breaking free of it" (10).

When George revives from his coma shortly before his death, he asks about the reading, which we assume to mean Charles' reading of Howard's nature journal:

Who is reading to me? Who is reading? What is that book? She said, What book, George? Have you been reading to Gramp, Charlie? Charlie said, No, Nan. She turned back to George and said, No one is reading to you George. George said, The big book. No, my love, there is no book; no one is reading to you. There is no one here at all. (175-6)

Like me, the reader may feel a chill run down her spine at this point, as we understand ourselves to be implicated in reading over George's shoulder, as it were, memorialising with him over his youth. Like George, we have been privy to Howard's thoughts and emotions, sharing his poetic vision and suffering. Moreover, we grasp that "the big book" is none other than the book of life, whose meaning is retrieved by following George down the trail of metaphorical resonances that helps unscramble the plot.

Each of the four narratives presents a distinct position on the relationship between nature, man and his works, ranging between a Romantic and Industrialist view. Each also contains the kernel of its opposite, forming the background or shadow of the dominant stance. Howard expresses this perfectly through the idea that his life is the shadow side of someone else, so that when he sleeps, his counterpart wakes, creating the scenes that constitute Howard's dreams, and vice versa. This is how he explains it to his second wife, Megan:

So that this alternating, interdependent series of lives formed a sort of intaglio; the waking day of each shadow was the opposite side of its possessor's sleep. (181-2)

These words are uttered by Howard just before he dies in response to his recurring nightmare about a large, dark room exactly like the future one in which George lies dying and in which he recognises some of the characters,

who nonetheless appear unaware of him. Thus, George and Howard's narratives are presented as background and foreground of each other. Similarly, the intaglio image serves to describe the reflexive relationship between the four narratives. I also interpret this on a metaphorical level as a reference to the reader's relationship with the fictional world.

As the novel progresses, foreground and background universally shift in tandem with George's development, thus acting both to mirror and underline his transfiguration. For example, George's clock manual, *The Reasonable Horologist*, reflects its owner's departure from his natural roots in the enthusiastic embrace of modernism with its subject-object orientation and abstract notions of time (Morrison 27-8; Nicholls 15-22). With its focus on man's relationship to time measurement, the manual's colourful history of clocks can be further interpreted as a metaphor for human evolution, albeit from the perspective of the early industrialist still harbouring Romantic notions of progress: "a heart open to nature and a head devoted to the advancement of men" (56). The individual referred to here is Ctesibius of Alexandria, inventor of a magnificent water clock similar to the one gifted to Charlemagne in 807 "to drip away the moments of his last seven years" (56).

The ironic tones of the manual, and the interplay of shared imagery across narratives, combine to suggest the shadow side of modernism that fails to appreciate the more poetic concept of "mutual appropriation" (Zimmerman 250)¹⁶ uppermost in Howard's narrative and journal. The idea that a natural element such as water has been harnessed for the purposes of a mortal countdown adds a comical dimension to the superlative depiction of its mechanisms. The calculation of life's final moments in terms of drips also mirrors George's slide towards mortality: "Eight days before he died" (7), "[o]ne hundred and thirty-two hours before he died" (28), "[n]inety-six hours before he died" (48).

By the final *Horologist* extract something of a reversal has been effected, with all the numbers now rendered "irrelevant" by the idea "that the clock's purpose is to return the hands back to ... the chosen time" (179). This

¹⁶ This phrase is used in the context of Heidegger's later work to denote his concept of *Dasein*.

time is the one selected from the start, implying George's return to his origins in reuniting with his father. Also implied is the narrative return to the beginning, which makes sense of the plot, confirming the narrative identity so crucial to the quest tale. Thus, even *The Reasonable Horologist* shifts away from its initial depiction of time as linear in favour of circularity. The appearance of this excerpt between George's and Howard's otherwise simultaneous deaths highlights these themes.

Perhaps the most breathtaking shift in perspective occurs in Howard's final journal entry in which the metaphor used to describe the eternal cycles of life becomes a horological one:

When it came time to die, we knew and went to deep yards where we lay down and our bones turned to brass. We were picked over. We were used to fix broken clocks, music boxes; our pelvises were fitted onto pinions, our spines soldered into vast works. Our ribs were fitted as gear teeth and tapped and clicked like tusks. This is how, finally, we were joined. (190)

This extract heralds the closing scene – George's last moment of consciousness – in which his lifespan zeros to nothing as he recollects a hitherto forgotten moment; namely, Christmas dinner 1953, when father and son meet after a twenty-seven year separation. The brevity of the encounter is disproportionate to its key significance, which acts as a final epiphany for George (and the reader), who now interpret all that went before in its light. The image of a festive meal interrupted, with food steaming on the table, returns us to Christmas dinner 1926 and its aftermath when time froze for the twelve-year-old George. In this final scene, we also understand that the interruption in time between Christmas 1926 to Christmas 1953 and the present of death has been healed. Thus as the novel comes to a close, George attains temporal unity, and therefore authenticity as he dies.

CHAPTER 4: Flow and Illness Narrative: George's Story

In *Tinkers* George's role can be construed on several levels. Firstly, his quest for meaning personifies the novel's own meaning-making process as discussed by Chambers. That is, his journey towards self-understanding reflects the dynamics by which *Tinkers* embodies its own narrative situation, or point. George can be seen to represent the human search for meaning inherent in intertextual, historical, familial, intergenerational, and even universal relationships. Secondly, his shift from a linear to a configurational interpretation of events mirrors the transformation of an anecdotal story into a plot or thematic whole to reveal meaning. I argue that George's healing depends on his ability to break with a pragmatic, or literal, mindset in favour of a reflexive or metaphorical one,¹⁷ and furthermore, that George's switch from literal to metaphorical thinking creates the narrative impetus for the novel. Thirdly, I suggest that George exemplifies the conversion from restitution and chaos to a quest prototype in accordance with Frank's thesis. In this regard, George's pivotal vision of "tiles loose in a frame" (64) provides an apt metaphor in my view for the dynamic by which this occurs, and which Frank calls "reflexive monitoring" (Frank 65). Similar processes are discussed and variously named by theorists as "reflective judgment" (Ricoeur "Narrative Time" 174), reflexivity (Hunt and Sampson 3-4), metaphorical relationship (Hunt and Sampson 52), and flow (Perry 27).

In illness, the eighty-year-old George typifies Frank's restitution model, in that he has no reference point for contingency and death (Frank 85). For George, thoughts of mortality have been crowded out by work, family and a retirement passion for antique clocks. It is only through the plight of his clocks that George understands the gravity of his situation:

¹⁷ Here I join with Hunt and Sampson in deploying the terms "reflexive" and "metaphorical" interchangeably to denote a fluid relationship with "more than one aspect of ourselves simultaneously" (Hunt and Sampson 52).

When he realized that the silence by which he had been confused was that of all of his clocks having been allowed to wind down, he understood that he was going to die ... (34)

In addition, we are told, "George never permitted himself to imagine his father" (19). The suppression of his childhood past and resistance to death result in a disruption of temporal continuity, whose consequences become abundantly clear when George decides to tape record his memoirs in the face of "consolidating illness" (21). The chronology of statistics that ensues proves unenlightening, and on replaying the tape, George is further shocked to discover the voice of an uneducated person, rather than the "admirable stranger" he anticipates (23). Worse still, he sounds like the country bumpkin he hoped to have left behind with childhood. Despite George's illusion of his life as one of steady material and social advancement, the recording suggests a contradictory stasis.

From a narratological viewpoint, George's linear ramble amounts to nothing more than E. M. Forster's "chopped-off length of the tape worm of time" (Burroway and Stuckey-French 274). It is an open-ended story lacking causal relationship, or plot (Burroway and Stuckey-French 273; Rimmon-Kenan 242; Talib 2). Ricoeur insists that to achieve narrative point, or meaning, the sequential order of events must be superseded by a configurational one entailing a "grasping together" of "human actions and passions" into a thematic whole ("Narrative Time" 174).¹⁸ Frank argues similarly for a relational order in attaining "narrative truth" (62).

According to flow theory, unless memories are shaped into relational patterns – "unless one finds likenesses and regularities among them" – there will be no meaning (Csikszentmihalyi 124-5). Csikszentmihalyi further emphasises the importance to our understanding of the "imagistic, puzzle-like qualities" that even theoretical thinking retains (125). In short, without the flow of connection between one memory, fact or idea and another, in which imagery is implicated, nothing makes sense (125). Apart from its chronology

¹⁸ Ricoeur borrows the phrase, "grasping together" from Louis O Mink's "Interpretation and Narrative Understanding", in *The Journal of Philosophy* 69, no 9 (1972), 735-7 (qtd. In Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 174).

and lack of thematic relationship, George's tape recording is striking for its dearth of imagery with which to build resonant patterns of meaning. In this regard, his story is in sharp contrast to Cardinal's, for whom images are stepping stones, guiding her from one memory association to the next as she gains an overview of her life. All is not lost, however, for the collapse of George's habitual narrative unearths a desire to see his father again and, most significantly, to "imagine" him (21). Even so, in the usual chaos of illness, his efforts are thwarted by the distractions of his "worn-out body and scrambled mind" (21), and when he does succeed, recollections occur "in an order he could not control" (18). It appears George's restitution narrative is in danger of spilling into chaos. The challenge for George, then, with minimal time remaining before his demise, is how to transform an anecdotal, and even a chaotic, account into a tale that casts his life, and thus himself, in a "truthful" light.

In Frank's terms, what George needs is a "good story" (62); one that reconciles past issues with the present of illness and an acceptance of future mortality (Frank 133, 166). That is, George's restitution stance seeks conversion to the more complex quest narrative. The good story, or quest, is one in which the narrator remains "truthful to life as it is lived" (Frank 62). In bearing witness to lived experience, the authenticity of both narrator and story emerges in the telling (Frank 61-2; Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 182). Thus, Frank is able to say that the narrator *is* the story (62). As Ricoeur points out, the discovery of the self through the act of narration can only occur if the "subject" is initially withheld (Frank 61). This position is confirmed by George's tape recording, which begins with his name, date and place of birth, and ends with no evidence of narrative truth or an emergent self.

Fortunately for George, his willingness to imagine – or form mental images – paves the way for a vision of "tiles loose in a frame" (64), which he recognises as familiar frames of memory. Contrary to expectation, however, they refuse to conform to his fixed linear narrative. Instead, they morph into shifting patterns, depending on the way they are viewed, "showing him a different self every time he tried to make an assessment" (19). This vision can be seen as a figurative depiction of the dynamics involved in Frank's "reflexive monitoring" so crucial to the telling of a good story (Frank 65).

During this process past and present alter in each other's light as fresh insights are traded (Frank 65). Through such an exchange, it is argued, memory is not only restored but, more significantly, freshly created (Charon 45, 139; Frank 61). Because of the interplay between temporal levels, the good story, or quest, succeeds in cohering previously fragmentary elements, thus initiating the highly ordered state of mind that defines flow (Csikszentmihalyi 41). This is not the chronological order George hopes to control, but a complex one entailing pattern recognition (Csikszentmihalyi 121). As Frank points out, however, truth is selective, and the question remains as to "which truth of which happenings" one should choose in the quest for "self-conscious[ness]" (62-3).¹⁹

The solution to this problem proves elusive for George, whose memory tiles resist a final order, forming new configurations even after his death, depending on the memories of others with whom they are linked. I read this to imply that George's past finally begins to crystallise into a relational, if somewhat puzzling, pattern, facilitated by imagistic association. Also implicit is the notion that his memory will be preserved by future generations, which in Csikszentmihalyi's view constitutes the first kind of memorialising that creates order, thus making sense of life (121). In a literary context, the vision can further be construed as interpretational flexibility on behalf of readers also involved in a form of reflexive monitoring as they correlate metaphorical and temporal dimensions. The ability to construe imagery and action at a symbolic level may even suggest interpretational possibilities in excess of authorial intent (Adelaide 8-10; Chambers 19).

The real epiphany for George, though, is that the gaps between tiles represent life yet un-lived, or in his case, unfinished business in the form of his absent father. The loss of this crucial memory tile disrupts the temporal unity that many scholars deem essential for the formation and maintenance of an authentic self (Dostal 156; Frank 60-2; Heine 41-2; Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 177-182). Not only is temporal, and therefore narrative, coherence

¹⁹ Frank's term is to be distinguished from Csikszentmihalyi's and Hunt and Sampson's use of the word, "self-conscious", which denotes a limiting preoccupation with self, as opposed to an expanded awareness, which they define simply as "consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi 74, Hunt and Sampson 21).

interrupted by memory distortion (Frank 60-1), but it is similarly impacted by a failure to acknowledge mortality, or what Heidegger terms “being-toward-death” (Dostal 156; Heine 82-3). Small wonder then that George’s earlier tape recording lacked temporal and thematic unity, as well as narrative identity.

The tile epiphany represents a turning point because now for the first time George becomes conscious of an imaginative, rather than a merely linear order:

... and there will be the stopped pattern, the final array, but not even that, because that final finitude will itself be a bit of scrolling; a pearlescent clump of tiles, which will generally stay together but move about within another whole and be mingled with in endless ways of other people’s memories ... and so, what army of strangers and ghosts has shaped and colored me until back to Adam, until back to when ribs were blown from molten sand into the glass bits that took up the light of this world because they were made from this world, even though the fleeting tenants of those bits of colored glass have vacated them before they have had even the remotest understanding of what it is to inhabit them and if they – if we are fortunate (yes, I am lucky, lucky), and if we are fortunate, have fleeting instants when we are satisfied that the mystery is ours to ponder, if never to solve, or even just rife personal mysteries, never mind those outside – are there even mysteries outside? a puzzle itself – but anyway, personal mysteries, like where is my father...(65-6)

The above quote appears to lack logical sequence, reflecting the chaotic phase of illness (Csikszentmihalyi 84; Charon 122; Frank 97; Garrett 15-6; Kleinman 7-8; Rimmon-Kenan 242). On closer examination, though, there is an intuitive momentum that leads George seamlessly to the key question, “where is my father.” This question, without even the interruption of a question mark, flows out of the swirling flux of thoughts and images, forming the central tile around which all the others may now coalesce in the

“complete picture” to which Fox alludes (Fox 65). The metaphorical picture defies logic or linearity (Fox 65).

Kevin Brophy describes metaphorical thought in terms of poetic experience, in which one enters “another territory of language” (Brophy 149) operating at the borderland of the conscious and unconscious mind (150,152). In his view, poetry resists the habitual thrust of language and consciousness with its preference for singular interpretation, opening the way towards ambiguity and nuance (149). The tile hallucination disrupts George’s everyday consciousness, opening his mind to what Virginia Woolf calls “a mystic quality” more easily accessed during illness (200). Moreover, the experience is conveyed in a style that resists convention, being tangential, contradictory, grammatically innovative and sparse on punctuation.

How does a single image or key memory initiate a flow state, orchestrating what Csikszentmihalyi calls “patterns of consciousness that bring order to the mind” (121)? And how may such a process lead to enhanced awareness, or “self-consciousness”, and ultimately self-transformation? Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of fusion and tension theory in metaphor may clarify these questions. Ricoeur proposes that Aristotle’s phrase “seeing as” constitutes an intuitive selection that instantly “orders the flux” of mental imagery (*The Rule of Metaphor* 213). For Ricoeur, therefore, to see (an image) is to simultaneously understand (its meaning). This insight acts not only as a cohesive force or fusion between image and sense, but also selects relevant imagistic aspects that then cohere into a meaningful pattern (213). His hypothesis supports Fox’s observation of metaphorical insight as instantaneous (Fox 65).

George’s tile experience metaphorises precisely this aspect of reflexivity, whereby the presence of imminent death reveals lapses of memory, hitherto suppressed, but which now focus and change the entire picture. Moreover, following his tile vision, George’s memory trail distils into a key image of his father in the midst of a Christmas day fit. The scene is portrayed in vivid, almost horrific detail (in contrast to the earlier tape recording), switching from third person omniscient to the first person perspective of the twelve-year-old George:

my father was in the middle of it, strangely quiet, as if concentrating or distracted, as wires and springs and ribs and guts popped and exploded and unravelled and unhinged. (86-7)

The retrieval of the forgotten image creates a shift in George's adult perspective, and assumes metaphorical power in keeping with earlier and subsequent scenes in which George's failing body is similarly depicted in horological terms. This conflation leads George to realise that it is *he* who has become objectified as a clock and not his father. Following on the heels of this insight, the ultimate memory is exhumed of the real, very human Howard, who knocks on George's door at Christmas dinner 1953. In the spirit of the quest tale, George receives him as the loving son he always potentially was. Thus in death both men are freed from the false clock identification.

Ricoeur and Hester describe the consequences of fusion between image and sense, not in terms of one representing the other, but rather as one and the same (for that is how they are seen) (*The Rule of Metaphor* 213). Thus, with the transformation of George's story into quest initiated by the tile imagery, we could say that George embodies, or *is* his story. Moreover, through metaphorical fusion, George and his father merge. This impression is enhanced by the fusion of clock and nature imagery between father's and son's interweaving narratives.

Besides its role as a bridge between image and sense in line with fusion theory, Ricoeur and Hester propose that "seeing as" is equally compatible with tension theory (213-4). Their stance is that seeing *x* figuratively as *y* also embraces the literal understanding that *x* is not *y*. Proponents of flow theory stress that tension among opposites (whether between differentiation and integration, contradictory emotions, or individual and community needs) leads to complexity and growth (Csikszentmihalyi 222-3; Perry 33). In George's case the tension created between the figurative insight (the tiles are memories) and the literal fact (the tiles are not memories) can be said to produce two outcomes. Firstly, the contradictory element creates the striking effect that brings the metaphor to life and awakens George to "self-consciousness". Secondly, for George the tile metaphor marks a switch from purely literal thinking to a more complex

register, whereby both literal and metaphorical awareness occur simultaneously and without conflict. As Brophy and Fox observe, diverse meanings – even contradictory ones – can be held within a single poetic image (Brophy 148; Fox 78). This latter point proves vital for George in his paternal quest, and thus in healing the past, for Howard’s spirit is only to be found on the metaphorical wavelength of the poet.

Brophy’s analysis of the relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind in the light of neurological research supports Ricoeur and Hester’s thesis concerning the compatibility of fusion and tension theory. According to Brophy, the work of memory retrieval, pattern recognition and “the massive task of scanning” required to produce insight are attributed to unconscious processes (147). I suggest these tasks are similar to those involved in reflexivity or metaphorical thinking. In Brophy’s view, the conscious mind is not capable of insight, playing the more passive role of recipient or interpreter. Moreover, consciousness cannot handle complexity, preferring a single, narrow interpretation only (149, 151). However, consciousness does play a vital role in triggering the creative activity of the unconscious through sustained focus (Brophy 146-7, 151, Charon 132, Csikzentmihalyi 211, Frank 65). I propose that the interpretive receptivity of consciousness referred to by Brophy translates into the witness role so vital to Frank’s quest, or good story.

In illness stories, the first witness is the sufferer himself, who turns to narrative in a reflexive act in order to make sense of his chaotic experience (Charon 65-6; Frank 56; Mantel 200). The act of bearing witness that marks the quest tale, however, automatically implicates others, who become drawn into an ongoing “circle of witnesses” (Frank 142). What may have begun as a monadic practice, therefore, through storytelling becomes a dyadic, or community one.

In testifying to the embodied reality of experience, illness narratives ultimately bear witness to sickness and death (Frank 85, 97), and whereas these may be divisive forces, they are also the common denominator that unites and harmonises (Charon 25). By recollecting the traumas of his own lived experience concerning his father’s epilepsy, George reconnects with Howard and comes to terms with mortality. Their twin stories become the

single narrative to which we bear witness, for as Ricoeur is at pains to point out, it is in the reader that the story becomes complete (Boulter 96; Charon 138; Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* Vol 1, 71). Just as the protagonists change in accordance with fictional conventions (Burroway and Stuckey-French 149-50), so too is the reader transformed through the power of sympathetic witness. In the words of Rita Charon:

Readers ... are fundamentally changed by virtue of their reading acts. Whether by exercising their metaphorical range, intensifying some of their characterological means of coping with uncertainty or rhetorically remodelling their patterns of thought, reading [is] identified as transformative. (52)

For Ricoeur, speaking in the context of the quest tale, storytelling always involves community ("Narrative Time" 184). Moreover, it is the dyadic nature of the narrative tradition that transforms a private struggle with death into a communicative act, "not just between living beings but between contemporaries, predecessors, and successors" ("Narrative Time" 184).

Following George's switch to a more complex register, triggered by the image of coloured tiles, the inexorable countdown to his death that punctuates the novel is now overtaken by a different configuration. From now on George's story constellates around the paternal recollections that the missing tiles represent, returning him in vivid detail to hitherto forgotten scenes. In place of the modernist narrative espoused by George of himself as an embodiment of the American dream, the real story, it transpires, pivots around Christmas dinner 1926 and its immediate aftermath. Thus, as George finally allows himself to return in memory to this traumatic event, the narrative breaks with its linear timeline, and spirals towards the unresolved issue at the bottom of George's life: Howard's abandonment of the homestead in January 1927, never to return.

Not only are temporal borders crossed, in that George finds himself reliving the past, but personal boundaries also become blurred. For George is now able to witness his father's memory tiles in a similar way to his offspring witnessing, and thereby changing, his own. Just as George

perceives during his tile epiphany that he has been “shaped and colored” by an “army of strangers and ghosts ... back to Adam” (65), so too does George now understand that his own past, and that of his dead father, may be influenced by the power of imaginative witness. In retrieving the memories that *are* his story, George (and the reader) experience an inversion – or even a suspension – of what Ricoeur calls “the anonymous time of ordinary representation” in favour of “the time of interaction” (“Narrative Time” 184). For Csikszentmihalyi, interactive time is viewed in terms of attunement to the rhythms of the activity rather than “the passage of time as measured by the absolute convention of the clock” (66). This type of absorption produces not only growth and change, but a strengthened sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi 212). Similarly, in Heideggerian thought, the time of preoccupation is a strong determinant of authenticity (Ricoeur “Narrative Time” 169).

Flow theorists link changes in temporal awareness to altered states of mind, which have been described as “a blurring of boundaries” (Perry 30), and a merging of space and time, delivering us to a “place of no time, no self, and perhaps, no rationality” (Perry 26). In the context of poetic metaphor, John Fox writes, “[a] metaphor does not usually make literal sense but it makes intuitive sense. It expresses a truth that exists beyond the rational mind, giving a broader meaning to life” (65). The atemporality experienced during flow may be said to differ from that accompanying illness, the former being described as a pleasurable state associated with a deep sense of connection and an expanded selfhood (Csikszentmihalyi 41). The temporal confusion attending sickness, by contrast, is commonly portrayed as chaotic and fragmentary (Charmaz 173; Frank 97-8; Rimmon-Kenan 241). Yet expansive states may still be achieved during illness due to the power of subjective experience, regardless of physical conditions (Csikszentmihalyi 192-3; Garrett 6-8). For Garrett, illness can be transformative for both sufferer and witness when pain is expressed creatively, and in particular through metaphor (36).

In both George's and Howard's cases, metaphorical expression gives voice to the complexity of the illness experience in all its terror and glory, as well as accommodating its mysterious, and even mystical dimensions. For Fox and Garrett, such richness and ambiguity are crucial to the healing

power of metaphor (Fox 65; Garrett 36). For the reader, the tile metaphor is central in revealing the novel's own self-reflexivity. That is, the shifting tiles within a frame can be construed as the four narratives comprising the novel. Each narrative presents differing and subtly evolving angles on the central theme, mirroring and underscoring the journey of the two protagonists towards reunion. The mobile tiles with their mutating shades and colours also represent the formation of "a complete picture" in the reader's mind as one image builds upon another. A further inference can be made to the reader's developing relationship to a text whose metaphorical resonances are sufficiently rich to inspire fresh insights with each reading.

The resonant power of the image constitutes the apotheosis of Ricoeur's thesis. In his view, the poetic image has the power to transport us even beyond "seeing as" to another level; "that of reverberation into the depths of existence" (*The Rule of Metaphor* 215). Bachelard terms this "a phenomenology of imagination" (*Rule of Metaphor* 214). In other words, metaphorical resonance forges a new way of being through imagination, or the power of the image. This position supports Punday's claim for imaginative movement as a strong momentum in the development of character and plot (140). For Fox, "[m]etaphors ... open communication between the known and unknown parts of our lives; they foster integration between our everyday self and our potential self" (65).

In *Tinkers* the unknown parts of George's life – or the gaps in his tiles – are symbolic of his lack of relationship with his father, who may also be viewed in a broader sense as the universal source through which all beings appear. I suggest that a similar concept is expressed in Heideggerian terms as *Dasein*, or "the openness in which presencing transpires" (Zimmerman 244). The word "presencing" aptly describes Howard's poetic experience of the numinous quality pervading all things, especially nature and the wild men such as Gilbert, the indigenous people and his own father. In his review of *Tinkers*, critic Roger Cox speaks of Howard's perspective similarly as "poetic" and "Whitmanesque" (6). Throughout the novel Howard is portrayed as deeply attuned to metaphorical resonance in that he sees himself and the natural world as reflections of each other. For George, in opening to a metaphorical perspective through the tile vision, a link is established between

previously fragmented or disowned memories, initiating a state of flow. As a result, in accord with Csikszentmihalyi's study, George finds himself "transport[ed] ... into a new reality", leading to "previously undreamed of states of consciousness" in which the self is transformed (Csikszentmihalyi 74). George thus becomes sensitive to the metaphorical implications of existence in which he, Howard, and their world become facets of a larger whole.

George (and the reader) are transported, not only back in time, but into the mind and soul of Howard during what is to become a moment of mutual crisis. The following passage speaks at a reverberative level to link George's tile epiphany with an equally pivotal one for his father. In this scene, Howard rides on past the homestead, abandoning his old life for good:

Howard thought...A move of the head, a step to the left or right, and we change from wise, decent, loyal people to conceited fools? Light changes, our eyes blink and see the world from the slightest difference of perspective and our place in it has changed infinitely: Sun catches cheap plate flaking – I am a tinker; the moon is an egg glowing in its nest of leafless trees – I am a poet; a brochure for an asylum is on the dresser – I am an epileptic, insane; the house is behind me – I am a fugitive. His despair had not come from the fact that he was a fool; he knew he was a fool. His despair came from the fact that his wife saw him as a fool, as a useless tinker, a copier of bad verse from two-penny religious magazines, an epileptic, and could find no reason to turn her head and see him as something better. (124-5)

In the context of telling a good story, Howard's refusal to name himself categorically in the above scene as subject in his evolving narrative implies an appreciation of the fluid complexity concerning memory and identity. He is simultaneously a poet, an epileptic, a fugitive, a fool, depending on the viewpoint. Such a stance reverberates in the mind of the reader with the tile insight. His wife, Kathleen, on the other hand, is portrayed to the bitter end as beholden to the rigours of clock time and other manmade conventions, such

as her puritanical beliefs. Hers is a story that does not change, for she cannot “turn her head” and survey life from another angle.

Prior to this scene, Howard catches sight of his family framed in the window as they wait at table for his return. There are obvious resonances with the tile theme here in that the sighting constitutes his last impression of the family, which will surely remain imprinted on his mind forever. The passage is emotionally charged because it represents the moment of separation between father and son. In sharing Howard’s perspective, however, we understand that George’s picture will be “changed infinitely” in tandem with our own.

The theme of relationships is figuratively represented in *Tinkers* at an explicit level through the events of the novel – and in particular through George’s illness journey. The relationship motif is implicitly expressed through metaphorical resonance across all four of the narratives comprising the novel. The point that *Tinkers* is making, I believe, is that the meaning, or point, of life resides in relationships on all levels, with a particular focus on that between author, text and reader. The bond between parent and child (in this case, father and son) takes centre stage, embracing both past and future generations. The message I take from *Tinkers* is that the most profound connection lies in metaphorical relationship, which by the end of the novel proves to be George’s achievement and salvation. His shift from an everyday, linear mentality to a poetic appreciation of himself and his world as mutually reflective suggests the ultimate fulfilment of human potential.

From an illness narrative stance, George’s story exemplifies my conclusion that the ability to move from a literal to a metaphorical register is pivotal in affecting a healing outcome. Through figural layering, a single image (for example, the tiles) serves to communicate simultaneously on multiple levels. Mental, emotional and psychological connections are instantaneous and form intricate patterns, initiating imaginative movement, or flow. Complexity expands consciousness for participants and onlookers alike leading to further growth and change. Not only is George transformed by his ability to imaginatively embrace both “self as other” and other as self, but the reader is also changed through similar acts of sympathetic witness.

Conclusion

In this exegesis, I have analysed five autobiographies and two novels with illness themes for their different use of metaphor in mediating the disruptions to temporality and selfhood commonly reported in illness. I chose metaphor as my central focus because of its almost universal prominence in illness texts. With reference to ancient and contemporary metaphor theories, I examined the different ways figurative language serves to express the evolving relationship of sufferers to their changed circumstances, including their formerly well and uncertain future selves. I identified three basic methods: Firstly, as direct correlation between the subjective illness experience and a specific image, which helps the invalid come to terms with their reduced status. Examples include Bailey's snail and Bauby's diving-bell as representative of slothfulness and immobility respectively. Both symbols, whether real or imagined, deliver the sufferer firmly into the world of the "really real", which I argued with Frank is essential to establishing the authentic ground from which the past may be reassessed, and from which future possibility may evolve.

Secondly, I demonstrated via texts such as Cardinal's *The Words to Say It* and Hargrave's *A Woman of Air* how self-reflexivity in the form of symbolic representation may also function as a method of externalising, and thus clarifying, internal experience. Cardinal's exposition concerning her relationship to her autobiographical protagonist confirms Hunt and Sampson's interpretation of self-reflexivity as "a metaphorical relationship with self". Cardinal writes:

To make them understand and to help those who lived in the hell where I also lived, I promised myself that I would some day write an account of my analysis, and turn it into a[n autobiographical] novel in which I would tell of the healing of a woman as like me as if she were my own sister. (248)

Similarly, from a fictional point of view I argued that Ann Palmer in *A Woman of Air* represents the concept of art, and specifically literary fiction, as a transformational medium for author, protagonist and reader. Her experience demonstrates that painful memories can be assimilated and understood when creatively reworked through character and action. In an illness context, I observed that the shift in Ann's perspective acts as a catalyst for Daphne's review of hitherto suppressed memories, culminating in her eleventh-hour redemption.

Thirdly, I identified the cumulative effect of resonant imagery in creating meaning through thematic unity. For instance, Daphne's spontaneous epiphany in *A Woman of Air* builds on and develops a floral symbology that spans the novel. In analysing Paul Harding's book *Tinkers*, I demonstrated how sustained metaphors, especially in the form of nature, clocks and tiles, serve an important narrative function in line with Punday's hypothesis, providing imaginative and memorial impetus, where physical action is impeded by sickness and death. The cohesive effect of recurrent imagery on different temporal levels is significant in effecting a healing outcome. In particular, reconciliation between generations commutes an apparently linear trajectory into a circular, or to use Ricoeur's formulation, a spiral configuration, in which the return "home" is quintessentially transformative. Thus, George and Howard reunite as they travel beyond time into a dimension of mutual interdependence, where human remains fuse with clock parts, which in turn become the workings of the cosmos.

One of the most interesting discoveries resulting from the textual analysis is the variation in outcome depending on whether metaphorical expression results from intuitive perception or habitual thinking. It is apparent that originality of expression does not lead to, but rather proceeds from a sudden flash of insight which initiates growth and change. This state of affairs is borne out by Bauby's apprehension of the butterfly image in terms of imaginative freedom. With this concept comes the possibility of moving back and forth in time and, ultimately, of recording the memorial flights and fantasies that culminate in the publication of his story and a posthumous identity he could never have

imagined. This example illustrates the hypothesis that innovative expression equates to renewed selfhood, as promoted by Ricoeur, a stance which I argued finds support of a particularly dramatic nature in *Tinkers* with George's shift from literal to metaphorical thinking.

Just as original metaphor arises from intuitive perception, I proposed that clichéd tropes are indicative of unconscious attitudes that conspire against change. In all of the texts studied, protagonists waver between insight and habituation, with many examples of the latter confirming Sontag's position that the unexamined use of stock images and phrases does more than impede recovery, proving injurious – and in her view, even fatal. Thus, Cardinal's unwitting bourgeois values foster disassociation towards her own bodily processes. Images of defecation disturb and even terrify her until she is able, for example, “to say the word “shit” free of shame and disgust”, (243) toppling the “castle” of prejudicial conditioning that had formerly imprisoned her.

Building on the notion of metaphorical perspicacity as instantaneous, I observed with Gibbs that understanding may also deepen over time as related insights are triggered, acting similarly to Cardinal's stepping stones. I proposed that it is precisely in this way that the sick protagonist becomes engaged in further growth and change as fresh discoveries are made. For Frank, such a dynamic inevitably involves a readjustment of the sufferer's relationship to their former selves, with implications for future self-concept. According to Frank and others, including Ricoeur and Heidegger, such a future must embrace mortality: facing death is fundamental to achieving authenticity in the present. In this regard, I joined with researchers Garrett and Frank in distinguishing between healing and cure, proposing that, despite the death of protagonists Bauby, Daphne and George, each attains what Ricoeur defines as “narrative identity”. In other words, each testifies to the truth (rather than an idealised view) of their situation. In bearing witness to such a truth, the invalid's account becomes a “good” or “quest” story in that it calls all of us to account in the face of contingency and death, whilst at the same time honouring the unique particularity that defines the sufferer. According to Frank and Ricoeur, the mark of

the quest tale is that the narrator discovers his or her true identity – namely, who s/he essentially always was – as the story unfolds.

The reflexive dynamic by which this occurs led to a discussion on psychologist Csikszentmihalyi's definition of “flow”, in which one's temporal sense becomes attuned to the demands of the activity itself, rather than external factors such as clock measurement. Hence, even in adverse circumstances like illness, participants may experience temporal cohesion, and therefore a sense of integration, as random experience is transformed into complex, yet highly ordered, psychological states. For the ill narrator, I noted, this often translates into an unaccustomed urge for creative expression in the form of writing. Examples include *Cardinal* and *Clendinnen*. In each case, the impetus is rewarded by the discovery of new ways to express hitherto submerged aspects of self, which in Mantel's case often amounts to the only sense of self she is able to retrieve from the wreckage of illness. I also observed that imagery is frequently implicated in leading the sufferer-narrator into flow via a delicate balance between apparently opposing forces in a tussle between the conscious and unconscious mind. Common themes include light versus dark, nature versus technology, and even in *Cardinal's* case, a single word spawning conflicting images, manifesting by turns as a bridge or monster, friend or foe.

In writing *The Homecoming* my own process depended very much on imagery as a means to enter and sustain the flow state out of which the story developed. This was particularly the case since I had no clear notion of the specifics of the project beyond that of the illness theme recurrent in my own life. For me, concrete images served as an entry point into the fictional world, spawning the details from which character and action emerged. For example, following Helen's second visit to Dr. Griffin, she sits in the car, dazed, contemplating her confusion and resistance at the prospect of further invasive treatment. At this point, Helen's fictional stasis mirrored my authorial one, in that I did not know how to proceed. Beginning with a detailed description of the plane tree outside the windscreen with the x-ray image of the surgeon's face forming through it, I traced the sensual impressions presenting to my imagination on her behalf. The broken white lines on the

road led to the cracked lips of paint on the door of her sister's house, and thence to the surprise appearance of the delightful Jane. These particulars then suggested the jarring rhythms of Trance music with its pulsing visual graph overlaid with medical nuance, the sinister Darth Vader mask, and ultimately the phone call leading to the alternative health outfit, Pi-Tech. The character of Jane appeared fully formed, and seeing potential in her bright, energetic presence as a balance for Helen's chthonic state, the teenager ended up playing a more prominent role than originally anticipated.

These developments were not premeditated and had the effect of absorbing my attention as I entered more deeply into flow. At the time of writing, I was only partially cognizant of the medical resonance inherent in the sound-generated computer graph, the road markings as reflective of Helen's shattered state, and the dry lips of paint suggesting her emotional inarticulateness. These symbols nonetheless served as an instinctive guide in discovering plot, character and theme. Only on subsequent readings did I see the door paint lips in terms of a thematic silence operating on many levels: Vera's speechlessness, the emotional and creative suppression of mother and daughter, and the estrangement between them. These perspectives fostered further insights, including that of Vera and Helen as complementary aspects of a whole, with Vera representing the shadow side that Helen must retrieve in her journey towards reconciliation. Thus, from an instinctive selection of a series of single images, metaphorical resonance developed into thematic cohesion. This process was integral to maintaining a flow state through the use of sensuously detailed imagery.

Like *A Woman of Air* and *Tinkers*, *The Homecoming* is essentially about relationships, not only metaphorically, thematically and intergenerationally, but also between author, text and reader. Helen's discovery of Vera's diary prompts questions concerning her own identity and is a catalyst for a fuller understanding of her mother and ultimately also herself. Kate and Paul represent an entirely different readership, with the former construing excerpts as working notes for a fictional tale, and the latter as confirmation of the romantic liaison between Vera and Jean-Claude. As I wrote, I was aware of the broader implications of this "text" for Vera and Helen as author and reader. Only with hindsight, however, did I recognise the

subtle influence on the novel's development of theoretical inquiry and a close reading of illness narratives, in this case regarding the relationship between textual interpretation and selfhood.

Following further consultation, redrafting and rereading, I realised that I had unwittingly woven together significant facets of time and place in my own life (albeit now fictionalised), lending emotional and psychological fluidity to otherwise fragmented memories. Sovereign among these was the unexpected French element, based on an important sojourn in my early 20s with a French provincial family, representing a homely oasis in an otherwise dark time. This led to the novel's surprise conclusion in which Danielle Le Clos appears, resolving the fictional rift in time and place.

Thus, by working creatively with memory and imagination, illuminated by theoretical perspectives, I have become increasingly appreciative of the power of metaphor to bring hidden dimensions of my own psyche to conscious awareness. As scenes and characters formed, their symbolic significance became at times immediately – and at others cumulatively – evident, further influencing narrative direction. I see this relationship between my authorial self and the unfolding tale as similar to Hunt and Sampson's interpretation of Bakhtin's "dialogic", which they express as a reflexive, or metaphorical one. I can equally relate to the emphasis Frank and Ricoeur place on temporal unity in effecting change via an ongoing growth in "consciousness". Helen is not me, nor is she so similar as to resemble the metaphorical sister of whom Cardinal speaks, but her fictive experience, together with that of other characters, and especially Vera, can be seen to symbolically reflect hitherto submerged dimensions of my own life and psyche.

With regard to genre, my original intention to write a novel has prevailed since, whilst I admire the innovative use of structure, imagery and language that make the memoirs examined so memorable, I feared becoming hidebound by the particulars of my own lived experience at the expense of a more imaginative exploration of the illness-temporality conundrum. In an illness context, however, Helen's experience mirrors my own in that she wavers between restitution and chaos, with an urge towards quest (to use Frank's terms). In my case, and that of other protagonists

featured in this study, this meant the impetus to write; and for Helen the desire to paint or draw. In all cases, the disruptions to temporality and self that typify chaos shift from foreground to background as a more ordered psychological state ensues with the onset of flow. In this state, Helen becomes absorbed in her art as she enters a dimension of freedom from self-preoccupation and time in the everyday sense. In imaginatively recreating these states, I also entered into flow, moving from one image to another, finally culminating in the emergence of the two black cats. These images resonate with Vera's cat, Sheba, as symbolic of an inner knowing and even psychic healing, forging a further link between mother and daughter.

Writing *The Homecoming* has been a deeply satisfying exercise. It has required interplay between conscious and unconscious processes, in which the metaphorical nature of thought, emphasised by Charon and Lakoff (Charon 119; Lakoff 204), often expressed itself on the page before I was fully aware of its implications. Following my research, in tandem with the creative production, I now feel better equipped to enter the flow state involving this symbiosis, although it will always remain an essentially mysterious process.

Mysteriously also, my physical health and energy – and notably my digestion – have improved since embarking on this project. I cannot realistically explain how this can be, nor categorically attribute the fact to my research and creative practice. Thinking metaphorically, though, I am tempted to ask whether there might not be a correlation between psychological and physical assimilation!

The growing number of people who survive serious or chronic illness indicates that the illness narrative genre is assuming increased relevance. Since I began my research in 2008, the list of new publications dealing with illness has grown in memoir, fiction and on the academic front. The specific focus of this thesis on temporal awareness and its metaphorical relationship in the context of healing has been less prominent. I recognise that my exploration of these issues through scholarly and creative practice may stimulate further inquiry, whilst at the same time representing an important contribution to the field of illness narrative and metaphor theory.

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