Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

How Liminal Identities Engage Imaginary Spaces in Contemporary Settings

Khin Myint

This thesis is presented for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of
Curtin University

April 2019

Declaration

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

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

Signature:

Date: 7th April 2019

Abstract

This thesis consists of a memoir and an exegesis. The memoir charts my sister and my upbringing amidst a climate of racism in 1980s Perth. We are raised in a house caught between Eastern and Western values. When my sister becomes sick, competing theories emerge about whether her illness is physical or psychological in origin, or both. It is a question that divides our family, the media and the medical practitioners we engage. Set during the final month of my sister's life, the story begins when she acquires a euthanasia drug, and I travel to America seeking closure about a failed romance. When things don't go according to plan for me in America, I travel around New York State looking for a place to stay. Alongside those events, I tell the story of my sister's illness over the thirteen years leading up to her acquisition of the euthanasia drug.

The exegesis explores the memoir's writing process. It takes the form of four personal essays that interrogate the ways in which people deal with uncertainty and loss. I look at the renewal and maintenance of identity, and I analyse the ways in which individuals, groups and institutions construct knowledge of themselves around notions of the sacred.

Contents

Creative Work: The River Inside ……………………………………6

Exegesis: Writing in Polarised Territory ……………………………………263

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents for their blessing to write the memoir uninhibited. I would also like to thank my late sister who always encouraged her little brother to follow his creative pursuits no matter what. I couldn't have completed this PhD without Ella Cross; her strength and support as both a friend and partner throughout the writing process never wavered. My good friend and mentor Olga Lorenzo also spoke to me often about life and writing from her home in Melbourne while I completed this PhD. Liz Byrski generously took the time to read a version of the memoir and then met to offer creative guidance. Finally, I would like to thank my supervisors, Thor Kerr and David Whish-Wilson, for their gracious supervision and faith in the project.

The River Inside

1

I lit another cigarette and watched the pale ribbon rise from its tip.

'Will Samuel give her the key if she asks for it?'

'I don't know.'

My hair and clothes reeked that week. I had begun chain smoking after Rachel's departure, and sitting on the beat-up old couch overlooking my mother's little cul-de-sac in Willetton was all I felt like doing. I wasn't sleeping. Probably the chain smoking didn't help. I just couldn't seem to pull myself together though. It troubled me, because although I'd been through my share of breakups before, I knew I should be doing better than this, but curling up to die was all that was appealing. I'd thought about it seriously. I'd looked online for ways to kill oneself, before coming to my senses.

'How are you going with it all?' she asked, looking at me carefully.

'Today was my last day of work,' I said. 'It's a relief at least not to have to go in.'

She shook her head and frowned but didn't say anything more.

I had given notice at work a few weeks earlier. Rachel had changed her mind and asked me to move countries, but then she'd changed it back again. Now I'd be sucked back into the

reality of Perth, and my sister Theda's illness, without a job or a place to live. This was the long-term future now. I would eventually become my sister's carer; there was no way out of it.

Mum excused herself and went back inside. I lay on the couch and listened to the crows cawing while blowing smoke rings and thinking about what had happened in the last few weeks.

Part of what was so baffling was that I'd never had a partner like Rachel. I didn't understand her, or what had happened. We'd met in Thailand doing aid work eighteen months ago, and people from different walks of life crossed paths there more readily than they did in my circles. Rachel was American and from a social stratum I wasn't versed in. She'd grown up talking left-wing politics over the dinner table, and she imagined fighting for social justice her whole life. I think a part of her imagined being a politician. As for me, I'd grown up wagging my classes and sucking on deodorant cans to escape life. Now that I was older, I wanted to be more like her. We had a 10-year age gap. She was 25, and fresh out of college, but her maturity and mine didn't seem badly matched. She was sophisticated and smart, and it had all been going so well, but then she'd left Australia suddenly, and I was thrown in a loop. She changed her mind when she got back to the US and invited me to follow her. But during our last trans-Pacific phone call she'd said things I'd never expected. They were from a different person. They were about money and status. 'Just be a man, Khin*,'* she'd said at the end of that call. 'Just be a fucking man.'

As for Samuel, he was my sister's boyfriend. If you can imagine a chicken bone full of anxieties, that's not far from the mark. He's a good guy, though. When I'd asked Mum about whether or not he'd give my sister the key, it was because he was safeguarding it. That key was essential. It opened a small metal box that Theda was keeping underneath her bed. The

contents had arrived the week Rachel left me—so roughly six weeks earlier—and they would end my sister's life if she took them.

Theda was a couple of years older than me. She was 37 and she still lived with our mother. Her illness was awful, but it wasn't terminal. Quality of life wasn't great though, and in that metal box was a euthanasia drug from Mexico, which had somehow made it through the post. She just wanted it nearby, that was all. It gave her a feeling of security, like there was a way out. It's not that she was definitely going to use it. Probably not. Samuel holding the key was her safeguard. He was the handbrake. He would need to be called before she could make any rash decisions.

Theda had had a boatload of potential when she'd fallen ill in her final year of university. It had hit her out of the blue. After a year of living with a diagnosis of depression, a doctor had re-diagnosed her with chronic fatigue syndrome. That label circled us for nine years, until a different doctor decided it was chronic Lyme disease four years ago. Psychiatrists, who my sister also crossed paths with, believed the illness was psychosomatic. They discredited all the organic theories. Dad also thought her illness was mental health-related, but he wasn't in Perth. I was undecided.

My sister had asked my permission to die a few years earlier and I'd given it. It seemed selfish and cruel to tell her that my opinion mattered when it came to her own decision to die. How could I pretend my opinion on her pain and suffering was in any way valid? I couldn't. But it didn't change the way I was feeling that week. I was all muddled up about both things—Rachel leaving, and Theda's drug in her little metal box under the bed.

I'll tell you a little about Rachel before going any further. Rachel and I had been deeply in

love that year. It had only just gone summer in Perth, and we were in our bedroom at the apartment we'd been renting for the last year. We'd been on the bed cuddling when she'd said, 'I want to announce our engagement after this trip, Khin. Just the announcement. It's important.'

'That sounds good,' I'd said without thinking much of it. We'd been planning to get married for most of that year. Ours had been a quick attraction from the start and we'd lived together almost straight away. It was intense and full of passion. I remember the smell of her hair and how heady it made me feel that day. She was like a sunbeam. I couldn't have been happier.

'I just think it's silly,' she continued, 'that we haven't told our friends yet.'

'Our friends know.'

'It's important that we announce it properly,' she said.

Looking back, I wonder if I should have shown more excitement. I was just so caught up in the plan that I lost sight of any need for fanfare. We would head back to America in a year's time, and she'd start grad school. We were planning a visit in July to spend a month with her parents in Albany, New York. I thought it was obvious I was onboard, but I wonder if she somehow interpreted doubt. I don't know, it's possible. After she left I was looking for any sort of explanation. I'd even sent her a letter apologising for things I couldn't really figure out, just a big cloud of apology grasping at anything I might have done. But the truth was I didn't know.

'I told your Mum about having it at the Unitarian Church in Albany,' she said a week later. 'We'll fly her over there, and Theda too if she can handle that?'

'Let's see,' I said. 'Maybe she'll be better by then.'

The last part of the year had included a lot of plan-making with Rachel. She knew what

her career was aiming for, but I was hoping to do something other than ESL teaching. I'd done it for ten years by then, and I enjoyed the students, but I wanted more. I'd just started a university course in creative writing. I wanted to write like Malcolm Gladwell—someone who studies a topic and educates himself in the process of writing a book. I couldn't think of a better ambition. It didn't really matter if I failed at it; I'd be engaging with ideas. A person could always find work. Also, that course had a scholarship at the end, so if I got the scholarship I'd have a little money when we returned to the US; if not then it didn't matter.

The week Rachel left was also the week we had a large lever-arch folder on the coffee table full of affidavits from our friends and parents stating how in love we were. What an irony that was now. In it were details of our joint bank accounts, bills and our lease. We'd been asking friends to send joint invitations to parties all year so we'd have more proof to go into it, proving to the government that it wasn't just a marriage of convenience. It was called a de facto visa, and the form was due on the Thursday. If we got it in on time her working rights would remain in place for another year as it processed, and then she'd effectively be a dual citizen.

Mary Devison, Rachel's mother, wasn't happy about any of it. She was a needling little woman, and she wanted her daughter back in America yesterday. She'd been sending Rachel weekly emails ever since visiting us before Christmas, dropping the hint that Rachel should leave me. That's why the July visit was so important. I needed to make Mary appreciate my good side somehow. I can still remember her affidavit, which came the same week Rachel talked about wedding plans. It came with a proud New York State stamp in the corner, and a little warning note stapled to the top of the document inside, reminding Rachel that she was ruining her life.

Rachel had laughed it off that day, but a week later, she left me. She changed her mind so

quickly I didn't believe it at first—I remember I even laughed a bit because I thought she was making fun of me. I thought she was joking. When I realised she wasn't, I spent the next 14 hours desperately trying to persuade her to talk about why. She changed the date on her ticket and left Australia the day after announcing her decision. I got some better explanations in a series of texts while she connected via Sydney to LA. She wrote: *I still love you honey, I'm so sorry to do this. But there's too many unknowns because we're from different countries*. And then another text shortly after: *Sweet boy, it broke my heart to do this. This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.*

Theda's euthanasia drug arrived that same week, like I said. That whole week was horrible. That's when I started smoking again and falling apart inside.

A couple of weeks after the departure, Rachel called from her mother's house in Albany, and changed her mind.

'It was a mistake, Khin,' she said. 'I didn't *want* to end things. I just wasn't being honest with you. Mum said that you'd not really leave Australia when it came to the crunch in a year's time and I didn't know what to do. I guess I got spooked by it all.'

We talked for hours on Skype. I took the day off work. She said she couldn't come back because we'd missed the cut-off for the de facto visa, and she wouldn't have working rights if she returned. When I asked if I could go there, she took a breath, looked up, and then exhaled with the word 'yes' on her lips.

'Do you want me to move right now?' I asked.

'No,' she said firmly, 'leave your ticket as it is, that gives us time to organise things and tie up loose ends.'

I could see her childhood room behind her. On my laptop screen it was almost like she was there with me. It was full of red cushions and she had a big poster on the wall. It looked

comforting. But she was also talking differently, a touch flippant and sort of childish. I didn't say anything. I was just grateful we were going to save our relationship.

A friend who's a bit older told me I was walking into trouble by agreeing to go.

'We were planning to get married,' I said.

'That's even worse,' the friend said.

Another friend told me she had always thought Rachel was slightly catastrophic. Needless to say I didn't listen. I quit my job and gave up our apartment, then went about saying goodbye to all my friends. I was still talking to Mum about the reality of me leaving Australia with Theda so sick, but I had no reason to believe the euthanasia drug meant things were actually at a crisis point. We'd been on the edge of my sister's death before. Theda had been sick for thirteen years, and I knew I had to make a decision for myself at some point. I'd been expecting it would be in a year's time, but this was okay.

After that, Rachel and I spoke every night. 'I've joined groups over here,' she said, 'I'm engaging with the political community. You're gonna love it. I'm volunteering with refugees again, and there's a women's refuge, and some rallies I've been going to. I've got my old self back.'

'That's great,' I said, wondering why she seemed so zealous and happy despite how fragile I felt.

'There's nothing to talk about regarding us,' she assured me. 'I just needed to change my situation. I hadn't *realised* how unhappy I was. I'm much better.'

'That's good,' I said. 'I'm really looking forward to seeing the new you.'

Three weeks later, she changed her mind again. She told me I didn't earn enough money and wasn't bold enough for her. 'My career is going to be in social justice,' she said. 'The kind of work I want to do doesn't pay much, so if I want a baby, I'll need someone who can

support me while I take time off work. You can't do that on an ESL teacher's wage.'

I told her she was wrong. I reminded her that I'd been paying my own way in the world since turning 17, and I pressed her for a better explanation, but her answer to that just threw me. She said she'd attended a contemporary dance performance with her mother the night before and had had an epiphany.

'I can be anything in the world I want!' she said excitedly, forgetting for a moment that she was breaking my heart and leaving me without a job or a place to live. 'And, Khin, you just don't believe in me enough.'

'What do you mean?' I said. 'Of course I believe in you.'

She shook her head firmly. 'No, you don't. You told me you were worried about my anxiety. No one who believed in me would say something like that.'

'I just said I wanted you to talk to me about it more,' I said.

'I don't need to talk about it.'

'I'll use this ticket to come and we can talk in person,' I said.

That was the wrong idea. That's when she then started screaming at me. That's when she said I wasn't a man, and wasn't rough enough in bed. She said she didn't like my spectacles and that I hadn't done anything meaningful with my life. She tore things off her wall, and threw them at the camera.

I tried emailing afterwards. We had a few confusing exchanges. After that, she cut me off.

So, I moved back into Mum's place because I had nowhere else to go. I usually tried to keep a little distance from Mum and Theda. It wasn't personal, I was just a much better brother and son if I wasn't living with them. Especially if heartbroken. The landlord had already promised my apartment to another tenant though. There wasn't any other choice.

After our phone call, I looked up Rachel's medication. Antidepressants are a strange

group of medicines. I had taken them when I was younger and suffering from depression. I could remember how much they changed the way the world seemed when you first started them. She was on them for anxiety, not depression, but the drugs were the same. The drug she had started taking a month earlier, listed 'mania' as one of its possible side-effects. For an intense week, I was convinced that the drugs were to blame. Google happily led me to forums full of people talking about how the specific medicine Rachel was taking was exactly what had made their own partners leave. They told stories of partners they had kids with suddenly becoming erratic, grandiose and then just vanishing. An anthropologist had even done a study on it, dubbing it the 'falling out of love antidepressant'.

*

After smoking a few more cigarettes, I went inside and slipped past Mum who was busy in the kitchen stirring a soup that smelled of chicken fat.

'Is that you, Minty?' my sister's voice whispered from inside when I knocked on her bedroom door.

'Can I come in?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Please do.'

Inside, the only light was the faint blue glow of the air filter, and I made my way towards the bed, closing the door behind me. I was always struck by how controlled the environment in her room was. She had a special air conditioner that kept the humidity and temperature constant. Her bedroom was sealed by a solid wood door keeping out sounds from the kitchen. It was like a comfortable tomb, with a massive bed in the middle.

'How was your day?' she asked tentatively.

'It's alright,' I said. 'I've been smoking.'

‘It’s okay,’ she said, patting the bed. ‘My allergies aren’t bad today.’

I leaned in and gave her a hug, then went to the armchair at the bottom of the bed.

‘You were at work this morning?’

‘It was my last day. Just for the morning.’

‘Did your students do anything nice?’

‘Some of the older women cooked injera,’ I said. ‘It’s a salty pancake from Ethiopia.’

‘You’ll miss that job,’ she said.

‘I’m sure they’ll take me back after this semester. I don’t have anything right now.’

She made an appreciative sound and asked if she could play her audiobook.

‘Of course,’ I said.

*

There are a couple of things about the state of euthanasia in 2013 that I think I should mention before moving on. In the Netherlands, where Theda had asked to be taken a few years earlier, euthanasia is legal. A person needs two doctors to sign off on it, and mental illness is a legitimate reason. I think this is where some liberal-minded people often become divided, because mental illness is a fraught category, and allowing people to euthanase over it is a pragmatist’s approach to their suffering, but there are arguments on both sides.

Euthanasia is legal in Belgium also, and in 2017 a Belgian woman named Cornelia Geerts asked her psychiatrist to green-light euthanasia because of her mental health. After her death, Ms Geerts’s sister told journalists, ‘I think if the doctors had tried to help my sister more, she might have felt there was another solution.’

On the other side of the debate is Edith Pol Vincke’s father, whose daughter slashed her

own throat in 2011 following a Dutch doctor's refusal to offer her euthanasia on mental health grounds. He said he thought his daughter would have tried living longer, or died more peacefully if her request had been granted. He understood that simply getting the means to kill oneself doesn't mean you're going to do it. There is a lot of relief in knowing you have a way out.

I see both sides. When Theda got her drug, I worried that there might be treatments, particularly mental health ones, that she could try if only I could get her to see her illness with a more open mind. But, on the other hand, as a family we'd already lived through several of her suicide attempts, and they'd been horrific as well as dangerous. She could easily have disabled herself as a result of them, leaving her worse off.

Like Pol Vincke's father, I believed that knowing she had a way out might relieve the anxiety and help her keep going. And like Ms Geerts's sister, I hoped she'd seek other options before deciding to die.

Sartre once said that some moral quandaries don't have answers. We have to rely on intuition then.

When I think of my sister's complicated illness, I often think of our ethnic background. My sister and I both got our names from our father's culture, which he left when he was 20. 'Theda' means crystal clear water. Ethnic uniqueness is fashionable nowadays, but back in our childhood it wasn't. Dad is Burmese, and the West brought him over and educated him on aid money with the idea of sending him back to Burma to share his skills. Instead, he married my mother. They met in a prison when Dad was doing an internship as part of the education he'd got in psychology, and Mum was teaching the prisoners how to sew. She was a ten-

pound-pom who'd recently immigrated to Australia, while he was a chocolate-brown Asian man who'd grown up under a military dictatorship until the age of twenty. As soon as the Burmese government found out about the marriage (Dad thinks they had spies in Perth), they cancelled his passport and threatened his sisters in Rangoon. The Australian government didn't want him, so it was a bit tense for a while, but he ended up being able to stay thanks to an unlikely set of events.

Theda still kept a photo of our father on her wall. I know it by heart—it's of him wearing a longyi and smiling, from those early days in Perth after the Australian government was essentially blackmailed into letting him stay. In the shot, he's doing something with his hands out of shot and he looks so much freer than I remember him being when I was an adult. I associate those years with happy memories. We were small enough that he used to scoop us up into his lanky brown arms, drop down into a typically Asian squat, and put us in the little hammock where his longyi hung between his knees. Then he'd waddle forward bouncing whichever of us was in there, while shouting, "Scuffling! Scuffling!", his arms flailing dramatically and our mother stirring something on the stove. But those days were short lived. When I was about 9, he was already a lonely and insecure man who had become obsessed with Buddhism.

Let me just tell you a bit about my sister's personality, since I'm mentioning our father. My sister wouldn't want me to say this, but she took after Dad in one particular way: she also had 'migrant syndrome'. Migrant syndrome is a shorthand term for when a migrant thinks they have to prove themselves to belong in their new country. I think this is what changed my father. It consumed him and drew us away from him.

Theda was born in Australia but we had both been bullied in school for being Asian. I went the opposite direction to her. I rebelled whereas she went to university and studied so

hard it almost drove her mad. She topped an undergrad major, then did two elite certificates, and then a graduate diploma in broadcast journalism that was so elite it only admitted ten people. She won an award for an assignment she did in her final year. Some people at the ABC took note and said that here was a person going places. In the final year on that course, not long after winning the channel 7 award, she came home one day really upset. A guy called Jeremy Fernandez was on her course and he'd been told by the course coordinator that he was too Indian-looking for Australian audiences. The coordinator had told him to adjust his career expectations. This wasn't explicit racism—the course had, after all, taken Fernandez into its fold—it was just practical reality, apparently. But Theda was luckier than Fernandez. She was mixed-race and quite a lot less brown. She was exactly the right kind of 'Asian' that progressive Australia was ready for. It upset her, and I get that now. It says to a girl who was bullied for years by racists that, while she was 'white enough' in the adult world to pass, her childhood bullies had 'had a point.'

Ironically, Australia changed more quickly after that. Fernandez went on to become famous, and Theda fell ill.

I want to say one more thing about my sister before moving on: there is a misconception that a woman who goes from leading her little brother around to seeking a career in front of a camera is necessarily confident. That wasn't true for Theda. She never stopped worrying about her reputation after the trouble she had in high school. Throughout her university years she would ask our mother to listen in on her phone conversations, in case she said something to a friend that would make that friend hate her.

If you had been my sister's friend during this time, you wouldn't have known this. She was as polite and amiable as anyone. If anything, she came across a little false because she curated herself so severely that it seemed unreal at times. So, when she fell ill with something

that got labelled ‘depression’, personally I wasn’t surprised.

What I knew about depression back then was that a good chunk of it could be related to shame. Mine had been. I’d felt ashamed about my ethnicity after high school, and the way it had drawn such violence and dislike towards me as a teenager. I’d eventually responded by rebelling and becoming a bit of a loner. I’d taken my trust out of the institutions Theda and Dad sought validation from, and found pride in being a bit marginal and more artistic. That worked for me. I don’t know if it would have worked for my sister, but she never admitted that what had happened during childhood was unfair, and she made herself wholly accountable for it.

The day after I sat in my sister’s room on my last day of work, I went to a doctor’s surgery in Leeming and launched into a little speech. ‘It would make things much worse,’ I said, ‘…I mean what would happen if the dose was wrong? And the Mexicans might have given her anything?’

The doctor nodded carefully. She wasn’t my sister’s Lyme doctor—I would never have approached him—she was my sister’s GP.

‘I understand why she wants to die,’ I continued. ‘And she’s promised she only wants to have it nearby. But I just had to ask someone who knows about these things how likely it is that the drug would be legit…I mean, what are the risks?’

The doctor looked concerned.

‘I really came to talk about getting sleeping pills for myself,’ I said. ‘I didn’t expect to tell you any of this.’

She was a young and vibrant woman who I trusted. I’d seen her for my own medical

needs once or twice, and I knew she understood Theda's general wish to die. She had been my sister's doctor for almost ten years and knew how dismal her life had become. I felt guilty. But I did what I did that day knowing it would have consequences. I watched birds on the grass hopping outside the window as I offered up concerns.

'Your family is cursed,' she said when I was done.

I laughed dryly, and then took a prescription for some sleeping pills. Fifteen minutes later, while pulling up in Mum's driveway, the doctor called. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I had to tell the authorities what you told me. I could lose my medical license if, heaven forbid, something happens.'

'It's okay,' I said.

A few hours after that, Theda caught me in the kitchen as I was making a cup of tea. 'How could you, Khin?' she sobbed. 'That drug is my only fucking control in this whole situation!'

'I'm sorry,' I said. Then I added, weakly, 'It just came out by accident.'

'That's bullshit!' she said glaring. 'You can't imagine what it's like. Just stay out of my business while you're here, okay?'

'Okay,' I promised.

It was a complicated month. I knew I couldn't stay in Perth after that day. I had begun to realise that I needed to get out altogether, for a while at least. Perth was a closed book. I knew that once Mum eventually died, I would have to take over caring for my sister. Rachel's appearance in my life had altered that, but now it was back. And once I eventually did take over caring for Theda, I would undoubtedly try and force her into seeing a psychiatrist, which

she would hate me for. She'd threaten suicide then also. It was a dark time coming that I couldn't see a way of avoiding. I wouldn't be able to have a family or a job of my own. A person couldn't look after my sister and do anything else, the care she needed was too full on.

I figured I would get away for a while and figure out a plan. I could seek some kind of closure with Rachel, and if that didn't work out, I could use the savings I had to stay away from Perth for several months anyway. I had my plane ticket, which wasn't refundable or re-routable, and I was still enrolled in the creative writing course. I could do it online. I'd find some little American town and focus. Also, I wondered if Rachel was right: maybe I wasn't 'bold' enough by any stretch of the imagination. Fronting up might show both of us that I was courageous enough for her. She'd not doubt my commitment then. It felt a bit dangerous, but it also felt distinctly like the right thing to do in the circumstances. Whatever my complex mix of reasons was, I felt much better after deciding to do it. I quit the cigarettes again, and two weeks later, my plane left the ground.

I remember a Chinese woman next to me snoring as I looked out the plane window and saw my city through a gap in the clouds. It was so far from any other place on earth. It was tiny, set on a snaking river like the curves of a swan's neck glistening in the moonlight. The moonlight made the tops of the clouds shine iridescent blue.

I was headed to the other side of the world and everything felt better. Theda had forgiven me. Her euthanasia drug was still there but she promised she wouldn't use it without calling me back to Perth first. Mum had given me her blessing too.

'You go see what's happening with that crazy girl,' Theda had said. She'd hugged me for a moment in the hallway, as I stood there with my suitcase in my hand.

That was the last time I would ever see her.

2

I want to tell you a bit about our childhood. This is not going to be a book about race, but it's hard to avoid. It seems to me that race as a topic scares a lot of people these days. It's sometimes used as an excuse not to think that specific things have complicated causes. I don't think like that. But with Theda's illness, those years in which we suffered racism as kids were a big part of how I ended up thinking about her mental health.

Theda never talked a lot about the bullying she experienced. I get most of my knowledge about it from Mum and a few conversations I had with my sister over the years. Mostly I interpret it through my own story, so I'll start with that.

The last time I saw Simon, I was sixteen and he was on his knees in the dirt. There was a polaroid camera going off, and the clicks and whirs of that camera were accompanied by frozen flash-images I still recall of him begging like a dog to a group of boys who'd shoved dry leaves into his ears and told him to beg. He had a trickle of blood down one brown cheek, as excited white hands fumbled while aiming that camera at him.

Caroline was my new friend back then. I'll never forget what she said. She turned to me, appalled at what was happening, and said, 'He brought it on himself, Khin. He should have

known they didn't invite him because they wanted to be his friend. He shouldn't have got so drunk.'

She was right, of course. But she also seemed to overlook something I did that night as well. Simon was the only Asian kid there apart from me—and a much darker one at that. White boys had been calling him 'nigger lips' and 'you-fat-Indian' all evening, but Caroline and I both imagined those insults were just easy taunts; after all, we were so used to hearing language like that in the early 1990s. We imagined that it wasn't really the thing called 'racism' which adults talked about sometimes, it was just kids being kids.

Something I didn't tell Caroline was that I had fallen for the same trick as Simon a few years earlier. I had gone to a party alone when invited for the wrong reasons. Asian kids didn't go to white kids's parties back then. The reason I got to hang out with people like Caroline now was because I'd worked so hard at presenting myself better after shifting schools. I had entered my new school knowing that I had to appear tough to survive. I wasn't an obvious target anymore. I acted whiter and more masculine. So it was that I got to be friends with Caroline. She was going out with Steve, who was older, and who was Chad's best friend. I was friends with Chad mostly, and the bullying of my past was not something I ever talked about.

My previous school's name is Rossmoyne. These days Rossmoyne is a school where a lot of Asians go. Asian kids were at Rossmoyne back in the 1990s, but I was an anomaly as a mixed-race one there. Following the troubles I had there, I got kicked out of it. Theda moved into it the same year I left. Looking back, someone should have asked what was happening with me. I could have set off alarm bells, and Theda might not have gone there, but I had no idea how to speak about being a victim of anything at age fifteen. Boys didn't talk about victimhood. I also believed that racist comments accompanying the bullying at Rossmoyne

were not really about race. I left that school assuming there was just something deeply wrong inside of me that those bullies had seen. When they had called me ‘nip’, and told me to go back to where I came from, I told myself it was just a convenient way for them to make me feel bad. Being Asian was one of the worst insults you could throw at a person, so them calling *me* ‘Asian’ when I clearly wasn’t one was simply a sign that they hated me, not that they actually thought of me like that. It probably sounds a bit daft in today’s ‘woke’ times, but in one of Australia’s most parochial cities in the late 1980s, a conversation about race wasn’t something families like mine had. My own dad had told me adamantly that migrants needed to work twice as hard to be accepted, but that this had nothing to do with that word ‘racism’, which he swears to this day he didn’t experience too much.

The day I saw Simon bullied those years of victimhood at Rossmoyne were behind me. Caroline, Chad, Steve and I had gone to SciTech that day. We’d taken LSD and sat in a hall of mirrors for hours laughing and bonding. Chad was gentle-minded and semi-popular, Caroline was pretty, Steve was 19 and still hanging out with high-schoolers. Chad mentioned later in the afternoon that he knew of a party some private school boys were putting on, so we took another tab of acid before going.

When we arrived at the party, a group of boys were drinking on the back patio. Simon was there, but it was before he was too drunk. I sat next to him early in the evening and I remember him well, because he was making dumb jokes, and the other kids were egging him on.

One of the realities that took me a long time to understand about my hometown is that parochial places don’t like outsiders, and Perth was very parochial. It is thousands of kilometres from anywhere, and it’s a mining economy in which tough masculinity reigns. Bogans were my world growing up. I was immersed in their culture. The only music I ever

heard was heavy metal. Theirs was a culture that feared anyone who was different: brown people, gays and 'girly' boys. In those years, Jack van Tongeren was touting a very specific kind of racism. He'd just been arrested for blowing up Chinese restaurants, and his political movement had plastered 400,000 posters around Perth with messages like: 'Coloured Immigration: A Trickle Is Now A Flood', and 'Asians Out or Racial War'. They called themselves the Australian Nationalist Movement.

At Rossmoyne, as I said, there was a large Asian contingent. White Australia policy had officially ended in '73. We'd all been born in the late seventies. Those Asians had come over as toddlers, and they were middle-class. They self-segregated. Quadrangles at lunchtime were entirely white, but on the far oval across the staff carpark the Asians would sit peacefully in a large group, chatting in their different languages and eating strange different lunches to the ones the white kids ate.

As soon as lunch bell would ring back then, all the Asian students would quietly and efficiently make their way down toward that oval. I remember kids in the halls and quadrangles would cough the word 'nip' into their hands whenever they got a chance to do it. The Asian kids avoided eye-contact and went on their way. It was broiling under the surface like that.

The problem Theda and I had was that we thought we were white in that situation. There wasn't a single mixed-race kid or Asian kid born in Australia who we could relate to.

'They're taking over this place,' kids I hung out with used to say. 'They're gunna steal all the jobs!' Occasionally one would then turn to me and say, 'Not you, you're different.'

I remember thinking that the Asian kids would have done better socially if they'd been good at sports. But they were academic, and the teachers loved them, which made the racial tensions worse. The lower grades were about 1/5th Asian, but the upper grades were about a

third. Part of the reason for that was because Rossmoyne was still a cheap-ish area to live in, and the administration encouraged white kids who'd been caught in its catchment area to leave in grade 10 if they weren't doing well. Studious Asian kids were making Rossmoyne look good in the state-wide stats, and that was all the administration cared about. They didn't even try to address the informal racial segregation taking place in their student body.

Let me tell you something I learned about racism from those years: it is about perceived threat; it's symbolic more than real and it's about anxiety in the majority. The year I shifted from Rossmoyne to Applecross, I was shocked at how much better things were at Applecross. The racist taunts were fewer, and there was less violence in general. Looking back, it makes sense because Applecross only had about four Asian students in each grade, so no one made a big deal out of them.

Another thing I know about racism now is that once it takes root, it gets power from the wider conversation about race in a society. I wasn't a news watcher in my teens, or even in my twenties, but looking back, the whole Van Tongeren thing was an extra adrenaline hit for all the usual high school group-isms. Pauline Hanson and her foray into national politics was still a decade in the future, but I remember kids at Rossmoyne saying things like, 'Van Tongeren is just saying what everyone really thinks.' They'd say that alongside comments about a man called Nicolas Meredith, who'd just been convicted of murdering a Vietnamese taxi driver and gone on a racist rant about it in court. I doubt these kids genuinely endorsed the murder, but they said these things anyway, and they said other things too. They said that all the Asians cared about was money, not people.

Back then you never saw a movie or TV series with an Asian kid in it, unless it was a Jackie Chan movie. I think lots of those bogan kids came from families where concern about the 'Asian problem' was a real issue. They were repeating their parents' worries.

My experiences at Rossmoyne were my first taste of real loneliness. I'd been fine in primary school, but I lost my best friend the day I entered high school. His name was Geoffrey, and he eventually ended up a drug addict so I know things didn't work out for him, but we lost touch when he took me aside and said, 'Khin, you should join the Asians on the oval.' That day marked the end of our friendship.

'Why?' I said.

'I just think it will work better for you,' he said.

'But I'm not one of them.'

'I know that,' he said, apologetically. 'But still.'

That 'But still' is what I failed to understand as a kid.

It's funny how hindsight gives you perspective. When I look back on it, I see the factors at play more clearly, but at the time it was hard. I loved Geoffrey, and understanding his rejection was impossible. I only followed his advice out of a blunt feeling of being misunderstood.

It turned out that those Asian kids on the oval were nice. I went one lunchtime, and a Singaporean girl said to me, 'Which home-language do you speak, Khin?'

'English,' I told her. She looked surprised and asked about my parents, so I told her I was a mix.

'That's interesting,' she said smiling gently and nodding like one of those cats with the bobbing heads on a Chinese restaurant counter. 'Which of your parents is from Asia?'

'Dad,' I said.

I remember how thoughtfully she looked at me then. She told me it made sense because the mother did most of the 'home language' teaching.

I can still remember what gentle people those students were. I liked them, but they kept

switching back to their own languages, especially when someone made a joke, usually about parental pressure to do well academically. I couldn't relate, and, despite their tolerance, it seemed obvious to me that I belonged somewhere else.

When I tried to join a white group in the quadrangles one last time, I got into my first serious fist fight. It was with a kid who told me in front of the others that I was a Vietnamese bastard. He was commenting on the 'smell', and talking about how we all stank of curry. When I corrected him about the nationality, he just took things further. He started doing the '*Burmese* mating dance' legs akimbo like the parody of an African tribesman's rain-dance, while telling the others it was how my 'black' dad had got my white mum to have sex with him. I saw Geoffrey laughing along, and that's when I threw a punch.

That punch changed my life.

I got into a total of eleven fights at that school. I'm not the sort of person who's well-endowed to deal with violence or who instigates it. It's true that I threw the starting punch in that first fight, but after that I never started another one. Most kids who won a fight got respect and were left alone, but it didn't work that way for me. First came Brad, then Peter, then Stuart, then Tim, then Owen, then Kieran, then Andrew, and others whose names I forget. It was a campaign. Each had spectators and the worst involved a swarm behind some random kid who'd decided he was intent on beating me up. I would see the swarm from a distance sometimes and try to avoid it, but that wasn't always possible. My property got regularly broken—something I know also happened to Theda when she moved there—and kids spat on my back when I was in class. My bag was often thrown in the changeroom urinals, and there was constant name-calling.

There's a Philip Roth quote that says it's worse being caught between categories than in any single one. I think that too. When you're in a category, even a denigrated one, at least

you're not alone.

When they finally kicked me out of Rossmoyne it was couched in language about academic problems. I'd stopped going to school to avoid the violence, and I had started catching busses all around town. I would leave for school in the morning, but I'd rarely arrive at the school buildings. Mum and Dad were too busy fighting their own cultural battle to pay attention. The school called them at first, but then gave up. I also started being rude to teachers. That was the only way I knew how to draw attention to the fact I was so unhappy, but no one asked why. No one asked if I was starting the fights either. I couldn't speak up because my masculinity was all I had left in that situation, and I imagined speaking up would take that from me too.

Getting back to Simon, the night that I saw him getting bullied, I was in a much better situation. I certainly didn't want to draw attention to myself. The camera was flashing and Caroline was right about the alcohol. I'd been sitting next to Simon when he'd been drinking before he got up and went into the dark recesses of the backyard to vomit earlier in the evening. Some other boys had followed him, but I'd not thought too much of it at the time.

When they'd returned from that darkness half an hour later, they'd had Simon with them, and had taken off his shirt and pants. They dragged him to the Hills Hoist near the back porch light, and tied him to it with sweaters. That's when the little crowd formed. They spun him around and around on that Hills Hoist until he came untethered, and then they tied him to it again. Chad and I were drinking on the porch and Caroline was off with Steve at that point. It was ugly stuff, but not so ugly it wasn't unexpected. A few weeks earlier, I'd heard of a kid (who was, in retrospect, most likely autistic) invited to a party, given weed, and then shoved

in a shopping trolley and hurled down a hill into an intersection repeatedly. It was not outside the norm for the Perth I knew back then.

That night with Simon on the Hills Hoist, I remember Chad turning to me at one point and saying, ‘That shit isn’t good, man.’

Not long after he said it, the crowd of about fifteen boys and girls carried Simon’s dark-brown body in his clean white y-fronts up the side path and I thought it was over. I remember feeling relieved. We drank some more and when the clock hit about 10pm, Chad suggested we go back to his house and get stoned. The LSD was wearing off. Music was blaring inside the house, but there didn’t seem to be many people left.

Chad went inside to look for Caroline, and when he returned with her, the three of us went down the side path to the front lawn, and that’s when I saw just how big the party had got. There were people all over it—200 or so—and Simon was everyone’s focus. He was propped up against the house’s front door under its porch light, and the crowd had formed an amphitheatre around him. He was missing tufts of hair and his eyebrows were gone. He had bruises on one side of his face, and the crowd was calling out encouragement, telling him to keep knocking. He was doing it for some unknowable reason, in a zombie-like state in his underwear. Some agitators were passing eggs around and people were randomly tossing them at him. I remember the sound of some hitting the door behind him with a crunch and the guffaws that rose when one missed or hit. His skin was covered in yolk.

Someone ran up to us and offered eggs, and that’s when Caroline said what she did about it being his fault. She and I were waiting for Chad, who’d now gone to find Steve. We were on that front lawn about ten minutes, and in that time, the crowd moved Simon off the porch and got him down on his knees in the dirt by a tree. When he was in the dirt, his crowd of tormentors got smaller, but that’s when the polaroid camera started flashing for photos they

could all pass around school the following week.

Years later, I would write this story for my local newspaper. It would be the year I was with Rachel. I would be in my thirties then, and gradually starting to look at my past with a new lens that she was offering thanks to her American college education and her interest in race. I would think about Simon's blackness for the first time, and the fact that his tormentors that night were all white. When writing that story for the paper, I would feel nervous about telling my city I thought it was racial bullying. But the editor of that newspaper said, 'Of course it was.'

I don't have a good answer as to why I didn't intervene and help Simon. All I can say is that this sort of thing wasn't unusual in the city I knew back then.

I heard later from Chad, who knew some of the kids from the party, that they shoved Simon in a cupboard. When he stumbled out in the morning, they held a hand-mirror up to his face and laughed, but Simon just cried. I also heard that he told his mother that he'd been mugged. That was his excuse for all the missing hair and the bruises.

The story about me is not much different. I don't want to dwell on it, but I'll just explain a few details, and a few about Theda also.

After I got in that fight with the kid doing the 'Burmese mating dance', and kids kept coming at me, I found a way to avoid going to classes. I was spending time alone, but at least I was safe. I went to lessons about a third of the time, making sure I missed lunch and last period, because those times were the dangerous times for me: last period meant I'd be vulnerable for the walk home after final bell, and lunchtime was when most fights on school

property occurred.

One afternoon I left during eighth period and a kid followed me. My plan that day was to have a smoke in the swampland behind the school until about half an hour after the final bell, then I'd walk home. But Kieran Scully appeared out of nowhere.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'm not gunna hurt you.'

Kieran had been the instigator of a two-on-one against me a few months earlier. I was nervous, but that day he was nice.

'We're immigrants too,' he said, handing me a second cigarette. 'We moved here from Ireland.'

'I was born here,' I said. 'But I don't think it's about being Asian.'

'Yeah,' he said.

After another cigarette, and asking me where my Dad was from, and being surprised that my mother was English, then making some joke about the English and the Irish, which I didn't understand, he invited me to a party.

'You just need to show the others that you're okay,' he said. 'Get stoned with us.'

'When?' I said.

'Two weeks Friday,' he said. 'I'll get you some weed if you gimme twenty bucks. Nicole will be there.'

'Nicole?' I said.

'Yeah,' he said. 'She likes you, mate. She was defending your name the other day.'

'Defending me?'

'Yeah,' he said, blowing a big smoke ring. 'She told the lads to lay off you.'

I think Kieran regretted his role in the events that followed. As part of his wooing process, he invited me around to his house a few times. It was an ugly Homeswest place with carpets that stank of ash. In it, he shared a room with his brother, who was in juvie that month. His mother was rude and his father didn't talk. Their garden was filled with discarded whitegoods and couches, and I remember one of the few moments I saw him look embarrassed was when he waved a hand at it and said, 'I dunno why my parents throw this crap everywhere.' I remember his hands. They were nice, like they'd been fashioned to make things out of wood or something. I sometimes wonder what happened to him.

The night of his party, I got stoned. They burned half my hair off, and someone hauled me in front of a large crowd and spat beer in my face repeatedly as the crowd chanted. Nothing had ever overwhelmed me like the drugs that night. I don't know what they were. Kieran and his buddies were friendly and encouraging as they tried to get those drugs into my system. After I was disoriented their attitude abruptly changed. I remember Kieran laughing afterwards as Owen Archie punched me. Apart from those memories it's all a bit hazy.

I moved schools not long afterwards.

I tried to kill myself a few years later. It was when these experiences were behind me, but I was still wracked with shame about them.

If there is one thing I could do for that kid who I was growing up, I would go back and give him some way of understanding these experiences. It wasn't just the other kids, adults had sometimes done things too. When I was 17, my first girlfriend's dad tried to pull me out of a moving car while shouting, 'Who does this Asian prick think he is!' He was coming around the bonnet to get to the passenger door, and she drove her car into him. I had never even spoken to him. That same year, another old guy went on a tirade against the 'stinking Asian little shit' who was sitting opposite him in a train carriage. I was in the same carriage,

and everyone, including me, ignored it.

After the party where Simon was bullied, I found a new best friend. His dad used to get drunk a lot and berate me for being part of 'the problem with this country'.

If I could go back, I would help the boy I was back then understand that none of this was his fault.

Pauline Hanson and her 'Australia is going to be swamped by Asians' political platform was still a couple of years off when I went through high school. When she finally hit the national stage, I didn't pay much attention to her. The truth is I never thought about racism much at all. I blamed myself for what happened to me.

There is something about this bullying that I think hit Theda particularly hard. Like I said, she never shared much about it, but I know kids used to gang up on her, and I don't think she had many friends. Shame is a complicated thing, especially when it happens at that age. I found a way of escaping mine, but I think Theda wasn't so lucky. There is a kind of hatred that comes from others but convinces you that you are the one who's wrong. If you don't find a proper explanation for it, it eats away at you under the surface and convinces you to blame yourself. I think Theda had that. She censored almost all of her natural responses when around others as an adult. It was like she had an irrational fear of exposure, but she wasn't sure what she was supposed to be hiding, so she hid almost everything. She was good at it. And she was pretty, so it worked to an extent. But as a brother, I could see the damage it was doing.

Perth, like all places, has moved on since the early 1990s, but I always thought Theda needed to leave it and form a clean break. I did. I returned after some years, a recovered

person, stronger for having got some perspective on the place I was born. Theda stayed. I've always thought it might have been why she got sick.

3

When the plane touched down, I collected my suitcase from the belts and made my way to the terminal exit. Outside was swarming. Four lanes of traffic were coursing through a pickup area, and people were rushing past with suitcases as if they knew exactly where in this megacity they were heading. It was after midnight and humid. It felt like the busiest time of day. I stood for a moment and closed my eyes, wearing the same clothes I'd been in for the last 36 hours. People were lining up to jump into sleek, mustard-yellow cabs. I remained motionless for a moment, then let myself get shuffled into one.

'Look at this!' my driver said once we were on the road. He had a thick Indian accent. 'Someone says the big idea is peace, my friend, but, let me tell you, it is just about making more bloody people!'

I laughed politely. The roads were chock-full and long stretches of expressway spun past. I was excited to see Manhattan again. I'd seen it once in my life before, but only briefly about a decade earlier on my way up to Canada.

'This bloody rain,' the driver said. 'It makes for the roads being crazy. Good business though, my friend. What's address?'

‘96th and Broadway,’ I said.

He repeated it, then turned off the intercom.

Half an hour later we pulled out of a bridge over the East River, and the scene beyond the windows erupted in a cacophony of activity that only New Yorkers see. I pressed the window down and the scent of weed was my first Manhattan smell, but it was followed by a dense stench of something hotter and more pervasive. A slew of shopfronts were open, spraying light on the antics of the lower East Side at 1am. The rain had been spotting on and off since we’d left the airport, but now it started to pour. Heavy droplets were smattering over everything in sight. My driver put my window up and flipped on his wipers, as pedestrians dove for awnings and braids of water appeared behind them like translucent ropes on glass windows and doors.

The next thing I remember is one of the most prominent memories I have about New York. It was a moment when the scene outside shifted so suddenly that it showed me something about perception and how drastically it gets altered by where you stand in a situation. I had arrived on the other side of the world, thinking that the sequence of events I had planned for my arrival would go more-or-less smoothly, when I suddenly realised with a sinking gut that I’d lost my wallet. Somehow, I’d not checked my pocket until that point. I checked every single pocket I had twice and then felt the rise of panic in my throat. I looked in the little backpack and it wasn’t there either.

I suddenly found myself looking out at street corners and subway entrances in a way I’d not expected to. I was wondering if a person could sleep in them. And I was wondering how helpful New Yorkers were towards strangers who told them there was a problem and asked for help. I was wondering where on earth I was going to sleep.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing on a curb-side in the upper 90s, slightly dazed, with

fifty dollars change in my hand. The money had been in a little pocket in my suitcase in the boot. I'd packed it alongside a reloadable Currency Card that the woman at the travel agent had sold me. I could still hear her voice in my head as I stood there on a quiet cross street: 'Just in case,' she'd advised when selling me the card. 'You should pack a few American dollars in your suitcase. It's not recommended to put cash in checked luggage, but I always put a little in. What's the harm? You lose $100, so what. It's better to be safe, mate.'

I couldn't have felt more vulnerable or grateful. In the last forty hours, I'd gone from relief about leaving Perth, to excitement about arriving in one of the world's most famous cities, to terror about money, and now relief again. Whatever gods were looking down on me, they were laughing. I wasn't out of the woods entirely; I would need to transfer money online from my account onto the card, but once that was done I'd have access to cash.

At the front desk of the hostel, a disinterested young receptionist informed me that I'd already been charged for my stay. 'For three days,' he said. 'Because you booked online and you're a late check-in.'

I asked him if I could borrow the hostel phone to call the airport, then sat down with my laptop and the handset in the grotty little foyer. I cancelled my credit cards, then discovered that it would take three days to clear the transfer of funds onto that reloadable Currency Card I'd packed. It was all okay though: the remaining American dollars I had was all I would need until then.

At 2am, I closed the laptop, handed back the phone and felt a wave of tiredness wash over me. I was just about to go up to my dormitory when I stopped to watch the TV over the archway for a moment. I'd been vaguely paying attention the whole time I'd been on hold, but now I started to really notice. It was pumping out one of those 24-hour news channels, and there was a big story. It was about a kid who'd been shot. I knew I'd seen the kid's name

on the TV screen in the cab on the back of my driver's seat, and I vaguely recalled what the story had been about. It was playing in a studio full of bright primary colours, with two done-up news anchors introducing snippets. The scene flipped to a courtroom where an overweight woman in a witness box was being cross-examined by an astute-looking lawyer. The caption said: 'Key moments in the Zimmerman trial'.

'Somebody just watching him,' the woman on the stand mumbled. She looked angry.

'What makes *that* racial?' the lawyer asked her.

'What make that *racial*?' she said, as if the question were unexpected.

The scene went on for a few more seconds, and then the name got said which I remembered from the cab too. 'So, it was *Treyvon Martin* who brought race into it?' the lawyer said.

'No, sir,' she mumbled.

'I'm sorry?'

'No sir,' she said louder this time.

The shot then flipped back to the studio and three talking heads appeared in boxes that the news anchors orchestrated into a discussion. 'What about the inner city?' one said. 'What we've got to understand is that people who grow up in that environment have grown up with a totally different understanding of what the world has in store for them.' Each talking head had its own perspective and there was some argument. They devoured the little court scene. Consensus was that the witness's testimony had damaged the case somehow.

Rachel had told me I'd be interested in American race politics when I saw them up close. It was part of what she wanted to get involved in once we got back to the States. She was a white girl from Albany, but she cared about underdogs, and there was no greater underdog within the American nation itself than Black people, she said. Rachel had introduced me to a

whole way of thinking and talking about race and identity that year. I had found it fascinating. It was thanks to her that I'd written that article about Simon, which the local newspaper had eventually published. That was one of the things that had given me the confidence to enrol in the creative writing course. I didn't know the case or understand the implications of it, but the level of energy and attention being put into that conversation was encouraging somehow. I liked it. I liked the fact people were discussing how the way you grew up affected how you saw the world. Rachel had predicted that I would feel at home amongst her country's national conversations, and I felt in that moment that she was right.

After watching it for a while, I was still a bit baffled by what exactly the case meant, but was too tired to watch anymore.

I found my room on the third floor and slipped into an upper bunk in a steaming hot dormitory that smelled of the socks of the man snoring in the bunk below. As I fell asleep I could hear people outside a block or so over. The sounds of revelling and cars tooting came in with the breeze from a window not far from my head. Then I fell asleep in the city that Woody Allen once said was impossible not to idolise.

Just after 11am I woke up and the guy below me was gone. It was light and I got down on the floor where I could see how tattered the room was. There was dust in the corners and a broken sink beside the window. The curtain was a piece of frayed cloth that barely kept out light. Sounds on the street were sober now. The day felt sturdy with them. I got my laptop, sat against the wall and emailed Mum.

After showering, I took a train to Brooklyn. It rocked beneath the East River, and my ears popped with the shift in air pressure as three rake-thin black kids danced on the poles before

we stopped in Williamsburg, where I got off. The buildings in Brooklyn were shorter than those on Manhattan. They were brown and squarish. Bars and cafes were dotted about, and a lot of young people were out walking.

After heading down the main strip, I ended up in a park at the end of Bedford Street, but, instead of stopping, I turned right and kept walking until gradually the feeling of Williamsburg was replaced by something else. Across a large road, I ended up in a different part of Brooklyn where the sun was beating hard on the pavement and the light was different. The people were Hispanic-looking. The street was littered with shops selling flimsy goods, and a few food carts were selling foods I'd not seen before. People were milling about and a touch older than those in Williamsburg. I heard one guy talking on his phone loudly to a rhythm that reminded me of rap and he spoke as if he wanted everyone to hear his conversation. The n-word was a punctuation mark. 'I'm not like that, nigger' he said to whoever he was speaking to. 'You feel me?'

A good few blocks further, I went under some train lines on steel girders where people were loitering, and some big project flats stood out just beyond the steel canopy. There was washing over the balconies, and a tall guy wearing impossibly clean sneakers handed another guy a baggie of something almost in front of me. They did it so gracefully that it might have been a trick of the light.

On my way back, I passed a barber's shop and I dipped in. I wasn't sure about it. The squash-shaped lady who greeted me had purple bags under her eyes and she waddled out from behind the counter and said, 'Whatchyo want?'

'Can you shave my head?' I asked, scared to seem frivolous for having walked into her shop without a sure plan.

She looked at me for a moment, paused, repeated my question, and then nodded towards

a cracked vinyl chair. ‘Fourteen dollars,’ she said.

I only had forty dollars until the Currency Card cleared its funds, but the idea of walking out of that shop again didn’t appeal for some reason, so I sat down. Along one wall were mirrors with magazine cut-outs of Black people with ornate and vibrant haircuts. While I sat in that chair, she spent the next ten minutes waddling around me with a pair of electric clippers. The clipper’s teeth on my scalp made the backs of my thighs tingle and I thought about what I’d just done. I thought of Theda and how far away from Perth this was in more ways than one. As I watched that hair leaving my head, the sensation of the clippers on me made me feel relaxed. I remember there was a morbidly obese man in the room too, and I could see him in the mirror, pooled on a crate and watching an old box TV bolted to the ceiling corner pumping out talkshows. The woman cutting my hair spoke to him a couple of times, but her voice was blended with ambient noise and I missed it at first. I didn’t realise it was her. She didn’t change her gait, or stop clippering as she spoke to him. I couldn’t make the words out, but it was as if she were having a conversation that was, perhaps, taking years to complete. She was dropping sentences towards it, and although he didn't respond, she didn’t seem to care.

When she was done, she asked me if I liked it.

‘It’s great,’ I said.

‘Thank you,’ she said, offering up a warm smile.

In the evening, I was back on Manhattan and I walked down to Times Square. I sat and watched people bathed in electric blue light from the huge screens. It was crowded and everyone had phones out. I sat in one place on a raised bit of concrete and watched a group

conspiring to take a photo. They were young, and one of the guys was the photographer. The other was in the photo. The guy in the photo was on his knees reaching towards a hand that the girl dangled loosely at her side as she pretended to look up at the screens. I think the idea was that she was meant to be looking ahead, getting drawn in by the electric-enchantment of those screens, but about to glance back at him. And, even though it was posed, it was nice to watch how much care they put into it. They looked sweet. Afterwards the three huddled around the photographer's phone. 'Share that one!' one of the guys said excitedly.

On my way home that night, I thought of Theda again, asleep in her bed, and I felt truly sad for the first time since I'd arrived in New York. She would have wanted to see what I had just seen. She would have been documenting it. She and I were different like that but we would have talked about it afterwards. We understood each other the way siblings do. As quickly as that nostalgia for her came though, it left again, and all that remained was an abstract idea. She was very far away.

4

Theda and I learned a couple of things early in life from our parents. One of them was how to negotiate ideological differences.

‘Buddhists teach detachment, son,’ Dad always told me growing up. ‘Detachment is what you must learn.’

‘Don’t become Buddhist,’ Mum said.

I’ve often asked Dad why Buddhism became so important to him when it did. He prefaces his answer by saying that his parents used to make him lick the local monk’s feet in his village back in Burma as a show of submission. It put him off his home culture’s religion as a young man. He blamed such attitudes for people’s submission to the political nightmare of his country, and the lack of scientific rigour in its education system too. But he said he rediscovered Buddhism’s worth when he came across a good English monk from the West who showed him what his country’s philosophical tradition had to offer.

My father is an enigma. I’ve tried to understand him though. One of the things I’ve always done is picture the day he arrived in Australia. I imagine he is wearing a longyi and the maroon felt-covered flip-flops that all Burmese people wear. It's 1973, and his feet have

the same faded green ink tattoos in Burmese script that are on their tops today. Those tattoos are meant to ward off snakebites. The day he arrives, he is slated to go into a dormitory on campus—one that the Colombo Program has organised for him as their first Burmese exchange student—but on that day it isn't ready, so a professor from the university takes him in and feeds him at his home.

I know what happened next, thanks to my mother. She told it to me and my sister when we were younger. Dad never shares stories like this about his cultural transition. He spilled peas all over the professor's floor while trying to eat them using the knife and fork provided, as the professor's attractive young daughters watched in horror. It was his first time using cutlery. He'd only ever used his hands before. Instead of leaving the evidence of his shame he crushed the offending peas into the carpet under the table with his bare tattooed feet.

My father never laughs when I remind him that I know this story. I tell him it's sweet, but he doesn't see it. Instead he tells me that I'd be the same if I were in Burma trying to use my hands with any grace, and then diverts the topic somewhere else.

I know he dreamed of the West when he was a child. He educated himself with black-market photocopied English books from the Bogyoke Aung San market in Rangoon because his parents were paranoid. His parents had lost one son to typhoid and forbade him from playing cane ball soccer with the other kids. It left him stranded in an uneducated family with nothing to do but read those books. His parents didn't have anything beyond a primary school education, and they encouraged him to be more religious, but he became studious instead. Under socialism the university was cheap, and when he was old enough his family pooled money to send him through high school, after which he was accepted at Rangoon University. Then the Colombo Program noticed his ability. It must have been mind-boggling for him: he was from a poor family in the developing world and suddenly he was accepted to study in the

West. The Burmese government gave him three months of intensive ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ training before letting him leave, and then the Colombo Program sent him to Australia and told him he’d study psychology. It was all paid for by the West. I don’t think he was prepared for all the differences though.

‘Migrants have to work twice as hard to be accepted, son,’ he used to say when I was kid.

‘Don’t you think it’s racist if migrants have to work twice as hard?’ I’ve since asked him.

‘That is just human nature,’ he tells me. ‘People are tribal, mate.’

‘Yes, but even if you’re a migrant you have equal rights.’

He just shakes his head and tells me that reality is different. He says this like it’s not worth talking about. Maybe he’s right, but I know it affected him. Mum tells me now that when a new manager was hired at the drop-in centre Dad helped establish after graduating and getting his citizenship, that manager said, ‘There are too many Asians here,’ then fired all of them except for my father. I’ve asked Dad about that and he doesn’t count it as racism. Mum also tells me that she was the one who looked for their first apartment. Dad was working, so she traipsed around looking for a flat. Pregnant with Theda, the landlords were sympathetic towards her. She was a young British migrant who was pregnant with her first child, and they’d promise her the place and organise a meeting to sign the lease, while calling her ‘love’ and ‘hun’. But when she returned with my father in tow, they would take one look at him and say the place was already gone. It happened so many times that they had to take out an ad in the local paper announcing they were a mixed-race couple looking for a flat. Eventually a British couple leased a place to them. Mum thinks it was because the landlord was a giant. ‘Those people don’t live long,’ she reminds me now. ‘They knew what it was like not to be normal in a city like Perth.’

Dad doesn’t think of any of that as racism either.

Mum says they were the only mixed-race couple she ever saw back then, and the fact that it was gender-reversed didn't help because they weren't just crossing racial boundaries, they were bucking the norm gender-wise also: white men sometimes married brown women, but the reverse was unheard of. Skin colour wasn't the only thing that played into their strange union. They were also mixing cultural backgrounds and crossing the global poverty divide at the same time. They argued a lot about how to raise children amidst all that. When I was growing up I remember endless fights about what us kids should be raised to think. Theda and I would listen from behind the kitchen door. Dad wanted us raised on Asian values, more conservative and a touch authoritarian, whereas Mum wanted us more 'independent-minded' and 'Western' because that's where we were living. My mother was uneducated, but she had a fierceness in her that she's always had, and when Dad lost that debate about how to raise us, he began sequestering himself in a little prefab room we had in the back garden. That's when he rediscovered Buddhism—the philosophy his culture had to offer the West—and he became zealous about it.

As a kid I would watch Dad through the windows of that little room in the back garden. He would sit for hours with a sarong over his head and meditating, or else he'd be reading books on Buddhism and psychotherapy, thinking about how the former could make the latter better. When he would come up for dinner during those years, he'd watch me like a hawk. If I did something clumsy, like scrape my knife against my plate a bit too loudly, he'd yell, 'Be mindful, Son! The Buddha teaches mindfulness. You are not mindful!' After dinner he'd retreat to his Buddhist haven out back.

Dad's zealotry was not just present at the dinner table. He admonished our lack of mindfulness no matter what we were doing. 'You Westerners,' he called us. This was accompanied by the assertion that if Theda or I got sick, it was in our heads. 'The mind is the

forerunner!' he would announce, quoting the Buddha (somewhat out of context) verbatim. Dad's Buddhism was oppressive, and Mum called him a Buddhist fundamentalist behind his back. She basically raised us after Dad rediscovered his Buddhism, partially because he was so inflexible, and partially because he wasn't very interested in us after that.

My father never took me out to play ball or anything like that. From the ages of nine to fourteen, the only memories I have of interacting with him are after dinner, when he would collect chicken bones off all our plates and snap them in half, then he'd suck out the marrow while announcing that Westerners were wasteful.

I've always admired my father's tenacity, he never played the victim, but what he did as compensation was, in my opinion, more damaging to our family. A little resentment aimed at his situation might have helped him release whatever pressure was pushing him down the ideological path.

When I think back on these years, I remember Dad becoming paranoid alongside his Buddhist revival. When he was up in the house with us, he became obsessive about locking doors and windows, and demanded that we lock flywires, trundle-locks, and deadlocks too, as well as closing all the curtains and blinds. No one was allowed to see inside.

When my parents officially separated I was fourteen, and it was a relief. After announcing the divorce, my mother explained how they would divide the house. Dad would live in their old bedroom, but he'd enter and leave it by its exit to the side path. That bedroom had an ensuite bathroom, so along with his prefab room out back, he had all he needed. She told us that they would nail shut the door connecting that bedroom to 'our side' of the house, as well as erecting a fence down the middle of the garden to separate his side of the garden from ours too.

Not long after Mum told us this, a man from Dad's Buddhist society came and took the

handle off that bedroom’s connecting door, then nailed a slab of chipboard over it. A week later the fence was erected. It was Dad who chose the fence. He chose an eight-feet tall one, made of solid gapless planks that ran from the middle of our back wall up to the middle of the back boundary fence. We essentially turned our home into a duplex. It’s not impractical when money is an issue, but I think it was telling that that fence in our backyard was higher than any of the fences between the houses on our street.

For about six months after the fence was erected, Theda and I would go over to his side of the house for dinner every Thursday. Dad had a small electric cooker in the wardrobe, so he’d cook something in that, and then throw down a sheet on the floor beside the bed for a dinner table. Theda and I would wash dishes in the bathroom sink afterwards, as he read Buddhist books on the bed while occasionally muttering ‘Ah-Ha!’ to himself.

We lived like that until I was 17, while Mum got her high school diploma. Those years were still fraught with conflict though. My parents were still too close to each other. Dad would occasionally come to our side and they would argue. I have memories of him on the back steps of our side of the house, arguing with Mum about how she was raising us.

Another thing that was difficult about those years was Mum’s mental health. She fell into a depression of some kind. She moved into a small room next to mine, and I would hear her crying through the walls. It was mostly worry about money, but I think she also felt trapped. When she’d been married to Dad, Australia was their compromise, but after the divorce it simply served to isolate her from her family back in England. She often told me that she felt like killing herself.

I think those years are when Theda became obsessive about doing well at school, and I took the other path. She was dealing with bullies too, but she still thought the educational avenue was where salvation lay. The presence of violence in my own predicament made me

rebel. Violence, even if you feel you can’t tell anyone it’s happening, is stigmatised enough in society for you to realise it’s wrong, leading to a distrust of the institutions that are failing to protect you. Whereas Theda didn’t blame the adult world the way I did for what she faced—social ostracism and reputational savaging by other girls.

She acquired an eating disorder around this time. As for me, I acquired a loner’s mentality. I had already stopped going to school, but I’d also started avoiding home. I would jump out my bedroom window when everyone was asleep and go smoke cigarettes down at the park a few blocks away. I romanticised being alone in my teens.

Perhaps it’s not so surprising that when I faced my first real challenge as a young man—depression and a suicide attempt—I chose to become anonymous and leave Perth, rather than seeking a solution in medicine or institutionalised therapy.

I stayed away from Perth for four years. When I moved back I was 23 years old and was shocked by how poor my sister’s health had become. Physically she looked okay, but she wasn’t going out at all. She had dropped out of her course and was living with our mother again, not getting out of bed much.

‘The doctors thought it was depression,’ Mum told me. ‘But we couldn’t figure out why the cognitive behavioural therapy didn’t work. Then we found this wonderful doctor who knew about something called chronic fatigue syndrome.’

‘Are you sure it’s not depression like I had?’ I asked.

‘She did everything Khin. She took anti-depressants and went to therapy.’

‘For how long?’

‘She was diagnosed a year ago. She even went on an intensive CBT camp.’

‘A year isn’t very long,’ I said.

‘We have to listen to her doctor,’ Mum said. ‘He knows all about this illness. He says it’s dangerous to misdiagnose it as depression. The treatments are completely different.’

I was under no illusions that I was more than just lucky having recovered from my own troubles. Nothing terrible had happened to me while I was away from Perth, and my mental health had righted itself. I could tell Theda’s physical symptoms were more prominent than my own had been when depressed, but I still felt the new doctor was wrong.

‘It took me years to get over depression,’ I told Theda. ‘I had to leave this place to do it. Maybe you should too.’

‘That’s you,’ she said angrily. ‘I’m not you, Khin. The doctors say I have *this*. Stop being so arrogant.’

'I’m just concerned,’ I said.

‘And you think you know more than a doctor?’

‘Doctors don’t know everything,’ I said. ‘I didn’t get better doing CBT. And from what I know of it, it doesn’t sound like something that would have helped me.’

‘I can’t get out of bed,’ she said. ‘I’m tired all the time. Do you think depression could do that?!’

‘Of course,’ I said.

She shook her head. ‘I’m not you, Minty. Stop projecting.’

What followed was a slow process of learning about a diagnosis. Over the next few years, terms like *neuralgia* and *fibromyalgia* made it into the family vocabulary. After my initial

grumbling, I kept my mouth shut and tried to remain open-minded. The doctor who had diagnosed her gave us a simile—he said a chronic fatigue sufferer's body was like a faulty rechargeable battery: it lost charge easily and took longer than usual to recover. He said that bedrest was the only long-term solution, and that psychological therapy—especially if it tired her out—was not worth it because that approach misunderstood the organic cause of the problem.

One summer a few years into the illness, I brought it up one last time. She and I were in the garden at Mum's that day. She was in her dressing gown, lying on a lazy-boy under some shade near a hydrangea, and we were having a nice conversation about something. I forget what we were talking about, but, when she changed subjects, I suddenly thought the timing was right to try and speak on the diagnosis again. Mum was running some errands so I was looking after her for the afternoon. We had been talking about whatever the unrelated topic was, when she said, 'I know my health has a huge effect on you and Mum.'

'I don't blame you,' I said gently.

'At least we're not barking up the wrong tree anymore, Minty,' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'With all that useless therapy.'

'What if therapy could still help?' I said tentatively.

'What do you mean?' she said, looking suddenly alert.

'Well,' I said carefully. 'Even if chronic fatigue is the main problem, some of your symptoms might still be helped by talking about your emotions.'

She looked at me like I'd slapped her. Eyes fixed on me, she said, 'Do you really think

I'd be that selfish?'

'It's not selfish to be sick,' I said. 'And I just mean *some* of the symptoms. Not all of them. There isn't an actual test or scan that tells us you've got chronic fatigue, right? This is all one doctor's opinion, that's all. Maybe he's misinterpreting some things.'

Her hand started shaking slightly, as she tried to get up. 'You think I'd put you and Mum through all this because I'm *selfish*?'

'It's not selfish,' I repeated. 'I was depressed all those years, and *that* wasn't selfish. I was just sick. There's nothing selfish about mental illness.'

She didn't seem to hear me. 'Great,' she said. 'So I'm a fucking *loon* then? My own brother doesn't believe me.'

'It's just——'

'*Most* doctors don't know about chronic fatigue syndrome,' she blurted, finally managing to get herself up out of the chair. 'You're just like *him*, Khin.'

'Like who?' I said.

'Like *Dad!*' she blurted.

Later that afternoon, I heard her sobbing in her room. When I took in her lunch, she wouldn't look me in the eye, and when Mum got back I didn't say anything. The next day Mum phoned and said she'd spent hours talking with my sister. She said Theda was losing hope. 'Your father told you kids everything was always your fault,' she said. 'It's incredibly hurtful for her brother to blame her for this too.'

'I don't mean it like he does.'

'Khin,' she said sternly. 'Do you think you know better than a doctor who's studied the

human body for years?'

'No,' I said, a touch sulkily. 'It's just that the mind is—'

'It's difficult enough looking after one sick child,' she interrupted. 'I feel like walking into the bloody ocean. All I ever wanted was a family, Khin. And I'm stuck in Australia raising two children alone. Now Theda is losing everything. If you two end up fighting, I can't cope.'

'Don't say that,' I said.

She went silent, and I could hear her trying not to sob. A few days later I apologised. And that was the last time I said anything about it for a long time.

*

In the subsequent years I would learn many things about chronic fatigue syndrome. I'd learn a lot more about its stigma, and how that affects people suffering under its name. I'd also learn that there is an incredible polarisation around the science of it. Some bio-markers show clearly that the body is affected, but there is no certainty about the root cause or its cure. Some research suggests mental health treatments help; other research shows the opposite. I also learned the sufferers prefer the label 'myalgic encephalomyelitis'—ME for short, which is the term I'll use for it from now on.

ME was first used as a label for chronic fatigue syndrome when a medically unexplainable set of symptoms appeared in 1955 at the Royal Free Hospital in London. It appeared to affect over 200 people, patients and doctors alike, and its symptoms were fatigue, partial paralysis and shaking. When outside investigators got called in to diagnose it, one of them suggested those symptoms were what you would find if the sufferers' brains and spinal

cords were swelling; the term for that would be myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME).

To this day, there remain doctors who believe the outbreak at the Royal Free Hospital was an example of mass hysteria. But there are also plenty of doctors who disagree with that analysis.

Either way, the name is a good place to see where the politics of this illness began. Diseases without agreed-upon labels get sidelined by institutions. If you're sick, then you need a diagnosis for any help to be offered, and it better be the right label, else you get shuffled to the wrong sort of doctor. There is a subtler layer also: if your illness' label refers to its cause rather than its symptoms, then that fortifies its legitimacy as non-psychosomatic. Hence many people's preference for ME over chronic fatigue syndrome. 'Fatigue' is a vague word that people use in everyday parlance for less severe forms of tiredness. ME sufferers, who desperately want the right sort of help, understandably don't want it applied to them.

The politics around ME as a label become more complicated, however, because the Royal Free Hospital incident happened before MRI technology was invented in the 1970s. When it was invented, patients suffering from similar symptoms were scanned, but those scans didn't show any swelling of their brains or spinal cords. The term 'ME' saves sufferers from being conflated with less severe forms of fatigue, but it misdirects medical professionals in their own specialised vocabulary. When a doctor sees the label in medical literature that comes with a footnote saying it isn't literally accurate, that begs all sorts of questions and implies a politicised illness. Such an implication draws up all sorts of questions and stigmas. It's a problem, no matter which side of the debate you fall on.

Not long after my altercation with Theda in the garden, her doctor suggested that she get a

bell so she wouldn't have to call out to Mum when she needed something in her room. The doctor said that calling out to Mum from her bedroom was tiring and it was better to stay lying down. Mum bought a bell that wasn't too offensive, and its constant tingle up the hallway was something I grew anxious about in the coming years. When I was visiting, it rang at least once every hour. When it did, Mum would get an anxious expression and drop whatever she was doing. As for me, I was a regular visitor at their house, and while our relationships had survived my early protestations about the diagnosis, I didn't like responding to that bell directly. I worried it was making things worse. For better or worse, instead of responding to it when it rang, I would ask Mum if I could do something to help her while she attended to it.

5

New York City in the summertime is magical. People dance and sing and practise yoga in the city parks. There are all sorts of interesting-looking people about. I enjoyed being around it all as I waited for my cash to clear. As iconic buildings peeked out from down the avenues, I walked with no purpose. I'd sit down when I was tired and watch the public scene while drinking cheap coffee or eating from the food carts.

When the money came through, I ate something decent, and on the fourth day, I took a coach up to Albany. Outside the windows, vines crept over concrete structures before giving way to fields and forests. As signs passed, I realised just how close Rachel was to a global centre. Her sophistication made a kind of sense then. She'd been so well-versed in culture and ideas I hadn't ever heard of when we'd been a couple, and now I wondered if the proximity to a global centre, where many of those ideas came from, had an effect. Maybe it explained some of the change in her character too, once she'd returned here. There was a sense of epic-ness and self-importance when you were near New York City.

Two hours later, I arrived in Albany. It was a much smaller city. I took a cab from the station, and my driver was a young black guy with a sore on his cheek who talked on his

phone for the first five minutes of the drive. I looked out the window at the sun beating on pedestrian shoulders and shiny car rooftops. People were well-dressed and less diverse in fortunes than those in New York City. It made sense. Albany was a government capital. I thought of Canberra and wondered if it had any similarities.

Before too long, the downtown buildings were behind us, and we were in suburbia with tall wooden houses that sat behind well-clipped lawns. We stayed on a main road, and a little way into the suburban sprawl, a large property on a busy junction appeared. My driver stopped and helped me with my suitcase, shook my hand emphatically, smiling like he had just offered me a million dollars, then zoomed off with a hip-hop beat blaring out his windows.

I found my room two floors up, behind a door with my name taped to it on a handwritten note. The house itself was massive. It was three stories high and very old. There was a large wooden staircase in the downstairs main room that led upward. High ceilings gave it a grand feeling. No one was about, but I'd let myself in with a door-code that the manager had emailed earlier that week. She'd given me instructions, and said no one would be around for the first couple of days.

My room was an attic. It was spacious, with a sloped ceiling that peaked in the middle, and there was a bed where it swooped too low to stand. On the opposite side of the room to the bed was a tired looking zebra-print couch and a scuffed coffee table. In the middle was a lot of empty floorspace. I liked it. It felt like a place one might spend a day and not feel cramped. Against the front wall was a small window, where schoolroom-sized desk overlooked the street. I went over to the bed and pushed on the mattress, then put my suitcase

into a corner. Given how borrowed all the spaces I'd inhabited since giving up the Perth apartment were, I felt like I'd stepped into luxury.

I went over to the desk and looked out the window. Down below two large suburban roads met in a narrow 'X'. One had restaurants and a couple of bars on it, with a police station in the narrowest part of the 'X'. Two smaller roads intersected the 'X' at its widest angles; my BnB and a public library sat opposite each other over one of those smaller roads. It was a good location.

After unpacking I went out onto the street and found a supermarket a few blocks up. I was mildly fascinated by the small differences on the shelves. One had cans of aerosol cheese, and bacon so fatty you could have made candles out of it. I remembered that Rachel had also felt that way about Australian supermarkets. 'You'll learn about my country, honey,' she had said a few months ago. 'You'll get to have the same experience I did in reverse.'

After I was done buying a few groceries, I slipped into a pharmacy and noted cigarettes on sale behind the counter.

'The US is a dinner table,' Rachel used to say to me. 'You have to bang your spoon on the table or you don't get fed. It's why us Americans are so much louder.'

As I walked across the carpark back towards my accommodation with a small bag of groceries in one hand, I passed two women standing by sedans. 'Livi!' one of them howled. 'I don't friggin bee-*leeve* it!'

'Are you kidding me?' the other woman sung back, 'You are, like, the *purrrfect* fucking person right now!'

I smiled to myself, recognising the same brash sing-song quality that had been in Rachel's voice. I couldn't imagine Australians playing up the excitement of seeing each other so much. That American way of greeting made you feel like you were the most important

person in the world for a moment. It was nice.

‘Australians look at me funny,’ Rachel had said to me after about six months in my city. ‘You all act like you don’t care about anything.’

‘It’s just the culture,’ I’d said.

She’d looked at me strangely. ‘You don’t belong here, honey’ she’d said firmly then. ‘You’ll like it better where I’m from.’

When I got back to the BnB, I cooked pasta with broccoli and tomatoes in a kitchen downstairs, and watched the sparrows out in the yard. It was an old wooden kitchen that reminded me of the 1950s, and after I ate at the counter I went upstairs and looked over an email I’d written to Rachel before leaving Australia. It was three paragraphs long and I’d shown it to both Mum and a friend before leaving. It apologised for turning up unexpectedly, and explained that I could accept it if she didn’t want to meet, but I hoped that she would.

I knew it by heart, but read it over one more time anyway, then hit send.

Half an hour later, the little flip phone I’d bought down in New York City rang.

Mum’s voice came over the receiver. ‘Did I wake you?’

‘Nope,’ I said, sitting up in bed.

‘The inter-web said New York is 12 hours behind Perth,’ she said. ‘Is that right, darling?’

'It’s right,’ I said. ‘Just flip the “am” and “pm”.’

‘We’re fine here, darling. I don’t want you worrying about us. Use this time as a break.’

‘Thanks Mum,’ I said. ‘How is it there?’

‘Oh, she’s still suicidal,’ Mum said, as if it were nothing. ‘But I have faith things will get

better. Don't you worry about it.'

'What are her symptoms right now?'

'She's got migraines. She's not sleeping either,' she said. 'But we're seeing a pain specialist in three weeks. How's Albany?'

Something in me went cold at the talk of sleeplessness. 'Is there anything you can do about her sleep?' I said. 'Do you have Olanzapine in the cupboard if she goes psychotic?'

Mum didn't say anything for a moment. 'The trouble is—' she replied haltingly, 'if she goes psychotic before I've realised it's happening, she won't take the Olanzapine.'

'If that happens then crush it up and put it in her food,' I said without hesitating.

She stammered that it was probably a good idea. I told it to her again, but she changed the subject.

'It's nice being somewhere slower,' I said to her earlier question.

'Have you emailed Rachel?'

'Yes.'

'Should I get off the phone in case she calls?'

'No,' I said. 'That's fine.'

There was another short pause. 'I don't want to tie up the phone if you're thinking Rachel might call.'

'It's not a problem, Mum,' I said.

There was one more brief pause. 'What will you do if she doesn't get in touch?'

'I'll start looking at towns,' I said.

'So, you're definitely staying in America?'

I hesitated before responding. I had told Mum I might stay for a while either way, but it had been a sentiment more than a concrete plan. Now I was sure of it, the feeling in the US

was so much better than back home. If I was careful, I could stretch my stay to six months, so long as I could find accommodation as affordable as the BnB I was in now.

‘I just—’

‘That’s good, Khin,’ she said before I could finish. ‘I don’t want you dragged into this again.’

‘Mum—’

‘Perhaps you should get off the phone?’ she said, her voice a bit shaky.

‘Alright,’ I conceded.

After the call I felt more sober. I looked out the window and a street light flickered on. A woman who was walking on the sidewalk looked up as if it had startled her.

6

There is an essay by Oliver Sacks about a surgical treatment he underwent when he had cancer. He uses his story to educate the reader about the two aspects of our autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. Both are beyond our conscious control. The parasympathetic nervous system regulates rest and recovery, by affecting hormones in the gut, kidneys and liver. It slows heartbeat and digestive processes. The sympathetic nervous system, on the other hand, is what wakes us up and prepares us for danger.

After Sacks' surgery, his parasympathetic nervous system kicked in so hard that he felt incredibly physically fatigued. He describes falling asleep halfway through uttering a sentence, or while taking a mouthful of food. He says he couldn't think or speak properly. Then, after a few weeks like that, it all swung wildly back towards the sympathetic nervous system. When this happened to Sacks, he suddenly found himself on the edge of a psychosis.

The basic point of the essay is that these two sides of our autonomic nervous system swing between each other like a pendulum, and when we're healthy that pendulum swings moderately. But it can get wildly out of kilter when disrupted by something as significant as

surgery. If it swings like that it can result in strange experiences, like Sacks' almost-psychosis. He quotes Mary Shelley—who wrote Frankenstein—about halfway through the essay. She suffered wild autonomic nervous system swings around migraines. She describes the change in her perception before a nasty one as a feeling of being 'dangerously well'.

Theda didn't start having psychotic breaks until a few years into her ME diagnosis, but when she did, that phrase—dangerously well—describes what I saw happen. She became suddenly better, dangerously but powerfully excited and delusional, and a version of herself that I'd never seen before then.

The very first time it happened, I drove to the hospital convinced that my mother was overstating the situation. I had never seen anyone I knew go psychotic before. I thought Theda was probably having something like a panic attack, which Mum was misinterpreting.

When I got to the hospital, the triage nurse had another nurse take me through a warehouse-sized emergency ward, where orderlies and other staff were speeding around each other with fierce looks in their eyes. The beds were divided by curtains and there was someone screaming in the distance, but I couldn't see who it was. I remember walking past a man on a stretcher with a bloom of bloodied gauze in his hand.

Once we were near the screaming, I realised it was my sister's voice. When I saw her, I was shocked. She was laying down on a stretcher on her back, gripping the sheets with her hands, her whole body arched and her face contorted. She looked like someone with an electrical current passing through them. She took a breath and her screaming stopped for a moment. That's when I noticed the jaw: it was sitting differently. Her eyes were loose and distant too. It was like she was a different person. She was possessed.

I stood there for a moment stunned. Mum was apologising to a nearby orderly. ‘She studied opera singing as a teenager,’ she stuttered.

I instinctively took a step towards my sister’s supine form on the stretcher. Her head swivelled in my direction, but when our eyes locked for a moment I realised I was looking into the eyes of someone who didn’t recognise me. That day changed my idea of what’s inside a person. Below the level of whatever it is that recognises loved ones, there is still a part that can take control of us. To use Freud’s terms, there is an ‘it’ inside of us.

A few weeks later I would learn what my sister experienced that night, from her perspective. She would explain it to me. She’d been hearing voices leading up to the moment her mind snapped, and, knowing they were unreal, she had tried to ignore them. Over the course of a week those voices had worn her down, and, by the time she was in emergency, she believed that everyone—Mum, me and the nurses—were all impostors. Our goal, she thought in that psychotic state, was to sedate her and then remove her bodily organs. We were going to sacrifice her for the sake of a girl in the next bed who needed them. Theda knew she’d been dosed with sedative. She’d tried to fight off the nurses on arrival. She could feel the drugs now trying to push her into sleep, and she was screaming to stay awake and keep us at bay.

Maya Angelou once described a scream as having no bottom or top. Theda’s screams that night were like that. A nurse came over and explained that they’d been waiting for the head doctor to okay more sedative. Before I’d arrived, four male nurses had held Theda down as a fifth had injected her with the first sedative. She’d kicked and bit at them. They’d given her the maximum dose, and now were at a loss as to how to calm her down. The nurse said the head doctor had okayed more, and they got a second dose into her. It was traumatic. However, after that, her head went loose and she fell into a semi-consciousness. She wasn’t

quite asleep, but she could no longer scream.

*

In 1976, a professor of psychology from Princeton published a book called *The Origin of Consciousness and the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. The work blurred the boundaries between anthropology and psychological speculation. Most modern psychologists don't take it that seriously, but it won the National Book Award, perhaps because it was better suited to the spirit of that era. These days it's a kind of cult classic. The basic argument is that human consciousness only evolved recently. According to the argument, we were conscious before but in a much different manner, experiencing our unconscious minds as voices in our heads instead of ignored thoughts. At the time, those voices reflected a collective imagination structured by the religions we lived under in small tribes. We understood them as our gods speaking to us directly. But then, about 3000 years ago, tribal groups began to mix more and the idiosyncratic 'gods' of one tribe were too incompatible with the gods of friendly others, so we shifted consciousness. Instead of continuing to hear voices, we let religion become more codified and we repressed our 'gods' into the unconscious mind we have today. That moment, the author argues, using the anthropological and literary record, is when the birth of modern humankind's mind really occurred.

If nothing else it turns current theories about auditory hallucination into an evolutionary story. Current mainstream theories about voices don't query where they come from—they're understood as emanating from the person's mind—rather they cite a failure to automatically identify the source of these thoughts as being the reason people hear them as voices.

After Theda's psychotic breaks, I found myself thinking a lot more about inner voices. I

found myself pondering religion a lot, because I would watch Theda fall into a psychosis every year, and each time the myths she spouted were a mixture of literary genius, religious fervour and madness. During those times she would listen to empty space, she'd giggle at nothing and have intense conversations with absolutely no one. But she also became a consummate mythical storyteller of epic proportions, with a charisma I'd never seen in her before. If I caught her in a moment of intelligibility, I was regularly astounded by how powerfully explanatory her mythologisations of our family were.

She once fixed me with a strong gaze while in a psychotic state, and said, 'The father is lost! He was reborn into an alien world, and he built a prison around himself for protection! He cannot see through the bars. He's so lonely and he doesn't even know it.'

The day after the emergency ward I went straight to the hospital after teaching. Mum had said over the phone that Theda was calmer, but still not lucid. She had been moved to the locked ward.

After being buzzed through a secure door, I found Mum slouched over a row of plastic chairs near a plexiglass cubby.

'Is she recognising anyone yet?' I asked after we'd said our hellos.

Mum looked exhausted. 'She's calling me "That woman who calls herself mother",' she said dejectedly. 'So no, not really.'

'Has anyone talked about why this happened?'

'The head psychiatrist thinks it could be schizophrenia,' she said. 'But, Khin, schizophrenia is a *lifelong* illness. Theda can't have that. She just can't.'

'Okay,' I said.

A few minutes later we entered my sister's room. She was sitting up in bed with her back against the wall, her narrow body rigid. Her neck was extended, and she glanced around like she was in charge of the scene she saw before her. There was a thick window behind her that displayed an area at the back of the hospital with some trees and a bench. The room itself was clean and mostly empty, with a curtain dividing it. I heard someone rustling on the other side of that curtain. Theda looked at it, then said loudly, ‘Martha, relax. Everything is alright.’ She then looked at me with wicked excitement, and lowered her voice into a whisper. ‘Oh yes,’ she said gratuitously, ‘*Neo* is here.’

Grandiose delusions are backlash delusions. Think of children who imagine they are Spiderman, become obsessed about it, jump off a building thinking they can survive, and then you hear that someone was secretly abusing them the whole time. That was another thing I would learn: grandiosity is often based in a feeling of deep disempowerment. Back then, I had heard of people thinking they were Jesus and the like, but I’d never given much thought to what the underlying psychology was about. Seeing my sister helped me understand it.

I would also learn later that this backlash actually borders on the supernatural. Scientists have measured the backs of the eyes of psychotic patients. Some sufferers (including my sister) don’t need spectacles when they're having an episode, despite needing them normally. Something about the psychosis can control muscles we don’t usually have conscious command of, including those muscles that control corneal curvature. It’s been measured with keratometry. That is a powerful finding, and what it implies—that psychosis alters muscles usually controlled unconsciously—goes part of the way to explaining why her face looked so different. The difference in her appearance was so subtle and powerful that it remains one of

the things I remember most vividly from these episodes. She was a different person, and that meant I was a different person too.

‘Neo,’ she said as I sat down, ‘I’m glad you came.’

Not long after my arrival, there were things all over the room. Mum had brought several objects she’d requested that the hospital made no objection to. One was a silver ring. There was also an iPod, a bracelet and a notebook. There were a few other objects I forget now. For some reason, as soon as I got there, she got out of bed and began placing them around the room in weird arrangements and looking at those arrangements with dissatisfaction, then moving them again. It was like watching someone cast spells.

In the coming years, as the regularity of these psychotic episodes set in, I would see her do this each time. Everything was more symbolic than functional when a psychosis hit. I would be cast as her trusted companion—sometimes I was Neo, other times I was ‘Angel’ or some other figure from a pop culture fantasy or sci-fi series. I fancied it was the purview of a younger sibling to take on a role in such a situation. It wasn’t so different to how we had been as children: me as the sidekick while she led us through imaginary and symbolic lands together, only now the roles were more equal.

Not long after an incident with her iPod, a nurse came into the room and announced it was medication time. Theda and I went out into the corridor where the other patients were peeling out of their rooms and forming a thicket around the plexiglass cubby. For the first time in decades, my sister led me through a situation that intimidated me. She aimed for a row of bolted chairs near the back wall, beyond where the nurses were dispensing medicines. Before we got there we were confronted by a behemoth of a man swaying on the spot. He

was a mess of tangled brown hair and had angry eyes. Theda glanced up at him without malice then ushered me around him. He was about seven feet tall and scared me, but when I turned around after passing, I noticed how his hospital gown was open at the back, and I felt a flash of sympathy.

After Theda had taken the medicine they gave her, I found a nurse and asked if there was any possibility I could take my sister outside of the ward.

'What are you thinking, love?' she said. 'You mean outside the building?'

'Just on the other side of that door,' I said, pointing towards it. 'Not too far. I just think it might help if I can talk to her in an environment she feels less threatened by. I think I might be able to help bring her back.'

'You mean back to reality?'

'Yes.'

She looked thoughtful. 'We sometimes let patients go out there to smoke, hon, that's something we can do,' she said. 'But your sister is really quite out of touch, as you can tell.'

'I can control her,' I said.

She looked me up and down for a split second then said, 'I'll need to check with the psychiatrist.'

She returned ten minutes later with the news that I could do it but needed to stay close to the exit door. If Theda tried to run, she informed me, I was to tackle her and call out for help.

I remember what I was thinking that day. I wanted to dig into the things she was saying and understand them better, but doing so in front of Mum made me self-conscious. Her speech itself was largely rhymes and riddles, but I kept catching snippets of sense. She was talking about our family, and her childhood. She was talking about things that sounded like metaphors for the illness. I hadn't seen her physically well like this in years. She was walking

about and not bothered by the lights or sounds of the ward; nor was she asking for special foods or any of the nutritional supplements that she usually took. She wasn't in pain for once either. Whatever was happening, it was remarkable. I wanted to get into her world and figure out how and why she was better.

Once we were outside, we headed for the little tract of bushland where the bench I had seen earlier was situated on the other side of a small stream. We were at the back of the hospital and no one else was around. 'Outside the tide, Neo,' she said.

'We'll have to go back,' I said gently. 'It's part of a bigger plan.'

She seemed to accept it, and we sat down when we got to the little bench. Her eyes lit up. Around us were eucalyptus trees that had lost their bark. Naked trunks stood elegantly with strands of their crispy skin strewn on the ground. The ground was also covered in tiny gum nuts. Theda's face shone as she spoke. She talked about 'the Sickness'. She said it was what 'Theda' had, but it could be solved if the divine beings could re-balance the forces of 'light' and 'dark' in another realm. She also talked of the cosmos, and said everyone was constantly being reborn in different lives in different realities. She said that 'the father' was trapped in a 'prison' because he came from a realm totally different to this one, and the transition had confused him so he'd built a prison around himself for protection, but it was killing him. She also said that 'the Mother' needed to be saved from her tendency towards self-sacrifice.

Years later I would learn about a shamanistic religion from South Korea, and I would wonder at how perfectly it fit what was happening to my sister. It is a tradition that identifies young women who suffer from an inexplicable physical illness. Their symptoms present when they're young adults, but instead of seeing it as medical or psychological the

community interprets it as spiritual. The afflicted women are believed to be conduits to another realm. When diagnosed like this, a senior shaman is called in to teach a ritual called *naerim-git.* After that, the newly-initiated shaman is ushered into her new role. She connects her community to the ancestors and spirits. Her illness is transformed into something suffered by one who offers the community insight into itself. She lives the rest of her life devoted to this calling. Sometimes she still suffers symptoms, but their meaning is altered, and she suffers less, if at all. Instead of a medical or psychological cure, a new identity is given that contains her affliction, offering something her community needs in the process. It all begs the question of what such an illness really is.

Psychosomatic illnesses have been noted since Ancient Egypt. A popular misconception these days is that they were the invention of sexist nineteenth century psychoanalysts like Freud—men who only diagnosed women with such an affliction. But they are actually much older than that, and they obviously affect both genders. Soldiers in the World Wars suffered them at high rates, and even Freud admitted there were male patients.

Modern science grapples with trying to discern what, exactly, is going on with psychosomatic illnesses. It has proved with brain scans that they are not the same as faking. In the 1970s, a certain branch of radical feminism argued that psychosomatic illness sufferers were a particularly sensitive type of individual whose bodies articulated frustrations that women faced in a patriarchal society. A little-known fact is that the women hanged in Salem as witches during the 17th century also suffered psychosomatic symptoms. Records of such symptoms pop up in various histories, like in Tanzania in 1962, when a laughing sickness exploded in the nation during a time of cultural conflict. Sociologists study these illnesses. Psychologists see them as tied into the personal traumas of those who suffer them, whereas sociologists see them as tied into the society.

For the remainder of her time in that ward, I visited each night after work. I got to know the faces of the patients, and a few of the nurses. I never saw the psychiatrists, but Mum spoke to them. Near the end of the seventh day, Theda's delusions were noticeably less dramatic. Her posture returned to normal and her face lost that alien quality. She stopped talking mythically and her shoulders slumped. Her eyes began to flick around the room and she blinked more. She needed her spectacles again. She asked if the lights could be dimmed, and the hospital food began upsetting her stomach. On the ninth day, she looked up at me while lying in bed, and reached for my hand over the bedsheets. She grasped it. Her hands were cold. Then she said, quite clumsily, like someone learning to speak again after a stroke, '*Khin*. You're *Khin*. You're my brother.'

After that the sectioning was lifted, and, later that week Mum and I helped her through the hospital carpark to the van. The next day she was back in her bed talking about treatments for the ME. Her food allergies and fatigue had returned. The neurological pain was there also. Later that week, her ME doctor dismissed the psychosis as a reaction to some medication. He said there was nothing psychologically wrong with her. And her bell began to ring again.

7

When my phone rang it was after 9pm. I could hear a couple of teenagers chatting below my window about a baseball match. I knew nothing about baseball. It was fascinating. Their accents were fluid and sticky. Rachel's voice filled my ear over the receiver.

'Khin?' she said. 'Is that you?'

'Yeah. You got my email, I guess?'

There was a short pause. 'You came to my city,' she said.

'Yes,' I said.

There was a longer pause. 'I see,' she said, then drew a tense breath. Instead of talking about anything regarding us, she offered up a plan. 'There's a place out on Western,' she said. 'It's called Uncommon Grounds. Do you think you can find it tomorrow morning?'

'Is it on google?'

'What do you think?' she said, sounding a little more certain of herself. There was a hint of something sardonic in her tone too, which seemed like a good sign. 'Can you meet me at 11am then?'

'I'll be there,' I said. 'I'm glad you called.'

'Good,' she said. 'Good.'

The next day, I caught a bus to a little cafe not far from the State University of New York campus, just east of where I was staying. I found Rachel sitting halfway down its narrow space at a table against the wall. The place had warm lighting and antique coffee posters dotted around. I remember thinking it was a nice atmosphere to talk to her in.

As I approached her table, I noticed how different she looked—it was subtle but clear: Rachel's posture and way of moving had always been a bit floppy, but now there was something rigid and pristine about how she was holding herself. She was also wearing different clothes. The Rachel I knew was a bit of a tomboy. But instead of pants and a t-shirt, she was wearing a delicate dress, her long straight hair combed more perfectly behind her shoulders than I had ever seen it, and transparent nail polish shining on her nails.

'Hi,' I said.

She looked up, not smiling.

'Do you want a coffee?'

She paused a moment and then said yes.

We ordered at the counter, and when we got back to our table, she placed her hands on it carefully, her nail polish glistening in the soft lights. 'Okay,' she said. 'You've got fifteen minutes.'

'I came to talk,' I said, somewhat taken aback.

'You said that in your email,' she said.

I nodded, slowly. 'Does it make sense to you why I came?'

She glanced down at her hands, then lifted four straight fingers to a shoal of hair that had

fallen over her collarbone. She shelved it behind her and looked back at me with a sort of defiance I'd never seen her direct my way before. 'I already told you I'd changed my mind,' she said. 'What else is there to talk about?'

I hadn't been at all sure how she would be in this conversation before coming, but her behaviour was different to anything I had expected. 'People don't usually change their minds so quickly,' I said.

'People change their minds all the *time*, Khin,' she said back firmly. 'It's been two months. You need to move on.'

'Four weeks since you broke things off.'

'Yes,' she said, shifting in her chair slightly. 'I had a moment of weakness.'

'It was three weeks,' I said.

'I'm not proud of it,' she said back.

I pondered it for a moment. 'When you broke things off, you mentioned so many things I'd never heard you talk about before.'

She shuddered and looked down at the table, then back up at me again. 'I'd been working at a fucking supermarket all year, Khin.'

'I thought you were happy?'

'I was checking people's groceries. I walked up that fucking hill every day.'

'Which hill?'

I immediately regretted it. 'The hill to that supermarket, Khin,' she spat. 'If you'd known anything about me, you'd have understood it was killing me.'

I sat back in my chair and exhaled. She'd only ever said she was happy in Perth, but pushing that point now didn't seem meaningful. She was telling me the opposite, and that was what I needed to understand. 'I didn't know you weren't doing well.'

‘You called me a *girl,*’ she said.

‘A girl?’

‘Yes. It’s good to know that’s how you see me.’

‘It’s just a way of talking,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘It does.’

I couldn’t immediately think of a response. I’d never heard her talk like this before and I wasn’t prepared for the turns our conversation was taking. ‘I think you called me a boy too, didn’t you?’ I said uncertainly.

‘It’s not the same,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

‘Men always patronise women.’

‘Why would I patronise you?’ I asked incredulously.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. She had her hands on the tabletop, and looked at her fingers now, inspecting the fingernail on one. I looked down at them, then at her. ‘This all just happened so quickly,’ I said. ‘You wanted to get married, and then you were just *gone*.’

‘I don’t think it was quick,’ she shot back.

‘How can you say that?’

‘Life is like this,’ she said as if explaining something to a child. ‘I’m sorry you got hurt, but it didn’t give you the right to come here and harass me.’

‘I’m not trying to harass you. I had a plane ticket already. I’d quit my job.’

‘That’s not my fault!’ she said, suddenly angry, as if the mention of money was more significant than anything else we’d addressed.

‘I’m not blaming you,’ I said. ‘I just want you to understand.’ I looked at her. She was staring back at me disbelievingly. ‘Can I at least try to explain it from my perspective?’

‘Sure,’ she said, removing her hands from the table, sitting back in her chair and narrowing her eyes slightly. ‘Go ahead.’

I paused to think. I wanted to say something that wasn’t combative, or too diffuse. She seemed to have come prepared with a perspective that ignored the events I found most important. I wanted to get through to her that I had a different experience. ‘You described a dream,’ I said slowly, wondering if this was the correct example, ‘It was before you broke things off that day. It was a couple of days earlier, I think…you said you’d dreamed you were breastfeeding our future child. You described it to me: I was on the bed, remember? I was holding you from behind and our future child was in your arms. It was a sign. Then, three days later you told me not to come. You told me that I wasn’t bold, and didn’t earn enough money. It was so sudden, and with no discussion or anything.’

Her expression twisted and I thought I saw a spark of recognition in her eyes. She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, the way someone does when trying to do a sum in their head. I stopped breathing for a moment.

‘Those…were big changes,’ she said sounding a bit uncertain. I felt a swell of hope. ‘I can see…I guess…’ she continued. Then she seemed to clamp down inside herself. ‘*But* that was just part of my process,’ she concluded.

It was then that we had our first moment of real silence. Something had been communicated; I wasn’t sure what. A woman sitting at a nearby table laughed loudly. Rachel straightened her posture and took her hands off the table. She rocked her head either side and cricked her neck. It was a gesture I knew well. There was still the Rachel I knew in there somewhere. I liked that awkward side of her that wasn’t lady-like.

She leaned over the table again, ‘I was *sick*, Khin,’ she whispered intensely. ‘I’d started taking an anti-depressant. You *knew* that. How much more of a sign do you need? It took

being around my family and friends to realise how bad you were for me. I'd started self-harming again. I was blaming myself, but it was *you* making me sick.'

'You mean pulling out hairs?' I asked.

'It's exactly what I did as a teenager. It's what it all started with.'

'Okay,' I said. 'And this stuff about me calling you a girl—it was important? It made you feel less sure of yourself?'

'Yes.'

I put my hands up to my face, and closed my eyes. I thought about it for a moment. 'Do you actually think I didn't take you seriously?' I said, putting my hands gently back into my lap.

She opened her mouth slightly then closed it again. 'No,' she said slowly. 'It's not like that. It's just that we have different ways of looking at the world. I can see that now but I couldn't when we were together.'

'I never thought that we had different ways of looking at things.'

'I can see it now that I'm back,' she said.

'I didn't mean to upset you,' I said weakly. 'I was stuck at Mum's. Theda had just got her drug. I had to get away.'

She started to nod slowly. I thought that maybe she was fighting back tears. 'Don't you understand,' she said, 'that all I have to do is tell the police I don't want you here and you'll be in a world of trouble?'

'Why would you do that?'

She shook her head. 'I told you not to come.' She wiped her eyes and straightened herself again. 'I know it's hard for you with your family,' she said sniffing. 'I'm dating.'

I looked at her with puzzlement. 'Okay,' I said.

‘How does that make you feel?’ she said, wiping away the last of her tears.

‘I guess it makes me feel cheap,’ I answered honestly.

‘But how do you *feel* about it?’

‘It doesn’t feel real.’

She looked off into the distance for a moment. ‘People move on, Khin. That’s what people do.’

We sat in silence again for a moment.

‘Are you still seeing that counsellor?’ I asked.

She shot out a hard laugh. We fell into another long pause. Her body seemed to relax. Then she said, ‘I knew back in Subiaco, Khin.’

‘Subiaco?’

‘I should have left you then,’ she said. ‘It would have been less painful for both of us.’

‘You knew what?’

‘I knew then that I wasn’t sure about you.’

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ I said.

‘Not to *you*.’

‘But it doesn’t feel like a true story,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t match the facts. We were happy in Subiaco.’

The next word came out of her mouth with a surprising amount of resolution. ‘Alright,’ she said.

‘Alright?’

‘Yes.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that I can see that you’re the one who loses in this situation. And I’m sorry. But

I want you to leave.'

I nodded slowly, realising that this was the end of our conversation. I looked up at the clock. Fifteen minutes was almost over. She'd remained true to her word.

Something in me went hard. 'I'll go,' I said. 'But only once I've found a town I can move to. I'm here now, and I'll leave you be, but I have to look after my own needs too now.'

'What the fuck?'

'I told you, Rachel, I can't go home. Theda has that drug, I have nowhere to go.'

'So you thought you'd stay in *my* fucking town?'

'I didn't know whether or not you'd change your mind. I thought I'd figure things out from here. I'm planning on finding a town somewhere. I need a break from Australia.'

She snorted a laugh.

'What's so funny?' I asked.

'I told you I don't want you here, and you're telling me that's too bad.'

'It *is* too bad,' I said. 'I'll stay out of your way until I'm gone, though. I have needs too Rachel. You have your whole family around you; I'm on my own. I'll be gone in a couple of weeks.'

'*Don't* dismiss my feelings,' she growled. 'I won't be able to relax knowing I might bump into you.'

'I thought there were a million people here.'

She looked at me carefully. 'I meant the Capital District,' she said. 'We were talking about places you might commute for a job. Albany's not that big.'

'I see that now.'

She let out a sigh then. There was another long pause as we sat at whatever impasse we were at. 'Maybe my parents can give you some money,' she said eventually. 'So you can

figure yourself out from somewhere else, away from Albany.'

'That's not necessary,' I said.

After that we walked out together and said goodbye in the carpark. It was a strange moment. I felt like I was saying goodbye to a stranger. As for the woman I loved, I never got to say goodbye to her. That woman just vanished like a phone call cut off mid-sentence.

*

The police came the next afternoon while I was out at the supermarket. I had been looking at potential towns online all morning, feeling freed but sad. It felt a bit surreal. There were places I could go now, places I had never thought about, even though I had heard of them in the movies.

Earlier that morning, when looking for a town to move to, I had googled pictures of places and tried to imagine myself there. A big hinderance was cost. Even the highway hotels were three times as expensive as my BnB in Albany. I found one affordable place in a town called Savannah down in Georgia, but the reviews mentioned gun violence and I wanted to think.

When I returned from the supermarket, there was a tall shaggy guy in the kitchen. His presence startled me. I hadn't seen anyone in the BnB since arriving, and he looked perfectly at home, as if he'd been there all along. He was blonde with a dense scruffy beard and blue eyes hidden behind high flabby cheeks. After offering a handshake, he told me about the police.

'They said they were after an Asian man in his thirties,' he said nonchalantly. 'They said he'd be Australian but Asian looking, so I'm guessing that's you?'

‘That sounds like me,’ I said.

‘Three of them,’ he said, as if talking about some curiosity unrelated to me. ‘Right up on the deck in their uniforms.’

‘Did they say what they wanted?’

‘They wanted to know if an Asian-looking Australian guy was here. I called the manager about it. She asked me to let her know if there was a problem,’ he said, looking me up and down.

I thanked him and went up to my room.

It was after dark before I mustered the nerve to go down to the station. I didn’t want the police coming back to the house. Rachel had sent an email a couple of hours after our meeting in the café the day before. In it, she’d written ‘get out of town’ at the end. It was very different to the tone we had left on when saying goodbye in the carpark. I assumed that her mother was part of the reason. Perhaps Mary had talked her into getting indignant upon her return to the house. In the email, Rachel had mentioned a lawyer, and I’d emailed back curtly, telling her to back off, and restating that I would leave her alone and be gone from Albany soon. But she must have then decided to go to the police. The whole thing seemed slightly unbelievable.

When I got down to the station it was after dark. I stood for a moment beside a memorial statue with a POW-MIA flag waving above it on a tall pole, then took the ominous step inside.

The station building was small. Inside was a narrow space on the public side, with a row of broken plastic chairs bolted against its wall. A young policewoman stood at the counter.

The area behind her was an office space with several desks and a lone officer at one of them, gazing into a computer screen.

‘I think you guys are looking for me?’ I said to her.

‘Ho’kay?’ she said lifting both eyebrows in a friendly way. ‘How can we help?’

‘Some police came to my door,’ I said.

‘Ho’kay,’ she said nodding.

‘I think it has something to do with my ex.’

She put down her pen and tilted her head. Crystalline blue eyes looked at me discerningly. She was pretty, but it was in a homely way. Her hands sat on the counter atop a yellow pad of blank lined paper, and her knuckles were peeling with eczema, which gave a strangely comforting effect. I was glad to be dealing with her instead of men with their beefed-up sense of protecting a woman against another man, especially some interloping older foreigner with brown skin. The shaggy guest at the hostel had said three policemen had been looking for me—which seemed excessive, given the nature of what it was about, so I didn’t really expect fair treatment.

She put down her pen, pushing the pad out from under her hands. ‘So, you mean they were looking *for* you?’

‘Yes,’ I said, relieved to be understood.

‘Ho’kay,’ she said exhaling. ‘And it was something to do with your ex?’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t in, so I didn’t talk to them. But a man from my building told me.’

‘When did we come to see you?’

‘Maybe about 3pm,’ I said.

‘And where do you live?’

'I'm across the road.'

'Where *exactly*?'

'The address?'

'Yes.'

I thought about it for a moment and couldn't recall the number. 'I'm not sure,' I said. 'But it's the one on the corner here. It's just a twenty-second walk away. It's a BnB.'

She looked at me perplexed for a moment. 'You mean *kitty*-corner?'

'Yes,' I said. 'That's right.' She nodded. I glanced down at her hands again.

'I think I remember that,' she said. Then, without saying anything more, she turned to the officer at the desk in the office space behind her. 'Hey Eddie? D'you know if they served that summons cross the road?'

'Summons?' he said.

'On the corner here.'

He looked up 'Which corner?'

'Kitty-corner,' she insisted.

Eddie was a middle-aged man with a tired-looking face and the countenance of someone used to concentrating on serious tasks. He pulled something loose from the stack of papers on his desk, then put it to one side and pulled out something else before offering it up. She went over to collect it, calm as anything, then came back.

'It was just this,' she said placing the papers on the counter. She then turned to the other cop again. 'Eddie?' she said. 'I can serve these, right? I mean I just get him to sign the log?'

The man said yes, and she pulled a log book out from under the counter then had me sign it.

'What is it?' I asked, anxiously.

‘Just a summons,’ she said.

‘A summons?’

‘That’s right.’

I tried to think what a summons was but couldn’t pull the information out of my head. ‘What do I have to do?’ I asked dumbly.

‘There will be a court date in there somewhere.’

‘A court date?’

‘That’s right,’ she said. Then she seemed to grasp the situation by its horns and said, ‘Look, take it home. Read through it, and if you’ve got’ny questions, we’re here all night, and you just live across the road so pop back over and I’ll explain anything I can.’

A court summons is the sort of document that reminds you that you're not powerful. Its strangely abstract language reminds you that there is an invisible apparatus you usually don't notice, but which you live under that can crush you in an instant. A charge like stalking a young woman fills a person with doubts. They're not just doubts about your position, but also about moral fibre. A deep part of me prided itself on the idea that I was a good man in regard to women and their specific vulnerabilities. The idea that I might have wronged Rachel made part of me quiver. Americans were very conscientious about accountability. I knew I hadn't intended to upset Rachel, but beyond that basic understanding, I felt out of my depth. A country that expects 17-year-olds to take out loans from private companies for university, and which boots you off healthcare at 26, is a country that interprets personal accountability differently to my own.

I sat down on the floor of my attic and read through the papers the policewoman had

given me. There were six stapled sheets. The front one was titled *Family Court of the State Of New York,* with a line of text directly below it containing Rachel's name, then a *vs.* and then my own name. I was referred to as 'the respondent'.

On the second page was a list of possible accusations. It was a multiple choice. The list was: *1. sexual abuse, 2. harassment, 3. strangulation, 4. forcible touching, 5. aggravated harassment, 6. stalking, 7. attempted assault, 8. criminal obstruction of breathing and circulation.*

Every single item on that list made me feel dirty for being implicated in a document containing those possibilities. Rachel had circled number six.

On the next page was her statement. I read it several times. She'd used the word 'agitated' to describe my demeanor during our meeting at the cafe. She'd also written, 'He refused to leave Albany', and I guessed she meant my refusal to leave it immediately, but she'd not said that. She'd also written that my BnB was only a mile from her house. That was true. I'd booked it online from Australia and noticed the proximity, and I should have been more cautious, but it was also the only affordable place in town by several hundred dollars. That sounded like an excuse as I pondered how a judge might hear me say it. This statement, on the other hand, seemed factual and concise.

I suddenly got that feeling you do when looking at a speeding ticket, and reading a line about how the police have photographic evidence of your car going over the limit.

At the bottom she'd written 'I feel unsafe in my community'.

Seeing her handwriting on a document like this was unsettling. She'd not written about our planned US trip, nor her unexpected departure from Australia; she'd written about fear for her safety. The last time I had seen her handwriting had been on a shopping list stuck to our fridge with the word 'a puppy' playfully scrawled at the bottom. Being on this document

now made me wonder who the hell I was.

8

A few months after Theda's psychotic episode, Mum handed me a booklet titled *Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: An Overview of the Canadian Consensus Document*. It was a thin booklet that cited several studies about ME and advocated for a biomedical (organic only) aetiology. Somewhere on the second page I read the following sentence:

> ME (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome), classified as a neurological disease in the WHO ICD, cannot also be classified as conversion disorder, which is classified as a mental or behaviour disorder.

Before Mum gave me those guidelines, and just after the locked ward discharged my sister, I came up with a plan that flew in the face of an organic-only diagnosis. I asked Dad if he'd consider looking after her for a while. I said I could persuade Mum to take a holiday, and he could look after Theda with a little more focus on encouraging her to get out of bed. He had been reluctant at first, but when I explained my reasoning he agreed, saying he needed to

work on his PhD anyway, so he could tie that in and use his long-service leave in the process.

‘You’ve always wanted to drive across the Nullarbor,’ I said to Mum once he’d agreed. ‘Take three months off and go.’

‘But your father has never been good,’ she protested.

‘You need a break,’ I said. ‘Besides, doesn’t this psychotic episode suggest there might be some value in a new approach?’

She was nervous, but she agreed. I gave her some money and then helped ferry medical equipment from her place up to Dad’s—my parents had long lived on opposite sides of Perth by this time. The following week, we drove Theda to Dad’s house and Mum headed over the Darling escarpment with her van full of supplies into the desert.

As the first June rains spattered my city, our little experiment began.

*

A week after Mum left, Theda rang me. ‘He’s killing me,’ she wept.

‘Give it some time,’ I said gently.

The next day, I went over and spoke to my father. He explained that he was expecting her to make her own lunches and get her afternoon medicines. He was making her dinners, but refusing to get glasses of water. He gave her the morning medicines. But he had confiscated the bell.

Mum called me from the Nullarbor shortly after Theda’s call. My sister had been on the phone to her too. ‘You need to convince your father what Theda’s doctors have said,’ she said. ‘Otherwise I’ll have to come back.’

I felt trapped. Theda was angry at Dad, but I couldn’t help noticing her anger implied

some sort of physical energy also. I thought maybe our little experiment was working, and I sought an outside opinion from an ex-girlfriend of mine who I knew my sister felt comfortable with. She was a woman called Jane, who had known Theda briefly before the illness. We went over to Dad's house together and Jane spoke to Theda, then we both had tea with my father. As I drove Jane home I asked what she thought.

'I can't tell,' she said anxiously. 'Your sister is so angry. She says your Dad doesn't believe in her illness.'

'Do you know what I mean about trying something different though?' I asked.

'How long will your Mum be on the Nullarbor?' she asked.

'Three months.'

She appeared to think. 'She does have more energy than usual,' she said cautiously. 'A lot of it is anger though.'

Mum called a few days after Jane's visit with something unrelated. '…I went out on foot,' she said breathlessly over a crackling line. 'I always wanted to see…the desert, I mean. I just parked at a truck stop and started—'

'Jesus,' I said.

'Oh, Khin, it was so wonderful—all this empty space!'

'Did you have water?' I asked.

'Just a small bottle,' she said.

'That's how people die, Mum.'

'It's okay…I'm safe now. I do suppose it was a bit silly.'

'What happened?' I asked.

She had walked for about an hour, when she had realised she couldn't see the road anymore. She'd then walked back towards where she thought the road was, but after two hours she still hadn't found it. Eventually she climbed a tree. The Nullarbor is mostly featureless, but it has a few low trees. From that treetop, she saw a car passing in the distance and lined up some bushes, then walked in that direction until she came out on the road, miles from the truck stop.

'You hitched?' I asked.

'I must have walked in a big arc, I think,' she said.

'You need to be careful, Mum.'

'I will. But Khin, sometimes you have to take risks in life. I want you to remember that.'

Hearing her talk like that reminded me of the adventurous spirit my mother had. When she had first come to Australia she had only been nineteen years old, and it was before people travelled as much as they do now. For a woman alone, moving to Australia, without much education, and not knowing anyone here, that had been brave. This was the same spirit guiding her out into the desert. Despite how reckless it had been, it was good to hear her sounding vital again. I thought of how cloistered and trapped she'd been in her life since Theda's illness. My mother had a unique mixture of adventurousness and loyalty that I rarely saw in other people.

Eventually, the couple who picked her up on the side of the road found the truck stop where her van was. It was a truck-bed, not an official stop with buildings of any kind. It was just a dirt shoulder of the road where truck drivers could stop for a few hours rest before continuing to the next petrol station. If she had remained lost on that plain, none of those drivers would have stayed long enough to notice that her van was abandoned.

'I'm proud of you,' I said before hanging up.

The next day she called and told me she was coming back. Theda had phoned her again. Dad was refusing to budge on his care plan. Mum had spoken to him, they'd bickered, and he had said that he knew what he was doing. She was worried that her daughter was being ignored by her father again.

'Your father is a psychologist,' she said to me. 'He sees everything as being about the bloody mind. God knows how much damage he's done for her ME recovery.'

I pleaded with her not to return but it was no use. She was still in South Australia but said she'd drive directly home and be back in a few days.

When her van pulled up outside Dad's house a few days later, it looked like a Mars lander. It was covered in red dust. We hauled my sister's things back to her place, and, before we were done, she stopped me in the driveway.

'Khin,' she said. 'You need to stop insisting that your sister's problem is mental. She's sick. Her doctor agrees: no one would fake an illness like this. Don't go blaming her for it like your father does.'

'I don't blame her,' I said.

She shook her head firmly, 'If you don't stop bringing it up,' she said, 'I can't stop you, but you won't be able to come over to the house anymore.'

I said nothing.

Mum seemed deeply troubled by her threat. I knew she wouldn't have said it lightly. She then said she would always see me outside of the house, even if she had to stop me from coming over.

After that conversation, I realised we couldn't go forward as a family unless I acquiesced completely. I wasn't my sister's doctor, I was her brother. And I was a son. Those roles were in conflict with what I thought would cure her, but my continued ability to play those roles depended on letting go of what I thought, even if I imagined it might save her life. Looking back, that year was when I first began to consider that my sister might die, and that I might have to watch it while holding the cure in my hands.

Not long after that day, Mum gave me a copy of *Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: An Overview of the Canadian Consensus Document*, which seemed to agree with everything she said. I still felt uneasy. But the lines had been drawn.

9

I sat on the wooden floor reading the rest of the papers the policewoman had given me. On the fourth page was a list of questions:

1. Did the incident involve a gun?
2. Has the respondent ever threatened you or your family members with a gun?
3. Does the respondent own a gun?
4. Does the respondent have a permit for a gun?
5. Has the respondent threatened you or your children with physical harm?
6. Has the respondent threatened any of your pets with physical harm?

I thought about partner conflicts in a country where guns weren't controlled like they were back home. The police would be wondering about whether I was the type of guy who might go to Walmart and buy one, then take out my resentment with it upon the person I felt slighted by. Rachel, I knew, couldn't possibly believe that.

The last stapled page was a restraining order. It was dated from that day until three weeks in the future, which was when I had to appear in court—July 26th. All I could think about was

that I had no options left. I was already considered guilty, I thought, even though no one had asked my side of the story.

I went back to the police station and the same policewoman was standing behind the counter.

'It's not the same as criminal court,' she said brightly. 'This is *family* court.'

'But I still have to go to *a* court?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said.

'What's the difference?'

'The difference is that this can only become a *criminal* matter if you don't appear on that day. Or, if you break the temporary order of protection you've got there.'

I flipped over to the last page. 'I don't know where those places are,' I said.

She looked at me blankly for a second, then nodded and swivelled the papers so she could read them. The list of places I wasn't allowed near was as follows:

- Rachel's home
- Rachel's workplace
- Rachel's school
- Rachel's mother's home and workplace
- Rachel's father's home and workplace
- Rachel's brother's home and school

She looked at the list and her forehead creased a little. 'This is just until the judge decides if a long-term order is required,' she said.

'But how can I avoid places I don't know?'

'Just be careful,' she said. 'I'm sure you'll be fine.'

I thought about it for a moment. 'But what if I walk in front of, say, her brother's school, and I didn't know that's what it was?'

She looked at me for a moment then slightly cocked her head. 'You don't know these places?' she said.

'No,' I repeated. 'I know where her house is, but that's it.'

'Well,' she said slowly, as if trying to do a sum in her head while speaking, 'just do your best then.'

I thought about it for a second longer. 'Can she say I broke this without proof?' I asked.

'A judge would hear your side of any disagreement.'

'In the family court?' I asked.

She looked uncertain then said thoughtfully, 'No, actually, then it would become a criminal matter. So, you'd face a criminal judge in that case, that's true. But he'd hear your side of anything.'

'Could I end up in jail?'

'It's a possibility,' she said. 'But stay away from those places and I'm sure you'll be fine.'

I blinked. I looked at her and scratched my head. Somehow it was inconceivable. I didn't think she thought I was lying. I wasn't sure what she thought, exactly. But the idea that I was as hapless as I was didn't strike her as true on some level. Would a judge see it that way too? Perhaps Rachel found it hard to believe also, though she knew me, and she knew I didn't know the location of any of those places. I realised then that I couldn't stay in Albany a moment longer than necessary, even if it cost a lot to leave without a proper plan. Under these conditions I needed to be gone yesterday.

‘I’m not from here,’ I said, feeling a bit teary. ‘Can I leave the state?’ I was thinking of the cheap hotel in Savannah.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘This doesn’t stop me from leaving Albany does it?’ I asked.

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘Just make sure you’re back here for the court appearance. If you miss that, then there would be a warrant issued for your arrest in the State of New York.’

I thanked her and left again.

As I walked back to my BnB I thought about credibility. I also thought of a Louis Theroux documentary I’d seen with Rachel about the American jail system. People without money for bail sometimes went into jails before their trials. I wondered if every jail in America was as scary as the one in that documentary. It was hard imagining Rachel intentionally putting me in that sort of jeopardy, but she was different since getting back to her familiar environment. She wasn’t the only factor to consider either. When her mother had visited us in Perth, she’d put down the family dog to make her point about wanting us to break up. She’d arrived in Perth and the first thing she said to Rachel was, ‘No one could look after him, honey, and it was—just—too important that I come here and talk to you about these…these…these decisions you’re making.’

The next day she’d told me that although I didn’t mean to, I would hold her daughter back from achieving her career dreams. Who knew what sort of hysteria Mary Devison would try and whip up in Rachel now?

Regardless of whatever I had done to cause the situation, it was a situation I needed to deal with, and Mary Devison was part of it. She had only ever known me as a loner. She had never met my own family, because Theda and Mum had been off getting a treatment that week she was in Perth. She had sent my mother an email after her visit stating what a nice

young man I was, and how much she looked forward to bringing me into her family. That email had obviously only been empty politeness. Now that her daughter was rejecting me also, Mary wouldn't see me in forgiving terms, and she had a vested interest in encouraging Rachel not to either. Another problem was that Rachel's friends here didn't know me. They wouldn't be able to put any impression of an actual person to the man Rachel described me as now. A lot of her friends here were new ones. Rachel and I had met in Thailand just after she'd attended university down in New York. People she'd known in Albany before college had moved on, and she'd talked about how returning to her hometown would mean making new friends. After leaving me in Perth, she'd signed on with all those social justice groups here. I could imagine a moral fervour brewing amongst such people about her rights, one which ignored the possibility that this man—whom none of them had ever met— didn't mean any harm.

I wanted to call Rachel and tell her she'd won. A day earlier I had felt indignant at her demand that I leave Albany within 24 hours, but that indignation was gone. It was now replaced by a cold realisation that she had the upper hand. Taking my time to choose a town, and moving to it in a cost-effective way, was a luxury I couldn't afford.

The next morning I made some phone calls. I wanted to speak to a lawyer. I figured that a lawyer would cost a couple of hundred dollars but could tell me how to deal with this, and, perhaps, contact Rachel to tell her I'd left town. Once Rachel knew that, I thought she might drop it. I still hadn't figured out where to go, but I could stay at one of those chain hotels on a highway if I had to.

I got hold of a firm called Kiosse and Taback LLC. I spoke to Kiosse. I explained my situation and she said, 'That all sounds very terrible and stressful. We charge $350 for an

initial consultation.'

'How long is an initial consultation?'

'You get an hour-and-a-half.'

'I don't need that long,' I said.

'That's the shortest appointment we do, I afraid,' she said.

I found myself saying yes to it.

'Great,' she said chirpily. 'We'll see you next Wednesday.'

I asked if she had something sooner, but she said I'd chosen a bad time to want a lawyer, because of American Independence Day. Fourth of July fell on the Monday that year. It was Thursday then, and she had nothing tomorrow; there was a public holiday on Monday. She was booked on Tuesday, so Wednesday would be the quickest appointment I could get.

I liked the way she spoke. She was direct but not combative. I decided that I wouldn't go outside my house until Wednesday unless absolutely necessary.

After the call I looked at the options of places to go again. I was still struck by how expensive everything was. I'd chosen the cheapest accommodation by half of all the low-end places on the Eastern seaboard. Savannah was not a good idea anymore. It was too far away, and, if I had to get back to Albany for court (which I hoped wouldn't be the case) then a trip down to Georgia, then back to Albany for court, then down to Georgia again afterwards was way too expensive. I knew Rachel might drop this once I was gone, but I couldn't be sure. I needed to make a pragmatic decision, so I started searching for a closer place to be for a month at least. I could go further afield after this had blown over.

Airbnb was not on my radar that year. It was not popular in Australia, and I'd never heard of it before. I was seeing it come up when searching for cheap accommodation though. Rachel had mentioned Uber before, and I felt like she'd also mentioned Airbnb. She was

from the place where all these innovations came from. It seemed a bit like Uber. I wasn't sure how you protected your money, and it would attach to my credit card so I was nervous about that. I think something about me was off that month. I was caught between two versions of myself—one who was cautious and investigated things, and one who was reckless and didn't. I calculated shaving a month off my overall America plan (Airbnb was still twice as much as my Albany digs) and I booked a place in a city two hours north without looking any further into how Airbnb protected your money.

When the host got back to me and said I was confirmed, I felt a measure of relief.

As midday approached I was feeling more settled with what was happening, but I still wanted to tell someone about it. The idea of going through this accusation in secret made me feel even more creepy than I already did. I also realised my biggest problem if this went to court was credibility. I knew that the context Rachel had left out of her statement might help, and my friends could verify that. I wrote to a couple of people, including Mum, explaining what had happened and asking if they'd write letters to confirm my side of things. One was my old friend Jane. She got back to me straight away. She said that Rachel was bending the truth, and of course she'd write a letter. I felt better after that.

Mum phoned minutes later at midday. She said that she'd called Rachel's mother.

'Why did you do that?' I asked.

'Rachel is being a bitch,' she said. 'I thought I could talk to her mother, mother-to-mother.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'I got their bloody machine,' she said. 'But left a message. I told them that you had every

reason to have gone there. I said that you'd agreed to leave her alone, so they were just being nasty.'

'Maybe you shouldn't call again,' I said anxiously. She agreed, but sounded angry on my behalf, which helped me feel better also.

In the three days after making the appointment with the lawyer, I only left the house once. On the 4th of July, I watched a steady stream of people filter down the avenue below my window. They sounded jovial. They must have been headed somewhere in the city to see the fireworks, and they were talking across the street to each other's small groups.

In the evening, colourful pinpricks from the fireworks scattered on my window. I sat drinking a hot chocolate at the little desk, soaking up my first American Independence Day. I felt oddly okay. I was troubled by what Rachel had chosen to do, but I also felt safe in the attic, and I was still shielded from the problem back home. The explosions in the distance came in satisfying clusters, each with a snap-crackle following a flash of bright colour.

The next day was the public holiday Monday. I stayed in for that too. On Tuesday, I went to the library next door to print some emails I thought the lawyer might want. They were the emails Rachel and I had exchanged directly after our meeting where she'd told me to get out of town and I promised to leave her alone. It was proof that I had at least promised to do the right thing. Whether or not a judge believed those stated intentions was another matter, but I figured those emails surely meant something.

I also printed a few pages I'd written out regarding the events around all this. I didn't want to exclude details, including anything I might have done that made me look even guiltier. I figured the lawyer could read it all, then we'd talk and I would flesh out any details

that weren't clear. That way I wouldn't be tempted to sugarcoat anything. I was still confused by the events. I also had a vague feeling that I had misunderstood something about women in general. The idea that women were more vulnerable to certain kinds of threat was something I understood, but the specifics were not clear in this case. Did my presence represent a threat, or was it something else? Society had notions about these things, but they weren't rules. American sensibilities and Australian ones might differ. That was the other reason I was looking forward to speaking to a lawyer: she could give me an impression of the objective reality of the situation, as much as there was one. And that would either put my conscience at rest, or help me own up to having crossed a line.

In the evening, I realised I had run out of food. I was leaving town the next day, so I only needed something for the night, and I snuck out across the road, feeling a bit tainted. I had felt that way at the library also. The idea that people who I might see would somehow know I was under suspicion was irrational, but I felt that way anyway.

On my way back, a car pulled up at the traffic lights. I was waiting for the pedestrian signal to say it was okay for me to cross, even though the road was basically empty. A voice yelled out from the stationary car's passenger window, 'Hey!' I stood stunned for a moment, wondering how I'd deal with whatever was about to be thrown my way. When the lights changed, the voice called, 'Nice ass, baby!'

As the car zoomed off to a Doppler effect of teenage giggles that faded into the distance under a receding line of streetlights, I realised I was living in a head full of ghosts: I was staying in the attic of an empty mansion in some strange city on the other side of the world, opposite a police station, afraid to step outside my door because the woman I'd thought I was marrying a couple of months earlier now believed I was stalking her. The absurdity of how quickly my life had changed in that short time hit me for a moment, and I felt lighter, but still

relieved to be off the streets.

That night, before going to bed, I collected the documents together for the lawyer in the morning. I included a handwritten letter at the last minute. It was a letter Rachel had sent after asking me to come to the US. She had just told me leaving was a mistake, and that had letter arrived in the post a week later. The envelope told its own story. It had arrived with a shiny gold sticker on its back—one with Rachel's name and university credentials embossed. I remember thinking it a strange sticker to put on a personal letter. The contents were sweet though.

Hi Handsome.

I miss you. I'm so sorry that I ran away. But I needed to, and now I'm so much better. I'm ready to be the best version of myself, and to be the honest, healthy partner that you deserve. I think that time apart will help us refocus as individuals, so that when we are together again we'll be stronger than ever. I love you so much!

Yesterday I went to the gym, then my dad came over for dinner. We talked about Burmese refugees then watched a stoner movie on TV. This morning I drove Dad's Burmese refugee family to the doctor again, then looked at pictures of us. You always hold me so confidently; I don't need it, but the visual proof of your devotion is reassuring. Tonight I'm going to a poetry reading at the gay pride centre with my friend Emily.

That's all for now. I'll see you tonight in my dreams.

Love Rachel

10

A few months after Mum's trip across the Nullarbor, Theda's ME doctor began to suggest practical solutions to make life easier. Mum began to buy equipment. First came a chair in the shower with holes in the seat. A green walking frame with hand brakes and wheels appeared in the hallway not long after that. I joked about its racing potential. Mum also got an old hospital bed-table on wheels, and when my sister ate, Mum wheeled it into a position over her bed. Theda would ring the bell afterwards, and Mum would come to collect her dirty plates. A special chair with armrests appeared over the toilet a few weeks after the walker.

Mum began to search more widely for treatments. A lot of the things you could read online said ME responded to alternative medicine well, and two large bookcases appeared in the house—one in the kitchen and the other in the already-crowded laundry—with shelves filled with medications from specialists of various ilks. It was a strange mixture of conventional and alternative treatments. There were powerful sleeping pills and opiate-based painkillers on those shelves; but there were also tinctures, nutritional supplements and flower essences.

The specialists were diverse. Nutritionists always suggested dietary changes and

supplements, a kinesiologist offered whatever it is kinesiologists offer, an acupuncturist stuck needles in her a few times before she complained it was too painful given her heightened sensitivity to touch. There was a revolving door of rheumatologists and pain specialists who scratched their heads and offered more conventional medicines. Occasionally, a mainstream specialist would suggest it was a psychosomatic illness, but people like that quickly got dropped. A psychosomatic diagnosis was no better than the accusation of faking as far as Mum and Theda were concerned. The possibility of symptoms originating in the mind was little better than superstition. And there was always a doctor who would say it was disreputable to think that psychology played any role. Despite this, their treatments were often blunt. One specialist suggested trans-cranial magnetics. Another suggested electroshock therapy.

They didn't see all these specialists at the same time, of course. She'd try one, improve slightly, and then when she slumped again she'd move on to the next. Each new treatment came at an emotional cost. Optimism would reign for a couple of weeks as she would seem to improve, but then it always got worse again, and depression would quickly follow, until the next treatment option was tabled. It was horrible to watch this cycle. With an illness like ME, there was never a shortage of practitioners suggesting treatment paths that couldn't be tried together. When it was your life at stake, too many options were more distressing than none.

Some treatments stuck. These were ones that weren't incompatible with much. At one point she began doing enemas, and she continued to do those forever after that, although they only helped partially with the constipation.

Of all her symptoms, the constipation was the most objectively measurable. A plumber had to be called out sometimes. I couldn't imagine something inside of my sister that was so solid that a man needed to pump it out of the pipes below the house, but that's how it was.

She was so fragile and slender. Something inside of her couldn't get out and it was balling up.

Over the years we also had hormone levels measured, and she consistently showed low levels of various substances in her blood and urine that indicated a malfunctioning system. Whether these measurements were correlates or causes of the illness was not something anyone could know, though the doctors she stuck with assured her that they did know.

Meanwhile, we tried colloidal silver, homeopathy and meridian tapping.

Alternative practitioners rarely said they couldn’t help. All they peddled was hope, and they routinely positioned themselves in opposition to the mainstream medical establishment, but one thing they consistently were not was Medicare-covered. Mum began spending all her superannuation on these treatments that never worked.

‘It’s worth it, Khin,’ she said. ‘If it gets her better, then it doesn’t matter what the cost is to me.’

I worried about that attitude. She might not care about her own situation, but she and Theda were the only family I had. I didn’t want either of them to fall to pieces, financially or otherwise. My mother had only ever worked as a dental nurse after the divorce, and she didn’t have much money. Despite this, her side of the little duplex was paid off thanks to an accident at work just before retiring. It was a blessing, that accident—whatever else went wrong at least she had the house. The accident had hurt her hands, but she could use them again now, and the payout had paid her mortgage.

As for my role, I did my best to support them both, but it began to take a toll on me too. After Mum’s failed trip across the Nullarbor, I had believed I would watch my sister slowly die. I realised now that I was watching my loved ones kill each other. Theda’s demands were

destroying my mother's health, and I believed meeting those demands was part of what was keeping her sick. It felt like watching two addicts. Watching people you love slowly die is tough. It made it worse that I thought I knew the solution to their problem. I desperately wanted to intervene, but to do so would have done nothing but alienate them both from me. Mum often talked of a vague wish to die. Sometimes she'd say, 'If it wasn't for you Khin, I'd turn on the gas, and close all the windows.'

Theda talked about suicide a lot too. She talked about it regularly. She said that she'd wished for so much more from her life.

One day, she took all the certificates for her tertiary education off the wall in her bedroom. 'I just can't bear to look at them anymore,' she said. 'All they do is remind me of what I lost.'

Occasionally I spoke to a close friends about what was happening, but it turned out they didn't know how to converse about it. If you tell someone you have a family member with cancer, it is tragic and difficult but there is a script. People aren't confused by it. But if I said to a friend that I thought my sister's illness might be psychosomatic, I was politely dismissed as a victim-blamer; or my sister was dismissed as a malingerer who needed to just get up and make herself better.

People talked about the next music festival, and what a great boon it was to live in Perth near such wonderful beaches in a time of economic growth. I could see those things too, but they weren't as meaningful. Every time my phone rang, my gut clenched and I feared another catastrophe; worried that it would be news my mother and sister had both killed themselves. I couldn't explain that to anyone. Nor could I simply let it go. This all led to my first big life

lesson from Theda's illness. It was that circumstances can isolate you, even if you're near people. When faced with a tragedy, what we really need is to be understood.

One winter, in about the sixth year of the illness, I decided to get away for a while. I took a semester off work and headed to South East Asia.

When I got back from that trip, I met someone who made me feel better about Perth. Her name was Madeleine, and she'd lost her father when she was 11. He'd died of motor neurone disease, and it had been a protracted death in which he'd lost control of his body for a while before passing away. Madeleine now lived in Perth with her mother, but she'd go over to a Queensland mining town once every few months to make some money stripping.

She was the only person in my social sphere who ever saw Theda psychotic. She dealt with it effortlessly. I was thirty-one and she was twenty-one, but she responded to my sister's suddenly-altered personality like it was nothing unusual. That was the same skill she probably used on punters at the strip clubs, I figured. She had the ability to just roll with whatever came her way, yet there was a detached intelligence assessing everything. There was no judgment in her.

We dated for a year, and I would eventually end it, but she showed me something about life. She and I both lived near Fremantle. We liked that side of town because it was less red-neck than the rest of the city, but like me she decried Fremantle's hippy culture. We were both too dark to imbibe the hippy-culture. She thought of it as fake, despite its declarations of love and spirituality.

I remember her mother. She was quite a character. Cher—that was her mother's name—had been a singer in her youth, and, after Madi's Dad had died, she'd faced single

motherhood alone with two children. She was too old for the itinerant life of a singer now and, as a result, her jobs were all menial. She kept her spirits up with a sense of irony, and she drank a little too much as well. I remember she talked about alcohol and life both in the way a person sometimes talks about a troublesome pet. I found her company soothing. Both Madi and her mother knew about Theda and my family's situation but neither tried to dismiss it or offer a solution. They were more at ease with the understanding that life sometimes offered up intractable realities. They were my friends that year.

After Madeleine and I had been dating for about six months, she invited me to her family Christmas. It was something I'll never forget. We were sitting around the table under an awning with all her half-sisters, aunts and uncles. It was one of the few times I'd seen a well-established family all together like that. There was a sense of belonging and camaraderie, and all the personalities present seemed to conspire in offering the sense of a clan.

There was a particular incident that day which helped me think something over that had been troubling me a lot. It involved one of Madeleine's half-sisters called Kaye, who was 15 years older than Madi. She had some good news to share. But an uncle accidentally let the news slip before Kaye arrived, and as soon as it was said everyone began to worry. The problem was that Kaye would feel betrayed about the news being shared without her there. It was now up to Cher to fake not having heard it when Kaye finally arrived. When she did, I realised why such a small thing mattered. Kaye was a fragile woman who had the look of someone on a tightrope that would snap if the wrong pressure were applied as she edged forward.

Cher was of particular importance to Kaye. She had been Kaye's father's second wife—the love of his life. It meant something I couldn't begin to make sense of, but she needed Cher's approval, and when she brought the news up, I watched Cher fuss with an authenticity

that only a professional performer could have mustered. She fussed over Kaye and made space for the news to be announced. It left me with a better understanding of my role in my own family. Caring for someone contradicted telling the truth sometimes, that's just how things were in life, and to love them well you needed to fake it with everything you had. Looking back on it, that incident seems so small, and its insight so obvious. But that is what I remember.

11

After packing my bag I caught a bus to the business park on the other side of the interstate where a garish v-shaped building hugged a carpark next to a big service station. Inside were companies cramped together amidst bland decor. I found the lawyer's office on the third floor where a receptionist directed me towards some chairs and a coffee table. A few minutes later a tall woman wearing a lipstick-red skirt-suit came in and introduced herself. 'I'm Leyla,' she said.

She had short brown hair and the same pleasant curtness that I recognised from our phone conversation. We shook hands and then went into a conference room, where we sat at one end of a long table with eighteen chairs tucked under it.

When she finished reading Rachel's statement she looked up at me and said, 'That's not stalking.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'It doesn't meet the legal definition. Can you tell me more of what happened?'

'I wrote it out,' I said a bit sheepishly. 'I worried I'd miss things if I didn't write them down?'

‘You wrote it down?’

‘If you’d be okay reading it, then we could talk about it afterwards?’ I said somewhat sheepishly. ’I just wanted to make sure I didn’t miss anything.’

She gave me a curious look, but took what I handed her. It took her about ten minutes to read. Looking back, I think I wrote it all out in laborious detail. When she was done, she said, ‘This just seems like a messy breakup to me.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Do you have anything to corroborate your side?’

I produced Rachel’s letter, and the two emails from the day before. She read them, and after that something in her manner towards me changed. She seemed a touch warmer and less officious. I interpreted it as a good sign. She then informed me that I had a strong argument for a dismissal but needed to be aware of a few things, which she counted off on long bony fingers:

1. The date on my court summons was for a preliminary hearing to decide if an application for a proper restraining order was legitimate. If I didn’t contest it, then the judge would grant one by default.
2. If I *did* contest the petition, and the judge hadn’t dismissed it at the preliminary (which judges were disinclined to do) then I’d have to go to trial.
3. The judge I’d been assigned was unpredictable but analytical (whatever that meant).

‘In the trial,’ she said, ‘you can present evidence and cross examine. That’s when we can tell your side of the story.’

‘I can’t tell my side in the hearing I’ve already got?’

‘There’s no time allotted for that in a preliminary. It depends on the judge’s mood. Sometimes they will ask a few questions. It depends. Is Rachel represented?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Does she have a lawyer?’

‘She's got a family friend,’ I said. ‘That’s who she mentioned in that email. I imagine she’ll use him.’

She asked if I knew the man’s name. I did. She jotted it down then told me that if Rachel wasn’t represented, then Rachel would cross examine me herself if we went to trial.

‘That seems absurd,’ I said.

‘That’s how it’s done,’ she said. ‘I think you have a strong case. But in matters like this the judge needs to assess according to what’s likely.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s something called “Preponderance of the Evidence”. It’s basically a 50% likelihood in the judge’s mind that you’re guilty. We use if for matters like this.’

I thought about it. As I saw it I was already guilty under that standard. I was guilty because men stalked women. It was common. There were movies and books about it.

‘I didn’t even know I’d get a chance to defend myself,’ I said.

She looked at me strangely. ‘Of course you will.’

‘I was thinking that maybe I should just let it stick?’

She nodded as if pre-empting the question, and then we discussed the probability of it. I didn't like the idea, but I knew it was practical. Thinking about a future version of myself, someone whom a court had given a restraining order to in order to protect a woman’s wellbeing, seemed awful. It was something I would know, even if no one else had to know it.

She said I would have to go to court regardless, but that it was probably the easiest thing

to do. She then asked about citizenship status and I told her it was nothing. ‘I’m here on a tourist visa,’ I said.

She excused herself to consult with a colleague in immigration law. I sat there looking around at the watercolours on the wall. They were mild and I imagined they were meant to be calming, but they felt like everything else in that building: deflating and from an earlier era, which gave me the impression of being stuck in time.

Ten minutes later she returned. ‘A petition like this affects someone like you in quite a significant way,’ she said, sitting down and thumbing through my paperwork. ‘If this sticks to you, then it will effectively ban you from this country for the rest of your life. So, my question to you is: how do you feel about that?’

I glanced out at the reception area through vertical blinds covering the glass wall that separated our conference room from the rest of the interior. The receptionist was talking on the phone, and I looked back at my papers on the table, then back at the lawyer in front of me. ‘I don't think that's very good,’ I said. ‘I don’t know about the future. I want to spend the six months here for now though.’

‘Well, if you lost this case you'd be deported.’

‘Deported?’

‘Yes,’ she said without blinking.

I thought about it for a moment. I wondered if deportation meant I’d also be jailed, or just left to my own devices to leave the country. ‘And what if I want to fight it?’

‘You can,’ she said instantly. ‘I think you have a good chance of winning.’ She gestured at the papers. ‘If that’s all she’s got.’

‘Could I defend myself?’

She paused for a moment and closed one eye slightly. ‘I would recommend using legal

aid,' she said, 'if you can't afford us. They're free.'

'Would I be able to do that as a non-citizen?'

'I don't see why not,' she said. 'Though a word of warning—some legal aid lawyers are great, they're as good as the service we offer, but others aren't. You don't know who you'll get.'

'How would I find out about it?'

'You would need to go to the court on Clinton Street. Then you'd wait until they gave you an appointment.'

'How long would that take?'

'A couple of weeks.'

'I can represent myself though, right?' I repeated.

She exhaled and tapped one finger on the table. 'This is a funny part of family law. It links to criminal law in some ways. I wouldn't recommend self-representation in a matter like this.'

I nodded uncertainly.

'Look,' she continued. 'I wouldn't warn you off self-representation in some other matters, but this is one I wouldn't do alone. If you're not going to use us, then I highly recommend using legal aid.'

'How much would you charge to represent me,' I said.

'We charge a $3000 retainer,' she responded instantly. 'And if a matter like this went to trial, which, as I said, is hard to predict, then there would be an additional $5000.'

'Wow!' I said.

'You'd get back anything we didn't use,' she replied professionally.

I knew those fees would annihilate my savings, but more importantly they meant I would

be back at Mum's house dealing with Theda's euthanasia drug. 'I've been thinking,' I said slowly, 'that she might drop it once she knows I'm gone.'

The lawyer tapped her pen on the table and shifted her lower jaw sideways a bit. 'You won't want to come back to Albany?'

'I hope I never see this city for the rest of my life,' I said. She smiled slightly at my moroseness.

'From what you've told me, it seems quite possible that Rachel is trying to get you out. She said that in her email.' She paused and held the same expression for a moment. 'So…if leaving is what you've decided to do—and I'm not saying you must, and I *wouldn't* say that—but if it *is* then…I'm wondering if someone can tell her you've left?'

'I would like that,' I said. 'I'm catching a bus to Syracuse after this.'

'*You* can't contact her,' she said, looking at me pointedly. 'This order forbids it. Are you aware of that?'

'Yes.'

'It's a temporary order, but it's as serious as any long term one. It becomes criminal if you break it.'

'I know that,' I said.

She tapped the pen on the table again, then looked upwards as if calculating something, then back at me, and said, 'I would be happy to make that phone call as part of today's fee.'

'That would be great,' I said.

'But if there are any other negotiations, other than that one call, then we'd have to talk about a fee.' I was hit by another moment of relief and thanked her.

After that, we sorted out some details and made sure my contact information and Rachel's were both correct on the documents. Then I thanked her one final time, and she

wished me luck. ‘Syracuse is a fine city,’ she said. ‘You’ll like it.’

After I left, I felt better. If anything, I realised Rachel had done me a kind of favour. Dealing with this was eradicating a good portion of my grief over the relationship ending. That would return, no doubt, but this was a very powerful distraction. And whatever was going on with Rachel, I couldn’t imagine a world in which she wanted to do me real harm. I was pretty sure she would drop the petition once she knew I was gone.

After the appointment, I went back to the BnB, collected my things, then caught a local bus to the station. I boarded a 2pm coach that had the word ‘Syracuse’ in large letters on a sign in its windscreen. As I was getting on, I noticed some college boys bantering cheerily with each other as they took the seats up front. The world seemed to come back into focus. I felt like a tourist again as I watched them teasing each other.

As the coach pulled onto the overpass I saw Albany’s small skyline out my window and sighed. I reached for my iPod, hoping I’d never see that skyline again for as long as I lived.

I woke up half an hour later as the coach slowed down crossing a bridge over a small river. The college boys were still talking loudly up front, and a scene of fields passed outside. I must have fallen asleep. I'm not a day sleeper, but the last thing I remembered was putting in headphones and resting my head against the window. My body was still a bit jet-lagged. A week earlier I had travelled as far across the globe as is possible, and so much had happened since then.

One of the boys was talking louder than the others, ‘…Rikki, is like, dude—her mom, like, married to some guy from the City, man. She’s, like, super upper-West side.’

My jaw felt funny and I rubbed it. While dozing off with my head against the glass,

vibrations from the engine had made my teeth chatter. I could still feel numbness in the back of my mouth.

The barns outside had roofs that reminded me of baby bonnets. The silos next to them were tall and slender, with dusty-red paint on their sides and white caps. They looked like armless toy soldiers.

'She's, like, totally cool, man,' the same voice concluded from up front.

'Nah man,' another retorted. 'Nah, Dude. She's, super interesting.'

'I'm not denying that,' the first voice said. 'I just think it's, like, something that factors in is all.'

I thought of when I'd been that age. I'd probably been just as clumsy in my more introverted way. I'd been travelling around the country, trying to get over depression, but I hadn't been very mature. They weren't much younger than Rachel really though. They looked about twenty; she was five years older but hadn't spent much time outside the protectiveness of college dormitories as an adult. In the years to come I would think about that more.

When I'd seen those boys boarding the bus, they'd had a jangled dance about them that I would one day associate with American college guys of a certain ilk. They were sweet-looking white kids, probably from good families, who'd never imagined anything other than going to college as soon as high school finished. Their body language seemed to riff off black America somehow, as well as I knew that way of moving from the movies at least. It was all flipping arms and clicking fingers. It looked like they had a secret-club language, but one they were only mildly aware of. Boys had their ways, I thought. Intimacy for men was always at a distance. I'd not really figured that out until I was older. I didn't know how to do any of those masculine languages back in Perth. Back home there was more uptightness. My close

friends in Perth were all women. It was something Mum had commented on. She said that when she had moved from England to Perth, it had shocked her how separately men and women behaved in Western Australia. ‘At a party, all the men would stick together and the women would go to the kitchen,’ she said.

My city wasn’t as black-and-white as that anymore, but it was still the city I had grown up in. I knew a few European transplants who'd said the same thing. ‘There's something wrong with the men here,’ was a comment I had heard more than one say. Scratching the surface revealed that they were complaining about stoicism. But those American college boys were different. They were more expressive.

I was suddenly struck by a feeling I’d had as a much younger man. I had felt it when I was 19 and encountered Melbourne for the first time. After having tried to kill myself, instead of staying in Perth I got on the dole and took a bus across the country. I arrived in Melbourne and watched men talking over café tables on Brunswick Street one night, gesticulating excitedly. It was a bold body language that would have been considered suspect in Perth. Recovering from depression was easier in an environment where masculinity wasn’t rigid.

As I sat listening to those boys, it lifted my spirits, and I realised that Rachel was right when she’d told me I would fit in here.

‘That billboard is a joke,’ one of the boys said.

‘We got those down in Philly,’ the other said.

Just then, I looked across the aisle. A woman was tapping on her phone, apparently oblivious to the loud conversation up front. She looked up and smiled briefly; I smiled back then turned to my window again. A train paced us for a while before its tracks took it away from the road. We passed another shallow river then more farmland. I had never imagined New York outside of the city, and now here it was.

When we arrived in Syracuse, I collected my suitcase from under the bus and made my way through the small station building to a carpark. There was a pudgy man with jet black hair and a manicured beard waiting next to an SUV. We recognised each other from the photos.

‘I’m Michael,’ he said.

‘Good to meet you,’ I said, offering a handshake. ‘I’m Khin.’

His hand had hardly any grip, and his skin was extremely soft, but his manner was confident and amiable. We put my case in the back of the SUV and he drove us out of the station. The seats had that new car smell about them. I looked out the windows at a mess of overpasses as we pulled up to some lights. ‘Most’a ‘Cuse is in a depression right now,’ he said gesturing at the window. ‘See these lots?’

The lots were overshadowed by the exit ramps, but I looked at one he was waving his hand at. It was full of rubble and the thin iron poles that stick out of concrete foundation blocks. ‘They’re trying to stimulate the economy, Khin,’ he said. ‘But nothing sticks.’

I nodded and we drove on. A billboard on a soot-caked pole caught my eye. Aimed at one of the exit ramps, the message boasted *Gander! New York's LARGEST Gun Store!*

‘The economy is not doing well in this part of the country?’ I asked.

‘Manufacturing left us in the 90s, Khin,’ he said, ‘We’ve had new industries come in and try to make it work. Even *big* tech like IBM tried to set up here.’

I stole another quick look at his face. He was nodding gently as he spoke. That well-maintained beard was so black it could have been dyed. His skin was as doughy-looking and pale as any skin could be. I wondered if he was Greek. He also had a bit of an oversized infant look. I got the impression of someone comfortably off, but also apologetic about it.

‘Do you see what I mean, Khin?’ he said, gesturing at the window again.

I nodded and made an agreeable sound. It was sunny outside. Even the razed concrete lot he’d pointed at was appealing in some urban sort of way. I was wondering where the skyline was. Coming in I hadn’t noticed it. Wikipedia had informed me that Syracuse had 200,000 people, and it was the birthplace of both Tom Cruise and the electric traffic signal. Apart from that I didn’t know a thing about it.

‘We got hit hard by the GFC,’ he said, nodding to himself mostly. ‘Most of New York State is like this now. Not the City. *They* have money. But it’s a recession in most other parts.’

‘You mean New York City is well off?’ I asked.

‘That's right. The *City*—that’s what we *call* it.’ He tilted his head a fraction and squinted at the road. ‘Not that I should complain though.’

I glanced over at him one more time. The Global Financial Crisis hadn’t hit my city at all. The mining boom in WA was still tailing off. Back home I never heard anyone I knew talk about the economy.

‘It’s just terrible now,’ he continued. ‘Gotta keep folks moving, you see, Khin. That’s the reality. People get into trouble if you don’t keep ‘em movin.’

‘What about yourself?’ I asked. ‘I don’t think you mentioned your job in your profile?’

‘I work for the hotels,’ he said, sighing slightly. ‘Beds, curtains, coffee tables. When they need anything like that they come to me. I source it and do the logistics, you see. I get a lot of stuff for my own house in the process. It’s a good deal.’

‘Sounds handy,’ I said. I was a bit dazed from the bus trip still, and couldn’t quite figure out what else to say. He seemed to be a man who liked to talk though, so that took some pressure off.

‘It is…it is,’ he said, nodding and smiling without taking his eyes off the road. ‘How

about yourself, you said you're a writer?'

'I'm an English second language teacher,' I said. 'I teach refugees. But I'm taking a break to write something.'

'Is that how you travel? With the English teaching?'

'I do it at home,' I said. 'But I get holidays and travel Asia when I can.'

He nodded, smiled then rocked his oversized body, 'Gotta love those teaching holidays, Khin. Refugees you said? Someone has to help em. Good for you…good for you. Is that private or government?'

'We're funded by the government,' I said. 'The refugees don't have money, but the government lets them have benefits in exchange for doing English classes with people like me.'

'Single payer?'

'Sorry?'

'I heard you get that in Australia,' he said.

I looked over at him. He was grinning and nodding to himself. 'That's what Obamacare is meant to fix, you see,' he continued. 'See, we have a *dual* payer system here. That's fine if you have a job but a lot of people don't, Khin. And a lot of folks work part-time. Or else their employer doesn't have an HMO. That's what this new bill is meant to fix, see what I mean? Sounds like you have single payer over there.'

I remembered Rachel telling me she was worried because she was going to turn 26 soon, and would no longer be on her father's healthcare plan. A country that didn't offer free healthcare created a different kind of citizen. I wondered, not for the first time, whether our breakup over my earning power had more meaning here than it did back in Australia. Maybe that's why it had seemed out of the blue for me, but not for her once she'd returned. 'That's

right,' I said. 'I've never heard that term before.'

'Thought you had single payer,' he said grinning. 'Someone's always paying, Khin.'

After that, we drove down a multilane highway and I finally spotted the skyline. It was a small city. A decent collection of modest skyscrapers and a church steeple poked out amidst a mess of ramps and expressways. When we got downtown, the traffic slowed and he began pointing out things. 'That's Starbucks,' he said. 'You should write there. I see people on their laptops in there all the time. Do you have Starbucks in Australia?'

'I think so,' I said. 'I've seen it in Melbourne. But we don't in my city for some reason.'

'See that's the problem with us Americans, Khin. We think the whole world revolves around us! It's just not the case. That's how it is when you're from such a big country. What are you writing about?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. Then I added, 'I'm enrolled in a course, but I'm really just a beginner.'

'Like an online course or something?'

'Sort of,' I said. 'Everyone on it is a lot younger than me.'

'I'm sure you will be great!' he enthused. 'You seem like a very astute person, Khin.'

'Thanks,' I said, not sure why he would think that, but happy for the compliment.

'Gotta start somewhere,' he continued. 'Work hard, put in those hours.'

I thanked him again and thought of Rachel. She'd said Australians lacked confidence when it came to our dreams. She'd called us 'British-lite' and said we had a culture of denigrating ourselves. She said it was a sign of insecurity that we did that and simultaneously fawned over Europeans, but criticised America as if we knew it already, while consuming its culture in the form of movies and other things. 'People tell me about America here,' she'd said to me more than once, 'as if they know it, and when I ask if they've ever been, they say

“no”. It’s ridiculous.’

Michael did another a lap of the downtown area, pointed out a few more shops, and then passed under an iron bridge. Just outside of the downtown area the mood changed abruptly. It was instantly more suburban-looking but quite noticeably poor. The first thing I saw was a three-story wooden house with all its windows smashed out and paint peeling off its sideboards. It looked like it was divided into apartments. A fire escape staircase was leading up to external doors on the other floors. It sat on a corner block and the front door was boarded over. A man in a different house was leaning out of his window, smoking a cigarette and looking at it without a readable expression. There was junk strewn on his lawn—a plastic tricycle was discarded in some weeds, and other nameless cheap objects that obviously weren’t being used anymore. I had seen urban poverty before, but this was different. It was also noticeably racialised. Everyone on the pavements was of African descent. Some guys were walking with that American gangster body language I only knew from movies.

Michael waved his hand at the windscreen. ‘It’s not safe through here,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t recommend walking. I live on the other side of it though, so don’t worry.’ He paused for a moment, and then said, ‘Are you hiring a car?’

‘No,’ I said, wondering how I’d get into town.

‘Don’t worry. You can catch the bus, and taxis are cheap. You have my number, right?’

I told him I did.

‘Good. Good,’ he said nodding.

We turned into an intersection with some traffic lights hanging from wires strung overhead—another thing I’d only ever seen in movies—and an old woman curled over a walking frame followed us with her gaze.

I would later find out that Syracuse had the highest concentration of coloured poverty in

the country. The inner-city area that Michael drove me through on that first day was one of its bastions. In the 1950s, all over the US, white families had started acquiring cars and vanishing from the inner-city areas, leaving a ring of black poverty around the centres. It was the opposite to a city like Perth, where most of the poor people lived miles from the centre. As I watched three kids jostling in a carpark outside a store, I wondered if inner-city degradation meant that middle-class Americans drove through these parts of their city to get to their jobs. It would affect the way you saw your place in the world to do that. I wasn't sure if it would make people feel grateful or numb. It seemed to me that a country like this needed unbridled optimism in the idea of a meritocracy. Without that there would be civil unrest. Neighbourhoods like this were reminders of how far you might fall.

When I'd been a teenager, my life had headed to a dark place. I was lucky I got out of it when I did. I'd used benefits and healthcare services to do that. I wasn't sure I would have been okay if any of those troubles had happened here. America was a tougher place to survive.

Michael began to give me a minor history lesson then. He talked about the Eerie Canal. 'Used to be they moved things about on barges, Khin,' he said. 'The canal ran from Albany to Buffalo, but Syracuse was one of its big hubs. We were a boom town back then! When rail came that system was obsolete. That's how it is with history. Hundreds of people died digging those canals and then a few decades later it all got replaced anyway!'

I listened and made agreeable sounds, while asking a few questions here and there to be polite, but my attention was still outside the windows. My life in Australia was fortunate. In my years in Melbourne, I'd spent twelve months in Footscray. The street gutters in that part of town had been littered with hypodermic needles, and there had been drug dealers on the corners. In other words, I'd seen poor urban neighbourhoods up close before, but the South

side of Syracuse was beyond it. The buildings were literally falling apart. Footscray was ethnically mixed, but the South side of Syracuse was mono-racial. There were guns out there also, I imagined. It all spoke to a different history.

I spied a man on the fire escape of another large house, outside of its third-floor exit. He wasn't wearing a shirt and looked relieved about something. The dilapidated mansion at his back had paint like stretched gum on its weatherboard.

'We're up here,' Michael said. We turned a corner and the atmosphere instantly changed. We were on a shallow hill. Reticulated lawns and well-kept houses stood either side of us, and there wasn't a single pedestrian in sight.

We pulled into a large brick house on the corner block. It was double story with pillars holding up a driveway awning. Two American flags dangled from short poles jutting out of its mid-eaves. Michael jumped out of the driver's seat, and he had my suitcase in hand before I was on my feet.

'Try the lock on the front door yourself, Khin,' he said offering up a set of keys. 'So you know how it feels.'

After fumbling with it for a moment we stepped through a little jacket-hanging room, and entered a large foyer-like area with polished floors and a wide staircase in its centre. There was a large alcove to the right with a woman watching a massive TV from a big couch. He introduced us and she said 'hello', her fingers stained orange and poised over a bowl of something. After that, we made our way to the staircase. Something went *pfft* halfway up *to the second storey,* and an apple scent filled the air. Michael grinned with pleasure. 'I get things from the hotel orders,' he reminded me. 'It's really not a problem.'

I realised I wasn't feeling very good. The fake apples weren't helping. I'd not wanted to isolate myself in the suburbs, and somehow I hadn't realised when looking at Google Maps

that that was exactly what I was doing by choosing a place like this. I'd chosen an Airbnb that was a long way from anything within walking distance. The feeling in the house was sterile. When we got to the second floor, I eyed a vase on a tall table in front of a garish mirror suspiciously. It looked cheap and pretentious. Michael was talking about bathrooms and kitchen space, but I was busy feeling like I'd made a dumb mistake. I'd paid a month in advance, and, as far as I knew, it was non-refundable, so I would be stuck here.

Despite my misgivings, the bedroom had obviously been carefully put together for guests. It had a double bed doused in thick bedding. And, though there wasn't any floorspace, it had a narrow table against one wall with a plastic coffee machine on it. He pointed to the curtains. 'Those are hotel-grade, Khin,' he said proudly. 'They keep out 100% of the light!'

Before leaving, he added in a gratuitous whisper, 'I use hotel-grade bedding. You won't sleep better anywhere!'

A couple of hours later, I lay on that bed. I didn't have the wherewithal to go out exploring that day, and there was no other place in the room to be except on top of it. I lay there for a while, staring at the curtains, and letting my mind wander. I started thinking about Theda and our childhood. She'd led me about back then. We'd played Barbies and dress-ups. We'd made cubbies out of dining room chairs with blankets thrown over them, and her company had been better than anyone else's. She'd interpreted the world for me, and turned it into games. She hadn't always got them right—once, when we'd been no bigger than tree saplings, she'd led me out to the backyard where there was a little bricked-in plot of earth and some edible plants; once there, she instructed me to rub our father's chilli plants in my eyes as she did the same. A few seconds later we both took the back fly-wire off its hinges while tumbling over

each other to get to our mother, who had scooped us up and dumped us both in the laundry sink while saying 'I told you *not* to touch your eyes if you touched them.' Those were memories which shone the brightest. During high school we'd been in different worlds. After it, the illness had occurred, and, in the last years especially, it wasn't possible to talk to her about much at all. She didn't have the mental energy. Now, I was here, and she was there, waiting to get better alone.

I started to wonder what it would be like if she really did die. It was a question I didn't like to think about, but we'd almost lost her three times already, so it was something I thought about sometimes. A world without her was something I couldn't imagine easily. If she was gone, it changed things. It would be something both Mum and I would need to make sense of together. We had both wished for it at various times. Theda was so unhappy that death seemed a mercy. But it was also too tragic to make sense of. Mum would be alone then too.

I wanted to call home but realised it would be 2am in Perth. When I was away like this, things were so much clearer. When I thought of her face and how earnestly she'd said to me that she hoped life after death didn't exist, I felt tears welling up in my throat. But even as I felt them, I felt another, stronger part of me, push them back down again. I couldn't let whatever was inside me grieve about a death that hadn't happened yet. I couldn't let it out.

Later that afternoon, I did something unexpected. I rationalised it as being because I didn't want to get depressed after having isolated myself in the suburbs. I got on my laptop, sat cross-legged atop that thick swampy bedding, and answered questions about my age, gender and earning power for a website with an algorithm that promised success. I'd never made a dating profile before, and it felt strange. Meeting people online was still embarrassing to my

mind. It said something that wasn't desirable. But Rachel had told me it was common in America, and besides, who would know me here, I thought. I constructed a profile that was as honest as I knew how to be with strangers. It felt a bit cheap and strange. Rachel had denigrated my cautiousness. But this was bold. This was taking a problem by its horns. To be honest, romance was the last thing on my mind, but I thought it would amount to an exercise in not getting depressed, like running once a day, or something like that. I'd be happy to not be quite so isolated. I could meet a stranger and practise talking.

After I was done, I lay down on the bed again and closed my eyes. The murmur of Michael's TV was under the door. That was something else he had explained: his bedroom had a connecting door to mine, and so did his mother's, who lived in the house also, but who I wouldn't see much, he said. My room had obviously not been designed as a bedroom in the original plans. 'You'll have your privacy, Khin,' he'd assured me several times, sounding slightly anxious while showing the room. 'No one will open those doors.'

As I fell asleep that night, the light of his TV was still flickering under the door leading to his bedroom. I could hear his mother's TV behind the other door, near my bedhead. It wasn't unpleasant. I woke up once and didn't know where I was. When the predicament slowly came back to me, I realised I was hot and that was what had woken me. Throwing off the covers, I noted that Michael's flickering TV light was gone. Then I slept until morning.

12

I learned what symbolic life was from my father. He didn't teach it, but I learned about it from him. The first time I recognised what I was seeing, I was 24-years-old. I was back from living in Melbourne and I wanted to have a relationship with him. I would go to his place for dinner, and he seemed to want me there. But when I was there I sometimes regretted it. He was critical. If I was doing some menial task, like washing dishes, he'd lecture me about how to do it mindfully, like he had when I was a kid. After having lived in another city for a good few years though, I had learned to shrug my shoulders. I felt like an adult by then. And we got to know each other better.

By then, Dad had moved out of the house with the dividing fence. My parents had both taken mortgages for new places; Dad's was in North Perth. His rooms were filled with junk. He had extra desks, fridge shelving, old broken computers, radios, water heaters and unused fish tanks. These things were either from the divorce or things he'd picked up from friends. Sometimes he went to the tip, and he never came back empty handed. His laundry was occupied by three dressers filled with various things he'd collected. He also kept spare milk crates in the corner of his kitchen. I'd once asked him for a piece of wire and his face had lit

up. ‘Son,’ he’d said excitedly. ‘Go to the laundry and look in the second dresser. In the third drawer down is a little elastic-band box full of bolts I saved when people threw them out. There is also a pencil case with used tap washers I saved from your mother’s. You will find a piece of wire I flattened!’

It meant something to him to have all this junk. He talked about how Westerners were wasteful. It was symbolic. It signified his Burmese roots. His attitude towards objects represented his homeland, and the frugality of the ‘Burmese way’, as he saw it.

One evening I was over at his house looking for something to chop vegetables with for dinner, when I came across the knife I’d used to try and end my own life several years earlier. I pulled it out of one of his kitchen drawers. I’d packed it away when leaving Perth, left in a box in his garage with some old letters and diaries. I looked at it for a while before saying anything. It had blood stains on the blade and around the handle.

My father was sitting at the dining room table in his longyi. ‘Dad?’ I said, holding it up. ‘Where did you get this?’

‘That used to be yours,’ he said, with a note of accusation in his voice. ‘You packed it.’

‘Did you notice it has blood stains on it?’

He rocked his head slightly, ‘It’s a good knife, Son,’ he said. ‘Nothing wrong with it.’

‘It’s the knife I used to try and kill myself with,’ I said darkly.

He looked at me with mild condemnation. ‘This is just the object, Son, nothing more. You need to learn that a true Buddhist knows this.’

He went back to whatever he was doing. ‘Why would you keep it in your kitchen drawer?’ I insisted, after a moment.

‘It’s good for tomatoes,’ he said. ‘A knife that can cut a tomato properly is hard to find. Don’t worry, I cleaned it. Those stains are permanent.’

In those years, I did my best to ignore Dad's neurotic side. I was old enough now to want to hash over a few things, but if I brought up anything about our childhood that was vaguely critical, I'd have to sit through a lecture on Buddhism and psychology. Or else, he'd say, 'That's just your perception.'

I once asked him whether his own perception was included in his dismissal of perception itself; he told me to stop wanking with words, and that Buddhists knew better than to do that. He never apologised for anything, except when he mimicked the way monks would formally ask for forgiveness after a meditation retreat. That would happen if you talked for hours and eventually got him to admit he had stopped being a father at one point. It didn't feel real though, and wasn't worth it. But once I understood that a lot of this behaviour was an attempt at regaining a sense of dignity, I found it easier to forgive. When I washed the dishes, I didn't wash them right; when I dried them, I didn't do that correctly either, by his standard; when I turned on the heater, I failed to do it with mindfulness. When I turned it off that was also my failing. But all these things he threw at me just faded into the background in the end. I accepted him as he was, and ignored what I didn't like.

Aside from his collected objects, there was also a veritable library in his house. They were mostly photocopied tomes that he'd had spiral bound, or books he'd found in university library sales. They were all about Buddhism or psychotherapy, and they sat on sagging shelves that ran down one side of his hallway from his front door to his back. Along with all those other objects, these things helped him regain whatever he felt he'd lost. My sister was correct during her psychoses when she identified it years later: he had built a prison around himself. It kept everyone else at bay.

Despite this, I knew that he was lonely, and that he regretted not having a better relationship with Theda or me. Sometimes he'd tease me about some predilection that he

thought I still had, and I would realise he was referring to something he remembered from my early childhood. I was an adult, and my habits and tastes had moved on. He was trying to catch up, but was unwilling to accept that he had ever not been around to know that things had changed. It was a strange kind of denial.

Mum was bitter about Dad. She said to me more than once, ‘He bullied you as a kid, Khin. And he blamed you kids for all his own failings, why do you not confront him about it?’

I never knew how to respond to my mother’s statements. The only real answer I had was that I forgave him, and kept him at arm’s length, but that I still got something out of the relationship. Theda couldn’t do the same. She confronted him about things from our childhood. I understood that, but I let it go. When he told her that her ME was psychosomatic, it was just another rejection. I realise that now. All she heard was him telling her she wasn’t good enough again. She wasn’t Buddhist enough, which was akin to him telling her she wasn’t Burmese enough to be loved by him. I think Theda needed Dad’s approval much more than I did in the end. I always wanted Theda to be able to see our father the way I did; as someone slightly mad, and deeply insecure.

People sometimes ask me now why I don’t speak Burmese. I once pushed my father for an answer, and he said, ‘You kids weren’t interested.’ I told him that wasn’t a good excuse, and he said, ‘I tried to teach you once, but you all laughed at me.’

I thought about that for a long time after he said it. I was sure we hadn’t laughed at his culture. In fact, we had often asked about it. He’d not wanted to share. He was ashamed of it. When I asked my mother about the laughing, she said he was referring to an incident when we’d been not much older than toddlers. He had tried to teach us a few Burmese words, and we’d laughed at the strangeness of the foreign sounds in our mouths, not at him. He’d felt

threatened by that though. When I understood that, I started to see him as someone plagued by a deep inferiority complex. Instead of facing it, he was putting Band-Aids on the wound, all the while protesting that there was no wound.

In the sixth year of her illness, Dad left Perth. He retired and went to Thailand to work as a volunteer with Burmese refugees. Theda felt abandoned. It left me as the only person there to support them.

The first time the idea of him triggered a psychosis for her was about a year after he left. She had stopped talking to him. I was still in contact though, and I never talked about him in front of her, unless she brought the topic up herself.

Our father had been away for a year, and he was coming back for a short visit to sort out something with his house. I was worried that Theda would be upset by it, so I kept it from her. She had stopped all communication with him, so she had no way of knowing he was coming. I didn't say anything, but when he got back, Theda overheard me talking with Mum about the fact that he was in Perth, and she became delusional. She had to be sectioned shortly afterwards.

The other incident occurred at a different time, after she'd already fallen into a psychosis. Mum had admitted her voluntarily to Perth Clinic, but they couldn't contain her, and they sent her to a locked facility in Armadale. After a few days on anti-psychotics, Armadale sent her back to Perth Clinic. She was readmitted, but one of the psychiatrists on roster that day looked like our dad. She flipped out, started hearing voices, was convinced he was there to torture her. They sent her back to Armadale after that.

Not long after Dad left, Mum asked if I would meet up with her a couple of times a week. She had lost touch with her friends, and said it was hard to feel normal while caring for my sister. Dad had called up one of her close friends on his visit to Perth, telling that friend that my mother was part of the problem. That friend had then called my mother up and accused her of making Theda sick. It marked the end of the friendship. I was furious at my father. My mother was already isolated, and he was making it worse, swanning off in Thailand assuaging his ego as the saviour of refugees.

I would usually meet Mum at McDonalds during the week. It was close to her house and it was cheap. With Dad gone, I my role naturally expanded. In emergencies, like when a psychosis hit, I was the only other person she could call. As a result, despite our best intentions to offer her something distracting when we met up, we usually ended up talking about my sister's treatments.

'Maybe you should just keep them simple,' I often suggested. She listened as much as she could, given the quest she was on to find a cure. Her spirits were low and she was constantly on a high dose of an antidepressant.

She still talked about suicide quite regularly. 'If it wasn't for you, Khin' she would say. 'Neither Theda or I would bother staying alive.'

When my sister's psychotic breaks occurred, she still referred to me as 'Neo'. I was her compatriot then. But I relinquished that status after I realised they were not going to cure her. It happened one night in the emergency ward at Fremantle. She was on a stretcher babbling and I was sitting on its edge, waiting for Mum to return. I looked at her and made a decision. 'Do you know where you are?' I said.

She looked at me.

'Do you hear that machine?' I said. 'It's a hospital machine. That's because you're in the hospital. That make sense, doesn't it? You've had a psychosis and that's all this is.'

It took a while, but I said the same thing over and over, trying to elicit a sober response. After about fifteen minutes, she looked at me uncertainly and said in a shaky voice, 'I think I'm having a psychosis, Khin.'

She held it together for a moment and was subdued, but, not long after then, I turned around to see if I could see our mother anywhere. I felt a thump on my back and I spun around to see her fierce eyes glaring at me. 'You!' she shouted angrily. 'You're one of *them!*'

That was the day I stopped going into her mythical world with her when she was delusional, in the hope she'd find a way of dragging some manageable part of it back into her normal life. Her psychotic breaks still cured her physical symptoms, but they didn't help anything in the end. They were only another symptom. I wasn't ever Neo again after that. Sometimes I regret choosing to do that, and I wonder if things might have shifted if I had persisted a little more. It was an honour to be given a trusted role, and I rejected it in the end.

She wasn't psychotic often. It was only once every nine months or so, for about two weeks. But over time, Mum and I got used to the locked wards around Perth. They varied. Which one Theda ended up in depended on which had a bed available. One time in Armadale, she grabbed me by the arm in the corridor near the beginning, and said, 'Lots of crocs in this one, Neo. We must warn the Paladians!'

At the Bentley ward, the nurses were bullies. They locked my sister in a room and told her she couldn't use the toilet. She urinated on the floor. As soon as they let her out she

promptly emptied a cup of water over another patient's head, convinced he was on fire. He jumped up, took one look at the conviction in her eyes and laughed before ambling off to clean himself up. I believed that my sister dealt with adversity when she was psychotic like she should have dealt with the bullies in high school. She saw an enemy, even though it wasn't a real one anymore, and she didn't blame herself for its presence; she blamed that enemy. Those were the only times I think I ever saw her without a deep shame buried in her somewhere. During a psychosis, the shame broke free and left, and her symptoms left with it, but she couldn't control the explosion of energy that happened then.

Over the next few years, when she wasn't psychotic, she mostly lost the ability to communicate altogether. She could think to some extent, but she couldn't hold a conversation. Her ME doctors said it was a symptom. She would lose track of a sentence halfway through. And, after a couple of minutes, depending on the topic, she'd usually tell me that she was too tired to talk.

I gradually developed an instinct for what she could handle. It helped that I was an ESL teacher, because I was used to talking with people who needed me to guide the conversation to topics they found easy. Usually, I brought a little snippet from the outside world. It would be something intriguing from work or my social life; something concrete. I usually tried to keep it very simple and a bit humorous. I'm not the funniest person, but I often made her laugh. Despite losing my status as Neo-the-fellow-adventurer, we were still compatriots.

So it was that when we spoke, if I noticed she was starting to tire out, I would let her know it was okay to stop talking. Despite that, she'd usually look ashamed of herself anyway. If I didn't notice her tiring out, she would try to converse until her eyes glazed over, but

eventually she would say, ‘I’m sorry, Minty, I don’t know what we’re talking about.’ She would look ashamed of herself then too.

I always told her it was fine, and of course it was. But I missed having a sister I could talk to. She never left the house except for medical appointments, and she was too tired to even watch TV for most of the years she was ill. She rarely used the internet, and reading was too tiring. Audiobooks were all she really had to stop herself from just lying in that darkened room in silence for months on end, between the psychotic breaks.

Despite the ME doctor calling the lack of cognitive ability a symptom of the ME, I often thought of how her inability to communicate seemed so similar to a symptom I’d had with the depression all those years earlier. I didn’t push this idea, but I thought it. I remembered that symptom. It had been one of the really shameful ones, and also one of the most unusual. When you’re clinically depressed, the world is flat and cognitively you get confused. You lose track of where you are in a conversation. It’s like being out on a featureless plain and trying to figure out the direction you’re walking. It looks like brain damage, but it isn’t, it’s something else. Doctors who deal with patients who have major clinical depression see it sometimes.

Mum continued to take Theda to different specialists as the years passed. Light and sound started to cause her distress, and the pain got worse. She asked me to use special deodorant and special laundry liquid. Some of the alternative doctors had convinced her that chemical toxins in the environment were making her worse. I began to experiment. I noticed that if I didn’t use the products she said were ‘safe’, but kept quiet about it, she didn’t seem to notice.

The line between neurosis and symptom was blurry. A pain specialist at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital offered her Fentanyl patches, and, after six weeks, she was hooked.

Fentanyl has side-effects, and one can be your skin. After she started it, she would break out in a rash if she touched certain materials. It confirmed the idea that she was specifically sensitive to chemicals in the environment that other people weren't sensitive to. During this time she started wearing cotton gloves. She also started vomiting. Fentanyl can do that to a person at high doses. She'd vomit eight or nine times a day. She used noise-cancelling headphones when she left the house to go to a doctor's appointment, and she covered her eyes with a mask. Even indoors she often wore dark glasses. Otherwise she spent her time in that dark room at my mother's house.

It wasn't until she'd been on the Fentanyl for six months that we began to realise she was addicted. A doctor at St John of God's Hospital first pointed it out. Mum couldn't figure out why Theda had so many new symptoms. The doctor diagnosed multiple chemical sensitivities first. That was his specialty, and like all doctors (and like me, I suppose), he saw in my sister's illness what he was an expert in. However, when he realised there was an opiate addiction, he took her off the Fentanyl immediately. She then went into withdrawal and it triggered another psychosis.

Sometimes I would think of leaving to get on with my own life somewhere else. But I couldn't bring myself to go. When Dad had first left Perth, I'd tried to talk him out of it.

'I can't put my life on hold,' he'd said.

'Why not?' I'd asked.

'You do what you think is right, Son,' he'd said. 'Your sister only listens to your mother

anyway. You think she has ME?'

'You should stay,' I'd said. 'What matters is being there for them.'

'I can't bite my tongue. I can't go along with your mother's doctor's diagnosis.'

'Just ignore the diagnosis,' I said. 'Focus on the fact that she's suffering.'

'I can't lie,' he said. 'Not for anyone.'

Christmas the year he left was hard. It hadn't been a pleasant time of year for many years by then because I usually ended up in the living room nibbling at leftover Christmas food while everyone else wept in their bedrooms. But I remember it vividly that year Dad went away from Perth. Mum tried to make it jovial. She put up a plastic tree and made a nice lunch. Theda got a bracelet she'd been talking about. It was partly a present from me too. It hung loosely around her wrist with a tiny silver charm of a cottage on it, and the plan was that she'd buy a new charm online at the end of each month with what remained of her disability payment. It was meant to be something totally unrelated to her illness that she could look forward to each month.

As we ate, Mum and I mentioned a couple of times how nice it looked. Theda ate boiled chicken. She was on a special ME diet as usual, but her spirits seemed okay. After we'd eaten, she went back to her bedroom to rest, and half an hour later I was cleaning up wrapping paper in the lounge room when I noticed that the house had fallen silent. I went and found Mum lying next to her.

I quietly left them alone, but when Mum emerged half an hour later she was red-eyed and told me that Theda wanted to die.

13

When I woke, the house in Syracuse felt empty. I wasn't sure if Michael's mother was in her room, but it was all quiet downstairs when I looked around. It seemed I was on my own. It was bright and sunny out. I didn't have anything to eat, so I figured I would explore the area a little bit and find something. After walking out into the suburbs for a while, I lost heart when reaching a big park. There wasn't a soul in it. Everyone must be at work, I supposed. I'd turned back toward the city, making the snap decision to ignore Michael's advice and walk it. People were out in the poorer area. Small groups of young black guys were doing those heavy-bouncy walks, and I saw a few women with prams. One of the young guys was wearing his pants so low I wondered if he used bobby pins to stop them from falling below his knees. I thought once again how American body language was fascinating. I'd seen a version of it in the college kids on the coach yesterday; then the young black guys I'd glimpsed from the car window. Now I could observe it a little closer. It was so expressive, very different from the college boys whose finger-snaps and jivey movements had said something about wit and the playful titter-tatter of point scoring. This was more an expression of gumption. I felt like a tourist. The way they walked reminded me of African

refugees back home, but this version had a different relationship to gravity. It was less zesty and it implied the person was carrying more weight.

A group of young guys slung around the entrance of a corner store gawked at me, and I remembered that I had my laptop in my backpack. It made me a little nervous.

As I walked, the warmth of the day slowed me down. I passed a squashed plastic printer on someone's front lawn. Most of those front yards didn't have grass. Gardens were subsidiary.

After twenty minutes, I realised I was lost. I had thought I would see the downtown buildings from this area, but I couldn't. I figured I might wait at a bus stop and see if one was headed into town. There was a woman smoking at a bus stop. I stood next to her and waited. She smoked a cigarette slowly, with one hand on her hip, dangling the cigarette off the other. After a few minutes she moved on, and I began to wonder if it was really a bus stop at all, or just something that looked like one. There was a sign on it that said 'Bus Stop', but it was old and there wasn't any schedule posted. Someone had scrawled the words 'Treyvon Martin' across the back of the 'Bus Stop' sign in black marker pen. That trial was still going on as far as I knew. I had seen it playing out in newspaper headlines and screen images that I'd glimpsed in various spaces while going through my little drama in Albany. This was the inner city that one of the talking heads on that TV in New York City had talked about: the boy who'd been shot had lived in an area like this, but he had been shot by a white man in an area like the suburb I was staying in.

After walking a little further, I noticed two men talking outside a low brick building, and decided to ask for directions.

‘Sup?’ the older one said as I approached. He looked about fifty. He was overweight and friendly-faced, talking to a guy in his twenties.

‘I'm trying to get to the city,’ I said.

He screwed up his face a little. ‘You mean downtown?’

‘Yes.’

Without hesitating, he pointed up the road. ‘Follow dis one then you see a bridge. Go under it. Then you on Salina.’ He then turned back to the younger guy without saying anything else.

I stood there for a moment unsure if I had understood correctly. ‘You mean two blocks down?’ I asked.

He turned back and looked at me for a moment without saying anything.

‘And then I take a left?’ I added hopefully.

His forehead creased. His eyes flicked around me for a moment. He was short and rotund with a bald brown head that shone with sweat. ‘Where you from man?’ he said.

‘Australia,’ I said.

He frowned a bit, then one corner of his mouth came up. ‘You mean the other side odda damn world?’

‘That’s right,’ I said then.

He stared at me, then cocked one eye comically and said, ‘You mean kangaroos an all that?’

I nodded eagerly.

The opposite corner of his mouth turned up and then a smile broke over his face. The most unexpected giggle came out of him, then he turned to the young guy again. ‘I mean, I pretty sure we got only one Australia, right?’

The younger guy grinned but didn't say anything. He turned back to me. 'Whatchou doin' here, man?' he said.

'I'm staying nearby,' I said. 'I figured I'd walk into the city.'

He blinked. 'You staying roun' here?'

'Yeah.'

He paused a moment and looked a bit dissatisfied, then said, 'You, mean *here* here?'

'Not exactly,' I said, pointing in the direction I thought Michael's house might be in, though, honestly, I wasn't sure anymore. 'It's up the road somewhere.'

He laughed and addressed the younger guy again, 'I mean, we done mind tourists, but he the first Australian I ever saw.'

The young guy grinned and the older one turned back to me. 'I'll be damned,' he said.

'Nice to meet you,' I said, smiling.

'Man,' he said, 'That's one crazy animal.' He glanced to the younger guy then back. 'You ever see one?'

'A kangaroo?'

'Yeah, ma-*man*!' he said enthusiastically.

'Sure,' I said. 'We get them in the outer suburbs sometimes.'

His forehead creased several times over. 'You mean people see that in the city?'

'Just the outer suburbs.'

He shook his head in disbelief. We stood there for a moment, at some kind of impasse, him beaming, me eager for the directions. 'You real close,' he said then. 'Jus two blocks down. Unna dat bridge. Then you be on Salina. Take a left. Keep walking. Das downtown.'

I thanked him and ambled off. I heard them laugh once I was a short distance away. A few minutes later, I found the underpass. It was rubbishy underneath and stank of piss. A

shadow separated from one of the pylons and lurched at me, babbling something incomprehensible. I got ready to defend myself, but then saw the figure was a slender woman with silver hair shaved to her scalp. She had almost-translucent eyes. She looked past me, and there was a charred glass pipe dangling from one of her hands. She'd already stopped paying attention to me by the time I'd identified her as not a threat.

When I got out at the other side of the underpass I turned left.

In the evening I called Mum and told her what I'd seen that day. I thought it was interesting and it was nice to have something to talk about that wasn't Theda, or my legal predicament. After I'd described it, she said, 'Life is random, Khin. You know that, don't you?'

'I do,' I said.

After that we talked a little about Theda's headaches, and then she needed to go.

Afterwards I thought about my mother. Her parents had taken her out of school in grade ten. They'd sent her brother through to university but not her. Her parents had kept her home, and her decision to then move to Australia had been considered bold and rebellious. People had told her she'd never make it on her own, but she'd arrived in Perth in 1971 adamant they were wrong. She'd worked as a dental nurse at first, then in a women's prison teaching inmates how to sew. After that, she'd worked with families in a poor part of the city. She was very a hands-on person. She didn't spend a lot of time delving into abstract thought, unlike Dad. She'd also been vaguely Christian for most of my childhood. But, these days, after a few years of Theda's illness, she'd renounced her faith. She no longer believed in God. Now she saw life as more-or-less chance. It was a connecting point for us, because I had an element of that existential outlook also. She advocated for an active role in one's own fate;

but she balanced that with the notion that things went wrong and got inside a person sometimes. I was lucky having a parent like that.

I spent the rest of my week in a cafe downtown at some corner tables that overlooked an intersection. Towards the middle of that week, a woman called Patricia started messaging me on the dating website and I messaged back. She was living in a town called Ithaca, which, as far as I could tell, was much nicer than Syracuse. She was Canadian and she worked at a university down there. I'd heard of it. It was one of the famous ones. She was nice to message with and had a pretty face. When I told her I wasn't really getting much out of Syracuse, she suggested I move to her town. It was only a couple of hours away, she said.

Near the end of that week, I received my replacement credit card. I then phoned the lawyer in Albany. I told her I'd pay her. The decision was a bit financially reckless but it felt right. It was the new 'me' who came to America and confronted a situation, who dated on the internet, who'd never rung up a debt before but had a credit card with a $6000 limit.

The lawyer seemed pleased. She said she'd already sent a letter to Rachel, and an email, as well as calling and leaving a message, but she said if we didn't hear back by the 27th, I had to be in Albany for the preliminary hearing. I knew if the judge didn't dismiss Rachel's case then that I wouldn't be able to afford legal representation for a trial, but I figured I could cross that bridge when I came to it.

That evening I knocked on Michael's bedroom door and told him I had to leave. He invited

me in and showed me some photos from his birthday party. He had printed them and put them into an album. The birthday party had been at a bar that week, and he'd asked me to come, but I'd sidestepped it. It wasn't because I disliked him—it was vaguer than that. It was an unease. He seemed dull in some way I was trying to escape. But I wondered how accurate that perception was. After telling him that he'd been a wonderful host, he surprised me and said he would refund the remainder of my month's rent. It wasn't the Airbnb policy he'd signed up for. I'd already sunk that cost in my calculations, but he told me not to be silly. 'All that matters, Khin,' he said, 'is that you're happy.'

The next day he drove me down to the station and talked all the way. His sister was recovering from ovarian cancer. He'd looked after her kids while she'd got chemotherapy. 'Family is the most important thing there is, Khin,' he said.

Before we got to the station, he shared another quick story. It was about a mentally unwell woman his friend had dated. 'She was very upset when Greg broke things off,' he said. 'She told the police he was stalking her.'

I felt blood rush to my face, and realised he must have overheard me talking on the phone through our connecting doors about my own dramas. 'What happened?' I asked.

'Look,' he said sighing, 'You never know what's going on in someone else's life, but I've known Greg a long time. He said when they first got together that he knew she was unstable, but he just—I don't know—he liked her, or something like that. She wasn't well though, Khin.'

'What happened?'

'She got a restraining order taken out on him. He was a wedding photographer. The

police turned up at his job and served it. Then, two years later, they turned up and said he'd been harassing her again.'

'Do you know if it was true?' I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know, Khin. But the thing you have to remember is that messed up people will mess you up, and there's nothing you can do about it. That's why you have to stay away from messed up people.'

'Sounds like good advice,' I said. He must have heard a lack of enthusiasm in my voice, because he just rocked his head and said it again like he was sure I hadn't heard. I felt guilty for having judged him. Whatever else it was, telling me that story was kind, and made me feel less of a freak.

A few minutes later, we got out of the car, and he shook my hand before handing over my suitcase. Then he pointed at a building behind the station. 'That's Destiny,' he said.

'What is?'

'It's the largest mall in the state, Khin—Destiny USA. That's just the back of it. It's much bigger inside. They have a full-sized rollercoaster in there. Not just a small one.'

14

The year I was 29, a cyclone hit the Pilbara and Steve Irwin got stung through the heart by a stingray. I also went to Hobart and met Rose. I was a part-time folk musician back then. ESL was my main job, but songwriting was a hobby that had taken off a bit. I'd always done it as self-therapy, but by then I also played small concerts and a few folk festivals. It wasn't much of a career, but it was also slightly more than a hobby. A more successful artist than myself had seen me at one of the folk festivals and asked me to support her album launch in Melbourne and Hobart. That's how I ended up in Hobart.

Rose was sitting on the steps at the hostel I stayed at. She was surrounded by backpacker guys, smoking cigarettes and telling stories.

'D'you play that?' she said, nodding at the guitar case.

'I'm finished for the night,' I said, 'But I'll have a cigarette if you can spare one?'

We ended up talking and swapped email addresses at the end of the night. Three months later I played at a folk festival in Canberra and she was staying nearby so we met up again. A few weeks after that, she sent an email asking if I'd like to spend six months in India with her. I'd never been to India, but I'd always wanted to go. I had images of swamis and yogis

meditating on the Ganges. It also seemed to me like India was one of the centres of the world due to its large slice of the global population-pie. I've always been fascinated by centres. I told her I'd ask for time off work and go with her.

A couple of months later, I arrived in Delhi just before she did. Delhi was chaotic. I'd never seen anything like it. Three sights stick in my memory of that first night: one is my dust-covered driver at the airport pissing in an unlit carpark. Another is of a massive truck with its driver on a plastic chair welded onto three metal poles over an engine block with no cabin around him; he was just wearing goggles. Lastly, I remember Paharganj that first night and seeing bamboo ladders on the unsealed market road, leant up against buildings so the locals could get into their rooms.

India was so much messier and poorer than I'd imagined. As I got to know the country better, I occasionally read the *Hindustan Times*, and two stories I read in it define how I was affected by the country as a whole. One was of a young couple who'd run off together. They weren't the right caste according to tradition, and the girl's family had hired local police to retrieve her. When her family got her back, they beat her. But they also got hold of the boy, who was poor, and they gouged his eyes out before throwing him down a ravine. That story appeared on page six of the Himachal Pradesh edition of the Tuesday paper. The other story was near the end of my time there. It was of a man whose defence in a murder case was that he'd been watching a love song on the TV when his wife had stood up. She'd announced that she loved him so much she would 'do anything' for him. She'd then poured gasoline over herself and lit a match. It was obviously false, but the papers were speculating that he'd get away with it. In general, India showed me how corruption, sexism and poverty are all wrapped up in each other. More than anywhere I'd ever been, it gave me the feeling that I was on a different planet, and incredibly lucky in my own life. India didn't depress me

though. It fascinated me. It truly was a centre of humanity in that way. It said something to me about what poverty really was, much more than just its lack of funds.

I was still quite unworldly that year, I think. I'd never expected that the most meaningful thing about India would be its poverty. People lived in corrugated iron shacks along the train tracks. Beggars were everywhere. Human life and dignity had a different meaning in that situation. I saw the 'sacredness of life' we had in the West as a necessary illusion against the realities of misfortune, because when push came to shove, misfortune won the game. People died young. You lied to save your own life and your family's lives. Life was incredibly hard. If I had been born in a different situation, then that would be me, I realised.

Rose and I spent our first four months together mostly in the foothills of the Himalayas. She was loving, but she drank a lot. We bickered when she was drunk. I fell in love with her though. I think we struggled to understand each other. She told me that she didn't believe men were capable of love. She said she'd figured that out by watching the men in her life. 'I fook'n hate you for making me care about you,' she said more than once.

There are a couple of stories about Rose that I always think of when I remember her. She'd grown up in a Dublin ghetto. Her mother threw her out of the house young. 'I thought we was just having an argument,' she told me stoically one evening. 'So I'm gone to a friend's house. But when I got back home there's all me things in plastic bin bags in the back alley gettin' rained on.'

I liked having a connection with someone whose backstory was like hers. It made me feel a lot less lonely than I did back home. Back home, my friends were either too reserved to actually tell each other of their tragedies, or they didn't have any. I didn't know which, though a lot of tragedies don't appear until people are out of their thirties. Rose's brother was in jail. He had a bad story too—their mother had driven him to the hills outside Dublin when

he was 14 and then left him there without any shoes as some sort of punishment. He'd never lived at home again after that. 'You're gonna love Michael when you meet him,' she said. 'Everyone does, but he doesn't suffer fools.'

We broke up at my behest. It was sad. She was aggressive, and when I complained about that she always apologised, but it wasn't something I thought I could live with. A few days before I left, she told me that she felt like an abusive husband because she could see her cycle but couldn't stop it. I think she felt like I was luckier than her, and resented it.

After separating, we both stayed on in India. A month later, we got back together. Getting back together was at my behest. I missed her. When she asked me to move to Belgium, I said yes. It was a big deal because it meant leaving Mum and Theda permanently. It was one thing to go to India for six months, but it was quite another to leave for longer. Despite our problems, I really loved Rose, and was committed to going.

We were living in a little beach hut behind some bar run by Ukrainians in Goa, and we were just waiting until our visas ran out before going, when I got an email from Mum that stopped me in my tracks.

After the email, I found a phone-wallah a little distance from the main tourist hubbub and called home. 'Can you call back tomorrow?' she asked. 'I'll get Theda ready.'

I told Rose what was going on, but she didn't understand. She said it sounded like Theda was just seeking attention. The next day I went back and called my sister in Perth.

Her voice was sobering. She sounded raspy. 'We've got rain here,' she said quietly. I could hear the silence of the room around her, but not the rain. 'Maggie was barking at Mum's bedroom door.'

'Maggie hates the thunder,' I said.

After that, she explained what she was thinking. When she was done, I didn't know how

to respond. She had asked me for permission to kill herself. I knew it was genuine. She didn't know that I was planning to move to Belgium because I hadn't told them yet. She outlined the reality of living with an illness that meant she was in constant pain and isolated. She talked about hitting the seven-year mark of the illness, and then about a book she'd ordered online about euthanasia. The book encouraged the person considering it to talk to their loved ones about it. That was so that leaving them didn't feel like a betrayal. Asking permission was about giving them the chance to at least say goodbye. I realised that it was also more than that from my end—it was about giving me the chance to give her something. There was nothing that either Mum or I could give her to make her life much better, but there was something we could offer to make her death less painful, and it wasn't a method, it was consent. If she were to die thinking we would resent her for leaving us then it would be something worse than it already was. Nothing could be worse than ending your own life and imagining you were betraying your loved ones with the act. I'd not asked permission before attempting suicide all those years ago. She was offering me this.

I found myself saying yes. I remember it very clearly. I was staring out at the scene in front of me, which was ocean waves foaming over the top of a reef. It was a low cliff overlooking some water, and there were just a few stalls selling cotton pants on the cliffside. A couple of tourists had just started haggling with a stall owner.

'You're asking permission?' I said quietly.

There was a short pause, and then she said yes.

I nodded slowly. She was so far away. 'I don't want you to die,' I said.

'I know, Minty,' she said. 'I just want you to know that I'm thinking about you. I won't actually do it without telling you first.'

'Then my answer is yes,' I said.

When I got back to the hut that night, Rose and I bickered again, and I realised I wasn't as certain about Belgium as I thought I was. It was one thing to leave my family behind for a relationship that was likely to succeed, but ours wasn't. The love was there, but we were a fraught couple. We were both pretty damaged people.

When I didn't go with her, it was a bit harrowing for both of us, but that's the choice I made. A month later I took a plane back to Perth.

When I got back, Theda's story got aired on the TV.

It happened like this: Mum helped Theda set up a Facebook account that year. It was 2007 and Facebook was only just taking off. After making the account, Mum intermittently checked to see if any of my sister's old friends had 'friended' her. She always reported this to Theda. It was about letting her know that people hadn't forgotten her. One person who got in touch was an old university colleague from the broadcasting course she'd done. He was now a journalist with the ABC, and he wrote a message saying he was curious to know where she'd ended up.

Mum sent him a polite reply on Theda's behalf, explaining the situation, and he wrote back asking if he could call her. Mum said that would be fine, but my sister wouldn't be able to speak to him herself. He said that was okay. When he rang, Mum explained the illness in more detail, and when she was done he told her that he knew a reporter who might be interested in telling our story.

That year was also a year in which a click economy was emerging in journalism. The man who the old colleague referred Mum to was starting an online publication. He had left print media and was reputable. Online news media still felt fairly new to us. When the article

about my sister was published, it caught a lot of clicks.

There is another strand to this story that I need to backtrack to tell. Just after I'd returned from India, a new potential treatment for my sister's ME came into the equation. It was something that a doctor from Belgium had recommended. He specialised in ME, and was visiting Perth to give a lecture on it. Mum, who was always researching ME for potential new treatments, found out about it. She emailed him and offered to pay him to visit the house and help come up with a treatment plan for Theda.

This Belgian doctor was touting a medicine that it turns out was produced by a man in the UK named David Noakes. I didn't find out until years later, but Noakes was an entrepreneur and a political man. He ran for the leadership of UKIP around the same time we were contemplating his wonder drug as per this Belgian doctor's advice. He was a British economic nationalist who had helped develop the political party that would later drive Brexit, so perhaps it's no surprise that when he got into medicine, it was more narrative-driven than scientific. In fact, Noakes wasn't a scientist at all, but he had hired scientists and set up the company in a way that left them financially motivated to find what he wanted them to. I'm sure there was some genuine desire to make a decent drug, but it wasn't well thought out. The result was a wonder drug called GC-Maf.

An interesting side-fact is that two of Noakes's assistants later filed sexual harassment suits against him. One included the assertion that Noakes had boasted to her that GC-Maf was made from his own blood. GC-Maf was, in fact, made with human blood. It's best to let Noakes's own words describe what he was selling:

> If you are terminal stage 4 cancer with two months to live, you can confidently expect

> to be cancer free in a year…You should not take anything that is destroying your immune system — so we advise strongly, don't take chemotherapy because it will destroy your immune system.
>
> David Noakes, CEO Immuno Biotech LTD.

As well as proposing GC-Maf for terminal cancer, he also sold it as a cure for AIDS, autism, and—relevant to my family—ME.

I was at Mum's house the day Belgian ME specialist came and diagnosed Theda. Before he arrived, I helped Mum clear the kitchen table of its usual clutter. Mum was overwhelmed with all the advice she got on the internet about my sister's illness. It was how she, in her sixties then, became digitally literate to some extent. The internet was a source of information. But for a woman who'd only finished high school in her 40s, and who'd never done a degree of any kind, sifting through the mud was a tough ask. There was a lot of scientific data she didn't understand, and the reputability of sources was something she rarely thought of. She was doing her best. Sometimes her house was littered with paperwork on it all.

When the Belgian doctor came, I let him in. He was a small rotund man with beady but intelligent eyes. His accent was pleasant and he was softly spoken. After we'd listened to him talk about ME in general for a few minutes, he went to Theda's room to diagnose her. He did what doctors call a clinical diagnosis, which means asking about symptoms and matching them to criteria. A lot of illnesses are diagnosed that way (even ones you would think might have more precise diagnostic tools, such as ALS). When he returned, he declared my sister one of the worst cases of ME he'd ever seen.

As we all sat down, Mum nodded anxiously while he outlined a treatment plan. He said

we should aim for using a new drug called GC-Maf. It wasn't legal in Australia but we could have someone in Europe post it in a nondescript box. He said others had done the same. It cost $1000 a month but it could give my sister her life back. She would also require preparation for it. That would include special nutritional supplements he could sell us from his practice in Europe. He said we should continue her bedrest, of course, and ignore anyone telling us it had psychological links. He said the best course of action would include a feeding tube surgically inserted into her abdomen so his special supplements could do their work better. He said that after a period of using them, we could begin with the GC-Maf.

After he left, Mum broke down. She said she'd remortgage the house if she had to.

'Maybe it's not necessary to go down this route,' I said.

She shook her head firmly. 'I'd do anything, Khin. He's an expert, and when it's your child you don't care.'

'What if she never gets better?' I ventured tentatively.

She looked at me uncertainly. She then said she'd ask Dad if he could help. I said I'd try to convince him too but I didn't like our chances.

The next part of the story is where I began earlier. It's where my sister's old university colleague got in touch on Facebook and ended up speaking to Mum. The journalist he put onto her wrote a story, along with a photo of my sister in her bed. The next thing that happened was that three producers from different current affairs TV shows called us asking to do stories on our family. As unusual as that might have been, it's what happened. Perhaps the general feel of anxiety amidst broadcast journalists that year had them looking intensely at what online journalism was producing, I'm not sure.

I doubt Mum would have let the media in if it hadn't been for her concerns about the cost of the GC-Maf though. She was desperate to get it and felt that if the media reported our

situation, then there might be a chance of Medicare weighing in and putting it on some list. She was angry, and those current affairs shows gave her a voice. They were shows that aired directly after the 6pm news and a lot of people would see it.

Something I learned later about TV journalism is that, when a segment involves an interview, the producers refer to the interviewee as 'talent'. Good 'talent' is an interviewee who comes across well. What makes an interview successful is not only expertise, but perceived emotional impact. Theda had a lot going for her as the 'right' kind of victim. She was pretty, biracial and young. The producers most likely also remembered or had access to her show-reel from when she'd won the Channel Seven Award all those years ago. Some media people had sent her congratulation notes after the award, which was given to a promising student in the field. Ironically, the assignment she'd won it for was a story she did about the Buddhist monks Dad followed. They'd been caught in a debacle with a mining company. I'd gone with her to interview the monastery's abbot. That assignment had been aired on TV, with her in the shot. She was now the story. They knew she was going to come across well. They knew it.

The next day three camera crews showed up on Mum's front lawn in vans with station logos painted on their sides. I was there but I stayed in the background. Mum had suggested I might like to be interviewed, but I was worried. I thought my doubts about the diagnosis would show on camera.

'We need footage,' a journalist from *A Current Affair* said to Mum when he arrived, 'of Theda herself. It's really important that the audience *see* her and *hear* her speaking.'

Theda was freaked out. She had known the TV people would interview Mum, but not her. She was afraid of people in general by then. She'd been isolated so long and she had that cognitive fog with talking where she lost track of a sentence halfway through speaking.

Having once been so articulate, she was very ashamed of it. Mum was explaining to a journalist that even if Theda could talk to them the lights would give her a migraine. She also explained the faulty battery metaphor and how social interaction was draining for my sister. The journalist nodded thoughtfully then excused himself. He went out front and returned a few minutes later saying that he'd spoken to the other stations (who were waiting outside patiently). They had all agreed to share the raw footage of my sister. That meant she would do just one interview. Mum would do three—one for each station—but the resulting cuts of raw footage, along with Mum's separate interviews, would vary the segments sufficiently to play on competing networks.

I had never thought of such calculations when watching news before. What a strange thing it was: an economics emerged around the emotional impact factor of a story that was in competition with showing its true complexity. People had careers riding on getting that emotional impact regardless of nuance.

It was a bit fraught, but, after talking with Mum, Theda agreed to do it.

It took a week for the segments to air. The day after they did, journalists from two of the networks contacted us. People had been calling their stations saying 'thank you for explaining what I'm also suffering from'. The coverage had hit a nerve.

I felt uneasy. None of the segments mentioned Theda's psychotic breaks. I didn't want her to have to reveal that on TV or to anyone she didn't want to, but it was part of the story that mattered. If the conversation about mental health had been in any of it, I would have felt different, but the better story was black-and-white. That was a story that involved clear villains and an obvious victim. The victim was not a problem—my sister was in a terrible

place, and no one could deny that. But the villain required construing her illness as a marginalised organic illness. That cast mainstream doctors and Medicare as conservatives wilfully ignoring ME. They were to blame.

Despite my worries, the media coverage did give my sister something she desperately needed that I hadn't anticipated. It gave her a sense of purpose and belonging. I saw the lift in her mood and the reduction of her symptoms for a short while. That made sense when I thought about it; when your life was lying in bed hoping to get better, the feeling of worthlessness was debilitating. The media had given her a feeling of being valuable to other people somehow. Other people were sick like her, and they needed her to be strong and in the media eye. For that sense of purpose, which probably saved her life then, I was grateful.

A knock-on effect was that two nascent online ME support groups contacted us a day after the story aired. We discovered an online community we hadn't known about. Facebook was the place they conversed. People were sharing videos of Theda's interview across the globe and calling her a hero for speaking about a marginalised community's lived experience. More media outlets got involved. *Who Magazine* would do a two-page spread and some other newspapers and magazines would do piggyback articles. Mum got used to talking to journalists. I would listen in sometimes as she spoke on the phone to them. Everything she said was sincere. She was articulate. She was exhausted, but I used to hear her speak and I'd thank god my sister had someone fighting for her that strongly, even if I thought it was the wrong fight. At one point, journalists approached the health minister to secure a comment about Theda. One asked him why a girl who'd damaged her transplant-liver with illicit drug use was being given an interest-free loan by the government for a new one, when my sister couldn't get an interest-free loan for her overseas ME treatments.

A student at the migrant school stopped me in the hall just after the first coverage. She

shoved a $50 note in my hand and said, ‘This is your sister on the news? Your surname is only one in Perth, I think?’

‘I can’t take this,’ I told her.

She fixed me with a fierce gaze and said, ‘Teacher, this is my religion.’

My colleagues at that job were also generous. They were mostly older Christian ladies. I’d worked with them for years, but when they suggested an office fundraising effort for my sister, I shied away from it. I felt guilty as hell but that’s how strongly I believed that the organic treatments were a dead end. Any money driving my sister towards them was actually making things worse. Another friend of Theda’s got in touch online after seeing her on the news and offered to help set up a donations webpage. Soon there was fifteen thousand dollars in an account from strangers and old friends of Theda’s alike.

I’d not seen political action online before that year. I joined the Facebook support groups out of solidarity. I saw their posts and ‘liked’ them when I was online occasionally, but I often felt uneasy about the content. I knew the people posting them were suffering, and I cared about that. I read their stories, and some sufferers had been abandoned by disbelieving parents. Most had lost friends. I didn’t want to be like those abandoners. But it wasn’t as simple as the polarisation of opinions on ME’s cause made it seem either. Lists of ‘ME-literate’ doctors appeared on those online forums. And lists of ‘doctors to avoid’ also got shared. The lines of good and evil were being drawn in no uncertain terms. Sufferers also posted articles that reinforced the ‘organic only’ narrative, and never posted ones that didn’t, or which highlighted how ME diagnostic criteria might catch mental illness sufferers also.

It would be many years before I’d hear the term ‘echo chamber’ but that’s what it was. It would also be many years before I would discover the truth about David Noakes. Noakes would eventually be charged with producing and supplying medicine without a license. GC-

Maf would be discredited. He'd also be found guilty of laundering nine million pounds, and the British government would raid his GC-Maf factory to discover that the blood he was using to make it was designated 'for research purposes only'. Parents all around the world who had put their autistic children on it were suddenly worried they may have infected them. One of Noakes's GC-Maf treatment centres for terminal cancer in Switzerland also came under scrutiny when patients left it and were admitted to a hospital. Isolated from their families, halfway across the world and desperately hoping Noakes's cure would save their lives, all five died of their cancers in the end.

Meanwhile, Theda's symptoms continued to fluctuate. When her mood went down, her physical symptoms also got worse. Mum pointed out that this didn't prove what caused what. But I noticed how before doctor's appointments her symptoms often flared up. I worried her unconscious mind was working to maintain her identity as an ME sufferer. Years later I'd also realise that when your illness is not believed by many doctors, it's quite hard not to unconsciously amplify your symptoms before being scrutinised. I understood that she wasn't doing anything consciously, but was so confused about what the right thing to do was.

After the media buzz died down a bit, Theda tried the GC-Maf. It didn't work. After the GC-Maf, Mum spent some of the remaining donated money on a bath. One of the things that helped Theda's pain was sitting under a warm shower, but she would do it for half an hour sometimes, and Mum's water heater broke. The bath meant Theda could soak instead. The money vanished. Mum's superannuation was gone too. Once the donations were gone, there was no more money and nothing to show for it. I was also useless financially during this time. I'd blown all my savings on that trip to India. I was broke and living in a share house.

Not long after deciding against the GC-Maf, someone on one of the support forums suggested a local nutritionist. They said he was someone who knew a lot about ME, because he had it himself. Mum took Theda to see him, and he offered advice about supplements and diet.

After the appointment, he began visiting Theda at home. He would go around to the house and lay on her bed with her. I was sceptical at first, but in the end Mum and I could both see that this man—Samuel—was okay. He was younger than Theda, and he suffered social anxiety. His marriage was on the rocks, and a few months after he'd started visiting my sister, his wife left him for another woman. He became my sister's boyfriend. He gave her something no one else could. He gave her romantic love. I doubted they had a sex life—Theda wasn't well enough to do much like that—and they never left the house, but there was intimacy, and I'm sure it kept her alive a bit longer.

*

Her next psychosis occurred six months after the media coverage. I was at the house before she got admitted. Mum had called me asking for help controlling her while organising the paramedics. She always got nervous because she worried Theda would be taken to one of the shitty locked wards, and she often tried to orchestrate it so there was less chance of that.

I found Theda in her room, which was a chaotic mess of objects strewn everywhere in odd arrangements. She was wild-eyed and alert. 'We crossed a boundary!' she screeched at me.

'Who?' I asked, hoping to coax her into a conversation, but I was no longer Neo then. She looked at me but didn't answer.

‘I tried to fight,’ she blurted. ‘*To flight*,’ she added (the rhyming was always a symptom when she was delusional). Tears began streaming down her cheeks and every muscle in her frame went loose. ‘I choked,’ she sobbed. ‘They shovelled dirt on top of us—we never should have crossed that line.’

‘Who?’ I asked gently. ‘Who did that?’

‘The priests! They raped me and Gemma. They raped us with their fucking sticks and then buried us alive!’

Suddenly her body went tense and a moment later I was on my back. In an instant, she’d shoved me down and grabbed a heavy rose quartz crystal off the bedside table. She was running with it down the hall, screaming. I caught her just inside the kitchen door as she was lifting it above her head. She had Mum in her sights and was going for her. Mum was halfway through calling the ambulance with the phone pressed to one ear. I barrelled into Theda and we tumbled down together. The crystal shattered like a bag of pennies, and she suddenly stopped resisting me and started sobbing uncontrollably. When the paramedics arrived, so did a police escort.

After that day, I began to worry that Theda might murder our mother during a psychosis. It wouldn’t be intentional. I didn’t hate her for the possibility, but she could do it, and then it would destroy her life, end our mother’s life, and probably destroy mine also.

That wasn’t the first time I had heard that rape story. Several times when she’d been psychotic, she’d recounted how, in a past life, Egyptian priests had raped her and buried her alive because she’d crossed some kind of boundary in a temple she was only partially allowed to inhabit. ‘People like her’, whatever that meant, weren’t allowed to go beyond a certain point, and she did. It seemed to me like a mythologisation of the bullying we’d both experienced as kids. No one ever seemed to connect it like that. Perhaps a therapist would

have. But it was ignored as irrelevant by her ME doctors, of course. They only ever asked about her body.

After the incident with the crystal, I pleaded with Mum to keep anti-psychotics in the house. It was always hard because, after each psychosis, Mum swore it must be the last one. Even after five or six of them, she offered reasons for each one—a reaction to a treatment; a lack of sleep; unrelenting pain. These were possibilities, but so was a serious mental illness, and that was something Mum just couldn't face. The ME activist community, the media and the doctors she saw helped her ignore it as a prospect.

TV journalists contacted us roughly every nine months. That was the cycle of our family story in their economics. Usually the last psychosis would have been months earlier. When a new segment would get done, the last psychosis was only a distant memory. As for me, I didn't feel like I was in touch with my emotions anymore. Something about not speaking honestly about any of this to anyone, and constantly worrying, had tangled inside me. I stopped playing music. I couldn’t do it. The music was tangled too. One day, I downloaded an audiobook on social psychology. Then another on religion. And then one on anthropology. It was something to focus on. An academic interest began to emerge. I’d always shied away from academia because I didn't want to turn out like Dad, but I was starting to think differently. I came across something called ‘iTunesU’, which was an online platform where universities put up free lectures from their courses. It was a self-directed and pleasurable way of channelling my sorrow into something constructive, just like music had been.

About a year after the media had entered our lives, I learned something in one of those lectures about a tribe in Papua New Guinea called the Kaluli. They lived in the rainforests

and had a witchdoctor. When someone died, the witchdoctor lit a fire and everyone gathered. He would dance himself into a trance, and at the ritual's apex he'd single out one person who was grieving. He'd taunt them about their loss until they couldn't take it anymore and would grab a smouldering log from the fire to burn him. The witchdoctor would shriek in pain and fall down, and all the onlookers would quietly disperse. For the next few weeks, people put gifts on the doorstep of the person he had humiliated. Those gifts were sometimes practical, but it wasn't the pragmatism that mattered; it was a community acknowledging a loss.

It was a strange grief I had in those years. It was about what Mum and Theda had lost already, and preparing myself for the loss of them that I could see was inevitably coming. Around this time I was beginning to realise that someone was going to die, if not both of them. I was silently preparing.

That story of the Kaluli touched me when I heard it. I couldn't talk to anyone who understood why I felt such grief about people still alive. I was losing them, and losing a part of myself. Being convinced that I knew what was wrong but unable to say anything was also a kind of grief. Whenever I talked to Dad it was on the phone, and now he spoke as if I was on my mother's 'team'. He assumed that I didn't understand the possibility that my sister's illness was psychosomatic. I wanted to scream. I couldn't bear how it felt witnessing a tragedy alone like that, being the only person who saw it the way I did. If anyone had been around to say 'Yes, Khin, I see what you mean, and it's tragic, and you're probably going to lose them both,' then things would have been easier to cope with.

That summer when the holidays came, I told my boss at the migrant school that I'd be leaving for a while again. I blew my savings on a trip to Canada, then returned to India. I knew that being around destitution would be soothing. It would remind me that my own troubles were all relative. I walked past beggars in the streets of Delhi who reached up with

fingerless hands from lives unimaginably more tragic than my own. It helped. I gave a little money each day, even though no one was around to see it, I burned the dancer that way. He shrieked and fell to the ground.

'I want you to live your life,' Mum said when I got back to Perth.

15

'Denver is where it's at,' the stocky man in the blue shirt said as we drove out of Syracuse. 'I mean you can gamble on the Oswego,' he said. 'Chicago is good too. But I go to Denver.'

I looked out the window. We were leaving the city limits. The air was soupy out there but the car had air conditioning. My driver was in his fifties and he had an old Lincoln town car with leather seats that looked well cared for, but worn. 'What's good about Denver?' I asked.

'Bigger,' he said without hesitation. 'Better. What happens in Denver *stays* in Denver.' He chuckled and touched his nose before putting both hands back on the wheel.

I was intrigued by the way he dressed. It reminded me of how I might dress if I were a driver like him. His pants were loose and his shirt was faded, but all looked well-ironed. It was the kind of shirt I imagined a working-class wife might hand to her husband of thirty-five years before he went to his working-class job. Those pants were the perfect compromise between comfort and formality.

We traversed a few casual topics, and after a while he began talking about football. It was a two-hour trip down to Ithaca and the car service usually drove several people at once, he said. I was the only passenger that day, so I asked a lot of questions. He told me American

football was all about strategy.

'If you get yourself a scholarship to Cortland,' he said, 'it's a free ride you gotcha self there. Mind you, it'll crap out your knees by the time you're 30. But…look, I tell my boy to get the grades he needs to cover his bases,' he paused for a second. 'How old are you?'

'Thirty-five,' I said.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise then smiled and looked back at me in the rear-view mirror. He narrowed his eyes a little before looking back at the road. 'Good, good,' he said. Then he paused for a second. 'Yeah, my boy's a little younger. He's 19.'

On the highway, distant hills began to roll down one side of the car and forest clipped past on the other. He nodded to himself and smiled while taking us through a few topics. He said he gambled on the Indian reservation when he couldn't make it out West. I quizzed him about the native people and asked whether the casinos were good or bad for them. He said he didn't know but he was interested in Australian aborigines, so I told him a few things I knew. He was obviously naïve about things outside of America, but I liked his demeanour. 'Nice asphalt on this stretch,' he said after a while.

'You drive this route often?'

'Not usually much in July,' he said. 'School holidays make it pretty rare actually.'

After that we talked about the weather in our two countries. He told me a story about New York winters and described black ice. 'It comes down then freezes,' he said. 'There's no way to see it if its covered in snow.'

'Sounds dangerous,' I said.

He nodded, 'Oh yeah, absolutely.'

'Have you ever had an accident?' I asked.

'Just one,' he said.

‘What happened?’

‘Well,’ he said, slowing down a touch, ‘I was takin’ a Korean girl from Syracuse airport to Ithaca—this same route, and she was South Korean, I think. That’s right isn’t it? North Korea is the crazy one, right? Anyways, she’d just arrived and was talking on her cell. I mean she was totally bawling. I’m thinking “Geez, if she misses him this much already, how bad is it gonna get a few weeks in?” And then out of nowhere the car hits some of that black ice and it just planes. We slid fifty yards before hitting a snow bank. The car stopped just before a steep drop. That snow bank saved our lives.’

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Yep,’ he said.

‘Did anyone get hurt?’

‘No no…she went white as a sheet though. Mind you, they’re pretty light-skinned, those Koreans,’ he looked at me in the mirror again, ‘Not as dark as you at least.’

‘Was she shocked?’ I asked.

‘She burst out laughing!’ he said smiling broadly at the memory. ‘I tell you, people sure are strange. I’ll tell you that much!’

After that, he asked my ethnic background, and then why I was travelling in the US. I told him a version of the truth about the latter. I said a romance had gone wrong. I spoke light-heartedly, but he took on a sympathetic tone and said that family was the most important thing. It surprised me a bit. Michael had made of point of saying the same thing to me. I realised then that it was true—I had considered Rachel family. She was one of the few people I had ever introduced to them after my sister got sick. People usually struggled to understand, but Rachel knew all about Theda’s illness, and about why I found it so much more tragic than if Theda were definitely physically ill, and not potentially denying a mental

illness at the same time. That was one of the reasons I wasn't angry about any of this. Whatever had happened to Rachel, I still cared about her. She was the only other person who knew what I was running away from back home. That's why I couldn't understand how she was pursuing me, or how quickly she'd changed her young mind. It *was* a young mind though. That was something I hadn't allowed myself to recognise properly until now. She was twenty-five, barely out of college, full of idealism, and yet it was such a relief to have someone not weighed down by much baggage, who was keen to understand the world as if it were new, fixable, and not full of unsolvable paradoxes. Yet, with Theda, Rachel hadn't tried to suggest there was an easy solution. She was too smart for that. People who suggested there was a solution didn't understand.

After the driver and I meandered back onto the topic of football, I explained Australian Rules to him. He seemed to love the cultural exchange. He said he didn't get to travel and when I told him it had a ball shaped like a rugby ball, but that you bounced it as you ran for the goal posts, he was fascinated and asked a lot of questions. 'I was never good at school,' he said. 'It was never really my thing. I wasn't very good at it. When my girlfriend got pregnant I was 17, so I had to take a job. Driving suits me though.'

'How many kids do you have?' I asked.

'A son and a daughter,' he said proudly.

'And you're married?'

'Still after 35 years.' He said, tapping his ring against the wheel.

'Congratulations,' I said.

'Yep, sure is,' he said, still looking proud.

'And is this your family business?'

'Yep. Got it from the guy who employed me twenty-eight years ago. It was between me

and another guy who worked for him, but the other guy didn't have kids so he gave me first option when he wanted to sell.'

'And is it just this route?'

'It started out that way,' he said. 'We were bigger for a while there.'

'You mean you had more than one car?'

He looked over at me again, then nodded to himself. 'Used to do all around New York State,' he said. 'Had five men back then.'

'That sounds big,' I said.

'It was a decent size.'

'Did you downsize as you got older?'

He frowned a little and slowed down again. 'The warehouse burnt down,' he said.

'Oh,' I said.

'We're just me now,' he said. 'My wife does the books and I drive. Course, she was a full-time mother, so that kept her busy, but with the kids growing up and all. You never stop being a parent though.'

I pondered that for a moment. My own father certainly never said anything like that. 'How did the warehouse burn down?' I asked.

'Well, we had a full-time mechanic back then. When you run a business there's lot of logistics. Before you do it you don't realise that. I didn't do much driving back then; I was mostly managing, organising logistics, advertising, payroll and the like. Anyways, my mechanic was working late one night and he left a welder on. That was it. The whole place went up. This car was at home though, so we were lucky.'

I didn't say anything for a moment. I was pondering the significance of the loss and weighing it against the seemingly light tone in which he was describing its events.

‘It wasn’t covered by insurance?’ I said eventually.

‘It was our fault,’ he said, as if that explained it.

‘They wouldn’t cover a mistake like that?’

He was watching the road calmly now. He didn’t seem distressed. ‘It was negligence, you see?’ he said nodding to himself.

‘Was there a court case?’

‘A court case?’ he asked, sounding surprised.

‘About the mechanic?’ I said.

He shook his head then laughed a little. ‘Nope. No. He didn’t have the money to pay for anything anyway, and I wouldn't have wanted to do that to him. He felt worse than anyone. It was just one of those things.’

After that there was a lull in the conversation. The hills on my side shifted back a little further beyond the fields and a dip between them and the highway produced a small lake for a moment. It was about the size of two football pitches, and there were houses dotted around. Some had little jetties and boats tethered. I got a strong feeling of nostalgia, as if I might have lived a different life there once, far from the city.

When the conversation picked up again we talked about other things, but I kept thinking about the fire. At one point he took his hand away from the wheel and held it sideways with the thumb up and two outer fingers tucked in. It was a stocky hand, with fingers like shortbread biscuits. ‘Do you see the shape of the pistol my hand is making?’ he said. ‘That’s New York State. That’s a good way to remember it, you see? Central New York is where the trigger would be. Do you see that? A lotta people call this upstate, but that’s just not right. Upstate is all the way over where my thumb is. This is a way to remember it, making your hand into this shape.’

I forget what else we talked about, but a couple of hours later forest swept up around us on both sides and we were no longer on a straight road. The car slowed and the light was tinged green. There weren't many houses, but I saw one set into the forest. It had a crisp lawn of soft-looking grass bordered with wilderness on all sides except the road side. There was a tree in its centre with a rope swing.

Not long after that, we were in a small town.

'This is it,' he said. 'Ithaca, New York. It's lovely down here.'

'Just drop me anywhere,' I said.

He let me out by a clutter of restaurants on the sidewalk. I shook his hand and could feel the callus around his first knuckle where he had obviously held a steering wheel for many years. After he drove off I looked around a bit before heading to the road I needed. I felt energised and not concerned about much. I wanted to absorb some of the atmosphere of the town before finding my room. There was a brick-paved commons and a guy selling hotdogs at a stall. On the row of restaurants, tables on the sidewalk had people at them who looked young and vibrant. They were talking amiably. I knew Ithaca was a college town, and I'd never been to one of those before. It felt good. I wheeled my suitcase along the pavement, up to where I'd seen the sign for the road I needed. A few people smiled my way as I walked, and someone even said hello.

On the street there were churches. I walked past two of them before I had gone a few blocks—one had a rainbow flag over its entrance and another with a sign saying 'All Faiths Welcome'. A few doors up from those churches was a residential house with Tibetan prayer flags strung over its deck and a note on the door that said 'Nuns have gone to India for the summer.' A mood of optimism was slowly taking hold. There were trees everywhere and it was much smaller than Syracuse had been. I kept an eye on the house numbers and found my

Airbnb on the next block up. It was a grey house beside a laneway that accommodated a tiny gorge bridged by a street. The small gorge was sunk a few metres down and it was about four metres wide. It ran all the way up to the next block, and there was shallow clear water moving at its bottom. Either side of the laneway were houses facing each other, with well cared-for gardens. At the end, where the laneway ended, the little gorge went under the next block's road, and I could see a building with a red sign and the words 'Gimme Coffee!' painted on it. Some young people were on tables outside it enjoying the sun and chatting.

My host had given me instructions to just knock and have a housemate let me in. He'd said the house had three permanent tenants. I was to make myself comfortable in the upstairs room. It would basically be like a share house but I'd be a temporary tenant on Airbnb, that's all. He didn't seem overly concerned with meeting. With the exception of Rachel's debacle, America was turning out to be more trusting than I'd imagined it would be. I stepped up onto a wooden deck and knocked on the door. 'Just a minute!' a young woman's voice called out from inside.

16

In the last months that Rachel and I lived in Australia, she'd had a shift in perspective. Her mother had visited us before Christmas, and, looking back, it started then.

The day after Mary Devison arrived, she was standing on our balcony drinking coffee in the sunlight, and I joined her. After a few pleasantries, she said, 'Khin, Rachel is…is…is *special*. I'm sure you're a nice guy. I mean, you seem perfectly okay to me. What I mean to say is that I didn't give Rachel the education and the…the…the political drive I did just to have her waste away in some backwards Australian city a million miles from anywhere.'

'That won't happen,' I said.

'I know you *say* that. But I know how these…these things turn out,' she'd replied.

Mary Devison saw my city (not entirely unfairly) as backwards. She had been born in the 1950s, and, while she had a master's degree and headed a nursing department, she knew her daughter could be something more. Mary talked progressive politics with Rachel from the moment she lay eyes on us.

'What did you think of what Romney said with this whole 47% thing?' she said to Rachel in the back of the car as I drove them from the airport on that first day. 'Jon Stewart sure had

something to say about it!'

'Khin teaches refugees,' Rachel said a few minutes later, trying to draw me into the conversation. I knew who Jon Stewart was, and we'd watched the Obama-Romney debates. Rachel had been educating me on American politics with those things. She would also read opinion pieces from the New York Times to me as we drove places sometimes. She'd shown me Anderson Cooper's giggle fit, and told me to buy a copy of *A People's History of America.*

'Yes…yes…yes…I do remember you telling me that, honey' Mary had said, sounding annoyed, before quickly changing the topic back to how ignorant Romney was.

I spent only four days in Mary's company. It wasn't ideal, but I couldn't get time off work, so I encouraged Rachel to take a few days off so they could go down south. When they got back, her mother seemed frustrated. The moment she walked in the door, she began talking to me about how important it was not to be lazy.

Despite her mother's obvious distaste for whatever it was I represented, I trusted Rachel. I couldn't fault the basic premise of Mary's anxiety either. She only wanted her daughter to have a meaningful career. Her daughter had got a 4.0 GPA in her bachelor's degree, which meant grad school was a no-brainer. I was just some guy who'd ended up an ESL teacher.

'She'll warm to you, honey,' Rachel said on that first night after hearing that her mother had put down the dog in order to come. 'She just needs to get to know you.'

'It's such a short visit,' I said.

'We'll see them when we visit the US,' she said. 'She can get to know you better then.'

Unfortunately, my own mother and sister weren't in Perth that week. Otherwise, they might have helped Mary's perception of me. But Mum had made a snap decision to trundle Theda off to Bali for a treatment. So, when Mary arrived I was just some older guy without a

family who'd stolen her daughter's affections. It must have been a bit off-putting. I believed Rachel when she said her mum would come around though. It wouldn't happen overnight, but we'd have more chances.

Mary Devison did play one unexpectedly powerful hand that week. And, after she'd played it, something profound happened to Rachel. Mary had played it while they were travelling down south, and Rachel told me when they returned.

'He's had it my whole life,' she said in whispered tones as her mother slept in the next room. 'I've often wondered why he doesn't remember some things.'

'Do you want to go back?' I said.

She shook her head, biting back tears, 'That's what Mum wants. She's been saying it's why I need to go back. But that's not right for us.'

'It can be,' I said.

'I don't *want* to go back. And he's had it his whole life. It's just that I've never known about it, that's all.'

Rachel's Dad suffered a debilitating anxiety disorder. He was getting electroconvulsive therapy, and had been for years. He was high functioning—he worked as a brain-software interface engineer—but it was obviously bad. Rachel had never known. She'd grown up with her parents married until she was sixteen but all she'd ever known was that her and her brother were required to be quiet around the house. Her dad had 'episodes', which her mother had told her were migraines. It turned out they'd always been anxiety attacks. When her mother couldn't live with the illness anymore, her parents split. They were still a family in many ways though. They shared Thanksgiving, and Rachel said her dad was often at her mum's house visiting.

After Mary left, Rachel started thinking about her childhood anew. It was like the whole

thing needed to be reframed. She started to wonder what else her mother had left out. 'It would have helped to know I wasn't the only one in the family suffering an anxiety disorder,' she said. 'I mean, maybe its genetic?'

'I'm sure she just wanted to protect you,' I said.

'I know,' she told me. 'But it changes things knowing that was happening. It's making me wonder about all sorts of things from my childhood.'

She also said her family had never talked about emotions. 'It's just how we are,' she said. I found that hard to imagine because Rachel was so open with me. But she said that was a new thing for her.

After her visit Mary started sending Rachel monthly letters. They always contained things reminding her about the downsides of me. Rachel reported this back, but she always said it dismissively. She said her mother didn't understand, and she was starting to realise how controlling she was. I assumed this was a process Rachel had to go through. Recognising a parent's shortcomings was normal in one's twenties as far as I was concerned. I never encouraged her to think negatively about her mother, though. I didn't want to position myself between them. I thought that was ethical; though, looking back, maybe it was naïve.

Rachel's mental health flared up a few weeks later. I started to notice that she didn't want to go out much. I quizzed her about it, and she spoke in vague terms—she said it was just what happened with her sometimes, but not to worry.

When she asked a couple of weeks later if I would think less of her for taking an antidepressant, I told her that I would never think that. We talked about it, and she said making friends in Perth was getting her down. I had some friends who we did things with, but she needed her own. I related to her problem. Good friends had always been a problem for me in my hometown also. I got on well with people, but I never felt strong emotional

connections to most of them. It was strange, because when I travelled I made friends with people I felt emotional solidarity with, but back home I didn't. I always found a kind of superficiality got in the way. Mediating that problem would have been easier if established networks weren't so cliquey regarding outsiders. Perth locals were definitely friendly, but, when it came to actually seeking out new connections beyond those friendly exchanges, moving into a new group could be hard. I had done it several times, but it wasn't easy. I knew several European transplants who had commented on the same fact. I also spoke to an Australian woman at work, one of my bosses, who had married a South American. She said her husband had complained bitterly about how cliquey our city was when he'd first moved there. 'Locals just stay with their old high school friends,' she said. 'They've never left Perth and moved somewhere else, so they don't know what it's like. People who leave don't return, and those who stay are, at base, suspicious of new connections.'

Perhaps my boss's statement was overly generalising, but I thought she was probably right. It was an isolated city's problem, another manifestation of parochialism. Nonetheless, Rachel assured me that she was more than happy with our relationship, and she said it wasn't the right time for us to consider returning to the US. So, the conclusion was that there was no shame in using a chemical crutch until she found her feet; and we would try to fix the social side of things together.

Once she started the pills, she told me she was fine and not to worry.

Looking back, I think I'd not been close to anyone who was so good at hiding a mental health issue before. She called it 'anxiety'. Although what she described was a kind of depression when I think about it. Whatever one calls it, she never flared up at me. We didn't fight at all. We only ever seemed to have fun, and there was no pressure in the relationship. One time I came home from work, and she jumped into my arms, then directed me towards a

laptop on the table, before proceeding to tell me what she'd learned about Middle East politics that day, using a map on her screen.

'The Sunnis had control, but they were a minority,' she said, excitedly, 'So when Shiites took it, all of a sudden the whole region was out of whack. The traditionally powerful class had to see themselves as only one identity amongst many.'

This intellectual side of Rachel was inspiring for me. She was more academically-minded than anyone I had ever been with, and what interested her was social justice, which interested me too. She taught me privilege theory, intersectional feminism, and what the term 'othering' meant. These things helped me look at my childhood differently, which was something I am deeply grateful to her for. I hadn't ever imagined before meeting her that people talked about racial identity in such detail, and how it affected one's sense of self, without being dismissed as complaining. But Rachel said that in New York it was a very vibrant conversation. 'You'll love it in my country,' she'd said.

For the first time, I really analysed the racial dimensions of my youth. I thought about how those experiences had affected Theda and me. I thought about what it had meant to be a 'muddy' racial category in late 1980s Perth. I thought of how adolescence was a time that coded itself into your psyche like no other. I pondered how it felt now when my friends said things like 'She's an Australian' to mean that someone was white. Australians never used hyphenated identities either. Why was that? 'Chinese-Australian', 'Italian-Australian', 'Indian-Australian' were terms no one I knew used. I thought of how nice it might feel to use one of those if doing so didn't seem like putting on airs. All my life, one of the first things people had asked me was always 'Where are you from?', and, if I answered that I was from Australia, they pursued it further, asking where my parents were from. My response was usually to say that my Mum was English, but that always made them look at me strangely, as

if I was avoiding the ‘proper’ answer. They would say things like ‘That’s not what I meant’. And they were right. I *was* avoiding part of the answer. Why did I do that?

I knew people weren’t being racist when they asked; they were just curious. Of course they wanted to know where my parents were from. I was the only brown person in the groups I moved in. Usually at a party I was the only Asian person there. But the few times I had mentioned my experiences of race in a negative way to these same well-meaning left-leaning friends, they had said things like ‘Oh well, we’re all mongrels in this country after all,’ and dismissed the topic. They were specifically interested in brown-skinned ethnicity when it was a curiosity, but if focussing upon that ethnicity reflected badly on their country they were dismissive. They didn’t do that when talking about Aboriginal or Muslim people, not that there were any of those around either. Asians were seen as a lucky group. Asians were doing alright for themselves. Even Rachel found it odd when I said I could relate to what she was talking about. She told me she thought it was only Black people and Hispanics who faced this stuff, and that an Asian resonating with the race theory she was espousing seemed odd. But I couldn’t deny it. These theories gave me something I needed in order to really think about my past.

As a suburban-bred white girl, Rachel’s understanding of race was theoretical, but it was something she cared about a lot. She was passionate about it. I didn’t have the theoretical backing she did, and she didn’t have the experiences I did. We were a good match like that. We both got something from the other that we didn’t have ourselves.

Because of that, we only ever seemed to be happy together as far as I knew. We always had things to share and talk about. The conversation was lively and cooperative, but not dull and overly-agreeable either. Our sex life was good.

I only ever saw her fly off the handle once. It was when we’d been taking a short holiday

to Phuket. It was just after finishing the aid work in Thailand. We'd had a nice night out, and we were enjoying a drink on the balcony of our hotel overlooking the beach. Phuket was a cheap holiday, and that hotel only cost about ten dollars a night, but after the conditions we'd been in on the Thai-Burma border it was the lap of luxury. We would return to Australia soon to begin our year together in Perth. Nothing felt wrong to me, and then she started talking about our dreams for the future. I told her I wanted to go back to university.

'Why?' she asked.

'I don't necessarily want a change in career,' I said. 'But I want to read the great thinkers and all that.'

'Which 'great thinkers'?' she asked.

I threw Freud's name out there because he was so obvious.

'Why would you read him,' she said angrily. 'He's a sexist old white man. There's enough of that already.'

I was surprised by her anger. It turned out she'd learned about him in her undergraduate degree. During one of her gender studies classes, the tutor had encouraged them to see Freud as a misogynist because Freud had believed women unconsciously envied men for their penises. The tutor had discouraged them from reading Freud at all.

'I've heard that,' I said. 'It sounds dumb. But Freud is also the "father of the unconscious", isn't he?'

We didn't bicker about it, or debate it, she just got up and stormed out of the apartment. Before leaving, she tearily announced that she didn't know if she could be with someone who disagreed with her on topics as important as that. It felt really odd to me. I didn't even care about Freud, he was just an example who had come to mind. I went looking for her that night. It was the middle of the night and we didn't know the area so I was pretty worried. The beach

was lonely and dark. When she came back, I was relieved she was safe. We made up and the topic just never came up again.

As we got to know each other after that, I noticed how she hungered to hear tales from my past. I realised that was one of the things she liked about me. She said her biggest problem during her younger years had been when her parents had amicably divorced. With that in mind, I guessed it was this lack of objective struggle in her own story that plagued her. She had such hot passions and a deep sense of unease about the way the world was. But she had no clear explanation for why. Perhaps, in her case, high expectations that she do something meaningful were part of it. I didn't look at life like that though. I would have been just as happy if she was wildly successful as I would have been were she a schoolteacher. I just wanted her to be satisfied.

But after her mother's visit, the expectations on her started to become clearer to me. Her mother wanted her to become something magnificent. Her backstory wasn't as mild as she'd imagined either. That complicated things for her also. Her father had been suffering a serious mental illness all the time, and she'd just not known about it. I think discovering that unsettled her a lot. There were some booklets she downloaded and then deleted from my iPad that seemed to speak to that unsettled feeling. I saw them because she failed to delete them from the cloud before leaving Australia. They were about the long-term effects of childhood sexual assault. It was possible Rachel had been assaulted as a child. I didn't know. I knew she'd had one creepy uncle, at least. But something in me wondered if those booklets were also blind stabs in the dark for an explanation. She was working backwards through her childhood, trying to understand herself in the present better by sifting through a tangle of gappy memories and overprotection by her mother. She was looking for explanations for how she was now. She was feeling anxious. We'd been talking about it a little, and I had wanted to

talk about it more, but she got upset if I pried too much, so I was cautious.

I think I realised what the past is by thinking about her. The past isn't gone, it's how we understand the present. If we've got a problem in the present, then finding an explanation for it in the past, whether that explanation is accurate or not, gives us back a sense of control. It makes the present seem more manageable. When I got over depression, for example, I meditated a lot, yes, but I also kept diaries in which I wrote about the bullies I'd dealt with. I tried to imagine their lives and limitations. I needed to tell a story about my past that wasn't so random and meaningless. So it also made sense that when Rachel's past got suddenly reframed by her mother, she needed to make her own backstory clear again.

When I think about her now, I think I met someone in a state of flux, caught between two worlds. One was a world I knew and was part of, in which she was free of expectations; and the other was a world in which she experienced a lot of pressure to make something of her privileges. Perhaps that's also one of the reasons she had loved me. In Perth we lived an easy and fairly carefree life, whereas America came with expectations that she succeed.

17

In the 10th year of Theda's illness a doctor suggested that she might be suffering from something called chronic Lyme disease. 'Minty,' she said after getting the news, 'this means I might get better!'

The symptoms for chronic Lyme disease were diverse. It was caused by a bacterium contracted from tick bites that buried itself in the nervous system. There was an acute version that could be diagnosed with blood tests and treated with antibiotics, but the chronic version had no test. It was controversial too, but it included fatigue, neurological pain, sound sensitivity, light sensitivity and food intolerance, along with psychosis on its list of possible symptoms.

Once the suggestion was on the table, it became hard to ignore. We had Theda's blood sent to a lab in California. They were called IGeneX, and advertised themselves as having a unique method for diagnosing chronic Lyme disease. The results came back inconclusive, but the printout had a hand-scrawled note and the words '*This could still be Lyme!'* with an arrow pointing to a number in a list next to the letters 'iGM'. It was encouraging and we took them to a Lyme-literate doctor for his clinical opinion.

After consulting with the doctor, it was decided that Theda should begin the treatment for chronic Lyme, which was a massive and prolonged (six months or more) dose of intravenous antibiotics. We couldn't afford the intravenous antibiotics, so Theda tried an oral version. She was swallowing so many pills that it was unbelievable. I remember watching her vomit into bowls my mother held under her chin. If the pills came up with her vomit, she'd have to try and swallow more. It was harrowing. She wrote in her journal that week: '*Oh God, even if you do not exist. I need you!'*

After seven days of it she gave up. Then she fell into the deepest depression I'd ever seen her in.

The Perth GP who gave her the antibiotic treatment was someone who was just starting to diagnose chronic Lyme disease in people. Previously he'd been a GP with ME expertise, but after years of little or no luck treating ME, he must have recognised the possibility of a different disease, and he became one of Perth's leading chronic Lyme experts. When my sister saw him, he was still working this out. She was one of his first patients to get the chronic Lyme diagnosis. He would later diagnose her boyfriend, an ex-girlfriend of mine, my future counsellor's wife and even himself with the disease.

This new doctor—I'll call him her Lyme doctor for clarity—said the vomiting she experienced on the antibiotics was the Herxheimer Reaction. When I looked it up, I discovered that it was a nauseating symptom caused by the die-off of bacteria rooted deep in someone's body. It added credence to the idea that Lyme bacteria had got into her nervous system. But I also saw articles from doctors who disagreed that chronic Lyme existed, and they suggested different reasons for the nausea, alluding to an overdose of antibiotics that should never have been tried in the first place. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned that the antibiotic treatment was both unproven and dangerous.

As word got out about chronic Lyme in Perth, Theda's new doctor's waiting list extended to months. His business boomed, and his name got shared on the ME support forums online, as new forums for chronic Lyme disease sufferers also emerged.

Theda got worse.

After the antibiotic treatment it was as if she climbed into a well inside of herself. She lost the ability to talk altogether. If she managed a sentence, she'd lose her train of thought after the next one. Her food intolerances also shot up. She could only eat boiled chicken broth, and drinking also made her want to be sick. Mum eventually figured out that giving her ice blocks for hydration was the practical solution. She became so thin that her joints bulged. And when she did speak, she only wanted to talk about how to kill herself.

The thing that confuses most people about Lyme disease is that it comes in two forms. One of those forms is an undisputed diagnosis. The undisputed one is *acute* Lyme disease. It's an infection contracted from ticks that are prevalent in North America and parts of Europe, and it's treated by a month-long course of antibiotics. The chronic version, on the other hand, was theorised in the 1990s. The CDC's official line remains that it is an erroneous label given to people who have varying symptoms of unknown origin.

The scientific territory around chronic Lyme mimics the polarisation around ME. In the early 2000s, the Connecticut Attorney General fought the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) because it sided with the CDC in dismissing chronic Lyme disease as a legitimate diagnosis. The attorney-general argued that the IDSA was denying people's lived experience, and, not long after his suit against them, Lyme activists and sufferers began threatening researchers online. One threatened researcher was a man at Tufts Medical Centre who'd been part of the original team of scientists who had discovered *acute* Lyme disease. He didn't endorse the chronic diagnosis. He was assigned a personal security detail after

stalking and threats began to pile up from groups who believed he was wrong.

A few months after Theda's failed antibiotic treatment, an article appeared in the *New York Times* about IGeneX—the lab we'd sent Theda's blood to—suggesting they were a morally questionable organisation driven by profits. The CDC also sent out warnings about them, saying they were worried about people getting erroneous diagnoses, and being sent towards harmful treatments.

Regardless of whether chronic Lyme was an accurate diagnostic category, or correct for Theda specifically, her physical condition got dramatically worse after that treatment. She became so underweight that I thought she was heading towards starvation. She acquired postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome: a precipitous drop in blood pressure upon standing. She needed a special reclining wheelchair, and when she went to see doctors, she would have to lay flat in Mum's little camper van. When they got there, Mum would go into the doctor's rooms first, wait until the receptionist said the doctor was five minutes from being ready, and then go out to the van and collect Theda using the special wheelchair.

When the TV stations contacted us that year, Mum told them about the new diagnosis, and *Today Tonight* did a segment, replete with questions for the federal health minister: '*why wasn't he doing more about chronic Lyme disease? Why weren't treatments that some Perth doctors said could cure it being administered under Medicare?*'

As a result, petitions started to go around asking the government to take chronic Lyme more seriously, and a strange thing happened. It's something that I can now see highlights a mechanism of political polarisation in general. The argument about the diagnosis got hijacked by a small group within the main group of sufferers, and that small group were the most vocal ones. They were also sincere, but they were a minority within a minority who drew the discussion into a different area that wasn't very constructive, but was hugely symbolic. The

problem for them was this: they wanted a clear narrative about chronic Lyme disease accessible to all. But in order to be suffering the chronic version of Lyme, you needed to have acquired *acute* Lyme at some point in the past. Acute Lyme comes from infected ticks, which the Australian government maintains are not present in Australia. People who hadn't ever left Australian shores in their lifetime faced a problem, and the argument on their behalf began to state that the Australian government and its scientists were involved in an institutional denial of acute Lyme disease in our country. The counterintuitive thing about this for me was that doctors like my sister's would have given them the antibiotic treatments anyway. But, in retrospect, I can see that they were fighting for something deeper than the treatment. They were fighting for acknowledgment that the problem existed. It was the meaning of an identity, and its ratification by the mainstream institutions that mattered.

What followed was a battle between the lived experience of suffering, and data that contested the cause of that suffering. This battle highlighted a strange paradox: instead of arguing about whether chronic Lyme existed, the media argued over who *had* it. In reality, 'lived experience' referred to the symptoms that suffering people lived with, while science debated the cause of those symptoms. Despite these two things—symptom and cause—obviously being very different, pretty often they were conflated in the media, and those who questioned the cause of the lived experience were accused of being 'victim blamers'.

This led to confusion in other domains also. In subsequent years I would sit through an extensive senate inquiry in Perth, where I would watch my sister's doctor go up against other scientists. The enquiry would pass over questions of chronic Lyme's actual existence. Instead, it would focus on who could legitimately have got it, and who could not have.

I would think pretty hard in the coming years about all this. I would eventually find out that it is the majority of the scientific establishment who believe chronic Lyme disease is not

a genuine disease. One of the concerns they have is that this label has a huge list of potential symptoms associated with it, and, according to the International Lyme and Associated Diseases Society, sufferers only need a few of those symptoms to be counted. This means that different illnesses can potentially be caught in the wide net that 'chronic Lyme disease' casts.

I remember one senator at the enquiry becoming enthused when he announced that anyone who disbelieved these poor people was in denial. Immersed in the debate, and trying to 'fight for the little guy', along with media and advocacy groups, he'd not recognised that those scientists contesting the cause were not necessarily contesting the suffering of the people themselves. It seemed to me we were arguing about what sort of society we were. The argument about chronic Lyme had begun to symbolise compassion itself for those involved, rather than embodying a robust debate with nuance and acknowledgement that this disease remained a complex scientific puzzle that we hadn't yet figured out.

The problem was that no certainty existed, but the suffering was obvious. Those who queried the cause were accused of dismissing the suffering. Emotions ran hot. Were we a society who listened to victims? Or did we let experts have opinions about their suffering, especially if the victims disagreed with those 'expert' opinions? In this situation, despite uncertainty itself being the one thing we knew for sure, it was eschewed by both sides. Both believed they knew the correct answer despite no one having enough proof to convince the other.

For Theda, despite being a symbol in this argument, its terms of engagement were never relevant for her specifically. She had left Australian shores in her lifetime, so she could have been bitten by a Lyme-infected tick overseas. As for me, I hated the idea of being cast in the same boat as the scientific sceptics. I didn't tell anyone that's what I was actually thinking. Amongst sufferers, media and advocacy groups, the sceptics were seen as a class of people

who categorically didn't listen to victims. They were the victim-blamers. They were part of the problem. And I didn't want anything about them and me to be the same. And yet, refusing to be sceptical was potentially worse in the end. If no one argued for the uncertainty about this disease to be acknowledged, then how many suffering people would be led astray by the wrong sort of treatment?

I was going to lose my sister. And I might lose my mother too. That would be my entire family. My investment in this problem was concrete, whereas what it represented about how 'compassionate' we were as a society, and whether or not we listened to victims' opinions about the cause of their problem, meant a lot less to me than finding a cure. Despite that, I certainly didn't want to alienate myself. I just wanted a solution. I was secretly open to both sides. But that openness, if I let it be known, would make me suspect in both camps, so I kept my mouth shut.

*

In the online support forums, I saw just how tragic all this was becoming. Whether or not it was a correct diagnosis, some people with it had committed suicide because they couldn't get better. Their parents had abandoned them. Friends, not believing in their suffering, had dismissed it as 'all in your head' and left them to fend for themselves. I saw my sister's story in all of those stories.

Amidst all that tragedy, an echo chamber existed. People only posted articles that supported the chronic Lyme diagnosis as an accurate one. Scientific scepticism was vilified. A conspiracy theory popped up too. It was from an even smaller contingent within that suffering community. They posted about a link between chronic Lyme disease and illegal

biological weapons testing. The idea was that the US government had done such testing on an army base off the coast of Connecticut during the Cold War, and ticks had been genetically altered to carry a mutated super-bacterium.

My family never went in for the organisational conspiracies, thank god. Theda didn't have the head to start thinking about anything like that. When she went psychotic her delusions were much more mythical than organisational. Mum was too busy. I was too sceptical. Dad was still absent.

Theda did start magical thinking though. She ordered an encased microchip from a website that promised to protect its wearer from electromagnetic fields. She wore it around her neck constantly. She also kept a metallic spiral at the bottom of her water jug, because the company that sold it said that it altered the water's ionisation. They said it gave water healing properties, which could help chronically ill people in particular. She also asked Mum to switch off the household wi-fi whenever possible. During one of her slightly better periods, she'd read online that wi-fi could increase pain in especially sensitive people. After reading that, she believed it was increasing hers.

I had no idea if any of that had scientific validity, but what I did believe was that thinking like that wouldn't help the bigger problem, which was a feeling of there being no way to fight. Psychologically speaking, it was making her more and more helpless. To imagine that invisible things in her environment were dangerous, even if it was true, fed a paranoia. It made her symptoms worse when she focussed on it. Sometimes Mum didn't turn off the wi-fi, and if Theda didn't know then she didn't complain. And yet, at times, the pressure of wanting to support my sister made me go against my instinct. I would always make sure the silver spiral was in the bottom of her water jug. I'd nod enthusiastically about the microchip when she asked what I thought, and tell her it was good she had it. If I hadn't done that, she

would have felt dismissed and ashamed. It was an incredibly difficult line to walk though. I didn't want to make things any worse than they were, but I knew faith in something—anything—played an important role in her ability to cope. Undermining her explanations for what she was going through could have destroyed that faith, especially if it came from her brother. I knew she needed to believe in things. I knew she was spiralling.

One reality that bothered me was 'sharks in the water'. These 'sharks', as I saw them, were people who didn't have answers but peddled certainty nonetheless. In a few years' time, when I would be living with Rachel in our little apartment, *A Current Affair* would produce a segment on a chronic Lyme treatment and show it to the nation. It would feature a young woman, like Theda, who was believable and vulnerable, and it would tell the story of a horrid illness that had stolen her life, and how she'd been cured by a clinic in Bali. She'd gone overseas to the clinic, because (the segment argued) the Australian government 'refused to admit that Lyme ticks were in Australia'. This young woman's recovery would be promoted as proof of the mainstream Australian medical establishment's wilful ignorance.

Theda and Mum would see that segment, and Mum would borrow $10,000 to go to that clinic. It would be an ordeal getting Theda there. I wouldn't have time to look up the clinic between helping them prepare, going to work, and getting ready for Rachel's mother's visit. I was afraid to look it up too. If I found anything incriminating about that clinic then one of the only things keeping Theda alive—hope in a new treatment—would be gone, and I would be the one to have taken it from her. But after Mum and Theda left for Bali, I would google the clinic and discover that the doctor running it was someone barred from practicing in Australia, because he also claimed that he could cure both cancer and AIDS using ozone treatments.

In the end, the woman who was featured in that *A Current Affair* segment fell back into

her illness. She wasn't really cured as the segment had argued. But the media would never cover the follow-up story. It lacked an essential ingredient for its ongoing emotional impact: it lacked a villain. If the media were ever to include her backslide, then the tale would have to be adjusted. It would have to be about a poorly-understood illness, with no real cure as yet, and some possible links to mental health. That wasn't a 'story' in the economy of public outrage.

The fiasco with Bali, and my relationship with Rachel, were still years away when we first tried to treat Theda with antibiotics, however. Before I even knew who Rachel was, Theda was sucking on ice blocks and eating chicken broth. I remember how her body looked—her ribs stuck out, and her eyes were sunken. She looked like people do in old photos from concentration camps. I lifted her naked body out of the bathtub, because she couldn't get out, and Mum was too weak. We were circling a dying creature, and things started to fall apart. The usual roles of the family became irrelevant. We were in survival mode.

Eventually my sister began drinking water again. She also started to eat a limited number of solids. Her physical state began to stabilise, and, as this happened, a paradox emerged—she could no longer bear to have anyone in her room, but she feared the house being empty. If she knew that Mum was out shopping, for example, she'd begin texting and asking her to come back. It would have helped if I had moved back home then, but I couldn't bear the position I was in with my hidden doubts about the diagnosis. I could only handle it if I was living elsewhere. It would have been a disaster if I'd moved back in and let something slip.

Despite this, I met with Mum a couple of times a week, and visited Theda about once a week. Mum only wanted an hour usually. It wasn't much. But as that paradox emerged in Theda, when Mum and I would try to meet, Theda would begin to send text messages after about fifteen minutes saying she was scared. Exactly what she feared was nebulous. I think

she feared what she might do to herself. It became more practical for me to visit the house more regularly. Mum was in near constant conversation with Theda about why she shouldn't kill herself. Theda talked of suicide nearly all the time. I tried to be a good brother, but I was selfish enough to fail in that department a little. I began to dread my visits, and, at times, I resented my sister intensely for what this was doing to our mother. Usually, after visiting, I would feel horrible. Sometimes I would shake as I drove home. The stakes were so high, and I didn't think anything would help. We all felt like that, I think.

In the summer of 2011, while my mother was at the supermarket, Theda used her walker to get down the hall to a bookcase. She found several bottles of Valium and Tramadol, swallowed all the contents, and then tied a turkey bag over her head before passing out in her bed.

As soon as Mum called me, and before I went to the hospital, I texted Dad. I asked him to come back and explained why, but he emailed saying he couldn't. He said the refugees needed him, and he attached a PowerPoint presentation on suicide watch that he'd produced with a Western aid worker. It was aimed at Burmese refugees, but he wrote that it would still apply to my mother and me in our 'current situation'.

Later that afternoon, Theda woke up in a hospital bed, alive but psychotic. They kept her sedated and treated her kidneys for the overdose, but once she recovered, they sectioned her in the locked psychiatric ward.

Instead of grandiose delusions, she expressed self-destructive urges this time. They were still grandiose but they lacked optimism. Her physical symptoms were also present for the first time during one of these psychotic breaks. She imagined she was in contact with an

unseen realm, but now she saw the only way forward as killing herself—that was all that could rebalance the 'light and dark' in the otherworld-battle she was perceiving.

Despite the delusions, Mum was more worried than previously that the psych ward was not taking Theda's chronic Lyme diagnosis seriously. They weren't following my sister's dietary stipulations from the Lyme doctor. Mum pushed for an early release and got it, but, when they released her, Theda was still out of her mind.

I met Mum at her house that day, and I spent it wrestling plastic shopping bags from my sister's hands. Theda was still too delusional to realise that we'd never let her attempt suicide when we were in the house. She and I ended up on the kitchen floor, like two dogs scrapping, wrestling over a plastic bag as Mum shouted from the sidelines for me to gain control of the situation.

When my sister recovered, she apologised and said she didn't know what she was thinking fighting with me physically like that. I forgave her of course. I knew the psychoses were beyond her control.

Her next suicide attempt came a few weeks after the first. I got a call while heading home from work. Mum was following the ambulance, but I was on the train and almost home.

I got there first and stood outside the emergency arrival area watching a man in a pale blue shirt standing near the staff-only entrance. He had an oxygen tank on a trolley. When the ambulance pulled in, paramedics pulled out my sister's unconscious body on a stretcher, and the man quickly put a plastic mask over her face.

That evening in the ICU, a doctor confirmed she was in a coma. She'd used a shopping bag, and more pills this time. She'd been unsuccessful, but the ICU doctor said he was

worried about brain damage when she woke up. He felt she *would* wake up, but he couldn't be certain. When we were able to see her, I wasn't prepared for how it made me feel. When I saw a machine respirating my own skin and blood, I wept like a baby. I hadn't cried in years, perhaps it was part of coping. That day I cried unashamedly.

Later that day, I texted Dad more firmly. I used the words 'brain damage'. He agreed to come back. When he arrived, he looked startled by it all. Theda was out of the coma, but she was psychotic once again, and she'd been sectioned in Fremantle Hospital's locked ward. 'This is very serious, Son,' he said.

'It's a delicate situation,' I said.

'You think your sister has Lyme?' he said, sounding annoyed.

'What matters is keeping things as far from terrible as possible,' I said. 'The truth about the diagnosis doesn't matter anymore.'

He shook his head and looked dismayed. He stayed a week though. I was glad that he had come back but I was also annoyed with him. After eight days, he returned to Thailand. I got a call from Mum a couple of days after that. The hospital was releasing Theda. She'd pushed for an early release again, and my sister was still psychotic. I was more worried this time though. Theda had been talking fiercely about the fact that as soon as she was released she'd rebalance the forces of light-and-dark by killing herself. Mum obviously thought she could contain that situation at home, but I didn't agree.

I took the call downtown. Mum was wheezing on the phone. 'I need you,' she coughed. 'They're discharging her, Khin, and I've had a vertigo.'

'Why on earth are they letting her out?' I said.

‘I took a hidden camera into the ward,’ she said.

Half an hour later, I was across town. Someone buzzed me into the second-storey ward, but its halls were empty and its plexiglass cubby was vacant. Theda’s room was on the left, down the hall. I found them both in the room with the lights off. A chair was jammed up against the door, holding it slightly open, and the room’s adjoining bathroom was casting just enough light to see their faces. Mum was on the edge of the bed retching into a plastic kidney-shaped bowl. Theda was pacing the far wall talking to herself.

The vertigo attacks my mother experienced had been a part of her life since my childhood. Her first had occurred when I was ten. I flagged down a passing car to drive us to a doctor back then. In other words, those vertigo attacks left her completely incapacitated. As an adult, when one happened, I would go straight over to her house to take care of both of them. It usually took most of a day. This time, however, I wondered if Mum’s vertigo would help keep Theda sectioned at the hospital without me having to show my hand.

The story with the hidden camera goes like this: Mum was certain that treating Theda’s chronic Lyme disease was the long-game. If we didn’t do that then Theda had no chance at all. With that in mind, when the psychiatrists at Fremantle’s locked ward refused to cater to my sister’s Lyme treatments, Mum contacted one of the journalists who was following their story. He gave her a hidden camera and told her to record the psychiatrists refusing to help. Mum did it, and his producer then called the hospital director and threatened an exposé.

The hospital director then told the head psychiatrist to release my sister, despite knowing she was both psychotically delusional and suicidal.

The day they released her, I knelt beside Mum and tried to talk her out of it. She was barely able to keep the bowl she was vomiting into at her chin. She wasn’t making much sense so I went into the hallway and pressed the button at the plexiglass cubby. A nurse

appeared. ‘I need to speak to someone in charge. It's about Theda Myint,’ I said.

The nurse didn’t move for a second. She looked at me as if she wasn’t sure what to say, then, when I asked again, she disappeared behind the door at the back of the cubby and a minute later a man with a fastidiously scissored brown beard appeared in the hallway. He was sporting five marker pens in his front shirt pocket and seemed defensive, so I assumed he was the man who’d been ordered to release my sister by the hospital director against his better judgment. ‘Yes?’ he said.

‘It’s about my sister,’ I said.

‘You’re Theda Myint’s brother?’

‘Yes.’

He looked at me for a long moment, then said evenly, ‘We’re releasing your sister because we can’t address her needs here.’

‘I know about the media,’ I said.

He blinked a few times. ‘We can't address her illness,’ he repeated, ‘So your mother has agreed that she can handle the situation.’

‘My mother is wrong,’ I said.

‘Your mother—’

‘Theda is hallucinating,’ I said. ‘She thinks ending her life is the only way to rebalance the forces of light-and-dark in another universe.’

He blinked some more but didn’t say anything for a moment.

‘I wouldn’t even get her home like this,’ I added. ‘She’d jump out of the car on the way and try to throw herself in front of traffic.’

‘Lock the doors,’ he parried back so readily that I stared at him for a moment in surprise. Despite feeling a measure of compassion for his difficult situation, I decided then that I didn’t

like him much.

‘She’d unlock the doors,’ I said.

‘Take back roads,’ he said. ‘Have your mother control her in the back seat and drive slowly.’

‘Mum’s vomiting into a bowl,’ I said.

He tried to stand up a bit straighter. ‘You need to help them in this situation,’ he said.

‘I refuse,’ I said boldly. ‘I don’t think she should be released, and I won’t drive them home.’

His eyes flicked sideways towards the plexiglass cubby he’d chosen not to use. ‘It would look bad for the hospital,’ I continued. ‘If you released her under these circumstances and she committed suicide.’

‘We’ve already signed the paperwork,’ he said. ‘Your sister is already discharged. She’s no longer our patient. It’s a courtesy that we are letting her use the room while your mother recovers from, what was it, her vertigo, you said?’

‘My mother is vomiting in a bowl,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he said uncomfortably. ‘As I said, they can use the room until your mother has recovered. You’ll have to excuse me.’ He went to leave, and I realised I’d lost the battle.

‘Can you at least give my mother something to stop the vomiting?’ I said.

He stopped turning and looked at me, then his jaw came out ever so slightly. ‘You want us to give your mother medicine?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘She’s not our patient,’ he said, stuttering a little.

‘She needs Stematil. She’s got a prescription for it. You can call her GP about it if you’re worried about that.’

His eyes flicked sideways towards the plexiglass cubby again. ‘We can’t give medicine to people who aren’t our patients,’ he said. ‘If you want to take her to a doctor, get her and your sister home first. We can loan you a wheelchair to get them down to your car.’

‘Who would look after my sister while I took my mother to the doctor?’ I asked emphatically.

‘If you’re worried,’ he said, sighing, ‘then take her to Emergency.’

‘Emergency?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

I thought it over for a moment. As irrational as it seemed to me, I was losing this battle about medicine for my mother too. ‘How would I get her there?’ I asked.

‘I'm afraid you’ll need to use the street,’ he said.

‘I'll need help.’

‘There’s ramps,’ he said. ‘Just take it slow.’

He then left. I wasn’t angry. I was in the middle of a battle of wills where the stakes were my sister’s life. I felt like I always did when someone’s life was at stake—I felt calm, and racked my brain for the most pragmatic solution. I went back into my sister’s room and crouched down next to Mum. Theda was still pacing against the far wall in the semi-darkness. ‘Mum’s having a vertigo!’ she said excitedly, glancing over for a moment.

‘Stay there,’ I said.

I spoke to Mum next, ‘I’ll help you go out into the hallway.’ I said. ‘Don’t take the bowl, just vomit on the floor. They will help us if it’s a problem for them too.’

‘Ask them for Stematil,’ she wheezed.

‘They won’t give it,’ I said. ‘They say you’re not their patient.’

‘Ask again,’ she said, not moving, and spitting up a mixture of saliva and bile into the

already-dirty bowl.

I went back out into the hall and rang the intercom again, but no one came this time. As I headed back to the room to try and convince Mum of my plan, I noticed the wheelchair in the hallway. It was where I'd spoken to the psychiatrist. It had the word 'PSYCH' stencilled on its back in white spray paint.

Ten minutes later, I had Mum on the street in the wheelchair. We'd made it down the ramps. She'd begged me to stop every few metres so she could vomit or retch. She had her bowl with her, but keeping her in the wheelchair was difficult because she didn't have much strength. I would put on the brake and step around, push her back in, then let her be sick again before moving any further. It had taken about ten minutes. The night was still and I could hear people calling out to each other on the next block, drunk and revelling.

Twenty minutes later when we arrived at the emergency department's entrance, which was only two blocks down, a triage nurse asked the problem. I was still in pragmatic mode, and said my mother was having chest pains. I knew it would get us through without having to wait for hours in the chairs. Mum needed to lie down. No one in the waiting area looked like they were as sick as she was. The triage nurse eyed me suspiciously, then let us skip the queue.

I sat in a corner of the busy emergency department that night, watching Mum sleep, wondering what the hell we were going to do.

The next day they discharged her, and I trailed in my car as she drove Theda home. My sister didn't try to fling herself into traffic, thank god, but I was sure we'd be back at the hospital by the end of that week. Or else, Mum would find Theda dead one morning in her

bed.

18

Ithaca's population is forty-thousand. It hummed that month of July. The students were not in town, but there was a big music festival on called Grassroots, and people were filing in from other parts of the state to attend. The festival was in a village called Trumansburg that was nearby, but Ithaca was the closest big town. The streets were filled with happy young folk who seemed excited. No one was rushing. Faces looked bright and energetic.

As the week went by, I felt a slowly emerging air of familiarity about the place. One of my housemates at the Airbnb told me that Ithaca had the country's youngest mayor, and that people were driving buses in Ithaca despite having PhDs in various topics, simply because they liked it here so much. I could see why. I'd never been in a college town before, and it was lovely.

Cornell University sat on a hill that overlooked the downtown area from a respectable walking distance, while the other dominating force spoke from the ground itself—the gorges. They ran through the whole town. Streets and houses were built around them. The town's quiet cooperation with these gorges brought a certain flavour to everything. Ithaca was what I'd call a feminine place. There was a hippy vibe that was familiar to me, but it was different

to the hippy cultures I'd known. Hippies, 'townies' and academics all seemed to converge and deal with each other in amicable ways. I heard people talking in supermarket lines and at the cafes about everything from politics to meditation, and the best fertiliser brands.

I met Patricia on my second day, at a bagel place near the university. She bought me a cup of coffee and asked how I was finding it.

'It's lovely,' I said. 'This is really unlike any place I've ever been.'

She was a scientist doing something called a 'post-doc' at Cornell, and when I told her I was hoping to find myself in academia again at some point, she quizzed me about it for a while. Her interest was polite and not patronising, even though I clearly didn't know much about academia.

'They give scholarships to unpublished writers?' she said.

'It's competitive,' I said. 'But yeah.'

'I don't know if you'd get that here,' she said. She then told me that Nabokov had written Lolita in Ithaca. 'He listened to girls on the busses, to get Lolita's voice right. It's creepy-cool, huh?'

By the end of that week, I felt more at home in little Ithaca than I had anywhere in my life. I was an outsider there, but so were a lot of people, and everyone immediately understood me affectionately as 'the Australian'.

The woman who sold me coffee in the mornings told me that she lived on a pig farm in a nearby hamlet; her dream, she offered up after quizzing me on where I was from within Australia, was to become a sex therapist and help people with 'alternative relationship' setups, whatever she meant by that.

Patricia wanted to meet up again. I didn't imagine telling her anything about Rachel and court, which felt a bit like lying because her questions included why I was in the States. I told her a relationship had gone bad and was glad she didn't ask to know more. I didn't talk about Theda and the euthanasia debacle going on back home either. I was just glad not to be feeling harried.

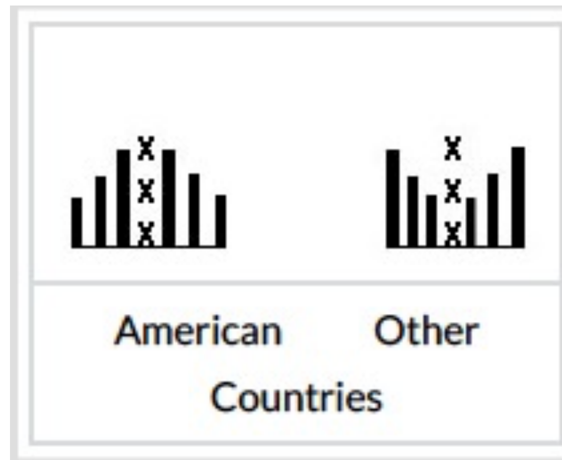
Walking became one of my pastimes. I started in the mornings, passed men with paintbrushes who swished them on houses not far from the laneway next to my house, and usually ended up in a café. People laboured on their laptops in those cafes, and I would sit amongst them, vaguely jotting down observations, or reading a book. I was not really trying to write the assignments for the course back home. I couldn't think about that.

Patricia was working full-time at the university, and I went to Cornell to meet her for lunch most days, happy for the company. I assumed that she was glad of the cultural exchange. She asked about Australian culture a little bit. She took me to the 'musical stones' near the library, and then we watched someone play *Blowin' in the Wind* on the clocktower bells. The rendition was so rich with overtones that it made me feel slightly nauseous.

In the evenings, when I returned to my Airbnb, I got to know one of the housemates a little. She was a neurotic and friendly woman called Caroline, who reminded me of Woody Allen. She said that Americans were really open on the surface of things, but it wasn't straightforward. She showed me something in Cornell's international student welcome homepage. Here's an excerpt:

> The American pattern below shows how Americans are initially very friendly and open: as symbolized by the first wall being very low. However, American values stress privacy and independence, and the walls become higher and higher before one

reaches the stage of a good friendship (represented by the Xs in the center of the diagram).



I wondered if it could help me understand Rachel. Perhaps it was not uncommon to suddenly change your mind about someone when they ceased to suit your circumstances in the US. You had the illusion of being in someone's heart, when, actually, you were further from their centre than that.

Caroline also took me to a bar one night. They had a quiz, and the topic turned out to be 'Australia', so I whispered the answers to most of the questions to both Caroline and the bar worker up one end, while feeling a bit like a minor celebrity.

After I was certain I'd found the town I wanted to stay in, I emailed my Airbnb host and asked if he would let me rent a room longer-term at a cheaper rate.

He said it might be possible, but he wanted to meet first.

When he arrived at the house, it was afternoon and we made tea then sat on the back porch. He was a gently spoken man in his mid-sixties with a triangular head, and a sinewy

body that looked well maintained. He had very clear glassy blue eyes.

'Are you intrigued by the US as a whole?' he asked carefully.

'Basically,' I replied. 'But I'm not looking to see much. I can't afford that. I figured I'd just stay put and let it broil around me while I write.'

He smiled. 'You're a true writer,' he said, 'with that attitude.'

'I just prefer staying in one place when I'm somewhere new,' I said. 'But thanks.'

'Ithaca is a terrific place for that. But, can I ask if you miss your family?'

His question surprised me. It was the third time an older man had mentioned family to me since I'd left Albany. 'A little,' I said.

We chatted while overlooking the backyard on that pleasant afternoon. The back lawn was large and unkempt, with a chicken pen at its far side. I hadn't seen any chickens though. There was a rusty bike rested against a tree in the middle, with long grass growing through its spokes. Gnats buzzed just above lawn-level, giving the whole scene a slightly hazy feel when combined with the sunny humidity.

'Do you have siblings back in Australia?' he asked.

'Just my sister,' I said.

'Is she artistic as well?'

'She's sick,' I said. 'So not these days, but she wanted to be a broadcast journalist once.'

He paused and then said quietly, 'Can I ask what's wrong with her?'

'Sure,' I said. Then I paused, and felt my way into the next part of the conversation. I felt like there was more space to say what I really thought for some reason. It was partly because he was older, and partly because I felt less guilty doing it so far from home. There was no chance of it getting back to my family. I often worried about that back home now that Theda's story was in the news. It was an irrational fear. 'The diagnosis is chronic Lyme

disease,’ I said. ‘I’ve often thought it might be a mental illness though.’

He didn't say anything for a second, then said gently, ‘My son died in March.’

I was startled by this. It wasn’t the revelation that someone had died, but something in his manner of telling me. ‘Your son?’ I repeated, not knowing what else to say.

‘On March 22nd,’ he said sombrely.

I looked at him. He was looking downward, not at the yard anymore, but at his hands. ‘What happened?’ I asked as gently as I knew how.

‘Just a few months ago,’ he said.

I glanced at his face again. His eyes were wet. He was looking out at the yard now, at the bike against the tree.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Have you been to Cayuga Lake?’ he asked, almost eagerly.

‘No,’ I said, waiting for more about his son’s death to follow.

‘It’s pretty,’ he said. ‘It’s the biggest one of the finger lakes. It’s named after the tribe from this area. You should go.’

‘Is it walking distance?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes,’ he said looking at me intensely, ‘You can walk there.’ He then seemed to quite suddenly lose his train of thought.

‘Is it big?’

He appeared to regain his composure. ‘Not too big,’ he said. ‘You could swim across it. I mean, people do that. It's a reasonable proposition.’

I wasn't sure what to say to that. There was another long pause.

‘My boy was a good swimmer,’ he concluded.

‘How did he die?’ I asked, realising I’d already asked it once.

'He drowned,' he said without giving away anything else. I nodded silently. Then he continued. 'It wasn't unusual that he took a canoe. He liked doing that, you know? Sometimes people want to go out by themselves like that. He was a good student.' He looked at me again, suddenly concerned that I should understand the meaning of his words. '*All* his teachers said he was a very well-liked guy. He was, you know? He was just a really good guy.'

'I'm sorry,' I said again.

'Yes,' he said. After that his gaze was a million miles away. I rocked my body quietly, waiting for the moment to pass. Then he said, 'I mean, people drown sometimes.' He paused. 'It's impossible to know what happened out there. People drown in the bath sometimes.'

I continued to rock my body and nod slightly. We sat in silence for a good while. I watched the gnats and sipped my tea. When he spoke again, it was with a renewed interest, 'Have you been there?' he asked. 'Out to Cayuga?'

'No. No,' I said. 'Not yet.'

The next time I met with Patricia I told her about it.

'I'm not surprised,' she said. 'We have a lot of that here.'

'Why?' I asked. 'It's so idyllic.'

'In a town like this there are a lot of very intense personality types. A lot of them have mental health problems.'

I frowned. 'He didn't seem certain his son killed himself. That's just the impression I got. I think he didn't know.'

'That's hard,' she said, making a sympathetic sound. 'Not knowing would be painful. I

wouldn't be surprised to hear it was a suicide though.'

'I can't see why it would be a problem in a place like this,' I said. 'I mean Cornell isn't just any university, it's a—what do you call it—an Ivy League?'

She laughed a slightly bitter but gentle laugh. 'It doesn't work like that,' she said. 'At a place like this you're not the smartest kid in the class anymore. People come from a particular kind of family. They get absorbed in projects. Everything about who they are hinges on what they achieve. If it doesn't work for some reason, or they think it isn't going to, then that can be pretty devastating. We had one in my department just last month.'

'A failed project?' I asked.

'A suicide,' she said. 'I didn't really know him, but it was sad. They offered counselling.'

'Could you tell he was unhappy?' I asked.

She frowned again. It was slightly puzzled. '*I* couldn't,' she said. 'I crossed paths with him a few times. He just seemed a bit eccentric, but that's not unusual in the sciences.'

After that, she took me to the edge of campus where a small bridge spanned a deep gorge with a shallow river. It was surrounded by a small tract of forest separating the buildings from Collegetown. The gorge was as wide as a narrow highway, and about fifty feet deep. At the bottom, transparent shallow water ran over smooth rocks. That's when I saw the nets she was pointing at.

'The council put them up a few years ago,' she said. 'Every gorge around Ithaca has one if it's deep enough to throw yourself off and get hurt. I'm not sure it does much but it would stop someone from making a rash decision.'

The net was unobtrusive. It was made of thin black nylon and spanned from just below the bridge for a good seven feet outwards. I figured you'd have to really hurl yourself off the bridge to get over it, and maybe even that was an illusion.

As Patricia and I talked I noticed a woman sitting on a bench watching us. It made me think. People sometimes saw a couple they imagined might be romantic. It was a mood of some kind. When I looked at couples like she was looking at us, I was sometimes wondering where my own life was heading.

'What about you?' I asked Patricia.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Do you get down because of your research?'

She rocked her head slightly. 'I'm pretty philosophical about my work,' she said.

'How do you mean?'

She twisted her lips slightly, then said, 'I work on a protein strand that I've been studying for two years. I know it might be nothing, but even if that's not the case it's still just a small part of what might eventually help cure some form of cancer. That's just how research goes. You think of it as a role, that's all.'

'Does it bother you that you might not find something?'

'Not too much,' she said. 'If a hypothesis doesn't pan out, then you've shown others what not to bother with. That's just science.'

After we had finished, she took me up to her lab and introduced me to some of her colleagues. They were attentive in a pleasant way, and I found them all quite attractive because of how clear and friendly that attention seemed. There was an intensity about people like that, and it reminded me of Rachel a bit—or perhaps of how I imagined her friends might have been if I'd ever met them. One was a young guy who looked in his early twenties, and he showed me a tiny silver jeweller's hammer when I asked how they dealt with the mice in cages on a few people's desks.

'It's just a tap on the back of the head,' he said. 'It's the most humane way to do it.'

A girl who was talking with us agreed it was a humane method, but said she couldn't do it that way. There was some mandated method she used instead.

After that, Patricia and I parted for the afternoon, but we had sex that night. She asked me over for dinner, and then invited me up to her bedroom. Afterwards, we lay and chatted a while, and then I dozed while she went downstairs to cook something. As I dozed I thought about where I was and how lucky it was I'd landed on my feet finally in this country. Patricia seemed blessed. She had intelligence and kindness. The attraction wasn't super strong, but she was different to Rachel. She was more moderate. Her body being a little overweight was a blessing too. It wasn't a big deal to me, but it meant something. A line from a Leonard Cohen song passed through my head. I'd heard it many times before, but I had never quite understood. It was sung to Janis Joplin. Cohen talks about being '*oppressed by the figures of beauty'.* I had always sensed that had a deeper meaning than just physical beauty. That song was sung to a specific kind of person whose feeling of not being good enough was balanced by a softness of spirit. Patricia didn't have the same power to attract men as Rachel did, but perhaps those who weren't blessed in some ways worked harder to be kind in others. I'd certainly learned a lot from all the things that had gone wrong in my own life. Maybe that was what Cohen meant when he followed up with the line 'We are ugly but we have the music'. Maybe 'the music' was seeing that things sometimes had no clear answer, or fairness, or resolution.

19

After trailing Mum and Theda from the hospital that day, I waited for the call to come about another suicide attempt. When it came, it was not what I'd been expecting.

'I think something in her has given up,' Mum said, sounding cautiously optimistic. 'She's not taking any of her medicines, and she's not listening to the doctor's advice. I think it's freed her somehow. I don't think it will last, but she's been wanting to go for walks around the block. I figured why stop her?'

'Wow,' I said, 'I think you should let her do what she wants.'

'She's still weak, but it's remarkable, Khin. She wants to go to the beach as a family, like we did when you were children. Can you meet us there?'

I took the next day off work, and met them a few kilometres south of where I lived, at Coogee. Theda wasn't psychotic, but something had definitely made it over the divide, and remained with her in this new form of sanity. She had control, but she was infused with whatever part of her psyche gave over to the psychosis. It was submerged but not completely gone.

Mum and I helped her walk from the carpark to the beach. We walked slowly down a

little path between some dunes, to an empty beach on the other side. There was a wide wooden jetty that offered some shade underneath itself on the sand before jutting out into the water. The water was turquoise and calm. The whole beach was deserted. We threw down a rug under the jetty and pulled out a few things to eat. Theda had abandoned her dietary rules. She ate crackers and some mild cheese. Mum had told me over the phone that she'd stopped taking most of the supplements as well. I hadn't seen her eat normally like this for years.

'I think I want to swim,' she said after we had settled.

'Where?'

'In the water, dummy,' she said. 'To that thing.'

I followed her gaze to a pontoon twenty or so metres out to sea.

'Are you sure?' Mum asked nervously.

'I'll be okay if Khin comes,' she said.

We stood up and made our way along a line of shell fragments in the wet sand. When we were near the pontoon, she turned and did a shallow dive. I did breast stroke behind her, keeping a few metres back, ready to intervene if she appeared to struggle, but she didn't. Her front crawl was of a previous era, reproduced with an attention to detail she'd had for everything back in childhood. It was like she was a version of herself from back then. When we got to the pontoon, she pulled herself up, and a moment later we were on our fronts on the wooden deck with clouds of moisture blooming underneath us. The air was dry and hot. The sun baked water off our backs and we lay in silence.

'Mum is thinking of taking me to India,' she said after a minute.

'I know.'

'She told you?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I think you should see it.'

‘It’s for a treatment,’ she said.

‘I know that,’ I said.

She relaxed. She didn’t speak for a while then. I glanced over to our mother, who was reading a book on the rug under the jetty. Mum had told me over the phone about some New Zealanders. They were ‘hippies’ she’d said, who’d contacted her on Facebook after reading about Theda in *Who Magazine*. Their guru was an Indian man who had an Ayurvedic hospital in Delhi, and they had suggested that Theda visit it. My task would be to look after the dogs. I was going to move out of my house and into Mum’s for three months.

‘You went with that girl,’ Theda said.

‘Yes.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Rose,’ I said.

She didn't say anything for a while. The swaying of the pontoon was soothing.

‘All those books have twists,’ she said.

‘What books?’

‘Those one's Mum reads.’

I followed her gaze back to our mother. ‘She says they don’t remind her of real life,’ I said.

Theda laughed. ‘This world is a bloody fucking shit-show,’ she said, then stopped trying to touch the water with her hand and turned onto her back. She lifted one arm from her side and covered her eyes. Her body was lithe and still slightly brown, even though it hadn’t seen sunlight in years. Beads of water were slowly evaporating on her legs. ‘Do you remember when we used to go to those pools as kids?’

‘The Bentley ones?’ I asked.

'That's right. And we'd lie on the concrete to dry off?'

'I do remember it.'

'Things were good back then.'

'Yes,' I said.

Then she asked me something that I'd never spoken to her about before. It was a thing from childhood that I hadn't thought about much since my twenties. She asked me about the sun.

'Did you avoid the beach when you were younger, Minty?' she said.

'Yes,' I said.

'Was it to stop going brown?'

'Yes,' I said.

'I was the same,' she said.

It was interesting to hear her talk like that. She rarely spoke to me about the way she'd felt before getting ill.

I looked out over the water and saw a discarded plastic cricket bat in the dunes. 'It's cool now,' I said.

'What is?'

'Being from somewhere else,' I said.

'You think?'

'Everyone is trying to say they're, like, one-fourteenth brown these days,' I joked.

'Really?'

'Sure.'

She laughed then, and it wasn't the careful laugh she usually did, it was a belly laugh. And then there was a short gap in the conversation before she said, with the remnants of

mirth in her voice, ‘I wouldn’t know, Khin. I don’t get out much.’

I turned over and let the sun bake my front. After getting completely dry, I turned again onto my belly and looked out over the water. Then I looked at Theda. She was still smiling. Her hair was so thick and dark, and her cheekbones were higher than mine. Her fingers were delicate, and the angles of her conspired to make her all softly joined-together.

I don’t know what happened that day. I remember the smell of the water. I remember how it felt to be younger.

*

Four months after that day, Mum and Theda returned from India. The story goes like this: Dad had met them there, and I’d moved to Mum’s house in Willetton to take care of their two little dogs. Dad took six weeks off his volunteer position in Thailand. Theda and he had begun talking again, mostly via an app where she could record her voice and send it to him and he could do the same. They were repairing their tattered relationship, so, when the idea of him going with them was proposed, he couldn’t really turn it down without losing ground. I think he was scared about how far things had gone. He spent four weeks in Delhi with them, but they shifted to Dharamshala because the Ayurvedic treatments weren't working, and one of the orderlies at the hospital had begun making sexual advances towards Theda. Dharamshala was Mum’s idea. She remembered it from when I had talked about it after my trip with Rose. It was in the foothills of the Himalayas where the Tibetans were.

‘I think if we come home now,’ she said over the phone from Delhi, ‘she'll just try again. Apparently you can see the Dalai Lama’s doctor in Dharamshala.’

‘I agree,’ I said. ‘I heard that too. Just keep her from losing hope.’

A couple of weeks after they shifted, Dad returned to Thailand. Two weeks after he’d left, Theda made her third attempt at taking her own life. She took every sleeping pill and antidepressant in their luggage. Mum rushed her to the closest hospital, which was a rudimentary one that the Tibetans used. Doctors there sent her to the Indian hospital in the flats of Himachal. Theda lay half-dead on a mattress with her kidneys failing as a doctor scrawled the names of medicines in Hindi for Mum to go into the streets and find. That hospital didn’t have bedsheets, food or medicines.

I was on the phone to Mum during this event. I remember my father’s panicked phone calls from Thailand. He rang me convinced I was the only one who could get Mum out of India. ‘If your sister recover, mate, she *will* try again,’ he said. ‘You must convince your mother to go back to Perth.’

‘Let's wait and see,’ I said.

‘You think things can't get worse, mate?’ he said. ‘Even if she recover, the hotel has the window. She can jump. If she break her neck, just imagine on top of all your mother has, that your sister will need the medical evacuation to Australia with the broken neck. You know how much that costs? Someone will lose their house, mate. I can't lose my house. Your mother will lose her house.’

I did what I always do with Dad, which was to nod along and tell him I’d relay his message. I hated when he called me ‘mate’.

When Mum called back she said the Indian police had been at the hospital when she’d returned with medicines. The doctors had reported the attempted suicide to the authorities. It was considered ‘attempted self-murder’ in India, and carried a harsh penalty. Thankfully, Mum had already befriended a Tibetan man I knew from the days with Rose. He and I had

stayed in touch via Facebook, and he was a wonderful guy. When I told him my mother was arriving with my sick sister in Dharamshala he'd befriended them without hesitation. After the suicide attempt, he left the Tibetan encampment to go and help them. It was against the law for Tibetans to leave their designated area without special papers, but he was a man who'd once trekked over the Himalayas on foot to escape persecution. He didn't think twice about risking jail to leave the encampment and help my family. We owe him a debt. He took an Indian friend with him that day who spoke Hindi and the friend helped translate the policeman's demands. The police wanted money. They took it instead of hauling Mum or Theda to jail. Another bribe was expected on Theda's discharge if she survived. Mum said she didn't want to return to Perth if my sister made it out of the woods. I sensed she was right. I told her Dad's concerns but we both agreed.

Dad had a small conniption over the telephone when I told him they were staying, but I told him if he was so certain about making them come back, then he could fly from Thailand to India and try to convince them himself. He let it go.

Two months later, I picked them up at the airport, and they both looked like half-drowned rats. I couldn't imagine what they'd gone through over there. Theda was slightly changed. She'd lost a piece of herself. Mum was hollowed out. She said they just had to keep trying for a cure.

A few weeks after their return, something in me started to go wrong. I snapped at a few people in my social circle pretty severely. They didn't deserve it. One incident involved me screaming at someone I cared about in a public place after smashing a glass on the floor. The other involved me kicking someone out of my house. Both had said that Perth was a

wonderful place after I'd berated it, and suggested that if I didn't like it, then that was something wrong with me, not the place. My overreaction was uncalled for. I wasn't well. The frustration and fear were bubbling up. It was the eleventh year of the illness and I was exhausted by it too. I felt trapped, and I didn't know what to do.

Dad offered a way out, and, for better or worse, I took it. He rang not long after those two blow-ups, and suggested I take a break. 'Son,' he said, 'I can get you a job here on the border working with the refugees. They need language teachers here.'

I ran the idea past Mum. I asked my boss at the migrant school for indefinite unpaid leave and he gave it. A month later I took a cheap flight to Bangkok, and then a cheaper one to a little town out on the flats of Tak near the border of Karen State in Burma.

20

A few days after the host from the Airbnb had told me about his son, he emailed and said I could stay long term at a cheaper rate, but only if I signed on for a year. I emailed back saying my visa was only for six months, and he apologised but said it wasn't possible like that, so I started to look on Craigslist. The second place I contacted said a six-month lease was fine. A woman in her forties said she was living with two others. She invited me over to meet her and see the place.

When I got there I was immediately struck by how good it felt. The bedroom was pokey but the house was not. It was a double-storey place that smelled of old wood. It was just south of the commons, so I'd be able to walk anywhere from there. The floorboards were unpolished and it had high ceilings. The woman I'd spoken to on the phone turned out to be very friendly. She had pictures on the walls that had been cut out from magazines and put into thrift-store frames. She sat me down and offered me tea while quizzing me a bit. She was overweight and smiley, and had the disposition of someone maternal. She'd ended a marriage to a British woman a few months earlier. She'd been living in London with her wife, but she'd returned to Ithaca to lick her wounds after the divorce. She said she didn't really

understand why her marriage had broken up and that distressed her. Two cups of tea later, I knew half of her life story and she said, ‘You’ll fit in just fine, honey. You’re exactly what we’re looking for. The room is yours if you want.’

I said I’d take it, and she invited me to a fire they were having in the backyard the following week. I wouldn’t be able to occupy the room for another two weeks, but she said I should come and meet the others. ‘You’ll love Caroline,’ she said, winking at me.

Halfway through the following day my lawyer called with news. ‘So,’ she said slowly, ‘I finally got hold of Rachel.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘She said she’d tried to call our offices. She made a big deal about how she’d left messages. But, to be honest, I think she was lying.’

‘Why would she do that?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. We have an excellent secretary. Unfortunately, either way, she wants to move forward.’

‘She wants to go to court?’ I said, slightly stunned. I’d begun to feel like my luck was changing in Ithaca, but this was a stark reminder not to get ahead of myself.

‘That’s right,’ she said.

I sat down on the bed with the phone pressed to my ear. ‘Did you tell her I’d left and wasn’t coming back?’

‘I did.’

‘Does she know that we have to go to trial and that this is going to drag out?’

‘We lawyers have very specific rules about what we can tell opposing party,’ she said. ‘I

informed her that we had to fight this as it had lifelong consequences for you because you aren't a US citizen. But I couldn’t give her any specifics. Like I said, there are things I can’t tell opposing party during a negotiation.’

I didn’t say anything for a moment.

‘Look,’ she continued, ‘my sense is that Rachel is angry. I think that she wants to do as much damage to you as she can. That’s my guess.’

‘I don’t understand it,’ I said.

She smacked her lips like she was chewing. ‘Well, like I said a week ago when we spoke, preliminary hearings are usually just to file intentions. But I’ll try to file a motion to dismiss.’

‘Do you need anything from me?’

‘Just be in court on Friday.’ She then paused and smacked her lips again, then she said, ‘Khin, can I ask if Rachel is educated?’

‘Educated?’ I said, taken aback by her question.

‘Yes, did she finish high school?’

‘She went to university.’

‘What kind of degree did she do?’

I thought about it for a moment. Answering questions about Rachel’s education was the last thing I had expected to be doing. ‘An arts degree of some kind,’ I said.

‘A liberal arts degree?’

‘I guess so,’ I said.

‘That’s interesting.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well, I would expect someone with any tertiary education to understand something we have here in the US called due process. Do you know what that is?’

I stuttered a bit. I knew the term and its basic meaning but I wasn’t sure how to define it to a lawyer. ‘I think so,’ I eventually said.

‘Well, basically,’ she said, ‘we don't just assume that because someone accuses you of something here in the United States that you’re guilty. I imagine you have something in Australia that's similar? Anyway, I would expect anyone with a high school diploma to know about due process.’

‘Do you think Rachel doesn’t?’

‘I think she imagines just turning up and getting what she wants without any questions asked. Someone would really only think that way if they didn’t know what due process was.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Look, Khin, lawyers are in situations like this to take the emotion out,’ she continued. ‘I informed Rachel, quite politely, and in no way to intimidate her, that I thought she wasn’t aware of the next part of the process, and that perhaps she should seek legal counsel. But she became quite upset with me at that point.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was cordial on my end,’ she said quickly, a touch defensively. ‘I just informed her that there was a process now, and that she should find out what it was. But she got quite angry at me. She wanted to know how much I was charging you.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I said that it wasn't relevant. But she said if I wouldn't tell her, then she'd “google” me—I mean, we don’t keep client records online. I don’t know what she’s thinking.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘I told her that what I was charging wasn’t relevant, and then she did this—you know—this big American movie style thing where she announced that she’d see us in court, and then

she hung up.'

'She hung up on you?'

'Yes.'

I thought about it. This was not surprising, but two months ago it would have been. 'So what's your sense of it all?' I said.

'I think what we're dealing with is a level of maturity,' she said evenly.

After that, we spoke a little longer about when and where to meet in the courthouse, and the sort of attire I should wear. I needed to get my hands on some cheap formal clothes.

When the call was over, I went for a long walk. I felt like layers of assumptions were being stripped away from me. The way I was understood by Rachel mattered. I had no idea how I was going to tell Patricia that I was going back to Albany. She and I were seeing each other every day, so I'd have to tell her some reason why I would be out of town.

I walked all the way up to the top part of Ithaca, through a playground and past a diner, and over to a high school. When I got to the high school oval I realised I'd reached the edge of town. There was nothing but a highway on the other side, and some trees beyond that. I walked out into the middle of the oval, and the school buildings were at my back. The kids were on holidays so it was completely empty. I stood in the middle of that grass, and everything around me went totally still. The air was still. Even the sky was still, and the rumble of cars felt completely still too, somehow. It was just a feeling. There was no one in sight. The two goal posts stood nonchalantly at either end of the expanse of grass, arbitrarily, both staring at me with those strange cross-bars that American football goal posts have. I felt totally alone. It was a strange feeling, calm and not sad, but I was also completely by myself.

Afterwards, I walked back. When I got to my house, instead of going straight inside, I stopped at the laneway and dangled my legs over the edge of the little gorge there for a while.

I watched the shallow water slowly pushing soft reeds and went through a list of people I knew, in my head. I knew a lot, but there was no one I wanted to talk to about any of this. Then I saw a slender snake, not much thicker than a narrow rope, vanish into the water.

When I got inside, I phoned my father in Thailand, and I asked him if I could borrow some money. It was humiliating, but I told him I might have to go to trial, in which case I'd not have enough money even with my credit card. He told me I'd made this problem myself, and that I had to learn from the consequences. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to learn. I wasn't sure of anything.

21

On the flats of Tak, a ute drove me from Mae Sot's tiny airport down a pot-holed road to a downtown 'hotel' that was no more than a lumpy bed in a room with a mosquito net strung from the ceiling. The weather was humid. Burma's border was only a few kilometres out of town, and it consisted of nothing more than a narrow river that a person could have swum across, but on the other side was a civil war zone. I felt a huge sense of relief about being away from Perth.

The next morning my back gave out, so I spent the next two weeks on a walking stick before starting work, eventually getting an x-ray at a Thai hospital, but, gradually, as my back recovered so did my mood.

In the mornings I saw monks in saffron robes collecting alms alongside shop owners tossing buckets of water on the road to stop the dust blowing up. I got myself a bicycle and rode into town most days. Men sat on metal stools in the marketplace selling live eels and baby tortoises amidst a bustle of more mundane stalls.

I settled into my job once my back was healed properly. I joined orphan kids in the cane fields every morning. They were teenagers whose parents had died in the fighting or who'd

been sent to Thailand so they would be safe. The boys and girls both wore a clay mud called *thanaka* on their cheeks. They laughed and teased each other, and lived in dormitories dotted in that field. A large concrete building in the centre of the cane field was our school. American money had paid for it but the teachers didn't get wages.

Most of the other teachers were refugees—men and women who'd been imprisoned for years inside Burma for attending protests, and, who, upon release, would have been targeted by the government. They had chosen to come here for their own safety. Now they were trapped because the Thai government had sequential blocks on all roads leading out of Mae Sot. The Thai army searched vehicle boots and undercarriages for Burmese stowaways trying to get further into the country.

It was hard work at that school, but I was finished by four pm most days. The biggest part of my job was to try and train those refugee teachers with English-teaching skills. I also had to sort out a language curriculum that made more sense than the one they had installed.

In the afternoons, when school was over, I would cycle back into the city itself and eat something or drink tea at a shop just outside the market. Gradually, my sense of back home diminished. I called a couple of times every week to check how they were going, but once I hung up, the dusty exotic world around me made Perth feel distant again. One stall near the tea shop offered fried crickets from a massive black wok to anyone who wanted them.

Mae Sot was a small city. It was roughly 200,000 people altogether. About 80% of its population were Burmese refugees, and the rest were Thais or Western aid workers. It would be misleading to call Mae Sot 'Thailand'. It was officially inside the country, but different from the rest of it. There were 172 NGOs there. The UNHCR camps were further north, and a good collection of Chinese-owned sweat shops had set up to exploit the cheap refugee labor. Big trucks picked up the undocumented workers at the ends of their shifts and ferried them to

dormitories. The sweatshops' owners didn't want their assets potentially thrown back across the border overnight if they got picked up by bribe-seeking local police, so they controlled their workers like cattle, loading them into the backs of those trucks every morning and night.

I'd never been around communities of people working for political ends before. My migrant school back home was not a very ideological place, but, on that border definitely, politics were a constant intrigue. I felt like I was growing as a person by witnessing it all. I'd never met Oxford or Cambridge graduates before, but I met a lot in that dusty city. They had put off their gap-years until after their degrees, and were from all over the Western world. Many of them were driven, and not always very personable, but all were very focussed on a noble cause.

There were about three hundred Western aid workers in town at any given moment. The younger ones were fresh out of universities and thinking about a career in the field, and there was a decent number of very short-term volunteers also, especially in medicine. There was a small portion of older people; retirees and the like. Most of the aid workers were under forty though, and on the weekends two bars attracted them.

It was some Italian doctors who I made friends with in the end. They had a sense of humour. They were med students doing a few months in the big American-funded clinic. A small group of us would eat fresh fish down at the local market every other night, while stray dogs wove between our legs under tacky plastic tables. On weekends we would sometimes go to one of the bars together, but some of them said they preferred smaller gatherings because the culture in the bars was often a bit holier-than-thou.

After a few months I had a little collection of Burmese friends. One was a woman teaching 'Grade 11' at the school where I worked. She was from Mandalay, and her English was fairly good. She explained the town to me a bit better. 'Thai police pay their bosses to

come up from Bangkok,' she said. 'They make a second wage by demanding bribes from Burmese refugees. They know Mae Sot is where police can get rich.'

'What happens if a Burmese person can't pay?' I asked.

She rocked her head and said they jailed you for two weeks before tossing you back over the border. It was easy enough to come back over to Thailand afterwards, but it was not something you hoped would happen, especially if you were a political refugee rather than an economic one. Political refugees were safer in the camps, because going back into Burma was dangerous for them.

I befriended a man named Aung Khine during this time also. He worked in the school too, and he drank tea at a little stall near my apartment most days.

'Your first name,' he said to me once we'd got to know each other a bit, 'it's strange. What day are you born?'

'Sunday,' I said.

'Khin is not a Sunday name,' he said. 'Why you have this name?'

'I was born with yours,' I said. 'But I dropped it.'

'Your first name is Aung?'

'Yes,' I said.

He squinted at me. 'Khin is what men call their wife,' he said. 'This is like "Sweetie" in English.'

'Are you saying I turned myself into someone's Sweetie?' I asked. 'Where is she?'

He slapped his knee and laughed hysterically, then offered me a cheroot cigar.

We became friends after that. Later that month, he told me about his time in jail. Back in Burma, he'd been tortured as a political prisoner for waving a placard at a protest against the military government. He'd been jailed for eight years. The prison guards had made him drink

his own piss for their entertainment. He couldn't go back into Burma now. ‘I have no home,’ he said to me once, grinning. ‘I cannot go back. Thailand doesn't want me. My home is my cigar and my tea!’

As I spent more time on that border, my state of mind morphed in a similar way to how it had in India, only it was more powerful this time. This time I wasn’t just surrounded by poverty and injustice, I was engaging with it on a more meaningful level. Once again, my own worries and problems took a back seat and that was good for my state of mind.

There was a dog who hung about my apartment building. I hated that dog. It was black and had a shiny coat, which meant someone was feeding it more than the rubbish most of the strays in that town survived on. It would snarl at me whenever I wanted to get past and into my apartment building. I was relieved when it wasn’t there.

The strays formed part of that town’s character. They coagulated into packs after midnight. It reminded me of something Rose used to say in India when observing the same phenomenon. ‘They’re just insecure,’ she used to say, ‘They spend all day surrounded by humans who treat them like crap, then at night they get to have control.’

It was dangerous, though. If you got caught by a pack of dogs alone in town, they often chased you. I met people who were thinking of leaving because they couldn’t handle the danger those dogs posed. After a few months I also realised that such things were part of what made that border so powerful. The proximity of danger was everywhere. When living in the West it was often easy to forget what physical jeopardy felt like. Danger like those dogs altered your sense of self. It brought you back into your body a bit. Everyone was scared. Hardly a night went by without someone having to toss stones at one in order not to be mauled. It was a fear that everyone you met could relate to, regardless of their identity in that politically fraught place.

One thing that I noticed didn't go over too well in the bars was my identity as half-Burmese. It made a lot of the Burmese instantly warm. 'Same blood!' they said more than once. But a contingent of the Western aid workers in those bars were jealous if I mentioned it, because my racial identity seemed like an unearned privilege. I found this jealousy both perplexing and ironic. It was probably the first time in my life when my Asian identity had given me any positive symbolic value to Westerners around me, and they weren't happy about it. A couple of times I made the mistake of telling the wrong Western aid worker that I was enjoying getting to know my roots on that border, alongside whatever good I might be doing. They didn't warm to the idea. I think they had conflated 'Burmese' with 'refugees' in their minds and made the category into a sacred class. I was therefore being an interloper by identifying with that ethnicity in any way.

'Do you speak Burmese?' a self-righteous young woman with perfect diction said to me one night when I told her I was enjoying that side of it.

'No,' I said, surprised by the snarl in her voice.

'These people are *victims,'* she retorted. 'You're not a victim. You're not Burmese.'

I met people like that fairly often on the border. I wasn't entirely surprised by it. A few times in earlier years Dad had returned to Perth with people he worked with, and I'd noticed some pretty fragile egos in the mix. There is something about meaningful work in a competitive environment that brings out a certain ugly pride sometimes. You see it in creative industries sometimes also. I guess that's just human nature.

She was right that I wasn't a victim, but that hadn't been my point. Looking back, I had never really felt comfortable about my Asian identity in Australia, but on that border, for the

first time, I sensed it was actually something to be proud of. When I met people like that, I judged them back a bit. I privately compared them to colonial missionaries. They were never explicitly religious, but the fervour of their compassion reminded me of something. Despite the presence of many genuine people in the mix, there was also a decent amount of that unselfconscious zealousness amongst the aid workers.

One person who was decidedly not like that was a woman from New Zealand called Katie. Katie was running a small NGO on the education side of things, and she had been there for ten years. I couldn't imagine living in that town for so long. She had a sense of humour about most things. When she had a big party one evening for all the Western NGO workers, she crocheted wall hangings of Aung San Suu Kyi as a vampire with fangs dripping blood. Aung San Suu Kyi was the iconic hero of the aid worker community, but Katie had a distaste for idol worship, and she poked fun at it.

'Most Westerners teaching English here don't know what the fuck they're doing,' she said to me when we met. 'They've got a degree in something else—international relations or something. They stay for a few months, which is fine, but in education you can really mess up students in that time. People get here and realise that teaching English is a skill, and they find themselves in front of a class for the first time without it. They confuse students, and muck up any semblance of a curriculum.'

'Why do Burmese even need English?' I asked naively.

She looked at me strangely. 'Why did *you* come here?'

'I came because I needed the break from home,' I said. 'And I heard they wanted ESL teachers.'

She laughed out loud. 'That's refreshingly honest,' she said.

Then I explained that teaching English to refugees was also my job in Australia, and that

I knew how to do it. She looked at me very seriously and said, 'You should stay.'

I did in the end. I spent eleven months instead of six. I worried about Mum and Theda while I was there, of course, but I was also hugely relieved to be away from it all. That was the eleventh year of Theda's illness. She suffered one psychosis that year. It was a scary time back home for a while. Mum also suffered something called a transient ischaemic attack, which was the precursor to a stroke that can be caused by stress. Perhaps I should have returned, but I didn't. All I saw ahead of me in Perth was another eleven years of the same.

I didn't see Dad as much as I'd expected to on that border. He was absorbed in his work, and there remained a kind of unspoken tension between us over what was going on back in Perth. We did see each other about once a week though, and that was enough.

I eventually learned that the reason the Burmese community needed English was because of their own country's textbooks. They were ridiculously bad. Burma had lived under an oppressive military rule much like North Korea's for a long time. Published material in their own language was full of lies. The easiest books to get on the black-market inside Burma itself were in English, so the only way Burmese people were going to educate themselves, at least for now, would be if they learned it.

It was at the party where Katie crocheted Aung San Suu Kyi wall hangings that I met Rachel. There were about a hundred people attending, and we were down the side of the house, near a small group of people grilling vegetables on an open fire.

'I saw you on the main road,' she said.

'You did?'

'In that big restaurant with the high ceiling,' she said. 'You were on your laptop.'

‘I would have been preparing a lesson,’ I said.

I didn’t think much of the interaction when it occurred. I had no idea I’d end up falling in love. I thought she was cute, but she was also clearly young, and I was constantly meeting people who fit such a broad description. She had big eyes and her teeth looked like they were clamouring to get out of her mouth. Her figure was petite, and she had long brown hair that went down to the middle of her back. I remember thinking it was unlikely she’d be interested in me, given that I was starting to feel too old, at thirty-five, for women in their early twenties.

‘I’m teaching here too,’ she said. ‘I’m being posted up to Mae Sariang tomorrow. It’s six hours north. I had to come and get my paperwork sorted out here though. I’m really nervous about it.’

‘I’m sure you’ll do fine,’ I said. ‘Where are you from?’

She told me she was from New York. ‘The state, not the city,’ she said.

‘I didn’t know New York was a state?’ I said.

She laughed, and told me her city was actually the capital of that state. We didn’t flirt that night, we just talked the way two people mildly considering friendship might. She was open-minded and quick. At one point I told her I’d had a rough time growing up, and suffered depression for a few years after high school. Her ears perked up at that.

‘What do you mean by depressed?’ she said.

‘It feels like a lifetime ago now,’ I said. ‘But I was really dark there for a while. I couldn’t see the point of life much.’

‘I had an anxiety issue as a teenager,’ she said then. ‘And in college a bit. I don’t think it will ever happen to me again.’

‘Life is a bit like that sometimes, isn’t it?’

We talked about our families, and it was refreshing given the fact that most conversations with strangers who were there from the West usually ended up being about politics and the plight. She spoke more personally.

Around midnight, she asked if I'd walk her to her hotel. I remember thinking at that point that she might be interested, but I still wasn't sure. We filled our pockets with stones for the dogs, and, after a few blocks, I got the impression she might want to kiss. When we did, I realised how attracted to her I was. She asked if there was a place we could go. I wasn't really fussed about the idea of sleeping together. The truth was that I was often a bit nervous when the possibility of sleeping with someone on the first night presented itself. I preferred something slower, but she was leaving the next day.

I remember the sight of her on the bed that night. She had small breasts and lovely hips. It was the sort of body that made me weak at the knees. The sex was fine. At one point she pushed me off her, turned around and got on her knees, then thrust her bum in the air, twisted her head back over her shoulder and let her mouth drop open. It seemed like a cheesy move, and I wondered if it was because she was younger and had grown up with online pornography around. I played along for a moment then gently ushered us back to something else.

What I liked best about the encounter was how we talked afterwards. It was different to the conversation beforehand, which had felt comfortable too, but this was deeper. The sex had made me feel at home. I felt calm and unashamed. She seemed the same. She talked in more detail about herself. Whatever it was, that night felt magical. It was like sparks that fly off the top of a bonfire on a quiet night, transient and pleasant but grounded in something primal. I knew it was possible I would not see her again after that, but I sensed I might.

A few days later, I sent her an email and asked how it was going. I slipped in that I'd be happy to make a trip to see her again if she wanted. She wrote back saying she was free that weekend if I was keen. We spent the next four months visiting each other on weekends, while living in towns 600 kilometres apart during the week. Those trips were fascinating and tinged with excitement. Before each one, I would down some Dramamine to stave off motion sickness, then hook one arm over the railing of a *songthaew*. The *songthaew* were canopied trucks with open backs for people to jump on and off quickly. You would share the ride with all sorts of local people. It was farm workers mostly. We always passed the UNHCR camps on that road too. Tens of thousands of bamboo huts were surrounded by barbed wire. One time, a Burmese friend took Rachel and I inside one, and we saw how people were living. There wasn't enough food, and there was no running water. Big sheds dangled the flags of more fortunate countries, with signs that said things like 'This rice is provided by the Brazilian people', or 'These lentils are provided by the people of Japan'.

Sometimes, when passing the outside of those camps on my trips to see Rachel, I saw trucks with the letters 'I.M.O.' painted in white on their sides. They were trucks for ferrying a few asylum seekers to be resettled in a third country. The numbers were so large that there was still a ten-year wait list for resettlement. Each day a few were leaving. I would glimpse the small groups, waiting at the gates, dusty-faced and clutching each other's hands.

On the other end of those journeys, Rachel would always be waiting. She'd meet me at the drop off, and I'd be drowsy from the Dramamine and covered in dust. She'd gently guide me toward her accommodation, and, once we were in the room, she'd push me into the shower. I would clean off the dust from the road as she talked about her week, while waiting for me on the bed.

As I got to know Rachel, one of the unexpected things was her mixture of traits. I was only just getting to know what people who bandied around political causes were like, but she was different in some ways from what I perceived as common. She had idealism, but she also had an introspective side that was playful. She said she'd grown up in a church called the United Unitarians, and they didn't believe in any specific god. They had a church, and weekly meetings. I wondered if having a spirituality was why she wasn't so politically zealous. What an irony that was: an actual religion made her less religiously zealous than many of the so-called atheists on that border. I realised that the older ladies at my work back in Perth had it too. They were also deeply moral people working with a vulnerable population, but they moved between the personal and political realms less judgmentally. They didn't muddle up the two. I knew most of them were also devout Christians, and I pondered the paradox of it without coming to any real conclusions, just a vague sense that life was full of strange contradictions.

I was also fascinated by Rachel's intellectual side. When she talked about global politics and identity, her interest was earnest and analytical without being pretentious. She was humble enough not to assume she had the answers, and I felt deeply engaged with ethics in her company. It made me want to learn more. I realised that I wanted to do more with my life.

When we'd talked about intellectual topics enough, we talked more personally again, or else we'd cuddle up. It was a wonderful balance; I'd never been so inspired by another person's company before.

A few weeks into it, we booked a cheap hotel in Chiang Mai and met there for the weekend. I remember I was lying on the bed, running my fingers over a colourful tiger-lily tattoo she had on her hip.

'I did that when I was 18,' she said.

‘It’s nice,’ I said.

She didn’t speak for a moment and then she said, quietly, ‘I thought you’d noticed my scars.’

I realised then that I had been looking at the scars. I was running my fingers along them underneath the tattoo. They were shallow, but obvious if you looked closely. There were several neat rows beneath the ink, perfectly aligned.

‘Tell me about it?’ I said.

‘It was when I was anxious,’ she said. ‘The cutting helped.’

We talked about it for a while, and I felt like I knew her better afterwards. I then told her about my own scars, and she said she'd noticed them. It brought us together in a strange way. I’ve often thought that there is an intimacy between people who’ve struggled with shame. I think it was around that time that I realised I was probably going to fall in love. I knew it would be temporary, but I was open to that. She would return to the US when her contract was over, and I’d go back to Australia to try and figure out a way forward with my situation there.

A couple of months after that day, it was New Year’s Eve and we met up in Chiang Mai again. We went out onto the streets that night and enjoyed the raucous energy of local revellers. Rachel was coming to the end of her contract. In another month’s time she’d be returning to America.

That night, people were letting off firecrackers on street corners. Some of those firecrackers were finding their ways under cars and into buildings. It was chaotic, but no one seemed to be getting upset over it.

‘In America this would never fly,’ she said, turning to me after we saw one dive under a parked car and then come out the other side.

‘Nor in Australia,’ I said smiling.

One of the firecrackers then found its way into a restaurant, and the patrons jumped from their tables, but no one seemed upset about it. There was too much goodwill in the air. The sky was filled with floating lanterns. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

‘You’ve really shown me about that,’ she said.

‘About what?’ I said.

‘That there isn’t just one way to live a life.’

‘Have I shown you that?’ I asked.

‘You haven't got a house or a big career, or anything like that,’ she said. ‘But you've chosen to do things with your life that have value, like travelling in India for example.’

‘You think?’ I said.

‘Yes, honey,’ she said, gripping my hand tightly. ‘I’ve been looking into a visa for Australia. If I take it then we can live there for a year, and, if this is really as good as it feels, then we can figure out what to do at the end.’

‘I could come to the US now if you want,’ I said, though I knew it was impractical. I had already looked into visas for the US, and I knew there weren’t any working holiday ones.

‘No,’ she said firmly. ‘I don’t want to go back. I’m not ready.’

We stopped to watch a tiny Thai man crouch under a lantern on a street corner. Four of his friends held it steady while he reached under it. He flicked a lighter, and then it started to glow. After a moment, it seemed to tug at the air and the people let it go. Slowly, it rose upward, narrowly missing some powerlines on the way, weaving a path towards the other lanterns, like a melody seeking its way into an ensemble. Those lanterns were the size of oil

barrels, but up so high, in the night sky, collectively, they looked like a massive school of glowing jellyfish.

22

Thursday I went down to the shop on the corner of Ithaca’s North Aurora and Seneca. The morning was crisp and people were busy chatting and drinking coffee, despite it only being 7am. When my phone rang, I saw it was Mum and assumed she'd called to wish me luck.

‘Where are you?’ she said.

‘I’m in a coffee shop. My bus is in forty minutes.’

She hesitated then said, ‘Khin, I’m so sorry, but Theda’s gone.’

I’m not sure what I said, but I remember that I stood up and walked to the door of the building, and out onto the sidewalk. When I got out there I said, ‘Okay’ and then asked what we should do.

‘When can you come home?’ she said.

‘I need to go to court tomorrow,’ I said automatically, without an ounce of emotion in my voice. Mum was the same. She wasn’t crying. We were both talking like people might talk about something serious, but which wasn’t a matter of life and death.

‘I'm going to email the Devisons,’ she replied resolutely.

I told her again that my bus for Albany was leaving soon.

‘I’ll call you back once you're on the road,’ she said.

Walking down State Street, I felt numb. I knew what she’d told me was the most significant thing to ever happen in my life, but I couldn’t figure out why I didn’t feel a stronger emotion. I felt abstracted from reality. The buildings seemed distant. Two thirds of the way up the road, I texted Patricia and asked her to meet me at the station before she went to work. I’d already told her about Rachel and the court case. She’d been understanding. She texted back wanting to know why I wanted to meet, and I replied it was something serious, but that I couldn’t say over text.

When I got to the station, she was waiting. I remember her dress. It was blue and vintage. It was so clean and pretty that I remember thinking it looked full of hope. We sat and held hands for five minutes on a little bench. I remember the pebbles under it. They were brown and spherical. Patricia didn’t try to say much. She knew my sister was sick with something, but we’d not talked about it in any detail. As I tried to explain the context of my sister’s illness, while also telling her that Theda had just died, she seemed a bit confused. A few minutes later, I sat in the coach looking at her standing on the curbside, and I wondered if I’d be seeing her again.

On the highway my phone dinged, and the screen pixelated an image of my sister in her bed with one slung arm over the brown teddy bear she still loved. Mum followed it up with a text message. She said that’s how she’d found her. I called back, and, afterwards, I called the lawyer and explained what had happened. Mum also sent me a copy of the email she’d sent the Devisons, which I forwarded to the lawyer, because she’d been concerned about it. It was addressed to Rachel and her parents, but without a greeting and just a single line as its content: *Theda took an overdose last night she is dead. Khin is on his own.*

That night I slept in the same empty mansion in Albany that I had on my previous nights

there. It was the same large attic room and there were no other guests. I remember emailing the manager and asking if there was an ironing board.

23

It was my sister who I rang that morning after I failed to kill myself as a depressed teenager. I was 19, and I didn't want anyone to know. I hid the wound from her that day with a long-sleeved jumper, but a few days later I showed both Mum and her what I'd done to myself. They took me to an emergency department where a doctor told me I was lucky I hadn't lost the use of my hand. The next thing I knew I was leaving on a bus across the Nullarbor, trying to put as much distance between myself and Perth as possible. It must have sent ripples through the family—that sequence of events. I don't remember a lot. I remember my sister though. She seemed deeply confused by how sad her brother was. I had moved out of our mother's home before I was legally an adult, and she was still there, despite being older than me. I think she found my behaviour confusing.

Many years ago, I learnt that when I feel lost, or when things fall apart, becoming anonymous in a strange place is a way I know to feel better. In my early teens, I would climb out my window after everyone had gone to sleep and walk down the road under the streetlights into the suburbs. I wouldn't have any notion of where I was headed, I'd just end up in a park, pull out a cigarette and smoke it under the moonlight. Everything would feel

fine for a while. I try to disappear like that when life is troubling.

There's a Jorge Louis Borges story that I read in my twenties. It was about cartographers who'd had the ambition to create a map so sophisticated that it captured everything about the empire it depicted. Eventually that map was the same size as the empire itself, covering the land, and it was abandoned. The author never explains why, but probably it was too unwieldy.

I've often felt like that when trouble comes. It's a flaw in my character that's sometimes a boon. It's as if any sense of where I'm going distracts me from what I have to do. Those are the times when surrendering to an adventure seems to make sense.

My earliest memory of Theda is when she was five years-old, and we were living in a little English town called Loughborough. I had a silver bike. Mum wanted to move back to England permanently, but Dad was struggling. He said the weather was too grey. I didn't know that at the time. We lived on a narrow road with terraces down one side and a meadow down the other. I remember the snow because I'd never seen it before. Theda was speaking with a British accent and she sounded like someone talking with a cube of apple in her mouth. We were walking down a lane, and she bundled some snow into her mittens then threw it at me.

'Throw it back,' Mum laughed. Dad looked over. He smiled like he'd just seen a magic trick, his dark-brown fingers laced with hers.

Theda fell ill at 23, but just before then I was visiting Perth from Melbourne for Christmas and she came to the Buddhist centre with me one evening. I think she wanted to try and persuade me not to become like our Dad. I'd been telling her how instrumental meditation

was in helping me get better from the depression. Her and Mum both thought I was nuts. ‘The fucking Buddha,’ Mum had said for years after their divorce, ‘Left his wife and children in pursuit of his own selfish enlightenment.’

‘I’m not like that,’ I protested to Theda that night.

‘But can’t you see how all that stuff is just denying that life *is* attachment?’ she said.

‘Meditation is an emotional practice,’ I said. ‘It just makes the emotions clearer.’

She looked at me sceptically. I was so certain of myself having just got over my first big hurdle in adult life. I was immensely proud that I could hold a job, pay my own rent and not be depressed.

Theda and I sat down in the hall. She wanted to sit further a little bit further away for some reason. When the monk spoke that night, his followers all listened in rapt attention.

‘How can you bear even hearing the word “mindfulness”!’ Theda had said to me earlier. ‘Don’t you remember how dad would use it to criticise anything we did?’

I remember the monk sitting in front of his huge golden Buddha statue after the talk. He invited questions, and Theda put up her hand. ‘How can Buddhists believe in karma,’ she said. ‘When children die of cancer?’

I remember how I felt that day. I was proud of her for asking something. I remember he made a joke as his response. It was 2001, Pauline Hanson was in the news, and he said he didn’t mind believing in rebirth and karma if it meant someone like Pauline Hanson would get reborn as Asian or aboriginal in her next life. The audience laughed and the heart of her question was left unanswered.

On our way home that night, she asked if I’d been embarrassed.

‘It's fine,’ I said.

‘But doesn’t it bother you if you believe this stuff?’

'I don't believe it,' I said. 'I just believe what helps and ignore the rest.'

I felt her eyes on me for a moment, and then she said, 'Khin, I want to give people who don't have a voice in society a voice. I want to tell their stories. That's why I'm doing this broadcasting course.'

'That's good,' I said.

After that she went silent for a while as the suburban wasteland of Perth's northern suburbs passed us by. Then, just as we were entering the freeway, she said, 'You'll become a famous musician one day, Minty. I just know it.'

24

The day after Theda died, I went to the Albany County Family Court. It was so quick in the end. Fifteen minutes after Rachel, her friend, myself and my lawyer had all walked into the courtroom, we left it again. On our way out, my lawyer shouted something at Rachel's back.

'Ms Devison,' she said. 'Don't try to contact Mr Myint.' It felt rude, but I think she just wanted to make sure it got caught by the recorders before we were outside the doors.

I had arrived that morning at the courthouse feeling as blank as I had the day before. I knew something had changed, but I couldn't understand the meaning of it. I went through security alone, then found my courtroom on the mezzanine level where three rows of wooden pews faced a door. My lawyer must have called ahead somehow and found out things were running behind schedule, because she wasn't anywhere in sight, so I sat down and waited. Half an hour later she turned up in the same red skirt-suit she'd been wearing when we'd met, and families slowly began to join us on the pews.

Rachel arrived twenty minutes later, with one friend by her side. I was surprised not to

see her mother. My lawyer asked which of the two young women she was and I told her, then she stared at Rachel for ten or fifteen seconds. Rachel sat as far from us as possible. I think my lawyer was trying to intimidate her, or figure her out.

After it was over, we got to the street outside and my lawyer offered me a lift. She had a cherry-red Alfa Romeo a sports car with bucket seats, and she sped up Western Avenue while flicking its tiny gearstick like she was swatting a fly.

'How do you feel?' she'd said.

'I'm alright,' I said.

'Do you understand what happened?'

'I think so,' I said.

That morning as we had waited, Leyla had begun talking to me about divorces. She'd said family law was hard, because watching people who'd once loved each other fight over kids was painful. She said she preferred figuring out financial splits. We talked about the Treyvon Martin verdict, and she said she wasn't surprised. She also told me that she had a boyfriend who was a math teacher in another city. She might move there eventually. We didn't talk about Theda, and I think she was trying to put me at ease with all the chatter. Waiting took a total of three hours, but at 1pm we finally got called in, and, just before entering the courtroom, she asked me what my plans were for attending my sister's funeral.

'I don't know,' I said.

'You need to be careful about leaving the country,' she said. 'The judge will let you put off the trial to attend a family funeral, but you might not get back into the US if you leave. I'll

need to check which database you're on.'

'Can Rachel still call it off?' I asked.

'Only until we step inside,' she said.

Once we were inside, I felt a calm descend over me. Rachel and her friend walked ahead. Her friend took a seat in the observation section up back, and Rachel went to one of the desks up front. Leyla and I took the other, and an aisle divided us. It was clean inside that room, and very well-lit with high ceilings. There was an American flag on one side of the judge's bench, and he was atop that bench in black robes. A portrait of Obama sat on the side wall and there was a plaque with the insignia of the eagle holding spears in one claw, an olive branch in the other, and a Stars and Stripes shield making up its chest plate.

When the proceedings began, the judge read Rachel's statement out, then asked if there had been an attempt at mediation. My lawyer said there had been, then tried to make a motion to dismiss. He asked why, and she told him a few of the missing parts of the story. She summarised much better than I would have been able to do. When the judge then asked Rachel if those missing parts were accurate, she still looked pretty certain of herself. I couldn't help but admire her confidence. I would not have been able to stand up in court and speak to a judge the way she did that day.

When he asked if there had been any contact between us since she'd filed the petition, she said, 'His mother contacted my family yesterday.'

The judge seemed a bit confused about that. 'Sorry, you're saying *he* contacted you?' he asked.

'His *mother* contacted my mother,' she repeated.

'I'm not interested in whose mother contacted who,' he said, sounding a bit annoyed.

I don't think Rachel could quite believe it. I was watching her closely. I don't think she

had realised that Theda was dead yet, not really. She'd known Theda well. No young person Rachel had known well had died before.

'His mother sent an email to my family yesterday,' she repeated a third time, as if not hearing.

That was when my lawyer stood up and demanded that Rachel explain the contents of the email she was referring to. Leyla had freaked out when I'd phoned her yesterday and told her about the email. She'd wanted a copy, and then told me that people did all sorts of things to win cases.

I remember watching Rachel and wondering what she was thinking doing this. I had no idea, but I didn't think it was malicious. She was standing behind her desk with three long and delicate fingers touching its smooth surface. She looked so narrow, in a pretty dress she'd worn to my birthday dinner a few months earlier. It was made of gauze and had blue flowers on it, with an opaque under-dress. I felt like I was watching everything from a distance. Nothing involved me, except my name.

Rachel looked surprised when my lawyer challenged her on the contents of the email. She looked a bit panicked, like she hadn't expected to be asked such an obvious question. There was a long pause and no one said anything for a moment. I don't think she registered that something meaningful had been left out. Then she said, simply, 'His sister died.'

She tried to say something else afterwards, but she'd worn the judge's patience thin. She had left out meaningful parts of the story and now this. It didn't look good. He reminded her that he'd warned the charge lacked substance when she'd gone to see him a month earlier. I realised then that I was going to be let off.

I didn't blame Rachel that day. I think she couldn't see straight and neither could I. We were caught in our own worlds, trying to figure out what it all meant—not just me coming to

America, but the meaning of the breakup. She'd abandoned a plan we had both fixated on for a year. It was a plan about the rest of our lives together. Now we were both trying to figure out what it meant. We were both at a crossroads, trying to understand who we were.

That was the last time I ever saw or heard from her.

The rest of the day is fuzzy. My lawyer dropped me at the BnB and I walked up its steps. I recall the sound of her car idling in the driveway and the feeling she was watching me as I fumbled with the door lock. I would communicate with her a couple more times. Once would be soon after that day. She would email me in Australia to explain that she had served Rachel with an official letter demanding that she never contact me again. That email would come with a bill, which included three hours of waiting time that day before entering the courtroom.

A couple of years later, I would contact her to ask if I could get a copy of the court transcript so I could check my memory against it, and she'd do that for free, which seemed unique given how meticulously her bill had logged everything to do with the actual case. That would be a couple of years later, and I would be living in Japan. She would wish me well in her response and include a line that she'd been thinking of me. My case had come up in a conversation with a colleague. 'You remember some cases in particular,' she said enigmatically.

When I got up to my room that day after court, I phoned Mum and told her I would be home soon. After that, I lay on the bed and all I could hear were the sounds of traffic from the street, and the occasional creaking of that big old mansion.

25

The day after appearing in court, I booked a place at a hostel in Brooklyn and stayed in my room mostly, but I went up onto the roof once for some fresh air. It was around midday and I looked out over the urban expanse thinking of how a city like this contained so many stories. Even after such a troubling time, I got the sense that America was an easy place to belong. Diversity and extroversion brought something to the surface. It was such a loudly-spoken place, and those buildings bulged with people from different backgrounds; from incredible wealth to the incredible lack of it. Stories didn't match expectations out there. And they fused predictable elements with weird and counterintuitive ones. Lives were incomprehensible sometimes, but you weren't alone.

I don't remember a single thing about the flight home, but my ticket tells me it took 36 hours. Mum picked me up at the Perth airport, and, as we drove back to her house, I looked out the windows at swaying gum trees, and thought of how quiet my city felt.

Mum's mood was sorrowful, but she wasn't crying much.

She explained that she had put Dad on the mattress on the floor in the spare room. She was sleeping in Theda's room, and I would sleep in hers.

When I got home, Dad was distant but amiable. Mum complained about him to me. He had gone through some of Theda's things and was asking for my sister's old iPod and a few electrical cables. It sounds crass, but he was just doing what he always did to cope. I know he was grieving, but he couldn't show weakness. I also noticed something he had taken from my sister that he should have left alone, and I confronted him about it.

He had hurt his back on the plane journey from Thailand to Perth. I knew that, but after having seen the object on his mattress for a day, I couldn't ignore it anymore. 'Are you using Theda's vibrator as a back massager?' I said.

His jaw came out a touch, and he said, 'This is just the object, son. You Westerners are too attached to symbolic bullshit.'

I said that he was wrong, and for the first time I uttered words that I'd never put together before. I told him that things didn't have to be real to be important. In fact, they could change everything.

'You are like the Thai businessmen on the border,' he argued back. 'They refuse to use the laundry service that Burmese ex-prostitutes set up. Those businessmen said those women were "symbolically dirty". This is bullshit, Son.'

We bickered some more and I told him that if he was so sure, then he should ask Mum what she thought.

The following day all three of us went to the funeral parlour. Mum was fielding text messages from the Lyme doctor. She had paid for my sister's brain to be sent to a chronic Lyme

research lab in Sydney, but Theda's Lyme doctor thought it was a substandard one. We were literally in the parlour foyer about to view my sister's body, and he was still texting Mum after she'd told him it was too late to change anything. I suggested she switch off her phone. She seemed relieved to have someone else give her permission for that.

When we stepped into the room with the body, my knees went weak. The casket Mum had chosen had musical notes on it. It was exactly the kind of tacky thing my sister would have chosen for herself. The room was large with chairs stacked in one corner and a coffin near its back wall. Slowly, I made my way toward it. When I saw the body inside, I stopped breathing. She looked like a doll. It wasn't her. Her face was not the shape it should have been, and the fingers were impossibly thin at the tips.

'It doesn't look like her,' Mum said.

Dad started touching the coffin. 'This must lock it,' he said, fiddling with the latch. I reached down and touched her hands. The fingertips were slightly purple, and they were cold. The parlour had put makeup on parts of her to give her skin more colour.

After five minutes Mum suggested to Dad that they leave me alone with the body. Once they were gone, I sobbed uncontrollably. I kept repeating the same phrase as I sobbed. 'I'll be good,' I said. 'I promise I'll be good.'

On the way home, Mum told me that Dad had acted strangely in the parlour foyer. While I was in the room sobbing, he'd started going through drawers and cupboards and pulling out documents and pamphlets, all the while muttering to himself about what each one was likely used for in the running of the parlour.

Later that day, he and I went out for a coffee together. It was at a café a few blocks away

from the house. It was raining. I told him I didn't mind about the vibrator. He shook his head, then said he'd put it back. He then said he was over his grief already because his Buddhist training allowed him to let go. I squeezed his shoulder and told him it was okay, but he only looked baffled at the gesture.

Two days later, we got an afternoon of sunshine amidst a week of rain. Mum carried the urn and fifteen of us walked with her along the sand towards Cottesloe beach groyne. I knew a few of the faces from the Lyme and ME Facebook groups. One was a young woman in a wheelchair who introduced herself and then told me that Theda had been her heroine.

I looked around at the water. Seagulls were hovering near the shoreline and foam waves were slowly pushing over the reef below them.

When we stopped walking, halfway up the groyne, surrounded by water on all sides, Mum spoke first. When it was my turn, I told the little crowd that Mum and I had given Theda permission to die. I couldn't think of anything else to say. Everything I had believed since the moment she'd first fallen ill was faith, but giving her permission, and not denying her reality were two things that weren't. I didn't know who I was now, but I knew that. Ships sat on the horizon and waves lapped against the rocks.

After a few other people had spoken, I climbed down to a flat rock near the water's edge, and my cousin—a Burmese man who'd arrived as an asylum seeker fourteen years earlier, who didn't speak any English, and who I hardly ever saw—stood at the rock just above mine and smiled. He smiled like the Rangoon sun. He handed me the urn. When I emptied the ashes onto a tongue of sunlight, people tossed flowers that landed with flops in a current that drew them slowly out to sea.

As we walked back, I went to my father’s side. I put an arm around his shoulders. He'd been mostly silent during those speeches, and when it had been his turn to talk he'd seemed embarrassed.

My mother came to my other side, and I put an arm around her too. Dad reached up and squeezed my hand a few times then let it sit. As we walked in silence I thought about what we'd all done to each other. We’d found ourselves here on the edge of the Western Desert in a city none of us felt at home in, and we’d been unable to resolve our differences. Two parents who came from opposite sides of the world had disagreed about a contested illness, and their one surviving kid, who’d also survived his own self-destructive urges, tried to make sense of his position in the middle. Our tiny impressed-upon family was like those birds up against the breeze, trying not to die, trying to let go, hanging on a gust of wind.

Writing in Polarised Territories

Tokyo: The Logic of Recovery

A few weeks in, I found a room in a building in Asakusa Taitō-Ku with fifteen others occupying identical tiny spaces. Most of the other people living there were young Japanese professionals from out of town on secondments. I remember the woman from the room next to mine. She was often sitting on the stoop below my window smoking. She smoked a lot. Something I remember quite clearly about her were the sounds she made when her boyfriend was in her room and they were in bed. It sounds crass, I know, but really it was just a curiosity. Her sounds of pleasure were unlike any I'd ever heard before. I found out months later from a friend that those were quite normal expressions of carnal pleasure in Japanese culture. All of the novel things I came across that year were like that in some way or another, startling in some pleasant and slightly mind-bending way. I'd gone to Tokyo in search of novelty. I was thirty-five and hurting. My sister had just euthanased herself and my American fianceé had left me. After both those events, I didn't feel that I knew how to be in the world anymore and I was looking for a distraction while I figured it out.

Ruti observes that we sometimes experience ourselves as a monstrosity because our ego

gets revealed as the fiction it always was.[1] These disorienting experiences yank us out from the socially-mediated way we understand ourselves and plonk us back into 'the real' (Ruti, 2010). Heidegger's description of coping characterises this. He describes beings as enmeshed in the symbolic world and invested in not thinking about that too much when it more-or-less works. He calls it 'background coping' (Heidegger, 1927/1962), but if something happens to disrupt it, then that experience can leave us in a profound state of fracture. That's what Ruti characterised as 'monstrous'. It's when our place in the world feels unmapped; the ego disassembles, and a fragmentary and unpredictable procession of moment-to-moment existences of 'the real' rises up. Lacan (1986/2013) provides the basis for understanding the real—fragmentary, sensory, disorganised and unmanageable. We seek to mediate it again as soon as possible because the social worlds we inhabit demand that we have some stable sense of coherent selfhood, even if it is just an always-not-quite-satisfying illusion.

But I hadn't been able to do that in Perth, which is why I'd moved to Tokyo. Perth was where things had fallen apart, and where who I was didn't make sense. In Perth I'd felt disoriented, paranoid, and confused. I'd struggled to recognise myself there. My schema were all out of sorts. Even time had had an unreasonably uneven quality about it. I'd been suffering insomnia and a kind of emotional fragility that I struggled to make sense of.

I'm going to briefly backtrack to give you the context. It had all started with my ex's unexpected departure. We had been living in Perth and planning to marry before a move to the States in a year's time. The US was her homeland. It all seemed to be going well, but then she'd returned to America suddenly. I was shocked. She'd only officially asked me to marry her a couple of weeks earlier and had seemed over the moon about it, but she justified the

[1] 'Singularity thus relates to those parts of the drive that manage to ooze through the sieve of various systems of organization designed to stabilise human life. These parts are, as it were, the "inhuman" (not fully socialized) element that chafes against the reasonable facade of subjectivity and personality. Lending the subject's character an uncanny monstrousness' (Ruti, 2010, p. 1122).

sudden change of heart with my lack of commitment and wealth. She said she'd spoken to her mother back in America about it and realised how it would hold her back. She wanted to work in social justice. Those ambitions, she said, along with wanting a baby one day, didn't fit with an ESL teacher who had writing aspirations.

The event of her leaving led me to intense shame. I didn't just feel inadequate, I felt like I'd been living in la-la land to not have realised these things myself. Lynd (1958) describes the experience of exposure to unexpected shame a bit like the disorienting state of mind I described above as 'the real'. She calls it both world and self-shattering in the same instant, and that's exactly how it felt, I suddenly wasn't sure I knew who I was anymore, my conception of manhood was wrong too, my ex even brought it up—'Just be a fucking man,' she'd said at one point. The things about being a provider with more status were accompanied by assertions that I wasn't bold enough as a person, and I wasn't committed to her enough either. It was confusing.

A couple of weeks later, she rang me from Albany, New York. She said she missed me. She still loved me, she said. She said she wanted me to quit my job in Australia and move to the States so we could sort it out. We'd always been planning the move in the long run. I'd already vetted it to my family, and put in place some measures for my sister's care for when my mother eventually died. I'd be leaving one family behind to start a new one, but my sister would still need care. So I figured going to the US sooner rather than later was just speeding things up. A wiser man would have been more cautious, but to be honest I was just relieved because the world and who I was in it made sense again. I wasn't inadequate and deluded, she'd just got cold feet, that's all.

I quit my job and gave up the apartment. Then, three weeks later, she changed her mind again. She called and said her mother had taken her to an inspiring dance performance, and

they'd both decided afterwards (amidst their enlivened feelings about that performance, apparently) that a better-connected husband really was what was needed. My ex was in her mid-twenties, from a WASP background, and had to be pragmatic, she said.[2]

That month, a more complicated thing was happening in my own background. My sister had just acquired a euthanasia drug from Mexico. I was worried about it. It didn't mean she was going to use it. Theda—that's my sister—had been sick for 13 years, and she just wanted it in the house. I understood. It's a horrible feeling to be trapped with no way out. She just wanted to know she had one. Her diagnosis was a tricky one. Doctors couldn't agree, and I believed it was mental illness seeded in the ethnic tensions of our youth, but I couldn't say anything about that. I'd tried in the early years to talk like that and only succeeded in alienating her. I wasn't about to bring it up again. She now had doctors who agreed with her that the illness was wholly biomedical, and it's unimaginable to me being stuck in bed for thirteen years. She had already attempted suicide four times. There was an almost-constant talk of more, and I understood it. Still I was worried she'd succeed now. I was also worried about what would happen if she didn't. Her illness didn't look to be improving and it was killing my mother slowly by a thousand cuts. Theda was miserable. I was always worried. Everyone was miserable. Her care was a full-time effort and not just material, but also constant encouragement that she not have a fifth suicide attempt. I had a future role in it if I wasn't planning a life in the States. I'd likely end up her carer when Mum passed, and that role would mean intense full-time caring with no possibility of a family or even a job. I'd have to become her nurse. I loved my sister, so there was no abandoning her needs if I didn't have a damn good reason, which is what my ex had been. When and if I would eventually take over, Theda and I would fight because I would probably start trying to get her to see

[2] White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

psychiatrists, and she'd resist, seeing that as a betrayal. It was a miserable future to imagine.

Despite that, a brother doesn't let his sister die. While I was dealing with my ex's phone calls from America, I also tried to get that euthanasia drug out of the house. I told a doctor of the situation, and she was obligated to tell the authorities but that backfired. I wasn't sure if I should try again. If I did my sister might hate me. There was also time-pressure. My ex's descriptions of me not being 'bold' or 'committed' enough were banging around my head and I was wondering if they were a provocation that she needed some bold gesture, like in the movies, where a romance almost breaks up before the wedding and the guy makes that courageous gesture of devotion and commitment. If that was the case then I'd need to do it soon. You didn't wait around to make gestures like that. I'd already spent $3000 on a plane ticket so that wasn't an issue. I also had no job or place to live anymore. What worried me most was doing the wrong thing. I had too many unanswered questions on every front.

There's a piece of psychological research that strikes me when I look back at those events. It's from 1949 when Frenkel-Brunswik introduced the concept of *ambiguity intolerance* to the analysis of why people act impulsively. He noted how a subject with high intolerance to ambiguity is often impulsive and willing to deny reality in order to accrue a sense of certainty. It's a bad life skill. The ability to tolerate ambiguity is akin to being able to put off gratification. That's linked to life success more than most personality variables, but some people just don't have it. It's a rather reductive theory though. If you're born with ambiguity intolerance, then what can you do? Kruglanski (2004) developed the concept as a context-dependent thing. That's more sensible. He reoriented the language and called the individual's ambiguity tolerance their *need for closure,* which referred to their individual desire to find definite answers, *any* answers, in ambiguous and uncertain scenarios. Stressful situations put pressure on an individual and increased their need for such closure. Heine,

Proulx and Vohs took that theory and ran further with it, looking at this now contextually dependent need as related to ambiguity in other areas of a person's life. They performed a series of experiments and discovered *fluid compensation.* Fluid compensation is when a person's need for closure increases as ambiguities add up. A person focusses on a situation they *can* resolve if other situations in their lives are ambiguous and uncertain (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013).[3]

For me the only avenue I could see where some certainty might be feasibly gained in my life was in America. If I made that gesture (which I was uncertain of working out) then at least I'd know it was either the right or the wrong move. I'd be able to tell myself that, despite my ex's accusations, I was in fact bold enough to try, and she'd see my commitment also. Perhaps you'd wonder why I didn't just take a step back and think *this isn't about me.* But I didn't. I'd never wanted to marry someone before. I'd had offers but shied away. The fact that the one person I had decided to marry was calling me 'meek' and incorrectly thinking I lacked commitment pushed me into action.

There was also an upside to America. If things in America didn't work out then perhaps I could turn the whole trip into a kind of holiday. It would relieve some pressure. I was enrolled in an honours course online. I had that to keep me busy. I could see if things worked out with my ex, and if they didn't I could find a little town somewhere in North America and write for a while.

When I got to Albany, my ex met me at a cafe and told me we were over. I felt better. I told her I wasn't going to leave America immediately but that I'd leave her be. She seemed fine

[3] Fluid compensation has also been linked to the psychology of abject poverty regarding the question of why the poor often use aid money to purchase cheap instant-gratification foods and objects instead of using it on things that would help their situation long-term (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012).

with that, but something must have happened when she got home because the next day three policemen came to my door looking for the 'brown-skinned foreigner' living at the BnB I was staying at.

I'm not denying responsibility here. What I did was risky, but that was the point.

I quickly discovered that if I didn't fight the charge, then I'd be banned from the US for life and I didn't fancy that. I left Albany and waited for my court date, getting ready to fight it.

My sister ended her life the day before my court appearance. In court the next day, my ex began to lose her case. It was apparent to the judge that she'd left out the context explaining why I'd fronted up a month earlier. She must have felt humiliated because in the face of that she tried to use an email my mother had sent her the previous day informing her of my sister's death. 'His mother emailed yesterday!' she said to the judge when he asked if I was still trying to contact her. She didn't mention the email's contents, but when they came to light the judge seemed fed up. He ruled in favour of a dismissal, and I walked out free.

These are events I can talk about now, but at the time they left me floored. I returned to Australia anxious and unable to sleep, paranoid and obsessively thinking about all the events around my sister's death and the breakup. I didn't know how to understand my responsibilities. My masculinity was in tatters. Despite winning the case, I was now unsure if I'd unconsciously intimidated my ex on purpose. I've always been a firm believer in the unconscious nature of my own unconscious. Maybe I'd done it on purpose? The whole world seemed to contradict itself when I thought of these things.

Something I learned about Israeli soldiers helps understand why I wasn't doing very well. Shalev (as cited in Junger, 2016) notes it when describing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder amongst returning Israeli conscripts. I don't want to include myself in the PTSD diagnostic category, though perhaps it's fitting, but regardless of what you call it the research on PTSD and identity is useful. Shalev argues that the low rates of PTSD with Israeli soldiers is because they return to a place where they can talk about what's happened. They're understood in their community because of the close proximity of the war, and because of conscription (Shalev in Junger, 2016). Recovering from traumatic events via talking helps meaning-making and identity formation in recovery (Brown, 2008; Herman, 1992/2001; Lifton, 1975). To put that in Lacanian terms, you'd say that a traumatised individual seeks a new identity mediated by their community after traumatising events.[4] Their community's symbolic order needs to enmesh them in the world again, so that their egos can coalesce and keep 'the real' at bay once more.

I couldn't find that back in Perth. Talking about my sister's death would betray my mother's narrative (Mum believed my sister had taken the only route possible due to a physical illness with no cure). I needed to talk about the breakup and the stalking charge too but that was just shameful. I think of Heidegger sometimes in relation to all this. He puts this scenario in terms of time. He argues that we try to make sense of the past in order to negotiate our present as a way of aiming towards the future. It is fundamental being-ness (Heidegger, 1927/1962).[5]

---

[4] The symbolic order refers to the way that the world and individuals within it are understood via language (Lacan, 2013).
[5] Heidegger made this point by describing a structure of 'being-ness' he called *care*: 'In defining "care" as "Being-ahead-of-oneself—in-Being-already-in…—as Being-alongside...", we have made it plain that even this phenomenon is, in itself, still structurally articulated. (Heidegger, 1927/1962, Division I, Section 41, H. 196)'

Despite all the difficulties there was a domain I felt excited about. I'd won a scholarship at the university, and I was back on a campus for the first time in over a decade, where I thought I might be able to talk about some of these complicated questions I had about masculinity, responsibility, expectations and the unknown. I quickly encountered a political fervour around gender. I was probably overly sensitive and let it get to me. I walked into the graduate common room one afternoon and found five of my younger colleagues reading sections of *The SCUM manifesto* and laughing about it.[6] The passage was about men being emotionally-vacant blobs. A small discussion ensued after the reading in which several people said that men didn't have any issues worth worrying about. It bothered me. It felt privileged and ignorant, and I felt like a nobody. It was a sensitive time for me, and I wasn't used to the passions of a humanities department. It reminded me of when I'd been younger and had first entered a university undergraduate course, feeling out of step with the 'cool' ironic opinions of everyone else. Campus lost its shine after that. I had a mobile wage and wasn't feeling great so I took the money and left. Tokyo was my choice. I figured it would be safe but novel, and very distracting for a while.

Disorientation

Tokyo is a magical city. It has an extremely low crime rate and feels very safe as a place in which to become disoriented. I ate strange food and engaged clumsily in formalities with people I stayed with. I didn't know anyone there. It was a city full of surprises. I saw

[6] The SCUM manifesto is a polemic by Valerie Solanas in 1967. It is sometimes interpreted as satirical (Haut, 2007) and sometimes not (Fahs, 2008). It argues that men have ruined the world, and it's women who will rescue it (Solanas, 1968).

someone walking their bunny, in its coat, on a leash down a main street on my second day. I kept to myself, but was very entertained as I wandered amongst the bustle. Everything came and went in a non-threatening novel way. It made me feel better. I drew my attention outward and away from my own inward-spinning head.

There's a word for that, I would later discover. That's also when I came across Heidegger for the first time. I listened to Dreyfus's (2007) lectures on Heidegger as I wandered the streets: Heidegger offering a whole language for the phenomenology of disorientation; it is a large part of the first division of *Being and Time* in which he spends time talking about worldhood and disclosure; the *present-at-hand* is when we notice things before we understand their meaning or purpose in the worlds we are inhabiting; when we are less enmeshed in those worlds, the objects in them 'show up' but aren't linked into our desires like they will be once we understand their use; when the world we've found ourselves in is bustling with the present-at-hand like that, then it is perceived as more in-motion, and we move through it in a way that makes the contingency of it clearer. To use Heidegger's term, the world is not well disclosed when we are disoriented in it (Heidegger, 1927/1962).[7] It's hard for me not to notice the connection between Heidegger's thought and a philosophy I grew up in. I grew up with a strong Buddhist influence thanks to a Burmese dad, and the way of perceiving the world as I've just described is what Buddhists call *sati.* Sati is the awareness that emerges for individuals when they're paying attention to the present moment, non-judgmentally as an unfolding stream of experience (Kabat-Zinn 2006). This form of attention is nonjudgmental and includes both external and internal stimuli, but of course the two are inextricable (Baer, 2003). One effect, when it's pleasant, is that it dismantles the notion of an

[7] Heidegger talks about 'world disclosure' as an ongoing process of comprehension interdependent with being itself, co-dependent with it. There are of course degrees of disclosure. This process is what Lacan would characterise as becoming enmeshed in the symbolic order and the ego emerging in the imaginary as a result.

enduring fixed self (Gunaratana, 1980). Sati is a way of experiencing the real that isn't unpleasant, but is calm and elating instead. Purser (2012) with his eye on Lacan, calls this 'the Buddhist real'. Buddhists see phenomena as transient and lacking essence (Chinn, 2001), but they suggest approaching that calmly without begrudging it. They understand the real as something that can be experienced in different ways. That is because in Buddhism the real is a dialogic phenomenon.[8] They believe the mind can direct itself in ways that are not linguistic, but instead are trained habits-of-mind that maintain calm in the face of the real's fragmentary onslaught. Copjec suggests this from a non-Buddhist language when she writes about the real as 'residue' of thought. She suggests that the real forms the 'internal limit' of thought, thus arguing that its experience is affected by thought even though it is beyond thought itself (Copjec, 2004, p.4). The real is tameable by thinking about how to approach it before diving into it. Bakhtin (from whom I lifted the term 'dialogic') would agree that the real is dialogic—all phenomena are *dialogic* in his view (Holquist, 1990/2002). This matches the Buddhist concept of *Pratityasamutpada*, which goes in hand with the idea of emptiness to suggest that all things are both contingently interdependent as well as lacking essence (Chinn, 2001). It can be hard for a Western tradition to understand this conception of the real because primacy is so often given to language and symbols and the real is seen as uncontainable, but Buddhist philosophy aims towards an embodied experience of the dialogic real, and it encourages we do that in particular moods.[9]

I'd practised meditation a lot in my life but it hadn't been very useful to me that year. Perhaps that's because I was too agitated to form a regular practice. I sometimes wonder if I

---

[8] Like Lacan, Buddhists note the inherently dissatisfactory nature of identification (though they include identification with physical sensations also). This is evident in the First Noble Truth labelled *dukkha*, which translates as 'unsatisfactoriness'. Buddhists offer a specific embodied way of approaching the real as an antidote to that perpetual dissatisfaction.

[9] Heidegger agreed with the assumption that moods (*stimmung*) are beyond thought. Along with Schmitz (2011) he took moods to be the aspect of being that engages thought from beyond itself. 'We cannot get behind our moods; we cannot get clear *about* them, and we cannot get clear *of* them (Dreyfus, 1991, chapter 10, section 3, para. 5).'

should have tried harder. But whatever the reason, I was well enough indoctrinated into Buddhist practices to aim for something similar but less formal. Travel is not the same as meditation obviously but it can operate on the same axis. Travel un-mediates the world somewhat and returns you to the real. The more alien the culture you enter, the closer to the real you get, until that culture becomes familiar and the real recedes again. Just like meditation, travel is a calm *mood*. It's done for pleasure, and the disorientation is sought out. Travel has the ability to put you in a state of detached curiosity that amplifies *sati* in its own milder way than meditation. For better or worse, I was taking that route.

It's just worth stopping here for a moment to reflect on this 'mood' I'm characterising. It's something that gets talked about a lot in various forms of therapy. It is something Levine, a psychiatrist who specialises in post-traumatic stress disorder, has described as the method for treatment. 'Curiosity [is] one of the prima facie "antidotes" for trauma,' he writes. 'Curious exploration, pleasure and trauma cannot coexist in the nervous system; neurologically, they contradict one another' (Levine, 2010, p.175).

Comprehending the Past

After a while of dwelling in the aforementioned mood and wandering the streets of Asakusa, I began to write. I wanted to begin sorting through some of the things that had upset me so much before arriving in Japan. Writing about them helped. If anxiety rose up and showed itself, then I'd head out into the streets again and embrace Tokyo's strange novelty for a while longer, which was always calming. Being a stranger in a strange land was like an analgesic. Novelty freed me and writing aimed me back at my troubles. This is reminiscent of the dual

consciousness that Buddhists call *Samatha* and *Vipassana* (Dhiman, 2008). Ruti (2008) characterises it as letting the real 'puncture' the symbolic in order to invigorate it.[10] It's also something Levine points out about his therapy format.

> This capacity to experience the positive bodily feelings (of interest and curiosity), while remaining in contact with […] feelings of terror and helplessness, allows [the traumatised person] to do something she would not have been able to do a few minutes before. She can now begin to stand back and "simply" observe these difficult, uncomfortable, physical sensations and images without becoming overwhelmed by them. They are, in other words, kept at bay. This dual consciousness induces a shift that allows sensations to be felt as they are: intrinsically energetic, vital and in present time, rather than as fragments, triggers and harbingers of fear and helplessness from the past (Levine, 2010, p.175).

I was writing but letting that energetic vitality of going out into the onslaught of strange Tokyo punctuate my writing when I needed. The result was that I began to contextualise some of the traumatic events. This is something, Van Der Kolk (another prominent PTSD specialist) talks about.

> Normal memory integrates the elements of each experience into the continuous flow of self-experience by a complex process of association; think of a dense but flexible network where each element exerts a subtle influence on many others. But in [PTSD] the sensations, thoughts, and emotions of the trauma [are] stored separately as frozen, barely comprehensible fragments. If the problem with PTSD is dissociation, the goal of treatment would be association: integrating the cut-off elements of the trauma into the ongoing narrative of life (Van Der Kolk 2014, p.180).

As I said earlier, I'm reticent to include my own journey here under the rubric 'PTSD' but it's hard to ignore how the structure of recovery operates in regards to these same mechanisms. They are mechanisms of identity that are universal to all of us regardless of whether or not we are diagnosable.

---

[10] 'If language is what holds the subject together, then transcendent episodes that manage to puncture the canvas of our sociolinguistic reality by definition undermine any lingering faith that we might have in the capacity of the symbolic to master the real (Ruti, 2010, p.1128).'

And so that's how Tokyo—a megacity that's always moving—took the pressure off and helped me deal a little with what troubled me. Eventually I'd return to the West, I knew that, and I'd have to deal with the West then, but Tokyo was a liminal ruminating space, a softer, easier-to-handle reality because I'd been given a modest mobile wage to live on there, and no monkey on my back.

*

I spent roughly nine months in Tokyo altogether. I made a couple of friends who both helped me see the process I describe above more clearly. Nicole had been living in Japan for a couple of years, and she had her own troubles. She said her mother had raised her to believe she'd never amount to anything unless she attached to a powerful man. It was coincidence that this was what my ex's mother had told her, and I found it affirming that Nicole had rejected that advice, though her rejection wasn't without problems. Now she was in Tokyo, working as an English teacher and sleeping with as many men as possible while writing a blog about it. She was using men rather than needing them, and her blog was witty and a bit mean sometimes. She was acting out, that was obvious, but she was also engaged in the process of comprehending an aspect of life she struggled with, just like I was, through writing about it in a context where she was an outsider.[11]

Another friend I made was Luke. He was in his mid-thirties and had been a taxi-controller in Lincoln, England his whole life. Aware that his job was about to be taken over by an app, he'd blown his savings and moved to Tokyo on a tourist visa, and despite the

[11] Freud defines *acting out* as the unconscious displacement of emotion one feels about a particular situation where that emotion cannot be expressed. That emotion then shifts into a different context where it can safely be expressed (Freud, 1914/1958). A cliche reading, though not necessarily incorrect, regarding Nicole's blog would be that it expressed anger she couldn't express towards her mother, or anger against the world for being as her mother described it.

limitations of that visa he said that if he couldn't find a way of staying he'd probably kill himself. He was also writing. His work was about the absurd uncertainty and meaninglessness of life.

Thinking about us all helped me understand alienation better. It occurs within the symbolic realm that we know, and putting ourselves in the role of an outsider returns some sense of agency to the alienated soul.[12] From a position of alterity it is possible to address an alienation one felt back home with a feeling of relative safety. For my own part, I was addressing that alienation by writing about masculinity, ambiguity and loss from the safety of Tokyo where I wasn't interpolated like I would be back in Australia. Nicole was addressing it by writing about sex and power. Luke was writing about impotence and masculinity by another name.

We were all doing therapy with ourselves, but given that it involved writing that each of us hoped would one day be published, we were also doing the work that Arendt (1958) attributes to storytelling as a political endeavour. We were de-privatising our personal experiences of alienation and transforming them into something we hoped would interface with the public realm at some point down the track and mediate a dissonance we felt existed. We hoped to change the world a little. Without wishing to sound grandiose, we had each embarked on a hero's journey. Campbell (1968) describes the construction of that journey as a fundamental form humans have evolved to instinctively know. It can also be understood in Lacanian terms: the hero gets 'the call' and abandons her home (the alienating symbolic order) and embraces the trials of the unknown (the return to the real), where she then recognises the illusion of her own ego (the old symbolic order is abandoned), and, upon returning to her homeland, she brings with her some significant value or wisdom retrieved

[12] Lacan notes that the symbolic realm is always inherently alienating since it is not the real, however there are *degrees* of that alienation and therefore degrees of agency to be achieved within the symbolic (Ruti, 2010).

from the unknown to produce a new sense of belonging and justice in her homeland (invigorated by her contact with the real she uses those experience to alter the old symbolic order in some way to make it better[13]).

Luke, Nicole and I were all attempting make the world a little more hospitable not only for ourselves but also for people like us. Perhaps we were running away as well. But these acts—as absurd and impotent as they might ultimately turn out to have been—were also heroic in their own small ways.

*

As for the ruminating space of being a stranger in a strange land, Deleuze and Guattari offer a term for it. They talk about *smooth space*. Smooth spaces are those contexts where discrete objects and hierarchies are less discernible. Such spaces are emergent and creative because new objects and hierarchies can be made in smooth space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). In smooth space new narratives occur.[14] Thinking of my time in Tokyo as a 'space' is to think of a space where a certain mood permeated that allowed me to think more calmly. Tokyo to a local is not smooth, but given my specific alterity, I experienced it as smooth. I couldn't perceive its hierarchies and objects, so I noticed the textures and phenomena more. I noticed these with greater detail. I moved within this for a good while.

But smooth space (as I'm interpreting it) is also a transient phenomenon. No matter how 'smooth' a space is we gradually learn to see its hierarchies and discrete categories—a desert

[13] 'This is not a matter of attaining some sort of essential core of being. Quite the contrary, the transcendent encounters I have been depicting extend the posthumanist critique of the essential self by revealing that the subject can approach its singulairty only when it finds itself on the brink of utter disintegration' (Ruti, 2010, p1128).

[14] 'Smooth space is a field without conduits or channels. A field, a heterogeneous smooth space, is wedded to a very particular type of multiplicity: nonmetric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities that occupy space without "counting" it and can "be explored only by legwork." They do not meet the visual condition of being observable from a point in space external to them; an example of this is the system of sounds, or even of colors, as opposed to Euclidean space' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.371).

might be smooth at first but as we gain knowledge of how to negotiate it the hierarchies of usefulness appear. And as the months went by in Tokyo this happened to me. Parts of the city linked up and made sense. I perceived it differently. I translated its usefulness. The *present-at-hand* became the *ready-to-hand,* and the world 'disclosed' itself to me.[15] I perceived things as tools in relation to each other, and as parts of a whole in which I could execute my desires more fluently. Smooth space became striated.

One week, after I'd been there a few months, I saw a baseball stadium from three different perspectives. I saw it during my daily wanderings over the course of several days, and when I realised it was the same stadium, I also knew where other things were in relation to it: I knew that Starbucks was a block over, and that beyond its tulip plantation was a canal, and that just beyond that was the apartment of the woman I'd begun seeing. She was becoming familiar also. Of course, the stadium is just one example. The world began to become intelligible in many ways as I got to know the city. The smooth space of Tokyo, made up of so many equivalent details, began to sort itself into which details were more significant than others, either from my perspective, or the way I understood Japanese culture to be interpreting them. As details sorted themselves like this, some into the background, and others into the foreground, *sati,* and its non-judgmental attention, naturally dulled. The world disclosed and much of its richness-of-detail withdrew.[16] And with its withdrawal I found I couldn't sleep anymore. I was getting anxious again. And when I sat down to write I felt heavy.

---

[15] According to Heidegger (1927/1962), the *ready-to-hand* is how we perceive objects when they become useful and are absorbed into background coping. Only during their malfunction do they once again become 'conspicuous'. (Dreyfus 1991, chapter 4, section 5, para. 2).

[16] Heidegger made a specific point of noting this as the 'natural' way of being-in-the-world. Dreyfus puts his idea intelligibly: 'When we are using equipment, it has a tendency to "disappear." We are not aware of it as having any characteristics at all. The peculiarity of what is primarily available is that, in its availableness, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be available quite authentically. That with which our everyday dealings primarily dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the task-that which is to be done at the time' (Dreyfus 1991, chapter 4, section 3, para.6).

Jerusalem: Group Identities

The airport was quiet in Tel Aviv. Signs led to a series of perspex cubbies at the far end of a large space where the uniformed woman sat inside and spoke through an intercom. ‘Where are you from?’ she asked.

‘Australia.’

‘Your name is not.’

‘It's Burmese.’

She gazed at me carefully. ‘You are Burmanese?’

‘No,’ I said, ignoring her error.

‘You know that country?’

‘My father is from there,’ I said.

She paused, leaning forward slightly. ‘You speak this language?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

I shrugged. She narrowed her eyes, then, still fingering the pages of my passport, said, slowly, ‘This is a bad thing.’ She then folded her arms and leaned forward a little. ‘I am from

Russia,' she said carefully. 'I am Israeli…yes, this is true, but I come from Russia. Did you know Israeli people can come from Russia? A lot of people do not know this, I find.' She paused. 'I speak Russian and Hebrew,' she continued. 'I also speak my native language from within Russia, which you have not heard of. I also speak that.'

'That's good,' I said.

She observed me for a moment then smiled to herself. 'I have three,' she said nodding. 'You have none.'

Something about this exchange warmed me to Israel. I can't quite say why, but it also characterised so much of what I learned during my months there. I had chosen Jerusalem because I was looking for novelty, yes, but also because I was looking for the mood of the Holy. What I found was a mixture of identity politics, conflict and the sacred.

Otto (1917/1958) defined the Holy as the numinous experience at the centre of religions. He called that experience 'mysterium, tremendum et fascinans'—*mysterious, terrifying and fascinating*.[17] The holy is a sublime and contemplative thing that acts as the central point around which religious orders justify themselves in accordance to those who have access to it. Otto's insight is a lot like Lacan's insomuch as it is an observance of the real and how it is mediated by a symbolic order that surrounds it.[18] However, similar to the Buddhist conception of the real, Otto argues that the real is awe-inspiring when handled expertly; in fact it breeds the production of knowledge; rather than simply being the unmanageable

[17] Breaking with sociologists who reduced religion to social functions alone, Otto paid attention to religious experiences of transcendence as a phenomenon.

[18] Lacan saw subjectivity as a constant negotiation between three registers of being: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. 'The symbolic interpellates us into the normative regulations of the social order. The imaginary founds our conception of ourselves as individuals who possess unique personalities and the potential for exceptional existential trajectories. And the real intrudes into our lives as an unruly vortex of bodily jouissance and unintelligibility that disturbs the reassuring (yet ever-fragile) coherence of our symbolic and imaginary configurations alike' (Ruti. 2012, p.1).

‘substance’ that knowledge attempts to translate.

An elegant way of picturing Otto’s (and later Eliade’s) conception of the Holy is Bunting’s 1580s map of the Christian world, which puts Jerusalem in the centre of that world, from where order emanates and then slowly degrades the further one gets from that centre. Otto argues that in the heart of Jerusalem would be an ineffable but very real experience called the Holy that religious professionals can access. It is also telling that near the edges of the map creatures are barely recognisable; dragons and non-real humans inhabit an ocean with god-knows-what below its surface. Understanding the centrality of the Holy, and its relation to systems of identity and knowledge is essential to this essay.

Eliade took Otto’s description of the Holy and expanded it. He made it less unattainable and more like a ‘substance’ located in places and brought forth by specific times and rituals that are dense with this substance so we can all experience it. As you would expect of anything associated with the real, it is represented in ways that never quite contain it; the sacred is a phenomenon that you can only experience. Eliade argues that our moods and behaviours alter in its presence (Eliade, 1959/1987). That had also been my observation of religious places I’d visited over the years. I had spent time in pilgrim sites before and I was always struck by how I could feel so different in them, even if the faith on display wasn’t my own. This is a Heideggerian observation: moods can be public, due to the intersubjective nature of being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). So, my own religious preferences aside, I figured if I went to Jerusalem, I would get a good dose of novelty and a chance to experience the holy/ sacred as well. Perhaps it was better that it wasn't my own faith, because there would less obligation.

Before moving on with the discussion, the character of the Holy/sacred needs a bit more elaboration than just ‘tremendous, terrifying and mysterious’. I include Bollnow’s description

of ‘devotion’ with it, which is a mood he calls ‘readiness to hear’ (Bollnow, 2017, p. 1410). Sacred moods also, necessarily, include contemplation of death. That is because death ultimately defines subjective time, while also fitting Bollnow’s description of ‘terrifying’ and ’mysterious’: the act of contemplating death is commonly both.

I wanted all these things. I particularly wanted to be around people contemplating death. Part of that is because while moods might not be thinking itself they *aid* thinking. They orient us towards genres of thought (Schmitz, 2011). I was in the mood to think about death that year. It hadn't been easy to think about in Tokyo or Perth, and I was grieving.

Modern grief is a strange beast. Kellehear (2007) argues that urban life has taken the business of engaging death and professionalised it, alienating us in the process from the event that defines life. Walter (2012) says modernity has masked not only dying but also grieving and its ‘wild emotions’. It treats those emotions with containment since they threaten modernity’s goals of control, progress and ‘happiness’. A society focussed on death might not spend so much time producing luxury goods, and spend more time inventing rituals.

Theda’s death was something I had only shared with a few people. As a tiny migrant family, we didn’t have aunts or uncles or cousins, just a couple of friends. We had been a loner family in a lot of ways, and Theda had been bedridden for thirteen years, so none of my friends ever got to know her. My ex had been one of the few people I was connected with who really knew her. That meant I couldn't share Theda’s life with anyone apart from Mum. I wanted to think about her, and I was in the mood to do it while around people who were more oriented towards death than they were enmeshed in busy productive lives. I knew that religious people, with their doctrines, rituals and belief systems, would be like that.

*

As I settled in, I often wandered down to the Wailing Wall. It was bewitching to watch people pray there. Of course, some things irked me, like the fact that the women got such a raw deal with their tiny section, or the nationalism on display sometimes with flag wavers, but I liked it nonetheless and even made friends. A young orthodox man befriended and showed me around his Yeshiva.[19] We met up a couple of times.

My accommodation was outside the Old City near a market, and it was there that I would watch the other kind of busy-ness that goes on in a sacred city: people prepared for Shabbat and walked with machine guns slung over their backs while talking on mobile phones; a brightly-lit shop window still strikes my mind when I recall that time, it had shelves sporting identical black hats and folded linen, for the orthodox, lit up like a stage late at night, as ritualised preparations heaved around it.

The locals who ran the hostel I stayed in were friendly. They were musicians, like me, and we got to know each other. I got to know Shahar in particular. He wanted to educate me about the politics of his country. 'Israel has a big problem coming,' he told me one evening. He had been describing all the identities fighting for space in the Old City—Jews, Muslims, Christians—and had moved onto the discussion of their internal tensions by then. 'The Orthodox will be the biggest population soon,' he continued. 'Many Jews worry about the Palestinian conflict getting worse then. The politics Orthodox have will make Netanyahu look like Mother Teresa. We already have to leave Israel to marry non-Jewish. This is trouble coming.'

Shahar had his opinions, and I cannot verify their truth, but I took his advice about sites to see while in his country. One afternoon, on his advice, I rode the tram up to the Yad Vashem

[19] A Yeshiva is a Jewish educational institution focussed upon the study of traditional religious texts.

near the outskirts of town. The Yad Vashem is the Holocaust museum, and some army sergeants were leading groups of young conscripts through it that day. Shahar had explained this to me as well. ‘It is part of basic army training for all Jews,’ he’d said, ‘to visit Israel’s holy places, and the Yad Vashem. You should see it before you go.’

The building itself was an elegant white complex set amongst trees, and that day I walked through it, amongst young soldiers absorbing exhibits that explained the slow emergence of the WWII death camps and their atrocities. At the end, I had no choice but to exit via one last official exhibit that was a large circular room with a huge hole that formed a deep well in its centre. There was water at the bottom but it was hard to see it. A plaque nearby indicated that the walls shelved files naming all the Jews who had died in the Holocaust. That room had a sacred air about it. The well gave off a fecund smell, and the thick concrete construction of the walls made it feel like you were underground. The combination of this and the museum’s construction of narrative that had preceded it produced an emotion that is hard to describe. It stopped my mind. It was an overwhelming sense of terrifying mysterious grief. It was the sacred of being-towards-death in its tragic modality.[20] If it was true that modernity didn't like grief then this space drew forth anti-modernity. It was ineffable, pure affect and taboo. But here we were being directed towards it, and there was an enchantment to that that is hard to place.

A few minutes later, I left and found myself on a balcony with some of the soldiers looking out at a vista with a few humble-looking houses dotted in the distant hills. That balcony was obviously there as the true last profane exhibit. It was placed directly after the sacred room and its well, and you had no choice but to exit that way. The houses in those hills

[20] Heidegger’s notion of death is that it exists as a perception in the lived present beyond what is possible to represent. ‘Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially […] But if ‘ending’, as dying, is constitutive for Dasein’s totality, then the Being of this wholeness itself must be conceived as an existential phenomenon of a Dasein which is in each case one’s own. In ‘ending’, and in Dasein’s Being-a-whole, for which such ending is constitutive, there is, by its very essence, no representing (Heidegger, 1962, Division II, H240).

on the vista silently commanded anyone who had arrived there to consider: *here you are, just outside the sacred room with the well, and this is where knowledge of our nation's existence and identity begins.*

I am going make two arguments now. I am going to argue that the sacred should be understood flexibly, in a way that Eliade intimated, which highlights its role as a locus around which justification of identity, and therefore knowledge production, occurs. The second argument will be about politics.

> 1) Eliade's vocabulary puts the sacred at the centre of knowledge. It is a necessarily vague and abstract, affect-laden but universal experience. It is a fixed node of 'absolute reality' in the mode of experiential contact, around which an order can then be set and maintained. Eliade argues that even non-religious groups operate in this way.[21] A post-structural thinker would be inclined to describe the sacred as a role in *any* system of identity. It is the ineffable 'sense' at any identity's central justifying point. Therefore, the dynamic of the sacred and its production of knowledge is not only an explicitly religious phenomenon, but one which occurs in all collective identities. That is argument number one.
>
> 2) Argument number two is this: A sacred centre is ineffable, but it still requires signification so that collectives can know where to access it. Laclau (2005) explains the symbolic device which can do this. He defines *empty signifiers* as those radically open symbols that collective identities swirl around. They are capable of signifying an

[21] 'To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior […] Even for the most frankly nonreligious man, all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the "holy places" of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life' (Eliade, 1987, p. 23).

infinite number of things to the individuals who engage them. Those individuals then project their sacred values upon these signifiers. The heterogeneity of what gets projected then leads to debate within that collective about the 'true' meaning of such signifiers.[22]

It is easy to stop the analysis there, and to characterise empty signifiers as symbols upon which heterogenous values can be projected. But consider the fact that an individual projects his or her *highest* values upon such signifiers. Where do these values come from? In a certain mundane sense they come from the individual's idiosyncratic historical and personal context, but in the more profound sense, like all knowledges, they generate upon important emotional experiences that the individual takes as 'sacred' in his or her experience of being. In this way, empty signifiers evoke the sacred from an individual's point of view. That individual then projects values which are predicated upon that experience of the sacred onto the empty signifier. In one sense, empty signifiers can signify a near infinite number of things; but, in another, more profound sense, they *always* signify the sacred.

That room in the Yad Vashem was an empty signifier indicating a central ineffable affect within the Jewish identity. It was a room constructed to signify it as it appears in the modality of terrifying, ineffable grief and being-towards-death. That modality acted as the node around which the museum was then justifying its surrounding nation's existence in narrative form. Eliade also noted this about sacred times and spaces—that they usually reiterate the telling of a people's creation myth. Calling the Holocaust story a 'myth' is not meant to denigrate it. It is a tragic true story. But it operates like a myth nonetheless because it *defines* a people.

[22] That debate is endless, and its endlessness is essential to the generative power and adaptability of the collective identity it takes place within (Geisen & Seyfert, 2016).

Those soldiers were not being marched through a museum; they were being marched through a kind of church.

Of course there are other sites, knowledges and narratives of Israel that circle deeper histories, with more ancient stories that are more explicitly mythical. What I am saying here is that the Yad Vashem was one such holy site. Shahar had tried to explain this to me before I'd gone to see it, in his way. 'It is part of basic army training for all Jews,' he had said, 'to visit the holy places, *and* the Yad Vashem.'

As I caught the tram home that afternoon, I couldn't stop thinking about that link between politics and the sacred—Jews bickered amongst themselves a lot, I had seen that, but the sacred united them, even if it wasn't an explicitly religious example of the sacred. And, from such nodes of affect, knowledge of an identity and the political consequences for a People and the nations around that People occurred.

The sacred and conflict

Three weeks later, I decided to take a tour up to Hebron in the West Bank. Hebron is a controlled city that is 80% Palestinian with a minority of Jewish settlers. Soldiers patrol the streets of Hebron and they arm checkpoints demanding the separation of the two populations. As far as the Israeli conflict goes, few cities depict it as clearly as Hebron.

As we entered the Jewish quarter it was like a ghost town in an old Western film. Apart from us, there wasn't a soul about other than a dust-covered army patrol who eyed us

suspiciously. Every house was surrounded by a cage and our guide said the settlers were inside but not coming out. I remember as we passed a house, I was riveted by the sight of its backyard surrounded by a steel cage, and a child's bike inside rusting away. It seemed absurd that settlers would choose to raise their children in Hebron if they had other options.

Later that morning, a beleaguered Jewish man in his sixties came out and lectured our little group about why his people had the right to be there. He talked of the holy sites in that city and their significance to his people. His point was that the sarcophagus of Abraham was essential to his identity, but I silently pondered the relationship between his version of the sacred and the people back in Jerusalem who didn't make their children ride bikes in caged yards.

I'm going to diverge slightly here to look at the mechanics of identity. There is a Saussurean logic to it. Identity is constructed as an exclusion. An 'us' requires a 'them'. That has been widely observed. Without exclusion, 'we' has no boundary (Hall, 1997; Holquist 1990/2002; Said, 1978/1995). Laclau and Mouffe (2001) take this further when describing how political identities operate. They are defined not only via exclusions, but especially via antagonistic relations with specific Other/s who they see as oppressing them. A political identity makes demands of those Other/s. For example: 'Give me space in the holy city!' It is somewhat crass using Laclau and Mouffe in this example, since their insights are aimed at the emancipation of the weak, but the observation is correct even when it is analysing a more powerful force oppressing a weaker one. To that settler, in his view, he was oppressed.

What struck me most about that morning was his desire to talk about the sacred. He talked of it, yet he had chosen an explicitly *political* identity. On reflection, this is not so surprising: political identities and religious ones share some key similarities, namely that both articulate against an enemy. Religious identities conjure transcendent enemies such as Satan

(Christianity) and Mara (Buddhism); while political identities conjure more mundane enemies, such as the Other who lives across the border. Given this similar need for an enemy, the two modes of identity production—religious and political—have the potential to support and mimic each other, especially if a political enemy is given transcendent status, or a religious enemy given a mundane representative. I will unpack this further in a few paragraphs time.

At midday our Jewish guide handed us over to a Palestinian man at a checkpoint. Israeli soldiers inspected our passports as an impassive sniper watched from a guard box a street over. The Palestinian man led us down several streets into a market that was an alleyway covered over with chicken wire above head-level. After we had looked into a few stalls selling bags and clothing, he pointed up at the wire. 'From settlers,' he said, moving his finger from trash-item to trash-item. 'They live in buildings above and toss down because they think of my people like the garbage dump.' He then pointed out two sharp-shooters in towers either side of the alley, 'Can you imagine to live like this?' he said.

After that he took our slowly sobering group through some winding streets and I caught up with him because I wanted to talk. I was curious. I asked him questions about the Palestinian people. He told me about his religion and some aspects of his people's struggle for education and employment. He complained that the Israelis took all the water in the desert, but then, to my surprise, he perked up and started asking me about the West. Looking back this isn't surprising. I knew it from other places where I had lived and worked amongst people trapped in a periphery nation. Core nations matter to periphery ones in a way we

sometimes forget.[23] This is not only because the core dominates the global market; it is also because the periphery reads itself in relation to the core's culture when understanding its own identity. How this process works is up for some debate, but as Žižek (2018 pp136-137) is quick to point out, the West often fetishises the ethnic Other, naively believing he seeks to preserve his unique cultural heritage as much as we do, when actually, while that may be somewhat true, he also wants to understand himself better in relation to the universal questions that he has in common with powerful cosmopolitan nations—questions about romance, gender and the meaning of an engaged life. Transported narratives inform a periphery nation's citizenry as it attempts to evolve local norms and practices, just as the West does. In the globalised world, periphery nations and their citizens do not understand themselves in isolation, rather they are interfaced by the global imaginary that they access via the internet and mass media that travels in various ways to almost all corners of the globe.

After a few more stops, we sat in our guide's home and ate lunch. After that he led us to the house of a man who served us tea and showed us photographs of his wife. This man recounted a story. It was alarming. He said Israeli soldiers had gang-raped and killed his wife. This story, as brutal as it was, felt unverifiable and likely apocryphal to me. Perhaps I am naive but I didn't believe its exactitude. It seemed too explicitly brutal. The Israeli government controlled Hebron in brutal ways, yes, but I would need more convincing that soldiers raped citizens. Who knows. I thought about this for a long time afterwards and eventually realised that what was interesting about it to me was that my Jewish guide had, in

[23] Freidman's core-periphery model is one conception of how to view different nations in relation to global power, core nations exert hegemonic cultural and economic influence whereas periphery ones are affected by that influence (Brar 2002). An understanding of the historical role of media technologies in the development of core-periphery relations is offered by Volkmer (2014).

his fashion, done the same thing. My Jewish guide had told stories that were aimed at reinforcing my perception of the other side's depravity. Reflecting on that helped me realise something philosophical about the nature of conflict and the sacred. I realised that conflict draws up the sacred in its own special way. Conflict does that because it demands self-justification. On borders and in contested cities you require more self-justification. And self-justification always articulates itself in relation to the sacred at the core of its identity. Righteous anger is more than just reactive, it is a deeply seeded sense of identity capable of sustaining itself. It is even described as a holy emotion around the globe.[24] Think of the Ku Klux Klan's burning crosses on lawns. They brought their version of the 'sacred' to the sites of conflict itself. They mobilised the sacred, and carried it with them to the houses of their enemies—black families who they saw as threats to their way of life. They engaged in self-justification in sacred terms, and perhaps what motivated them to do that via conflict was a struggle to feel the sacred any other way. Conflict demands a righteous version of the sacred to show its face. It is crass calling righteous anger 'the sacred', but it can be accurate. Righteous anger is a collective affective experience of being drawn up into something universal and larger than oneself. It is an emotion at the core of an identity. It *is* sacred.

After that day, I thought of the beleaguered settler who had failed to convince me that the holy sites in Hebron were his real reason for bringing his family there, and I wondered if it was actually the conflict that gave him access to the sacred in a way he couldn't feel it amidst the busy Jewish plurality back in Jerusalem. His strategy mediated the sacred through a different emotion. But, importantly, it maintained the emotional experience.

[24] In Christianity Scott offers an example: 'Be angry and yet do not sin; Do not let the sun go down on your anger (Scott, 1779/2017)'. The Hindu goddess Kali can also be read as an example of divine anger. There are many other examples across religions, including in Tibetan Buddhism (The Dali Lama & Jinpa, 2013/1997).

The following week, I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City. That site offered a different vision of conflict that was more difficult to read.

The Church is supposedly where Jesus was crucified, though I heard from Shahar that it was only because a queen had said so. The most likely site of the actual crucifixion was outside the city limits.

The church now houses seven Christian sects who, upon its discovery, bickered so severely they each camped out in the building to stop the others from taking it over while they slept. Nonetheless, territory got stolen and things were moved in the dark of night until eventually the bickering got so bad that an agreement had to be signed. The building got divided into seven permanent sections, based on where each sect was camped at that time, and it was uneven, but at least it stopped the aggressive from overpowering the weak. The agreement stipulated that no one was allowed to alter anything about the building unless the others agreed, which would prove to never happen. As a result parts of the building were in terrible disrepair. There were fallen stones and the walls were scorched with soot in one part. The sect who occupied that scorched part weren't allowed to clean it off because the others wouldn't give permission. It was absurd. A rigid roster was also set up for each sect's rituals. The animosity was palpable. You could smell it.

My encounter with that church was a reminder that major conflict was not the only kind in a place like Israel. In the case of that church a vicious politics of small differences was occurring. What's more those bickering sects were surrounded by clearer examples of Otherness with whom they could have practised more direct exclusion—Jews and Muslims in

close-by quarters.

It is tempting to see these sorts of small-difference conflicts as a microcosms of straightforward ones, and somehow secondary. And while it is true that there are many similar mechanics at play, there is also something more intriguing going on in the background if you look closely. I am going to describe something from my childhood now to make this point, and I will come back to the church at the end of that description.

*

Like most children, my first contact with group politics came at the hands of peers. I was in a unique position as I went through high school in the late 1980s/early 90s. Australia's national identity was in flux. White Australia Policy had ended when Theda and I were born, and we were the only mixed-race kids in that high school. It was in Perth, the most isolated city on any continent, and isolation like that can breed a protectionism in the culture as insecurity about outsiders manifests during certain eras. I was not the only person with Asian heritage there of course. My cohort of other Asians were the first generation to go through high school after White Australia Policy's dismantlement also. My suburb had attracted a lot of specifically middle-class Malay and Singaporean families. Kids from these families had two Asian parents and spoke English fine, but they used non-English languages at home and when they were relaxing together at lunchtime. They had not been born in the West, and even though they were going through childhood in Perth, they had a sense of solidarity as migrants. The white kids didn't like them, so, in response, those Asian kids formed a large mixed-grade group on the oval, and they did everything together. That group must have comprised about sixty kids, I think, perhaps more. They were a sizeable minority. They sat

together in class and ate their lunches on the far oval beyond the staff carpark away from the white kids' animosity. The white kids took the quadrangles that were bordered by the classroom buildings. That was the central position. Lots of those white kids felt the Asians were a threat. Their parents must have said things because the phrases that came out of their mouths were adult ones—'They're gunna steal all the jobs…all they care about is money…they don't care about real people.'

That's all well and good, and is typical of that era in Perth's history, but looking back I can see how the self-segregating Asians in our midst were actually also a kind of windfall. They were a clear identifiable Other against which the white kids could understand themselves. I did it too. I never thought of myself as part of that Other. My concept of self excluded them (though I never partook in the racist jibes). It was thanks to those Asian kids and their nearby-distance that a continuous discourse about 'us' and 'them' was allowed to evolve. We were not *them*. The idea of them was also quite disgusting—friendships between the two groups didn't articulate. Interestingly, a sole African kid who had been born in Australia did fine mixing with the whites. But he didn't have a large group of self-segregating Africans framing his appearance to the whites either. That racially bifurcated world was Asian and white, and it actually made the business of understanding who we were easier because it allowed us clear exclusionary boundaries. What's more, those Asian kids ate 'disgusting' food (that we secretly liked), and they smelled funny. Nor did they understand that Australians shouldn't show off their smarts.

I'll just go through some of the phrases to draw a picture: one was 'nip…nip…nip' whispered like an incantation as some poor Asian kid quietly made his way to the oval. Sometimes there were shouts of 'go back to where you came from!' but those were rarer, only about one a week, and to a loner from a bully.

Those Asian kids did *too* well academically. School administration encouraged some white boys and girls to drop out after grade ten, but never those Asian kids. They lifted the school average and gave it a good reputation for a state school. They also cared about pleasing the teachers, who we instinctively hated, and teachers liked them back.

Enter: my sister and me.

As you might guess, we considered ourselves 'white'. English was our only language and we were culturally Western. We didn't share key interests that marked 'Australian-ness' emphatically (like the love of Australian Rules, swearing, or broad accents) but we expected to be integrated. Instead, both of us got ostracised. We were severely bullied in different ways. My experience of that was violent, Theda's was as girls do it. I stopped going to that school for half a year to avoid physical attacks. I had no idea why any of it was happening. Unfortunately, Theda and I were never there at the same time, so we couldn't support each other. She spent her first two years at a music school before returning to Rossmoyne High just as I got asked to leave.

I never admitted I'd been bullied at Rossmoyne until years later. Theda took longer.

I learned something about the underlying mechanics of racism when I shifted schools. The school I attended after Rossmoyne was called Applecross High, and Applecross High wasn't nearly as racist as Rossmoyne. On reflection, I attribute that to the size of the perceived threat from the majority's point of view. Applecross High had only about three or four Asian kids in total. They were integrated with the white kids. It would be incorrect to say that racism was completely absent from Applecross High—I remember a few outbursts, for example Brad Davidson yelling repeatedly at a Japanese exchange student 'Why you no speak English!?' as a quadrangle of white kids laughed and half-pitied her—but that was a minor incident compared to the frequency and severity of overt racism at Rossmoyne. At

Rossmoyne, I had fought with my fists repeatedly, and Theda had feared for her safety with good reason on a daily basis.

It took me a long time to understand why Theda and I were targeted at Rossmoyne, and why I was *not* targeted at the second school. Part of the reason was likely that Applecross was a wealthier area, with more progressive families populating its catchment area, but the in-group/out-group mechanic involving a larger out-group was also clearly a factor—Rossmoyne had a *significant* Asian population, so the perceived threat was larger.

When I look back on those years now, I wish there had been a discourse on race that I had had access too. It would have helped me understand what I was facing. I remember Rossmoyne High kids going on tirades about 'the Asians' and saying how 'Van Tongeren was just saying what *real* people thought'.[25] I distinctly remember one kid telling me that a local man named Nicholas Meredith, who'd killed a Vietnamese taxi driver then gone on a racist rant about it in front of the media after his court appearance, had done the world a favour. Then a nicer kid had turned to me and said, 'not you, Khin, you're different.' For years, these contradictory messages about who I was in the racial mix confused me. They made understanding the racial dimension of my childhood difficult to parse. As a result, I didn't even want to admit that I was Asian until I was in my late-twenties, when suddenly being ethnically different gained a certain (if not ambivalent) 'cool' factor amongst the progressive white middle-classes I was mixing with by then. I did eventually understand the racial dimension I am describing here though. I have my ex (Rachel) to thank for that. She talked a lot about racial identity. Understanding race was part of her 'project' for caring about the world. She had studied race at university, and the way she talked about it normalised a few

[25] Jack Van Tongeren was a notorious Perth-based racist. He formed the Australian Nationalist Movement which firebombed Chinese restaurants, amongst other things, and plastered 400,000 anti-Asian posters around the city in the 1980s and 90s (Salaem, 1999).

ideas I had been uncomfortable applying to myself until then. She spoke freely about the social dimension of a person's racial identity, but her discussion was not cordoned off to the indigenous population, nor to first generation migrants only. Hearing her talk like that freed my own perspective, and allowed me to think about the significance of race in my own life more clearly. She also introduced me to useful vocabulary, such as 'the other', and 'white privilege'. In moderation, these terms were helpful.

My own analysis of my childhood now goes into understanding how monsters are constructed in a culture. That was what Theda and I were perceived as while growing up within the context we traversed. Monsters constitute the embodiment of a culture's deepest fears, in particular its notions of the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. The shape of a monster is defined by the culture that gives birth to it; and monsters often represent a fear of what is uncategorised or, worse, un-categorisable (Cohen, 1996, p. 19). To understand this it helps to consider that '*Monstra*' comes from the Romans who derived it from the Latin word *Monstrum* that means 'warning'. The Romans used this term for hermaphrodites, who were drowned upon birth due to their un-categorisable gender predicament. It is also telling that after the classical period, representations of monsters started to resemble humans more, suggesting that the role of the Other was now that of a more recognisable other while the colonial and chattel slavery periods were occurring. Cohen (1996) ties this turn in monster representation to anti-miscegenation sentiments embodying fears of 'us' and 'them' mixing.

My sister and I were superficially un-categorisable in our social milieu back then. We were symbolic of the erosion of key categories that kids and their parents were using to define themselves, and, as gentle kids without much Australian oomph, we didn't do ourselves any favours. I was too 'feminine', and Theda was too 'clever'. And of course we were both brown with funny names.

The uncanny is an unconscious thing. It is the strangely familiar that creates cognitive dissonance upon contact (Freud, 1919/2003). Horror Philosopher Noel Carroll riffing this insight about the uncanny tells us that *category jamming* is what gives many monsters their 'disgusting' quality that is viscerally felt (Asma, 2009, p. 200). Disgust is a biological response, not a conscious choice. Its evolution is related to the behavioural immune system around food and hygiene, but moral systems draw upon it to turn moral transgressors into viscerally threatening apparitions (Haidt et al 1997). Nazi propaganda used metaphors depicting the Jewish people as a pathogen to the 'body' of the German people (Buscemi, 2016). Morality and disgust have a long history of being bound up together like this. Moral arbiters will often manipulate this potential link to create 'bogeymen' out of other people. Transgender people are a striking example of this in a contemporary setting. The stigma that trans identities experience is not a manifestation of misogyny or homophobia alone, rather it is the deep fear of a breaking down between categories that the dominant identities want maintained. Heidegger (1927/1962) can offer an ontological insight about this. His assertion that categorical perception is how beings gain some sense of mastery over the contingency of life links the unsettlement people feel at *category jamming* with fears about not being able to negotiate the reality of their own lives if such jamming occurs.

I understood this all better when reflecting upon a key moment in my teenage life. It happened when I was 14 years-old, and I had been getting targeted to the point of dejection. It had gotten worse because I had fought back and won two fights. The usual rule was that a winning boy was left alone, but in my case things just escalated. I was desperate for some relief. Those fights were terrible things to deal with. Some boy would just randomly decide to come for me, and he would amass a crowd then scour the hallways looking for me as I avoided him. I had a girl come do it once with her big jeering crowd, her point was just to tell

me how disgusting I was. It is not the worst thing that could happen to a child. I can think of much worse. But given my constitution, I couldn't cope with it. I was alone and baffled, so, one afternoon when I had been avoiding two particularly nasty boys who had their own separate crowds scouring for me, I asked a kid in my computing class why it was happening. He was adjacent to those bullies socially, but I knew he didn't dislike me. I had never had the courage to ask anyone before. I was scared of what the answer might be. But I did ask then, and he sincerely tried to answer. It was decades ago now, of course, but I remember it very clearly.

'It's just something about the way you look,' he said.

'Is it how I dress?'

'It's not how you dress. It's what you are.'

'How I act?'

'Kind of.'

'How can I change it?' I pleaded.

'You can't,' he said. 'It's not *like* that. It's not something you can change. It's not something I can describe, but it's something everyone can see. I know you can't see it. I know that. But everyone can see it.'

The reason I remember that conversation is because it was defining. After that day I stopped going to school. I gave up believing I could win. And it was after that six months of wagging that the administration kicked me out. I was angry at teachers, inarticulate, a smoker, and not turning up for classes.

But what that boy told me that day was useful later in life. He struggled to articulate it, but I remember the look on his face—it wasn't mean-spirited, it was just baffled, and it was certain of itself at the same time, like a person trying to describe something they know in

their heart rather than in their head. He was telling me I triggered a deep visceral reaction in people that was beyond signification. Theda and I were the uncanny. We were un-categorisable and unique at that time, strangely familiar in the wrong way. We were Other, but not Other. We represented the erosion of how the world worked to those kids.

Returning to the discussion of the conflict at the church, perhaps you can see where I'm going with this analysis. What I have just described about my childhood is the same—those Christian groups were not similar, they were *uncannily* alike. They would have perceived each other in the tense situation of Jerusalem's bigger fights surrounding them as 'Other but *not* Other'. They all revered Jesus, but the other sects ate different foods, spoke different languages, and had rituals that were offensively incorrect somehow. As such, each was deeply unsettling to the others. That's why the politics of small differences is unique in its way, and not just a microcosm of bigger conflicts. Small differences unsettle with their monstrosity, if it is the right kind of small difference. The uncanny Other triggers bigger anxieties, then the gut wrenches and church walls remain caked in soot in the name of Jesus.

The Sacred and the Individual

The next shift in my thinking happened a few weeks later. I had been thinking about identity in groups a lot, and it had led me to my father. Dad had arrived in Australia on the Colombo Program in the 1970s. That program had given him a Western university education on the proviso he return to Burma once that education was over. It was the politics of international

aid. Dad was lucky. He was from a poor family, but they had pooled resources to put him through university in Burma, where education was ridiculously uncritical under socialism, but cheap, and in that university he was picked up by the Colombo Program. He arrived at 23 years of age in Perth, out of step and without any spoken English skills. Then he married my mother—a working class British immigrant—and the Burmese government found out (Dad thinks they had spies). He instantly got a letter from officials threatening his family back home, because anyone who married a foreigner was a traitor.[26] My parents borrowed money and paid a bribe for his family's safety, but Australia didn't want to give Dad refuge. A series of fortunate events let him stay, but he was cut off from his culture and his family, in the West with a freshly-minted Western education and decent career prospects.

He didn't work with other Asians in the Justice Department. He was a bit of a loner, I think. Some years later, when his marriage to my mother began to falter, he started to look like a man having an identity crisis. He became zealously Buddhist and began to call my sister and me 'You Westerners'. He would chastise us for not being like Burmese kids. He would watch me like a hawk at dinnertime and yell at me to for not having enough *sati*. It got so bad that my mother and Theda would distract him to give me some relief. At the end of dinnertime, he would collect bones off all our plates, snap them, and suck out the marrow while talking about how Westerners wasted nutrition. Apart from that we didn't see him much. He had started a PhD in Buddhist psychotherapy and worked on it obsessively in a room separated from the rest of the house. Usually he would arrive home from work each day, go down to that room, return at dinnertime, then go back out there until after midnight. It was an obsession that ultimately ended his marriage.

A great irony in all this is that Dad hadn't cared for Buddhism in Burma. Despite coming

[26] In the 1970s Burma's leader was General Ne Win. One of his senior generals, Khin Nyunt, had a son who married a Singaporean woman. Khin Nyunt publicly denounced his son for this act ("Burma junta leader disowns his son," 1998).

from a very religious family, he had secretly blamed his country's religion for Burma being so far behind the West scientifically.

Looking back, I think his behaviour classically reflects an inferiority complex Fanon (1952/2008) described. The black man in the white context of the Australian middle class of the 1970s was simultaneously 'Other and not Other'. He was materially included in some situations, attempting to pass as one of the majority, while simultaneously being the other against which that dominant culture was struggling to define itself. Fanon proposes that this schizoid state leads to an inferiority complex, and I think it fits my father as he was back then. The PhD he was pursuing asserted his homeland's value through its Buddhist connection, and it sought validation via a Western institution. I wonder if he craved that validation, and displaced his frustration about not having received it yet onto us. He used to tell my sister and I that if we were sick it was because we weren't Buddhist enough. His strange behaviour continued throughout my twenties and early thirties. In my mid-twenties, I found him using a knife I had attempted suicide with when I was 19. I had kept it and put it in a shoebox with some diaries. It had blood stains on it that wouldn't come off (I have a morbid sense of sentimentality). When I confronted him for using it to chop tomatoes he said that my indignance was 'Western attachment'. It was typical that conflicts like that always led back to West versus East.

When he chose to leave Perth after my sister had been ill for several years it was to fill a volunteer posting on the Thai-Burma border where Western aid workers admired him. I think that helped him regain some dignity he felt he had lost.

I don't think he sees it in these terms, but I have always looked for ways to understand him. My father is a complicated person.

I believe Theda had a similar kind of crisis to our father. I left Perth after my suicide

attempt. I left with a streak of resentment towards the place, that never quite vanished. I felt betrayed by it, and the institutions there. But Theda and Dad sought validation. Following in the footsteps of my mother, I ended up with a more working-class mentality, whereas they sought a place with more prestige and it caused them trouble.

It is only conjecture, but I always attributed my sister's illness to this identity crisis in some way or another. Some medical practitioners believed she had conversion disorder, and my sister took great offence at that, but I always secretly believed it possible and even likely.[27] Theda had been traumatised by our childhood too, and the idea of that trauma articulating through adulthood wasn't far-fetched. When she began to suffer psychotic breaks later in life, during her protracted illness, her physical symptoms would always vanish for the duration of each psychosis. Her symptoms would be gone and she'd be delusional, convinced of 'past lives', specifically one that she believed held the key to her physical illness. She described it to me many times while delusional. In this 'memory', she was part of a religious order in ancient Egypt; they had allowed her entry, but not full membership. She wasn't allowed into the inner sanctum of the temple. As the story she told goes, one day she attempted to go into that inner sanctum and the head priest found out. As a punishment, he ordered a gang-rape. A group of priests raped her then buried her alive. When she told this story it was as if she was there reliving it. During slightly 'more sober' psychotic moments she said that the injustice of this death was why 'Theda' was sick in her current rebirth. That atrocity needed retribution or resolution somehow. Whenever this story came out it was amidst a chaos of pressured speech and un-contained, energised behaviour.[28] She wouldn't

[27] Conversion disorder (CD) is the modern name for chronic psychosomatic illnesses which were once called 'hysteria'. The adjective 'psychogenic' is also often used in medical contexts. These illnesses affect roughly 20 in every 100,000 people (Feinstein, 2011; National Organization of Rare Disorders). Patients are usually unaware that symptoms are psychologically linked. Symptoms can be severe and chronic. CD is classified in the DSM V under 'Functional neurological disorders' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

[28] Psychiatrists label the speech many psychotics exhibit as 'pressured' to describe its tendency to flow freely without an apparent desire to engage its interlocutor in response (Colman, 2015).

recognise me most of the time when she was like that. I always remember this part of her delusions because it was repeated over several of her episodes. I thought it was telling that it described being half-ostracised, and then punished for crossing a line that 'her kind' weren't allowed to cross.

I read somewhere that psychotics often draw in the unresolvable conflicts from childhood that play out in their psychosis. It made sense to me that her psychotic breaks were linked to our childhood. My family was torn between East and West in many ways. Eventually my parents nailed shut an internal door in the house and built a large dividing fence down the middle of the garden, so we could live on either side of it. As children Theda and I had demands on us from school to be more Australian, and from each parent to be something else ethnically than what we were. We weren't Western enough for the kids at school. We weren't Burmese enough for our father. And our mother warned us not to be like Australians, who she felt were overly macho and bullying.

Pierre Janet's (1907) theory of psychosomatic illnesses fits how I saw my sister's illness later in life. I saw it as chronic dissociation. In real life, before she got sick, she had not seemed able to show her true feelings in many contexts. It made her appear a bit fake sometimes, but I knew it was just shame. She covered up her fear of being ostracised so severely that it was unhealthy. As a university student she would sometimes have our mother listen in on her phone conversations in case she said something to make her friends hate her. She was deeply troubled by the idea that she was somehow monstrous even though people were much nicer at university than those high school bullies had been. She never quite shook the experience of it. Bullying in adolescence is unique. Studies have linked everything from psychosis and depression later in life, to low wages, low education and higher levels of c-reactive proteins in patients who were bullied during their adolescence for six months or

longer (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Janet's concept is that a person unconsciously dissociates from a part of themselves they cannot face because acknowledging that part is too terrifying. The dissociated aspect resurfaces in physical format beyond the person's control or awareness of its mechanism, in lieu of any perceivable emotional distress. According to Janet, we are complex psychobiological beings that include memories, sensations, emotions and behaviours, so the idea that an unconsciously dissociated part of us would resurface physically is not a radical notion for him. Hustvedt, amidst a description of her own psychosomatic experiences, puts Janet's theory like this, '[conversion disorder] then, is a systemic divide that allows a renegade part of the self to wander off unguided (Hustvedt, 2010, p. 23).'[29]

After her death, I let go of some of my assumptions, but they still seemed very possible to me. Like me, Theda struggled to understand the reason for her shame because it was complex. Her response had been to try and make herself 'perfect'. She had denied anything about herself that wasn't 'normal' before her illness, and for a long time during it. I didn't judge her for that, but it was obviously unhealthy. I wanted her to see it.

As Kaufman (1989/2004) points out, shame is a complex social emotion that can become untethered from our awareness of its original cause. When that happens it can define the character of a person who takes herself to be tainted in some unknowable way, leading to an intense irrational fear of exposure (Kaufman, 1989/2004). Though conversion disorder's mechanisms are still somewhat mysterious, contemporary theories suggest intense shame can lead to a splitting of the self that drives what Janet described (Irwin, 1998).

I thought Theda needed to rebel. She needed to acknowledge and reject the bullying from

[29] Janet's teacher, Charcot, originally theorised 'hysteria' as an unknown neurological mechanism. Janet (1907), Breuer and Freud (1895/2000) drew it into the realm of psychological analysis, before modern psychologists renamed it conversion disorder.

our childhood, and perhaps reject our parochial city for a while also. In short, I felt she needed her anger. When she went psychotic, that anger certainty did flow, which is why I loved seeing her like that, despite how concerning her lack of control was when psychotic. She let it all out and appeared to heal physically while doing so. She was combative and wildly creative; full of pushback. It was the part of her she heavily curated when not psychotic. I interpreted her psychoses as this broken-off part of her finally pushing through to the surface, animating her being instead of manifesting as symptoms in her flesh. She was suddenly untethered, articulating the traumas and confusions that had created her shame in the first place, via myths of past lives that were like allegories of its inception.

I will never know if I was correct, and I only wanted her to get better, but it seemed deeply intuitively correct to me. Our mix of disposition and the experiences we had growing up overwhelmed both of us. Identity comes largely from group belonging, which occurs in places, cultures and families who offer it or don't. But following that process it also lives inside a person alone as a half-submerged ghost in their unconscious, beyond their control, and it can make a person sick or suicidal without knowing why. It can drive pathological things a person isn't aware of, like othering their children, or abandoning them. It can drive conflict between nations, between family members and between parts of ourselves as easily as it can feel deserved, undeserved, or difficult to parse.

*

On my way out of Tel Aviv airport I watched a custom's officer searching my suitcase, and I thought of the woman who had stamped my passport on arrival months earlier. She had been alone in her little Perspex cubby at the end of an empty immigration hall late one night, and,

despite being charged with defending the border, she had engaged in a little game about who she was. Her questions about language and the pride she had shown while articulating the superiority of her connection to her roots was something I understood. Perhaps that is why I had warmed to her instead of getting annoyed. Her behaviour was about the stability that comes from dignity versus the anxiety at what dignity overpowers—shame. Identity fixes our position to a group against the swirling and contingent background in which all groups are inextricably enmeshed, and it offers an attempt at dignity to those in each group.

I wondered for the first time about my ex's dignity. I was still deeply troubled by what had happened between us. It had unsettled things much deeper inside me than just my desire to marry someone nice. It had drawn up my own shame, so well-curated in a less destructive way than Theda's, but there nonetheless. My selfhood had been shaken. Masculinity—the sense I had of what was expected of me in order to be loved—had lost some of the magnetism on its compass. And now I was on my way out of Israel and wondering if our conflict had somehow been about dignity. Her dignity. She had been torn between her mother's idea that she needed a husband with status, and whatever had made her want to marry me in the first place. Those sudden changes of heart were undignified. Perhaps turning me into an enemy, and then articulating a certain kind of 'feminism' against the man she had loved was her confused attempt to fend off shame. Conflict drew up the sacred in its righteous format and justified her at a time of personal uncertainty about what she was doing and why. She had been in flux, confused, probably ashamed of having led me to the altar, so to speak, and then losing interest. I gave her a reason to burn a cross on my lawn, by making that gesture I did, but it wasn't a 'cross-burning' that had needed to happen. She had always been the stronger voice in the partnership. I had never given her a reason to think I would ever hurt or try to intimidate her. Who knows. Just like with my sister's illness, all I can do is

guess now.

As for my own search for meaning and dignity, I wasn't very focussed on identification with a cause or group that year. I had never really been that way inclined; but I was even more inclined to take the stance of 'detached observer' in times of personal trouble. Such a stance allowed me to process the tangles inside of my mind with a feeling of spaciousness; not with an ideology, cause or a stated enemy distracting the process.

New York City: Emancipatory Politics

I found an apartment in Brooklyn with the help of an acquaintance I'd met a decade earlier in India. He saw on Facebook that I was in America looking for a room, messaged that he was living in New York City and promptly offered to help out. His name was Ben, and after that we met about once a fortnight for a chat and a drink. He introduced me to Colin. They were both actors. Ben was from New Hampshire and Colin from somewhere else. They were pleasant company. We met with Charlotte sometimes, who was Ben's friend from Montreal studying contemporary dance at Juilliard.

After Jerusalem and Tokyo, New York felt like a cacophony. I had been getting a taste for strange places while working on my PhD, but they were all very different from each other, and New York felt energised by its multitudes of identities, its media saturation and its various forms of extroversion. It put me in the mood for a different kind of thinking.

One night, Ben took myself and Colin to a theatre show on the Lower East Side put on by a small company he knew. It was set in a fictional kitchen at a made-up Manhattan restaurant that explored resentment and resignation amidst employees. It was also, quite obviously, allegorical of intersectional identity politics, which was a flavour of thinking prominent in

New York city that year. At the end of the show, the cast, writer and director sat down for questions from the audience. The show had been a great performance of a good script, and the questions were engaging as well as political. I remember one in particular because it was against the grain of the politics expressed by almost everyone there. It was a man in his thirties who piped up about what he called 'identity politics'. He told the director that he believed anyone in the US could succeed regardless of gender, race or social class. Privilege and disadvantage were more or less illusions, or, at least, not worth focussing upon from his point of view. A few members of the audience politely disagreed and the discussion moved on without incident.

After it was over, Ben, myself and Colin found a little bar a few blocks over from the theatre building, where we could have a drink and talk about the production. We disagreed with the man who had channeled the American Dream. He was a cliché. We were like most people I knew in the arts—sensitive to the operations of identity and therefore in agreement with the basic project of an identity politics that acknowledged the way social and political dynamics informed a person's experiences of self. Intersectionality spoke to that. It was a nuance I wished had been around when I was young. It was not only attempting to recognise the politics of privilege and disadvantage; it was a recognition that history affected the present even after the injustices of history had been officially outlawed.

Just briefly, before continuing, I will locate intersectional theory in critical theory. It is animated by the imperative for social change and arose as a response to mainstream feminism's ignorance of the realities Black women faced that weren't captured by either the race or gender emancipatory discourses of that time (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Intersectionality unified feminism and operated as a way of observing overlapping kinds of oppression faced by people along race, class and gender lines that

hadn’t been considered in combination before (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Since then intersectionality has evolved into a methodology which often considers many more categories than simply race, gender and social class; which remain primary, but not limiting (Carbado et al., 2013). Methodologically speaking, intersectionality seeks to reveal the interwoven ways in which social structures produce and reinforce power as well as marginalisation, by interrogating the ways existing paradigms produce knowledge and politics that often function to normalise these dynamics (ibid).

When Colin, Ben and I were done talking about the play and its qualities, we moved on to talking about other things that were apparently unrelated. Ben and Colin were both discussing acting and its craft. I tried to chime in as a writer discussing my own craft, with varying levels of success and laughter. Overall, it was a lively conversation and a very pleasant evening, but the reason I am telling you this story is because of the final part of the conversation, which highlights a central theme of this essay. I remember it clearly because it intrigued me so much.

After a few drinks, Colin looked around nervously before speaking, seemingly worried that he would be overheard. Once he looked sure no one other than Ben and I were paying attention, he explained that Charlotte and some of her friends had been describing the culture at Juilliard. ‘As a guy you can’t talk about gender,’ he said, ‘Or if you're white you can't talk about race. People shut you down by calling out your privilege.’

We talked a little bit about that, and Ben said he had noticed a similar atmosphere pervading some of the spaces in his wider artistic circles, but not all of them by any means, and he agreed that the college experience sounded stifling. Colin said Charlotte’s main

complaint was that professors were letting it happen, and that it was breaking down into smaller and smaller callouts. Neither Ben nor Colin seemed to see the connection between the play we had just seen and what Colin was describing, which was strange to me, because the callouts charged a person with not holding a valid opinion according to their specific identity within an intersectional framework.

We chatted a little after that about getting older and then moved on.

On my way home that night, I thought about it. I didn't know Juilliard or whether Colin's second-hand account of Charlotte's complaint was specifically valid, but I had come across a similar kind of attitude amongst some of the younger postgrad folk at my university back home. It was the underlying threat of being shut down if you spoke without 'lived experience' on the 'wrong' topic around them.

Intersectionality can be used as a coalition building methodology between disadvantaged groups that recognises both their difference and similarities while uniting them (Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). However, it has been criticised for increasing social fracture and encouraging social divisiveness. Haidt & Lukianoff (2018) suggest it has increased political polarisation and social breakdown. Fukuyama (2018), Manning and Campbell (2014) and Lilla (2017) critique these social effects, albeit without explicitly naming intersectionality. The arguments these scholars make, along with journalists who chime in, is that by highlighting increasingly ever-more specific types of oppression, we create a competitive victimhood dynamic that pits groups against each other.

As someone who'd suffered quite specific marginalisation in childhood, I felt a connection with the intersectional outlook; on the other hand, I had also come across people

in my more-recent past who'd sought to limit discussions in its name. As an example, I could recall being told by a colleague at my university a few years earlier that my role in the academic setting lay in my being half-Burmese, not in my being a man. As someone very interested in gender, that felt oppressive. Even if Charlotte's account was hearsay, I couldn't ignore the root of her complaint: the passion for understanding collective identity along intersectional lines, which seemed to have intensified recently in some contexts, was causing trouble in some settings, in ways that were both questionable and stifling.

The first part of this essay will concern itself with callout culture. Callout culture is common parlance for a 'tendency among progressives, radicals, activists, and community organisers to publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behaviour and language use by others' (Ahmad, 2015). It carries a negative connotation by critics who use the term because 'callouts' are often considered an end unto themselves rather than meaningful political activism (Ahmad, 2015; Fisher, 2013).[30]

Over the course of this PhD, I spent roughly eighteen months in the States, mostly in New York City or Ithaca. During that time I heard a lot of talk about callout culture: in conversations like the one described above; and frequent press mentions too (Freidserdorf, 2017; Singal, 2017; Christakis, 2016;[31] Walters, 2017).

When I started to follow the issue, it gave me mixed feelings: I was onboard with the idea of recognising how certain identities had been denigrated in the past, as well as the ways their subordinate positions continued to be overlooked in the present; yet, as mentioned

[30] The definitions offered for the term 'call-out culture' here come from journalistic sources, not scholarly ones. No peer-reviewed articles I came across attempted to define the term explicitly; the few that dealt with its pejorative meaning preferred to rely upon the assumption that readers understood it already. Fisher's (2013) article here is cited on Wikipedia as one of the first observers of it as a cultural phenomenon.
[31] Christakis was another academic writing critically about her own teaching experiences amidst call-out culture.

earlier, callout culture also seemed prone to disingenuous acts, often from so-called allies, who, in my estimation were better off than the disenfranchised parts of society they claimed to represent. When callout culture was at its best, it drew attention to inequalities in everyday parlance; it highlighted ignorance and entrenched marginalisation; it gave voice to the oppressed, resisted centralised power, and educated people about the experiences of specific demographics. But, at its worst, callout culture was appropriated, and it denigrated individuals for perceived membership to an advantaged group, regardless of their individual experiences outside of that clunky frame. Callout culture articulated an intersectional politics of identity, but, like all politics, it could be misused.[32]

The issue of callout culture affecting academia, which was the subject of Charlotte's gripe about Juilliard, has drawn some comment from academics focussed on cultural and social phenomena in their professional lives, some of it in peer review journals as analysis, and some simply noting the problem (Walters, 2017; Christakis, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Manning & Campbell, 2016).

When I first came across the discussion, it was in the public domain as an opinion article. Vox.com published 'I'm a Liberal Professor and my Liberal Students Scare Me' by Schlosser (2015) describing a stifled debating space in tertiary education due to the threat of being 'called out', which, he argued, was silencing professors. Schlosser said that students might call out professors, or, perhaps other faculty would do it. He wrote, 'I have intentionally adjusted my teaching materials as the political winds have shifted […] most of my colleagues who still have jobs have done the same' (ibid).

Living in America had made me aware of an enthusiastic temperament in the American

[32] The connection between call-out culture and the emergence of social media is worth considering. McLuhan (1964) argues that new media articulates social and epistemological outcomes without society noticing. The increased conflation of individual with group identity might be one such outcome of digital social media.

culture wars, and when this professor described contemporary social justice theory being simplified into absolutist frames, much like I had encountered back home, I wasn't surprised. He said that in combination with the precariousness of the neoliberal university academic's employment status, an academic was too vulnerable to accusations about things said in class, taken out of context and weaponised for various reasons that weren't political as much as they were neurotic or opportunist but still harmful to one's career. In short, Schlosser described a puritanical religiosity to American callout culture on campuses.

If Schlosser is right, then this is increasingly being reflected by institutional changes in US tertiary education. Anonymous bias reporting systems and bias response teams exist in a large number of US institutions with the aim of schooling 'offenders' if they misstep (Manning & Campbell, 2016; FIRE, 2017). Manning and Campbell argue that this recent institutional reality colludes with a contemporary cultural shift in students, who show an increasing tendency to report each other for smaller and smaller offences. Manning and Campbell argue that this is partially due to increased perceptions of harm, perpetuated by discourses such as Sue's (2010) microaggression theory becoming mainstream, and a general shift in cultural trends that valorise victimhood over what they label as the dignity and honour cultures of previous eras. Lukianoff & Haidt (2018) argue that over-reporting of small infractions to university authorities is caused by several factors, including overprotective parenting styles for middle-class American children born after the mid-1980s.

In 2016 there were 231 bias response teams operating at various US universities (FIRE, 2017). The university of Minnesota provides a useful example of one. At the time of writing this, it is operating its own anonymous bias reporting system, and a bias response team that educates those who misstep. It also publishes a list of phrases considered microaggressions on its official webpages. Phrases included are: 'Where are you from?' and 'America is a

melting pot' ("Responding to Bias at the U of M," n.d.; "Examples of Racial Microaggressions," n.d.).

Scholars such as Manning and Campbell, as well as Lukianoff and Haidt, provide their own analyses of call out culture in academe, which I will address later; but, for me, a unique way of analysing it presented in 2014 when I was called out by colleagues online over something I posted on Facebook.

My post that day was critical about a video selling itself as 'feminism', which I didn't believe was genuine or prosocial. I wasn't someone who often posted political opinions online, but that day I did. The video was an advertisement that had been getting shared a lot on social media, promoting T-shirts with feminist slogans on them. In the video children dressed as princesses were swearing at the camera about the gender wage gap and rape culture. They used various statistics to back up their obviously-scripted expletive laden statements.[33] The advertisement itself was a gimmick, of course. I didn't find the swearing offensive. It wasn't until, out of curiosity, that I looked into the statistics that I was annoyed by it. I discovered then that the facts the video used had been misleadingly oversimplified, and the situation in reality was more complicated and less polarising. Feeling duped into moral outrage, I then reposted the video with a critical comment saying that its intentions were not genuine, and that it was twisting facts for its own attention-seeking T-shirt-selling ends. The post was visible to everyone on my network, but the response I got was from one colleague at my university, and it drew comments from several others in our academic cohort.

At first I was excited to be engaging in a meaningful discussion, but it soon became clear that I had misstepped regarding something quite sacred. Commenters were outraged that I

[33] The video in question was by T-Shirt company FckH8 (FckH8, 2104), owned by Synergy Media.

would speak out against something others perceived as 'feminism'. Logic and fact-checking weren't welcome. The incident confused me because it didn't demonstrate critical thinking from people I expected to have it. Statistics had been the central justification of the video in question, and that's what I'd critiqued, but one man wrote that my post ignored the 'lived experience of women'. I understood his point that qualitative research mattered, but when talking about crisis levels of phenomenon 'x' in the population at large, descriptive statistics played a key role. After all, such statistics were what the video had used to draw up outrage. More disturbing to me was the collective derision expressed when I suggested that both genders had concerns. I argued that twisting reality on either side of the gender divide was unfair, creating tension where mutual recognition of different burdens would be better. The response I got was a dismissal of men's concerns altogether and attacks on my moral character. I have always been interested in male suicide and men's problems with violence, being a survivor of both. I didn't expose my personal backstory in defence to these callouts, which probably would have helped me save face, but I had brought up the topics of suicide and violence (both perpetration and victimhood) as examples of things men needed help with in society. Both concerns were dismissed out of hand.[34] I found it privately distressing, took the post down, and felt further alienated from my institution.

Having worked with disenfranchised communities for my whole adult life, I eventually realised that this dynamic was something I had seen before. An example would be from 2011, when I worked on the Thai-Burma border for a year with Burmese refugees fleeing the civil war in Karen State. In that context, 172 non-government organisations (NGOs) were on-site also, and those NGOs drew a lot of Western volunteers who had put off their gap-year until after their degrees. These volunteers were well educated, but, until that point, university had

[34] Butler (2004) writes about this when interrogating where public compassion goes, using Levinas's concept of *the Face*.

been their only experience of adult life. They were often loud, articulate, highly-educated and self-righteous in ways that trampled the delicate pragmatic realities of the situation we were all dealing with. Such so-called allies were a burden. They wanted to control the conversation, and it seemed to me that their identity as 'saviours' was a narcissism that got in the way of them seeing the larger contours of the crisis they supposedly cared about.

The callout I dealt with online over that 'feminist' video was certainly not high stakes, but it felt similar in character. I had always viewed men's and women's issues through a Systems Theory lens (Skyttner, 2001). That is to say, I tended to view the expectations projected by any society upon male and female bodies as emerging from that society's history of gender. I saw gender as a system of identity involving interrelated and interdependent roles, each with benefits and burdens. Those roles were aimed towards group survival.[35] How those interdependent roles evolved and continue to evolve is therefore in relation to each other: a dialogue. Such a perspective doesn't deny hegemony and injustice within the system, but it acknowledges that the system emerged as a cooperative strategy, and therefore its parts continue to be interrelated and interdependent as they change. I had always felt that it was a nuanced way of looking at gender, a holistic way, and, even if not agreed-upon, not an opinion that would jeopardise my moral standing if I made it public.

I was too far away (in Japan at the time) to go and mend perceptions in person. It worried me a little because I didn't want to be tainted at my institution as an 'anti-feminist', whatever that supposedly meant. The truth was that I didn't consider myself any kind of 'ist' or anti-'ist'. Ever since dropping the identity of 'Buddhist' as a man in my twenties, I had believed that actions were more important than identity. Having watched my father's

[35] von Bertalanffy originally defined systems theory in 1955 when looking at biology (Skyttner, 2001). It went on to become an interdisciplinary method for analysing systems both natural and man-made. This theory views systems as made up of evolving interrelated and interdependent functional parts, which form a whole that has some underlying telos (ibid).

Buddhism, I realised that identity sometimes got in the way of principle, because you began feeling too much pride and began defending it at the expense of the very principles it was based on. There is a Zen koan that refers to this problem: *if you see the Buddha on the road, kill him*. It refers to pride and certainty about one's identity in relation to a beloved teacher. This koan argues that such pride and certainty gets in the way of actually walking the path to Truth.

I also worried after the incident that conversations about gender were constrained by the threat of shame in academia. I had already suspected that, but this seemed to confirm it. If you spoke outside your lane, even if facts were on your side, that wasn't okay. I had not signed up for university in my thirties to be so severely curtailed.

The incident was also ethically paradoxical, because I knew that my colleagues and I were actually on the same page politically regarding recognition of oppression, freedom of gender expression, and the quest for equality. My life's work until that point had only ever been about helping the disenfranchised.

After the incident passed, I thought a lot about why the video had upset my sense of ethics. I realised I had felt indignance about public compassion being unnaturally twisted towards the most optically-appealing causes. Competition for public compassion is a reality, and twisting facts is not good for it. Lying leads to animus between groups, instead of uniting them.

As a particular individual with my own biases and moral tastes, I obviously cared for some causes more than others, but constraining such biases required that no identity group lie to win public attention over the needs of others.

In 2016, radical democratic theorist Mouffe specifically called the division into small warring camps on the left a 'major problem'. She called it a problem that fractures the

‘collective will’ which emancipatory politics needs (Shahid, 2016). Laclau and Mouffe (2005; 2001) argue that in order for such a collective will to evolve, emancipatory politics needs to establish *chains of equivalence* between different political causes, offering them common goals without unifying them into an undifferentiated mass that ignores their unique needs. That is hard when so many varied extant interests influence and become invested in the construction of these political causes, pitting them against each other, which is an involvement I will describe below.

Neoliberalism and Social Justice Narratives

A way of reading my little incident above is to note how capitalist logic engages social justice narratives in the 2010s. Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony (2018) discuss how Patrick West reapplied Veblan’s 1912 theory on conspicuous consumption—how certain products are made to be consumed in public settings as a way of performing status—to the notion of ‘compassion’ for describing the modern hunger for demonstrating empathic moral attitudes through consumptive practices. West called this practice *conspicuous compassion,* and, while his (2004) analysis is fairly cynical and more descriptive than useful, his term itself is exact. A slightly different view has been provided by Hebdige (1989), noting that when communities in modernity lack a coherent ideology or geographic anchor they sometimes circle specific kinds of emotion as an organising principle.

Empathy is both emotional and cognitive; compassion, which empathy evokes, operates upon reward-related brain circuitry (Preckel, Kanske, & Singer, 2018).

Empathy is meaningful in addressing injustices, but emotional experience is also

subjective and, potentially, myopic. It can incite an addiction to the emotion, at the expense of critical thought.[36] Corporations recognising that potential addiction, along with people's need to perform conspicuous compassion to one another, and their hunger for the communities of affect that arise in relation to both, are thus incentivised to piggyback social justice narratives. Thus, 'social justice' has become a novel branding strategy. Pepsi, Nike and Gillette all tried a version of it in 2018/19, with varying levels of success.[37]

In the case of the video I grumbled about back in 2014, the company producing those T-shirts had not only encoded conspicuous compassion into its product but also into its advertising campaign, which was designed to look like a racy activist video, therefore good for sharing on social media as a performance of one's solidarity with a community of affect. It encouraged performances of this solidarity via 'likes' and reposts, not via meaningful action itself. This disjunct between performance and meaningful action relates to what Nancy Fraser (2013) described as a characteristic of neoliberal feminism.

Fraser's (2013) critique of neoliberal feminisms was that they focus on representation more than substance. They recognise attainments of position rather than attempts to restructure power in a meaningful way for all marginalised positions. The structure of the problem Fraser identifies is the same as my own gripe: wearing a T-Shirt, or posting a company's polarising video stands in for meaningful political engagement, at the expense of such engagement. Of course, I realise now that amidst such 'superficialisation' of causes, marketeers may game facts for profit at the expense of the emancipatory political field they appear to engage.

Let's unpack that last point. Marketeers recognise the desire many people have to resist

[36] Yale psychologist Paul Bloom (2016) makes a similar argument.
[37] Nothing has been written in scholarly journals about these campaigns yet, but journalists have attempted various forms of speculative analysis. (Barro, 2019; Hunt, 2018; Victor, 2018)

Power and to protect the less fortunate; they also recognise the desire people have to experience the positive affect associated with empathy, and to engage communities of affect; as a result, such marketeers make products that can speak to these demands. Corporations are incentivised to choose easily-identifiable causes with ideal victims that the maximum number of people can relate to, then brand their product to those causes. When doing this they are also incentivised to skew facts that amplify the urgency of their chosen cause, because any heightening of the moral outrage adds value. Moral outrage is also addictive (Crockett, 2017). In this case the addictive nature of compassion combines with the addictive nature of moral outrage to form a particularly addictive combination. Thus, if creating more outrage requires twisting facts, then so be it, as long as the corporation doing so can get away with it. That's why ideal victims are desirable for such branding exercises—it's easier to stoke moral outrage at the expense of facts if impetus towards protecting those facing an injustice is strong in the general public already. But the result is that we begin to see alternative fact mechanisms occurring in the name of social justice, driven by neoliberal marketing strategists. These marketeers usher public compassion towards superficial consumption, and create derision amongst disenfranchised groups who see other's needs becoming unfairly amplified in the public imaginary.

Furthermore, corporations riffing on social justice in this way are not only incentivised to produce outrage at the expense of facts, but to draw controversy along a certain balancing line in that regard. Hence, using questionable facts (and gimmicks such as swearing children) is not against corporate interests even if it puts off a minority of critical consumers, because controversy creates online friction, and online friction aids their advertising strategy. Advertising akin to that video I critiqued primarily uses social media space that foregrounds posts which draw comments. This is a new model in which bickering in the comments of an

online post boosts that advertisement's visibility amongst the extended networks of those who engage it that way, thanks to algorithms that measure comment counts not comment content. Controversy increases comment counts for obvious reasons, but it also relies on the fact that, once drawn into online debates, individuals engaging then try to save face (Boyd, 2008; Chou & Edge, 2012; Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004; Chen, 2015). All this face-saving boosts the original posts further, distributing them more fully. Therefore, any savvy brand will create just the right kind of controversial, moral outrage-inducing advertisements that favour being shared on social media as conspicuous compassion, amongst communities of affect, regardless of how these advertisements might also cause derision from a critical minority within those communities.

When I posted my dissent about that video, I was manipulated by this fairly new marketing model. I was triggered by the campaign's misconstrued facts and the uncritical nature of how I saw people engaging it online. I perceived both as unethical, and I inadvertently took part in a marketing strategy by voicing my dissent publicly. The people who called me out for that dissent in the name of 'feminism' also took part in the same marketing strategy from the other side. I attempted to defend myself against their callout of not being 'feminist' enough, and my detractors attempted to save face and continue to perform conspicuous compassion to their community of affect. We did exactly what the company wanted—we boosted their exposure in our networks. That helped Synergy Media, the corporation owning the T-Shirt company we were all bickering over, but not us and our fragile but valuable social capital.

Consider this self-description on Synergy Media's website:

> 'Synergy Media Ltd. is a boutique design, merchandising and marketing agency dedicated to innovative brand building. We generate results by engaging people's

> minds and igniting their emotions. We help a diverse range of businesses establish and strengthen their brands, developing brand identity, collateral materials, package design, merch development and production, web applications, marketing, and more.' (Synergy Media Ltd, 2018)

The Sacred and Social Justice Narratives

Corporate intervention is not the only reason that callout culture is increasingly being discussed in *Vox.com* articles and bars around the Lower East Side. Shaming practices are on the rise in general (Solove, 2012). Callouts were once used in pre-modern times within smaller sedentary communities in various ways, but this practice declined in modernity as populations became more urban and mobile. Now, largely thanks to social media, such practices have seen a resurgence. Modern incarnations of callouts (unlike their traditional counterparts, which were often controlled by authority figures and delivered in public squares) democratise the process of identifying shame-able offences and punishing perpetrators (Solove, 2012).

Jon Ronson's (2015) book explores dozens of case studies that depict modern callout-style shamings online. Ronson is a long-form journalist with a decidedly left-of-centre politics on display in his work. One of the online mobbing victims he interviews, Justine Sacco, made a poorly-worded joke in 2013 that she tweeted to her 170 Twitter followers: *Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm White!* Some weeks later, Sacco told Ronson that the joke was meant to make fun of white privilege, and given her context and other tweets that day it is likely true. There is, as Ronson points out, a comedy tradition of jokes where mocking the gleeful flaunting of privilege is meant to make fun of that privilege to its detriment.

After tweeting it, Sacco turned off her phone and got onto a plane from New York to Cape Town, where some of her family lived. Meanwhile, her joke got shared with a *Gawker* journalist who retweeted it to his followers. Sacco was in the air and became the number-one worldwide Twitter trending topic along with her identity and the name of her employer. Outrage in this case came from casual tweeters as well as public figures. For example, one author tweeted, 'If @Justinesacco's unfortunate words about AIDS bother you, join me in supporting Care's Work in Africa' (Ronson, 2015a). People had already written blogs about Sacco before her plane hit African soil. A worldwide Twitter mob emerged as a contingent and temporary community of affect signalling conspicuous compassion through the act of shaming Sacco.

Figure 1: Tweet from an airline during Sacco's shaming. From "When online shaming goes too far," by J. Ronson, 2015 (https://www.ted.com/talks/jon_ronson_what_happens_when_online_shaming_spirals_out_of_control?language=en).

Figure 1 shows the economic piggybacking I mentioned earlier, and it is worth noting that Google also made between $120,000 and $468,000 from users searching Sacco's name that month, which was a name usually only looked up around 40 times a month, but was googled 1,220,000 times that month (Ronson, 2015b). Some prominent tweeters tried to put a brake on the shaming by suggesting that Sacco's joke didn't seem to be aimed with racist intent, but these tweeters were shamed for intervening (ibid). Soon a few voices in the crowd began calling for Sacco's firing, and her employer responded (no doubt worried for its brand) by tweeting that it found Sacco's twitter comment 'outrageous' and 'offensive', and it was planning to contact her when she landed (ibid).

After that moment, people began tweeting about the imminence of Sacco's terminated employment: *All I want for Christmas is to see @JustineSacco's face when her plane lands and she checks her inbox/voicemail. #fired; Oh man, @justinesacco is going to have the most painful phone-turning-on moment ever when her plane lands; We are about to watch this @JustineSacco bitch get fired. In REAL time. Before she even KNOWS she's getting fired* (Ronson, 2015b).

Sacco's predicament formed a well-known narrative tension: we knew something she didn't, and we couldn't wait to see what would happen as she found out. Someone then discovered which flight she was on and linked in a flight tracker under the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet, which began to trend. People were waiting to snap pictures of her at the Cape Town airport after she'd cleared customs:

Figure 2: Justine Sacco (in dark glasses) at Cape Town Airport. From *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (p. 72), by J. Ronson, 2015, New York, NY: Riverhead Books. Copyright 2015 Riverhead Books.

Sacco was fired, received death and rape threats, her holiday was cut short, hotels she had booked refused to let her stay, her employment prospects were altered and her mental health compromised (Ronson, 2015a). Sacco's story is familiar in 2018, but she was an early example of the online mob shamings that became more popular in the late 2010s around emotive issues in the name of social justice. Her case is instructive in a couple of ways; importantly it demonstrates my earlier point about a culture that is more invested in representation than in significant material social action, a dynamic of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994). In short, the shaming of Sacco offered an opportunity to perform compassion without practicing it, and to take this performance as the reality of compassion nonetheless.

The incident also demonstrates a pleasurable social emotion Durkheim called *effervescence*, which he linked to scapegoating rituals in religion (Durkheim, 1912/1976).

Durkheim points out how scapegoat rituals create collective ecstatic experiences that reassert a community's identity (Lukes, 1985). This begs the question of what is causing a hunger for effervescence via online scapegoat rituals in the name of social justice in the late 2010s. One explanation I offer is that displaced economic and social frustration congeals into *moral tribalism* afforded and perpetuated by media convergence.

Media convergence is the process of previously-separate domains converging in the digital space. It is an ongoing process in which the relationships between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences is altering (Jenkins, 2004, p. 33). A key shift that defines it is consumption being increasingly consumer-curated and reproduced: consumers filter content in personalised ways and share it amongst their networks. Algorithms aid and reinforce this by offering 'more like that', and, as a result, we are increasingly perusing journalism only on specific topics that interest us, from voices that confirm our subjectivities, via multiple publications of varying quality within the digital realm. This curated experience increases confirmation bias and feeds moral outrage.

Media convergence isn't only about more biased information consumption, it is also the convenient linking of previously more-separated domains that can feed social emotions with the biased information. Now, as well as more-biased consumption, people are connected to online 'public squares' such as Twitter, where the identities of everyone, including public figures, are theoretically accessible. This gives rise to a new sense of political agency and empowerment. We feel like we have a voice that can be heard in the new digital space, and we form peer-to-peer networks with strangers who share our views. These networks are defined through voluntary, temporary, tactical affiliations 'refined through common

intellectual enterprises and emotional investments and are held together through mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge' (Jenkins, 2004, p. 35). In other words, we share articles, self-made media, remediated texts and opinions within these online communities. This is a key moment of convergence: our curated consumption of media, and the peer-to-peer sharing networks we are part of feed each other. We share information from our curated newsfeeds with our peer-to-peer networks. Homophily occurs, and digital journalism then encourages it further by reporting occurrences aimed for sharing amongst these networks. With the aid of such journalists (and other opportunists, with their varying levels of repute) we see the worst behaviour of those whom we exclude from our community, and our homophily now feeds on ever more outrage-inducing material like this. This increases the self-righteousness of our networks, which are beginning to act more like *moral tribes*. Our membership to these tribes is soothing, and marketable to industry. Our tribal identity is also sold between corporates with varying interests, and we now receive product placements and political messaging to match our ilks of tribalism.

At the same time, we are experiencing increased pressures in other domains of life as individuals with families; pressures we cannot fix: casualised employment; and growing fiscal inequality. We are also more disconnected and lonely. This alienation is due to many factors, but partially thanks to media convergence itself—the domains of dating, friendship and sexual encounters have shifted into the digital space too, which is a space adapted to our mobility as workers, and our lack of geographical community. It is easier to find a new lover, or a new set of friends who suit our needs in any given moment. This change reflects the 'voluntary, tactical, and temporary affiliations' (Jenkins, 2004, p. 35) we are all part of in the digital realm too. We move nomadically between partners and groups, partly because we must and partly because curating friends and partners to match our hungers for novelty and

shifting circumstances is easy. This is convenient but it also lends a superficial dimension to our community ties.

Along with these more-available possibilities, we also compare ourselves to others more than we did in previous eras. We have constant access to a stream of other lives via Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook (and whatever comes next). We aren't as pretty, happy, successful or talented as those we might see when browsing their lives online. A study of how this affects the young is telling. Figure 3 shows annual change in teen smartphone adoption alongside time spent online and rates of depression and change in unemployment in the US.

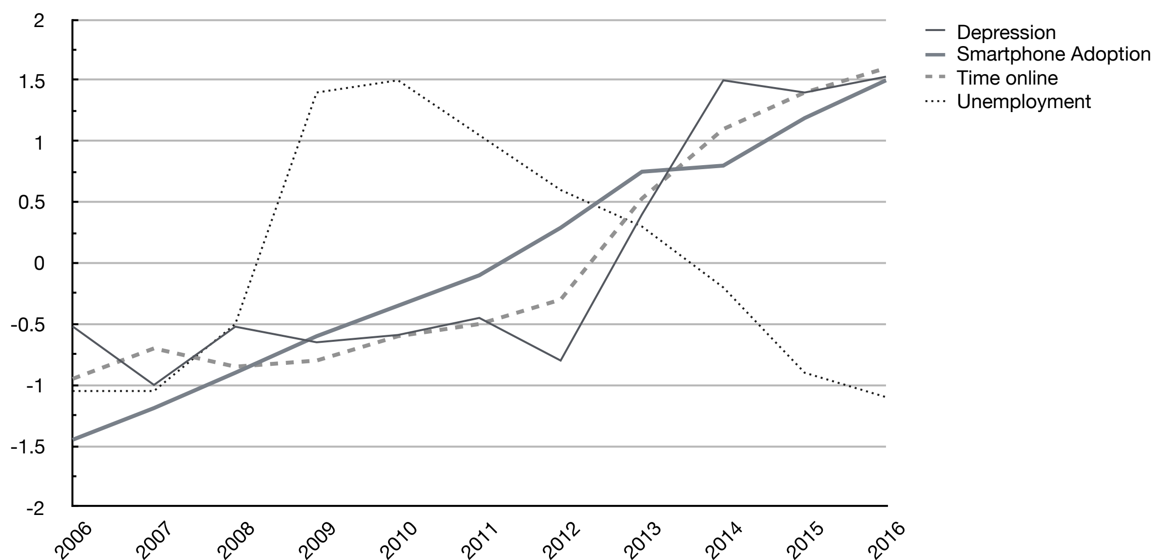


Figure 3: What fits—and what doesn't. Adapted from "iGen: the Smartphone Generation," by J. Twenge, 2018 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA8kZZS_bzc). Copyright 2018 by J. Twenge.

The issues teens are facing are an instructive example, but, as I said, an increased sense of alienation, inadequacy and loneliness is not limited to teens; we are all more aware of our relative fortunes in relation to the representations of others, and an increasing number of people are psychologically vulnerable (Twenge, 2017). Along with our increased sense of alienation, frustration about this situation gets displaced. It becomes outrage and anger that

fuels our networked communities online. These communities have the potential for tribalism already, but, with displaced emotions fuelling them, that increases. It becomes an 'us versus them' sensibility, which allows our online networks to offer us an intense sense of belonging and dignity despite our sense of alienation offline. That intense sense of belonging and dignity needs outrage to maintain itself. If our online community wasn't explicitly political before, then, driven by that need, it easily becomes so now. It congeals our collective angst into the assumption that no one apart from ourselves understands our predicament and oppression.[38]

In this modality, as 'voluntary, tactical and temporary' members of online *moral tribes*, we begin to show a Durkheimian tendency: the will to assert collective identity by drawing up effervescence. *Moral tribes* begin to persecute scapegoats because, as Eliade suggests, the central nodes of an identity are always an emotional experience, with any rational ideology relying upon these emotional experiences as its main justification. We enjoy the effervescent experience of shaming others. It is a feeling that further mediates our more distressing emotions; it intensifies the righteousness of our *moral tribe*. Our tribe's stated ideology is secondary to these transcendent collective emotional experiences.[39] The affective dimension of tribal life is what makes us feel better, not its stated ideology, though the two are co-dependent. We operate like the settlers in Hebron now—we seek to draw up the sacred via conflict. We burn crosses on the lawns of our enemies by calling them out. We attack anyone who missteps according to the morality of our tribe's stated ideology; though really it is hunger for the effervescence of shaming that we feed with. We also become like the sects in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: we see similar tribes to our own, who in different contexts

[38] Žižek (2018) critiques this on the political left, '[Left] Identity politics reaches its peak (or, rather, its lowest point) when it refers to the unique experience of a particular group identity as the ultimate fact that cannot be dissolved in any universality […] while this is true in a certain trivial sense, one should thoroughly deny any political relevance to it (p. 129).
[39] Haidt (2012) argues that much moral reasoning is actually post hoc. He describes a rider on an elephant. The rider represents rational thought, and the elephant he is riding represents the emotional impetus that underlies it.

might be appealing, but who are now uncannily monstrous because their morality is not as pure as ours. This tendency works against the vision of various minorities, lower-classes and women uniting over their shared experience of oppression.

Moral tribalism is how we re-enchant the disenchanted world in which we feel disempowered and profane. As Eliade says, even desacralised man cannot help but express his religious urges somehow, and it is through amplified moral outrage on social media that we can find some of those religious urges being satiated in the late 2010s.

The above is a dark tale. It might seem pessimistic, but none of this argument is to suggest that emancipatory movements are not making reasonable and fair demands too. Nor do I mean to ignore the fact that conservative and right-wing groups experience the exact same process. Both are true. My point in this essay is that communities supporting social justice, especially online, are included when talking about this slide into destructive and divisive tribalism. It is the slide of otherwise justifiable emancipatory discourse, and it is often downplayed.

When considering that slide, separating justifiable social justice impetus from unconsciously tribal behaviour is tricky. An important thing to recognise is that those who speak on behalf of marginalised communities aren't necessarily of the oppressed group that they speak for. Even if they belong to an oppressed group, they do not always represent a majority view from within that group. Allies and spokespeople are leaders, but online spaces give the angriest voices platform in a way not known before, and specific angsts can easily be displaced into the rhetoric of a moral cause that quickly gains popularity as a representation of that cause in such an interconnected realm.

In 2015, journalist Jonathan Chait wrote an incendiary article about moral tribalism on the American Left; it described how intersectional identity politics were articulating in the

Facebook group *Binders full of Women Writers*. The group was a collective of those who felt oppressed by patriarchal norms in media industries, but it was full of bickering as smaller groups within the larger collective claimed others were erasing their specific concerns, and speaking from relatively more privileged positions than themselves. Chait blamed identity politics, intersectionality, and political correctness (PC) in general for this example of progressive solidarity breaking down into divisiveness. In general, he was angry about free speech being chilled in various domains too, including university campuses for the same reasons. The article drew angry responses from spokespeople in emancipatory groups. These ranged from those accusing him of being a white guy scared of minorities and women, to critiques about his sense of the scale of the issue.

The real problem with Chait's article was not that it depicted PC culture as a bigger problem than it is though; the problem was that he didn't analyse it deeply enough. Arguments about prevalence aside, it would have been more useful to offer a theory of how intersectional identity politics becomes pathological, rather than arguing it inherently is so. Chait was derided because people aren't going to just abandon emancipatory projects understood via an intersectional framework. Both intersectional framework and its emancipatory impetus are justified. So what is needed is an analysis of the pathos that slides them into *moral tribalism* when that occurs.

Here is the theory I am offering: as we experience increased loneliness, inadequacy, alienation, anxiety and fiscal pressure in the late 2010s, our associated emotions get partially displaced into online *moral tribes* as a way of moderating those emotions' negative impacts on our individual lives. The appeal of effervescence in this *moral tribalism* is further afforded by media convergence and corporate piggybacking.

It is also worth noting as an addendum to this part of the discussion that when

scapegoating in general increases, whatever its cause, there is also more anxiety amongst individuals exposed to it. People witnessing accusations being made against others online are made more nervous, and are more likely to be socially-aggressive themselves as a pre-emptive defence. That is the dynamic depicted in Arthur Miller's (1953/2003) play *The Crucible,* in which accusations of witchcraft flowed more freely as the fear of being accused of witchcraft increased.

This is what Žižek (2018), citing John Summers, argues can come at the expense of actual emancipation.

> The struggle for identity is a perfect substitute for the class struggle, since it keeps people in permanent mutual conflict, while the elite withdraws and observes the game from a safe distance (Žižek, 2018, p. 128).

I only partially agree with Žižek (and Summers) here. As Ruti (2012) points out, this position can fall prey to embodying a privileged universalism that leaves no room for acknowledging the specific vulnerabilities and demands of particular groups with different histories. Ruti recognises that weakness, and she argues against it by highlighting Butler's approach, which focuses on the recognition of particular vulnerabilities faced by various identities due to their specific positionality in regard to the discourses of power. Žižek's argument is that such a focus can fall into the self-destructive and unhelpful tribalism I have described above. But Ruti is also correct: failing to recognise the unequal positions of various groups, in favour of focussing on the principle of overthrowing power collectively, is also divisive because it ignores meaningfully different needs, injuries, resentments and demands.

What is required, Ruti (2015) argues, is the ability to hold two opposing arguments in mind at the same time continuously. On the one hand Butler's focus on specific vulnerabilities offers sensitive appraisal of the emancipatory landscape and its varied

precarities; on the other hand, Žižek's focus on wide collective struggle moderates the former's tendency to slide into the competitive victimhood that *moral tribalism* in the name of social justice allows.

Of course, once two opposing ideas are held in mind continuously, the way they are deployed in various discussions and politics is an uncertain business. An irreducible aspect of contingent and ongoing human judgment comes into play, because neither argument can offer a categorical rule for how to proceed.

I believe that this is an irreducible problem. There is a Hegelian dialectic at play here. In the context of recognising hegemony, Butler offers a thesis that specific identities are uniquely vulnerable, whereas Žižek offers the antithesis to Butler insomuch as he argues that focussing on specific identities is a distraction from more general emancipation. Ruti and I argue for a synthesis that sees both points as irreducibly accurate, and that both should be acknowledged in a consequent dialogue with each other that is ongoing. I argue that we must shift from the paradigm of certainty, where it is assumed that a categorically 'correct' approach (Butler's *or* Žižek's) is ever possible. Hegelian synthesis in this case is recognising that the two positions cannot be reduced to certainty, and must remain in continuous engagement with each other. This recognises the tendency that both approaches have for pathological overextension when considered in isolation.

Backlash and Callout Culture

In line with Chait's complaint about moral tribalism on the American Left, Fukuyama (2018), Lilla (2018), Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) have pushed back against what they perceive as

fractious moral tribalism emerging from increasingly intersectional identity politics in progressive camps. Of these scholars, the last three self-identify as Democrats. Similarly, Ruti (2012) and Žižek (2018) offer their own nuanced versions of such pushback; while McWhorter and Loury resist callout culture from a race studies perspective. McWhorter, echoing Žižek (2018, p. 133), accused the temperament of current American social justice activism aimed at helping Black people as being 'less about helping black people than it is about white people seeking grace' (McWhorter, 2018). Loury made a similar criticism calling contemporary social justice activism's callout tendencies 'indiscriminate' and 'disproportionate' (Loury, 2019, 24:50).[40]

There is also a slew of commentary in journalism deriding callout culture and its connection to the identity-conscious political Left. Much of this pushback riffs off specific incidents, utilising examples like Ian Buruma, James Damore, Aziz Ansari, and Margaret Atwood—all of whom were called out for various reasons over their 'failure' in regard to social justice narratives.[41] The recent firing of film critic David Edelstein for a 'sexist' remark is one of any number of examples, and it drew commentary in *The Guardian* from feminist academic Kipnis (2018) who wrote that American social justice culture had turned into 'One flub and you're out' in which an 'unthinking social media post will outweigh a 16-year track record.' Kipnis is a self-identified progressive academic whose past work actually focussed upon the need for identity considerations in emancipatory politics. Articles from thinkers like her, whose politics appear to align with the goals of an emancipatory democracy that

[40] McWhorter hails from Columbia; Loury is at Brown. Both are Black professors who write about race; these specific citations refer to material published outside of peer-reviewed journals. Hyperlinks to it are included in the reference list.
[41] Atwood (2018) suggested callout culture was a 'witch hunt' and was roundly criticised for it (Kassam, 2018). Echoing McWhorter (2018), Atwood described online callout culture as being religious in character. Damore's callout was widely documented in the press, for example, Blackford (2018); notably Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer protested Damore's callout (2017). Aziz Ansari's callout was also reported widely, see, for example, Weiss (2018). Buruma, after having been fired following callouts for one of his publishing choices in the *New York Review of Books*, drew support from authors Ian McEwan and Joyce Carol Oats expressing concern about callout cultures' censorious tendencies (Pilkington, 2018).

acknowledges identity, should concern anyone interested in the survival of an emancipatory politics that acknowledges identity.[42]

Perhaps one of the biggest potential pushbacks comes from a silenced lower class. Lower classes are victims under contemporary capitalism, but, as Jacoby (2015, p. 512) notes, victim identities do not have a clear linear causal relationship from actual victimisation to public awareness, rather they are mediated through a series of steps powerfully influenced by the political contexts in which they occur. As such, lower classes can easily feel ignored when race and gender-focussed emancipatory discourses dominate media and political discussions. This is furthered by general animus towards such lower classes. Žižek (2018, p. 127) observes how representatives of emancipatory politics often dress up a fear of 'lower class vulgarity' as emancipatory discourse. Kipnis makes a similar point about anti-pornography feminists in the 1980s. She identifies how the lower classes rebelled against what they perceived as upper-middle class moral puritanism around pornography that branded itself as emancipatory discourse but was transparently classist. Kipnis argues that lower-classes then viewed their own supposed 'vulgarity' as a mark of their rebellion against higher classes talking down to them (Kipnis 1996). Essayist Shannon Burns (2017) noted something similar in *Meanjin* in an essay titled 'In Defence of the Bad White Working Class' where he describes the recent resurgence of 'political correctness' as excluding those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who cannot 'talk-the-talk', and who, incidentally, do not like admitting that they are victims. This desire lower classes have not to see themselves as victims means that their resentment often has little focus, and, unfocussed like that, it can easily lash out like a blunt and antisocial instrument.

This potential animus is made worse by the unconscious nature of authoritarianism

[42] Rebecca Traister, Hannah Rosin and Michelle Goldberg are three famous progressive voices, who, though not academics like Kipnis, have spoken out about the problem (Chait, 2015).

practiced by those with high cultural capital in the emancipatory discourses currently taking centre stage. Such people may position themselves as allies or spokespeople for oppressed identities but often do so from a position of relative individual privilege. Ljunggren (2017) looks at such cultural elites in general. He notes how moral and ethical tastes dictate membership to modern cultural elites more than the consumptive practices of the previous era's cultural elites. He then notes these elites' tendency to actively downplay their own privileged position as agenda-setters in the public domain. He looks at four groups in particular: actors, cultural directors, editors and humanities professors. He also notes that while downplaying their privilege such groups also show a tendency to denigrate voices they consider illegitimate. He speculates that some of this behaviour may result from an inferiority complex that such elites have towards an economic upper-class who dominate them in contemporary capitalist society; intensified by casualization of the academic profession (Fichtenbaum, 2014). When combined with a tendency that all classes have to depict themselves as middling (Savage et al 2001, 2010), and with the desirability of performing allegiance to egalitarian values that modern Western democratic societies demand, the resulting situation is one where people who have great cultural influence deny their privilege, while simultaneously speaking of egalitarian values, and championing marginalised groups who they like, but policing out the voices of groups who they do not find appealing, such as the 'vulgar' lower classes. In other words cultural elites can become moral trendsetters who selectively consider marginalisation only as it suits their own performances of identity within the competitive industries they engage.

Callout culture is important to recognise in that situation because it acts as a policing strategy used by such groups (and their imitators) to intimidate swathes of the lower classes into remaining silent. Meanwhile, both callout culture and the simultaneous posed self-

flagellation done in the name of anti-racism/anti-sexism may ultimately only perpetuate the centrality a cultural elite's privilege and the entrenchment of its oversights.[43] That scenario is likely to cause widespread backlash against the emancipatory movements that get appropriated and mediated by such elites, with the backlash coming from lower classes who feel ignored and denigrated by people better off than themselves. It is likely that this backlash will focus on the emancipatory race and gender discourses, rather than their spokespeople, because a distinction between the two is not being made obvious.

It is easy to then argue white lower class backlash results from the privileged universality of white heteronormative identities (whether lower class or not) feeling threatened by the symbolic de-centring of their group. While this argument is true to an extent, evoking it means that lower classes can easily be dismissed categorically as sexist or racist, by elites who only see the backlash in terms of gender and race identities, rather than seeing a more-complex causative structure that includes class divisions, and their own elitist actions in regard to those divisions.

My Personal Interest in Callout Culture

I was interested in callout culture because I felt threatened by its pathos. I was at odds with some of its overly simplifying narratives around gender in particular. I wanted to write about gender issues, but worried I might be called out. I was writing about a woman's complexly-motivated yet somewhat spurious accusation, which was at odds with group social action

[43] 'White Liberals so gladly indulge in self-flagellation: the true aim of their activity is not really to help others but the *Lustgewinn* brought about by their self-accusations, the feeling of their own moral superiority over others. The problem of this self-denial of white identity is not that it goes too far but that it does not go far enough: while its enunciated content seems radical, its position of enunciation remains that of privileged universality' (Žižek, 2018, p. 134).

based upon calling out men for harassment in the late 2010s. The media discourse on that social action was framing it as universally morally appealing, and expanding definitions of what constituted harassment as well as expanding notions of female fragility made me feel like I shouldn't be telling my story lest it be decried as sexist. That feeling of being silenced fed into a more personal domain: telling my story to a public was one thing, but I was also trying to make sense of my own complex feelings about what had happened between my ex and me as I attempted to reconstruct my masculinity in light of it. According to media discourse on the issue, my desire to see those events with anything other than self-blame was at best ignorant of women's needs; and at worst a manifestation of male privilege exposing its fear of being displaced.

The media's oversimplification of harassment narratives, while not ultimately nuanced is at least understandable. Victims of harassment and abuse need to speak out about their experiences, which, as well as being attempts to change norms within a culture, have been shown by Boyd (2009) to aid victimised people's individual recoveries. There are certainly many victims of bonafide harassment, and as certain types of victimhood gain recognition in the public domain, any story that challenges their basic narrative is perceived as potentially damaging public perceptions of this nascent recognition. Yet, gender dynamics between men and women remain complex and varied, so a media discourse that acts as if only one simple narrative can exist in situations where a he-said-she-said occurs is patronising and alienating for people of any gender. That alienation grows into a backlash. It is easy to characterise this backlash as a backlash against women's emancipation, but that is a one-dimensional analysis of the situation. The backlash is at least partially against the oversimplification of a dynamic many people have experienced and know, and is often complicated.

I was not someone who had ever wielded great cultural capital, or much that is associated

with male privilege. As I worried that I might be accused of protecting my privilege by speaking out, I also felt such an accusation would be unfair: fiscally, I was at zero, with some debts; I didn't own a house or a car; my job was traditionally a 'pink' job; I had very little family support; and I had suffered severe racism and bullying in my youth, for being too 'girly' as well as Asian, which had left me with certain kinds of emotional scars as an adult. I felt the term 'male privilege' was unfair in my case. Also, in regard to the specific he-said-she-said that I was struggling to narrativise, I was not as well-educated or as well-off as the woman who had accused me. In fact, she had also accused me of not having enough status or money for her more socially-mobile outlook. In light of all these factors, seeing myself as privileged wasn't easy, and yet I felt that political winds would be quite quick to identify 'privilege' as the reason for my apparent dissent if I said anything about my own experiences publicly that wasn't purely self-effacing.

What's more, I felt that my story had some real cultural value. The relations between men and women in a world of changing gender norms, especially across differing social classes, is complicated and worth talking about. My desire to understand and write about that topic would speak to those complexities, and that could be of use to other men and women negotiating similar fraught territory, or simply interested in a nuanced representation of it.

Production of the signifier 'Feminism' in the Media

It is impossible to talk about gender issues and media discourse in the 2010s without discussing the evolution of feminist discourse in the public domain that occurred in North American around 2011 (Rottenberg, 2013). This revival was in full flight when I was in the

US while writing this PhD. Google trends data shows that searches for the term 'feminism' tripled in 2014 alone in the US. This media revival of the term in the public imaginary was different from academic feminism, so I will use the term in quotes when referring to the former.

Rottenberg (2013) attributes this twenty first century 'feminist' revival to neoliberal brands of feminism that became popular in the early 2010s, such as the kind propagated by billionaire Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) book *Lean In*. As Rottenberg notes, this 'feminist' revival ignored important divisions within academic feminism, especially those between neoliberal and socialist styles. In short, it was the revival of a term in the public imaginary, rather than a revival of the ongoing philosophical discussions at universities, which had never ceased.

I noticed the renewed media interest when I began to see sensationalist articles popping up in newspapers where journalists asked female celebrities if they were 'feminists' in late 2013. If a celebrity said 'no', then other journalists wrote response pieces that criticised their moral character or intelligence, citing, at best, a dictionary definition of 'feminism' in the process to educate that celebrity and the public about its meaning.[44] At that point, the term itself was acting as an empty signifier, indicating the desire for gender equality as a core value but little else of what that might entail. As I argued earlier, empty signifiers (Laclau, 2015) actually signify an ineffable emotional dimension. This one was referring to feelings about justice for women. These feelings were mediated through actors and singers, but they lacked clear ideological definition beyond a simplistic and vague dictionary definition.[45]

Following the rising popularity of this empty signifier, a more specific discourse emerged

[44] *Washington Post* journalist Jessica Contrera noted the same trend in 2014 (Contrera 2014).

[45] 'Only an empty signifier allows the attachment of diverse elements, including conflicting and apparently irreconcilable ones. The more complex a culture or society, the more pressing the need for empty signifiers' (Geisen & Seyfert, 2016, p. 115).

in its name to provide some of that more nuanced definition. This was the issue of US campus sexual assault.[46] I was living in Ithaca, New York, at this time, and I was trying to interpret the meaning of what I was reading in the national press: a statistic was being repeated that roughly 25% of all college women would be sexually assaulted before finishing their degrees. Headlines were outraged, and people were speaking about it in cafes and bars.

Representation of a Crisis

The statistic above was central to the discourse. The Obama administration had already responded in 2011, via the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), during his re-election campaign, by introducing new stipulations about how universities should deal with campus sexual assault accusations. The OCR had issued several unprecedented edicts in a letter that threatened to defund universities if they didn't alter their procedures. Those alterations took place under an existing law called Title IX, and the amendments included the stipulation that universities use a standard of evidence called 'preponderance' which amounted to 50% certainty required before finding someone guilty of an offence. The letter also urged that accused parties should not be protected by double jeopardy, nor allowed cross-examination rights to their accuser, nor legal representation. In practice accused students wouldn't be allowed to see many types of evidence against them, nor would they be allowed to know who their accuser was in some instances.

Combined with these significant erasures of due process, the OCR had encouraged

[46] Media showed some awareness of this within itself, for example, in this *New York Times* article: 'Although the outcry over sexual assault on college campuses has intensified recently, the issue has a long history' (Zimmerman, 2017).

universities to use a single-investigator model for the purpose of expedience. This model put a lone individual in the position of investigator, judge and jury in such cases. All of these changes, it turns out, would lead to some remarkable articulations of 'justice' in subsequent years.[47] Hundreds of cases continue to move through the US court system in 2018, in which young men feel they have been unfairly expelled from their universities (Kipnis, 2018). Settlements paid to these young men have likely tallied in the hundreds of millions since the OCR's erosions of due process; these settlements are confidential, but, for context, before the OCR's 2011 letter, between 2006 and 2010, a single educational insurer paid $36 million to male students expelled but then deemed falsely accused (ibid).[48]

While Title IX cannot punish perpetrators with jail or fines, it is important to note that it can see a student or staff member expelled or fired, with a mark against their name as a sexual perpetrator, or gender discriminator, which can effectively exclude them from new jobs or enrolments in other institutions, or jobs requiring background checks in general. These effects could be life-altering for students in particular, especially in the US context where student loan companies are unforgiving and a mishap at your institution can leave you in double-debt to ruthless private loan companies because you've had to start over at a new school. Or, if you cannot gain another enrolment, then perhaps simply in single-debt without any qualification at all, and no means to get a well-paying job to pay back that loan which, unlike Australian student debt, begins immediately, gains interest, cannot be dissolved through bankruptcy, and does not wait until you are earning over a certain amount before it kicks in.

---

[47] For a detailed legal analysis of the OCR letter, its legal standing and consequences, see Rubenfeld's (2017) analysis in the *Texas Law Review.* In one case, an investigator found an accused student guilty of violent assault for waking up his boyfriend with a kiss (*John Doe v Brandeis University*, 2016).

[48] Settlement is a common outcome in these matters, ie *John Doe v Brown University* (2018); *John Doe v Amherst College* (2017)*;* Taylor, (2017). For a comprehensive set of court documents regarding complaints filed against universities citing lack of due process in these matters since the OCR letter, see Johnson (n.d.).

The 25% figure justifying all this was widely reported in the press leading up to the 2011 letter and its aftermath (Johnson & Taylor, 2018). The figure served as a justifying fact and itself was based on a study by Krebs et al in 2007 called the Campus Sexual Assault Study (CSA). The study had some issues. It used a non-representative sample, and suffered from a severe self-selection bias.[49] Researchers then included 'too intoxicated to give consent' in their definition of assault, alongside unwanted clothed-touching (Krebs et al, 2007). Having personally been ground-up against numerous times on dance-floors in American college towns by drunken women—many of whom I wished hadn't tried—I realised what this definition would do to the resulting data in any study.

Sexual behaviour is so varied that distinguishing its types and acknowledging the complexity of consent amongst those types in varying contexts is essential. When considering these, despite how provocative a media headline containing the words 'sexual assault' might be, definitions need to be at the forefront of the resulting public discussion. It turns out that around half the respondents Krebs and his cohort classified as assault victims in the CSA disagreed with the definition researchers gave for what had happened to them (Grigoriadis, 2018, chapter 8, para 8).[50] This problem was also present in a study by Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that came out in 2011 along with the OCR letter. The CDC study led to another uncritical media articulation of numbers under sensationalist headlines. The CDC study looked at the general US population (Breiding et al., 2011). It used a telephone survey, with a low response rate, and therefore another severe self-selection bias. Participants were questioned about being 'high or drunk' and also about being 'passed-out or unconscious', but the researchers counted sex in any of those conditions as rape if the

[49] Self-selection bias occurs when certain types of respondents are more motivated to take part in a study in which participation is voluntary. This can lead to a non-representative sample, skewing the descriptive data. In this case, victims of sexual assault might have been more likely to take part in the study.
[50] Over half the victims in Krebs et als' study believed the incidents were not serious enough to report; 35% believed no harm had been intended by the perpetrators (Krebs et al, 2007, xvii).

respondent believed their state of mind had made them incapable of giving consent. 'Drunk' and 'high' sex accounted for 61.5% of the CDC's 1 in 5 figure. It isn't hard to imagine someone being so drunk that they are incapable of consent, but leaving that definition to the subjective opinion of a self-selecting survey respondent is unnecessarily vague.

Male rape victims were defined differently: men were only considered rape victims if anally penetrated by another man using force, or if they were made to perform oral sex on another male. That definition left them with a 1.7% lifetime rate of rape; whereas being unable to consent to vaginal sex, or to oral sex with a woman was considered 'other sexual violence' whether the men were drunk or not. In other words, the survey defined women as rape victims in situations involving alcohol if they felt it had impaired their ability to consent; but not men. A surprising, but not widely reported implication of the study using these definitions was that when rape was defined similarly between men and women, then men and women showed equal rates of rape in both 2010 and 2011. This is also questionable. Clearly, the study had issues.

It also found a high rate of 'other sexual violence' towards women and men in their lifetimes (44%), but researchers had included being tricked into sex because someone 'lied to you or made you false promises' in its definition of sexual violence. It also included being pressured into sex because of guilt, threats to end a relationship, or because of repeated requests. Of this 44% figure, men counted for just over a third of victims, but, although media reported the survey widely, sexual violence was not widely reported as an issue affecting both genders.

Following the skewed media representation of these problematic reports, the Association of American Universities (AAU) did a study costing US taxpayers 2.34 million dollars, which found that, once again, 1 in 5 women would be sexually assaulted in American colleges

(Cantor et al., 2015). This study had some sampling issues also; its response rate was under 20%, so once again a serious self-selection bias was present. It was also a non-representative sample, with female respondents outnumbering male respondents three to two. Most significantly though, the definitions of sexual assault and rape were still vague. At the behest of universities, the study avoided using the terms 'rape' or 'sexual assault' in its survey, and, instead, asked about behaviour which conflated many categories of sexualised engagement (Johnson & Taylor, 2018).

Not asking respondents if they had been 'assaulted' or 'raped' has a purpose of course, because researchers don't want victims to downplay their experiences when such evocative words are used, but it also has an obscuring effect. In the AAU study, 75% of respondents who researchers classified as rape victims said they hadn't reported their incidents. That might be because under-reporting is a problem, due to shame, or the fear of not being believed, but it is also worth considering the meaning of the following: 58% of the 75% who didn't report their incidents said the reason that they didn't report them was because they didn't believe them serious enough incidents to report (ibid, p. 50).

If many women considered something under the label 'rape' not serious, that begs the question of how researchers and the general public might be defining rape differently, and what that means when media run with the term in headlines as if no such disjunct exists. Studies looking at how population 'x' defines rape would certainly be meaningful in this situation.

Johnson and Taylor (2018) along with Kipnis (2018) critique a number of studies like the above for imprecise and impractical definitions, which, Kipnis argues, also code puritanical attitudes towards women's agency in sexual matters. Both scholars trace the history of such studies back to a study by Koss (1987) who researched this issue amidst arguments by

Dworkin and MacKinnon in the 1980s that defined all sexual contact, even in Western democracies, as tainted by violence due to the social structure of patriarchy in general (Dworkin, 1987/2006; MacKinnon 1987).[51] Koss, vaguely, defined women's sexual agency as lacking when alcohol was involved. The paternalism towards women and their sexual agency coded into these studies is an issue, yet often overlooked when media see a more alarming story on the horizon. Studies using this methodology and finding this high rate of sexual assault are incendiary for the press, and they get reported uncritically, despite the fact that these figures are wildly at odds with studies that are generally considered reliable from other sources that don't include such wide definitions. For example, a study done by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 2014 found that 0.61% of female college students were sexually assaulted in their college years, of whom 0.2% were raped (Langton & Sinozich, 2014). This study's methodology doesn't differ wildly from the CSA or AAU studies—it doesn't only look at reported incidents, and it asks about behaviour rather than victims' perceptions of the correct label for their experiences—however this ongoing study surveys a much larger and more representative sample of the US population, and the researchers define sexual assault and rape more narrowly. The gap between the two figures is huge, and the BJS researchers offer a few reasons for that, stating the problem of definitions and differing methodologies in their report. Studying this issue quantitatively is difficult though, and I don't imagine that the 0.61% figure is necessarily accurate, but the 25% figure that media reported is twice the number reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where sexual assault is a weapon in the ongoing civil war (Stewart, 2018).

Something else notable about the media focus on these studies in the 2010s is the skew towards the campus issue specifically, and Ivy Leagues in particular. Rennison, a former

[51] 72% of the women Koss (1987) classified as victims stated that they didn't consider themselves victims.

statistician at the Bureau of Justice Statistics, pointed out in the *New York Times* that women without bachelor's degrees in the same age bracket were 400% more likely to be assaulted than those enrolled, though looking at most media reports on sexual assault that year one would never know this (Rennison 2014). At face value, a crisis with ideal victims was being amplified to the detriment of other groups, by the media capitalising upon the sensationalism made possible by an uncritical approach to problematic studies.[52]

Stanley Cohen (1972/2011) points out that moral panics are useful for media. They drum up business. He also notes how they give politicians and institutions the justification they require from the public for their authority. We see this before election campaigns often, when a 'crisis' is played up by politicians who sell their moral fibre upon how they alone can deal with these situations.

Cohen (1972/2011) produced the seminal sociological work on moral panics, and he sets out the roles of 'moral entrepreneurs' and 'folk devils' in his equation of them. The entrepreneurs profit from exaggerated fears of the devils, who may present a real threat, but not so large as the threat is being portrayed.

Obama weighed in on the issue several times. Once during his bid for re-election in 2011, also with a program called It's On Us in 2014, and just prior to Clinton's run at the primaries against Sanders in late 2015 when Obama announced the 25% figure during the Grammy Awards (Johnson & Taylor, 2017; Eilperin, 2015). Many other politicians have weighed in too, notably senator Gillibrand, who plans to run for President in 2020 (Goldmacher, 2019). Gillibrand has an intriguingly contradictory political past regarding her current political identity; as a young lawyer she defended big tobacco (Hernandez & Kocieniewski, 2009),

[52] Žižek (2018) makes a similar argument, asking why sexual assault discourse focusses on elite victims, while ignoring less ideal ones, such as the victims in the Rotherham and Telford scandals (p. 153). He argues that this kind of hypocrisy in progressive discourse is what drives people towards the alt-right.

and she was given an ‘A-rating’ by the National Rifle Association when a member of congress, where she also supported strict immigration reform (Viebeck, 2019). After entering the senate, however, her politics shifted on all these issues, and her focus on campus sexual assault emerged as an optic during that political rebranding effort. During the media focus on the campus sexual assault studies, Gillibrand used Emma Sulkowicz, who I will talk about shortly, as an optic for herself in the press, appearing in media alongside Sulkowicz after inviting her to the State of the Union Address (Atler, 2015; Freidman, 2015). Current US presidential runner Kamala Harris has framed part of her political identity around this issue also, as has Senator McCaskill (Yoffe, 2018; Harris, 2017). Congressman Jared Polis weighed in too in 2015, suggesting that if eight innocent boys were expelled under Title IX for every two who were guilty of rape, then that was a desirable result (Volokh, 2015). It is worth noting, as demographic context here, that college women and college-educated women swung more heavily towards the Democrats with Obama’s election in 2011 (Johnson & Taylor, 2018, p. 36).

From having no prior interest in campus sexual assault, I began reflecting deeply on why this media frenzy and potentially disingenuous representation of an issue mattered to me. I felt like this discourse in general was censorious, as well as misdirecting limited public compassion, but there was more to it: I was still wondering about what had motivated my ex to prosecute me. I imagined that a discourse that encouraged women to see themselves as especially fragile when conflict with men occurred may have played a part. My ex was only just out of college, and had been heavily involved in student activism. I was speculating, of course, but on a personal level I needed to try and understand her motivation to make sense of my own behaviour in relation to her.

As Butler (1990/1999) notes, performance of gender is dictated by discourses.

Masculinity and femininity were both being construed in relation to each other in these heightened media discourses around harassment. Since MeToo, commentary in the public domain has begun picking up how emancipatory discourses have been affecting constructions of flirting. Scholarly research is only just emerging in 2019.[53] An *Economist* article in 2018 reported a post-MeToo study finding that 25% of US college-age men believed that asking a woman out for a drink constituted sexual harassment (The Economist, 2018). Back when the campus assault discourse was strongly in the US media in 2014/15, it was confusing as an individual man to produce masculinity in regard to it. Definitions of what constituted harm were shifting. And if society was agreeing that women were more psychologically vulnerable than I had assumed, then that meant one thing to me as a guy constructing masculinity in regard to women; but if women in general were as robust as I had previously imagined regarding the sometimes-confusing interactions that can occur around sex and intimacy, then that meant another thing. Of course women and men face different realities of this dynamic, but I leaned towards perceiving more robustness in women than media reports based on studies classifying sexual assault so loosely seemed to imply. It was confusing. To follow the implicit reasoning of liberal media on women's psychology seemed sexist, paternal and, even, patriarchal. That said, how men understand their responsibilities to women around intimacy speaks to whether or not they are seen as loveable individuals, so I was highly motivated to be more sensitive if that was required. My sense of masculinity was in a crisis after the events with my ex. I wanted to get it right. And I was anxious about that.

[53] Examples are Žižek's critique, which appeared as a section titled 'Against Contractual Sex' in his late (2018) book; and Bartlett, Clarke, & Cover's (2019) *Flirting in the Era of #MeToo*.

An aspect of the discourse about men, women and sex that confounded me was the nature of truth. Truth and facts in the discourse were being constructed differently to how I had expected. In 2014, Columbia undergrad Emma Sulkowicz accused a fellow student of raping her. It was during the explosion of media interest in US campus assault that I've described above that the Sulkowicz incident became an international media sensation. Sulkowicz was a Columbia fine art senior alleging that Paul Nungesser (her friend and sometimes lover) had anally raped her during a sexual encounter between them in her dormitory. Sulkowicz said the encounter involved consensual vaginal and oral sex, but that the anal sex had been forced (Grigoriadis, 2018). She didn’t perceive the incident as a rape until a friend convinced her that it was.[54] She then used Title IX to prosecute. The university found Nungesser not guilty, and Sulkowicz began protesting by carrying her mattress around Columbia's campus; an act that doubled as the final fine art assessment for one of her units (Johnson & Taylor, 2016). Her protest garnered international coverage. It focussed on the personal narrative of Sulkowicz herself, operating at a juncture where the domains of activism, art and journalism met. The personal narrative genre of this journalism masked the fact that journalists didn’t query the story’s factual truth. For example, they didn’t attempt to contact the accused (Johnson, 2015, p. 114), nor did media reports cover the intriguing reality of an international condemnation of a college-age undergraduate who’d been cleared of the crime in question.

On reflection, journalism like this in 2014 is not surprising. Media outlets since the digital revolution have shown a continuous blurring between the categories of opinion and

[54] Sulkowicz annotated a copy of the Facebook messages that she shared with Nungesser after the alleged incident (Jezebel.com, n.d.). She did this for Jezebel.com, who uploaded it following the messages’ exposure by Young (2015) in *the Daily Beast.* In those annotations she described talking to a friend and learning that ‘rape’ was the correct term for her experience.

hard news that remains difficult for audiences to negotiate (Chao-Chen, 2013). American audiences also prefer politically-narrativised news (Anderson, Ogola, & Williams, 2014, p. 146). Much news is also increasingly shared on social media. Article-specific social media sharing statistics then combine with comments sections on each article to incentivise a sort of journalism that plays ever more specifically to what is popular about a given story and angle (ibid). Combined with the increasing *moral tribalism* that I described earlier, journalists are tempted more than in previous eras to focus upon specific stories that play to certain kinds of zeitgeist emotions and sentiments, at the expense of other journalistic ethical principles.

The Sulkowicz story was well timed. It presented an ideal victim—young, attractive, Ivy League-educated and articulate—in a way that blended two competing visions of feminism within the media imaginary. This was at a time when media 'feminism' was looking for more substantive definition than an ill-defined sentiment associated with justice and equality for women. Sulkowicz, the attractive daughter of two psychiatrists, was both victim and a well-educated employable woman of agency with a bright future. Because of how she represented the production of an empowered female identity, her story was suited to sharing on social media as a performance of one's own ethical character. It was very popular.[55]

This coverage offers a window into the construction of truth in the digital era around emotive topics where competing interests seek to promote themselves as social justice-driven or associated, for varying reasons, amidst media convergence that spreads popular stories instantly far and wide in an ever-more interconnected world. Baudrillard's point about the

---

[55] *The New York Times* (Pérez-Peña & Taylor, 2014)*, Time* (Sulkowicz, 2014a; Sulkowicz 2014b), *New York Magazine* (Van Sykle, 2014)*, The Sydney Morning Herald* (Taylor, 2015), *The New York Post* (Fenton, Palmeri, & Greene, 2014), *Marie Claire Australia* ("Mattress Girl Accused Rapist Settles Case With University," 2017), *The Telegraph* (Sanghani, 2014), *The Washington Post* (Nadia Macdonald, 2014), *The Guardian* (Gambino, 2015), *The Australian* (Arndt, 2017), *New York Daily News, Rolling Stone* (Nathanson, 2014), *Business Insider Australia* (Jacobs, 2014), *Elle* (Duan, 2014) and *Slate* (Hess, 2014). She was also on the cover of *New York Magazine* (Grigoriadis, 2014).

construction of truth in a hyperreality is well taken here.[56] He states that a discourse can cease to 'measure' itself when it saturates the media enough. Such a discourse saturates to the point that it no longer needs to respond to facts or discourses that contradict it. Its status as 'true' is confirmed via its ubiquity in media channels, and a public used to perceiving such ubiquity as truth.

Despite evidence coming to light some months after the initial coverage of Sulkowicz's story—evidence that threw doubt on her version of events—the 23-year old's truth had already reached the status of a public truth. This is often still reflected in how she is spoken of in the press today.[57] The art world also embraced her uncritically.[58]

I was living in the US during this time, and trying to reconstruct my masculinity after being shaken by an accusation of harassment towards a woman. I was beginning to feel disillusionment as did that. The Sulkowicz coverage, and the campus assault coverage in general, showed me how media seemed to care very little about nuance when a woman was accusing a man of crimes around harassment or assault in the late 2010s. The media seemed keen to interpret any accused man as guilty. Miscommunication was rarely considered a factor when conflict had occurred; nor were different severities of infraction being considered; people accused of almost *anything* relating to sex were railroaded in the press. This all made me wonder if I could ever be honest about my own experiences with Rachel.

[56] '[When discourse] can be reproduced an indefinite number of times […] it no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational' (Baudrillard 1962/1994, p. 2).

[57] After the incident Sulkowicz exchanged friendly messages with Nungesser for weeks, in which she professed love for him. He threw a party after the alleged incident to which Sulkowicz messaged saying she would bring 'da females'. Her accusation came six months later, as their communication dwindled (*Paul Nungesser v Columbia University, trustees of Columbia University, Lee C. Bollinger and Jon Kessler*, 2015). A National Public Radio interview in 2018 presented her uncritically as a 'survivor', later publishing a post-broadcast clarification that this was misleading (McEvers, 2017).

[58] *New York Times* arts critic Roberta Smith reviewed Sulkowicz's project (Smith, 2017), as did *New York* art critic Jerry Saltz, who included it in his 'best of' list for 2014 (Saltz, 2014). Marina Abramovic commended it (Corbett, 2014). Sulkowicz went on to a career as an artist (Cascone, 2015; Drinkard, 2018). Nungesser was paid a settlement by Columbia after he sued for harassment and defamation (Taylor, 2017). His mother said in an interview she felt there was a form of lawlessness operating around this issue in the US; and his father expressed concern that his son would become a 'cynic' or a 'suspicious man' (Cadenbach, 2015).

Would the world contradict me on account of my gender? Could I tell my story without simply being shamed for it? It was an important story for me, one I needed to be able to share sometimes. How should I deal with not being able to tell it? I also began to wonder how it was possible to construct any kind of workable heterosexual masculinity in this sort of environment.

In Western cultures, for now at least, there remains an expectation that men 'intrude' upon women in certain romantic contexts. On its surface this may sound crass, but it is reflected in cultural norms and in media representations of romance. It codes a type of masculinity that is not afraid to *make the first move* or *make a grand gesture* to show courage and/or commitment. It is antithetical to the trope of the dithering man who wants to play the field and play his cards close to his chest. If that cultural expectation was still in place, then what type of masculinity was possible, given than a misjudged intrusion would be seen by one's society as nothing less than moral corruption? Could a man risk even the normal *intrusion* that was expected of him anymore under such circumstances? What did it mean that the expectation was still there? It seemed unfair.

As you might recall from the first essay, my decision to go to America and see my ex was partly a gesture to show commitment and courage to someone who had said that she feared I had neither. The gesture was intrusive, yes, and it was certainly a bit clumsy, but to me it was a gesture not designed to intimidate, rather to see if such a performance of masculinity was needed. This is something Žižek (2018) writes about in his critique of the MeToo movement. He talks of the logic involved in making a romantic pass that intrudes without asking prior permission. Žižek argues that one must make this *intrusion* in order to see if it is desired, in a context where various games involving ambiguous and contradicting signals often occur. Of course, acknowledging ambiguity doesn't endorse clear and persistent harassment of an

individual, but Žižek insists that the *intrusion* is not a simple matter either. He points to the atmosphere around sex in the late 2010s as debilitating: the individual is left wondering if he will be made a political example of if he tries an advance that is rejected (Žižek, 2018, pp. 159-160).

Despite not mentioning masculinity by name, it is masculinity's construction in relation to contradictory expectations in the romantic field that Žižek is referring to here. Confusingly contradictory expectations of romantic engagement are a common theme when writing about dynamics between men and women. I wanted to write about them, but I wasn't sure I could do that in the current moment to a sympathetic reader. Given what I was seeing in the press and on my own social media networks, it seemed that commenting on anything to do with an accusation made by a woman against a man was taboo unless it followed a narrow politically-motivated script in line with women's emancipation from oppressive gender norms. If conflict had occurred, then suggesting ethical ambiguity or a woman's shared responsibility in any romantically-charged dynamic with fallout was simply a mark of one's personal moral ineptitude.

It turns out that I wasn't the only memoirist experiencing confusion in relation to all of this. The same year that Meghan Daum won the PEN Writer's Award for non-fiction, she was also baffled. In 2018 she produced a long personal essay depicting her own experiences of the same US cultural moment I have described above. She specifically describes how mass media coverage of the campus sexual assault issue, as well as discussion of it in her own circles, and social media networks, all confounded her. She speaks specifically of the Sulkowicz saga as part of what disillusioned her, while it simultaneously confused her own

moral and intellectual production of selfhood on a broader scale (Daum, 2018).[59]

As I looked further into the temperament of the campus assault discourse, another event caught my attention. It was a debate at Brown University about the existence of rape culture on US college campuses.[60] Brown's president Christina Paxson publicly disavowed the question, stating her disagreement with the 'nay' position before the debate took place (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). The university responded by putting on a competing lecture that offered no opposing view, and by providing students with a safe-space for those who might be traumatised by the presence of a two-sided debate in campus around this issue (Shulevitz, 2017).

It is difficult to know what motivates public figures and corporations (including universities) in situations where a genuine concern gains traction in the public imaginary. Issues like campus assault can be highly emotive and exploitable for corporate branding and political and media capital, but they are obviously also genuine moral, and, at times, directly traumatic concerns.

However, the suggestion that a debate about the prevalence of sexual assault on campus was likely to traumatise students may be a step too far. Haslam's (2016) theory of *concept creep* suggests that concepts of harm in modern egalitarian societies show a tendency to expand across two dimensions:

---

[59] Daum is an adjunct creative writing professor at Columbia. Her 2015 book of essays *The Unspeakable: And Other Subjects of Discussion* was the one that won the 2015 PEN Award. The PEN Award is one of North America's major literary prizes.

[60] I first encountered this debate via Young's (2015b) article which led me to a recording of the debate on YouTube (McElroy, 2014). It has since been written about by Lukianoff and Haidt (2018).

> This expansion takes 'horizontal' and 'vertical' forms: concepts extend outward to capture qualitatively new phenomena and downward to capture quantitatively less extreme phenomena. (Haslam, 2016)

In this case the existence of the debate itself (as opposed to the issue it dealt with) was considered harmful. It was as if debating a problem's extent had become taboo.

Haslam, using Hacking's (1996) idea of the *looping effect,* argues that expanding concepts of harm quickly become normalised in public discourse, which then alters how selves are produced within those contexts. This is a Heideggerian perspective about the way we quickly absorb new tools and categories into background coping as we engage the ongoing business of becoming.

While making his point, Haslam also argues that *concept creep* is ethically ambivalent, because its positive effects relate to deeper understandings of what constitutes harm; while its negative effects include a sense of unrealistic helplessness for some identities produced within such a discourse if it goes too far. Such a discourse also has a debilitating effect on meaning-making for more severely-harmed victims when distinct categories that define key traumatic experiences in their lives are conflated with less serious types of injury in the public imaginary.

The 'nay' debater in the Brown debate made this exact point. She began her argument by saying that as a survivor of two serious sexual assaults herself, she felt debilitated by definitions conflating her experiences with regretted drunken sex (McElroy, 2014). She told the audience that she had been blinded in one eye during one of the sexual assaults she'd endured, and she felt the new definitions were making her invisible. Similarly, Kunst et al (2018) found that victims of serious sexual assaults were more skeptical of MeToo than other populations. These researchers speculated that this could be the result of serious assault

victims feeling debilitated by the conflated categories.

Not long after the Brown debate, the US campus sexual assault discourse began to show further signs it was expanding notions of harm. My honours supervisor, Julienne Van Loon, had travelled to the US in 2012 to interview a professor called Laura Kipnis for an article on contemporary feminist philosophers, of which Kipnis was one (Van Loon, 2015). I had heard of Kipnis because of that connection, but I was surprised, while following the campus assault discourse in 2015, to see her name come up. Kipnis was being investigated under Title IX for an essay she had written. In the essay she had described US campus sexual assault discourse as paranoid, panicky and sexist. Kipnis also described mandatory sexual harassment training she had undergone with other faculty at Northwestern University as patronising and ineffective. She argued that the US was currently going through a kind of sex panic (Kipnis, 2015).

After publication, students from Kipnis's university marched in protest against her, carrying mattresses (in tribute to Sulkowicz), and accusing her of making an 'unsafe environment' on campus with her essay. The university responded by launching the first of two Title IX investigations into Kipnis that could have derailed her academic career. A year-and-a-half later, she published a book about the first investigation, along with descriptions of another investigation she had sat in on. Included in her book were also several stories sourced from others investigated under title IX. Kipnis highlighted how unfair the process was for the accused, and questioned the direction she saw 'feminism' taking. She felt the movement was lending itself to melodrama. She also defined the campus assault discourse in the late 2010s as a bonafide moral panic akin to McCarthyism and the Salem witch hunts: 'Future generations will look back on the recent upheavals in sexual culture on American campuses and see officially sanctioned hysteria' (Kipnis, 2017, p. 1).

Following the publication of the book, a graduate student implicated in it (though not named) sued Kipnis and her publisher (Gersen, 2017). Kipnis's university also launched a second Title IX investigation into her, and another into a male professor who had sat in as Kipnis's support person during her first Title IX hearing in 2015.[61] The university's Title IX investigation into this support person was launched because, after witnessing Kipnis's initial hearing, he told a faculty senate he believed Title IX was curtailing academic freedom. In other words, he was subjected to a Title IX inquiry, because he had openly criticised Title IX.

Both of these subsequent investigations were eventually dropped (Gersen, 2017).

There is an entire thesis in unpacking the details of whether or not the US campus sexual assault discourse of the 2010s was a bonafide moral panic in all of its aspects. Several academic voices have weighed in so far. Stewart (2016) argues it is, while asking emphatically why sociologists haven't studied it yet. Johnson and Taylor (2018) wrote a book about it with the same argument, and describing University of Pennsylvania law professor and civil rights lawyer Rudovsky comparing Title IX alterations and the campus assault discourse to post-9/11 panic about Iraqi WMDs (p. 12). Kipnis obviously sees it that way. However, I will limit my own discussion of the campus assault discourse, for now, to its elements of moral panic that have produced intriguing identities.[62]

Manning and Campbell (2014), mentioned earlier in this essay, suggest that victimhood is becoming a way of negotiating status and competing in many settings. But I would like to get underneath these assertions, and draw up the question of what motivates performances of self

[61] Title IX hearings don't allow the accused to have legal representation, but they are allowed a silent observer who can sit with them for emotional support (Kipnis, 2017, p 131).
[62] Cohen (1972/2001) lists several features of moral panics, namely how the media engages the oversimplification of a narrative about a threat, which then leads to policy-makers enacting institutional changes.

that revolve around group outrage or personal victimhood, when such performances display a tendency towards *moral tribalism*.

Dean (2009) argues that a tendency to over-perform both personal victimhood and moral outrage is a new modality afforded by the digital space, which plays into and is encouraged by contemporary capitalism. Dean, Ingraham and Reeves (2016) claim this tendency is largely due to personal feelings of disempowerment in the contemporary capitalist landscape. Their argument hinges on the idea that these feelings have responded to social media in unexpected ways: the democratisation of online voices creates the illusion of potential political agency for individuals who feel powerless, but a concomitant anxiety about being heard with that agency amongst the mass of other voices simultaneously gaining access to it also occurs. This gives rise to what Dean calls *communicative capitalism,* which is capitalism's response to this anxiety.[63] Ingraham and Reeves use the example of the Adria Richard's callout of sexism that led to undeserved firings. They use the example of this callout and media response to it to argue that social media-era moral panics are now being catalysed by a frustrated citizenry from below power. This is different from what Cohen (1972/2011) argued, when he said moral panics were catalysed by those already holding power and looking to reinforce it. Ingraham and Reeves point out that Cohen viewed his own perspective about that as a cursory observation, and that he had an inclination to revise it himself as culture had evolved since the publication of his original work on the topic.

The irony, of course, is that moral panics, regardless of who catalyses them, ultimately benefit powerful interests more than the disempowered (Dean, 2009; Ingraham & Reeves, 2016).

---

[63] Communicative capitalism is 'the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism' (Dean, 2009, p. 2).

As a final point, it is also important to consider how moral panics—even if they originate from below power—affect other disempowered groups. Alterations to institutions done in the name of exaggerated threat can severely affect minorities. One such group regarding the discourse on sexual assault is black men. Data from a University of Michigan study finds that black men make up 6% of the US population, but, in 2016, accounted for 59% of exonerations from sexual assault charges (Gross, Possley, & Stephens, 2017). For African American men there is a historical precedent of prejudice against them in matters of sexual misconduct, especially involving white women. During the civil rights era, Black men were represented as 'dangerously hyper-sexual' and the legal system assessed black guilt in sexual assault matters in prejudicial ways as a result (Ikrad, 2013).[64] Institutional changes around Title IX, done in the name of social justice for women, deeply affect black men, many of whom enter universities from lower social classes on scholarships. In 2014, Colgate was one of the few colleges that collected sexual assault figures indexed by race. It showed a student population of 4.2% Black students, and whatever fraction of that was black male students accounted for 50% of the sexual assault violations reported to the university that year (Bazelon, 2018).

It seems obvious that the dangers of underestimating sexual assault are big. But the dangers of overestimating it, and eroding due process or fair-mindedness in regard to it are also great, particularly for disenfranchised men, and for victims of serious assaults (such as the 'nay'

[64] 'Representations of black men as beasts that were created in defense of African colonialism evolved into those of black men as bucks who required slavery's domestication, and both were followed by post-emancipation images of African American men as rapists and thugs who could not handle their newfound freedoms. (Ikard, 2013, p. 72)'

debater at Brown). It is interesting to note that both of these groups have shown a marked lacklustre towards, for example, MeToo.[65]

Gauging the Discourse

Gauging any kind of crisis discourse is difficult, but sexual assault is particularly hard to investigate. Contesting figures need balancing by acknowledging how underreported assaults can be, analysis of why this underreporting remains a problem, and recognition of how difficult sexual assaults are to prove.[66] As I've pointed out, there are arguments that over-reporting of non-serious incidents is increasing in the current climate. But, even if true, that doesn't mean serious assaults don't remain underreported or frustratingly unprovable.

At the time of writing this essay, MeToo is in the news. It has many advocates, but there are critics too, in both the public domain and academic settings. Something none of these critics appear to explore is the discursive context in which MeToo occurred, which is what I have attempted here.

Looking at MeToo specifically is beyond this essay's scope, but I would suggest that one cannot engage it analytically as a cultural and political phenomenon without recognising the discursive context from which it emerged in the US. That context included the rise of online callout culture, as well as expanding notions of harm, and receding notions of women's sexual agency; alongside the birth of media's digital revolution with all its bias and sensationalising problems. This media-in-transition showed a renewed interest in the term

[65] Hill, 2018; French, 2018; Bazelon, 2018; Kunst et al., 2018).
[66] Greer (2018) describes some of the deterrents in place in England, such as mandatory handing over of digital devices to authorities for victims, but not perpetrators. Instead of addressing issues of concept creep around consent, Greer suggests (controversially) that we simply treat rape as less of a crime.

'feminism', which began operating as an empty signifier mediated by celebrity representations in the wake of popular neoliberal 'feminist'-branded products such as Sandberg's (2013) *Lean In*.

Including the above elements when analysing 'feminist' discourse in the 2010s is not meant to denigrate emancipatory aims. Ignoring such aims would be anathema to understanding. However, much has already been written about that, whereas including the complicating aspects I have highlighted in this essay furthers a more holistic appraisal of how political phenomena are articulating in contemporary settings.

I struggled to form a coherent narrative voice around the part of my story that addressed the accusation against my narrator. I wanted to highlight the complexity and ambiguity of the incident. I didn't want to write a story that portrayed the trope of the 'malicious lying woman' accusing an innocent guy. Rather, I wanted to portray both the accuser and the accused in somewhat sympathetic terms. I felt that would encourage public discussion with nuances rather than categorical oversimplification.

I attempted to highlight the vulnerability of both myself and my accuser. I thought a lot about the 'dialogue' between myself, my story, and the politics my story would articulate into. I thought of Arendt's (1958) description of how personal storytelling operates. She argues that it occurs at the juncture of the personal and the political, drawing attention to the meaning of that juncture for any given cultural moment.[67] Personal stories force the society in which they are articulated to confront notions of the individual amidst social meaning-making processes that interpellate that individual. I told the story of a painful and confusing

[67] 'Hannah Arendt's view [is] that storytelling is never simply a matter of creating either personal or social meanings, but an aspect of "the subjective in-between" in which a multiplicity of private and public interests are always problematically in play' (Jackson, 2002, p. 11).

experience: being a foreign man accused of harassment while in the US. I told this story while seeking sympathy from the reader for the accused, while trying not to vilify the accuser. Such a story has a political valence that seeks to rebut oversimplification. I aimed my story in this way while analysing the culture around me as one in which emancipatory narratives were ethically motivated, but also influenced by complicated and contradictory conscious and unconscious interests operating simultaneously across several domains.

Ithaca: Polarisation and the Role of Wabi-sabi

During the time I spent in the US, my closest friend there, Jessica, was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. Sufferers with that diagnosis prefer the term myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) so I'll use that term from now on. Jessica's diagnosis was in 2015, and in 2017 she was re-diagnosed with chronic Lyme disease. Her doctors were telling her there was no doubt she had it, and she'd also had her blood sent to a lab confirming that assertion.

Chronic Lyme is a controversial diagnosis. The majority of the medical establishment do not ratify it as an accurate diagnostic category. The minority of doctors who diagnose it remain controversial, so is the lab that Jessica used. It was a lab that had drawn ire from sceptics, and a *New York Times* article accusing it of ulterior motives and unproven methods.[68] After my sister's experience with both these diagnoses, and that same lab, I hoped Jessica would consider the chronic Lyme diagnosis provisional, and not rule out other possibilities.

[68] Hurley & Santora, (2005) *New York Times* article is the one I am referring to here. A more scholarly review of critiques against chronic Lyme testing labs in general is provided by Auwaerter et al (2011).

Despite that hope, I knew it might not be possible. I had been thinking a lot about contested diagnoses since Theda’s death. I was writing about my family’s experience, and pondering how the contested nature of her diagnosis had affected her identity, causing her to dig in rather than remain open to possibilities. Any patient with a contested diagnosis is in a fragile position. This is because the medical establishment plays a defining role in an ill person’s production of self, and, if the establishment is bickering over your illness’s definition, then you are deeply affected and often desperate to resolve the definition of what is wrong with you, even if, objectively speaking, that's not possible. One way to understand that is to consider Parson’s (1978) definition of the *sick role*. That role includes the expectation that an ill person accept treatment, and receive (supposedly forthcoming) exemption from various social responsibilities in return.[69] A sick person enters into a subordinate relationship with the medical establishment that controls their access to treatments and exemptions using the primary mediator of a diagnosis. A diagnosis therefore becomes intrinsic to the ill person’s survival. Waitzkin (quoted in Frank, 1995/2013) describes how a patient's sense of self becomes enmeshed in the ideology of medicine through this mechanism.

There are problems with the *sick role* regarding contested illnesses. The organising principle of the diagnosis doesn't function properly. Both treatments and exemptions are then randomly denied from a patient’s point of view, depending on what the doctor they encounter believes about the contested label for their symptoms. Stigmatised and chronic illnesses suffer this fate even more so, because, in modernity, with the pressure to be productive, the *sick role* is less easily given to people with illnesses that do not either heal or end in death. This is because such illnesses put no time limit on the burden they produce for the society in

[69] Parson’s theory has been deconstructed with an eye to its oversights in regard to chronic illness, the realities of bias, stigma, and ways illnesses are narrativised around all three (Frank 1991, p205-16).

which they occur—something a production-focussed society would resent. Chronic Lyme and ME are often incurable but they do not kill you. This incompatibility with the *sick role* in post-industrial society thus leads to sufferers being deeply stigmatised.

Despite this problem, both ME and chronic Lyme disease continue to have contested aetiologies in which one side of the scientific debate alludes to mental health as a cause (Prins & Bleijenberg, 2006[70]; Rebman et al., 2017[71]). Compounding this problem is the fact that both illnesses have also undergone continuous shifts in diagnostic criteria over the years; shifts that were not standardised across institutions and practitioners. This has led to concerns about heterogeneous patient groups for both diseases that may include sufferers who have purely psychiatric conditions alongside those who don't (Jason et al., 1997; Nacul, Lacerda, Kingdon, Curran, & Bowman, 2017).

Amidst this mess of definitions, there is research that links ME and chronic Lyme symptom patterns to psychological factors (Prins, van Der Meer, & Bleijenberg, 2006;[72] Hassett, Radvanski, Buyske, Savage, & Sigal, 2009;[73] Smith & Wessely, 2014)[74]. And there is research that denies or simply ignores those links (Russell et al., 2016;[75] Hooper, 2007;[76] Greco, Conti-Kelly, & Greco, 2011;[77] Stricker & Johnson, 2012[78]).

The research linking these two illnesses to mental health does not always suggest they are entirely psychiatric in nature, but it is often misinterpreted by patients and the press who portray it that way. Links between psychiatry and physical symptoms exacerbate patient anxiety due to the delegitimising aspect that a psychological component to any diagnosis

[70] Myalgic encephalomyelitis.
[71] Chronic Lyme disease.
[72] Myalgic encephalomyelitis.
[73] Chronic Lyme disease.
[74] Myalgic encephalomyelitis.
[75] Myalgic encephalomyelitis.
[76] Myalgic encephalomyelitis.
[77] Chronic Lyme disease.
[78] Chronic Lyme disease.

implies (Rebman et al., 2017;[79] Seiler, 2018).

Under such circumstances, patients with ME or chronic Lyme are an enigma. Often doctors prescribe opposing treatments. It is a common scenario, for example, that doctor-A puts a patient on one path, but then an encounter with doctor-B informs them that doctor-A was wrong and they must do a contradictory treatment. For an already vulnerable person this perpetually unstable flux, subordinate to a battle going on within the institution, which affects their dignity, treatment and exemptions, is debilitating and damages their mental health—regardless of whether it was compromised beforehand. To put their psychological situation in Lacanian terms, a person with a chronic Lyme or ME diagnosis is not only struggling to get the right exemptions and treatment, they are also set against a symbolic order that continually interpellates them in contradictory ways around stigmatised categories, which makes identity-formation not only nearly impossible, but also fraught with anxiety about one's moral status.

Patient advocacy networks are understandably desperate to stabilise the diagnostic category. They often demand these illnesses be seen as physical only (Seiler, 2018, p. 49). The alternative to this false certainty is letting patients fall into the 'medically unexplained' category, which has been stigmatised throughout history, often branding people as hysterics, and denying them the exemptions of the *sick role*. AIDS, for example, once suffered this fate (Sontag, 1989).

What strikes me after having watched a family member deteriorate amidst this controversy is that the stigma associated with mental illnesses is pernicious, and it is much worse for someone suffering a potentially psychosomatic illness. I came to this conclusion because had my sister's diagnosis been contested on physical grounds—such as one part of the establishment suggesting it was caused by a bacterium, and another part declaring it

[79] Chronic Lyme disease.

genetic—any resulting stigma would have been quite different, if present at all.

O'Sullivan, a neurologist, makes the same point:

> It is not necessarily the greater suffering that receives the greatest consideration and sympathy. Illness is not scored in that way. Deadly disease obviously scores higher than others. After that there is an unofficial ranking system for illness in which psychiatric disorders are the out-and-out losers. Psychiatric disorders manifesting as physical disease are at the very bottom of that pile (O'Sullivan, 2015, Chapter 2, Section 4, para 1).

After having lived with an illness in the family that was potentially psychosomatic, I had begun to question why we take schizophrenia more seriously than psychosomatic illnesses, the latter of which are nothing less that somatic hallucinations beyond the patient's control. Although schizophrenics suffer social stigma, I couldn't imagine society in general suggesting that their predicament was simply 'made up' as a way of avoiding responsibilities, which is an accusation that many psychosomatic illness sufferers often face.

This type of dismissive stigmatisation can be understood by recognising how psychosomatic illnesses threaten the boundary between mental and physical phenomena in the public and medical imaginaries. Such a threat is more dangerous to those imaginaries than other mental illnesses tend to be. Stemming from the time when post-Cartesian medicine gave priority to the body, mental illnesses enjoyed their status as no longer being the work of the devil, but they also began their long struggle to gain legitimacy as not personally blameworthy. At least by maintaining a firm boundary between mental and physical illnesses, many people feel protected from such blame. Psychosomatic conditions erode that distinction. I've already spoken at length in a previous essay about the stigma faced by those who disturb boundaries that dominant groups and institutions use, but it is worth reiterating here: when a person represents an erosion of key categories used in the production of identity

by another population, they are perceived by that population as ‘disgusting’.

During the time of psychoanalysts like Freud and Janet, psychosomatic illnesses enjoyed less stigmatisation than they do today. But that era has passed, and stigma against psychosomatic illnesses is once again entrenched in both the public discourse and in medical institutions. O’Sullivan (2015) comments upon witnessing it amongst practitioners in hospital settings during her career.[80]

This stigma goes partway to describing why, in the face of scientific ambiguity, patient advocacy groups for both chronic Lyme and ME push for their illness to be understood in physical terms only. It is partly a stigma-avoidance strategy.[81] Motivated in this way, patients and advocacy groups are understandably likely to evoke the AIDS-activist model (Seiler, 2018). Patients want to avoid a repeat of history in which their illness is misunderstood due to prejudice. They want the best care, and fear their illness being misunderstood or discriminated against; after all, the medical establishment has a history of seeing biologically-based illnesses it doesn’t understand as psychological—AIDS, multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease and endometriosis are clear examples of that.

But psychosomatic illnesses do exist, and in this fraught situation, patients, family members, friends and doctors can sometimes come to differing conclusions about what is happening to someone. Parts of the scientific establishment can emphatically agree with both mental and organic aetiological positions. Fuelled by such institutional legitimisation, and in combination with the pressures to support a sick friend or family member, families and friendships often fracture over disagreements about how to treat ME or chronic Lyme

---

[80] O’Sullivan (2015) talks of a psychosomatic patient suffering blindness. She describes practitioners privately mocking the patient, and the confusion that created for her as a practitioner. ‘When I returned to the ward to give Yvonne her discharge letter I felt impossibly confused. Had I been told to disbelieve her blindness but avoid confronting her? Or should I disbelieve myself and what I thought I knew?’ (Chapter 5, para 68).

[81] Scarth (2018) has found similar patterns in subjects who show a strong desire to narrate their current and past suicidality in terms of brain chemistry despite also being sufferers of severe psychological traumas. Scarth speculates this is a stigma-avoidance strategy.

disease. I witnessed this in my own family. I also heard of other examples of it through the online networks I am part of that support chronic Lyme and ME sufferers. Some patients have had a parent abandon them, and many have lost friends. Chronic illness sufferers often have limited social networks already, so the loss of any single ally or supporter can easily mean a patient's social support network is halved or entirely obliterated.

Despite the either/or epistemology most often evoked in relation to ME and chronic Lyme disease, there is a growing body of literature that suggests the best frame for understanding both is biopsychosocial. This is by no means settled science, but this promising model proposes a complex and multifactorial causal structure for these illnesses; one which includes psychological, social and biological factors combining (Geraghty & Blease, 2018;[82] Satalino, 2008, p27).[83]

I watched Jessica and her family going through the stresses of all this a couple of years after losing my sister to it. Jessica had already lost contact with many of her friends, and her parents were sceptical about the chronic Lyme diagnosis. It was causing tension. Seeing her family go through it reminded me of just how sensitive what I was writing about could be for those living it. Even though I knew this from my own experience, seeing it again was a stark reminder. The number of sufferers is not low either. According to the World Health Organisation, ME affects 1.69% of the global population (Dinos et al., 2009). There is no reliable data on the prevalence of chronic Lyme disease, but the literature suggests its diagnoses is often interchangeable with ME because the two have similar symptoms (Lantos, 2015; Rebman et al., 2017).

[82] Myalgic encephalomyelitis.
[83] Chronic Lyme disease.

When writing about an issue that affects so many people, it is essential to be both pragmatic and sensitive. The potential explosiveness of this issue is similar to the sexual assault discourse I explored in the previous essay; stigmatised illnesses have various economic and political capitals associated with them that complicate how their needs get articulated and interpreted.

In 2006, Connecticut Attorney General Blumenthal threatened the Infectious Disease Society of America with an antitrust suit over its Lyme disease treatment guidelines because they denied the existence of chronic Lyme disease (Auwaerter et al., 2011). Acute Lyme disease is not contested, and it is most prevalent in traditionally Democrat-voting states (Lowenfels, 2005). This coincidental correlation between voting preference and the geography of acute Lyme disease means that politicians can weigh into the scientific debates about *chronic* Lyme disease for political reasons. They can do this because acute Lyme disease is the precursor of chronic Lyme disease; so those who believe they have the latter also hail from those states where the former is prevalent. Presidential runner and current senator Kirsten Gillibrand, whom I mentioned in the last essay in relation to Emma Sulkowicz, has joined forces with Blumenthal in advocating for more chronic Lyme research that aligns with advocacy groups' demands (Blumenthal et al., 2015).[84]

The chronic Lyme disease advocacy groups who engage such politicians are desperate. My own experience with them has never caused me to question their sincerity. They are largely comprised of sufferers, their family members, a minority of scientists, and friends. But such advocacy groups can also include over-zealous elements. These more extreme elements have a history of intimidating medical researchers whose findings don't support a

[84] Collignon, Lum, & Robson (2016) cite Gillibrand and Blumenthal's political actions, arguing in *the Medical Journal of Australia* that Australia is being influenced by scientifically-flawed politics which emanate from the US around chronic Lyme disease.

physical-only aetiology. This has led to several prominent researchers abandoning their work on cures, scanning packages sent to their labs for bombs, and hiring security personel to protect them from stalkers.[85]

Along with the political capital I mentioned earlier, doctors and laboratories who diagnose chronic Lyme may be influenced for economic reasons (Lowenfels, 2005). Some have been sanctioned. One practitioner was convicted for accidentally killing a patient in 2008 with a dangerous treatment; several other 'chronic Lyme-literate' practitioners have been convicted for other treatment-related incidents. Laboratories that ratify the diagnosis have been fined for using unproven methods, while not disclosing their competing economic interests regarding 'treatments' for the people they perform diagnostic tests for (ibid). Alternative-medicine practitioners also cash in on the ambiguity, whether they do it sincerely believing they can help or not. During my sister's treatment, practitioners often reinforced the perception that the scientific uncertainty about psychiatric links regarding chronic Lyme and ME were nothing but conservative medical establishment hogwash. They also took large sums of money from our family for treatments they offered in lieu of that 'hogwash'. Accepting these narratives, and thinking there were no other options when the alternative treatments failed, my sister eventually took her own life in 2013. Concerns about this side of alternative medicine have been raised by Martensen (2009), who argues that desperate patients are easily exploitable subjects.

In short, there is a business model in perpetuating the idea that the biomedical aetiology of these illnesses is settled and being intentionally ignored by mainstream science. It is an underdog narrative that has taken hold in many of the advocacy groups, a minority of

---

[85] ME researchers have suffered stalking, harassment and death threats from patient advocacy groups (Feilden, 2011). One Lyme researcher, who was a Tufts medical centre scientist originally accredited with discovering *acute* Lyme Disease, refused to acknowledge chronic Lyme disease was a legitimate physical illness. After stalking and harassment from advocacy groups, he had to hire a security team (Grann, 2001).

practitioners, and amongst progressive political figures. That narrative is appealing because it offers a suffering and stigmatised group within society a path to dignity, but it doesn't reflect the uncertainty of the science.

Scientific consensus is that the question of what causes and can treat chronic Lyme and ME remains open. False certainty coming from the media, a minority of scientists, and from politicians, shuts down critical research (Lowenfels, 2005). In my own experience, I've seen how false certainty in the discourse also discourages patients and families from pursuing options. Amidst such certainty, the perception that mental health is a tainted category is actually perpetuated. For patients, this perception may not extend to other mental illnesses, but encompasses psychosomatic ones which they may find themselves 'accused' of having.[86] As an example, my sister refused to consider mental health treatments, while often denigrating the idea that physical symptoms could have psychological explanations which weren't blameable upon the patient, but she never condemned me for suffering depression as a young man. I understood her aversion to the indignity of a psychiatric explanation for physical symptoms, as well as the fear that psychiatry was simply the wrong call, but I will always wonder if mental health treatments might have saved her life.

In my opinion, a sensible strategy when discussing these illnesses would be to raise awareness of them and their suffering, alongside acknowledging the reality of their correlative biomarkers, without suggesting that the science also linking them to mental illness is categorically false. It would also be wise to fight the stigma that psychosomatic illnesses face, given that fighting that stigma is simultaneously a noble cause in its own right, and because it is a stigma uniquely associated with these diseases.

[86] It is projected that roughly 20 in every 100,000 people will be affected by psychosomatic illness (Feinstein, 2011; National Organization of Rare Disorders).

In my memoir, despite admitting my own doubts, I leave the question of cause open regarding my sister's illness. In the course of writing the story, I spent a lot of time researching psychosomatic illnesses. Ignorance about them is almost wholly unremarked upon in the press. It is a remarkable thing to go uncommented upon in an era when attention to other minority issues is gaining traction in the media; but, then again, uncertainty is not a sensationalist story about underdogs. The popular press has a history of either denigrating ME patients, or championing them as maligned sufferers of purely physical illnesses fighting a conservative medical establishment. Both narratives identify a clear enemy. Consider how they also reinforce the perception that psychosomatic illnesses are illegitimate *no matter what*. It is a very entrenched stigma when both the denigrating narrative and its antidote both perpetuate that notion.

In light of this, I will spend a bit of time unpacking psychosomatic illnesses. O'Sullivan (2015) points out that the most pernicious assumption is that psychosomatic illnesses are malingering (faking), hypochondriasis (an anxiety disorder) or Münchausen syndrome (a psychological disorder that craves the attention of carers). Psychosomatic illnesses, now called conversion disorder, are none of these. Brain scan studies prove that distinction (Arehart-Treichel, 2014; Boeckle, Liegl, Jank, & Pieh, 2016, O'Sullivan, 2015).[87] Psychosomatic illnesses are beyond the control of the sufferer, and, as O'Sullivan argues, society must reduce stigma and increase understanding about their complexity.

Siri Hustvedt, a psychiatry lecturer at Cornell and other institutions, is also a prominent feminist academic (Van Loon, 2015). She takes a similar interest to O'Sullivan. Her political stance on the issue is the same but she uses a different strategy to argue; while writing about

[87] O'Sullivan's book was aimed at a general reader, and it won the prestigious Wellcome Book Prize in 2016. This suggests that, despite the popular press implicitly denigrating psychosomatic illnesses, there is growing demand for more nuanced perspective about them in the general public (Flood, 2016).

of her own chronic psychosomatic issue in memoir form, she recounts the bafflement she felt about what was happening to her. Confounded by the idea that physical symptoms like hers could be connected to her psyche, her gradual acceptance of that idea in her memoir gives credence to the notion that psychosomatic illnesses fool their sufferers, even highly intelligent ones. She accompanies personal storytelling with a dizzying array of case studies, psychoanalytic frames, and clinical studies that show how involuntary and mysterious psychogenic phenomena are (Hustvedt, 2010).[88]

Acting within the domains of their professional and academic expertise, both Hustvedt (2010) and O'Sullivan (2015) attempt to address psychosomatic illnesses in a medical humanities paradigm. Aiming their discussion at a general reader, in a world where talk of psychosomatic illness is terribly dumbed down, a unifying theme of their work is the interrogation of the mind/body binary itself. A quick list of proven potentially psychosomatic symptoms gets the point across about how problematic a rigid mind/body division in medicine can be: symptoms in conversion disorder can include but are not limited to blindness, paralysis, dystonia, psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, anaesthesia, swallowing difficulties, motor tics, difficulty walking, hallucinations, and dementia (Ali et al., 2015). As O'Sullivan points out, we experience psychosomatic phenomena when we blush, or when our heart races upon seeing someone we find attractive. Of course, everyday psychosomatic phenomena are not to our detriment, whereas chronic psychosomatic phenomena are. In general hospitals it is estimated that 5% of patients have conversion disorder, and in neurology departments it is estimated that 20% of outpatients are suffering from it (Feinstein, 2011).

In Hustvedt's discussion she talks of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, both of whom

[88] 'Psychogenic' is another term for psychosomatic illness and conversion disorder.

studied and formulated theories about psychosomatic illnesses. These nineteenth century psychoanalytic theorists are often associated with these illnesses in the public imaginary, and often to the detriment of dismantling the stigma against psychosomatic phenomena because their theories are now sometimes seen as sexist. A simple example of that appears on The McGill University Office for Science and Society website ("The History of Hysteria," n.d.). This webpage describes 'hysteria' as nothing but sexist nonsense perpetuated by psychoanalysts. It gives no mention of the scientific community's rebranding of hysteria as conversion disorder, and the ongoing research into it, or the people who suffer from it.[89] Consider how McGill's webpage is similar to denying the existence of any other mental illness that presents more in female populations, such as depression or general anxiety disorder.[90]

A superficial reading of this denial of a mental illness might see it as emanating from the fear of repeating past sexism, but it is actually the fear of anything that complicates the mind/body. If psychosomatic illnesses weren't so stigmatised, then the fact that women suffer them more frequently would not denigrate their gender's dignity in the public and medical imaginaries to the same degree. The root of the problem in this case is the stigma against psychosomatic illnesses, not their gendered epidemiology. This is one reason why Hustvedt's contribution is so welcome—her credibility as a highly respected feminist voice within academia and the public domain helps reduce the impression that psychosomatic illnesses are sexist delusion.

It remains true, of course, that the dangers of over-diagnosing conversion disorder are

---

[89] Hysteria is an outdated term (derived from the Greek word meaning 'womb') for what modern psychiatry calls conversion disorder. 'Hysteria' carries sexist connotations with its history of over-diagnosis in women. Its concept has, at times, been both appropriated and rejected by feminist theorists for various reasons (Devereux, 2014; Tasca, Rapetti, Carta, & Fadda, 2012).

[90] Women suffer higher rates than men of depression and anxiety disorders (Zender & Olshansky, 2009). Men suffer higher rates of antisocial personality disorder as well as higher rates of substance abuse disorders (Eaton et al, 2012).

huge, as history shows. But the dangers of denying its existence also have a great human cost. The history of such illnesses, after all, is much older than psychoanalysis. Record of them dates back to ancient Egypt (Tasca, Rapetti, Carta, & Fadda, 2012). These illnesses will not just vanish because we wish they would.

Given how specific chronic Lyme and ME are, I took a broader approach than either Hustvedt or O'Sullivan regarding the psychosomatic possibility with my sister's illness. As I researched psychogenic phenomena, the intriguing nature of them was offset by the reality of my sister's specific situation, and the unknowns of it. This eventually led me to think of psychosomatic illnesses as occurring within a group of related medical phenomena that complicate the mind/body binary. They are: a) purely psychosomatic illnesses, b) illnesses that have psychological treatments but not psychological causes,[91] c) illnesses that belie bodily breakdown caused by psychological trauma.[92]

Illnesses in this broader taxonomy confound medicine because they challenge one of its deepest categorical divisions, but they are not the same as each other.

One approach that I didn't fully agree with was Stengers' (2013) argument positioning itself against diagnostic taxonomy altogether. She argues for a paradigm that views illnesses in terms of their phenomena, without presupposing a coherent biological system underlying it. Stengers encourages what Thompson (2005) says was a reality until the mid-twentieth century—that many cures were in fact essentially placebos. Such a situation creates the problem of potential exploitation. In my memoir I write about a woman who went to Bali for

---

[91] Parkinson's disease is an intriguing example of an illness with a purely biomedical aetiology but potentially strong psychological links in treating some of its symptoms (Lidstone, 2014).
[92] Various studies link changes in the endocrine system, immune system, HPA-axis, and the endogenous pain modulatory system to emotional trauma (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is an example of a potentially fatal and biomedically-measurable syndrome that can be triggered by emotional trauma (Templin, Napp, & Ghadri, 2016).

chronic Lyme treatment and got cured (she relapsed later). The media reported this uncritically. As a result my family paid for my sister to go to the same clinic. It didn't work for Theda. I later discovered that this clinic also advertised itself as being able to cure AIDS and cancer using ozone treatments. Stengers flags this problem as 'snake oil salesmen' but doesn't recognise that many such salesmen and women are completely genuine and still ineffective, yet their reputations rise if they have limited success in treating patients. My mother spent all of her superannuation on treatments like this. Stengers talks of illness as 'sites where it is a matter of curing rather than proving'. But without the mediation of a diagnosis these 'sites' can attract true-believer practitioners who will take desperate patients into the small 'scientific religions' they articulate, genuinely, but without refunds. Helen Garner's (2009) memoir *The Spare Room* demonstrates this same problem, as Garner's friend desperately seeks a cure for cancer from such people.[93] So, while Stenger's point is well taken, it is incomplete if her analysis doesn't simultaneously recognise that there are material problems that spring from such idealism. This is mainly due to the fact that sick people are often desperate, and much of the alternative therapy industry is unregulated, under-trained and full of sincere 'charlatans' who are ill-equipped to deal ethically with the levels of desperation and scientific uncertainty coming their way.

A grounded philosophical approach would look at the problem of illnesses that have no definite aetiology as sites open to mediation via accurate scientific diagnosis 'at some point in the future'. A moderate approach like Stenger's is also needed but must adapt to the needs of the former, and accept the fact that in chronic illnesses a phenomenological approach like hers can also play into a restitution (recovery) narrative that is pathological and exploitable.[94]

[93] In Garner's memoir, her dying friend goes to Bali to see a Dr. Theodore who Garner portrays as a charlatan. The treatment my sister sought in Bali was also from a Dr. Theodore.

[94] Frank (1995/2013) describes the *restitution narrative*, as the dominant and often-pathological cultural norm that a sick person should and can get better.

Sometimes an illness is currently incurable and its aetiology unknown, which is a reality that must be dealt with philosophically also. Consider how dangerous it was when endometriosis was misdiagnosed as conversion disorder. Now reverse that and consider how it might be to diagnose an illness connected to emotional trauma as purely physical simply because we don't know how to cure the former yet. Doing so will lead people down the garden path of placebo treatments that never address the complexity of what's wrong, but bankrupt them in the process. It is a bind because patients, terrified of the stigma against psychologically-linked physical symptoms, will encourage their own misdiagnoses by 'shopping around' for such practitioners.

New treatments were constantly coming into our lives with my sister. I would watch Theda get somewhat better after trying one, only to get worse again some months later. It was heartbreaking to watch this cycle. A treatment would lift her slightly and then leave her high and dry, poorer and more disheartened than ever.

A Wabi-Sabi Approach

Thinking about the ethics and consequences of my story led me to think more about the problem of writing into polarisation in general. It was interesting to write a story that would articulate into a polarised discourse on Lyme/ME, and into a polarised discourse on sexual harassment. I spent a lot of time thinking about my readers and their enmeshment in the politics of both. In both cases a sympathetic group would be threatened by my story. In Lyme/ME discourse that group would be patients and some of their allies. In the sexual-harassment discourse (articulating as MeToo for much of the time I was writing the memoir)

that group would be people wanting sexual harassment taken more seriously. My story rubbed against both discourses in slightly antagonistic ways. It would be grating for some feminists and some Lyme/ME activists alike.

Wabi-Sabi is a philosophy behind some of the artistic traditions in Japanese culture. Its aim is to remind us about impermanence, contingency and imperfection. One well-known Wabi-Sabi tradition is pottery, in which bowls are smashed, then re-joined into the shape of themselves. The bowl remains useable but now communicates impermanence, contingency and imperfection more obviously to its user.[95]

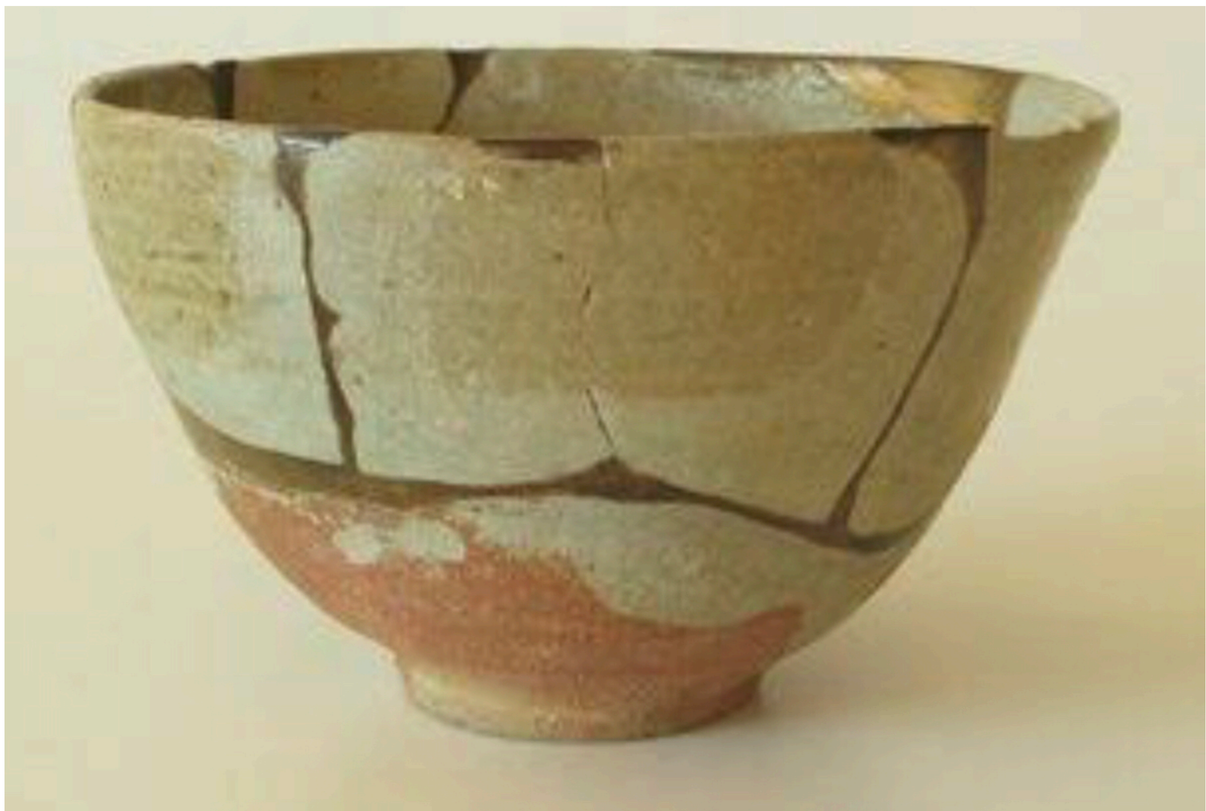


Figure 4: A bowl from the Kintsugi tradition of wabi-sabi. From "My Refuge House: Restoring one Life at a Time," by C. Sprague, 2012 (http://www.myrefugehouse.org/2012/11/27/wabi-sabi-beauty-in-brokenness/). Copyright 2012 C. Sprague.

[95] Juniper, 2011.

When analysing the emancipatory discourses I would rub up against with my memoir, I began to use this metaphor of wabi-sabi as a way of understanding what I was aiming for. I wanted to highlight an imperfection without trying to upset a fragile form. I wanted those emancipatory discourses I would rub up against to see themselves more like the bowl in Figure 4, not as useless, but as imperfect and contingent.

A wabi-sabi attitude is not coded into modern emancipatory political movements though. Contemporary emancipatory discourses are less often organisations like unions with structured introspection embodied by committees. Following the trends of social media discussed in the previous essay, they are more often rhyzomatic assemblages that occur around empty signifiers in the name of sentiments towards 'justice' within a digital space. Wabi-sabi *dissent* recognises that these discourses are valuable, and already on the back foot, because of their subordinate positions to the power they are resisting. They are fragile forms, just like the bowl. But despite that, they are also, at times, overly-convinced of their own moral perfection.

As I thought about these emancipatory discourses, I also thought about what constitutes them. It helps to refer to Bakhtin here, who observes that discourses are *languages* (Holquist, 1990/2002). That is to say, they are systems of categorical difference which order the real, and which have conventions and rules that change over time as they're used in various contexts amongst other *languages* attempting to do the same thing.

It is easy to overlook how an activist *language* is operating within itself because the temptation is to interpret its purpose as fighting the more powerful *languages* subordinating its position. The work of Foucault (1965) and Derrida (1972/1982) takes up the challenge of

the latter and has revolutionised how we analyse subordinate positions according to the mechanics of the powerful discourses that interface them. Yet, Foucault and Derrida's work doesn't seem to encourage a focus on the other purpose of any *language*, which is to subordinate the real with some kind of categorising strategy. As described in an earlier essay, the real is unmediated, so any *language* seeks to dominate it. Thus, an emancipatory *language* aims to resist and restructure power wielded by more powerful *languages*, but it is also a *language* ordering the real with its own vision of Truth.

I realised that analysing how a *language* orders the real would mean going back to Saussure, because there is an inconclusive attitude towards Power in Saussure's (1916/1966) approach. His approach allowed me to bracket the question of extant power for a moment, and to look instead at the ontological functions of the emancipatory *language* I was investigating mechanically. Despite what this approach misses in terms of recognising power dynamics amongst various groups in society, it is precise in its recognition of how the real gets ordered by a system of meaning. Saussure's insight was that languages divides the real via an interrelated set of differential categories. Similarly, any *language* (discourse) works by the same mechanism: separating the real into 'this is not that' via an interdependent system of differentiation.[96] Consider how a Lyme/ME activism discourse does this. Key to its ordering of the real is the division between the mind and body. This distinction is maintained in service of separating 'real illness' from 'fake illness' and putting Lyme/ME firmly in the camp of 'real illness'.

As you can see in this example, a *language's* key distinctions are linked to the epistemologies of more powerful *languages*. By reinforcing mind/body (and real/fake by proxy) the Lyme/ME activist discourse reproduces the ontology of the dominant medical

[96] 'A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas' Saussure (1916/1966, p. 120).

discourse it is resisting.[97] The problem is not that Lyme/ME activism goes too far; it's that it doesn't question its assumptions about the real.

The mind/body binary that gets reproduced in Lyme and ME activist discourse does something else too—it tends to conflate psychosomatic/Munchausen/hypochondriasis into a single category. I never met a Lyme or ME activist who recognised the distinction between those three. Whenever the question of psychological links to their illness came up, sufferers would say 'how could anyone think I'm making *myself* sick!' This assertion implies that an illness with psychological links would not occur below the level of subjective awareness. Thus a conflation of unconscious/conscious mental processes was also present in this 'emancipatory' *language*.

What I have just described are only a few of the machinations within the *language* of Lyme/ME activism. Any *language* defines what is possible to think or talk about, and, as a dissenting voice, I wanted to draw attention to how the activist *language* was limiting thought, despite the fact that its initial purpose was to liberate people from the confines of limiting thought on this matter.

After my sister's death, I watched a senate inquiry into chronic Lyme disease. The inquiry was meant to address concerns of the chronic Lyme disease-suffering community. The activists who had instigated it were conflating two categories for the sake of that inquiry. They were conflating acute Lyme and chronic Lyme, most likely because framing the debate like that meant they could argue with scientists on firmer footing than debating the question of whether *chronic* Lyme was a legitimate diagnostic category altogether. Their conflation was deliberate and temporary but it had knock-on consequences. One was that it perpetuated misunderstanding. I recall an outraged senator questioning how anyone could hear the

[97] Note: I am using *languages* (italicised) and 'discourses' interchangeably.

harrowing stories of Lyme sufferers and still deny that ‘those ticks’ existed in Australia. He adopted the activists’ conflation of acute/chronic Lyme and was, by proxy, conflating two more sets of categories: accepted-diagnosis/controversial-diagnosis, and aetiology/ symptom.[98]

So far, I’ve described the following machinations as occurring within the Lyme activist *language*.

- mind/body : reinforced
- fake illness/real illness : reinforced
- psychosomatic/Munchausen/Hypochondriasis : conflated
- chronic Lyme /acute Lyme : conflated (sometimes)
- controversial diagnosis / accepted diagnosis : conflated (sometimes)
- aetiology / symptom : conflated

A key insight of Bakhtin’s about *languages* is that they are ontological. That is to say, when they divide the world into things that exist which are not the same, they restructure reality itself. *Languages* define, rather than simply describe the world around them. That was also Butler’s (1990/1999) insight about gender when she made her famous arguments about its construction. To Butler, a gender was defined by discourses that were then performed by individuals, often without self-consciousness, who imagined their senses of masculinity and femininity were fixed and real. By seeing how gender was contingent upon discourse, Butler challenged this assumption, and, in the process, described a contingent ontology much like

[98] The scientists arguing against the Lyme advocates were debating the cause of the symptoms, not their existence.

Bakhtin does.[99]

I used the Saussurean method of analysis when I was trying to think through how the Lyme/ME activist *language* structured reality for those people using it. The usefulness of this method actually became clearer to me when I was thinking through MeToo's discourse in regard to the other polarising aspect of my story. I noticed some things about how MeToo was operating in the media when journalists started calling accusers 'survivors'. 'Survivors' is a presumptuous term. Of course, the term 'victim', while understandably used as a sign of respect, is strictly-speaking presumptuous also for a crime with no proof of injury. But calling victims 'survivors' was stronger again, and it conflated accuser/victim further in the imaginary it evoked. It also reinforced a hard-line distinction between real/fake: accusations were either made by survivors of objectively traumatic events, or they were made by false accusers, who many activists said were a myth.[100] This left no room for grey areas, where trauma might result from events that aren't generally considered traumatising. It left little room for incidents that may have traumatised someone who was unusually sensitive to a certain kind of behaviour, or someone who had been traumatised by miscommunication or misunderstanding. In this way, MeToo was, paradoxically, limiting women's experiences by categorising their traumas only as 'real' or 'fake' and never anything more complicated or subjective.

The tendency for the MeToo *language* to do this also limited men, of course. It conflated accused/guilty in the imaginary also, because assuming that all accusers were 'survivors' of objectively traumatising events also meant that all those they accused were guilty. This meant that men who hadn't intended to do harm but who may have caused it regardless couldn't

[99] Some critics interpret Butler's assertion of discourse-constructed gender as a denial of biology, however, it's important to highlight that recognising contingent ontology doesn't preclude pre-existing qualities in the real that influence (but don't entirely dictate) how things get classified.

[100] Duck-Chong (2018), for example, describes false accusations as a 'myth' despite her essay's critical treatment of the movement.

view their behaviour as accidental, nor could the women harmed. Nor was a spectrum of harm considered much. This was made clear in the popular media context when Matt Damon was roundly criticised by MeToo activists, later apologising, for suggesting that behaviour fell on a spectrum, and that some was worse than others.

MeToo's *language* was making rigid distinctions in how it divided up the real; these distinctions between real/fake, accused/guilty and victim/accuser limited what one could think or say in regard to male-female conflicts pertaining to harassment and assault. The *language* was restructuring reality. Such a situation is initially exciting for activists who want an issue spotlighted, but it also sets up their movement for justifiably-argued backlash from those who feel that too much is being lost in the process.

While pondering such tensions, I realised that anyone wishing to critique an emancipatory discourse needed to recognise two things about it. Firstly, it would likely be ethically driven, but how it divided up the real would, like all *languages*, be limiting. Yet, because of ethical intent, these *languages* would resist interrogation. Thus, the fundamental problem with some activist movements is not that they overextend themselves; rather it is the fact that as *languages* they attempt to restructure reality without adequate ongoing critique from an empathetic public. That public understandably doesn't wish to interfere with their ethical purpose, but we then find that those *languages* are unable to cope with certain kinds of nuance that occur in the real.

Elizabeth Duck-Chong (2018) makes a similar point in *Meanjin*. Her essay attempts *dissent* about MeToo's discourse. She argues that the categories within it for 'victim', 'guilt' and 'perpetrator' are too clunky. Without being as explicitly theoretical as I am being here, she points out that the categories of fake/real are also conflated.

Duck-Chong appears to struggle at points, and her thinking is not clear. Despite

appearing to argue against a real/fake dichotomy, she then reinforces it by dismissing the 'myth' of false accusations, as if false is a predefined and simple category. She then immediately suggests that pretending no women lie is a disservice to the emancipatory cause, as if 'lying women' and 'truth-telling women' are also simple clear cut categories. Much of her essay does battle with itself like that, which, to me, appears to belie the fact she hasn't properly engaged a theoretical dimension of discourse analysis required before commenting. However, her lack of explicit discourse analysis aside, her essay is an attempt at wabi-sabi nonetheless. A glance at her prose shows that she obviously isn't trying to alienate the emancipatory discourse on sexual harassment while critiquing it.

It is true that when we engage in *dissent* from within a *language*, that *language* will be naturally uncooperative. Wabi-Sabi needs to simultaneously read the *language* it engages, query it, then highlight its deficits somehow. An analogous example would be comedy. A comedian who wants to make fun of Scottish coal miners to Scottish coal miners must understand the system of meaning that those miners are using before poking at it. A comedian who is effective won't offend many punters, but instead will make them laugh and take an introspective look at their meaning-making system's shortfalls. It is an art form as much as an analytical virtuosity.

Laura Kipnis's (2017) *Unwanted Advances* does wabi-sabi well in my opinion. Well-received in many feminist circles, the book is an example of *dissent* that works. This is largely because she is a master of a wry but warm tone, alongside her astute analysis. Nonetheless, in her acknowledgments, Kipnis writes that she struggled to find the right tone for her book, and that she embarrassed herself before her editors, while attempting to get it right. She uses the term 'embarrassing' as if, similar to a comedian, being booed off stage is what occurs; but the truth is that wabi-sabi on polarising topics is both personally and

professionally dangerous to get wrong. That is perhaps why we don't see enough of it on issues that need it. When critically engaging with sensitive topics like MeToo or marginalised illness, failing to get the voice right means being judged as morally suspect.

The politics of uncertainty

An element of *dissent* I want to discuss before finishing is that of uncertainty. Media saturation in the digital era has increased levels of certainty on many topics where it doesn't belong. Floridi's (2015) *the Politics of Uncertainty* argues that we must reintroduce uncertainty into many domains, but that doing so is an art. He offers a metaphor, suggesting we should see uncertainty like cholesterol, as something that in excess is destructive, but without which we would also suffer.

In writing my memoir I tried to use uncertainty like Floridi suggests. I tried to let it brew moderately around the memoir's characters and events. I left my sister's diagnosis unresolved, which offers a certain meaning to the debates around Lyme and ME without trying to undermine them. The same goes for how I approached MeToo. MeToo was the political context into which my story with my ex would articulate. But rather than attempting to create a good-guy bad-guy dynamic between my ex and myself, I aimed for some ambiguity about what had motivated us both. I did that in order to highlight the shortfalls of viewing such incidents between men and women in overly-certain black-and-white terms.

*

Despite this essay being quite analytical, the execution of wabi-sabi is an art. One technique I used to try and achieve that art was to adopt an existential voice. I quote a Leonard Cohen lyric in one of the memoir's final chapters. It is about not being beautiful. The lyric portrays this scene: Janis Joplin is standing in a hotel room, the implication is that she has just slept with Cohen; she gets up and makes herself a drink, then admits to him that she isn't beautiful and that she knows it; in fact, she tells him that neither of them are, but that there is 'music' for people like them who can admit it and accept it (Cohen, 1974). This is the tone I wanted to achieve for the voice of my narrator. It was encoded with the idea that our wishes are rarely reality, but that there is music in our sense of loss.

I quote another piece of art near the end of the memoir that has a similar tone. It comes from Borges (1962/2007), and it is his famous short tale describing cartographers who tried to map their empire. They make the map so large it covers the land and it still fails to capture even an iota of the empire's nuance, dimensionality or contingency. A beautiful part of the story is an image in its final sentences. Some old beggars and animals are sheltering under the remains of the cartographers' massive map, which is by then only tatters.

*

A PhD in creative writing mixes two somewhat contradictory ideas: detached analysis and creative production. I have given the analytic part of this PhD in a genre that crosses between personal essay and analytical/argumentative essay. I did that because it was my own attempt at wabi-sabi regarding my positions on the things I discuss. I've made points that I hope have value, but I have presented them as part of a thinking process that happened over time, in places, amidst people within my own biased narrativisation of personal history. That is

exactly how the lived phenomenon of thinking occurs, so denying it in the writing itself seemed pointless. One of my other well-liked Borges stories is when he wrote of a civilisation that embraced a particular kind of attitude towards philosophy. In his imagined world, any published argument was considered incomplete unless it emphatically offered, in the same document, a counterargument to itself just as convincingly. This, Borges tells us, elevates the philosophical work to a kind of art, one with a measure of humility about the ambiguity, contingency and uncertainty in its heart. For me, acknowledging the subjective formation of my arguments, and presenting them in a personal narrative's context is an adjacent idea. It comes with an admission of fallibility as well as information that might help my reader contextualise what I've argued, by noting it in relation to my own character, which is a character that eventually found a way of weaving experiences it had trouble assimilating into a coherent, if not ultimately illusory, sense of self.

References

Arndt, B. (2017, July 28). *In the accuser's favour*. Retrieved from https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/mattress-girl-saga-a-warning-to-unis-on-sexual-assault-cases/news-story/daecd8a0b17438c2a2fc4a681d159da5

Ahmad, A. (2015, March 2). A note on call-out culture. Retrieved from https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/a-note-on-call-out-culture

Ali, S., Jabeen, S., Pate, R. J., Shahid, M., Chinala, S., Nathani, M., & Shah, R. (2015). Conversion disorder — mind versus body: a review. *Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience*, *12*(5–6), 27–33. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4479361/

Alter, C. (2015, January 20). Emma Sulkowicz will be Kirstin Gillibrand's guest at State of the Union. *Time*. Retrieved from http://time.com/3674450/emma-sulkowicz-gillibrand-state-of-the-union/

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5.* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.

Anderson, P. J., Ogola, G., & Williams, M. (Eds.). (2014). *The future of quality news journalism: a cross-continental analysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Arehart-Treichel, J. (2014). Imaging shows brain changes in conversion-disorder patients. *Psychiatric News*, *49*(2), 1–1. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.pn.2014.1a2

Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press.

Asma, S. T. (2009). *On monsters: an unnatural history of our worst fears*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Associated Press. (2018, February 9). Suicide of Rose McGowan manager sparks #MeToo backlash. *The Australian*. Retrieved from https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/world/suicide-of-rose-mcgowan-manager-sparks-metoo-backlash/news-story/

2d2eed1f9ebfa8a1fd8786663a9dfed2

Atwood, M. (2018, January 15). *Am I a bad feminist?* Retrieved from https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/am-i-a-bad-feminist/article37591823/

Auwaerter, P. G., Bakken, J. S., Dattwyler, R. J., Dumler, J. S., Halperin, J. J., Mcsweegan, E., … Wormser, G. P. (2011). Antiscience and ethical concerns associated with advocacy of Lyme disease. *The Lancet. Infectious Diseases*, *11*(9), 713–719. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(11)70034-2

Baer, R. A. (2003). Mindfulness training as a clinical intervention: a conceptual and empirical review. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *10*(2), 125–143. https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bpg015

Banerjee, A., & Duflo, E. (2012). *Poor economics: a radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs.

Barro, J. (2019, January 15). Why Nike's woke ad campaign works and Gillette's doesn't. *New York*. Retrieved from http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/01/why-nikes-woke-ad-campaign-works-and-gillettes-doesnt.html

Bartlett, A., Clarke, K., & Cover, R. (2019). *Flirting in the era of #metoo — negotiating intimacy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Pivot.

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. G. Glaser, trans.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (Original Work Published 1962).

Bazelon, L. (2018, December 4). I'm a democrat and a feminist. And I support Betsy Devos's Title IX reforms. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/opinion/-title-ix-devos-democrat-feminist.html

Blackford, R. (2018, March 15). Don't shoot the messenger when confronted with inconvenient ideas. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/dont-

shoot-the-messenger-when-confronted-with-inconvenient-ideas-91661

Bloom, P. (2016). *Against empathy: the case for rational compassion*. New York, NY: Ecco.

Blumenthal, R., Coons, C., Whitehouse, S., Casey, Gillibrand, K., Reed, & Ayotte, K. *Lyme and tick-borne disease prevention, education, and research act of 2015.* , Pub. L. No. S. 1503, 17 (2015).

Boeckle, M., Liegl, G., Jank, R., & Pieh, C. (2016). Neural correlates of conversion disorder: overview and meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies on motor conversion disorder. *BMC Psychiatry*, *16*(1), 195. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-016-0890-x

Bollnow, O. (2017). The nature of stimmungen. *Philosophia*, *45*(4), 1399–1418. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-017-9923-z

Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. (1996). Remediation. *Configurations*, *4*(3), 311–358.

Borges, J. L. (2007). *Labyrinths: selected stories & other writings* (D. A. Yates & J. E. Irby, trans.). New York, NY: New Directions (Original Work Published 1962).

Boyd, D. (2008). Facebook's privacy trainwreck: exposure, invasion, and social convergence. *Convergence*, *14*(1), 13–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856507084416

Boyd, M. (2009). Of shards, subjectivities, and the refusal to "heal": Refiguring the damage of incest. In R. Heberle & V. Grace (Eds.), *Theorizing sexual violence* (pp. 72–95). London, England: Routledge.

Brar, B. (2002). Theorizing transitions: post-coloniality, post-socialism and the coming age of globalization. *International Studies*, *39*(4), 323–334. https://doi.org/10.1177/002088170203900401

Breiding, M., Smith, S., Basile, K., Walters, M., Chen, J., & Merrick, M. (2014). *Prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence victimization — national intimate partner and sexual violence survey, United States,*

2011. Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6308a1.htm

Breuer, J., & Freud, S. (2000). *Studies on hysteria* (J. Strachey, trans.). New York, NY: Basic Books (Original Work Published 1895).

Brown, L. S. (2008). *Cultural competence in trauma therapy: beyond the flashback*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Burma junta leader disowns his son. *BBC News*. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/59989.stm

Burns, S. (2017). In defence of the bad, white working class. *Meanjin*, *76*(2), 36–41.

Buscemi, F. (2016). Edible lies: how Nazi propaganda represented meat to demonise the Jews. *Media, War & Conflict*, *9*(2), 180–197. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635215618619

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge (Original Work Published 1990).

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence*. London, England: Verso.

Cadenbach, C. (2015, February 2). Nachtshatten. *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*. Retrieved from https://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/leben-und-gesellschaft/nachtschatten-80948

Campbell, B., & Manning, J. (2014). Microaggression and moral cultures. *Comparative Sociology*, *13*(6), 692–726. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341332

Campbell, B., & Manning, J. (2016). Campus culture wars and the sociology of morality. *Comparative Sociology*, *15*(2), 147–178. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341382

Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Bruce, C., & Thomas, G. (2015). *Report on the AAU campus climate survey on sexual assault and sexual misconduct*.

Retrieved from Association of American Universities website: https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/%40%20Files/Climate%20Survey/AAU_Campus_Climate_Survey_12_14_15.pdf

Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality. *Du Bois Review, 10*(2), 303–312. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349

Carbin, M., & Edenheim, S. (2013). The intersectional turn in feminist theory: a dream of a common language? *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, *20*(3), 233–248. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506813484723

Cascone, S. (2015, July 29). Can Emma Sulkowicz find lasting success? Retrieved from https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-career-emma-sulkowiczs-future-302622

Chait, J. (2015, January 27). Not a very P.C. thing to say. *New York*. Retrieved from http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/01/not-a-very-pc-thing-to-say.html?gtm=bottom>m=bottom

Chao-Chen, L. (2013). Convergence of new and old media: new media representation in traditional news. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *6*(2), 183–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2013.785667

Chen, G. (2015). Losing face on social media: Threats to positive face lead to an indirect effect on retaliatory aggression through negative affect. *Communication Research*, *42*(6), 819–838. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650213510937

Chinn, E. (2001). Nagarjuna's fundamental doctrine of Pratityasamutpada. *Philosophy East and West; Honolulu*, *51*(1), 54–72.

Chou, H.-T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than i am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *15*(2), 117–121. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0324

Christakis, E. (2016, October 28). My Halloween email led to a campus firestorm — and a troubling lesson about self-censorship. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/my-halloween-email-led-to-a-campus-firestorm--and-a-troubling-lesson-about-self-censorship/2016/10/28/70e55732-9b97-11e6-a0ed-ab0774c1eaa5_story.html?utm_term=.0df5b786ea0c

Cohen, J. J. (1996). *Monster theory: reading culture*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press.

Cohen, L. (1974). *Chelsea Hotel no. 2* [Recorded by Cohen, L]. On *New Skin* [CD]. New York: Sony BMG Music Entertainment.

Cohen, S. (2011). *Folk devils and moral panics: the creation of the Mods and Rockers* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge (Original Work Published 1972).

Collignon, P. J., Lum, G. D., & Robson, J. M. (2016). Does Lyme disease exist in Australia? *The Medical Journal of Australia*, *205*(9), 413–417. https://doi.org/10.5694/mja16.00824

Colman, A. (2015). *Oxford dictionary of psychology* (4th ed.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press (Original Work Published 2001).

Contrera, J. (2014, September 26). 'Are you a feminist?' — it's the question more and more female celebrities are being asked. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/are-you-a-feminist--the-question-more-and-more-female-celebrities-are-asked/2014/09/26/5c5913f4-44bd-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.389a268bb044

Copjec, J. (2004). *Imagine there's no woman: ethics and sublimation*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

Corbett, R. (2014, October 24). Marina Abramovic is a fan of the Mattress Girl. *New York*.

Retrieved from https://www.thecut.com/2014/10/marina-abramovic-is-a-fan-of-the-mattress-girl.html

Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, *66*(3), 710–22.

Crockett, M. J. (2017). Moral outrage in the digital age. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *1*(11), 769–771. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3

Daum, M. (2018, August 25). Nuance: a love story. *Medium*. Retrieved from https://medium.com/s/greatescape/nuance-a-love-story-ae6a14991059

Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: communicative capitalism and Left politics*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, trans.). Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press. (Original Work Published 1980).

Derrida, J. (1982). *Positions* (A. Bass, trans.). Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press (Original Work Published 1972).

Devereux, C. (2014). Hysteria, feminism, and gender revisited: the case of the second wave. *English Studies in Canada; Edmonton*, *40*(1), 19–45.

Dhiman, S. (2008). Cultivating mindfulness: the Buddhist art of paying attention to attention. *Interbeing*, *2*(2), 35–52.

Dinos, S., Khoshaba, B., Ashby, D., White, P. D., Nazroo, J., Wessely, S., & Bhui, K. S. (2009). A systematic review of chronic fatigue, its syndromes and ethnicity: prevalence, severity, co-morbidity and coping. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, *38*(6), 1554–1570. https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyp147

Dreyfus, H. (2007). *Philosophy 185 Heidegger* [iLecture]. Retrieved from https://archive.org/

details/ucberkeley_webcast_itunesu_461120554

Dreyfus, H. L. (1991). *Being-in-the-world: a commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Drinkard, J. (2018, March 11). 'Carry that weight' artist Emma Sulkowicz has a new art show. *New York*. Retrieved from https://www.thecut.com/2018/03/carry-that-weight-artist-emma-sulkowicz-has-exhibition.html

Duan, N. (2014, September 9). Going from class to class with Emma Sulkowicz and her mattress. *ELLE*. Retrieved from https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a14546/columbia-university-sexual-assault-mattress-performance-emma-sulkowicz/

Duck-Chong, L. (2018). We need to talk about Tom Ballard. *Meanjin*. Retrieved from https://meanjin.com.au/blog/we-need-to-talk-about-tom-ballard/

Durkheim, É. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, trans.). New York, NY: Free Press (Original Work Published 1912).

Dworkin, A. (2006). *Intercourse* (first Basic Books Ed.). New York: Basic Books (Original Work Published 1987).

Eaton, N. R., Keyes, K. M., Krueger, R. F., Balsis, S., Skodol, A. E., Markon, K. E., … Hasin, D. S. (2012). An invariant dimensional liability model of gender differences in mental disorder prevalence: evidence from a national sample. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *121*(1), 282–288. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024780

Eilperin, J. (2015, February 8). In Grammy video, Obama says of rape, 'It's not okay – and it has to stop.' *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/02/08/in-grammy-video-obama-says-of-rape-its-not-okay-and-it-has-to-stop/?utm_term=.fbca75734099

Eliade, M. (1987). *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, trans.).

San Diego, Cal: Harcourt Brace & World (Original Work Published 1959).

Engelberg, E., & Sjöberg, L. (2004). Internet use, social skills, and adjustment. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *7*(1), 41–47. https://doi.org/10.1089/109493104322820101

Examples of racial microaggressions. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2019, from University of Minnesota website: https://sph.umn.edu/site/docs/hewg/microaggressions.pdf

Fahs, B. (2008). The radical possibilities of Valerie Solanas. *Feminist Studies; College Park*, *34*(3), 591–617.

Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (C. L. Markmann, Trans.). London, England: Pluto Press (Original Work Published 1952).

FCKH8. (2014, October 21). *Potty-mouthed princesses drop f-bombs for feminism by Fckh8.com*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqHYzYn3WZw

Feilden, T. (2011, July 29). "Torrent of abuse" hindering ME research. *BBC News*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-14326514

Feinstein, A. (2011). Conversion disorder: advances in our understanding. *CMAJ : Canadian Medical Association Journal*, *183*(8), 915–920. https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.110490

Fenton, R., Palmeri, T., & Greene, L. (2014, September 3). Ivy student carries mattress everywhere after 'rapist' isn't expelled. *New York Post*. Retrieved from https://nypost.com/2014/09/02/ivy-student-carries-mattress-after-alleged-rapist-isnt-expelled/

Fichtenbaum, R. (2014). Inequality, corporatization, and the casualization of academic labor. *Academe*, *100*(5), 56.

Fisher, M. (2013, November 24). Exiting the vampire castle. *OpenDemocracy*. Retrieved from https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/mark-fisher/exiting-vampire-castle

Flood, A. (2016, April 25). Wellcome book prize goes to psychosomatic illness study. *The*

Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/25/wellcome-book-prize-neurologist-psychosomatic-illness-suzanne-osullivan-its-all-in-your-head

Floridi, L. (2015). The politics of uncertainty. *Philosophy and Technology*, *28*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-015-0192-0

Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and civilization: a history of insanity in the Age of Reason.* New York: Vintage Books.

Frank, A. W. (2013). *The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics* (Second edition). Chicago, Il: The University of Chicago Press (Original Work Published 1995).

Fraser, N. (2009). Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history. *New Left Review*, *56*, 97–117.

Fraser, Nancy. (2013). *Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.

Freidman, D. (2015, April 26). Columbia student says Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand smeared him by standing with alleged rape victim. Retrieved from https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/columbia-student-gillibrand-smeared-rape-talk-article-1.2200058

French, D. (2018, October 12). The black men who identify with Brett Kavanaugh understand the stakes. Retrieved from https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/10/brett-kavanaugh-confirmation-fight-race/

Frenkel-Brunswik, E. (1949). Intolerance of ambiguity as an emotional and perceptual personality variable. *Journal of Personality*, *18*(1), 108–143. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1949.tb01236.x

Freud, A. (1993). *The ego and the mechanisms of defence*. London, England: Karnac Books (Orignial work published 1936).

Freud, S. (1958). Remembering, repeating and working-through (further recommendations on

the technique of Psycho-Analysis II). In J. Strachey (Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works* (pp. 145–156). London, England: The Hogarth Press (Original Work Published 1914).

Freud, S. (2003). *The uncanny* (D. McLintock, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin (Original Work Published 1919).

Friedersdorf, C. (2017, May 8). The destructiveness of call-out culture on campus. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/call-out-culture-is-stressing-out-college-students/524679/

Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: the demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Gambino, L. (2015, June 9). Emma Sulkowicz's This Is Not A Rape site taken down by cyberattack. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/09/emma-sulkowiczs-this-is-not-a-site-taken-down-by-cyberattack

Garner, H. (2009). *The spare room: a novel*. Melbourne, Vic: Text.

Geraghty, K. J., & Blease, C. (2018). Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome and the biopsychosocial model: a review of patient harm and distress in the medical encounter. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1481149

Gersen, J. S. (2017, September 20). Laura Kipnis's endless trial by Title IX. *New Yorker*. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/laura-kipniss-endless-trial-by-title-ix

Giesen, B., & Seyfert, R. (2016). Collective identities, empty signifiers and solvable secrets. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *19*(1), 111–126. https://doi.org/

10.1177/1368431015573364

Goldmacher, S. (2019, January 16). Kirsten Gillibrand, New York senator, joins democratic race for president. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/us/politics/gillibrand-president-election.html

Grann, D. (2001, June 17). Stalking Dr. Steere over Lyme disease. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/08/magazine/l-stalking-dr-steere-079596.html

Greco, T. P., & Conti-Kelly, A. (2011). Antiphospholipid antibodies in patients with purported 'chronic Lyme disease.' *Lupus*, *20*(13), 1372–1377. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961203311414098

Greer, G. (2018). *On rape*. Melbourne, Vic: Melbourne University Press.

Grigoriadis, V. (2014, September 21). Meet the college women who are starting a revolution against campus sexual assault. *New York*. Retrieved from https://www.thecut.com/2014/09/emma-sulkowicz-campus-sexual-assault-activism.html

Grigoriadis, V. (2018). *Blurred lines: rethinking sex, power, and consent on campus*. New York, NY: Mariner Books.

Gross, S. R., Possley, M., & Stephens, K. (2017). *Race and wrongful convictions in the United States*. Retrieved from Newkirk Centre For Science and Society, University of California Irvine website: http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race_and_Wrongful_Convictions.pdf

Gunaratana, H. (1980). *A critical analysis of the Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist meditation* (PhD). American University, United States, District of Columbia.

Hacking, I. (1996). The looping effect of human kinds. In *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate* (pp. 351–383). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Haidt, J., Rozin, P., Mccauley, C., & Imada, S. (1997). Body, psyche, and culture: the relationship between disgust and morality. *Psychology & Developing Societies*, *9*(1), 107–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/097133369700900105

Hall, S. (1997). Spectacle of the "other." In *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices.* (pp. 225–238). London, England: Sage Publications in association with the Open University.

Harris, K. (2017, September 9). Title IX protections for sexual assault survivors are under attack by this administration. Survivors deserve to be heard and believed. We must speak out. It's a matter of civil rights. [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/KamalaHarris/posts/10156025395677923

Haslam, N. (2016). Concept creep: psychology's expanding concepts of harm and pathology. *Psychological Inquiry*, *27*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2016.1082418

Hassett, A. L., Radvanski, D. C., Buyske, S., Savage, S. V., & Sigal, L. H. (2009). Psychiatric comorbidity and other psychological factors in patients with "chronic Lyme disease." *The American Journal of Medicine*, *122*(9), 843–850. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2009.02.022

Haut, M. (2007). A salty tongue: at the margins of satire, comedy and polemic in the writing of Valerie Solanas. *Feminist Theory*, *8*(1), 27–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107074194

Hebdige, D. (1989). After the masses. In S. Hall & M. Jacques (Eds.), *New times : the changing face of politics in the 1990s* (pp. 76–93). London, England: Verso Books.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). London,

England: SCM Press (Original Work Published 1927).

Heine, S. J., Proulx, T., & Vohs, K. D. (2006). The Meaning Maintenance model: on the coherence of social motivations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *10*(2), 88–110. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1002_1

Herman, J. L. author. (2001). *Trauma and recovery*. London, England: Pandora (Original Work Published 1992).

Hernandez, R., & Kocieniewski, D. (2009, March 26). As a young lawyer, Gillibrand defended big tobacco. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/27/nyregion/27gillibrand.html

Hess, A. (2014, October 30). Emma Sulkowicz inspired students across the country to carry their mattresses. Now what?. *Slate Magazine*. Retrieved from https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/10/carry-that-weight-emma-sulkowicz-s-mattress-becomes-a-national-movement.html

Hill, J. (2018, October 12). What the black men who identify with Brett Kavanaugh are missing. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/why-black-men-relate-brett-kavanaugh/572776/

Holquist, M. (2002). *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his world* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge (Original Work Published 1990).

Hooper, M. (2007). Myalgic encephalomyelitis: a review with emphasis on key findings in biomedical research. *Journal of Clinical Pathology*, *60*(5), 466–471. https://doi.org/10.1136/jcp.2006.042408

Hunt, J. (2018, September 5). Colin Kaepernick, Nike, and the myth of good and bad companies. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/09/nike-kaepernick/569371/

Hurley, D., & Santora, M. (2005, August 23). Unproved Lyme disease tests prompt warnings. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/23/health/policy/unproved-lyme-disease-tests-prompt-warnings.html

Hustvedt, S. (2010). *The shaking woman, or, a history of my nerves*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Ikard, D. (2013). *Blinded by the whites: why race still matters in 21st-century America*. In *Blacks in the Diaspora*. Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press.

Ingraham, C., & Reeves, J. (2016). New media, new panics. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *33*(5), 455–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1227863

Irwin, H. J. (1998). Affective predictors of dissociation II: shame and guilt. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *54*(2), 237–245. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4679(199802)54:2<237::AID-JCLP13>3.0.CO 2-K

Jackson, M. (2002). *Politics of storytelling: violence, transgresion and intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Jacobs, P. (2014, September 11). The Columbia student who's carrying a mattress until her alleged rapist leaves campus says she's getting a ton of support. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.in/The-Columbia-Student-Whos-Carrying-A-Mattress-Until-Her-Alleged-Rapist-Leaves-Campus-Says-Shes-Getting-A-Ton-Of-Support/articleshow/42213870.cms

Jacoby, T. (2015). A theory of victimhood: politics, conflict and the construction of victim-based identity. *Millennium*, *43*(2), 511–530. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829814550258

Janet, P. (1907). *The major symptoms of hysteria: fifteen lectures given in the Medical School of Harvard University* (2nd Ed.). In *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria: Fifteen Lectures given in the Medical School of Harvard University, 2nd Ed* (2nd Ed.). Oxford, England:

Macmillan.

Jason, L., Taylor, R., Kennedy, C., & Jordan, K. (2000). Chronic fatigue syndrome. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, *23*(3), 243–263.

Jenkins, H. (2004). The cultural logic of media convergence. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *7*(1), 33–34.

Jezebel.com. (n.d.). Annotated messages. Retrieved March 14, 2019, from Scribd website: https://www.scribd.com/document/254707657/Annotated-messages

John Doe v Amherst College. , No. 15-30097-MGM (United States District Court District of Massachusettes August 2, 2017).

John Doe v Brandeis University. , No. 15-11557-FDS (United States District Court District Of Massachusetts. March 31, 2016).

John Doe v Brown University. , No. 15-cv-00144-S-LDA ((United States District Court District of Rhode Island) November 2018).

Johnson, K. C. (2015). The war on due process. *Academic Questions*, *28*(1), 22–31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-015-9475-2

Johnson, K. C. (n.d.). Campus due process documents. Retrieved March 28, 2019, from kc-johnson.com website: https://kc-johnson.com/campus-due-process-documents/

Johnson, R. D., & Taylor, S. (2018). *The campus rape frenzy: the attack on due process at America's universities*. New York, NY: Encounter Books.

Jones, S. (2017). Having an affair may shorten your life: the Ashley Madison suicides. *Georgia State University Law Review*, *33*, 455–517.

Junger, S. (2016). Bonds of battle. In *Best American Essays 2016*. Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Juniper, A. (2011). *Wabi sabi: the Japanese art of impermanence*. North Clarendon,

Vermont: Tuttle Publishing.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *10*(2), 144–156. https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bpg016

Kassam, A. (2018, January 15). Margaret Atwood faces feminist backlash on social media over #MeToo. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/15/margaret-atwood-feminist-backlash-metoo

Kaufman, G. (2004). *The psychology of shame: theory and treatment of shame-based syndromes*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company (Original Work Published 1989).

Kellehear, A. (2007). *A social history of dying*. Port Melbourne, Vic: Cambridge University Press.

Kipnis, L. (1996). *Bound and gagged: pornography and the politics of fantasy in America*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Kipnis, L. (2015, February 27). Sexual paranoia strikes academe. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia-Strikes/190351

Kipnis, L. (2017). *Unwanted advances: sexual paranoia comes to campus*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Kipnis, L. (2018, December 22). A man lost his job to a rape joke. Are you cheering? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/22/rape-joke-metoo-movement-career-repercussions

Koss, M. P., Gidycz, C., & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The scope of rape: incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of higher

education students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *55*(2), 162–70.

Krebs, C., Christine Lindquist, Warner, T., Fisher, B., & Martin, S. (2007). *The campus sexual assault (CSA) study* (Report No. 221153). Washington, DC. Retrieved from Research Triangle Institute website: https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf

Kruglanski, A. W. (2004). *The psychology of closed mindedness*. In *Essays in Social Psychology*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Kunst, J. R., Bailey, A., Prendergast, C., & Gundersen, A. (2018). Sexism, rape myths and feminist identification explain gender differences in attitudes toward the #metoo social media campaign in two countries. *Media Psychology*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2018.1532300

Lacan, J. (2013). *The ethics of psychoanalysis 1959-1960: the seminar of Jacques Lacan* (D. Porter, Trans.). Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis (Original Work Published 1986).

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. New York, NY: Verso.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Verso (Original Work Published 1985).

Langton, L., & Sinozich, S. (2014). *Rape and sexual assault victimization among college-age females, 1995–2013*. Retrieved from Bureau of Justice Statistics website: https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsavcaf9513.pdf

Lantos, P. M. (2015). Chronic lyme disease. *Infectious Disease Clinics of North America*, *29*(2), 325–340. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.idc.2015.02.006

Levine, P. A. (2010). *In an unspoken voice: how the body releases trauma and restores goodness*. Berkeley, Cal: North Atlantic Books.

Lidstone, S. C. (2014). Great expectations: the placebo effect in Parkinson's disease.

Handbook of Experimental Pharmacology, *225*, 139–147. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-44519-8_8

Lifton, R. J. (1975). The postwar war. *Journal of Social Issues*, *31*(4), 181–195. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1975.tb01020.x

Lilla, M. (2017). *Once and future liberal*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

List of rare disease information. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2019, from National Organization for Rare Disorders website: https://rarediseases.org/for-patients-and-families/information-resources/rare-disease-information/

Ljunggren, J. (2017). Elitist egalitarianism: negotiating identity in the Norwegian cultural elite. *Sociology*, *51*(3), 559–574. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515590755

Loury, G., & McWhorter, J. (2019, February 18). *Glenn Loury & John McWhorter: talking blackface and "cancel culture"* [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWyNm9RsZbA

Lowenfels, A. B. (2005). Poly-ticks, politics, and Lyme disease. *The Lancet*, *365*(9462), 846–846. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)71040-0

Lukes, S. (1985). *Emile Durkheim: his life and work, a historical and critical study*. Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press.

Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2018). *The coddling of the American mind: how good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Lynd, H. M. (1958). *On shame and the search for identity*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World.

Macdonald, S. (2014, October 29). It's hard to ignore a woman toting a mattress everywhere she goes, which is why Emma Sulkowicz is still doing it. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/10/29/its-hard-to-

ignore-a-woman-toting-a-mattress-everywhere-she-goes-which-is-why-emma-sulkowicz-is-still-doing-it/?utm_term=.4f3180683f82

MacKinnon, C. A. (1987). *Feminism unmodified: discourses on life and law*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Markman, K. D., Proulx, T., & Lindberg, M. J. (2013). *The psychology of meaning*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Martensen, R. (2009). *A life worth living: a doctor's reflections on illness in a high-tech era*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Mattress Girl Accused Rapist Settles Case With University. (2017, July 25). *Marie Claire*. Retrieved from https://www.marieclaire.com.au/mattress-girl-accused-rapist-settles-case-with-university

McElroy, W. (2014, December 11). *Wendy McElroy on "how should colleges handle sexual assault?"* [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdlVcjYYCbs

McEvers, K. (2017, July 25). After assault, some campuses focus on healing over punishment. In *Law*. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2017/07/25/539334346/restorative-justice-an-alternative-to-the-process-campuses-use-for-sexual-assaul

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

McWhorter, J. (2018, October). Atonement as activism. *The American Interest; Washington*, *14*(1), 1–4.

Miller, A. (2003). *The crucible: a play in four acts*. In *Penguin Classics*. New York, NY: Penguin Books (Original work published 1953).

Morley, D. (1995). *Spaces of identity: global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Nacul, L., Lacerda, E. M., Kingdon, C. C., Curran, H., & Bowman, E. W. (2017). How have selection bias and disease misclassification undermined the validity of myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome studies? *Journal of Health Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105317695803

Nathanson, R. (2014, December 1). 'Carry that Weight' changes the conversation on campus sexual assault. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/how-carry-that-weight-is-changing-the-conversation-on-campus-sexual-assault-77543/

Nussbaum, M. C. (2004). *Hiding from humanity: disgust, shame, and the law*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Office of Civil Rights. (2011). *Dear colleague letter on sexual assault*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education website: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104.html

O'Sullivan, S. (2015). *Is it all in your head? true stories of imaginary illness*. New York, NY: Other Press.

Otto, R. (1958). *The idea of the holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (J. W. Harvey, Trans.). London, England: Oxford University Press (Original Work Published 1917).

Parsons, T. (1978). *Action theory and the human condition*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Paul Nungesser v Columbia University , trustees of Columbia university, Lee C. Bollinger and Jon Kessler. , No. 15CV03216 (United States District Court Southern District of New York April 22, 2015).

Pérez-Peña, R., & Taylor, K. (2014, May 3). Fight against sexual assaults holds colleges to account. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/us/

fight-against-sex-crimes-holds-colleges-to-account.html

Pilkington, E. (2018, September 25). Acclaimed authors pen letter in protest at “forced resignation” of Ian Buruma. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/sep/25/ian-buruma-new-york-review-of-books-letter-forced-resignation

Preckel, K., Kanske, P., & Singer, T. (2018). On the interaction of social affect and cognition: empathy, compassion and theory of mind. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, *19*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2017.07.010

Prins, J. B., van Der Meer, J. W., & Bleijenberg, G. (2006). Chronic fatigue syndrome. *The Lancet*, *367*(9507), 346–355. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(06)68073-2

Purser, R. E. (2011). A Buddhist–Lacanian perspective on lack. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, *39*(4), 289–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2011.618061

Rebman, A. W., Aucott, J. N., Weinstein, E. R., Bechtold, K. T., Smith, K. C., & Leonard, L. (2017). Living in limbo: contested narratives of patients with chronic symptoms following Lyme disease. *Qualitative Health Research*, *27*(4), 534–546. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315619380

Rennison, C. M. (2014, December 21). Privilege, among rape victims. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/22/opinion/who-suffers-most-from-rape-and-sexual-assault-in-america.html?module=inline

Rennison, C. M., & Addington, L. A. (2014). Violence against college women: a review to identify limitations in defining the problem and inform future research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *15*(3), 159–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838014520724

Responding to bias at the U of M. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2019, from University of Minnesota website: https://bias-response.umn.edu

Roberts, D., & Jesudason, S. (2013). *Movement intersectionality*. *10*(2), 313–328. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000210

Ronson, J. (2015a). *So you've been publicly shamed*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Ronson, J. (2015b, July 20). *When online shaming goes too far*. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/jon_ronson_what_happens_when_online_shaming_spirals_out_of_control?language=en

Rottenberg, C. (2013). The rise of neoliberal feminism. *Cultural Studies*, *28*(3), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361

Rubenfeld, J. (2017). Privatization and state action: Do campus sexual assault hearings violate due process? *Texas Law Review*, *96*(1), 15–69.

Russell, L., Broderick, G., Taylor, R., Fernandes, H., Harvey, J., Barnes, Z., … Fletcher, M. A. (2016). Illness progression in chronic fatigue syndrome: a shifting immune baseline. *BMC Immunology*, *17*(3). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12865-016-0142-3

Ruti, M. (2010). The singularity of being: Lacan and the immortal within. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *58*(6), 1113–1138. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065110396083

Ruti, M. (2012). *The singularity of being: Lacan and the immortal within*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Ruti, M. (2015). The posthumanist quest for the universal: Butler, Badiou, Žižek. *Angelaki*, *20*(4), 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2015.1096646

Sacked Labour minister Carl Sargeant found dead. (2017, November 7). *BBC News*. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-41904161

Said, E. (1995). *Orientalism*. London, England: Penguin (Original Work Published 1978).

Saleam, J. (1999). *The other radicalism: an inquiry into contemporary Australian extreme*

right ideology, politics and organization 1975-1995 (PhD, University of Sydney). Retrieved from https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/807/2/adt-NU20020222.14582201front.pdf

Saltz, J. (2014, December 10). The 19 best art shows of 2014. *New York*. Retrieved from https://www.vulture.com/2014/12/19-best-art-shows-of-2014.html

Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: women, work, and the will to lead*. London, England: W H Allen.

Sanghani, R. (2014, September 3). Student vows to carry mattress everywhere until her alleged rapist is expelled. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11071949/Student-vows-to-carry-mattress-everywhere-until-her-alleged-rapist-is-expelled.html

Satalino, A. (2008). *Personality traits, perceived stress, and coping styles in patients with chronic Lyme disease and fibromyalgia* (PhD). Walden University. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/304381325?accountid=10382

Saussure, F. de. (1966). *Course in general linguistics* (C. Bally, C. A. Sechehaye, & A. Reidlinger, Eds.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill (Original Work Published 1916).

Savage, M., Bagnall, G., & Longhurst, B. (2001). Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: class identities in the northwest of England. *Sociology*, *35*(4), 875–892. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038501035004005

Savage, M., Silva, E., & Warde, A. (2010). Dis-identification and class identity. In E. Silva & A. Warde (Eds.), *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu's Legacy: Settling Accounts and Developing Alternatives* (pp. 60–74). London: Routledge.

Scarth, B. (2018). *The implications of locating social suffering and suicidality in the brain*. Presented at the Building Critical Bridges: The Third Conference of the Critical Suicide

Studies Network, University of Western Australia.

Schlosser, E. (2015, June 3). I'm a liberal professor, and my liberal students terrify me. *Vox*. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/2015/6/3/8706323/college-professor-afraid

Schmitz, H. (2011). Emotions outside the box—the new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality (R. Müllan, Trans.). *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, *10*(2), 241–259. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9195-1

Scott, T. (2017). *The force of truth: an authentic narrative*. Forgotten Books (Original Work Published 1789).

Seiler, A.-C. (2018). *When the body cries out: doctor patient relationships in the context of medical uncertainty* (PhD). The Wright Institute Graduate School of Psychology. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/2115474442?accountid=10382

Shahid, W. (2016, December 15). America in populist times: an interview with Chantal Mouffe. *The Nation*.

Shulevitz, J. (2015, March 21). In college and hiding from scary ideas. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html

Singal, J. (2017, May 2). This is what a modern-day witch hunt looks like. *New York*. Retrieved from http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/05/transracialism-article-controversy.html

Singer, P. (2017, August 10). Why Google was wrong: Did James Damore really deserve to be fired for what he wrote? Retrieved from https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/google-wrong-article-1.3399750

Skyttner, L. (2001). *General systems theory: ideas and applications*. Singapore: World

Scientific Publishing.

Smith, C., & Wessely, S. (2014). Unity of opposites? Chronic fatigue syndrome and the challenge of divergent perspectives in guideline development. *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry; London*, *85*(2), 214. https://doi.org/10.1136/jnnp-2012-303208

Smith, R. (2014, September 21). In a mattress, a lever for art and political protest. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html

Solanas, V. (1971). *SCUM manifesto*. New York, NY: Verso (Original Work Published 1968).

Solove, D. J. (2007). *The future of reputation: gossip, rumor, and privacy on the Internet*. New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press.

Sontag, S. (1979). *Illness as metaphor*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Sontag, S. (1989). *AIDS and its metaphors*. London, England: Penguin.

Sprague, C. (2012, November 27). Wabi Sabi: beauty in brokenness. Retrieved February 22, 2019, from My Refuge House website: http://www.myrefugehouse.org/2012/11/27/wabi-sabi-beauty-in-brokenness/

Stanley-Becker, I. (2018, July 30). Famed opera singer blames #MeToo for her husband's suicide: "You can break a person." *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/07/30/famed-swedish-opera-singer-blames-metoo-for-her-husbands-suicide-you-can-break-a-person/?utm_term=.7c6005b78c5c

Stengers, I. (2013). The doctor and the charlatan. *Cultural Studies Review*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v9i2.3561

Stewart, M. (2016). The campus “rape crisis” as moral panic. *Academic Questions*, *29*(2), 177–187. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-016-9560-1

Stricker, R. B., & Johnson, L. (2012). Spirochetal “debris” versus persistent infection in chronic Lyme disease: from semantics to science. *Future Microbiology*, *7*(11), 1243–1246. https://doi.org/10.2217/FMB.12.92

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Sulkowicz, E. (2014b, November 24). Emma Sulkowicz: what I’m thankful for. *Time*.

Sulkowicz, E. (2014a, May 15). My rapist is still on campus. *Time*. Retrieved from http://time.com/99780/campus-sexual-assault-emma-sulkowicz/

Synergy Media Ltd. (n.d.). Synergy Media Ltd. Retrieved January 15, 2019, from https://synergymedialtd.com/

Tasca, C., Rapetti, M., Carta, M. G., & Fadda, B. (2012). Women and hysteria in the history of mental health. *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health : CP & EMH*, *8*, 110–119. https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017901208010110

Taylor, K. (2015, May 20). Emma Sulkowicz takes mattress protest to graduation ceremony at Columbia University. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from https://www.smh.com.au/world/emma-sulkowicz-takes-mattress-protest-to-graduation-ceremony-at-columbia-university-20150520-gh5v9w.html

Taylor, K. (2017, December 22). Columbia settles with student cast as a rapist in mattress art project. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/nyregion/columbia-settles-with-student-cast-as-a-rapist-in-mattress-art-project.html

Templin, C., Napp, L. C., & Ghadri, J. R. (2016). Takotsubo syndrome: underdiagnosed, underestimated, but understood? *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, *67*(16), 1937–1940. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacc.2016.03.006

The Dalai Lama, & Jinpa, T. (2013). *Healing anger: the power of patience from a Buddhist perspective*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House (Original Work Published 1997).

The Economist. (2017, November 17). Over-friendly, or sexual harassment? It depends partly on whom you ask. *The Economist*. Retrieved from https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/11/17/over-friendly-or-sexual-harassment-it-depends-partly-on-whom-you-ask

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). (2017). *Bias response team report 2017* [Non Government Organisation]. Retrieved from https://www.thefire.org/first-amendment-library/special-collections/fire-guides/bias-response-team-report-2017/

The history of hysteria. (n.d.). Retrieved January 23, 2019, from Office for Science and Society website: https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-quackery/history-hysteria

Thompson, W. G. (2005). *The placebo effect and health: combining science and compassionate care*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Twenge, J. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy—and completely unprepared for adulthood—and what that means for the rest of us*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

Twenge, J. (2018). *iGen: the smartphone generation*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA8kZZS_bzc

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Viking.

Van Loon, J. (2015). A feminist approach to popular philosophy: classifying recent work by Sarah Bakewell, Laura Kipnis and Siri Hustvedt. *New Writing*, *12*(3), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2015.1051994

Van Sykle, K. (2014, September 14). The Columbia student carrying a mattress everywhere

says reporters are triggering rape memories. *New York*. Retrieved from https://www.thecut.com/2014/09/columbia-emma-sulkowicz-mattress-rape-performance-interview.html

Victor, D. (2018, January 20). Pepsi pulls ad accused of trivializing Black Lives Matter. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html

Viebeck, E. (2019, January 20). 'I will stand up for what I believe in' Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand says — but what she believes quickly changed as she moved from House to Senate. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/i-will-stand-up-for-what-i-believe-in-sen-kirsten-gillibrand-says--but-what-she-believes-quickly-changed-as-she-moved-from-house-to-senate/2019/01/19/1534b4ce-1b55-11e9-9ebf-c5fed1b7a081_story.html

Volkmer, I. (2014). *The global public sphere: public communication in the age of reflective interdependence.* Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Volokh, E. (2015, September 11). Better that five innocent students get expelled than one guilty student stay enrolled. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/09/11/better-that-five-innocent-students-get-expelled-than-one-guilty-student-stay-enrolled/?utm_term=.e005ac6ac407

Wallace, E., Buil, I., & de Chernatony, L. (2018). 'Consuming good' on social media: What can conspicuous virtue signalling on facebook tell us about prosocial and unethical intentions? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3999-7

Walter, T. (2012). Why different countries manage death differently: a comparative analysis of modern urban societies. *British Journal of Sociology*, *63*(1), 123–145. https://doi.org/

10.1111/j.1468-4446.2011.01396.x

Walters, S. D. (2017, May 5). Academe's poisonous call-out culture. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/Academe-s-Poisonous-Call-Out/240016

Weiss, B. (2018, July 31). Aziz Ansari is guilty. of not being a mind reader. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/opinion/aziz-ansari-babe-sexual-harassment.html

West, P. (2004). *Conspicuous compassion: why sometimes it really is cruel to be kind*. Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society.

Wolke, D., & Lereya, S. T. (2015). Long-term effects of bullying. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, *100*(9), 879–885. https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2014-306667

Wood Rudolph, H. (2017, October 11). How women talk: Heather Wood Rudulph interviews Deborah Tannen. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Retrieved from https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/how-women-talk-heather-wood-rudulph-interviews-deborah-tannen/

Yoffe, E. (2018, October 13). Does anyone still take both sexual assault and due process seriously? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/sexual-assault-has-become-partisan-issue/572893/

Young, C. (2015a). The unsayable. *Academic Questions*, *28*(1), 40–47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-015-9482-3

Young, C. (2015b, February 2). Wrongheaded political correctness. *Newsday*. Retrieved from https://www.newsday.com/opinion/columnists/cathy-young/wrongheaded-political-correctness-cathy-young-1.9896913

Zender, R., & Olshansky, E. (2009). Women's mental health: depression and anxiety.

Nursing Clinics of North America, *44*(3), 355–364. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cnur.2009.06.002

Zimmerman, E. (2016, June 22). Campus sexual assault: a timeline of major events. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/education/campus-sexual-assault-a-timeline-of-major-events.html

Žižek, S. (2018). *Like a thief in broad daylight: power in the era of post-humanity*. New York, NY: Allen Lane.

Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.