HENS LAY, PEOPLE LIE

A Novel and an Exegesis

Beyond Epistolarity: The Warp, the Weft and the Loom

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two components: 'Hens Lay, People Lie', a novel, and an exegesis, Beyond Epistolarity the Warp, the Weft and the Loom. Together they propose that 'creative epistolarity', namely imaginative writing with factual material, including personal letters, emails and journals, provides women with a safe space where knowledge can be intuited, articulated or performed. In this space, women find their own creative voice, write their stories and in turn, understand themselves.

'Hens Lay, People Lie' draws heavily on the epistolary genre but aims to move beyond that genre by using an auto/biographical and creative epistolary style better suited to reveal emotion and character. The novel illustrates that creative epistolarity intersects with feminism and postmodernism and is uniquely placed to empower women to write their stories. The exegesis discusses theories, methodologies, fictional techniques and creative decisions made during the writing of the novel. Key writerly choices are examined: the choice of an epistolary novel and the importance of creative epistolarity as a way of knowing the self as well as production of knowledge. The research process is practice-led research informed by personal correspondence and personal history in the autoethnographic mode. The exegesis presents a reflective examination of existing works in the genre of epistolary fiction and calls on the practices of exponents of the epistolary form such as Elizabeth Jolley, Nancy Turner and Lionel Shriver. It also provides an evaluation of the relationship between the artefact and diverse critical theories ranging from Hélène Cixous' écriture féminine, Carolyn Ellis' concept of autoethnography, and Margaretta Jolly’s discussions on epistolarity.

The thesis demonstrates that narratives of women’s experience have the capacity to challenge metanarratives and instigate social, cultural and political change.

Keywords: Auto/biography, autoethnography, epistolarity, writing practice.
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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the examinable outcome. Photos used are under the creative common licence. Document formatting and proofreading was conducted by Marian and Paul Whitting and editing by Dr. Elizabeth Colbert, and Cindy Vallar in accordance with the Australian Standards for Editing Practice (ASEP) for research students' theses and dissertations.

Signed:

Glenice Joy Whitting

September 2012
Dedication

For Mickey and my family.

For their love, support and encouragement.
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Those who work with their hands are labourers, those who work with their hands and heads are craftsmen; and those who work with their hands, heads and hearts are artists. (Anderson 2004:73)

The interior of the Trades Hall looked cool and inviting. On a whim, and to escape the hot north wind dust devils swirling down the busy city street, I stepped inside. A kaleidoscope of multi-coloured silks, mohair and cottons, on and off looms, dazzled the senses. A small elderly weaver clad in hand-spun garments was sitting in front of an old-fashioned loom. Her eyes conveyed the wisdom of her life and the joy of creation. She smiled and I was instantly drawn to her. She passionately talked of warps, wefts and webs. I stroked soft wool and felt the strength of firm cotton threads used to create intricate innovative designs. Over coffee, we talked about our lives and the craft of weaving. I did not understand the weaving terms, but yearned to be part of her world: to weave my own design.

This thesis is comprised of two distinct but related components: the novel, 'Hens Lay, People Lie', and accompanying exegesis, 'Beyond Epistolarity’. Together they demonstrate that imaginative writing combined with factual material, which I call 'creative epistolarity', provides women with a safe space, a gap between fact and fiction, where knowledge can be intuited, articulated or performed. In this space
women can find their personal creative voice, write their stories and in the process understand themselves.

To hold all the strands of the artefact and exegesis together, and to engage in an analysis of my work, I used a weaving metaphor. My choice of a metaphor was a deliberate strategy designed to make the process of thinking through theoretical models practical and possible rather than mystifying and difficult (Bartlett & Mercer 1999: 367). Weaving on a handloom involves interlacing one set of threads of yarn (the warp) with another (the weft). The warp threads are stretched lengthwise in the weaving loom. The weft, namely the cross threads, are woven into the warp to make the cloth (Simkin 2011). In the writing of my PhD, autobiography and biography, 'auto/biography', was the warp: the taut foundational threads attached to the metaphoric loom. Creative epistolary fiction was the weft, the interwoven threads creating the colourful design. The shed, the space between the alternating warp threads through which the shuttle containing the weft is passed, became the safe creative space from which I tackled the challenging emotional and ethical aspects of the novel. Autoethnographic informed qualitative inquiry supported my practice-led research and provided the methodological components of the hand-operated loom, the firm framework that cradled the weaving of words.

'Hens Lay, People Lie' explores my thirty-five year long-distance pen friendship with an older American woman. Throughout the exegesis I have used the nickname Mickey for my friend, and within the novel the character's name is Martha. Mickey gave her permission to use her full name; however, these name changes preserve her anonymity. The novel is partly auto/biographical while embracing the creative techniques of fiction through the epistolary arc of letters, journal entries, limericks and poetry spanning thirty-five years (1975 - 2010) and two countries (Australia - USA).

A PhD by artefact and exegesis is more than a hybrid: it allows the researcher to both situate their creative practice within a trajectory of research and do justice to its personally invested poetics (Hamilton & Jaaniste 2010: 32). Academic analysis and practice-led research as a methodology gave me a certainty of structure. The exegesis was a writing project and there was a question to be addressed: does contemporary creative epistololarity give women a safe space to know themselves,
find their voice and write their stories? Because writing a novel means living with uncertainty, I found myself returning to the certainty of the exegesis until I saw my writing of the first draft of the novel as an act of research. It was my way of discovering what I wanted to say creatively, and how I wanted to say it. A mutually beneficial relationship developed between the exegesis and the novel. Research for each chapter of the novel impacted on and informed the exegesis and vice-versa. The more I engaged in practice-led research, the more my creative practice was enhanced by my engagement with critical theory.

The exegesis explores how my critical reading enabled me to work effectively alongside the creative practice. Researching issues such as postcolonial feminisms, *écriture féminine*, hybrid genres, ethics of care and, when Mickey died, writing from mourning, prompted key questions which affected the crafting of the novel. In five handwritten journals, which I consider as ‘letters to myself’, I worked through the many issues and challenges relating to both the exegesis and the novel. The journals are both reflective, reflexive and recursive. By reflective thinking I mean my deepest thoughts about events, situations, people involved, their experience and how they felt. Reflexive practice entails paying acute attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions and an evaluation of current literature, critical theories and decisions accepted and abandoned (Bolton 2010: xviii). The recursive dimension of the journal refers to their impact on subsequent drafts of the novel.

I became a critical observer of my own writing practice, which led to emerging insights into why I write and why I write the way I do. I learnt to appreciate the extent to which my research influenced, not only my thinking, but also my writing and how the shed (the space between fact and fiction) could provide me with a safe space to tell my story. I discovered that the ensuing narrative of two women’s experience had the capacity to challenge metanarratives and instigate social, cultural and political action (Schneider et al. 2004: Liamputtong 2007). As well, I discovered that my predicament applied to women writers more generally.

The interplay between the research process, which included the reflective/reflexive journal, and the creative writing, had a profound effect on my writing practice. For example, in my journal I explored many issues arising from my decision to write the
novel using embedded dialogue without quotation marks. Of equal importance was the decision to use Australian spelling. This was appropriate because the Australian character, the older Diane, reveals the story. However, for authenticity, and to enhance the distinction between the voices of the main characters, Martha’s letters contain US spelling. The inseparable relationship between the novel, journal and exegesis developed into a praxis that has already extended beyond the boundaries of this PhD journal and exegesis. I have found a new way of working and it has become the way I write and will design future novels.

Although both the novel and the exegesis stand as individual pieces of work, they are companion pieces. One form of expression is not more important than the other. The artefact and the exegesis are equally valid forms of creative inquiry (Atherton 2010: 3). However, the reader would benefit from reading the novel first. This will allow the woven cloth of the story in all its colours to be experienced before the loom of the exegesis is revealed.
There are no faster or firmer friendships than those between people who love the same books. (Irving Stone)
This book is based on fact and woven with fiction. I have created a cast of fictional characters and used an amalgamation of real and imagined letters. Some of the events described in these pages did happen, others are pure invention, others still a blend of both.
CYANIDE JAR

How many hours have I spent
Thoughts beating in my mind
Pinning down a sentiment
When suddenly I find
That words, so nearly sentient
Can die when too confined—MRB
July 25th 1975,

It should never have happened. Not like that. Not in sunshine. A hint of spring in the air. It should have happened in the dark, when clouds covered the moon and fog hid the enormity. But she travelled every day by train. Loved the click clack of wheels. Didn’t mind the graffiti, called it New York’s urban art, but she only glimpsed it. Saw what she wanted to see. Always had a book two inches from the chunky glasses balanced on her upturned nose. She swayed and jolted to wherever she went, lost in another world, another time. Closed off from strap-hanging folk on their way to windowless offices, but she was coiled, ready to strike. Her lashing tongue, barbed words always found their mark. A thousand tiny cuts. When she flew too close to the sun, my body bled. After she tumbled to earth I tried to gather her in my arms. Lift her out of blackness. She left me grieving in the dark. So like Chuck. Too much like...

The plane dips its wing. I glance out the window then hastily stuff my diary into a backpack already overflowing with our passports, airline tickets and two books. Below, a dried up Coopers Creek staggers through shimmering heat. Ochre soil and sparse trees stretch for miles. The vast open spaces and parched land reminds me of home. Only the ocotillo cactus and century trees are missing.

It’s a good thing I’m small. Beside me, Chuck’s frame fills the seat to overflowing, his legs wedged under the seat in front. That man’s not made for tiny planes. When I tap his arm, he removes the large white kerchief covering his face and glowers.

    Buckle up.

    What?

He’s turned off his hearing aids. Again. I point down and he fastens his seat belt.
Far below, a child waves beside a pull-along camper parked too close to a water hole. No critter in its right mind will drink there. Clothes hanging on a line means soapsuds leaching into sand. A cloud obscures my view and I lean forward. Smoke. Burning wood. Decimated trees? I search for more transgressions. Where is their latrine? Don’t tell me they’re wandering into the bush. Let's hope they take a shovel.

Crazy folk. I turn to Chuck. Don’t they know anything? Chuck. Turn on your goddamn hearing aids.

Sitting on a log in pitiful shade beside the makeshift runway, I read my journal notes on Alan Moorhead's Cooper's Creek. The arrogance of some men. How could Robert O'Hara Burke, against all advice, take fellow explorers Wills, King and Grey, from New South Wales, through endless miles of desert to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the hottest, driest time of the year? What a recipe for disaster. Brahe, the leader of their backup party, waited four months for them at Cooper's Creek before returning to Menindie. Prior to leaving, he buried the remaining stores and blazed a prominent Coolibah tree with the message, DIG. 8 FT NW. APR 21 1861.

Lionel, our tour leader, wanders over. We'll head off to see the Dig Tree in about ten minutes, Martha. He points to his watch. I nod and continue reading.

The backup party left in the morning. Burke, Wills, and King, only hours later, after weeks of crossing a dry salt lake sizzling in unbearable heat, their camels slaughtered for meat, staggered into the deserted camp. The retrieved food was soon gone. Only King survived. It is the tragedy of the story that gets to me.

My stomach rumbles at the thought of food. A two-inch-thick steak, smothered in crushed peppercorn sauce with a sprig of fresh parsley, would be good. Instead, I dig deep into my pack for a cookie.

The story fills my mind as we stroll along the sandy track. Twigs snap and shatter under foot and a heavy blanket of heat saps my energy on the short walk leading past that makeshift camp I saw from the air. Goddamn tourists.

* * *
The night belongs to the novelist. You straighten your back and
stretch weary muscles. A bold, bright lamp highlights the desk.
In the shadows, folders and documents festoon every inch of the
floor. The filing cabinet a hanging garden of paper. The only
time available in your busy life to write The Book is between
three and six a.m. Snores, loud and sonorous. Sound sleep for
him at last. A cough. He will soon stretch, yawn and feel for
you.

You glance at the folder marked 'Martha', containing how
many years of letters? Can it really be thirty-five? The last
two years of Martha's letters are in loopy script scrawled on
bright yellow paper. Why yellow? Maybe the lone general store in
Portal, Arizona only stocked one colour? Why didn't she buy a
white pad on her monthly shopping trip to the larger town of
Geriton? Maybe yellow was easier on ninety-year-old eyes.

The first rays of sun gild the topmost leaves of tall
melaleuca gums and spread a promise of hope beneath dark clouds.
It will soon rise above them, lost to you for another day. But
today you know why you do this. Why you write until your eyes
won’t focus and your head tips towards the computer screen
hoping for some support. You lean back in your padded chair and
smile. The black words beam back at you. Half an hour ago they
were blood red, chaotically dripping and slipping down the
screen. Now, they make sense and positively glow. The beginning
of this work in progress finally feels right. Your fingertips
caress the screen. How joyous when the writing flows.
1975: Outback Australia

A droning, buzzing sound tugs at Diane’s thoughts. She swishes her hand in front of her face, but the gnat-like noise doesn’t go away. Her barefoot daughter shouts and Diane hurries to the camper door. Kerry waves at a speck in the sky and laughs as it waggles its wings before disappearing beyond the tree line. Diane juggles two cans. Tinned sausages or baked beans? Big choice, but the nearest store is a day’s travel away. But why worry? Kerry and her Dad are a joy to feed. If Diane put a feather on a plate, they’d think it was chicken. She puts the tinned sausages back in the cupboard. What six-year-old doesn’t like baked beans? That’s what they’ll have for tea tonight.

Kerry splashes in the milky water of the lagoon. Her fair skin so tanned by lengthy days under the sun she could be mistaken for an aboriginal child. It has taken a long day of dirt, dust, cockatoos and kangaroos to travel from the outback town of Innamincka, population seven, to this oasis. Diane revels in the solitude. She doesn’t have to answer to anyone. A hairdresser is always at someone’s beck and call. You must fit me in. I must have my hair tinted, cut, permed, set, tipped, spiked. I’m going to a special date, dance, party, funeral, hospital.

Their is the only camp for two hundred miles. The campervan shimmers in the energy-sapping heat. She feels like a gypsy. Everything they own—socks, shirts, pants, towels, sleeping bags, is securely pegged to hastily erected rope lines attached to two Coolibah trees. The luxury of an unlimited water supply means she no longer has to stand Kerry in a bucket, soap her down and rinse her with only one dipper.
15.11.2008: Journal:
The squabbling of waking seagulls drags you out of your memories. You stretch aching shoulders before abandoning the computer, and the novel in progress. Under the shower, you ponder whether to include your first marriage and messy divorce. Nineteen and ceremonially bound to a boy your own age. How young. How stupidly young. Your hasty wedding so reminiscent of long-gone war years. The borrowed gown, the romantic week in a family friend’s cottage in the Dandenong Ranges. His flight to Malaya to rejoin the 2nd Royal Australian Regiment commissioned to fight Communist Terrorists on the Thai border. Two years in Malacca protected by the army. The return to Australia to build a home and be told you couldn’t have children. To be blessed three years later with a daughter, only for the dream to shatter. Eight years of marriage. Three years on your own. You pull your mind out of the past. No, better to leave all that out.

In 1974, at the local Baptist church, the sun shone, silk rustled and doves cooed when the Reverend Marks murmured a benediction. Both sets of elderly parents sighed with relief and toasted everything that moved at the reception at the Sundowner Hotel. Your little girl clung to Ron’s knees as to a life raft in a storm. The adoption ceremony and immediate three-month camping trip around Australia achieved the desired result, three fractured lives becoming a family.

They are living their dream. Mum, Dad and daughter bonding in the isolation of the bush. Getting to know each other, testing strengths and weaknesses. And there are weaknesses. Diane cannot resist Kerry’s crumpled face and tear filled eyes and often, for the sake of peace, gives her the desired toy or chocolate. Ron believes the old adage, spare the rod and spoil the child still applies and that a swift hand across the buttocks does more good than harm. When crammed together in an old beat up campervan the differences in parenting techniques are accentuated.
This sounds interesting. Ron had pointed to an advertisement in *The Aussie Trader*. Much loved campervan. Needs repair. A thousand dollars.

Uh ha, Diane murmured. Dishes clattered in the sink. To her, it sounded like a real estate advertisement for a 'renovator's dream'.

I'll offer seven hundred and see what they say.

It took six months of sawing and hammering in the garage until after midnight before the camper, complete with new refrigerator and stove, was ready to transport them to what Diane referred to as, 'The trip of a lifetime'.

Kerry pesters Diane to distraction to play cards, or *I Spy with My Little Eye*, or help build a cubby. I'm bored, she moans.

Diane would kill for electricity, running water, and her twin tub washing machine features constantly in her dreams. But she would endure anything—dust, flies and even bindy burrs—to wake each morning to corellas squabbling in dead trees, a blue canopy of sky and no television. So much time is wasted on television and there is a constant haze of smog over the city. Out here, the stars at night are bigger, closer and almost touchable.

Visitors. Kerry points to a small group of people and hurries to her mother's side. Diane wraps an arm around her and hugs her close.

Ron. There is a sharp edge to Diane's voice. He hurries over. She glances around the makeshift camp and sighs. Too late to pull the washing off the line, or to straighten up. She snatches a dirty tea towel off the back of a folding chair, grabs a garbage bag full of rubbish, throws them into the camper and slams the door. Let it stink; she’ll sort that out later. If only she’d tinted her hair last night when Kerry was in bed. She groans at the thought of dark regrowth.

A tall, bearded man leads the small group. Behind him, a bulky elderly man strides in front of a short athletic looking woman. Both wear battered khaki trousers and multi-pocketed vests. Binoculars and cameras are slung around their necks. Pulling off his floppy hat, the elderly man runs calloused fingers through a thatch of greying hair, revealing dark eyes partially hidden beneath bushy eyebrows. He glares at the sun then drags the hat back on and, with outstretched hand, ambles over to Ron

Dr Livingston, I presume?

Ron grins. Ron Simpson, he says shaking hands.
Where do you come from?
Melbourne.
Why, you look like decent people, Chuck replies.
I'm Martha, I say introducing myself to Diane and Kerry.

Take a load off your feet. Diane points to a canvas camp-chair in the shade. Ron grabs a stick and lifts a battered kettle off the campfire. Lionel tips his akubra back on his head and squats on his haunches. Glad to see you've kept the billy boiling.

Chuck, always ready for a cup of coffee, hitches trouser legs and with a grunt, eases his bulky frame onto a log. Black, thanks. He holds up two fingers. Two sugars. He whisks away flies with the back of his hand.

Holding an enamel mug, Chuck noisily clangs the spoon. I mentally count, four stirs clockwise and three anticlockwise, then wait for him to loudly sieve coffee through his bristly grey moustache. Once he settles down for a talk, there is no moving him. I want to see more than the blaze on the tree. Maybe I can wander off to a secluded spot to lie on my back on red earth and observe comical corellas bitch and squawk. Or even catch a glimpse of the elusive blue kingfisher I've read so much about. Noisy chatter. With all this activity, there is no hope of sighting a kingfisher.

I smile at Diane and tap the chair beside me. She settles back with a thankful sigh. Diane is the same age as my youngest daughter, Barb, but there the similarities end. Barb has olive skin, her thick black braid reaching to her waist. Diane is fair in a Nordic way, but her tight curly hair has dark roots.

The little gal plonks herself at her mother's feet and Diane absent-mindedly strokes her daughter's hair. The gesture tugs at my heart. It is a long time since my children were small. Barb is in her late thirties, and I can't remember when we last exchanged a caress. So many years without a gentle stroking of hair.

Coffee? Diane picks up a mug, takes a heaped spoon from a jar of granules and adds water from the billy.

What happened to a coffee pot filled with brewed coffee made with real beans. I can cope, but life is too short for instant. I take a couple of sips before placing the mug on the sand.

Where are you from? Diane passes me a slab of fruitcake as big as a doorstop. In between bites I tell her about New Mexico. Of the blood red Sangre de Christo mountains, ice crystals turning trailing trees into frozen chandeliers, adobe
houses high on a hill, Madonna-blue gates and the Palace of the Governors. Diane listens intently. She waves her hand towards the little gal who has run off to play.

I’ve always wanted to travel overseas, but with a six year old…We watch Kerry happily add rocks to an already large cairn that is beginning to rival Machu Pichu.

An Afghan camel driver would be proud of Kerry’s cairn. Diane smiles as another rock is added. Got any kids?

Two daughters… The cairn grows higher. And I have a granddaughter. I nod towards Kerry. Just wait until your little gal is a teenager.

Diane pushes the cake plate in front of me. I shake my head, grab two imaginary waistline love handles before pointing to the camp oven. Smells delicious. What’s cooking?

Damper. It's a type of bread and easy to make. Just mix together self-raising flour, water, a bit of oil and some salt.

I take out my journal and start jotting notes.

I'm the same. Diane indicates my book. I always keep a record of our trips and I'm constantly making lists: shopping lists, things I need to do, things Ron needs to fix…Damper is great when I've run out of bread.

I tuck the journal back into my daypack. Do you like to read?

When I get time.

Have you read Patrick White? *Voss* is a tour de force.

Diane puts a log on the fire, pokes it with a stick and checks the camp oven. I try again. Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*? There is no look of recognition; instead she asks who organised our tour.

The Audubon Society.

Diane shakes her head, so I tell her that a rare first edition of John James Audubon's sumptuously illustrated *The Birds of America*, depicting more than four hundred life-size North American species in four monumental volumes, is her State Library's most valuable book.

Her face has a 'so what' look about it.

It's worth over a million dollars.

Diane raises her hands and shrugs her shoulders. A daughter, six days a week hairdressing, plus canteen duty at the school?

We both smile. I'm not that old that I can't remember.
Chuck scuffs the red dust with his boot, picks up a fragment of bone, places it in his large palm, and prods it with a scarred brown thumb. Part of the mandible of a *macropus giganteus*.

Really? Ron looks closely at the piece of kangaroo jawbone. Lionel joins us in the shade. Diane can't keep her eyes off his bushy beard. She leans towards Lionel. You look like Ned Kelly. Have you been to Glenrowan? Did you see the museum? Ned Kelly’s armour was made out of ploughshares and they hanged him in the Old Melbourne Goal. He wrote a letter—

The famous Jerilderie letter. Lionel strokes his beard and laughs.

Lionel is also famous, Diane, I interrupt. He's a published author.

Diane’s smile is pleasant, but I can't believe someone so well informed about Ned Kelly is not aware of Lionel's achievements.


I've never met an author. Diane stares at crumbs of cake trapped in Lionel's beard.

See any dingos? Lionel whips a comb out of his pocket and, with a flick of the wrist, removes the crumbs.

We hear them howling some nights, Ron says. During the day, you can’t get near them.

They get bad press, I say, my blood rising. Journalists write stories of howling Dingoes roaming the countryside and killing sheep. It reminds folk of the *Hounds of the Baskervilles* and they—

It sells papers. Chuck knows me too well. Once I get started I can't stop.

Far more newsworthy than stock killed by feral domestic dogs.

Diane passes Lionel the last piece of cake.

It's the same with everything, I say. Misinformation. Why do folk rely on newspaper articles and television when they can buy Lionel's book and learn something factual?

The men and Kerry wander off, their eyes scanning red soil while we sit well back from the campfire and watch the billy boil. We chat about the weather, how quickly
the washing dries and the price of a dozen eggs. The homey smell of cooking and the soft rustling of invisible critters soothe my nerves, but Diane's bleached head tightens the stress knots in the back of my neck and shoulders. It stirs a memory of my first child when she tried to bleach her hair and ended up with a spiky crop that defied definition.

That must be cold. Diane points to my mug. I shake my head, but she throws the contents onto thirsty soil and makes another cup.

Would you like powdered milk? More sugar? To cover the awkwardness I prattle about books, poetry and writing limericks. Diane tries to keep up and nods occasionally while poking the already red-hot coals of the fire.

You've lost me, Martha, she finally says. I'd love to be able to talk about literature. Be well read. She glances at Kerry paddling along the edge of the waterhole. Maybe I can find time to borrow some books from the local library when I get home.

There are many famous authors, such as Virginia Woolf and Christina Stead, but I suggest you start off with Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë. It focuses on the emotions and experiences of a thinking, passionate woman. I'm sure you'll like it.

Jane? Diane smiles wickedly. I know her well. She has a white minx rinse before her hairset every week.

I wriggle in my seat, appreciating the joke, because I've done it again. Let my passion for books override my sensitivity.

That fruitcake was delicious. It's the best I've ever tasted. Diane smiles and eases back in her chair.

I'll send you the recipe if you like. What's your address? I rummaged around in my backpack until I find one of Chuck's cards.

CHARLES M. JACKSON
11 Camino Ranchitos
Santa Fe, New Mexico 83565 USA

Tearing a scrap of paper from the bottom of a Woman's Weekly magazine, Diane writes.

Diane Simpson, 57 Kingsley St Kubungi Beach 3192, Victoria Australia

I tuck the address inside my journal, recalling many exchanges of addresses. Chuck's cards handed out to networking acquaintances at conferences, in hotel
lobbies, to wide-eyed students clinging to his coat tails desperate to tap into his body of knowledge. This time, I wish I had a card of my own.
Diane chews the end of her pen. What do you say to an American poet? She glances at the clock on the kitchen wall. Any minute now, Kerry will bounce in, throw her books on the table and then it will be Mum this, Mum that, until tea time.

*Dear Mrs. Jackson,*

*I hope you are well. We...*

She frowns, screws the page into a ball and tosses it amongst the other false starts littering the table.

*Dear Mrs. Jackson,*

*It was lovely meeting you at the dig tree. When you walked over that sand dune you seemed to come from nowhere. We must have looked so grotty with all that washing hanging everywhere and Kerry was running wild.*

Diane bites her thumbnail as she stares at the page.

*You will be pleased to hear that when we got home I joined our local library. They got your tour guide's book in for me. Danny was such a lovely dog. No wonder Lionel wrote about him. Is it cold over their in Santa Fe. It is so hot here and we will soon be swimming in port phillip bay. Kerry loves the beach. I'm expecting her in at any minute. It only takes her a quarter of an hour to walk home from the local state school. Ron is back working at Vallor Optics in the city and I'm still cutting and curling at Christobell hairdressing salon. I hope you like the photos. If you have time, could you please write?*

Diane leans back and sighs, remembering her mother sitting at her green laminated kitchen table, head bent, pen in hand, writing a letter. Herself a child twirling and swirling to a tune on the radio. *Pack up your troubles in your old kitbag and smile, smile, smile.* The music stops. Her mother listens intently to the news of the final destruction of Germany and shakes her head. In the centre of the table are the makings of a food parcel. An open tin containing fruitcake, biscuits, hand-knitted socks and chocolate. Diane kneels on a chair and reaches into the tin.

*Get your hands out of there, you little devil. Her mother laughingly pushes her away. This is for people far worse off than us. She sits Diane in the chair and takes the remains of yesterday's large block-loaf of bread from out of the cupboard. Holding the loaf against her chest, cut side up, she butters it and spreads it with jam. When she hacks a thick slice towards her large bosom, Diane holds her breath.*
Carefully folding the letter, then placing it in an addressed envelope, her mother puts it in the tin. She looks around for the large roll of silver duct-tape, finds it, then enthusiastically secures the lid. Diane helps her wrap the tin in a square of rough hessian material, then her mother, with a big bag needle and strong thread, sews it secure. In bold black marking pen she writes, *Mr & Mrs Donovan, 54 Lee St Highams Park London.* Tomorrow, she will post her bundle to Britain.

After the war, Diane's mum constantly checked the letterbox. When a blue-striped envelope arrived, she hurried inside. Holding the letter close to her chest, she made a cup of tea then settled into her favourite lounge chair with crochet covers draped over the arms. A letter knife, kept especially for the occasion, slit the thin aerogram edge. The aerogram was so thin it looked as if it would crumble to dust if harshly handled. Diane knew whining, or temper tantrums would be ignored until every word was devoured.

It's snowing in Higham Park, her mum said, wiping sweat from her forehead. Margery sends her love, she softly whispered to herself.

Does she seek the same friendship, the same connection to someone overseas as her mother? Maybe Diane wants a Margery of her own. And Martha is a poet. If only she could distil her own feelings into words that paint indelible pictures. After adding a photo of herself and Martha sitting together in the shade, Diane seals the envelope and then, in her best writing, prints: *Mrs. C. Jackson, 11 Camino Ranchitos. Santa Fe. New Mexico, 83565 America.* An offending thumb mark quickly erased ensures the letter is looking its best. Complete with colourful stamp she will post it on her way to work tomorrow.
4.2.2009: Journal:
You look in despair at the computer screen. Writing a novel is like trying to drive a bulky four-wheel drive with a flat tyre. It won’t do what you want it to. You struggle with what appears to be pages of useless drivel. At least you won’t be upset if you once again click some vague computer key and lose two hours of work. Good riddance.

Your last computer program was much friendlier. It had a little paper clip with big eyes that blinked and Clippy would tap, tap, if you hesitated for too long over the keyboard. This new Word processing is more sophisticated, but you miss your tiny computer friend. Maybe a cup of espresso, strong and black with just a touch of milk, will help you concentrate.

A folder on the floor drags you back from the brink of despair. There are some benefits to being a hoarder. At least you have many of Martha’s letters. Some are in an A4 folder, still others neatly filed in the cabinet under Letter/Martha/Dig Tree. You didn’t think to copy and file any of your letters. There are some personal notes wedged between the cost of petrol and details of where you camped each night in your diary. Not letters as such, just rambling notes and impressions with many missing years in between. Have you recaptured the person you were back in the seventies? Dug deep enough into your memory ten, twenty, thirty years ago to that first trip to the banks of Cooper’s Creek.
The wooden door slams behind me, making the garland of red chillies quiver. Not that Chuck will notice. He's at his worst today. Ranting and raving that my research is incomplete, full of mistakes. Like always, I followed his orders to the letter. As far as I'm concerned, he can type the damn essay himself.

Gravel crunches underfoot. It feels as if the snow will arrive early this year, so I'm glad of my warm sweater. I hate the cold, but it is still better than the humid fecundity of the tropics. It's impossible for me to breathe there. I need the clear air of Santa Fe's high altitude to get air deep into my weak lungs.

The flag is up on our mailbox. Dragging a stack of envelopes from beyond the steel trapdoor, I hurry inside and put on the coffee percolator. It's the usual stack of bills. I systematically slit them open with the tapered letter opener that belonged to my mother. Everything is addressed to Chuck, until, on the last envelope, I see: Mrs. C Jackson. I have difficulty reading the longhand scrawl and spelling mistakes grate, but the words transport me to another country where spring is the air.

The pleasure of the letter is astonishing. She calls me a poet. Am I? In all honesty, I only share my verses with my writing group. To be published is Chuck's domain. Diane's childish script has poor punctuation, the spelling is appalling, but it is wholesome and heart-warming. And that sort of effort deserves a reply.

10/27/75

Dear Diane,

‘Usually at this time I am out doing my early morning walk, but today I made up my mind to reply to your letter.

I lean back in my chair. Why am I doing this? Why write a letter when I'd rather read a book. It's not that I'm lazy. For every trip I have a typed and bound copy of my handwritten travel diaries. All are referenced, every detail meticulously recorded: time, place, temperature, people and addresses. But sometimes, I wish I could be like my first-born. Merril filled book after book with thousands of imaginative words. But I cannot write about wild, other worlds, of mythical flying beasts and fairylike creatures.
I read Diane’s letter again, the spelling mistakes like squeaking chalk on a blackboard. The Devil's fingernails scratching my intellect. I've spent too many years editing and proof reading Chuck’s papers. Goddamnit. That gal doesn't have a hope in hell of getting on in life if she doesn't learn to spell. My fingers automatically grasp the red pen and with a will of their own start circling, underlining and correcting.

I hope you don’t mind me correcting your letter, Diane, but we often don’t see our own mistakes. Have you thought of consulting a dictionary? I know a great many people who have trouble with spelling, and I’ve always wondered why they don't check...

I glance at the photos on my desk. Diane and myself. Forever smiling, clutching that dreadful coffee in hot enamel mugs. Slouched in chairs in scarce shade, we are both at ease. What do we have in common? Nothing. Different interests, level, of education, lifestyle, and an age gap of thirty years, not to mention a different culture and country. Enough to put off anyone.

I glance at the photo again. See the clothes line, dishes in a bowl of suds, the remnants of a once large fruitcake. Camp oven on the fire. Two women coping with the whims and needs of men. At least we have our daughters.

The desert landscape reminds me that...

Chuck and I are originally Westerners. We spent thirty-two years with the Department of Reptiles and Amphibians at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, but missed the West so much that he took early retirement. We moved back to Santa Fe to be close to our youngest daughter, Barb.

I stare out of the window and shake my head.

Writing has jogged so many memories, Diane. My earliest recollection is of...

Mother beckons and I run. She hoists me astride her ample knees and holds my hands. I start to jig. She laughs and bounces me. We chant; I sprang to the stirrup,
and Joris, and he, I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three. Afterwards, we sit side by side at the dining room table cluttered with story books, colouring pads and pencils. Mother makes loopy letters. Later, she cleans my ears with the head of a bobby pin.

Father stands, arms crossed, staring at me over horn-rimmed glasses. His friends call him Stony. A great nickname for a petroleum geologist. Hands on my hips, feet well spread and with clean ears, I recite: The sedimentary aspects of the stratum, I look at Father to check if he is listening: has internally consistent characteristics, another check, that distinguishes it from contiguous layers.

Have you finished talking, Martha, or are you going to enlighten us some more? he sarcastically enquires. I run and hide under the bed. His loud raucous laugh follows me.

Years later, I saw the twinkle in his eye and discovered that a sure way to extract an approving guffaw was to recount passages of poems from the leather bound, gilt edged book with RB on the front. In a thick Scottish accent, accompanied by elaborate gestures I'd recite, To a Mouse.

Wee sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie
O what a panic's in they breastie.
Thous need na start awa sae hasty
wi' bickering brattle.

Father liked to believe he was a direct descendant of Rob Roy. With a surname like Roydon, it could be truth. Mother's maiden name was Finney. Scot and Irish. What a genetic mixture. When I was born, Father took one glance, said I looked like a little Irish Mick, and named me, Martha. Such an unforgiving name for a child.

* * *

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Diane stands beside her brick letterbox and stares with amazement at the red white and blue edged envelope with the American stamp. She had not expected a reply. Hot sun stings her skin and she hurries inside. Holding the letter close to her chest, she takes a mug of coffee to the kitchen table then carefully opens the envelope. A photo reveals Martha standing in front of her snow-encrusted adobe home. Ropes of red chillies frame the door. Diane holds the photo to her nose, hoping for a whiff of the icy coolness of Santa Fe.

She reads the letter twice, savouring Martha’s childhood memories and family news. It is a generous response. But there is a sting attached. Neatly folded behind Martha’s words is the letter she sent. Every spelling mistake is underlined in red, the correct spelling in firm, minute script in the margin. Diane is shocked to see so many.

For years, she’s been writing letters to friends and family. Loves the feel of the pen skimming across the paper, unable to keep up with thoughts tumbling onto the page. Little daily dramas, cute kiddie sayings, camping adventures with never a thought about spelling. If she had to spend time checking every word, she’d never write to anyone. Diane screws her edited letter into a ball and throws it into the pedal bin. Why bother? She doesn’t have time for such nonsense. Leave correct spelling and well-crafted letters to ageing poets.

She pins the photo next to one of Kerry's drawings on a corkboard on the kitchen wall. While preparing the evening meal, and all through dinner she keeps glancing at the photo. Martha’s eyes challenge her. After the dishes are done and the sink cleaned, Diane finally stamps her foot on the pedal bin flipping the lid, bends and retrieves the letter and smooths it out on the bench. Maybe she should get a dictionary.

* * *
I pull out the drawer in my writing desk and scratch around amongst paper clips, staples, and a two-hole punch. All I need is one thirty-one cent airmail stamp to post my letter to Australia. I'm not walking to the post office in this freezing weather.

In amongst the clutter I find Father's leather wallet with the tooled Indian head on the front. Inside is a folded piece of paper.

I hate to appear bumptious, or even so presumptuous, as to talk about that taboo subject, money.

Father’s doggerel.

Dear Diane, Have you heard of doggerel poetry? If you receive any Christmas letters in the form of bad poetry then you certainly have experienced it. Why do people insist on sending those inane Dear Blank Christmas verses? You'll never get one from me.

But father's doggerel always makes me laugh. So comical, so political.

It seems that some can't find it, and others never mind it, and that, to me, is something less than funny.

He travelled the world. In his letters to me, he would start a verse and I would write one back. It only stopped when he died. The date in the top right hand corner of this letter is 2/8/1965 when America was heavily involved in the space race and committed to the Vietnam War.

It is time to be specific, either Space, or the Pacific, and decide to give it everything, and soon. We are fed up: can't absorb it. What use put a man in orbit: is anything we need found on the moon?

At the bottom of the page is my reply.

I'm sending you this token of poetic spirit broken, Of high ambitions buried in the ground. Since I've lost my rhyme and reason And this ain't the time or season, I'm willing to concede the latest round.

Carefully folding the yellowing paper into its original creases, I tuck it back into Father's wallet. I miss the old son of a bitch, but strangely, I no longer feel so alone.
Pouncing on a stray stamp, I lick it and press it on the envelope addressed to Kubunji Beach.
Dear Martha, I looked up doggerel in one of two amazing books I bought the other day from a second-hand bookshop. They were only a dollar each. They have brown leather covers with gold writing and a gold pineapple in a circle for a badge. Together they make a complete Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary. The first book goes from A to P and the second one from Q to Z, but the part I like best is the section with foreign words. First, there is the English word, followed by French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish and the last one is Yiddish. Amazing. The books are so big I could use them for a doorstop. According to page 375 of Part One, doggerel is trivial, awkwardly written verse. I thought of trying to write some, but when I read it is 'usually employed by poets for satiric, comic, or rollicking effect' I realised it was out of my league. I’m no poet, so no verses from me. Instead, I’ll tell you about growing up in Australia.

Diane rereads Martha's letter. It is an invitation to share her life, but she's never had time to sit and think about the past. It's just that, the past. She rests her chin in her hand. What can she tell Martha? She chews the end of her pen. Her mind drifts to the clouds. It floats for a while then soars faster and higher than any seagull, trying to find the person she was so many years ago. Freed words tumble down, eager to be first on the page.

The train, nicknamed The Red Rattler, clicks and clacks its way from Taylor to Buntland. Half an hour's travel filled with schoolgirl giggles and daydreams. Diane stares out of the window from sleep-rimmed eyes at broken paling-fences, rusting swings, overgrown vegetable gardens and flapping washing. She makes up stories about the occupants based on their laundry. Nappies snuggle next to support hose. Flimsy night-dresses seductively flap. While on other lines, Yakka overalls overpower football socks, and grandpa long johns. All the stories have happy-ever-after endings. Diane looks for the spire of the Noblevale Girls Domestic Arts School. When the train pulls into Buntland station, old English beech trees block her view.

The school day is spent cooking cakes and buns, learning how to fold a nappy, sterilise bottles, sew floral pyjamas and crochet lace tablecloths. High on the agenda is how to organise a household budget for a family of four and to sing like an angel. After all, the girls are told, they will soon marry so why do they need to learn advanced arithmetic?
Diane soon discovers her mother is right. The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. Rock cakes, slightly out of shape, but with a daub of raspberry jam in the middle, are a boy magnet on the train going home. The rich smell of freshly baked cakes fills the carriage as giggling girls distribute culinary treasures to favourite ravenous boys. The girls don’t keep any for themselves. Instead, they watch with parted lips and shining eyes as their gifts are consumed. With tilted berets, singing *Fortis et Fidelis*, they promise to be strong and faithful.

Leaving a domestic arts school at fourteen—after passing Home Management, Cooking, Sewing, mothercraft, first-aid, Music, Sport (how you hated those baggy Bombay bloomers), Geography and basic English, ensured you were well suited to a life of domesticity. For what your parents called ‘a good trade’. Later, your world was quartering apples for the school tuck-shop, washing and ironing, Mum’s Taxi Service and hairdressing. You had it all, a caring husband, a healthy child, a house, a car and a job you loved. So why did you yearn deep inside for something you couldn’t name?

In 1955 this was just the way the world was for you. Most of the boys who ate the rock cakes on the Taylor train went to the local technical school to learn how to dig trenches, join pipes, saw timber and build houses so they could support a wife and children. Your mother often quoted Alfred Lord Tennyson’s ‘Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do and die’ as a fact of life. You now know different.
We love living at Kubunji Beach, Martha. Lots of birds visit our yard. Ron made a fancy wooden birdfeeder complete with roof and tiny swings. He placed it on top of a tall pole so next door's cat can't scare the birds. Yesterday, two rosellas chased off at least five pigeons to get to the seed. I buy it by the bag from a seed merchant in Lockwood. If I get time, I love to walk along the local beach picking up bits and pieces. On the mantelpiece is a big glass bowl full of shells I've collected over the years. But I don't get much time to go to the beach these days. There is always so much to do.

The unfinished letter waits on the kitchen table. Diane sighs and dumps her shoulder bag and hairdressing kit onto the tiled bench. It had taken three days and twenty mesh sheets, each supporting a dozen two-inch tiles and a gallon of grout to finish the bench. The pleasing effect, spurred her on to renovate the entire kitchen. The antique olive and ochre colour scheme gleaned from television images of ancient stone Mediterranean villas and gossiping black-scarfed women. A terracotta fruit bowl completed the Italian kitchen theme. After successfully tiling the bench, the kitchen floor was next, followed by the floor of the thirty-foot-long family room. Not a perfect job, but better than worn-out vinyl and saved them a fortune in labour.

She glances at the huge kitchen clock above the refrigerator. In two hours, Ron will be home from Vallor Optics. Grinding spectacle lenses is a precise, painstaking job requiring a firm hand and unlimited patience. A lens pressed too hard against the emery wheel will explode and the whole process has to start all over again. Five years ago, he found the clock beside the workshop garbage bins in Old Hardware Lane.

It still works perfectly, he said, standing well back to admire the three foot round chrome creation.

But it's big enough to hang at the Flinders Street Railway Station.

It'll grow on you.

The ticking will drive me insane.

Years later, Diane has learned to live with it. He won't part with his clock no matter how much she complains.

She's got fifteen minutes until Kerry charges in waving her latest creative masterpiece. Where on earth will she put it? The fridge door is already covered in crayoned butcher's paper and fridge magnets. Kerry's latest of Mum, Dad and self
has huge belly buttons, podgy hands and fat sausage fingers. Diane looks for a spare spot. She decides to place it next to the four-wheel-drive chugging up a vertical mountain. Kerry's rays of a bright yellow sun, like fingers of God, bless the right-hand corner of every scene.

Diane glances at the clock. Ten minutes left of peace and quiet. Just enough time to finish Martha’s letter. The back door bangs.

Hi Mum.

Diane puts down her pen.

I want a dog. Kerry dumps her schoolbag on the floor. Her jumper next to it. She puts her arms around Diane's waist.

Can I Mum? Everyone at school has a dog.

Who will look after it when we go camping?

Grandma loves dogs. Kerry looks confidently at Diane. She’ll take him.

A chorus of barking welcomes them to the dog pound.

I’d like a small, shorthaired bitch, Diane says to the receptionist. Rows of cages stretch before them. Kerry heads for an Alsatian as big as a horse. Then she wants a Bull Mastiff that bares its teeth and growls. Diane snatches Kerry's hand back before she loses a finger.

What about this one? A whimpering brown and white wire haired terrier licks Diane's hand. Pink tongue slipping through gaps in the wire.

What’s her name? Diane asks the attendant.

Sally.

They soon discover why Sally was left at the pound. She hovers three inches behind the heels of whoever is closest, and they are forever tripping over her. Throw a ball and she will fetch, but only in one direction. If, after throwing the ball left, Diane throws it to the right, Sally will still run left and keep going, forever chasing an imaginary ball.

They take her to the local beach, and she starts swimming to Tasmania. The local life saver has to paddle out on his board and bring her back. In Kerry's arms Sally's paws are still paddling. When Diane moves Kerry's bedroom furniture, they wonder if Sally has serious mental problems. Every morning, as soon as Kerry's door is opened, Sally jumps onto her bed. For the week after redecorating, Sally runs in,
jumps and hits the wall where the bed used to be. Dumb dog. They jokingly agree that if by any chance she dies, they should have her stuffed and stand her, head leaning pathetically against the very expensive unused doggie door. That way they wouldn’t miss her so much.

Whack. Crack. Yelp. Diane dashes to the back door.

Sally, she calls. The wire haired terrier, tail between her legs, runs to meet her. From the step, through the cyclone-wire back fence, Diane can see to the end of the golf course. Gum trees vie with wattles; mushrooms are plentiful and every year a cherry plum provides a dozen jars of jam. She laughingly calls the Greendale Golf Course her ‘country estate’. It is Kerry's haven. A place where, every night after school, with friends in tow, she can run, hide and make cubbies. If only they could stop Sally digging under the fence and retrieving golf balls.

_We have tried to continue the golf course theme into our own backyard. Two large flowering gums shade tree ferns and ivy-covered, rock-edged gardens surround a small patch of lawn. If we stuck a flag in the centre, it could be mistaken for a putting green._

_Life is so busy these days. We—_

Time. There is never enough. The Valor Optics reject clock rules Diane’s life.

5:00 a.m. Wave goodbye to Ron, who walks to the Kubunji Beach station to catch the 5:32 a.m. train for the city. 6:30 a.m. Sing, Wake up chickabiddie the morning is bright. The birds are all singing to welcome the light, and drag Kerry out of bed. 6:45 a.m. Cook and cover the evening meal to save time later in the day. 7:30 a.m. Pull back the collar of Kerry's shirt to check what's underneath. The memory of the last classroom Show and Tell still haunts Diane.

Look everyone, Kerry said, standing on the platform in front of the class and pulling up her woollen jumper. I still have my jamies on under my clothes. Drop her at school and arrive at the Christobell Coiffure Hairdressing Salon at the Thrift Park at exactly 9:00 a.m. The first client in the chair impatiently taps her foot. No time to think. Elderly parents organised to pick up Kerry after school and keep her until Diane arrives home.
Martha, I envy you your childhood surrounded by books. The only book we had was the Bible and no one read that. Any spare time was spent playing in our big backyard. Did you ever play hopscotch or make jacks from lamb knuckles? At night, we watched TV and split our sides laughing at the series Dad and Dave. Most nights I’d pull the blankets over my head, turn on the bedside radio and shiver at the sound of a creaking door introducing The Inner Sanctum Mysteries. During the day, there were always chores to do. Reading was considered a waste of time. Even now, I find it hard not to feel guilty if I sit and read a book. I love hearing about your family. My parents live ten minutes away...

She writes about her German ancestry. How Kerry never tires of the story of Little Red Riding mit de Red Hoot. Ex-military, Diane's dad is tall and stern, but keeps Columbine toffees in his pocket and spoils Kerry rotten. Australian-born Mum, short, tubby and as soft as butter. Knits dozens of jumpers for Kerry from discarded garments. The wool unravelled, washed and then knitted again in stripes to rival a bumblebee. Osteoarthritis means a walking stick. Jokingly, she brandishes her weapon at Kerry.

Not the stick, Grandma. Kerry laughs, dropping to her knees in prayer position. Anything but the stick.

But that's enough about my family, Martha. I must tell you about Ron’s parents.

She blurbs on the page that they live across the street and Pop is a real Cockney from the Old Country, who can barely write his name. He lost the top of his finger at the local saw mill and cut it down to the first knuckle with a breadknife. He got more worker's compensation that way. Ma insisting she is Australian. In 1917 both lied about their ages to do their bit for the war effort. Pop gassed in France. Ma nursed him in an army hospital and both of them seventeen. Most days finding Ma crocheting rugs and listening to classical music, Scamp, one of her two cats, curled on her knee. How she is the most tolerant person Diane knows. If Ron said, Ma, I think we'll go to the moon tomorrow, she’d say, Have a nice time, Dear. Every Sunday, the family gathers for lunch at Diane and Ron's Kubunji Beach home.
Diane glances at the clock, where has the time gone? She hastily scrawls, *Six o’clock. Must run*. Signs the bottom of the letter in a flourish and stuffs it into the stamped-addressed envelope, the glue stinging her tongue.
Dear Diane, I am a very curious person and I was interested to hear about your life. There is something indulgent about revisiting the past. I often wonder if my memories are true. Did things really happen that way, or is it a construct of my imagination? Some people yearn for the good old days, but my memories from when I was young are of my family constantly on the move. I went to several schools: Denver, Edmonton, in the province of Alberta—east of British Columbia, Canada—and spent two miserable years in Beverly Hills.

I look back at the last sentence. Miserable is the word. Father was constantly called to different locations, and we were forever packing our bags and following. I hated high school in Glendale, California. All that false glamour and gossip parties. In laced up boots and old baggy jeans, I adopted a John Wayne swagger and thumbed my nose at those prissy gals.

What happened to my school buddy, Phil Schutz? Memories of pumping worms out of the muddy bank of the local stream. Ignoring sticky goo oozing through our fingers. Threading fishhooks down through worm heads. The death throes irresistible to rainbow trout. Two Huckleberry Finns strutting home. Catch slung over our shoulders.

I lost days reading books, captivated by the lives of the people in the stories: the struggles of artists in dreary attics, the hungry years of couples in tiny apartments and anything I could lay my hands on about the natural world. I was a whiz at the natural sciences; only studied subjects that I liked and managed to avoid anything to do with math. Chuck looks after the finances.

When I won a full scholarship to Mills College in Oakland, my parents could not believe it but it was more misery: no boys, except on weekends as dates. Horrors. No wonder I told the college they could keep their scholarship, went back south and enrolled at UCLA.
The auditorium was filled to overflowing. Students dropped pens, discussed plans for
the weekend, and shuffled papers, but when Charles Mathew Jackson strode into
the room you could have heard the flutter of a butterfly’s wings. A single tap on the
microphone, one look from glowering eyes, half hidden beneath bushy eyebrows,
ensured complete silence. And me, his university-appointed research assistant—the
one who toiled though microfiche files, found dozens of relevant journals,
photocopied, read and summarised, typed reports listing everything under theme,
topic, keyword or author. I sat behind him on the stage.

His large hands gripped either side of the podium. He leaned forward and
intoned, Today we focus on the life habits of the...

No need to listen or take notes. I researched the goddamn paper. Typed it.
Chuck pulled himself up to his full six foot five and tightened his buns. Great buns. I
laugh at the memory of adoring faces, fluttering eyelashes, leather patched elbows
on desks, chins resting on hands, pens raised ready to preserve every word the
Great Man uttered. What would they have thought if they knew the night before,
Chuck, wearing only socks, was in my bed?

_I love to travel. Imagine having three great trips in one twelve-
month period. In Peru, we visited the fantastic ruins of Machu
Picchu. I’m sure you have heard of it. It is hard to believe that
without modern machinery..._

One benefit of being married to a world famous herpetologist is the university-funded
research trips. We may be retired, but research still takes us into the Arizona and
Mexican deserts search for rattlesnakes. A hessian bag in one hand and long
hooked stick with a retractable rubber loop in the other. On hearing the familiar buzz
identifying a rattler, Chuck deftly slips the noose over its head then carefully drops
the snake into the sack. I pull the drawstring tight. If it is a small specimen, guess
who carries the bag? Later, Chuck measures, weighs and bands the snake, then
while it slithers across hot sand to freedom, we rejoice.

Local village children always gather around us begging for sweets. Chuck
grins wickedly and shakes a discarded snake rattle in a small clear plastic box. They
scream, eyes scanning the ground, until he opens his hand. They say he is _loco._
Para que los amigos, he says, handing out chocolate. A month later, we are off again, this time carefully imprisoning scorpions in screw-top jars.

I’ve been to so many countries, always first class. Wined, dined and cared for as the wife of Charles M. Jackson. On the bottom bookshelf in my study I search past Africa, Canada and Easter Island until I have Peru in my hands. I open the journal at random and read.

Huge blocks of stone were so perfectly fitted that even now, you can’t put a knife blade between them. Machu Picchu is 7000 feet above sea level, about the same elevation as Santa Fe. The pointed peak behind the ruins seems impossible to climb, but…. 

On top of the world, I fling my arms wide and embrace the glory of mountain peaks. A wild wind presses my clothes tight against my fubsy frame. Stones, covered in moss, long tumbled over precipices, rest on vivid green grass far below. The porters smile at my rapturous joy. Sitting on their haunches, they husk corn and boil rice. Such strong men: rugged and vital with the timeless features of the ancients. Their colourful serapes the same as the singing shepherds herding llamas past huge boulders. Wisps of tussocks curl like lighted incense sticks in brass cauldrons in smoke-drowsy temples. Imagining Diane's delight, I carefully record every image.

Martha, Chuck calls. Where are my glasses?

In your duffle bag. Chuck is on his knees, bending over a small green fern half-hidden by a moss-covered rock. He counts the fronds. Without looking up, he snaps his fingers and stretches out his hand, palm up. I rummage amongst shirts and shorts until I clasp the firm cylinder of the glasses case then slap it into his open hand.

We may have a new species here, he says, his voice trembling. One, two, three. I drop down beside him and peer at the tiny fragile plant.

It resembles Cyathea concordia. Look, he says in awe, pointing to a leaf. The hairs are restricted to the veins and, he takes a deep breath, it has nearly concolorous stem scales.

Has it been recorded?

He doesn’t answer, already mentally writing his paper, etching his name forever into refereed scientific journals. My excitement dies. Over thirty years ago, he
discovered a new species of snake. All this discovery means is more work for me. More research and pages and pages of typing.

What will you name it? I inquire. Chuck grabs my hand. I can't believe it when he says, I'm naming it Martha Jackartus.

From La Paz, Bolivia, to Santiago in Chile and then on to Easter Island with its strange stone figures. There are more horses than people. The friendly islanders gallop madly everywhere. This is one of the remotest spots on earth. The air is pure and clean, and so is the ocean. On the map, Easter Island is almost due south of Albuquerque…

Thirty hours straight to get home. Thirty hours. Two thousand miles east to Chile, north to Miami and then west to Albuquerque. How ridiculous.

Damn airplanes, Chuck moans. Noisy, crowded and once they git you in, you can't git out. He refuses to be crammed into what he calls the sheep section. At the boarding gate in Miami, every seat is full. Tired toddlers run endlessly up and down luggage-laden aisles.

Attention all passengers on American Airways flight 507 travelling from Miami to Albuquerque. Due to mechanical problems, your flight has been delayed.

I put my hand on Chuck’s knee to stop the drumming of his foot.

Flight 507 will now depart at eleven p.m.

Chuck pushes my hand aside and strides over to the newspaper stand. He angrily flicks pages of several books without buying one. With the Financial Times tucked under his arm, Chuck makes his way to the counter then hands the sales clerk the exact change.

Have a nice day, the gal says. Chuck looks around the crowded airport. I have other plans, he replies and strides off.

There is no way of getting word to Barb. She has already left Santa Fe.
Dear Martha, I hope you didn’t mind me asking for a copy of your travel journal. It sounds like a wonderful trip, and I don’t think we’ll ever get to Peru. I've always dreamt of travelling to exotic places, but with Kerry to educate...

The back door bangs.

Kerry, I've told you a thousand times not to slam the door.

But Mum…

It will soon be off its hinges.

But Mum.

Don’t but Mum me.

But Mum, I've got a letter from Miss Finlay. She says to tell you I won that scholarship to Hallston College.

Diane hugs Kerry and blesses her teacher in year-six at Kubunji Beach State School for suggesting Kerry sit for the entry exam.

Kerry thrives on a blend of academic classes, basketball and music. Soaking in the bath is what looks like an upturned cow's-bladder. Kilted in green-and-gold Gordon tartan, Kerry looks every bit a Highland lassie. After several noise-induced headaches, Diane bans practising in the family room; the wail of bagpipes not so ear-shattering in the backyard. Not so for Sally. Sitting on the back step, head at a pathetic angle, the dog howls. Many a Greendale golfer misses a putt on the seventh green.

It is a struggle to pay for school fees, books, uniforms, sporting activities and excursions. Diane shops at the local market for specials, forgets the new lounge suite and replaces the worn-out welsh plugs in her 1965 XP Ford Falcon. When she hears the newly constructed Riverside Retirement Village wants a hairdresser one day a week, she feels it is the answer to her prayers.

No matter how early she arrives at the salon, there are always several elderly clients sitting in chairs waiting for her to open the door.

Don’t hurry, Dear. They patiently watch Diane fumble for the salon keys in her bag.

We have all day. No rush.
The clients are mainly women in their seventies and eighties who grab the broom and sweep up hair, pop chocolates in Diane’s mouth to keep her going, bring her coffee in bone china teacups with sugar lumps on the side.

How wonderful to be so young, they say on days when she drags her feet. They chat, tell jokes and laugh until tears run down wizened cheeks.

Do everything while you can. Life is so short. They have so many stories to tell. Lifetimes of experiences. Diane starts keeping a journal.

After Kerry and Ron are in bed, exercise book on her knee, warmed by the Coonara heater, she scribbles long into the night. Her pen skims across the page capturing stories.

Ninety-three-year-old Violet remembering collecting wood for the outside copper where her mother boiled and scrubbed other peoples’ clothes.

Danny, a World War Two fighter pilot with a severed nerve in his leg who drags his right foot, whispering of the horror of being a prisoner of war.

Eighty-nine-year-old Thelma, blue-rinsed hair bobbing, hurrying into the salon requesting, Please fit me in. I’m off to hospital today for an autopsy.

Diane laughs, remembering her shocked reaction. Autopsy/biopsy. Similar words, but such different meanings. Thelma always mixes up her words. She told Diane about a visit to a local Italian restaurant and asking for a small serving of gnocchi.

I love a bit of nookie, she said.

Thelma was the reason Diane bought a journal in the first place. She had to jot it down. Had to share it with Martha.

* * *
I turn on the TV for the CNN news. Images flash across the screen. Pelicans struggle and die in a black oil slick oozing over the beaches of Brittany. A turban-headed Ayatollah sits cross-legged in the grass, waiting, watching, hoping. Isaac Bashevis Singer wins the Nobel Prize for Literature. Bodies beside a Red Cross truck announce the death throes of Rhodesia. Such trouble in the world and it is with relief that I return to my half-finished letter.

Diane, I’ve just re-read Ernest Hemmingway’s ‘The Old Man and the Sea’. It stood out from all the others on the return shelf of the library. This is one of the main advantages of being a volunteer. I get first pick. It is a great story of an epic battle between an old, experienced fisherman and a large marlin, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1952. I’m sure your library will have a copy.

Thank you for your kind offer, and we are still thinking of coming to Australia. But not this year. So why don’t you and Ron come here? You could stay with us, and I could show you some of the places I’ve raved about in my letters. It may be impractical for you to come at this stage, but as you say, it’s fun to dream.

Where will I take Diane? My thoughts fly to the glorious wilderness of the Jemez Mountains. Majestic pine forests, colourful leaves and the whispering winds of Valle Grande. How long will we need to hike Coyote trail? It only takes me a day. But I set a snappy pace. Many in my hiking group, much younger than me, have trouble keeping up.

And there is always Peralta Canyon in the Superstition Mountains. My heart sings every time I see orange, white and ochre strata snaking through those soaring volcanic cliffs. At least twenty million years old.

Diane and Ron may not come, but there are always letters.
I often wonder at the time it takes for a letter to travel from Australia to here and vice versa. Your last letter finally arrived, but I don’t know when you mailed it. You wrote “Fri” but no date and there was no postmark. I’ve been meaning to tell you that when you write ‘America’ on my address that it should be ‘USA’. It’s easier and it tells which ‘America’. Canada and Mexico are America, as are all the various countries in Central America, not to mention all those in South America. Your letters do get here, but better that they don’t confuse anyone, no?

You never made that mistake again. Martha, via her letters, informed, reprimanded and educated. Tucked between observations on her family and the weather was always a comment on the ineptitude of the current political administration. Never afraid to voice her concerns, she later bought a bumper sticker ‘Bush shit’. Environmental issues were also included. The East African Wildlife Journal of Ecology arrived in your letterbox and you learnt about the plight of the African Elephant. You sent a small donation. You read about the World Conservation Union and the Environmental Liaison Centre International. Organisations and Societies you had never heard of before. Slipped between recipes of green chilli and beans, you discover a world outside of family, work, and Australia.
Diane glances again at Martha's letter, tries to write, scrubs the ball point pen on paper, but still no ink, throws it in the bin, grabs another and carefully prints in the top left-hand corner,

_Thursday, 25th July 1980._

_Dear Martha, I can't wait—_

The phone rings. Thelma wants a permanent wave. Tomorrow. Diane stretches the phone cord as far as she can, drags her bag towards her with her foot and reaches inside for the appointment book. She glances at an already full day. Where she can find two hours for a perm?

Would eight o'clock be too early? Diane smiles and jots down the name. She'll have to be quick off the mark tomorrow.

She stuffs the appointment book back in her bag and dumps it beside the front door. Walking back to the kitchen via the lounge, she stops at the bookcase. It is a little off centre. Strategically placed to hide a watermark on the wall from the last wild storm. Thinking of Martha, she runs her fingers across the spines of the Dymo labelled books Kerry is studying. Dickens, Bernard Shaw, Jane Austen. Diane yearns to have the time to read at least some of the stories. She stops at _The Complete Works of Shakespeare_. Kerry constantly quotes the Elizabethan bard. It sounds like another language. Opening the book to _The Tragedy of Macbeth_, she glances down the page.

_Act 1—Scene 1. A desert place._

_Propped on the arm of the couch, Diane imagines the rolling sand hills and hot wind of Coopers Creek._

_When shall we three meet again._

_In thunder, lightening, or in rain?_  
_When the hurlyburly's done,_  
_When the battle's lost and won._  
_Not bad so far. She skips to the next page._  
_As two spent swimmers do cling together and choke their art—._
The shrieking whistle of the kettle has her shoving Macbeth back into the bookcase and running to turn off the gas. Diane promises herself she will read it one day. As soon as she has time.

We can't believe that we both managed to get the time off work, Martha. Kerry will be fine. She's going to stay with my Mum and Dad. I'm so sorry we won't be able to meet Merril. Alaska is a bit far away. Do you think we'll get to see Barb? I'm busy packing our cases and learning as much as I can about Santa Fe. My Lonely Planet book says the light switches are upside down, and the water goes down the plughole backwards? Is that true? Another difference I've noticed is that I write my birth date as the third of August and then the month and year 3/8/1941 and you put August first, 8/5/1917. Did you realise we are both Leos, both lions? Do you believe in astrology? Should I pack thick jackets?

Plump pink and white blossoms cover the weeping crab-apple tree outside Diane's bedroom window. Her mum refuses to call it a crab-apple. Too common. Isn’t the Betchel's Ioensis gorgeous this year, she says. Fallen petals decorate a newborn lawn. Diane tries to imprint a detailed memory picture to sustain her over the hot summer months ahead. Freesias are blooming and a delicious, delicate scent of spring wafts through the open window. Diane tosses and turns. Clutching the sheet up to her neck, she holds her breath and listens. Outside is a rasping sound, like deep-throated heavy breathing. A burglar searching for the best place to enter? A perverted prowler? She punches Ron's arm. He snorts and turns over, dragging the doona with him. She thumps him again.

What? Ron rubs bleary eyes.
There’s someone outside.
What do you want me to do? He pulls the doona over his head.
Go and look.
At two in the morning? You've got to be kidding.
She pulls back the doona. One glance at her face, and he stumbles towards the kitchen, checking Kerry's room on the way. Drawers slam. Ron mumbles obscenities. Diane drags the doona up under her chin. Not daring to move, the raspy breathing conjures visions of a leering Peeping Tom only two feet away.
Ron plods back to the bedroom. Found it, he says.
Diane shields her eyes from a dazzling beam of light. Ron puts down the torch and struggles into his dressing gown. She gestures dramatically towards the door. Okay. He rummages in the bottom of the wardrobe searching for his slippers. She points again. Okay. I’m going. The front door creaks open, footsteps disappear down the drive, torch light flashes through leafy trees. Piss off, Ron shouts. Get out of here, you bastard. A scuffle. He may need help.

Leaping out of bed, she grabs the beside lamp: yanks the cord out of the plug, runs through the front doorway then down the path.

Ron is shining the torch into the branches of a tall pyramid tree. He directs the beam on Diane, flimsy nightie flapping in the breeze. Not bad, he says. She brandishes the lamp with trailing cord. Ron points the beam of light into the crab-apple.

Bloody possum. He wraps his arm around Diane's waist and gives her a squeeze. He’s as big as a boarding house pudding. You won’t get any more flowers this year. He’s eaten all the buds.

Diane neatly folds the heavy duffle coat, an out-of-season bargain from Aussie Disposals. How will it fit into the already full suitcase? Wear it? In this heat? Impossible. Carry it over her arm? She places it on the floor beside the case. She'll worry about it later. She must pack the three t-shirts, their 'made in China' tags carefully removed. Diane admires the bright aboriginal designs under a bold AUSTRALIA emblazoned across the chest. Ochre for Martha, Navy blue for Barb and dark green for Merril. Martha can post it to her later. Chuck’s fuzzy little koala on a key ring will slip into her pocket. But twenty-one kilos? And winter in Santa Fe. Maybe even snow. Diane studies the ever growing pile of 'must have' clothes. Boots. She needs winter boots. She glances at her bare legs and flip flops. Packing summer clothes would have been easier.

After reading every book on New Mexico she can find at the Kubunji Beach library, Diane still expects nothing will prepare her for the actual experience, reminding her of their first 'out of Australia' family adventure.
They watch the Norwegian cargo ship the *Samos* berth at Appleton dock.

Kerry runs up the gangplank while Ron and Diane trail behind, struggling with two suitcases plus Kerry's backpack and the outsized pink teddy bear Grandma insisted on giving Kerry just before they left. Their forward cabin is spacious with a view of a huge packing case. An acrid smell, accentuated by the over-eighty-five degree heat, reveals it holds a horse.

Sailing down the Yarra River, they lean on the deck rail and watch dock lights disappear. A summer breeze ruffles hair, noses twitch at the smell of hay and fresh horse dung, but nothing can mar their pleasure. They pass underneath the flying buttress of the Westgate bridge, framed by stars. Sail past the shadowy hump of Point Nepean, the beacon of the Queenscliff lighthouse a thin shaft of light in the night sky.

Sweat stains Diane's shirt, but Kerry, oblivious to the heat, jigs beside the roped off lowered gangplank. Diane and Ron patiently wait, eager to feel dry land under their feet. She gazes at the denuded hills and scattered township of Port Moresby. This is not Martha's Africa. Too humid, no flame trees and no elephants, but it's the next best thing. Certainly cheaper. Two days on a cargo ship, a week bunking with friends, and an economy flight home. Travelling on a shoestring means meeting ordinary people and having unplanned adventures.

On the wharf far below, New Guinea nationals squat on boxes and squabble over card games. One stands, cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, *You bringum newspaper?*

Ron throws down a *Melbourne Sun*. A black hand waves, a page torn out, large tobacco leaf added and the whole lot deftly rolled, lit and smoked.

The man on the dock, carefully snuffs the end of his newspaper cigarette with his fingers and hurries down the wharf. The *Samos*’ siren blasts three times. Seagulls wheel in fright. Crewmen hurry past, secure cargo and shout commands. The gangplank creaks and cranks back into sailing position, while propellers thrash foam. The *Samos* slowly sails from the dock.

Diane grabs Kerry. Sits her on the rail while a large ocean liner sails towards their recently vacated berth. White paint gleams, a line of flags flutter from bow to stern, three rows of portholes indicate multiple decks. Kerry points to a nuggetty tug shepherding the huge liner. FAIRSTAR in bold black letters on her prow.
A straw-covered semitrailer, complete with thatched hut and palm tree, is pushed onto the wharf. Grass-skirted girls writhe and dance, men in bird-of-paradise plumed headdresses beat drums, stamp and chant tribal songs.

What's that? Kerry sniggers and points to long tasselled tubes covering penises bouncing up and down to the drumbeats. Diane grabs Kerry's finger and folds it under.

And that, Kerry says, pointing with her fist to the bunch of arse grass swaying behind. Diane laughs. Before she can explain the custom, a group of chanting, swaying women distract Kerry. She slips to the deck, holds up both arms, wriggles her hips, stamps her feet and imitates their hypnotic stomping dance.

Street vendors swarm. Passengers scurry like an army of scavenging soldier-ants up the hill to the waiting town.

You re-read what you have written, checking for mistakes and the odd strange word. Suddenly you laugh. A hearty uplifting laugh. You have the cargo ship Samos birthing at the dock. You imagine baby ships bobbing in the watery swell. The automatic spell checker confused, deceived. Once again, you marvel at the difference one letter can make.

When the Samos docks stern to bow behind the Fairstar, engines thrum underfoot. Diane feels for the captain having to give up his place for high paying tourists on a strict schedule. Only half of their ship fits on the wharf. Diane peeks over the side, making sure to hang onto the rails. It's a long drop from the deck to the water.

Captain Largos, shaking his head, points to the only crane out of three working. Bundles of cargo in a large wire cage are winched overboard and onto the wharf below. Kerry jumps up and down, crying, Let's go. All the way. Okay?

Diane vigorously shakes her head and points to the secured gangplank. She picks up her backpack, grabs Kerry's hand, insists they return to the cabin with an offer of chocolate and games, but braces herself for Kerry's inevitable question.

Why? Kerry asks. There it is. Always the why. Why go to the cabin? Why can't they go ashore? Diane points to the gangway. It can't reach the wharf.

Kerry shows her a rope ladder over the side. Diane shakes her head, and mouths a silent no.
I'd be careful. I'd—
If you put one foot—
Captain Largos sees Kerry's pouting lips and tear-filled eyes. Would you like to go ashore in the cargo cage?
Kerry beams. Diane feels the colour drain from her face. Heights not her strong point, especially from the deck of a large ship.
Thank you, but—
Please, pleeeese.
Diane stares with horror at the empty cage swinging high in the sky and vigorously shakes her head. You're not getting me in that thing.
Looking up with big blue eyes Kerry grabs her father's hand. You'll take me, won't you, Daddy.
The cage swings back onto the deck, wire door open. Diane taps the wooden pallet floor with her toe. It seems firm enough. Two small hands push against her bottom and she stumbles in. Ron follows and clamps both arms protectively around Kerry. Diane grabs his bicep with one hand and the wire cage with the other. The door secured, she feels like a captured animal heading for the zoo. With the speed of a lift accelerating to the fortieth floor, they are hoisted high, only to stop with a jolt. They sway in midair, the sky and sea a blur of blue.
Shit, shit, shit. Diane's fingernails dig into Ron's arm. Fear prickles her armpits. The swaying eases. Sweat stings her eyes. She wants to close them tight, to shut out the image of eye-level wheeling seagulls and tiny figures on the wharf below.
Again. Do it again. Kerry tries to break free from her father's arms.
Stand still, Diane cries. The crane moves and they swing like a pendulum. Kerry screams in delight.
Oh, my God, Oh, my God. The chain above scrapes and creaks.
Look at Mum's face. Kerry laughs. Mum's losing it. The fingers of Diane's left hand tighten their grip on wire, her other hand cuts off the circulation in Ron's arm. Slowly, the cage is lowered and lands with a thud on the wharf below.
Wow, Kerry says. Better than Luna Park.
Diane hurries home from the Lakeside Book Club, clutching Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Martha will be pleased to hear she has joined a Council of Adult Education reading group. Secretary by default. No-one wanted the job, and it's no big deal. The twelve members range in age from nineteen to eighty-four. This month, each member will have selected a title from the designated reading list. Once a month, a box arrives with twelve copies of the book, plus discussion notes. Diane must look up who chose Tess. It must be Merl. She loves nothing better than what Diane calls an intellectual doorstop. She snuggles into bed, props open the book and reads, *A pure woman faithfully presented*...

In the morning, the book, open at page three, is on the floor. Next month, once again she'll guiltily blow the dust off the cover before slipping it back in the box. With the trip to America coming up fast, there isn't a minute to spare.
Dear Diane, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is an interesting read. What did you think of it? Such a tragic tale of loss of innocence. The ultimate destruction of such a young gal overwhelmed me. Thomas Hardy’s writing is good, but there are several authors I enjoy more. The one I like most is John D. McDonald. He has two main characters, Travis McGee and Myer Myers. The good guys always win, and McDonald cares about the environment. So do I. I have several of McDonald’s books waiting for your arrival. I hope you leave enough room in your suitcase for them. Three days is too short a visit, but my beloved mother-in-law always said, fish and visitors spoil after three days. I’m sure that doesn’t apply….

I hike down Camino Ranchitos, Diane’s letter in my pocket. Why did I extend such an enthusiastic offer? What if the old saying is true and our friendship begins to stink after three days?

When I pump my arms and power walk in time with my thoughts, I feel better. I’m sixty-six and set in my ways. I’ll have to give them our room and make up the spare beds. Where will we take them? What will I feed them? What if she asks about Merril?

In our letters, I need reveal only what I want to reveal. Present any persona I desire. Make out life is perfect. I absentmindedly wave to Nancy Garcia, our nearest neighbour. Chuck’s first Santa Fe conquest. Nancy soon learned that he quickly tires when it’s free and easy. Will Chuck behave himself? Keep his cruel wit under control? What about Merril? This family is glued together, but the crack will be forever visible. A twig cracks underfoot, the sharp noise reminding me of Merril’s tenth birthday.

Chuck is working in his study and I’m busy in the kitchen when Merril runs past waving an object above her head. Barb’s favourite doll? I brace myself for the conflict to come and sigh. This scenario repeated often before. But this time, when I
recognise Chuck's irreplaceable ancient Aztec statue, I freeze. The pride of his collection.

Put that down.

She turns and laughs. I run towards her. She ducks.

Right now, I shout hysterically, pointing to the coffee table. She ignores me. Waves the statue in front of my face. I try to snatch it out of her hand. She smirks and runs back into the living room.

Help. Barb.

Barb's face is twisted in horror. Merril holds the statue high above her head. Barb jumps up and down, trying to reach it, pleading, Give it to me. Please, please give it to me.

What’s all that hollerin', Chuck bellows from his study. I'm trying to work.

Barb and I are immobilised, but Merril laughs, makes as if she is going to hand the statue to me, then throws it with all her strength onto the floor. Shards of ochre pottery litter the room. Barb screams.

Chuck rushes from his office. The three of us stand motionless in the middle of the room.

What happened? He bends on one knee, turns a piece over and over in his hand, shakes his head like an old lion, and we wait for the roar. Instead, his eyes narrow like a rattlesnake ready to strike. An icy shiver runs down my spine as he slowly rises to his feet. Towering over us, he coldly says, Someone’s responsible.

Silence. Barb and I watch Merril. She looks Chuck straight in the face, tears well in her eyes, bottom lip quivers.

Barb didn't mean it, Dad. It was an accident.

Chuck glares at Barb. Her eyes wide in disbelief, she shakes her head from side to side, her breath rasps in her throat; another asthma attack imminent. Chuck believes Merril. Always believes Merril, the smart one. Merril the magnificent. Bright as a button. Top of her class. Who would believe that Chuck Jackson's brilliant creative child could be flawed? Born without a moral compass?

The headache throbbing at the back of my neck expands to my temples. Merril. Why does everything in my life come back to Merril. Such simple things can bring waves of grief. A flower. A song on the radio, writing a letter, and the words, How are your
children? Best to quickly put it all aside. Ignore it all. Bury it all beneath a hard-won feisty exterior.

Friends are understanding, but when they see red-rimmed eyes, they shuffle their feet, cough, look away, talk about the weather or the price of eggs. They no longer talk about their children. When they ask how I am coping, I want to scream at them, How the Hell do you think, but instead I smile and say a brisk, Fine.

I can always talk about books; biographies, novels, non-fiction, you name it. To read and talk about other people's lives is my salvation. I have always been an obsessive reader. Often women addicted to being perfect wives and mothers accuse me of neglecting my husband, children and domestic chores. Goddamnit. I quickly finish the letter. Three days...

* * *
Dear Martha, I've bought a long singlet type, skivvy thing to wear under my jumpers. My mother insists I keep my nether regions warm. To her, the nether regions are your lower back, especially the kidney area. To achieve this you must tuck your garment right under your bottom. So I'll arrive in Santa Fe with my nether regions protected.

It won't be long before we are talking our heads off. How fortunate that you can take us to Jack Master's tiffin, (you'll have to let me know what a tiffin is). He sounds like an amazing man. Seven books? Incredible, and I'm not surprised you have the entire collection.

Diane folds the letter, placing it on the kitchen bench. What will it be like to meet again? Martha is cultured, well read. And wealthy. The country she lives in is the Land of the Free: of star-spangled banners and Cape Canaveral. Glittering literary festivals and poetry readings. To Diane's extended family, students performing a Gilbert and Sullivan light opera in the local hall is the pinnacle of artistic outings. Religiously, every Saturday, the family follow Australian Rules football and barrack for the Footscray Bulldogs, shouting, 'Chewy on your boots' and 'Moz, moz, moz' to upset the opposing team. Up There Cazaly sung at the top of their voices. Does Martha like football? Will their differences add spice, or be a barrier to friendship? What if they don't like each other?

Diane busies herself baking a fruitcake to remind them of their first meeting. The two hours at the Dig Tree still vivid in her mind, and there have been years of letters in between. This meeting could break the friendship or bind them closer. It is a risk worth taking. Her mental picture of Martha is an educated, artistic, world traveller not afraid to speak her mind. She is everything Diane wants to be. But Martha is her mother's age. Will that make a difference? Will she live up to Diane’s expectations? What expectations does Martha have of their friendship? Either way, three days under the one roof will be enough—for both of them.
Two. 1980: Santa Fe

After Diane and Ron finally get through customs, Diane searches the crowd for Martha and Chuck. Diane waves, but how should she greet Martha? Cheek kiss? Shake hands? Hug? Diane doesn’t know the boundaries. Throwing protocol to the wind, Diane stoops and wraps her arms around Martha in a bear hug.

Martha seems smaller and has no spare fat on her frame. Diane's duffle coat hides her love handles, the memory of being a bulky teenager surfaces. The tall girl marked for a succession of male roles in school plays. A glance at Martha’s strong features beneath a crop of wayward hair reassures Diane that neither of them would be selected to play cutesy girly parts.

Chuck’s greeting is easy. A firm handshake. Straightforward. Men are like that. He seems even larger than before. A bear of a man at least six foot five with only the slightest sign of a paunch.

What is the population of Australia? Chuck asks. How much is the national debt? On the drive home, neither Diane nor Ron can answer his rapid-fire questions. Chuck pounces when they don't know. After half an hour, Ron says, Fiscal policies? Don't ask me. I just live there, mate.

The Chevy Blazer’s wheels crunch to a stop in the gravel drive in front of a house. It is just like the photo of Martha’s home pinned to Diane’s kitchen corkboard. Ropes of bright red chilli line the doorway. On the step, a hedgehog-shaped boot scraper. Inside, is a landing with steps down to the living room. Martha leads them past a study with endless shelves stacked to overflowing with books, to a bright sunny room with narrow floor to ceiling windows. She pulls back wooden shutters.

Two single beds, pushed together, face the windows, providing a view of the natural desert garden. A silver clock sits on a bedside table, and in one corner is a wardrobe, probably full of clothes.

We can’t take your room.

Martha laughs. See you downstairs for dinner.

Martha shells peas into a bowl.

Can I help?

Out of my kitchen, wench.
Diane wanders into the living room. Mellow, wooden coffee tables, laden with books, squat on patterned Indian rugs scattered over the reddish-brown brick floor. She picks up an intricately woven basket, noting the fine close weave. A variety of small clay statues, rock specimens and carved wooden figures cover a wide display shelf. Barbed wire twisted into crucifixes and clay masks cling to the walls. A small, stone statue of a dancing, humpbacked flute player with feather antenna catches her eye, but she doesn't know where to look when closer inspection reveals a huge phallus.

Martha emerges from the kitchen. Diane quickly points to a clay figure further along the shelf. What a fascinating statue. I like the sloping forehead and thick lips. Chuck had one even older than that. Martha quickly adds, But I like this statue. It has the face of the ancient Mayans.

Diane nods, and stares at the statue.

Martha takes a large book from the bookcase. Read this. It has everything you need to know about the Central American tribe.

Ensconced beside Ron on the body-weathered leather couch, Diane gazes in admiration at Chuck. Surrounded by Indian art and craft, he stands, hands clasped behind his back, feet apart in front of the fireplace. He picks up a rectangular metal plate with a steel handle on the side and another at the top.

What do you think this is used for? He holds up the object. I found it in Mexico.

Diane and Ron gaze at the old iron contraption. Martha fidgets in her chair, crossing and uncrossing her legs. Chuck watches them squirm like two ants under a magnifying glass. Diane breaks the silence. Two handles? Why two?

Make a guess
A lid for a box?
No.

Chuck looks at Ron. A handle for…something? Ron says.

Martha picks up a *National Geographic* magazine and flips pages.

Ron turns the object round and round. Some sort of farm implement?

Chuck shakes his head and turns his gaze to Diane. She looks across to Martha, but she is focused on Chuck.

I give up. Diane throws up her hands.
Martha covers her ears. Chuck holds the contraption by the top handle and vigorously twists. The metallic clanging reverberates around the room.

What the hell is it? Ron shakes his head. It blew the wax out of my ears.

It’s a Metraca.

They wait to hear the rest. Chuck straightens his moustache with his forefinger and continues. Mexicans are not allowed to ring the church bells during lent, so they use this instead. God awful sound, don’t you think?

Diane and Ron nod.

When those *hombres* hear this, they sprint to church—

And I’m calling you all to dinner. Martha points to the dining room table. I hope you like your steak rare.

Well done for me, Ron says.

You’ll get it rare. I’m not drying out good steak for anyone.

Ron rolls his eyes at Diane.
I fill the right side of the double-sink with hot soapy water then throw in dishes. Chuck and his mind games. I call this one, ‘guess the artefact’. He never misses an opportunity. Show off. How would Diane and Ron know about a Metraca? Seeing Chuck play with them is like watching a rattlesnake before it eats its prey, only he doesn’t give any warning before he strikes. He sprinkles his conversation with Spanish, knowing they don’t understand. He calls Ron blanco hijo de puta and smiles when Ron asks what it means. Tells him it’s Spanish for friend. Not true. It’s actually white sonofabitch, meaning an arsehole. The bastard. I want to tell him to go to hell.

I want to relax, to discuss what Diane and Ron would like to see, to do, but as always, Chuck holds the floor. Now, he’s moved into phase three. He shows them his hand-crafted woodwork. This will take at least two hours. I’ll never get a chance to talk to Diane on her own. Just women’s talk, or idle prattle as Chuck calls it. Instead he has them fixed in his mesmeric gaze, showing them an intricate box faceted out of small pieces of different species of wood from around the world. He turns it around and around so they can view it from every angle. Points out the mitred corners, the inlaid colours. Next step? There he goes. He’s lifted the lid. Revels in Ron and Diane’s exclamations of delight at the snakeskin lining and small pieces of black obsidian called Apache tears.

I twist the faucet harder, but the goddamn thing still drips.

Chuck’s woodwork is beautiful, like crafting a scientific essay. All the separate parts fit together and produce a significant article. At least woodworking keeps him out of my hair. Especially since he retired. All our friends have innumerable spun bowls, knick-knack boxes, square blocks for pencil holders and every form of salt and pepper shaker imaginable. My cupboards are jam-packed with the stuff.

Thank God he’s currently co-writing a scientific book, titled *Venomous Reptiles of South America*, with an ambitious forty-year-old colleague. A younger replica of Chuck. Rebellious black hair bent over a stack of typed pages. Beside it, an unruly mass of grey. They work well together. Chuck's red ballpoint pen slashes and burns, but apart from proofreading, he’s not really involved. The collaboration works well. The young researcher will have the name of an eminent herpetologist to add veracity to his project, and Chuck will have his name on a current publication. To prove he is still working, still alive. At least this time, he is not travelling to some far-
flung desert. Someone at the University of Arizona will do the typing, and my fingers get a rest.

Thanks for a delicious tea. Diane grabs a tea towel and lifts a well-rinsed dish from the drainer.

Tea? Goddamnit. I knock myself out fixing a large dinner and she thanks me for tea. Does she mean afternoon tea?

Do you usually have dinner later?

Diane looks bemused, and we realise there has been cross communication. We search for other examples of language differences. She says petrol instead of gas. She calls biscuits, scones. Cookies are biscuits. Swimming costumes are togs or bathers. She has breakfast, lunch/dinner and tea. Why? Because that’s what her mother calls the main meals. Everyone knows dinner is at night. And the weirdest of all? The herb oregano. Diane pronounces it or-e-ga-no. I call it oreg-ano.

Diane, I say. You put the wrong em-pha-sis on the wrong syl-a-ble.

* * *
The fire in Martha's eyes, and the quickness to state her point of view and stick to it against all opposition, fascinates Diane. If only she had the courage to be the same. To make outrageous statements. To be taken seriously and have the unshakable belief that she is right. But, aside from the domestic ties of motherhood and meals, where is their common ground? Their conversation is like her grandfather's word games.

The English language is crazy, Diane says. There is no egg in eggplant, ham in hamburger, apple or pine in pineapple.

Martha leans forward, her broad smile encouraging. Diane warms to the game. English muffins were not invented in England or French fries in France.

Martha laughs and joins in. If a vegetarian eats vegetables—Martha's smile is wicked—What does a humanitarian eat?

Diane finally relaxes. Laughing, they make their way upstairs to the room off the landing. When Diane steps into Martha's study, her eyes widen. Apart from a thin vertical window, the walls are lined with books. Rows and rows of spines, trumpeting titles, advertising contents, announcing authors, with names emblazoned in gold, red or bold black: Dickens, Austen, William H Prescott. Authors her teachers at State School mentioned, but whom she never read. There's a complete shelf of dictionaries. Others hold travel, non-fiction and novels. Overall, the sharp smell of old leather and new ink takes her breath away.

This is a first edition. Martha reverently hands Diane a gilt-edged, leather-bound copy of Tennyson's Poetical Works. She admires the plush red-and-gold cover page and the bewhiskered portrait of the man himself. Opening the book at random, she reads,

thick leaved ambrosial

With an ancient melody

of inward agony...

Inward agony is right. She will need a dictionary beside her to make sense of these poems.

Amazing. Diane carefully returns Tennyson to his rightful place. But I'd need a month to read it.
Martha beckons her to a shelf crammed with travel journals. Handwritten titles and dates neatly inscribed on each spine.


Taking a well-thumbed journal from the bookcase, Martha eases into her favourite chair. Patting a seat beside her, she passes the journal to Diane.

My favourite trip.

Diane turns page after page of meticulously typed words and intricately designed graphs and tables. And you say you're not a writer?

I wouldn't call a record of dates and species, coupled with a few personal observations, good writing. Martha points to a page. Diane reads out loud:

Nairobi 1973. Of all African countries, I love Kenya. When I'm here, I constantly smile. I find the people naturally exuberant and quick to laugh. However, today I felt old and affronted when a middle-aged African man called me 'Mama’. I was not his mother. My reaction seemed to bemuse him. Later, our tour leader, Jock, explained that in Africa ‘Mama’ is a title of respect….

They share a smile. Language differences yet again.

I often wonder where my love of Africa comes from. Martha rubs her chin. I think it dates back to the mid fifties. Someone unearthed a huge talking drum in the American Museum of Natural History.

Diane settles into her chair, happy to hear one of Martha's stories. How different they are to the stories back home about the 'goings on' next door, or the strange habits of the postmaster's dog.

Martha's eyes half close. Sometimes long forgotten ancient collected items are found in the basement.

Diane imagines a dark dungeon, clouded in mystery, packed with archaeological treasures.

A Nigerian drummer, Babatunde Olantunji was in New York City. I don't recall how we and our colleagues, Pete and Angie, were invited to join a small group one night to hear the old drum come to life. Martha laughs. Why would they think two herpetologists would care about anthropology?
Her voice has a dream-like quality. Diane can't take her eyes off Martha's face.

Few of us had ever been in the basement of the museum. Olantunji's long fingers reverently caressed the enormous, carved, hollow, log. Martha's fingers unconsciously stroked the air in front of her.

He softly explained that before a tree was cut down to make a drum, it was necessary to speak to the tree's spirit. Ask permission for its use. Martha looks at Diane and smiles.

First, he struck the drum lightly, and then he began to make it talk. Martha shivers. When something moves me, music, art or poetry, I get chills. Her finger waggles at Diane. Believe me, that man nearly froze me. Especially when he stopped sending messages and began to play complicated sounds, one rhythm on top of another until it seemed as if at least four hands were at work.

Diane imagines the blur of hands, like the calypso drummers on TV that Ron admires, who create sounds that defy description.

Martha points to the journal. In spite of this experience, I was still conditioned by all the books I'd read.

Diane raises an eyebrow.

You know, Tarzan and the apes: noble tribes, vine-festooned trees and grinning chimpanzees.

I loved *The Jungle Book* and Riki Tiki Tavi, Diane says, remembering her favourite childhood book.

Africa, Martha says dreamily. I felt as if I was home. She takes the journal from Diane and closes it. Maybe it's genetic.

Diane doesn't reply. She knows nothing about genetics.

I heard that Richard Leakey, Professor of Anthropology at Stony Brook University in New York, thinks so. Leaning forward in her chair, Martha takes a deep breath before adding, Maybe we do all go back to the three-and-a-half-million-year-old Ethiopian Lucy.

Diane is fascinated, but also feels as if she's back in school. This is going to be a long couple of days. She wriggles in her seat, rubs her knees.

Do you know that Lucy is the first almost complete skeleton found of early woman?

Diane nods. She does now, so it's not a lie.
You must read Donald Johanson and Maitland Edey's *Lucy: The Beginnings of Humankind*.

The back door slams, heavy footsteps enter the downstairs living room. Martha struggles to her feet. She hands the journal to Diane and indicates the shelf.

Frankly, I’m not crazy about the book. Martha walks towards the stairs. But *Lucy* provides a good hook to hang one’s ideas on. You can almost visualize the little creature being the mama of all who came later.

Later, in bed, Diane toys with the idea of a genetic link from Lucy, through her mother to her. Memories surface of her mother's stories of how Diane's grandfather had crushed her mother's dream of a singing career. Forbidden to take singing lessons, she cooked, cleaned and sewed for five younger brothers and chafed at the injustice.

Diane tosses her schoolbag onto the chair by the back door and sits on the step to wait. She soon hears the staccato clack of high heels hurrying down the cracked concrete sideway.

Sorry to be late, Love. Her mum pulls out the long hat pin that secures her latest handmade creation of felt and flowers to her greying curls.

Come on in. I'll get you a slice of bread. She twists the key in the lock then hurries inside. Placing her handbag and coat on a chair in her bedroom, she closes the door. Ties a cobbler apron firmly around her ample waist then runs fingers through greying hair.

Hurry up and set the table, Love. Your dad will be in any minute. Diane and her mother are used to this ritual.

Ever since her mum joined the Uniting Church Choir, she often forgets the time.

Years ago, I wanted to enter the Sun Aria Competition, but my father... The choir master says I’m the best soprano they’ve ever had.

Diane's mum pours boiling water from the kettle into two pots on the stove. She sings, *One alone, to be my own, I alone, to know her caresses. One to be, eternally, the one my worshipping soul possesses*, each word a treasured diamond. When the pot lids rattle from the steam, her mum looks around. A neat pile of
ironing, done before leaving, sits on the ironing table. Physical evidence of a day's hard work. Table set. Pots bubbling. Her mum nods with satisfaction.

The back door opens and Diane's dad steps into a warm, steamy kitchen to be greeted by her mum with an armful of folded ironing. Putting it down, she takes his jacket, hangs it on a hook behind the door. Diane takes the kitbag out of calloused fingers. Her dad inhales deeply. Smells good. Dinner ready?

Won't be long, Love. By the time you change out of your overalls, it'll be on the table. As soon as he leaves, her mum starts peeling potatoes.

Diane sips a cup of percolated coffee, listening intently as Martha outlines the plans for the next day.

We're all going to Jack Masters' seventieth birthday celebration.

Jack who?

Martha looks startled. Masters. Jack Masters. His real name is John, but all his friends call him Jack. She waits for the name to register. I wrote to you about him.

Diane waits for her to continue.

The world famous English author of Bhowani Junction?

Diane helps herself to carrot cake, brushing crumbs off her lap. She vaguely remembers an old black-and-white film, but can't recall the story.

Martha hurries to the bookcase beside the fireplace. I have a signed copy. She lifts down a small, dark brown book and flicks open the cover. Diane reads, To Martha, Best wishes, Jack Masters, 1955.

He lives in Santa Fe, so I wrote to him. Told him how involved I became in the story and how much I respected his research. She reverently strokes the cover. I was shocked and delighted when he replied.

Diane stares at Martha's animated face and wonders how anyone could be so enthusiastic about an author and his books.

Jack is the leader of our Santa Fe Chilli and Marching Society.

Diane glances to see if Martha is serious. Elderly people practicing drill, or training to be marching girls? The thought of Martha in a short, pleated skirt, barely covering her bottom, makes Diane giggle.

It is an excellent hiking group, but any hike with Jack is like a forced march. He's a lieutenant-colonel. DSO and OBE. Treats us like foot soldiers training for a campaign.
Diane has a vision of the famous author striding out in front with his gaggle of followers marching behind. She manages to maintain a serious expression. Martha picks up the empty mugs and heads for the kitchen...

You should read his war trilogy *Loss of Eden*, she calls over her shoulder.

Diane makes a mental note of yet another book, three in fact, she'll have to look up when she gets home. She wants to run a mile. Feels like a dumb Australian.

That night in bed, Diane pummels her pillow. Famous authors. Poets. Playwrights. She's never heard of Jack Masters, or whatever his name is. Does she call him Jack? Mr. Masters? What of the others? At least twenty, according to Martha, including Ned Colbert, who worked with Chuck at the New York Museum. Apparently, Ned discovered the first complete skeleton of a *Coelophysis*: She can't even pronounce that, let alone knows what it is. She has no idea who these people are, yet she has this uncomfortable feeling that she should know, should be impressed. Well, too late now and no use pretending. Let them take her as she is.

Heavy, antique, wooden doors swing open to reveal an indoor floor-to-ceiling waterfall. Water trickles over delicate ferns clinging to the ceiling-high rock-face. It swirls around blue water lilies thriving in a large pool. Four steps lead down to a huge open bedroom/lounge with a stunning view of mountains and valleys. Plate glass windows make up the entire back wall. The entrance is at street level, but Jack and Barbara Masters’ adobe home is cantilevered over a canyon.

Martha, eyes sparkling like an infatuated schoolgirl, tugs Diane's arm.

This is our world famous author.

Diane can't take her eyes off his leathery, brown face, overshadowed by an outsized, canary yellow, Stetson hat with an eagle feather stuck in the band. Jack crushes her hand. Pumps it up and down.

Any friend of Martha's is a friend of mine. He leads Diane over to the bar.
Name your poison. He holds up his half-full whisky glass. Diane points to the water jug. She wants to keep her mind clear.

You can't drink that. He grins at her. Fish piss in it. He pours her a glass of red wine.
As soon as Jack walks away, Martha hurries over, grabs Diane's wine and replaces it with a glass of water. Fish might piss in it, she says, but that other stuff will give you problems.

Jack taps his whisky glass with a knife and shouts in his ex-Indian Army voice: Let the competition begin.

People scatter to find seats. Everyone takes a turn reciting poems, reading short stories or reporting the successes of authors Diane has never heard of. Martha walks to the front and announces: An ode to Ned and his Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The crowd laughs. Ned stands, takes a bow, and is hooted down.

A fossil hunter named Ned
Went looking for critters long dead
Imagine his glee, at the uncovery
Of Coelophysis in bed

Martha hesitates, glances around the room. With a flourish, she bows low, accepting the applause. Chuck grabs Jack’s hat and in a western-movie-actor’s drawl asks, What is the difference between a buffalo and a bison?

The audience shouts back, You can wash your hands in a bison.

Jack presents Chuck with a blue winner’s sash.

Diane feels like one of Jack's pissing fish helplessly flapping out of water, until she notices gnarled hands and lined faces. Everyone is the age of her parents. Retirees enthusiastically reliving past glories. Santa Fe is full of them. Is it for the weather? In Australia, Grey Nomads flock in the thousands to sunny Queensland — beautiful one day, perfect the next — to avoid the extreme heat of the far north and cold of the south. Or is it for Santa Fe's easy-going lifestyle? It's reputation of being a centre of art and culture?

Diane writes wonderful letters, Martha announces. She hands Diane an envelope. It was in the mailbox when we got home. Read it to us.

Diane recognises her own handwriting. But it's for you, Martha.

She hands it back. Martha rips open the envelope then extracts the neatly folded pages. She holds them out to Diane.

Come on. Share the news.
Out loud? Her stomach churns. Her mind races. She wrote this two weeks ago. Had she said anything negative about Ron, who sat beside her? Personal thoughts to be shared only with Martha?

Diane slowly opens the page. She looks at Martha, who nods.

Dear Martha, Diane begins, her eyes trying to read ahead before she speaks. She swallows, her face red.

Dear Martha, It won't be long before we ... She edits as she reads, adding pieces about the weather, Kerry at school. Innocent, general conversational pieces she never committed to this page. Her ad libbing covers the sections she omits. Personal observations about Ron's health and a growing feeling that that she wants more out of life than the nurturing roles of dutiful daughter, wife and mother coupled with full-time work. None of it meant for an audience. Diane finally finishes with, Much love, Diane. Kiss. Kiss.

With a sigh of relief, she stuffs the letter into her pocket.

Come on, you lazy barracudas, Jack says. Time for some musical entertainment. Imaginary lines divide them into three groups. Jack extravagantly conducts their enthusiastic singing. Row, row, row your boat. At last, here is something Diane knows. The song triggers memories of pre-television family nights.

Diane's Grandma and Grandpa are staying overnight. Her family sits on straight-backed, wooden chairs around the Laminex table in the pearl-grey and woodland-green kitchen. Her dad takes a harmonica from his pocket, taps it several times on the palm of his hand. Cupping his left hand around the silver shaft, he plays a couple of riffs, before the family lustily sings Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree. Merry, merry king of the bush is he.... Later, it is card games or Scrabble. Some nights, her dad brings out the Novelty Evenings, Parlour Games book.

Who's going to play the Ring Contest?

What’s that again? Diane's mum's chair scrapes closer and she grabs a pencil.

The answer to these questions must end with Ring. The ring of an acrobat...Daring. The ring of a doctor...Curing. Her dad looks around the table at unenthusiastic faces.
No? Maybe Twisted Animals? Each word represents an animal. Let's see. He checks the book.


Diane has *My Own Colouring Book* and a box of crayons, but in front of the adults are pencils and notepads. On the first page of the notepads is a list of sixteen sentences.

Worth Studying
Extravagant and Peculiar
Makes Travesties etc.

Her dad, book open at page nine reads, Can you name the author? The initials are the capital letters in the describing sentence. You have fifteen minutes to see how many you can get. He waves a block of Cadbury dairy milk chocolate, First prize.

All eyes are on the kitchen clock. He raises his hand. Pencil points are licked. When the second hand hits twelve, he drops his arm: Go.

The only sound is the ticking clock and the occasional, Could you have picked anything harder, Len? Answers scribbled.

William Shakespeare
Edgar Allan Poe
Mark Twain

When her grandma wins, Diane shares the chocolate. Usually her grandpa wins, but tonight he says the English language is daft.

Just because you won tonight, Minnie, Don't get any big idees. You're supposed to say ide-er, Grandpa. Diane ignores her mum's stare.

She's used to what she calls The Double Whammy.

Show me the R in idea and I'll say it. He looks like a bantam rooster. Feathers ruffled, ready for a fight.

Don't encourage him, Diane, her grandma whispers.

Grandpa looks around the room. Her grandma sighs.

English is an impossible language. He sits up straight and crosses his arms.

How can I tear my shirt and shed a tear?

No one answers.

And we have noses that run and feet that smell. Grandpa makes a lot of sense, but he argues about everything.
Did you learn English by osmosis? Sitting in a chair pushed up against the kitchen table, a fountain pen placed in your hand? Your mum stands over you while you scrawl a thank you letter on pink paper to Aunt Mildred for the birthday present. Was this more than a lesson in good manners? Christmas cards and get-well notes to aunts and uncles, holiday postcards to friends and family, parlour games. The gift of a pink leather-covered diary and primary school teachers who praised your script and cared. All part of your basic training, the beginning of your writing apprenticeship. In later years, Martha’s letters introduced you to a world of literature. Pricked your curiosity. You made lists of authors and books that even when dipped into, made you lift your head for a moment to a place far beyond the busyness of life.

***
I open the bedroom shutters to a world of white. A glitz blitz of powdery snow.

Damn it, Chuck. And it's only October. Maybe we should skip Bandelier and take Diane straight to the airport?

He peers out the window. Poe key toe snow.

It may be a little bit, but it's still goddamn cold.

I wander around mindlessly, tidying the living room. Why go? It's years since I've been there, but at the gathering yesterday, Jack grabbed my arm and took me aside.

Take Diane to Bandelier.

They're leaving tomorrow. Jack raised his glass.

We'll only have a couple of hours to get them to Albuquerque. The eyebrow lifted higher. And… Jack raised his whisky glass and waggled his finger. Do it, he said and walked away.

But why? Why stir up old memories?

My mind drifts back to four of us climbing narrow, two storey-high, wooden ladders. Anchored against the sheer cliff walls, they lead to abandoned Native Indian cliff dwellings and sacred caves. I can almost see the dust that rises like fairies riding a shaft of sunlight. Smell the smoke that used to drift from the narrow hole in the domed ceiling of the ancient ceremonial kiva.

We sit around the remains of a central fire and become part of the circle of life. The spirits of past ceremonies wrap me in their embrace, like an old Indian warrior: his children hugged to his chest, all enfolded lovingly in a large blanket draped around his shoulders. The ancient tribes always protected their young. They taught their children their mythology, providing emotional and mental strengths. What did my children learn from a father cursed with laissez-faire arrogance? What did Chuck and I give to our children? He was only interested in teaching brilliant students. Only interested in Merril.

I place my offering of a small clay bear amongst the fruits and trinkets others have left to appease the gods.

I glance at my watch. Time to round up everyone and get going. Grabbing several extra snow jackets, I hurry down to Ron and Diane patiently waiting in the living room.

* * *
Chuck's spare snow jacket reaches below Diane's knees. The sleeves cover her hands, but she is grateful for the extra warmth. At her feet is a pair of state-of-the-art hiking boots. Try them on, Martha says. I bought them in a hurry, and they're far too big for me.

Diane has never seen such superbly crafted boots. Leather uppers, solid sole, two rows of stitching and a cushy innersole. Are you sure?

Martha nods.

Diane unzips then kicks off her cheap vinyl boots. With fumbling fingers, she criss-crosses long laces through metal eyelets across a soft leather tongue.

Stand up, gal. Wiggle your toes.

Diane lifts one foot after the other, marches across the room, shoulders back, walking tall. Perfect. She gives Martha a grateful hug. I could walk to China in these.

Diane’s boots plough through powdery snow. She glances at Ron, his smile as broad as Kerry's on Christmas morning. It never snows at Kubunji Beach.

The towering cliffs of Bandelier National Monument look like a movie set. Chuck and Martha lead the way along pristine paths to promised Indian dwellings carved high into the cliff face. Eagles wheel and soar high above cliff-top pines. She shivers; their plaintive call captures the spiritual essence of the place.

Martha strides ahead, shoulders hunched as if her backpack is full of bricks. Diane hurries to join her, wants to share her load, but they march in silence. It's a struggle to keep up. There is no breath to talk. Martha, sweat glistening on her forehead, finally presses a hand against the cliff face and gazes at the cobalt blue sky.

Something about the stiff line of Martha's back makes Diane leave her alone. After several minutes she asks, You okay?

Martha nods.

On the trek back, walking side by side, she whispers to Diane, My heart is in this place.

Wedged into Qantas' economy class, Diane looks at her snow-wet boots to remind herself it is not a dream. It is so hard to believe that in twenty-four hours they will travel from the first fall of winter snow to the leafy crab-apple of an Australian spring. They left Australia on Tuesday, the twenty-first and arrived in America on Tuesday,
the twenty-first. On their return they will get back their lost day. She would like to ask Martha, Why is this so? She would like to ask Martha about her heart and Bandelier.
Dear Diane, I'm amazed your fruitcake made it through customs. In some strange way, it has become a symbol of our friendship. Rich and satisfying. Your letters nourish my soul in the same way a good book feeds my mind. Although, I am appalled that so many good books contain spelling mistakes and misused words. One exception was 'The Great Gatsby'. Whoever edited it did an excellent job. And it was a great read.

I don't suppose you will have time to read it now that you have your own hairdressing salon. Do you still get up at 5:00 a.m. like me? I don't know what I'd do without my early morning walk.

The din of my alarm clock jump-starts me. 5:00 a.m. Chuck is lumped under a heap of bedclothes. It's hard to get him into bed. Even harder to get him out. What if I throw a frozen bag of peas under the cover? Red-faced bellowing is not worth it. He's not an early morning fitness freak. Soon, the coffee percolator burps. Half an hour of push-ups and body-curls, plus a two mile walk, always gets me going for the day. At least Barb and Elizabeth follow in my footsteps.

The island of Arran bus is filled with Scots. I squeeze next to a hardy little woman, plaid skirt wrapped warmly around her legs and fastened with a thistle brooch. A silk scarf tied under her chin. She reminds me of Queen Elizabeth taking her corgis for a romp.

This is my granddaughter. I point to Elizabeth.

Aye. I ken see the likeness.

Apart from the dark red hair, Elizabeth does look like me. Same brown eyes, and she can blame me for her stocky figure.

From a worn, leather handbag, the woman produces a picture of two teenage girls sitting on a photographer's stool, legs crossed.

I hae twae, she says with a smile. She points with a work-worn finger. We both be hags.

I'm like an old hag. I want to moan and wail my discomfort as the bus bounces along the winding road towards our hostel. I can't believe I'm staying in youth hostels
and travelling on public transport. It's uncomfortable, cold and sparse. So different 
from the usual plush hotels, private suites and bevy of attendants and silver service. 
But Chuck is not here to pander, protect and domineer. I'm spending precious time 
with my daughter and grandchild. Three generations. I cling to that. But dark, damp 
Scotland when I'm a desert rat? This is not Africa. Yet the scenery out the window is 
spectacular. Beautiful, windswept beaches and wild sea. Mossy mountains, their 
summit obscured by mist, walls of stones, and an art colony.

I wish we had time to stop, but Barb is on a budget. She's always watching 
her dollars and this cheap Brit rail pass gives us seven days unlimited travel on 
every type of conveyance: ferry boats, buses, railroads and yesterday, a postal van. I 
wish sometimes she would lighten up. I'm paying for Elizabeth, and she is worth 
every penny. Her sunny smile and sense of humour keep me going. The bus lurches 
around a steep corner, revealing a majestic castle silhouetted against a misty grey 
sky. I take out my map. What castle is that? I ask the local woman.

She turns and looks out of the window.

Ooh. That be the modern one.

When was it built?

Sometime in the seventeen or eighteen hundreds. I'm nae sure of the date. 
She taps her finger on her cheek. You be better visiting the old ruin on the peak. She 
points to a spot on my map. I promise it will top my list. Not today. Later, much later. 
After miles and miles of bouncing over pot-holed roads, I too am old and ruined.

The bus driver pulls to the curb and points to John O' Groats Hostel high on 
top of a steep hill. I rub my aching bottom, ignore the twinge in my neck and hump 
my large travel case onto my back. My daypack hangs on my front. Elizabeth wants 
to take my daypack, but I won't allow it. I may be in my sixties, but I pride myself on 
my independence. Elizabeth calls me a feisty little old lady, in hiking boots. I tap the 
driver's shoulder, point up the hill and ask if there is any transport.

Ooh. It's nae verra far, he says, giving me a wink. Especially for a strapping 
lassie like yerself.
Dear Martha,

The hairdressing salon is going well. I have two excellent girls and an apprentice. They look after things when I go to the retirement village. I still care for the same clients, at the same time, every Tuesday. We talk about our families (or lack of), our failings (and other people’s) and swap recipes.

When the village residents talk about old-soldier, Daniel, standing before the automatic teller machine shouting, I’ve won. I’ve won, Diane turns away to hide her sadness. The residents laugh and smile, but when one dies, suffers a stroke or loses their faculties, or as Thelma says, facilities, a collective shiver runs through the village. They close ranks, deliver casseroles, sit and listen. The solitude of the bush, without the need for glamorous makeup, and no electricity for hairdryers, clippers or curling tongs, becomes irresistible to Diane.

The trip to Bandelier and the ancient cliff dwellings plants the desire to learn more about Australian indigenous culture and country. What better way than first hand? Diane organises a camping trip to Ayer’s Rock. Maybe Outback travel will encourage Kerry to prod, question and explore.

Heat, soul-searing heat. Dirt, dust, scrub and mice, hundreds and hundreds of mice, scuttle under tent flaps, copulate in sleeping bags and feast on their food cache. Diane moves a box, and they scamper and scurry. Ron copes with chewed ropes, nibbled hessian bags and threatens to shoot the lot. Kerry chases them with the broom.

There are at least ten other camps nearby. A new arrival hurries past with her jeans soaked from the knees down: first time to the camp toilet. She will learn to stand to one side, press the button and run like hell to avoid the tidal wave erupting from the bowl.

Diane waves. Smug in her dry-legged jeans, she turns the camp oven just one twist on hot coals to evenly cook the beer-bread. One stubby of beer poured into self-rising flour and some sugar, lots of sugar, ensures they will not starve tonight. Ron calls it sacrilege, but two hungry adults and a growing girl take some filling.

An elderly aboriginal woman, her loose frock tugged by hot wind, sits on hot sand. She clicks two message sticks, smiles, then points to the ground. Diane and Kerry squat in the bull-dust, and are instantly besieged by millions of affectionate bush flies.
undeterred by the swish of leafy fly-swatters. Momentarily, the flies rise, only to settle again onto backs, cluster around eyes and buzz in ears.

_Uluru._ The woman points to the rock.

_Ayer's Rock?_ Diane asks. The woman nods. _Uluru._

The sound rolls off Diane's tongue, the Pitjinjara word flowing and musical when compared to clipped colonial speech.

The woman clicks intricately patterned message sticks. Her rhythmic, mournful chant communicates more clearly than any words her timeless relationship to the land. With nods, gestures and a smile, the woman hands Kerry a _nulla nulla_ war-club. With whoops and blood-curdling yells, Kerry dances around them defeating imaginary enemies. The childish antics make the woman and Diane laugh, but Kerry's dance and the woman's rhythmic clapping reveal an ancient culture stretching back thousands of years.

Diane breaks open a paddy melon, exposing soft white flesh and pink seeds. She points to her mouth.

The woman violently shakes her head.

A flock of wild budgerigars wheels and swoops across a limitless sky. Their wings flash iridescent green before they disappear into a blue deeper than any sea. Kerry points: talks about her Billy Budgie back home in his cage. Confined, content, secure. If only he could fly free above the small waterhole surrounded by palms teeming with raucous life. The pool is protected by towering ochre cliffs blocking out a thirsty sun. Cool, clear, a place to nourish body and soul. Diane drinks deeply of the water and the peace and vows this will not be the last time.

The lingering last rays of sun tease and caress the rock as it shimmers and preens under a darkening sky. Outside their camper, Diane sits on warm sand and cuddles Kerry while they watch the rock transform from wanton scarlet to consecrated purple. Rocking Kerry, Diane murmurs, _Uluru, Uluru._

Gazing at the monolith rising out of miles and miles of flat scrubby ground reminds Diane of Gulliver, a captured giant who, with a bellow, could rise at any moment from a century's long sleep. This may not be Martha's Kilimanjaro, but it is just as breathtaking. Hunkered in the earth, it allows mice-like people to scamper, climb, and nibble at its edges.
Following the Malu trail, they view the womb-shaped Fertility Cave, sacred to aboriginal women. Creep into dark, dank recesses to see where the fruits of that fertility were initiated. Shiver at the sight of the black, blood-soaked rock where boys were turned into men.

Holding Kerry's hand, Diane helps her over rough sections, and hesitates when Kerry points to the dark stain, wanting to know the cause. Diane's explanation of ore-stained water seeping through the rock is accepted.

They climb. Oh, how they climb, past Chicken Point where the safety chain finishes, to scramble hand over hand, often down on their knees as wild wind whips their hair.

Come on, Mum, you can do it.

Diane's legs are like two weak elastic bands, but Kerry won't let her stop. She tugs and pulls Diane until finally they reach the top and gaze in awe at...nothing. Miles and miles of flat nothing. Apart from the distant Olgas and the rocky outcrop of the Dome of the Dying Kangaroo their view is unhindered to the horizon.

Diane hugs her trembling knees. Her mind drifts to everyday concerns. Is everything all right back in Melbourne? Will the two-wheel-drive truck and old pick-up camper survive the corrugations and dust of this long trip? Will their meagre supply of flour be adequate? She tugs at her jumper. Does it cover the broken zip of her jeans? Was her life like one of those camp-ground mice, always scrabbling and scampering, consumed by the petty problems of everyday living? If only she could remember to lift her head long enough to see the magnificence around her. Kerry snuggles beside her. Diane smiles at the happy upturned face. She pushes a stray curl back from her daughter's forehead. Here, on top of the world, the wind picks up her puny troubles and scatters them harmlessly over the vast landscape to reveal their good health and good fortune.
You love the sound and feel of tapping keys, seeing words skim across the screen. But where are you going with this novel? One minute you're confident, bubbling over with enthusiasm. But words often fail you. The visions are there, dancing in dark places. Scenes, characters and settings float past in an endless procession and, like the fairies in *Lady Cottington’s Pressed Fairy Book*, you try to trap them. Sometimes when you're asleep, your dream catcher captures perfect words flowing out of your subconscious. You jump out of bed and grab your pen. Squish, snap, trap. Unfettered, unedited sentences that sing when read, but completely unrelated to the writing in hand, destined with great regret for the cutting room floor.
The pot of red chillies on the bench droops in spite of copious amounts of water and tender loving care. The kitchen corkboard is covered in pictures of Martha and Santa Fe. Diane glances longingly at them and yearns for something beyond doing the dishes and making money to pay the bills. Something to nourish her soul. She wants to learn, to understand, to be like Martha.

...so, Martha, I've gone back to school as a mature-aged student—I sound like a piece of old cheese—studying for my year twelve certificate at our local Tertiary And Further Education (TAFE) College. It was a sudden decision. One I hope I won't live to regret. Sorry. I know it sounds crazy, but I must run. I have homework to do.

Like a novice skier hurtling down a black run, icy exhilaration lashes Diane's face, sharpens her mind, but it's just as scary.

A month ago, sitting in the balcony of the Robert Blackwood hall, only Kerry existed amongst the capped and gowned graduates. She walked to the stage and Diane suddenly saw a huge educational gap widening between them. Kerry's Bachelor of Arts Degree ensuring she already talks in a language Diane cannot understand. Martha's letters constantly nudge her. Has she read anything new lately? What did she think of Douglas Preston’s latest book? The yearning is there, but never the time. Kerry is beginning to map her own journey. The recently elected Whitlam Labour government has introduced free education for anyone deprived through financial hardship or lack of opportunity. TAFE College, only ten minutes away, has VCE classes for mature aged students.

Write about anything you like, the teacher says to Diane. She looks the same age as Kerry. Opening the three-hundred-and-twenty-page exercise book, Diane stares at the blank paper. Her body is fertile, but what if her mind is barren? The other students begin scribbling. Diane's hand shakes, cannot hold the pen. Wrapping her bulky cardigan around her, she forces herself to write her name at the top of the page. At least it isn't blank.

But what can she write about? What does she want to say? Writing over and over again, I have nothing to say. I have nothing to say... she suddenly finds she is writing about why she sits in this classroom, her hopes and fears, her sick dog and the two snails crawling across the dew-drenched path this morning. A dove calling from the roof of the old tenement house in Footscray. Grandpa bent over, tending his
beloved potted plants, nurturing them more than his eight children and ten grandchildren. Potted plants don't answer back. Black pants held up by braces, the seat, shiny with wear. White shirtsleeves rolled back, held by silver elasticised grips below bulging biceps, the result of working in a soap factory eighty hours a week. The studded, Sunday, detachable shirt collar removed. A small, nuggetty man with a shock of white hair on top of which is perched a jaunty, black hat, thumb marks imprinted in the front point of the crown.

Cats on the roof. He looks at Diane. She looks up, but can’t see any.

Where?

Those doves are telling us. See? He points to a group of doves perched on the ridge, calling to each other. Listen. In a singsong voice he chants—There’s cats on the roof, There’s cats on the roof.

I hear them, Grandpa.

Now listen for the reply. Hear it?

She shakes her head.

Can’t you hear, Well chase em off? Well chase em off? Grandpa also thinks they say, The fruit salad's crook.

Diane is small and in Grandpa’s bedroom, her shoulder blades pressed hard against the side of the bed. He rubs against her, rasping his unshaved, whiskery—Don't...

Diane doesn't hear the word 'stop' until the teacher's hand takes the pen out of hers. At the end of the class, she collects their writing. Diane prays she will be able to read her scrawl, but please God, never let her read her writing aloud in front of other students. She bruises easily.

* * *
Dear Diane, I'm afraid I'm not much good with plants and have managed to kill my fair share. Have you tried leaving your chilies outside in the sun?

I'm so pleased you have decided to further your education. You are studying two of my favorite subjects, English Literature and Biology. I think these days I would be called a college dropout. I was twenty and in the middle of the college year when Chuck transferred to the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. I dropped everything, my degree, my academic dreams of being a biologist in my own right, and followed him. We married two months later.

Chuck's mother is old enough to be my grandmother.

On our wedding day, she grabs my shoulders. Why are you marrying him? Kind eyes gaze into mine. You've got yourself a real handful there, gal, but since you've made up your mind... She unclasps the twisted gold and silver chain from around her neck then places it around mine.

Good luck. She kisses my cheek and hugs me tight. You're going to need it. She laughs at my serious face.

I soon understand I have hitched my wagon to a roller coaster. The slow ratchet pull of research, the magnificent view of knowledge from the top and the stomach churning drop into the rigour of publishing. Brilliance and paranoia. The steel trap of his mind. But amongst all the chaos of research started and abandoned, abrupt manner and self absorption, of papers littering the floor, Chuck and I are the perfect team. The revered, flavour-of-the-year scientist and his trusted research assistant. The magnificent Lone Ranger and his clever sidekick, Tonto, government funded, travelling the country and eventually the world.

Two years married and a horror of a day. If Chuck's article is to be published in the next research journal, it must be on the editor's desk by the end of the week. The bibliography is a nightmare. So many obscure references to check and change. Why doesn't he keep detailed accounts of the books he reads instead of piling them up on
his desk? You'd think he would know by now. All footnotes must be verified, and he has dozens of them. How does he expect me to get it done in such a short time? I've already taken several headache tablets. Time for a break.

Reaching up on tiptoe to our kitchen cupboards, obviously designed for a giant, I grapple for a mug. Coffee black and strong will help. Rolling my head around, listening to the grisly cracks of stiff muscle and bone, I do not hear Chuck sneak up behind me. His arms around my waist, warm and comforting, until he presses his groin and the hardness I have come to know only too well against my butt.

Not tonight, I groan. You want that essay finished, don't you?

Essay? He nuzzles my neck.

You have to take more care with your references. I try to push him away. If you'd only follow the Harvard style—.

Have you finished talking, Martha, or are you going to enlighten me some more? He presses harder, grinds against me, arms pinning mine to my side. The more I struggle, the more aroused he becomes.

Chuck. Not now. My refusal only makes him more determined. Lifting me off my feet, he marches into the bedroom and throws me on the bed. I struggle, pinned down, his face two inches from mine.

Spit sprays when he shouts, If I want to fuck you, I will.

Wham. Bam. Not even a Thank you, Mam. I could have been eating an apple while he had me for all he cared.

Why didn't I run away? Slam the door like Nora did when she left the doll house. Instead, life for me became one big lesson on how to live with this man, who expected me to respond enthusiastically to the constant thrust in the dark.

With Chuck constantly in the bedroom, it is a wonder I didn't have fourteen children.

My mother-in-law was well versed in natural family planning. She pulled up her chair close to mine. Talked about the weather, future family outings and the blood-cleansing properties of spinach before saying, Are you serious about postponing having children?

I nod.
You realise you're safest straight after your period, and most fertile in the middle of the month? She can tell by my vacant look that I have no idea of what she is talking about. She tut tuts in frustration.

You must learn all you can about natural methods of how to avoid becoming pregnant. She looks straight at me. Surely you've heard of the Billings Ovulation Method of contraception.

With my mother-in-law's knowledge and assistance, I manage to limit babies to two. If only she could have helped me raise them.
Journal Entry, Portal Arizona 1956
The colors of the large cliffs guarding the entrance to Cave Creek Canyon change almost every hour. This year the rains are late and the leaves of the large sycamore, oak and juniper trees are brilliant orange, red and gold. But what good is that to me when...

Hold on tight, Chuck shouts as the four wheel drive slides and grinds along the slippery Canyon Creek road. Black clouds rumble, lightning crackles above mountain tors. Torrential rain lashes the windshield and at, Turkey Creek, we have to pull over to wait out the worst of the thunderstorm. A bedraggled black-throated desert sparrow, outside my side window, shelters on the lowest branch against the trunk of a mesquite bush. Water drips off his beak and, every now and again he pathetically peeps.

Hang the microphone out of the window, Chuck shouts.

I reach into the back seat, searching amongst anoraks, spare boots, and piles of books and papers. Chuck's fingers drum the steering wheel in time with the rain.

Hurry up.

It's here somewhere—

*Hijo de puta, Martha.* The storm will be over. Dragging up the mike by its cord, I hang it out the window. The running tape captures the syncopated boom of thunder, crack of lightening, and drumming rain interspersed with the sparrow's peeps. An unforgettable opus to nature.

We aquaplane home on the flooded gravel track, arriving back in camp just in time to record the perfect climactic roar of a flash flood. Added to this, within hours, the spade-foot toads start their mating calls.

A cluster of primitive cabins is this year's research base. Compliments of the American Museum of Natural History. Pete, Angie and family have to use the amenities block. Ours is the only building with indoor plumbing and roomy, shelved closets.

How's this? Chuck leans back in his chair, legs crossed, looking directly at the camera. He wiggles his bushy eyebrows, jiggles an imaginary cigar—a plausible imitation of Groucho Marks. Julie Shelford photographs Chuck for an article in *Adventure Magazine.* She laughs, tossing back blonde hair, leans over and grabs his
chin, turning his face to the light. An intimate look passes between them. Their laughter, jagged fingernails raking the blackboard of my heart. Chuck touches her arm, leans forward. Another lingering look. Snap. Snap. Snap. How many photos does she need for her damn article?

Coffee? I clear a spot amongst the deluge of papers littering the table.

He jokes and laughs. She clasps her hands behind her head. Fiddles with her hair, piles the long locks high on top of her head, tendrils curl bewitchingly around her face. Breasts thrust invitingly forward, she leans well back in her chair to reveal long limbs. He sits legs spread apart, hands on hips. Body language. She sees me watching and flashes a grin. The bitch.

I've read your husband's article in the *American Museum of Natural History Bulletin* she says, as if genuinely interested in only his mind. It's fascinating. White teeth flash.

Julie needs to photograph rattlesnakes for her article, Chuck adds. I'll take her up into the canyon. We'll only be gone a week.

With the laundry door closed, I grope for and find the half-full cranberry juice bottle filled with port in the bottom of the soiled linen bin. Listening for the sound of approaching footsteps, I unscrew the cap and don't put the container down until it is nearly empty. My breathing steadies as alcohol eases the tightness in my chest.

Go, I say out loud. Don't worry about me. I'll look after the children. I upend the bottle again. And type your latest article. Bottle in hand, I salute the laundry door. Good luck to you. At least you won't be pawing me for a while. Wiping away tears with the back of my hand, I drain the bottle and then hide it at the back of the shelf. With a smile firmly planted on my face, I return to an empty room.

With Chuck away, the house is quiet. The girls lie on their stomachs on the sitting room floor, drawing in their exercise books, crayons spread out in front of them. I dig my fingers into the base of my skull to ease the pain. The last thing I need is a migraine. Checking the girls are okay, I find the cranberry juice container I tucked behind the Cheerios box in the pantry. Take a hasty drink. Sucking an extra strong peppermint, I go back into the sitting room and flop down beside Barb, adding a sun here, a moon there, and playfully tug her long hair.
Can I have a candy, she asks. She loves Mommy's peppermints. Everyone thinks they are my favourite. I hate the things, but the stronger the better. Taking the packet out of my sweat pants pocket, I offer one to Merril. She screws up her nose, shakes her head, packs up book and crayons and goes to her room.

The whispering sounds of birds settling for the night drifts in the open window. Walking around the silent house, I pick up a stray crayon. Pop a sock into a sneaker, before tucking the girls in for the night. Barb wraps thin arms around my neck and hugs me tight. Nighty night. Don't let the bed bugs bite. I lean over to kiss Merril. She turns her face to the wall.

In the sitting room, I pick up my latest book. Flip the pages. Throw it onto the couch. How can an author write such trash? Predictable plot. Unbelievable characters happily humming love songs as they live in domestic bliss. Songs of copulation more like it. The pain in my head spreads to my temples. In the kitchen, I grab the cranberry juice bottle filled with port, bought from The Grand Hotel, no questions asked, pour myself a large glass, drain it and sigh.

What are you doing, Mummy?
I jump. Merril stares at the glass in my hand.

What are you looking at? I rinse my glass until it is squeaky clean.

Can I have a drink? She points to the cranberry bottle on the draining board.

You're supposed to be in bed, my lady. I pat her on the bottom. She pulls a face, drops her bottom lip. Puts her hands on her hips and stares.

Off you go. To your bedroom.

But I want cranberry juice.

I mouth the word No.

Why can't I?

I'm not in the mood for one of her temper tantrums. They can last all night. She pushes past me and reaches for the bottle. Turning quickly, I knock it into the sink, the contents gurgle down the drain. I grab Merril's shoulders and shake her.

Now look what you've made me do.

Keys in hand, I dash out the front door and jump into the car. Half an hour late. The kids waiting. Where has the time gone? One minute it was two o'clock and the next
four. Was I asleep? Not upright at the kitchen table. Another blackout. Two hours this
time. The gals are sitting on the grass outside the school.

Where have you been, Mommy? Barb flings her arms around me.

So sorry, Honey. I was working for Daddy and fell asleep. Merril looks at me
with penetrating eyes, and walks away.

Come back, Miss. Reluctantly, she climbs into the car. I start off down the
road.

Where are you going, Mommy? Barb asks.

Home.

You're going the wrong way, Merril shouts. Turning the car around, I head off
in the right direction.

The girls leave for camp the next day.

Alone in the cabin, tears prick my eyes. Trickle down my cheeks. Hurrying into the
kitchen, I reach for the bottle. My hand freezes in mid air. Merril's lunch is on the
bench, Barb's backpack beside it.

I lie on the bed, curtains drawn against the morning sun, wet wash-cloth across my
aching forehead. My head spins. How many painkillers have I had? Two? Maybe
four? I glance at the line of tablets laid out neatly on the bedside table. Such pretty
colours. The blue ones are my favourite. Maybe Valium will help. I swallow two with
a glass of port. Toss from side to side. Chuck will be flirting with his new flame,
helping her over streams, carrying her pack. Julie laughing at his lame jokes.

What rock is that? she asks.

Intercoursite.

Intercoursite? I've never heard of it.

Just another fuckin' rock.

I reach for the half empty bottle.

Sunlight floods the room. Covering my eyes with my hand, I'm confused. It should be
dark. I check the bedside clock. 10:00 a.m. The next morning. Blacked out for
twenty-four hours. An empty juice bottle on the floor. The world spins. Bed rocks.
Trying to stand, I fall backwards. I stare at the ceiling, seeing faces in the shadows,
spiders on the walls. There are blank places in my head, and I can't remember what
is missing. Pushing back a lank lock of hair, I catch a glimpse of myself in the

My eyes won't focus. Books don't help. They haven't done it for me for years. Painkillers? Hallucinogenic mushrooms? The Oaxaca Indians use those. Not strong enough. I dream of holding an electric drill to my skull. Boring into the black spot, the source of the pain. That will kill it. Instead, I scoop all the pills into my hand and hold them to my lips, but my glass is empty. I stare at the handful of pretty pills. So easy, but who will take care of the kids? Chuck? No way.


A video plays in my mind. Lying in my coffin. Kids motherless. Chuck?

A cougar coughs a warning. I grab pen and paper. Scribble memories of baby kisses, first footsteps, Mother and Father, aunts, friends and all the people who have ever loved me. Wrap all the love in the world around me. Promise never to drink again. Cry. Help me.

Eight hours later, pouring every last dreg of hidden port down the sink, I hide empty bottles in the middle of a bag of trash then pour a long glass of water. For four days I shake and shiver, sipping at a glass of water that never leaves my hand. I feel as if I've drunk a dam dry.

Chuck and Julie walk in. They don't look at each other. Julie, water running off her hiking jacket, hair lank, finger by finger drags off wet gloves. Dumps her bag on the floor by the settee.

Did you get the photos?

It poured nonstop. And we didn't find one friggin' rattlesnake. Chuck throws his wet jacket on the floor. We'll have to do the interview using caged snakes.

With shaking hands, I pour myself another long glass of water.
The nights belong to the novelist. You burn the midnight oil and commit words to text. It becomes an addiction. Floors are left unswept, dishes pile high in the sink, bills languish unopened. Life revolves around the story. When you wash dishes, sweep floors and pay bills and are trapped by the busyness of life, the novel nags for words. An unanswered letter on the kitchen bench begs for a reply.

Diane searches for something to write that isn't doom and gloom. She must keep the letter bright and cheerful. She yawns and straightens her back. Her spine creaks.

_How are you, Martha? I've just scoffed a whole block of rich dark chocolate. You'd love it. It's a new variety full of hazel nuts. Delicious, but probably the worst thing in the world for me. I seem to have gained an extra kilo and it's clinging tenaciously to my hips. Maybe that is why my left knee keeps seizing. I'm sorry it has taken me so long to reply to your welcome letter, but Mum hasn't been well, hairdressing has been crazy. I know, excuses, excuses._

Leaving the barely started letter on the kitchen table, Diane ventures outside. Moonlight outlines tall gums and highlights scarlet Canna lilies. The softness of night wraps around her, and she breathes crisp air. Facing the full moon, eyes closed, she bows three times. If only her wish could come true.

A constant ringing. Diane rolls over and grabs the bedside phone. Hello? Listens to the urgent voice. I'll be there as fast as I can.

On the edge of the bed knuckling sleep out of her eyes, she reaches for the folded track suit on the floor. Ron's head appears above the covers. Off again, he murmurs, gently rubbing her back.

She touches her lips to his forehead. He smiles, mutters something, pulls the doona up to his neck and rolls over. She wishes she could curl up beside him. Be there when he wakes and sleepily gathers her in his arms for an early morning cuddle. It will be at least five hours before she returns.

She grabs the bag, hanging on the bedroom doorknob. It contains her mum’s medical details, doctor's phone number, correct money for the telephone, several tissues and an old _Woman's Weekly_ in case her mum wants to read. Sally Morgan’s _My Place_ will help Diane. She'll need Sally's down-to-earth sense of humour.

You fuckin' idiot. An addict, high on drugs, berates the triage nurse, shaking a fist in her face. Code grey. Code grey. Security guards instantly appear and the man, still screaming abuse, is dragged away. Crying children in dressing gowns and slippers cuddle into concerned parents. A drunk holds a bloody cloth to his forehead. An elderly woman doubled over in pain, her husband patting her hand.

Diane approaches the desk. Can I see Valerie Gilbert?

The nurse checks her admittance form. Take a seat, we'll let you know as soon as doctor has seen her.

She's eighty-three, and I need to be with her.

The weary nurse sighs.

I've been before. I know to keep out of the way. Diane is waved through.

Groans and cries come from behind blue-curtained beds. White-coated doctors and nurses hurry past. Diane wants to chant, I'm late, I'm late for a very important date, and expects to see the mad hatter and Cheshire cat appear. In the last bed in a long row of cubicles, a small figure struggles for breath, oxygen mask clamped to her face. She takes her mother's bony hand, gently squeezes and smiles.

Sorry to trouble you, Love, her mother whispers.

No worries, Mum. I wasn't doing anything anyway. Her mother's smile extends to her eyes. Diane drags up a chair and sits beside her. It is always a long, long night.

* * *
Dear Diane, I'll be so glad when summer is over. I hate hot weather. Of course, knowing me, I'll be bitching about cold weather all too soon.

I was sorry to hear about your mother. It is so hard when a loved one is ill. I know I've mentioned this before, but have you talked with your mother about the future? Maybe it is a good time now that she is feeling a bit better. Chuck and I both belong to what we call the Hemlock Society.

I stop writing. Should I mention this? Is it too harsh? Maybe, but these things have to be faced. Chuck and I have decided that we do not want to be kept alive if there is no hope of a full recovery. Many of our friends agree. We refuse to become drooling fools in a nursing home.

To cheer you up, I've sent you a subscription to SWARA magazine. The last issue focused on the culture and art of the Wabenzi tribe. This inspired me to write a limerick. Why don't you try one? They are great fun and will help you forget your troubles. You'll find the rules in Baring-Gould's book 'The Lure of the Limerick'.

Will I send my limerick to Diane, or keep it only for my own amusement? I read the rollicking rhymes again.

There once was a man named Mwenzie,

Who worked himself into a frenzy

He got filthy rich, that son-of-a-bitch,

And joined the tribe of Wabenzi

Maybe not. But when I get back from Rwanda, I'll tell her stories that will take her mind off nursing homes and the Hemlock Society.
I can't wait to leave Santa Fe. But first there are suitcases to pack, both mine and Chuck's. I don't want to begin to think about being crammed into an airline seat for twenty-four hours. Especially next to someone I don't know.

I've contacted East Africa Wildlife Safaris and insisted that Jock Anderson once again be our guide. Just his name sends a delightful shiver down my spine. That Kenyan-born big braw Scot is built for tossing the caber. And he tells such hair-raising tales. Four years in the mountains fighting the Mau Mau.

Last trip, he strode along, never once looking back to see how I fared at crossing streams and getting through the bush. Finally, I said, Do you always leave little ladies to fend for themselves, or are you paying me a compliment?

He pondered a minute. Paying a compliment, I guess. And besides, you wouldn't accept help anyway.

How did he know?

I hope Jock doesn't find out that I turn sixty-eight on this trip. His legendary speciality is a birthday cake made out of a big, dry elephant turd decorated with icing. Diane's fruitcake is more to my taste.

Fierce tsetse flies swarm around me, but one quick spray and I'm surrounded by corpses. Chuck grumbles and snorts his disapproval. Our guides speak only French. Fortunately, Jock hands us a list of instructions on how to behave when we meet the gorillas.

- Walk quietly without speaking.
- Stay with the group.
- Crouch down when approaching gorillas.
- Sit still.
- Do not make eye contact.
- Do not make any quick or aggressive movements.

The mountain slope is steep and slippery, and we are soon in a murky, cloud-filled forest. Sweat pours down our faces. We bushwhack our way through dense vegetation and clumped bamboo, until I am exhausted. Sitting on a log, I can't stop rubbing the welts and itchy rash from stinging nettles. All forgotten when our guides make low, guttural, grunting noises and point to the first gorilla signs: faeces, uprooted bamboo and flattened places where they made beds for the night.
Crawling under a branch, I see two young gorillas. A little distance away, their mothers placidly munch leaves. One mother has a tiny baby. I crouch and slowly move forward to get a good look at its sad, little, wrinkled face as it peeks out from its mother's arms. The other young ones are rambunctious and devilish. They obviously want to play and swing overhead on bamboo stalks. Sneaking up behind me, they touch my arm and scamper away. Before long, the young gorillas move on and I follow.

Reaching a ridge, I realise I have wandered off on my own. Jock will be furious. I listen to hear if he and the others are bashing through the bush below. I can't hear a thing. Even the birds are silent. My heart thumps in my chest, and I push my way through the undergrowth. A crashing sound makes me look up the slope. A Big Daddy silverback gorilla ambles towards me. I freeze. Forget to crouch. Forget Jock's warning lecture.

Directly opposite me, the silverback rises to his full height. He is magnificent. Majestic. Black shaggy fur, leathery bearded face, thick hairy arms, his hands the size of a dinner plate. He clutches a piece of bamboo like a conductor about to instruct the orchestra. Every inch the dominant male. I take a hasty photo. He is so regal. His power tangible.

A deep-throated grunt has me instinctively folding my hands across my chest and submissively bowing my head. He grunts again, drops down and continues down the slope. I sink to the ground, my back against the base of a huge bamboo, euphoric, dizzily silly. Grinning like a hyena. A gentle pat on my head. It is a young gorilla. I am très contente, the experience worth the lecture I will get from Jock for wandering away from the group.

Back at the hotel, begging children surround us, tug at our clothes, hound us for money or treats. Drinking lemon squash in the bar, my ears assaulted by disco ‘music’, and nauseated by the feeding frenzy of the buffet, I write in my journal,
Best birthday present ever, but if the human race keeps procreating at this rate, there will be no room left for majestic gorillas, not to mention all the other African animals. Already their habitat is dwindling at a colossal rate due to the greed and necessities of man. Here, human habitation is as dangerous a threat to the survival of the gorillas as the poacher’s snare.

I want to run away. Back into the forest. To sit with the gorilla our guides call Ndume. Goddammit. Gorillas are our cousins, our closest living relatives after chimpanzees. Their DNA is ninety-nine percent identical to that of humans. How dare mankind destroy the forest. How dare people destroy what is rightly theirs. Missionaries should hand out birth control with the food. Offer a transistor radio for a vasectomy.

Back in Santa Fe, I have the photo of Ndume enlarged and framed. In his honour, I attempt to create a double dactyl. I have to fudge a bit on the extent of my travels, but the result is,

Honkety tonkety,
Martha’s a naturalist
Veteran traveller
Cairo to Cape
USA to Australia
Zaire to Zambia
Anthropomorphizing
Every large ape.

* * *

90
Dear Martha, So that’s a double dactyl. I looked up the rules. How on earth did you manage to construct one? They are nearly impossible. I gave up after the first line. Maybe we could try one when you are here, but I can’t guarantee I’ll be any help.

According to Diane’s *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (unabridged)*, a double dactyl is a witty verse form, also known as higgledy-piggledy with a history as a parlour word game. Like a Limerick it is rigid in structure and is usually humorous.

True, it was fun to write her first limerick. Not that she would show it to Martha. But this is beyond her. And there is more. The entire poem is a single sentence and...Diane needs another dictionary to look up what parthenogenesis and choriamb mean. She slams the dictionary closed and shoves it back on the shelf. Forget it. She’s not like Martha. Diane has a full-time job. Martha can travel to Africa and write the double dactyls.

We are envious of your constant travels, Martha, especially your trips to Africa, but at the moment Asia is the best travel option for us. It is closer, warmer (but not as warm as Kenya) and certainly much cheaper. Hairdressing cannot be called a high-paying job, and I have to make every penny count. Barb and I would get along just fine. Qantas advertised incredibly cheap airfares to Penang, and Kerry is happy to look after the house. I haven’t been there since 1965 and can’t wait.

For Diane, Penang feels like home. After twenty-six years, apart from one or two big resort hotels, it still has the same old-world Portuguese and colonial Malayan charm. People smile and the sun shines. Ron hails a taxi. Stepping inside is like sitting on the couch in her mother-in-law’s living room. Hand-crocheted doilies drape over plump, embroidered cushions. But this driver carries his comfortable domesticity theme to a higher level. A bright floral lining, called Contact, designed to cover kitchen shelves, sticks to every panel. Tiny, pink roses on a blue background. On the dashboard is a miniature red shrine. The *pièce de résistance* is a vase of artificial flowers wired to the back of the driver’s seat. Ron raises his eyebrows at the decor.

You stay? The taxi-driver’s grin reveals large yellow teeth.

The Casuarina Hotel on Batu Ferringi. Passing the upmarket resort boasting royal patronage in domestic splendour, they sweep into the palm-lined drive of an old refurbished hotel. Cheap, clean and close to a bus stop.
Diane tosses her suitcase onto the bed and drags out a lightweight t-shirt. Ron looks for an air conditioner. Diane laughs. Points to the overhead fan lazily circulating hot air. She pulls back heavy drapes and sighs with delight at the view. Tall palms line a crescent of golden sand leading to manicured green lawns dotted with La-Z-Boy lounges.

Ron kicks off his sandals and is prostrate on his side of the bed. Soon loud snores reverberate around the room. Diane hurries downstairs and books a morning tour of Georgetown.

Welcome to our shitty tour, the coach driver announces, wiping his sweaty face with a not-too-clean cloth.

What did you say? Ron tries not to laugh.

Welcome to the shitty of Georgetown. The coach driver's brown, shiny face and white teeth grins at them from the rear-view mirror. Diane and Ron, hands over their mouths, try to smother their chuckles.

It reminds Diane of her first trip to Penang. Arriving late at night, she put both hands together in prayer position saying Selamat pagi and wondered why everyone laughed. Apparently, she was wishing everyone good morning with a heavy Australian accent. And she never did get her tongue around surnames starting with Ng.

At Glutton’s Lane, they eat curried prawns, lean elbows on the table, drop food and loudly burp to show appreciation of a good meal. It is easy to slip into the gin-sling, joss stick and trishaw travelling, Asian culture experienced by foreigners.
Diane rubs her aching lower back. Camping for a week on a blow-up mattress is not the best way to sleep, but she needs to be beside her mum. To give her painkillers or help her onto the commode during the night.

Her mum's bed is in the large front room of the Retirement Village Unit, and Diane's dad constantly moans about being 'kicked out' into the smaller bedroom. Her mum blames the crippling arthritis that caused many restless nights, but Diane suspects that it is her mother's attempt to find some small haven to call her own in the close confinement of a small unit. At least, she could shut the bedroom door and leave her husband's political ranting and raving behind.

Are you sure?
Her mother nods.

Planting a kiss on the wrinkled face, Diane feels the paper-thin skin. The doctor says her mother's condition is brittle. What does he mean exactly? Fragile? Delicate? Frail? Ready to shatter? But that was a week ago and nothing much seems to have changed. Would one morning make any difference?

It's our exam today. Diane holds her mother's hand, feeling the fragile bones give under the gentle pressure. Osteoporosis. Osteoarthritis. Silent killers.

I won't be long. Are you sure you'll be okay?
I'll be all right. Her mother swallows hard. Don't worry about me, she whispers, but her eyes plead for Diane to stay. Fingers curl around hers and hold on. Diane hesitates. It will only be for three hours.

See you soon, Mum, she says, withdrawing her hand with difficulty from her mother's grasp. A cheery wave, and she is out the door. Her mum will be okay. Once she gets her appetite back, she'll improve. They have been through this so many times before. Diane is in for the long haul, spacing herself to last the distance. Once she would have been nervous about sitting for an exam, but after a week of commodes, plumping pillows and listening to fluttering life struggle through old veins, Technical And Further Education classes are an excuse to get in the car and escape for a couple of hours. Her dad is left in charge.

Sitting at a desk, folded exam paper in front of her, pen poised, Diane watches the hands on the clock tick to 9:00 a.m. A bell rings. She opens the paper and begins to read. Machiavelli and *The Prince*. Power and politics.
Question One: Who wrote, Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely? She smiles, Martha would love this one and quickly writes, Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Creighton in 1817. One down, twenty-nine to go.

Question Two.

Diane continues answering the multiple choices, but underneath the veneer of the dedicated, mature-aged student, is the image of her mother's face. As soon as she finishes this exam, she can hurry home. She shouldn't be here. She should be rubbing cooling ointment into an angry bedsore. Positioning pillows to buffer aching bones. She forces herself to focus. Back to Machiavelli. Back to *The Prince*.

Diane Simpson, someone calls. Diane raises her hand. A teacher hurries over. Diane see the urgency in the teacher's face, hears it in her voice.

Your mother is gravely ill. She shakes Diane's arm. It's taken half an hour to find you. Giving Diane a push, she shouts, Go, and points to the door.

Grabbing car keys and leaving the half-finished exam, her bag on the floor, Diane races to her car. She must get back. Must be there. Her mother needs her. Is waiting for her. White-knuckled, she grips the steering wheel, plants the accelerator to the floor. A heart attack? Stroke? Pain? Struggling to breathe? The speedometer reads one hundred and ten kilometres. How many times had they sat together in this car? The flying flea her mum calls it, but today it can't go fast enough. Faster. She must go faster. Presses metal to the floor. One hundred and twenty. Diane feels her mother's presence beside her. She turns to look. The car veers to the side of the road. Wheels skid on gravel. Diane slams on the brakes and unconsciously flings back a protective arm. The seat beside her is empty. Diane's voice echoes in the car.

Mum, if it's time, don't wait for me.

Peace fills the car. Diane's knuckles regain colour. The speedometer climbs to one hundred kilometres and stays there. She yearns to see her mum, hold her, be there for her, but—No. Not if it means more pain. No more suffering.

An ambulance blocks the drive. Diane's car skids to a stop, and she runs into her mother's room. Her mum lies on the bed, the village nurse's hand cups the drooping chin. An ambulance attendant, head turned to one side, eyes half closed, stethoscope hooked into his ears. Hollow cup pressed on her mum's bony chest, he
searches for the music of life. On his young face is the same rapt attention as a teenager plugged into CD player headphones. Fingers drumming to a heartbeat rhythm no one else can hear.

He removes the earplugs

There's the slightest pulse. He looks at Diane. We can bring her back.

Diane stares at him. She shivers with hope. More time. To be together. Hold her. Love her. She looks at her mother, as if to ask permission. The skeletal face is serene, forehead no longer wrinkled with pain. Hands calm on the covers. Bring her back? To what? The ambulance officer is filling a syringe.

Let her go, Diane hears herself saying. Let her go. She takes her mother in her arms and cradles her. Gently rocking, she strokes the fine grey hair and croons.

*

3:00 a.m. Diane folds the front of her dressing gown over her chest. Her feet in fluffy slippers. She shivers. Stretches weary arms and sighs. Jumbled thoughts cover pages of an exercise book. What compels her to sit here, night after night, recording her mother's stories? Some funny, but most sadly reliving the pain of parting. Time for a break.

Coffee mug in hand, she opens the door and walks out into the night. Across the newly mown lawn wafts the heady perfume of ginger plants. Sounds carry in the crisp, dry air. The bark of a dog, caw of a crow and the rustle of gum leaves.

A full moon sends a silvery ladder to earth inviting all who dare to climb. Is this why she is so restless? Is she, like many others, affected by the full moon? It's deeper than that, a primordial urge to record her mother's story. Why this compulsion to write? To preserve her mother's life within the pages of a book. At first, she didn't know where to start. Now, every time a memory pops into her mind, she grabs her pen. The feel of a fine biro skimming across the page seems to bring with it some relief. A coming to terms with loss.

It began when Diane sifted through a shoebox of certificates and came across several photos. Her mum smiling proudly in her new winter coat with the treasured fox fur stole. The immortalised fox head with glittering marble eyes grips in its teeth
its own leg, holding the stole in place. It seems macabre to see the art of the
taxidermist displayed upon her mother's shoulders when she wouldn't have hurt a fly.

A photo of her mum wearing a rakish brown hat to Aunty Mary's wedding. Diane and her mum lying on beach towels at Sandyland Beach. She must show them to Kerry. Tell her about the young woman her grandmother was before either of them arrived on the scene. But Kerry's eyes will glaze. She'll pretend to be interested. She is too young, too busy making a life of her own to delve into the past. To discover the woman behind the remembered elderly grandmother. Later, much later, she will want to know her roots, and the exercise books will reveal her grandmother's story. Diane hopes that one day it will become a book. Maybe even be published.

But who would want to read an ordinary story of an everyday woman? What could be interesting in that? Most books are of famous people or contain dramatic events. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about religious frenzy and Puritanical fanaticism in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester was an ordinary woman, who had a child outside of marriage. This sin resulted in expulsion from her community and incredible suffering.

*Angela's Ashes* is a memoir of Frank McCourt's Irish/American childhood and a mother courageously coping with sub-standard housing, an alcoholic husband and a family on the brink of disaster. But Sally Morgan's *My Place* is a down-to-earth story of everyday life where Curly the dog bites the Health Inspector's bottom. Hidden beneath the humour and personal anecdotes the story reveals what it is like to be aboriginal in a society that ostracises them. The ease of the story and the humour helped Diane through many a dark hospital night.

Maybe her mother's story will do the same. Show what it was like for her mother's generation of Australian women. Show her mother's hopes and dreams in contrast to the reality. So what if it doesn't get published. At least the family will have a record. Valerie Dulcie Gilbert will not be forgotten

But the fear is there. Can she write this story? She opens the fridge. She'd kill for cheesecake. Searches the shelves. Apparently His Roundness has discovered the last slice left over from the night before. With a sigh, Diane opens the sweet biscuit tin.
Dear Martha: I'm sorry about the delay, but I've had the rug pulled out from under me. Mum passed away on Tuesday. For several weeks her condition was described as brittle, but it still caught me by surprise.
Dear Diane, I’ve enclosed a copy of our Australian International Expeditions itinerary so you’ll have some idea where and what we’re doing. I must admit to being excited. We fly directly from Cairns to you.

A quick sip of coffee is enough to make me grimace, but the long buffet has a plentiful supply of cookies, dried fruit and nuts. Chuck, feet planted well apart, The Sun newspaper spread wide, expertly skims the page. Quickly capturing the essence of an article, he grunts disapproval. I lean back into plush upholstery and cross my legs. The Qantas First, or the platinum level lounge, is a quiet oasis amongst the bustle and clatter of Cairns Airways terminal. One benefit of travelling with a world-renowned, retired scientist is to not have to mingle with the hoi polloi.

A somber customer service attendant approaches. This can't be good. I've seen that look before and it has always meant trouble. Chuck keeps reading, oblivious to what is happening. She glances at him and decides I'm her best option. Good choice.

I'm sorry, Mrs. Jackson, she says, but your flight has been delayed. I tap Chuck's knee.

What? he shouts, reluctantly taking his eyes off the page.

I motion for him to turn on his hearing aids. We've been delayed. I wait for the explosion.

Again? Can't we ever catch a plane without it being delayed? Glowering at the attendant, he demands, How long?

Approximately two hours.

Two hours. He whacks the newspaper against his leg. What am I expected to do for two hours? I—

I grip his thigh and squeeze.

Get us on another flight, Chuck orders.

There are no other flights, Sir. I'll keep you informed. Her job completed, she is already backing away.

I can’t be hanging around a godforsaken—
I squeeze again. He glares at me.
Snafus and stuffups are par for the course these days.
But—
I pass him a bowl from the buffet. Want a nut? He glares at the cashews, shakes out the paper and continues reading.
Three and a half hours later, we board the plane.

Diane’s tight blonde curls stand out amongst a crowd of bobbing heads.
Martha, she calls, waving both arms.
Chuck pushes our cart loaded with three large suitcases and some duty free. He may be over eighty, but in his Texas hat, bolo tie, denim shirt, faded jeans and brown leather boots, he looks the quintessential American male. What must I look like in my Gore-Tex pants, shirt and multi-pocketed jacket? Ready for the next African safari?

Before I know it, Diane engulfs me in a bear hug. She hasn’t any lumpy love handles this time. The five years have been kind to her. I wish it was the same for me. It will take a lot of trekking and many push-ups to shed my extra ten pounds.
God awful trip. Chuck pumps Ron’s hand up and down.
What about coffee? It’s an hour’s journey home. Diane guides us to a coffee shop that sells organic, gluten-free bread, cakes and muffins.
Damn stupid term. Chuck points to the sign. I haven’t seen any inorganic food, have you?
I sigh with delight as I sip a steaming mug of Kenya and mocha blend, with a twist of lemon.

Diane insists that Chuck sit in the front of the RV with Ron so ‘us girls’, as she puts it, can chat on the trip to our home. We talk about the vagaries of air travel, inclement weather and possible sights to see before Diane launches into a detailed report of what she calls ‘The Kerry Capers’. I squirm in my seat.

How’s Barb? she asks.
I explain that she is looking after our home in Santa Fe.
And Merril? Still in Alaska?
I lift my backpack onto my knee, drag out a tissue and blow my nose. She’ll be there for a while.
Diane waits for more.
She's married you know.
When? What's he like? Diane leans forward, eager for news. I take off my
glasses, wipe them with a clean tissue and then put them back on again.
Last year. A great guy. Works as a lumberjack up in the Yukon. When the car
pulls into the driveway of a cream-brick house, I sigh with relief.
Tell me about him.
I hesitate. We had a falling out. I sigh. It's a touchy subject.
We're here, Ron calls. Hacienda Kubunji. Welcome, amigos. With a flourish,
he gallantly opens the car door.

Amber glass flanks a strong wooden door. Ron and Chuck put our cases onto two
single beds in the front room while Diane gives me a quick tour through their funky
house.

There are some large rooms, some small ones and a big family room off of
which is Kerry's bedroom. A wood-burning stove glows in a corner. After three weeks
sweating in the tropics I need heat and stand in front of it rubbing my hands. Beside
the stove is a large packing case stacked with what Ron calls Mallee roots. They
come from up north and burn with a clear, bright flame that gives out a lot of heat.

I'm dismayed to discover there is only one bathroom. How the hell do they
cope with one? How will we manage sharing with three other people for a week? On
the most primitive safaris in Africa, we always had our own bathroom. I'll probably
end up constipated.

The next morning, there is hoar frost on the lawn, and I'm dressed for the tropics. A
pair of Chuck's socks and a one of Diane's sweaters helps, even if I have to roll up
the sleeves three times and the band is under my butt. Migod that wood heater is
great.

There is more food than I can believe. Goddamnit they never stop eating.
Eggs and bacon for breakfast, cookies at morning tea, huge lunch, fruitcake for
afternoon tea, and a full dinner at night. Lucky me. But I'm so stuffed I can hardly
move. I'll end up over ten pounds heavier.

Would you like to go for a walk before it gets dark? Ron shoves his arms into
a navy-blue jacket and opens the back door. I'm used to trekking in tree-covered
mountains or kicking up dust on a desert trail. Pounding pavement past rows of
suburban homes is not on my list. As if reading my mind, Diane quickly adds, We'll go through the back gate to the golf course.

Warm and cosy inside one of Diane's winter jackets, I follow Ron, Chuck and Diane through the wire back gate into the golf course. A setting sun casts long shadows across the undulating fairway.

Several golfballs dot the back yard. Have all the golfers gone? I imagine a golf ball bouncing off my skull. The result of a golfer with a wicked left hook. Diane assures me that even the most fanatical golfer has left the course for the day, drawn home by the thought of a hot meal or they are drowning their sorrows at the eighteenth hole.

We stroll past a row of tall, ancient pines planted when their housing estate was a dairy farm. Chuck points. Do you know what they are?

Pine trees, Ron replies.

I know they're pines trees. There are seven hundred different species of pine. What are these?

The species that grow here.

Chuck hoots with laughter.
Wind sweeps the cliffs at The Nobbies, the topmost point of Phillip Island, and brings with it, in gusty blasts, the stinging smell of seal pee. Public binoculars are hard to adjust. Past the breaking waves, Diane can barely make out Seal Island and what appears to be a mass of brown rocks. She twists the knob one more turn and the rocks become a seething throng of seals, barking, flapping flippers, skimming off rocks into foaming blue water below.

Gripping windswept parkas they walk along the boardwalk. A fine misty spray dampens their hair. Martha’s grey, wavy tresses twist into curls, but Diane’s perm begins to frizz. She pulls on a beanie.

Chuck and Ron stroll ahead. White feathers twist and twirl in the air. Overhead, seagulls scream and squabble looking for a place to roost on crowded cliff ledges. Nests, containing head-waggling chicks, occupy every spare inch. Martha and Chuck have their own binoculars slung around their necks. They handle them with the ease of long familiarity.

A seagull swoops low. A long stream of shit hits Chuck on the side of his head and dribbles onto his left shoulder.

Blanco hijo de puta, he swears.

I wouldn’t call that gull a friend. Ron laughs and glances at Chuck. He is too busy dragging out a large handkerchief and ineffectively wiping bird shit out of his hair and eye to answer. Martha doubles over with laughter.

Goddamn pesky critter. Chuck flaps the useless handkerchief. Martha! Chuck is red faced, the left side of his grey hair plastered to his head.

Not a happy camper, Diane whispers to Martha. They giggle like two school girls, smothering laughter with their scarves.

Martha!

She recovers enough to hurry to his side to pat and wipe with the end of her scarf.

Let’s get back to the motel. Ron walks towards the car. This bunch of blancos hijos de putia, he says mockingly, have to leave before dusk if we are to catch the penguin parade.

Buses. Rows and rows of tourist buses. On the walk to the visitor’s Information Centre, they pass an obscenely expensive, state-of-the-art, silver Porsche.

Look at that. Ron gives a long, low appreciative whistle.
Martha glances at the car. Why would anyone want something like that? She sniffs loudly. It’s just a big, silver suppository.

Ron chuckles and hurries ahead. Diane’s eyes open wide, and she laughs. Only Martha could get away with something so outrageous, but she glances around to see if anyone else has heard. Do you always speak out like that?

In her best Texas drawl, Martha replies, Darlin’, I cain’t do nothin’ else.

Floodlights lead them down a concrete path into a cluttered shop. The shelves are packed with every tawdry souvenir imaginable, penguins on rulers, rubbers, t-shirts and aprons. Bookmark koalas, kangaroos in glass snow globes. Diane turns over a toy kangaroo. Made in China. A book on Australian animals? Printed in China. It becomes a game between Martha and Diane to see who can discover something made in Australia.

I win. Diane waves a bunch of everlasting daisies.

Sitting on concrete steps with busloads of tourists, they watch a high tide swell onto a flood-lit beach. Soon, Fairy Penguins will return home to their burrows after a day at sea. The public address system constantly tells them, in seven different languages, what to do.

Stay on the steps.
Do not go onto the beach.
Do not use a flash light. You will permanently damage the penguins’ eyes.
Do not…
The light slowly fades and the wind strengthens.

Look. The collective cry ripples through the crowd. Fingers point to a single penguin emerging from the dark sea, stomach full of krill for waiting chicks hidden deep in dark places. Its throat contracting, ready to regurgitate into demanding beaks. Everyone jumps to their feet, pointing and shouting in different accents. Ja, Ja, See. Look. Hai. Kawii. The voices sound like those issuing from the biblical tower of Babel.

The penguin waddles a couple of paces up the beach. Flash, flash, flash. It hesitates, shakes its head, waddles a couple more inches. Flash, flash.

Diane glares at several tourists, but they are oblivious to anything that isn’t framed by a camera lens.
Stop! Martha shouts at a young Asian couple. Do you want to blind them? The couple look at her uncomprehending. She is an angry foreigner speaking in an unintelligible tongue, but her violent gestures and tone of voice unmistakable. They move away.

Goddamn tourists, Martha says loudly.

Diane pulls her beanie over her ears, presses the scarf against her cheeks and pretends not to hear. Her thoughts race back to another time. Same island.

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The night is crisp and clear. Quiet, Diane's mum shushes. Don't make a noise. Cold sand tickles bare feet. The path leads through scrubby tea trees and tussocky grass covers penguin burrows. Hopeful peeps greet them as they pass. Dad's torch beams the way while they slip and slide the last couple of yards down a steep sand dune to Mutton Bird Beach. A click extinguishes the light and the night wraps around them like the blankets draped around their shoulders. They sit like Geronimo and his braves smoking a pipe of peace. The only sound are the waves sizzling on the shore and the odd call of a hungry penguin chick.

Here they come, her dad whispers. Her gaze focuses on the black sea. Not there, he says. Look up.

High in the sky are flocks of mutton birds, swooping, soaring, squabbling and fighting. The cries fill her ears. On the sand, heading for their burrows, the mutton birds chatter amongst themselves. Harsh words are said, unwanted guests rejected to search for another boarding house for the night.

Look, Diane. Her mum points to the ocean. A single penguin glides in on a swirl of water. Momentarily, it rests on its belly then stands, shakes and stretches. For a brief instant, the body and outstretched flippers are a shining white cross against a blue-black sky. The penguin quickly waddles past and disappears into a burrow to the joyous cries of its chicks.

Soon, two more Fairy Penguins appear, then more and more. Every new wave beaches a line of penguins. They huddle together, reassuring each other, before making a dash up the beach. The sand is soon covered with indigo shapes.
The chorus of hungry chicks grows louder and louder. They seem to call Me, me, don't forget me.

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Look, Martha. Diane gently holds back a bent tuft of grass. Martha hurries over, drops to her knees in the sand and peers down the well-concealed penguin burrow.

Cute chicks. Martha places the tuft gently back across the hole.

Why didn't she think to bring them to Mutton Bird Beach last night? Why go the tourist route? Instead of seeing a multitude of birds waddling up the beach to feed their young, they witnessed thirty dazed and bedraggled, genetically programmed birds running a gauntlet.

They slip and slide the last couple of yards down the steep sand dune to the beach. Ron and Chuck trail behind, while Martha and Diane walk in companionable silence along the shore. Salt-laden air stings her nostrils. Waves leave white lacy patterns on wet sand. She feels ten again, and joyously collects a gleaming alabaster cowry shell. Martha holds it in the palm of her hand.

What a perfect specimen of a *Notocypraea*.

When Martha doesn't know the biological name for hanks of black seaweed, Diane expels a sigh of relief.

Running along the water's edge, she pops seaweed bubbles with her heel. A lone mutton bird rests on the sand, its beak open, eyes staring. The tiny chest heaves, every breath laboured. The men catch up.

What can we do? Diane kneels. If we leave it here, the crabs will get it. She looks at Ron, who shrugs his shoulders. The bird flutters a wing.

Martha and Chuck exchange a long look. Martha nods. Chuck scoops the bird into his large hand. He carefully pulls out each wing, studies it and gently folds it back. He feels its breast and...squeezes. The bird's beak flies open. The thin liquorice strip of a tongue protrudes in a soundless scream. Chuck squeezes harder and holds tight until the tiny head drops forward and the bird lies still. He gently places the body back onto the sand and walks away. Wind ruffles lifeless feathers.

Come on, Diane. Martha grabs her arm and starts to walk away. Be happy it didn't suffer.
You need a break. Time to let the memory settle. And you typed penguin chip instead of chick. A Freudian slip? You are hungry. You've been tapping here for hours, lost in another time, another world. Your shoulders ache, your neck hurts. What did Ken say during that health and safety lecture at Chisholm TAFE? Every hour, get up and walk around your chair, stretch and bend. You're glad he can't see you now. He would be appalled. You're booked in to the physiotherapist tomorrow. Hopefully he can manage to sort out your kinks.
God knows how many are coming; I’ve never seen so much food. The savoury smell of party pies whets my appetite, but my favourite is what Diane calls a crock-pot curry. I must get the recipe. My job is to cut mountains of fruit for the fruit salad.

    This should be enough. I put down the knife.

    Keep chopping, Martha. Diane adds a large can of peaches. You don’t know this mob. They eat as if there is no tomorrow.

    I glance at the overloaded table set up in the family room. They’ll need to, to demolish all this.

    Quiches cool on the kitchen counter. Cutlery, plates and napkins are on the sideboard. Diane checks a huge, silver clock on the kitchen wall. It’s large enough to challenge Big Ben.

    Ron's parents and my dad should be here any minute. Diane wipes her hands on a tea towel. And you'll meet Kerry's boyfriend. Imitating Kerry's voice, Diane adoringly says, He's so gorgeous. You love him, don't you, Mum. Winking, she hands me a huge pineapple and a large carving knife.

    I gaze in amazement. Surely you won't need this as well?

    She points to the bowl. Where to start? Why doesn't she use those symmetrical rings of pineapple in a can? She keeps her eye on my valiant attempts to rid the pineapple of its skin.

    I’d better hurry and get the cake done. Diane slathers whipped cream over a large sponge cake, then decorates it with strawberries.

    Have you seen the sparklers? She searches under the clutter on the counter. We must have a couple of sparklers. Finding two she jabs them into the centre of the cake.


    Pop says you get less than that for murder.

Diane, her mother-in-law, Elsie, and Kerry genuinely hug and kiss as if they haven't seen each other in years. Warm smiles are reflected in their eyes, and their light-hearted banter ranges from flab and fat to old age. I never know what to say to Barb. One slip of the tongue, and she won't talk to me for weeks. It's like walking on eggshells, always careful, always anxious not to crush or destroy. I mentally edit my words before speaking, and she accuses me of being withdrawn. Diane and her
mother-in-law are friends. My mother-in-law would have fitted in here. She can talk for hours on any subject and always has a quick answer, especially for Chuck. She instantly puts him back in his box. He often accuses me of only marrying him for his mother. I constantly remind him that when I left college and flew to New York for our wedding, she wasn't on my mind.

*Lara’s Theme* from *Dr Zhivago*, plays in the background. The men have retired to the living room. Kerry is up to her elbows in soap suds. Where will she rinse them? The sink only has one bowl. The plates go from the soapy sink to a dish drainer. Elsie dries and Diane puts away. I leave them alone.

Outside in the garden, surrounded by lush greenery, I realise that our home is falling down around our ears. We've had the flat roof repaired several times, but it still leaks and in winter when it snows chill winds howl through cracks in the walls. Wardrobe doors swing askew and taps drip. In summer I have to put a pot beneath each one to save water.

Dishes clatter. A burst of laughter. Why can't Barb and I be easy with each other? Why does it have to be so hard? She keeps telling me to change my tune and not be so negative. When I get home, I must try to be a better mother.

I wander back inside and Elsie throws me a tea towel.

You can't get out of it that easily, she says. Diane dobs a speck of foam onto Elsie's nose. Wiping it away with the back of her hand, she dips her fingers into the suds and flicks Diane. Laughter and fun.

Chuck tells Pop a gag. I bet it's his favourite. The one about the inebriated customer sitting at a bar in a tiny Texas town. I've heard it a thousand times before, but Pop listens to every word.

Chuck leans forward, revelling in the rapt attention.

...and the customer looks up at the barman and says, This town is the arsehole of creation.

Pop and Ron are already laughing.

The Bartender ignores him. The customer repeats what he said. No response. The third time he hollers, This town is the arsehole of creation.

Chuck pauses for effect before delivering the punch line. And the bartender asks, Just passing through?
Elsie 's hand clamps her mouth to smother a giggle. Pop laughs so hard he falls off his chair. Chuck hoots, hollers and slaps his knee.

The airport departure doors open and close, devouring passengers. Chuck shakes Rob's hand. *Muchas gracias, amigo*, he says before enveloping Diane in a bear hug. On release, she clings to Martha and hugs her tight. Martha whispers in her ear, I'll never forget the party.

* * *
There was nothing better than talking face to face. Martha’s strong, opinionated voice, the way she shrugged her shoulders, the slight curl of her lip when she called Ronald Regan a washed up, has been, hick actor, gave extra life to the meaning of her words. Her eyes either pinned you to the wall or invited you into her literary world.

But there was an invisible barrier beyond which you dared not go. Flashes of sarcasm cover fleeting sadness.

Today, you want to write and tell Martha about the early morning, raucous call of wattlebirds siphoning nectar from the crab-apple blossoms outside your bedroom window. Ron pulling the doona over his head threatening, If those birds don’t shut up, I’ll cut down the bloody tree. Flipping through one of your favourite books, you find your thoughts and feelings distilled in a fourteen-word poem by Dominique Hecq. You send it to Martha.

**The day breaks**

**Into a ball of sounds that roll**

& knock you over

You wish you could be a poet and write eloquent, inspirational words that concisely convey your thoughts and feelings. You are in awe of the power of language. Marvel at, but also cringe at how inadvertently omitting one character can change the entire meaning of a sentence. Like the email you sent to the Director of the Melbourne Writers' Festival. Instead of typing, Dear Louise, you put Dear Louse.
Dear Diane, Your letter only took five days. That must be some kind of a record. I wish I could have been with you at Kerry and John's wedding. To see them walk into the church to the skirl of bagpipes would bring tears to my eyes. Just wait until your grandchildren marry. That's when you feel old.

A row of pictures line my desk. Elizabeth's first smile, first steps, first day at school, going to the prom and graduating from college. She's Barb's daughter, but there the likeness ends. I look closer. Her hair may be red, but it's wavy just like mine. We have a lot in common. We both love reading.

I tried to ring you, Diane, but only got the goddamn answering machine. I apologise for the long silence and hope you understand. Chuck has had a stroke, but he is home and coping well. Barb insists I still go on the trip to Kenya.

Martha! Chuck bellows from his armchair in the living room. I ignore him. Martha, he calls again. Ever since the stroke, he has become even more demanding.

Coffee's percolating, I say and look again at the printed itinerary on the kitchen counter. Should I go? Chuck's walking with a cane, and his speech is not affected, but will Barb be able to manage her father, especially if he gets in one of his moods? He keeps telling me to go. Says he will be all right. It's only for two weeks, and I can do with the break. What if Diane can join me instead of going to the Himalayas? She should experience Africa. Before it's too late.
I know you like eastern countries, Diane, but please don’t spend your money on the Himalayas. I think they’ll be there for a while yet, but I can’t guarantee that the African animals will. I hate what mankind is doing to our beautiful planet and dread seeing the destruction of the forest. Jock Anderson is our guide and the Kenya safari still has vacancies. It would be marvellous if you could join our group. It is much too short, only thirteen days, but it goes to my favorite places and is all private camping. To give you some idea, here is part of a write up from the Nairobi Times.

For sheer abundance of wildlife the Masai Mara game reserve is the tops in Kenya. The golden plains, which seem to stretch forever, teem with hundreds of thousands of wildebeest. To see twelve lions in one hour’s game-viewing is the norm. Herds of giraffe, gallop away like painted rocking horses. Beautiful topi stand sentinel on every other anthill. It is even possible to see a placid, lonely rhino and a Mara tented camp is cosseted luxury.

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Diane looks up from reading Martha’s letter. Outside the kitchen window, a honeyeater, clinging to an overhanging Grevillea branch thrusts its tongue deep into drooping red flowers. Diane runs tired fingers through her hair. Africa. Martha is raving again about it: the multitude of animals: lions, tigers, and her beloved elephants. For the past twelve years, they have trumpeted from photos stuck to the corkboard on the kitchen wall. Even from this letter. At the bottom of each page is a line drawing of seven African elephants against a backdrop of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Martha’s handwriting finishes well before the frieze.

Tempted? Of course. Diane turns the letter over and rereads the second page. Thirteen days. Six thousand dollars. Four hundred dollars per person, per day—not including airfare. And that’s American dollars. Even more when converted to Australian. Double that amount if Ron wants to go. With that sort of money, Diane could pay off the mortgage. Martha may be, as she puts it, in a carpe diem frame of mind. It’s all right for her to say to hell with expense. She can afford to have chocolate mousse for dessert while sitting in a deckchair watching an African sunset. Has she ever lived from wage to wage and bought her clothes at the local opportunity shop? Has Martha seen her older cousin in a pretty dress, knowing it will be two years before it is passed on to her? Folding the letter, Diane slips it back into the envelope. She’ll write and tell Martha why she hasn’t a hope in hell of going.

* * *

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I force myself to sit and write. The lounge needs dusting, pantry stores replenishing and another volunteer is ill so the library wants me to do an extra day.

Dear Diane, You nearly got a typewritten letter from me. I thought I had lost my old, faithful typewriter years ago during our move from New York. Today, I unexpectedly unearthed it from behind a pile of furniture stored in the basement. I'm overjoyed to have my old friend back. However, it is like me, a bit worse for wear. Some keys stick. So I have abandoned my old friend because this letter must be written. Must be sent. I need to shed a letter's worth of guilt.

Rereading my last paragraph, I feel better already

I fervently hope that this will break my inability to get to the huge pile of unanswered correspondence that grows every day. The more I procrastinate the harder it is to get started. I don't think I answered your last letter dated Oct. 1st. Horrors. My profound apologies. One reason is that I arrived home from Kenya to some horrible news. Please keep this in confidence. I tell you because you are part of our family.

Barb hurries over to gate six of the Albuquerque airport, pecks my cheek and grabs the backpack. ? I ask, how is everything

Fine.

Your father's okay? She nods and strides ahead. I have trouble keeping up.

The drive through Albuquerque is silent. It's 6:00 a.m. and Barb's already driven an hour to get to the airport. Does she resent the early rise? Has she forgotten all the times I've got up early for her? All the dirty diapers and midnight feeds. We reach open grasslands. Storm clouds, heavy with rain smother the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Lightning flashes.

Did your father give you any trouble?
A bit.
What do you mean?
The bastard tried to kill himself.
My hand clamps over my mouth. I'm afraid of what will come out.
Scattering gravel, the car skids to a halt on the side of the road. She leans her forehead on the steering wheel.
My voice wavers. Are you sure, he's doubled up on his medication before.
Well I got there at seven thirty in the morning. You never told me he had to be watched twenty-four hours a day. Her hand goes to her hip. Anyway, it was no mistake. It was more than pills. Barb's fingers pinch her lips. She could be twelve again and defending herself against Merril's accusations.
What do you mean, more than pills? I hid his gun, and he can't get around with that useless —
Do you want to hear? she shouts. This is not one of your shitty novels.
I'm sorry, Barb. I squeeze my daughter's arm, take a deep breath and grit my teeth, preparing to hear the worst.
Barb's tone is matter of fact.
He took a bunch of pills. She cocks her head to one side. But the added touch was a plastic bag tied over his head.
What! My thoughts imagine auto-erotic-asphyxiation. Something else Chuck has hidden from me?
Barb takes a deep breath, turns her head away and continues speaking as if I'm not here. The house was too quiet. The porch light still on. I kept calling his name. The living room smelled like a bad nursing home. Stank of urine. His face was purple. I ripped off the plastic bag—.
I catch my breath. She faces me. He was still breathing, Moth-er.
I open my mouth to speak, but she holds up her hand. You weren't there. I didn't know what to do.
A sudden shower of rain drenches the car. Water streams down the windshield, obliterating the outside world. Tears glisten and my own unshed tears burn my eyes. If I'd been there, the misery would be over.
Would it? You didn't see him, she shouts, her back pressed against the driver's door. Didn't see the agony on his face. She closes her eyes at the memory.
I keep my mouth shut.
When Dr. Shultz took a look, he asked me what I wanted to do. Father's vital signs showed his life was in the balance. I decided to wait and see.

My mind whirls. The pain and confusion in Barb's eyes a reminder of how much Chuck hurt Merrill. Threw her out of our home. Refused to talk to her ever again. Why didn't he die?

Through the cascading veil of water I see clearly for the first time. An attempted suicide. His way of destroying Barb. Destroying me. Did he think she would ring me and bring me home? How dare he plan this for after I'd gone. Typical. Selfish bastard. Up to his usual tricks. Heaping the responsibility onto Barb. Again. And Barb has failed. Again.

I'm so sorry, Barb. I reach out to her. She brushes my hand aside. I don't know what to say, how to comfort her.

Father slept for twelve hours. Then he started talking nonsense. Real gibberish. I couldn't understand a word. I didn't want to be on my own. I needed someone to put their arms around me. Tell me it was going to be all right.

I'm sorry, Barb. I haven't been much of a mother to you, have I? We're certainly not a family that does relationships well.

She glares at me. I had no one I could ring. Father woke up in a rage. He fought against the restraints. Called me pathetic. Useless. A selfish bitch. Abused me the whole night for tying him to the bed. For not helping him to die.

Barb rolls up her sleeve to show yellowing bruises. Familiar marks, identical to those I hid under my long-sleeved sweater after nights resisting Chuck's nocturnal advances.

I told him next time I'd tie the bag tight around his sad arsed neck.

Where is he now?

The psych ward.

I try to put my arms around Barb, but she pushes me away.

You know what he's like, Moth-er. They diagnosed clinical depression. He told them to fuck off, and the restraints there are leather belts, not his godamn necktie collection.

Barb, when my time comes, I hope you make sure I don't mess it up. Barb stares at me with wide eyes.

I refuse to be a burden.

She turns her head away.
But I won't choose something as horrific as a plastic bag. I grab her chin in my hand and look her squarely in the eyes. Do it for me. Promise?

She nods.

Slide over, I say then walk through rain to the driver's door.
Diane checks the appointment book. Today is Millie’s hairdo day. A retired volunteer worker, she has adopted Diane’s hairdressing salon as her latest project and happily sweeps up hair, makes tea and takes out hair-rollers. She bustles over to a client, lifts the hairdryer and asks, can I take you out?

Where? the surprised client replies.

Just your rollers, Dear. Millie carefully removes the hair net.

Like many women in the village, her husband died several years ago and the residents have become her surrogate family. She fusses and worries over them as if they are the children she never had. She tells Diane about a male resident driving the village bus to the shops and not knowing which way to turn. Worries he might have the beginnings of Alzheimer’s.

Diane glances at her watch. Maybe with a bit of luck and Millie’s help, she will finish early today.

She has to hurry home and pack.

Dear Martha, Last night, I watched Joan and Alan Root’s TV program and found it fascinating. I’ve always been interested in the life of a baobab tree.

Diane smiles. The thought hadn’t entered her head until she read Martha’s letter.

I can’t wait to see their balloon flight over Mt. Kilimanjaro, but it will make me envious. There is no way we can ever afford to travel in Africa, but I have found the cheapest deal for flights to Nepal. I’ve read so much about the Himalayas, especially the first successful ascent of Mt. Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay that I...

Arriving at the Kathmandu airport, Diane’s lei of wilting marigolds sticks to her sweaty neck. She fans her face with an old newspaper. The sign, Foreigners with visa please wait here before passing out, seems appropriate.

Diane and Ron, transplanted from a cold Melbourne winter into the blistering heat of Nepal, struggle onto a minibus. Holding on tight, they bounce down crooked streets, narrowly avoiding overloaded bikes, trishaws, small dented taxis and tuk-tuks. People push, dogs scrounge and sacred cows, high on diesel fumes, lie in the middle of the road chewing discarded paper. Traffic weaves around them. Diane mentally records the sights and smells to write up later. At last, she will have a travel journal to share with Martha.
The Harati Hotel blends with the local decay. Its doors open directly onto a narrow pot-holed street, but the interior is neat and clean. Large foyer windows give the illusion of a glasshouse protecting delicate blossoms from a polluted world.

Horns blow, cymbals clang and a body, covered by red cloth and marigolds, bounces past on a stretcher carried by monks. Diane leaves Ron resting in the hotel. Stepping into the street, she squints in the harsh sunlight. The smells of urine, cow dung and hot dust sting her nose. A shopkeeper wipes dust off a bottle of water before handing it to her. She checks to see if the top is still sealed. She doesn't want to get Bali Belly, or The Pharaoh's Curse. Back home, they call it The Trots. She hopes there isn't a Nepalese version. Local biscuits look nice, but a funeral pyre of dead flies squashed against grubby glass ensures she hurries past.

A thin mother dressed in rags, nursing a tiny baby, pleads with outstretched hand alongside thin dogs and shrewd monkeys. A young boy smiles and asks—How much you pay for night?

The night?

He raises his eyebrows and a quick gesture makes his meaning clear. Diane laughs, shakes her head and hurries on. He follows.

Only one hundred Rupee, he emphasises. Two Ossie dollar.

Placing the back of her hand dramatically against her forehead, Diane sighs loud and long. In her best theatrical voice, she says. Headache.

The whole night, he insists, flashing a winning smile.

Diane pushes some rupee into his hand and hopes he has a good night's sleep.
Martha, you won't believe this. At Chitwan National Park, I finally rode an elephant.

The tunes of Oklahoma rattle through your brain. You're typing to the beat of Oh What a Beautiful Morning, Oh What a Beautiful Day, remembering grass as high as an elephant’s eye.
A mahout with a broom scrubs his elephant's back. Other elephants bathe, trumpet and squirt fountains of water. Push, pull and roll trimmed tree trunks into a pile. One lumbers down a riverbank, the mahout standing on its neck, holding an umbrella to keep off the beating sun. The elephant is soon submerged, only the tip of the trunk visible. The mahout appears to be walking on water. The elephant slowly emerges from the deep. Baptised.
A trunk taps your arm. A baby elephant nearly knocks you over to grab the bunch of bananas out of your hand. The hair on his head as stiff as a straw broom, his trunk snotty. You fall in love with him. Stroke his side, scratch under his chin. He leans on you, and you almost topple. His mother hurries to him. Majestic, maternal, magnificent.
You pretend you're on Martha's Kenya safari, minus Kuku Paka chicken in silver tureens and white-coated African waiters. Climbing a tower, you clamber onto what looks like a seat made from an upturned table tied to a matriarch elephant’s back. Clinging to one of the four 'table' legs, you lumber off in search of rhino. Hump de humpety, hump de hump. Along an open section of the track, a mahout on another elephant cheerily waves. Holding on tightly with one hand you enthusiastically wave back. People are so friendly. He waves again. You wave even harder, until you realise he is pointing at your leg.
A huge, fat grub crawls up the leg of your jeans. You freeze, then whip off your bush hat and quickly send it flying. Your elephant lumbers on.

Back home at Kubunji Beach, Diane opens the front door then throws a bag of used hairdressing towels into the laundry. She can't wait to make a cup of coffee and get
stuck into her studies. She should be able to fit at least an hour in before the six o'clock news.

Walking into the kitchen, she finds the floor awash with water and Ron working on the back of the dishwasher.

Mice, he says at her startled look. They've eaten through the pipes. He holds up two pieces of PVC pipe with serrated edges. I'm not sure if I can fix it.

Diane races to the laundry, grabs the bag of hairdressing towels and upends it onto the floor. The towels are soon soaked.

Where has all this water come from?
The fridge. Ron concentrates on meticulously measuring pipes.

What's wrong with the fridge?
I think it's carked it.

Diane opens the freezer door. Meat, chicken and pizza slices are slowly defrosting. She starts unpacking it onto the bench, wondering what she can cook before it spoils. She drags out the electric frypan.

You may want to put a pot on the stove.

Diane stares at him.

I forgot to tell you. The electric frypan doesn't work.

The hardware store rises from the land like an Egyptian pyramid. Men are drawn to it eager to discover the treasures inside. Ron loves to meander down the aisles fossicking for screws, hoses or whatever takes his eye, convinced whatever he buys will 'come in handy one day'.

He picks up a multipurpose, fully adjusted ratchet. Turns it over, feels the weight, and twiddles the adjustable screw. A slow smile steals across his face.

Perfect. He nods approval and wanders farther down the aisle.

An electric hedge trimmer. Only fifty-five dollars, ninety-five cents.

But we don't have a hedge.

He reluctantly puts it back on the stand and moves on.

Duct tape. Two meters by 3 centimetres. Only five dollars, fifty cents. He puts it in Diane's basket beside the electric frypan. Next is a jigsaw that will cut holes in anything.
Diane doesn’t mind, especially when she has shelves in all the wardrobes, a rod to hold winter coats in the laundry cupboard and a slow-drip system to turn on once a week to keep the lavender alive until the winter rains come.

At least Ron isn’t like his father. In his parent’s home, the new, extra large refrigerator was crammed into the tiny kitchen. Ron’s dad worked out that directly behind the refrigerator was a laundry cupboard. One day, he sat having his breakfast when he jumped up and grabbed a hacksaw on the bench. He cut up the plaster wall beside the refrigerator, over the top and down the other side, just missing severing several live electrical wires. He then pushed the refrigerator back into the cupboard.

Beside the garage, he uncovered several long lengths of trellis strapping. Using ‘liquid nails’, he soon covered the jagged gaps. Ron’s mum had nowhere to put her brooms, dustpan or vacuum cleaner, but the refrigerator door was now flush with the kitchen wall.

Ron considers every disaster a personal challenge. Diane wants to call a tradesperson, but knows it is futile to even suggest it before Ron has a go at repairing whatever is broken. He spends hours in his garage, sitting on the floor like a garden gnome, or at his bench, comfortably ensconced in the large, black leather office chair gleaned from a neighbour’s hard rubbish. Rescued from the pile on the nature strip waiting for council collection. Diane mutters, Men are from Mars, Women from Venus, calls the garage the ‘man cave’ and keeps well away.

You trundle along together in a comfortable routine. When the first rays of the sun create dancing patterns on the bedroom wall and the raucous wattlebirds shatter the early morning peace, you get up. You make breakfast while he showers. You chat for a while about your daughter, or the day’s list of things to do. He does the dishes. Then you part. He goes to his garage and projects and you to your study; the latest pile of readings as large as the Bible and twice as difficult to read.
Your desk is lined with folders: you yearn to live the story. There will always be emails to file, passports to renew, bills to pay and there is always hairdressing. But today, you push the daily domestic clutter to one side, put on imaginary blinkers, boot up the computer and, with a smile, immerse yourself in a world of heat and dust. Share your life with Martha.
I stand in front of Chuck, sitting shoulders hunched, on the side of the double bed. His hair's a mess. Most men his age are bald, but the hair I have always loved is now a nuisance. It takes me ages to tame the wreckage. And he needs shaving again – not that anyone but me will care. It's a balancing act, another one: which do I hate more? The unshaven face or the act of shaving. That awful scrape, the pinching of the nose, the tilting back of the head and shaving under the chin. The Gillette, not a cut-throat, too close to his jugular. To leave him unshaven for a day won't make any difference. There's always tomorrow.

He's not so fussy about his appearance these days. I hold up the blue checked shirt, the one he wore with the turquoise Bolo tie for our fiftieth anniversary.

Left arm first, I say, aware of the acrid smell of stale sweat when I lift the useless arm and push it into the waiting sleeve.

Now the other.

His smile is sweet. I button his shirt, and he asks, did you ever get married?

I laugh and hold my sides, hoot and holler. Chuck doesn't understand, but laughs with me. We cling to each other, tears of laughter streaming down our faces. Finally, I pull myself together. Yes. To you. Fifty-five years ago.

Bubbles of laughter vanish. His eyes widen and his mouth forms a soundless scream. We have feared this moment. His brilliant mind finally destroyed by relentless mini strokes randomly killing parts of his brain.

Is it time? he asks.

How does one decide? How far does a mind have to deteriorate before it is time?

Chuck takes my hand. Traces the lifeline stretching from thumb to wrist.

Never a nursing home...

I stare out the window, watching the wind bending the sycamore trees.

There's the cry of a coyote on some far hill. If only I could throw back my head and howl. I try to digest the situation, the awful realisation that everything is about to change. Chuck squeezes my hand.

We need to talk.

I can't breathe.

Chuck stares at the palms of his hands. I keep falling, he says, absentmindedly rubbing a scar on his forehead. And now this. It's time.
I cup his face in my hands and search his eyes for doubt. He is calm. Sure. His good arm wraps around me, and I sink against his chest and sob.

The grandfather clock strikes the hour. What is time? Something I've had so little of with this new Chuck. It took a series of strokes to kill his sarcasm, the belittling, the womanising; to destroy hatred in my heart and replace it with a sad compassion. A blood clot to tame the lion. Although he is not caged or cowed. The brilliant mind I fell in love with works some of the time. Last week, he wrote a page of an essay on the feeding habits of the Western Banded Gecko. At these moments, his mind transcends the damage and shines as bright as before. The world is still ours.

When we navigate from bed to chair we soon come tumbling back to earth. His bulk and towering height leans on my short frame. We stagger, fall, struggle, laugh and cry. He reaches out to me with both arms. After many years, he is once again emotionally and physically mine.

Chuck lounges in his father's leather chair. The only part of his inheritance left from the family home after the old man died. His right fingers drum the worn arm. I busy myself preparing a tray of coffee before taking my seat next to him; the Lone Ranger and his faithful Tonto ready to support him to the end.

Our doctor leans forward. Are you sure?

Chuck nods.

Years ago, we joined the Hemlock Society to prepare for a dignified end. I refuse to end up like Mother. I had to key in a code to open the door and push past a wiry resident in a pink dressing gown, hunched over like a sprinter on starting blocks.

I must go. Must go. Must go, she repeated over and over.

In spite of the flowers and room deodorant, the acrid smell of urine permeated the home. On good days, I found Mother in the drawing room. Her wheelchair pushed close to a large, polished table.

Bent heads, twisted limbs, vacant eyes surrounded us. Still better than her lying stretched out on her nursing home cot, with the side-rails up, face twisted in pain. A shot of morphine brought relief. Aunt Nettie's crocheted rug the only colour in a grey room. Mother never acknowledged the gaunt figure on the other bed. Both women believed they had a room of their own.

Would you like to go to the garden, I'd whisper in her ear.
Lovely, this is the dullest party I've ever been to. No one knows how to make conversation any more.

I wheeled her through glass doors into the terracotta brick courtyard. To what we called our wooden seat and the brass plaque. In memory of ... When cut crystal champagne flutes and a bottle of Moët appeared from the depths of my tote bag she'd shiver with delight. My mother, Hanna Maria Roydon, may have been addled, but she never lost her taste for good Champagne.

What is this? Her nose wrinkled if I tried to pass off a cheaper bottle. I talked, she listened, until a butterfly flew past, a spot on her arm needed close inspection, or a white uniformed nurse hurried across the courtyard.

The hired help is wonderful here. She'd smile.

Yesterday, they brought butterscotch pie, fresh from the bakery down the road. She leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner and, with a gracious wave of her hand towards the opposite ward, confide, You know the president lives there. Mamie Eisenhower's parties are elegant and impressive. She serves sweet tea with lemon and ice, corn on the cob, hushpuppies, and then steaming bowls of She-crab chowder and southern fried chicken hot from the pan.

I wiped saliva from her chin.

Was mother still living in the rambling old Southern home of her youth surrounded by friends? Secure in the love of her family? Attending parties, being wooed by gallant beaux, the smell of honeysuckle heavy in the hot night air?

Maybe being addled was not so bad after all. Until rare moments of reality when tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks, her body wracked by spasms of pain. Then she asked, Why? Why? Why? Why tie a large white bib around Mother's scrawny neck and call it a napkin? Feed her spoonful by torturous spoonful. Why leave her like this? Father could not bear to permanently say goodbye.

We give injured lizards a lethal injection to end pain. You can call it euthanasia, right to die, any goddamn thing you want, but we believe it is our right to end our own lives when it becomes intolerable. But is it time? Only Chuck can tell us that. Our doctor reaches for his coffee, and we discuss the options.

Lethal injection, Chuck suggests. Doctor shakes his head.

Tablets and a plastic bag over the head?
My mouth gapes. Have you forgotten already? I shout at Chuck. How will you tighten the string?

The doctor looks at Chuck. He points at me.

Forget it—

Martha can't help you, the doctor interrupts. It must be by your own hand. We talk for over an hour and finally know what we must do.

* * *

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Dear Martha, How is Chuck? It must be such a blessing to have Barb living so close.
Can Merril get away for a visit? I know it must be hard when they are trying to build up a new business. I have some good news...

Dust, driven by gale force winds, billows down from the drought-stricken Mallee and chokes the city of Melbourne. It is 4:00 p.m at Kubunji Beach. Diane has three hours before the graduation ceremony. In the car, she checks the bag at her feet. Purse, glasses, hairspray and make-up. She wants to look her best for the photos. She visualises walking up stairs. Reaching the dais. Shaking the chancellor’s hand. Receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree and accepting the Golden Key for academic excellence. Will she stop at the top of the stairs and hold them aloft in glee? The music from *The Stripper* pops into her mind. Dah dah dah, de da da da. Gowned arms outstretched, doing a shimmy. Ron would have a fit. A sedate walk down the stairs more suitable for a woman in her late fifties.

Wetting the tip of her finger, she nervously rubs a spot on the knee of her black slacks. The jacket is fine. Back from the cleaners that morning. The white blouse new. Ron turns into Punt Road. Traffic is banked up and over the hill.

We’ve hit a slow-moving car park. His fingers drum the steering wheel.


5:00 p.m. A rooster crows. Diane swears under her breath. She will kill Kerry for making that rooster her ring tone.

Just letting you know we are here. Kerry’s voice is calm. Where are you?

On our way.

Ring when you get near.

Diane checks her watch, looks at the traffic jam and begins the moan. We’re not going to make it.

Don't panic. Ron pats her knee. Plenty of time yet.

6:00 p.m. The rooster crows.

Still in Punt road. Diane’s voice is tight and high.

Don't worry if you don't make it, Mum, Kerry says. We'll still take you out to dinner.
The traffic moves another few feet and they reach the turn off, but it is six forty-five.

Hang on, Ron says. Gap ahead, and drives like a maniac toward the university.

Diane slumps in the seat.

7:00 p.m. She's missed graduation. A hundred dollars gown hire fee down the drain.

The rooster crows. Kerry's voice is elated. Looks like a lot of people haven't made it yet. They're delaying the ceremony for fifteen minutes.

There's the gate. Ron skids to the curb. Run for it. I'll park the car.

Diane leaps out of the barely stopped car, dodges traffic to cross the road, runs past wrought iron gates, between buildings, beyond Burgan Hall to the student union block. Taking stairs two at a time, she signs in, a dresser throws a gown over her shoulders and jams a too small mortar board on her head. It slips rakishly over one eye.

Go, the dresser shouts, pointing back down the stairs. Gown flying out behind her, Diane reaches the hall. John holds open the door and Kerry pushes her through. Diane barely hears the processional march above the pounding of her heart.

The University pub is packed with rejoicing families. Conversation hums. Glasses chink and are raised to toast flower-clutching graduates. Diane, eager for the celebratory bubbles of champagne, beams at Ron, Kerry and John

A young waiter bustles over, black apron tight around his youthful waist.

A bottle of Cordon Rouge Champagne, Ron orders.

The waiter brings the bottle, shows it to Ron for a nod of approval and asks, Celebration?

Bachelor of Arts, Ron proudly announces.

The waiter, looking at Kerry, smiles and says, Congratulations.

Kerry laughs. Points to me. Not me, she says. Mum.

With a shocked look on his face, the waiter turns to me.

How long did it take?

Diane grins as she slips a photo into the envelope.
Dear Martha, Can you believe it? I’ve finally graduated. It was a fabulous night. At uni they had photography booths set up in the student union building, and Kerry insisted I record the occasion. What a laugh. The photo says it all. Instead of proud parents standing behind the graduate, Ron, Kerry and John are behind me.

* * *

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We can cope a bit longer, I tell Chuck, but he's made up his mind. I am not expecting what comes next.

Come with me, he says. We can go together.

It sounds as if he is inviting me on a holiday, or one of the scientific excursions we so enjoyed. This isn't a trip. This is a journey into the unknown, a termination, a snuffing out of life.

I can see it, have read this ending in many books. The double suicide, the doting wife dying in her husband's arms. The end. Close the book.

This is not a story with a tidy ending; this is life. To die with him would put an end to this pain, but there is no reincarnation. No happy Christian afterlife. Dead is dead. Finished. Muerto. One of us a murder, one a suicide.

Goddamnit, I'm fifteen years his junior. Has he forgotten that? Has he forgotten Elizabeth? His death would be enough for her to try and understand without losing both of us. My mind whirls in every direction. Stay, go, No. Stay, stay. Stay and be free. Free to live my life how I want to live. Finally do what I want to do, you bastard. I suddenly feel guilty. This is not just about me.

What about Barb? Does she have to lose a mother as well?

Bacon sizzles in the pan. Two eggs over easy. Toast slightly burnt just as he likes it. Lashings of butter, cholesterol not an issue. Percolated coffee. It gives me something to do, something to distract me from what is happening. His jeans hang loose, wrinkled like an old elephant's hide over his shrunken butt. Head bowed, I carefully button the anniversary shirt, adjust the bolo tie, comb his hair and, on top, place his Stetson, all wrinkled and worn; sweat stains add another pattern to the diamond back snakeskin band.

Chuck leans heavily against me, and we stagger to his old man's recliner. His fingers grip the arm, and I carefully ease him down, arranging his useless forearm on the armrest. He's like the statue of Lincoln, that distant look already seeing the future.

I place the loaded and cocked Beretta in his lap. To be aimed at the base of the skull. He's never looked more handsome.

Still time to change your mind, he says.
You too, I reply, but know the decision has been made and Chuck is not a man to change his mind. Ever. I hold his head to my chest and stroke the shaggy mane. Life has never seemed more precious.

How can I leave him to do this alone? To die alone? It takes all my courage to look at him. We kiss. A long, tender, goodbye kiss. I know I have to walk to the door. Know I must walk the four kilometres to the library, be seen by people, have an alibi. But how to leave? How to walk away from fifty-five years of laughter, fears, tears and adventure? Of kids, and marital rape. I squeeze his hand, grab my anorak and library backpack from their pegs, and close the door behind me.

Sleet slashes the Santa Fe Public Library, partly obscuring the old coach lamps on either side of the entrance. When lit, they show the way in. Everyone is welcome here. Every Tuesday and Friday, when I walk up the three wide steps and through the green-latticed doors and the ochre archway, my breathing slows and a weight shifts off my shoulders. Most people park their troubles by the door.

In this place of culture and learning I find peace. I hesitate before pushing open the doors. Inside, people whisper and paper rustles. This is my church, my sanctuary. Especially today.

Hi Martha, the librarian greets me. I smile and nod, but dare not speak, afraid of what might tumble out if I unclench my jaw.

We can do with your help today. She gestures towards a genealogy group in front of microfiche machines. Old ladies in grey cardigans looking up death. Later, I will sort out the messy pile of microfiche film, but now I hurry to my spot at the back of the library and file books. I greet old friends, James Joyce, Margaret Ackland and Don Preston. I will need them all in the days ahead.

People speak, ask me questions, seek my advice. It’s as if I am standing outside my body watching some other person sort, stack, tag and file.

I tap my watch. Two hours before I finish. Barb always meets me at twelve for coffee. My stomach churns at the thought. There will be no coffee for me today. What will I say to her? She cannot come back to the house with me. Must not see her father. This is something I must do alone.

I tap my watch again. Has it stopped?

The Dr. Seuss sessions finish in the reading room and happy children file past. Running the tips of my fingers along the line of spines, I randomly select a
book. Theodore Bernstein *The Careful Writer*. My old friend Bernstein. I must write to Diane. She will be shocked, but will understand. Maybe I'll ring her tomorrow. This sort of news is better delivered personally. I wonder what time it is there? The hands of my watch crawl towards the hour. Time to smile, greet, make small talk, be noticed. Bernstein falls off the table. I jump. It sounds like a shot.

In the diner on Main Street, the meals are cheap and the coffee good and strong. Barb sits in her usual seat. The waitress delivers the obligatory coffee. I mentally count four stirs clockwise and three anticlockwise. She'd hate to hear, and would deny, that she is so like Chuck. Before the stroke. One look at my face, and her smile disappears.

Today?
I nod.

She wants to come with me.

Are you sure, Moth-er? I want to lean on her, share the burden, but I will walk back up the hill, and she will wait at home for my call.

The juniper trees lining our driveway struggle in the wind, and my hiking boots scrunch on fresh snow. I shiver. Wet from the knees down. To walk close to the gutter, with cars whizzing past spraying water, is a dumb thing to do, but I don't care. New ropes of red chilli brighten our doorway. The groundhog boot scraper sits beside the welcome mat.

I pull open the door and dump my backpack. From the inside landing, everything looks the same. As usual at this time of day, Chuck is asleep in his old man's chair, his mouth wide open. I'll walk down the stairs. He will greet me and the whole goddamn nightmare of die now, die later, will start all over again.

But this time it is different. His eyes are open. I want to close them, must close them until I remember the doctor's adamant words. *Do not touch him. Don't touch anything. Ring the police. Do you understand, Martha?* I understand, but cannot obey. The doctor is not here. A soft stroke of the eyelids is all it takes before I ring Barb.

I need her here.

Nine one one. What is your emergency? the female voice asks.

I hesitate.
Your emergency? she repeats.
What to say? I haven't mentally rehearsed this part.
My husband is dead, I blurt out, quickly adding, he suicided.
Have you tried CPR?
Are you mad? He shot himself. I brace myself against the wall.

Barb's four wheel drive grinds to a halt. I stand in front of the closed front door. She tries to push past me.

Remember your father the way he was. I grab her arm. I need you here.
Our street soon looks like a disaster zone. A fire engine arrives first, then an ambulance and several police cars. We stay outside. A man wearing jeans and a parka approaches us from a sea of uniforms.
Mrs Jackson, I'm a police chaplain.
I'm an atheist, I quickly respond. The last thing I want is some Bible-bashing cleric to tell me it's God's will.
The chaplain puts his hand on my arm. I'm not here in a religious capacity, he says. I'll be a buffer between you and the police. He takes us inside and we sit in my study.
I cannot look at the chaotic scene downstairs. A large policeman sits beside me. He flips open a notebook and clicks the top of his ballpoint pen several times.
Where were you, Mrs. Jackson.
At the library.
Did anyone see you? He wants names and addresses. Wants to know when I met Barb. Did we have coffee? When, how, and why Chuck died? Did I know he was going to do it? Was he depressed, sad, aggressive? It is his manner, the tone of his voice, that makes me feel guilty. I am to blame. My fault. I had not loved enough, given enough, been tolerant enough, had left Chuck alone.
The chaplain intercedes. I think that's enough for today, Officer Gonzales.
The policeman clicks his pen and puts it into his top pocket. He hands me a card. I'll see you at the station tomorrow and we'll sort it out then.
I nod, but all I can think about is Chuck's body is downstairs. What is taking them so long? Why haven't they gone? It's a suicide for Christ's sake.
Let the man rest in peace.
The kettle whistles on the stove. Barb pushes a chunk of her carrot cake across the table to me.

Eat, she commands. You get mean when you're hungry.
I take a bite, but can't swallow.
Are you listening, Moth-er?
I nod.

Who do you want me to call? Barb thrusts out her hand. Give me your list. Better they find out from us than the morning newspaper. She's right, but I'm still trying to swallow my cake.

He asked me to go with him, I say.
You're free now, Moth-er. The bastard's gone. Barb sweeps up cake crumbs with a damp cloth. I must ring the undertaker. Who did you choose?

How can she be so matter of fact? No shock, no dismay, or why did he say that? No thank you, Mother, for staying. I zip my lips. Free? I'm shaking. My mind shattered.

* * *

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Dear Martha, Hairdressing is as busy as ever and manages to take care of four days a week. To get that one precious day of study I have to start work at 7:00 a.m. At least, I don't have to spend time on my hair. I've given up perms. My hairdressing friends find my straight hair hard to accept and keep offering to 'fix it' for me. You look so different, they say. Would you like me to do something? Not a vote of confidence, but I'm determined not to return to the Woody Allen curls.

Diane tucks the letter into the padded jiffy bag addressed to Santa Fe. Inside, she will slip three well-used books bought at a garage sale. The covers are tattered, but it's the content that matters. When Martha sees the copy of *Australian Short Stories*, featuring forty-eight authors from 1894 to 1996, she will be delighted. A story a day for over a month.

Add to that a quirky collection by Elizabeth Jolley. *Woman in a Lampshade* is full of fantastic characters, all of whom fail to achieve the expected. The book is well thumbed. Diane has read each story several times and found them slyly comic, sometimes disturbing, but written with a delicacy and compassion as moving as the characters themselves. She has marked her favourites, 'The Last Crop' and 'The Pear Tree Dance', with two Australian wildflower bookmarks, instead of putting an asterisk beside the titles or highlighting them with Texta. Diane marks anything significant in all her books.

Martha would be appalled. She doesn't mind second-hand books as long as they are not, as she calls it, defaced. Thank goodness, she won't set eyes on any in Diane's bookcase. But if Martha lived closer, they could browse together in a favourite second-hand bookshop called, of all things, The Pigs Wings. Later, they could swap books and discuss the stories.

Her friends can't understand her passion to write, her commitment to study.

Why do you do it? they ask. Why lock yourself away? Get out and have some fun. Diane translates that to eat more, drink more, gossip more. She is changing; she no longer wakes each morning feeling something is missing. It feels good. She has her own set of writing wings; as long as they don't fall off if she flies too high.

Diane can't wait to return to her computer, to her mother's story crowding her head. Away from dirty dishes, toilets that block and shower recesses needing cleaning. Back to characters more alive, more vibrant and full of life than anything
around her until tomorrow. Tomorrow, real life takes over and, once again, she will pick up the threads.

Ron sticks his head through the study door. Do you want a cup of coffee? The jug’s boiled.

Diane sighs. For him, retrenchment/retirement is not what it is cracked up to be. Too much time, not enough energy, and everything in the house is working perfectly.

3:00 a.m. The phone rings. Diane drags the receiver to her ear.

Did I wake you? a familiar voice says. What time is it there?

* * *
When I slam our front door red chillies jiggle and dance. Dry, high-altitude air clears my head, fills my lungs. Hiking boots tightly laced, I shrug my shoulders, adjusting the backpack, the dowager's hump an impediment these days. It is four miles walk to the sheriff's office. I check my watch. 9:00.a.m. A promise is a promise. Best get it over with. What can they do?

Barb’s four wheel drive scatters gravel. She jumps out and grabs my arm. What are you doing, Moth-er? she shouts. I told you to wait for me. Her hand bruising my arm, I shake her off.

Why didn't you answer your phone?
I start walking down the drive. She runs after me.
Moth-er. Stop. Let's talk.
Keep out of this, Barb. It has nothing to do with you.

Marching up the imposing steps of the Santa Fe Sherriff's Office, through the automatic sliding doors to the counter, I feel like a suspect in a Mickey Spillane detective novel. Hopefully, the outcome will be the same. The innocent always walk free.

The officer on duty takes Gonzales' card and walks away. The wooden bench is hard on old bones. My attorney hurries through the doors. Sits beside me.

Remember what we said?
I nod.

The last time I was in this office was for a query about my driver's licence. A dishevelled young man, head hanging, is dragged in the front door, a burly officer on either side, but my eyes are on a young woman with wild eyes, slouched on a seat. Filthy overalls, cropped and matted red hair. Metal rings pierce her eyebrows, lips and ears. She cusses loudly at anyone who comes near. I want to put my arms around her. Rock her, tell her it will be all right. She reminds me of Merril.

The sparse interview room smells of antiseptic. The plastic chair is hard and cold. Perched on the edge of the seat, elbows on the table, the comforting presence of the attorney next to me, I wait. Gazing around the room, I try unsuccessfully to spot the surveillance camera. I'm focused on a suspicious section of the ceiling when Officer Gonzales, the name proudly emblazoned on a silver strip, strides in. Scraping a chair across the tiled floor, he sits in front of me. He looks more relaxed today in his navy shirt, corporal stripes, gold sheriff badge, Taser on his belt.
He flips open his notebook. Reads for a moment. There is accusation in his eyes. Disbelief on his face.

You say your husband suicided.
I nod.

You say you were at the library.
I nod again. Gonzales is so arrogantly young. So sure of himself. So secure in what he thinks is right and wrong.

What time did you arrive?
How dare he judge. I grip the edge of the table. Unshed tears sting my eyes.

Goddamnit, man—

The attorney grips my arm. Pulls me back in my seat. I concentrate on a scratch on the table. Take several deep breaths.

What is the charge? the attorney asks.

Gonzales ignores him. Leaning towards me, he says, You understand, don't you Mrs. Jackson—he pauses for full effect—that the charge is murder.

I don't hear anything after that, but my attorney's mouth moves. See him hand the officer a folded paper. Gonzales leans back in his chair. He reads Chuck's suicide note aloud.

I, Charles Mathew Jackson, being of sound mind...

He thrusts the paper in front of my nose. Is this your husband's signature?
I nod.

He drums his fingers on the table. Looks shaky to me.

Does he think I stood over Chuck and made him sign? Held his hand on the pen and guided it across the page? That I pulled the trigger? He has no idea of who Chuck was. No one could make Chuck do anything he didn't want to do. This is ridiculous.

What more do you want? I ask.

How did he get the gun? He was partially paralysed, I believe.

How the hell do I know?
Question follows question. I answer them as best I can.

He shot himself, I keep repeating like a broken record. Goddamnit, he died by his own hand.
The interview over, my attorney shakes my hand and walks away. I'll ring him tomorrow and apologise for my temper.

My mind reeling, I start for home. I will be available for further questions. I will not leave Santa Fe County. He can call any damn well time he likes.

And I will go home and bury my husband.
Dear Martha, Floral Waters. What a ridiculous name. I feel as if I should be skipping down the bank of the canal scattering petals out of a wicker basket, singing, *Flowers that bloom in the spring tra la*. We arrived here on Ron's birthday, and yes, even though it is a unit, it has the mandatory double garage. I often think of my mum. *How she would have loved this place. She always dreamed of living on the water.*

A flock of black Cormorants gracefully glide onto the manmade canal. Through her study window, Diane catches a flash of wings and peers over the top of her computer monitor. She never tires of the daily feeding frenzy.

The cormorants work as a team, swimming, diving, herding an unseen shoal of fish towards the end of the two-meter-wide canal. Seagulls soar like white ballerinas above the black throng. Looking for easy pickings. And loping along behind is a lone grey crane. Diane hopes that one day he will catch up. She wants to pinch herself, to remind her of her good fortune to be here after searching for months for a home, not too big, not too small. Something just right.

It was a wrench to move after forty years in the same place. She loved the old rambling home they had added to year after year. First the family room, then Kerry's bedroom and finally, the huge veranda across the front. Not to forget the extra large plate glass windows in the late eighties. On moving day, she walked through the house, thanked every room, said goodbye before turning the key in the door for the last time. But it was time to move. The Kubunji Beach house was too large for the two of them. And she couldn't face renovating. Not again. A modern unit, on a new estate built on a series of canals the answer.

You haven't moved out of your comfort zone, have you, Mum. Kerry looks up from the street directory, her finger indicating the short distance between the old home and the new. Diane had looked further afield, but she was happy living by the bay. If only Martha could see the jetty covered in cormorants, wings outstretched, facing the sun. How can she write the scene so Martha will understand the joy it creates. See it through her eyes. Diane sighs. It is impossible to catch the contented ka, kar, karking cries of full bellies, or the whoosh of wings, or multitude of tiny splashes as cormorants rise high into the sky.

* * *
Dear Diane, I wish we could communicate via telepathy. I really don't know why the news of your move bothered me. I suppose it's because now I can't visualize where you live. Please send me a floor plan, but especially a map of the area, and where it is relative to Melbourne. That really won't be enough, so I guess I'll just have to visit you to see for myself. Don't worry; it won't be for a while, I assure you.

Barb straightens a rug, flicks a feather duster over the clay masks on the wall.

You shouldn't be alone, Moth-er. She straightens the sitting room cushions. Dad's gone and you're rattling around in this big house. Maybe I should come and live with you?

I stare out the window. The last thing I want is for Barb to live with me. For the first time in fifty-five years, I'm free. But how to say no? Barb is disastrously divorced, living at a motel and cleaning the units to pay for her rent.

Sometimes, I miss the sound of Chuck's voice. Miss the blood-stirring arguments. I'll have plenty of those if Barb lives here, but she is a great cook. My stomach growls at the thought of moist carrot cake. Hot from the oven.

You don't need this. Barb moves a favourite chair into the basement.

And why is this couch here? It would be much better by the window.

Everything in the kitchen is different. Pots are where the juicer once lived, knives replace spoons in the cutlery draw and my treasured Aztec scatter cushions replaced by Barb's plain equivalent. The price of carrot cake is too high.

The worst part is the constant arguments over whether to use salt or pepper and the price of a loaf of bread. It's like living with Chuck all over again. Two Bantam roosters in the one pen. Each fighting for its own space, only Barb is twenty-three years younger. I want her to leave, but I don't want to make a mistake with a daughter. Not again.

Is that wise, Moth-er? Barb flips through a stack of brochures. Travelling on your own to Australia when you're eighty? Maybe I should come with you?
I rattle off all my well-thought-out reasons in case she suggested this, ending with the word 'cost'. This time, I want to be free to please myself. The thought of such freedom makes me giddy.

When Chuck was alive, he told me when, where and who we had to see, but left it to me to make all the arrangements. It was my fault if planes did not connect. If baggage was lost. Or Chuck caught a cold. Barb would be the same.

This trip is an eightieth birthday present to myself. For once, I'll be unhindered by the needs of others. A chance to visit friends before I am too old. A chance to catch up with Diane. This time, I will not invite Barb, or offer to pay her fare.
Diane and Martha relax on the outdoor deck, chairs pulled close to the house to escape a keen wind rippling across Floral Waters. Pelicans dip and fish along the edge of the canal. Plovers call to their mates. Gathering rain clouds hide the sun.

Great coffee. Martha takes another sip.

Diane is glad she bought the new percolator and some decent coffee beans. A mixture of Kenya and Mocha.

The wind freshens and sweeps up the canal. Diane shivers. We call this a lazy wind. She pulls up the collar of her jacket. It cuts right through you.

You call this a wind? Martha laughs. It's nothing compared to the gales I put up with.

They sit in comfortable silence. Diane leans forward. Did you hear that the peat fires are still raging in Indonesia?

Martha nods.

What shall we do about our trip?

I hate to give up the idea of Kalimantan and the proboscis monkeys.

Me too. Diane chuckles. Those monkeys remind me of a couple of rheumy-eyed old men I know at the village. But what can we do?

Martha sighs and shrugs her shoulders. Best to cancel.

Sure?

I believe Kuala Lumpur airport is still closed. Martha folds her arms. And the latest news has a cloud of orange smoke smothering everything and there's a threat of acid rain.

Diane sighs. I'm sorry it didn't work out, Martha, but don't worry. We'll take you to a place you'll love.

* * *

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From my window seat, I marvel at dozens of tiny islands strung like a necklace across Bass Straight: Flinders Island, an emerald in a sea of blue. The tiny AUS-Air plane flies low. The jacket I've borrowed from Diane keeps my body warm, but my feet are freezing. Sunny Australia? Trust me to arrive during the coldest snap in twenty-five years. Instead of flying to the warmth of Borneo, we're heading towards Antarctica. Damn the peat fires and god help those poor proboscis monkeys.

In the seat beside me, Diane studies promotional brochures gleaned from the Moorabbin Airport lounge. She looks up.

Mount Strzelecki sounds good. She holds up a picture of a lush, green mountain soaring into a clear blue sky.

Ron reads the airplane safety manual.

Diane smiles and points down. Not long now. She continues reading. I marvel at the ease of our relationship. The past week in Melbourne we have rolled along together, give and take. Comfortable companions. If only Barb and I could be like this.

Above the drone of the engine come a series of staccato cracking sounds and I glance at the wing. Metal fatigue? Is the plane falling apart? It looks well used with the torn seat pocket and dog-eared magazines. Rat a tat tat. Rat a tat tat. I cross my arms and hold them tight against my chest. Murmur my mantra against fear. No nursing home. No nursing home.

Ron puts the safety manual back in the pocket. Diane licks her finger then turns another page. The other passengers chat or snooze and seem unconcerned. I look at the wing. Chunks of ice whip back from the edge and hit the fuselage. The only danger frostbite once we land. I wriggle numb feet. Maybe Diane has a spare pair of socks. If not, there should be at least one five-and-dime store at Whitemark.

The pretentiously named Flinders Interstate Hotel is the homeliest of places. Worn carpet, mismatched furniture and no elevator. Not quite up to my usual standards. Ron offers to carry my bag up the flight of stairs to my room, but I hold tight to the handle.

I may be eighty, but I'm not decrepit. Hope you're not offended.

It's just that we have adjoining rooms.

Don't snore too loudly then. I shake my finger at him. I remember your snores.
Diane laughs. Don't worry, Martha. I've brought some of those strips to put across the bridge of his nose, and if that fails, I'll give him a swift dig in the ribs.

Diane doesn't mind what unit she has, or where they go. This is her first chance to travel with Martha. She wants it to be memorable, aware that at eighty years of age, this could be Martha's last trip to Australia.

The rooms are sparse, with a basic en suite and a sink that gurgles. They have all lived in worse. Diane picks up a program for an old television high on a rack on the wall, but puts it back on the table. She stands at the window watching the sea pound against lichen-covered rocks. A fishing boat bobs and dips under a cloudless, blue sky. Who watches television with a view like that? Let the outside world look after itself. The worst that can happen here is bad coffee.

Diane checks her watch. Time to head to the restaurant. Diane stuffs her arm into a warm cardigan. Ron starts for the door.

Have you got the sacred wallet?

Ron pats his pocket and smiles. In Melbourne, Martha had insisted on putting one hundred dollars into a wallet and they put two hundred. A brilliant way to prevent arguments over who pays the bill.

The dining room is empty. Their chairs scrape against the polished wood floor. A head appears over swinging bar doors leading to the kitchen. A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman marches in, floral cobbler apron firmly tied behind her back.

I'm Ann, and I'm your cook tonight. I can grill you some garfish, if you like?

She looks at them as if daring them to say no.

It was swimming in the sea two hours ago.

That clinches it. They all nod.

It comes with chips and salad, she says as she disappears into the kitchen.

Pots clatter. The whoosh of a gas jet.

At least it's not three days old, Martha jokes.

Ann soon reappears with laden plates. Martha is still arranging her napkin when, with gusto, Ron attacks his meal. He rolls his eyes in appreciation. This is the best fish I've ever tasted.

Martha keeps glancing at Ron's plate. If you keep eating as fast as that you'll get indigestion.
Ron slows down a fraction, but his plate is soon wiped clean. Diane pushes
some fish to one side, places her knife and fork together, and leans back.

Finish that, Martha says. It's only a mouthful.

I'm totally stuffed. Diane pats her stomach and pushes her chair from the
table. Ron leans across and forks her leftover fish onto his plate. Martha's eyes
widen. Ann hurries in with three extra garfish.

Saw your clean plates. Here's some more.

Diane leans forward and whispers to Martha. Does this put us in the
'treasured member of the family' category, or the 'uncouth mainlanders' section? The
memory of the transfer from the airport and the driver's tales of a visiting football club
from Melbourne greedily scoffing down food and then, stark naked, racing each other
in supermarket trolleys down the main street at midnight, prominent.

Before Ann can escape back to the kitchen, Martha asks, how to get to Cape
Barron?

If you want to know anything about the history of the island, you must visit
Wybalenna cemetery. Ann gestures towards the dining room door. Now you run
upstairs, clean your teeth, and when you get back, I'll show you a couple of
interesting places on a map.

Definitely 'treasured members of the family', but Diane worries that Martha will
give her usual sharp reply and relegate them to the 'uncouth mainlanders'. Martha
remains silent. Diane grins, remembering Martha's advice. Never argue with a good
cook.

They arrange with Ann to hire a car.

Where do we pick it up? Ron pushes back his chair.

Out front. It's a white Nissan. Ann laughs, I hope you don't mind a few dents.

It's Gwen McKenzie's turn on the roster.

Roster?

There's no Avis or Budget Rent-A-Car here. You'll find the keys in the ignition.

What a jewel of a place, Martha says. I wouldn't have missed this for the
world.

Over breakfast, the local maps are checked and a decision is made to visit Trouser
Bay.
Martha, in a thick Texan drawl says, Now there's gotta' be a story about Trouser Bay.

Ann explains that, after his ship wrecked, a sailor had a lucky escape when he managed to struggle ashore. His trousers washed up three days later.

It's thirty kilometres away, she continues. That's an all-day trip.

All day? Ron raises an eyebrow. It only takes an hour to drive thirty K's to Melbourne.

I forgot. Ann gives them a pitying look. You're mainlanders. Are you still going?

They nod in unison.

Maybe we could have a barbecue? Diane suggests. I'm sure we can find a picnic area and a coin-in-the-slot hot plate, like those lining the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne.

Ann gives them a frying pan, a box of matches and three Scotch Fillets. Laughing like school children, they set off in Gwen McKenzie's car.

Diane and Martha sit on sun-warmed mulch under a stand of casuarinas, their legs dangling over the edge of a cliff. Below is a sweep of golden sand. The blue waters of Trouser Bay sparkle in the sunlight.

This is God's own country. Martha breathes in the fresh, salty air. No tourists and the best food. Just magic. She picks up a twig. This is amazing, she says, turning it over in the palm of her hand. See the minute scale of these leaves. They are grouped in whorls of five.

You'd never guess you love biology.

Nearly as much as I love reading. Martha drops the twig, pulls a book from her pack and hands it to Diane. She glances at the title, An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness.

It's a story of incredible loss. Martha hesitates, looks as if she is going to say something.

Ron flops onto the picnic rug. Any lunch? He reaches for the picnic basket. Diane playfully slaps his hand.

Come on. Give a man a break. I could eat a horse.
Diane aims the book at him, but instead, folds back the green table napkin covering the picnic basket. She takes out four ham and salad rolls, tasty cheese, enormous homemade lamingtons, equally large raspberry slices and an apple for each of them.

Ron grins. This would feed an army.

Are you sure? Martha tosses him the box of matches. Maybe you can get the steaks going.

Muchas gracias Senorita.

With a sigh, Ron stretches out on the rug, hands clasped under his head. Diane and Martha relax in comfortable silence. The spot, a perfect place to sit and dream. Diane rubs an aching knee. Lines etch deep around Martha’s mouth and eyes. What is her life like? What are her hopes and dreams? At least, her small body is still sturdy, her mind as sharp as ever. Diane hopes she’s as good when she’s eighty. But what has she achieved so far? Nothing of great note. A few qualifications. A couple of prizes for short stories, but still struggling to finish a book.

Below, white crochet foam edges the curve of golden sand, joining land to sea.

* * *
I hold on to the panic handle as the Nissan bumps and jolts down the grassy road. We stop at a post and wire fence. A collection of headstones and neglected graves huddle beneath the only patch of tea trees on the grassy coastal plain.

The rusty gate creaks. We stroll down a windswept path lined with purple irises. Past ancient headstones. One tombstone stands proud and tall surrounded by a cluster of unmarked graves. I can barely read the inscription: **Mannalargenna. Last chief of the Portland Tribe.**

Perched on a stone slab, I pull out my glasses and guide book and read, *Between 1833 and 1847, one hundred Tasmanian aborigines died on Flinders Island.* The memory of an old Apache saying surfaces. There is no death, only a change of worlds. I don't believe it.

I move on to another gravestone. **Private Patrick Monaghan. King's Own Light Infantry. Died 1885.** The icy Antarctic wind blows in from the sea. I blow on my cupped hands and read the epitaph on the next headstone.

Sacrificed to the memory of Margaret Monaghan 24 years, 5 months and her two children, James and Patrick, who were drowned 23rd of December 1840 by the upsetting of a boat conveying them from on board H M Brig Tamar to the settlement at Flinders Island.

Two days before Christmas. Twenty-nine-year-old Private Patrick Monaghan, King's Own Light Infantry, after waiting over six months for his family, stands waving on the shore. Sees them lowered over the side of the brig into a row boat. A few whitecaps, but the skies are blue. The boat cresting waves. Dipping out of sight. Flailing oars. Did he plunge into the waves? Did fellow infantrymen hold him back? Did he watch his wife and children drown? I hurry to a patch of weak sunlight.
Diane pushes open the dining room door. The place is deserted. Ann emerges from the kitchen to tell her that every Sunday the restaurant is closed. Ann suggests they try the local golf club.

It’s a nice trip. Just keep the ocean on your right. She walks them to the front door.

I think she wants a night off, Martha mutters, climbing into the back seat behind Ron. I hope this place has decent coffee.

The road runs through the middle of the course. Golfers, dragging buggies, smile and wave. Kangaroos prop upright and scratch their bellies, ignoring the little white balls whizzing past their ears. Ron parks the car beside the covered porch leading into the bistro.

The dining room is basic, but the menu extensive. Again, they have the place to themselves. With a John Wayne swagger, Ron approaches the bar.

What time do you close?

The barman looks up from wiping glasses. What time are you leaving?

Martha looks at the empty tables. You could fire a gun and not hit anyone, she says. So different from Santa Fe.

Ron ploughs through a huge mixed grill.

You shouldn’t eat so fast. Martha indicates his empty plate. It’s not good for your health. Her plate is still half full. Ron picks up the menu. Anyone want sweets? They have a special. Ice cream with Crème de Cacao.

Martha shakes her head

Sounds good. Diane looks around for a waiter. Sure you don’t want one, Martha?

Don’t worry about cost. Ron waves the sacred wallet and grins. Still plenty left.

Martha folds her arms. Crème de Cacao?

Ron nods.

Martha’s mouth forms a thin line. I can’t have alcohol.

Are you on tablets? Lots of people in the village say alcohol and tablets don’t mix.

I’m a recovering alcoholic, Diane.

Eyes wide, she and Ron stare at Martha. Struggle to comprehend.
I'm an ex-lush.

Lush? Diane's teetotalling mother, a former Rechabite Queen of the Band of Hope, once pointed out an old bag lady sprawled against a brick wall, moaning over a broken bottle of gin. Grabbing Diane's hand, her mother stepped over the acrid contents staining the path, and preached a lengthy lecture on the evils of drink.

You? An alcoholic? Diane cannot visualise her 'Saint Martha' as a lush. You never mentioned it.

Ron fidgets in his seat. The lemon meringue pie looks good.

It's not something I talk about.

But how—?

Ron points to the cake display. What about cheesecake?

They shake their heads. He walks over to the counter. Diane leans forward, takes Martha's hands in hers and whispers, What happened?

I beat it. Did it cold turkey.

Diane furrows her brow.

I called on all the love in the universe to help me. Martha pauses. And I succeeded.

Ron arrives with a large slice of mud cake. Martha gives Diane's hand a quick squeeze and says, But that's all in the past. She sits back in her chair and turns to Ron. Did you hear about the Quaker drinking orange juice in the bar?

Ron grins. Diane smiles automatically, her thoughts elsewhere.

With an outrageous Texan drawl, Martha recites, A drunk wanders into a bar and sits next to a man drinking orange juice. Why do you drink that stuff? the drunk asks. The man replies, Because I'm a Quaker. Then talk some Quaker talk, says the drunk. The Quaker raises his glass and says, Fuck thee.

Ron slaps the table, throws back his head and laughs. Diane feebly smiles. What else has Martha omitted from her letters?
Diane dashes from room to room. Is the porch light on? Cutlery out? *Yothu Yindi Tribal Law* CD playing? At least the marinated chicken wings, Hungarian meatballs and Welsh rarebit are in the preset oven. A fruitcake sits in pride of place on the table. As long as there is plenty of food, the night will be a success. She stands back. That will do. What isn't displayed now can be dealt with later. She glances out the window. Fifteen years ago, the detractors moaned that this would be a mosquito-ridden swamp. They were wrong. A large moon illuminates an indigo sky. Lights from the houses opposite strobe calm water. Strident calls of plovers, protecting nests, eggs, or young, interrupt the soft night sounds. This is why she loves living on these manmade canals.

The doorbell rings. Diane's friends and neighbours ebb and flow, smiling, joking and making welcome her special guest. Martha sits in a chair at the end of the table.

    Migod. All this fuss, she says to Diane. I've been celebrating for over two weeks. What's so special about turning eighty? Next they'll want me to wear a party hat.

    One of Diane's hairdressing friends has already had more than her fair share of wine. Sashaying in her three-inch-high heels, juggling a tray of petits fours, she quaffs from a wine glass constantly refilled from a four-litre cask. Calls it her Chateau Cardboard. She glares at Diane's straight hair.

    Call me if you want a perm.

    Martha watches her with anxious eyes. Does she know about AA? she asks Diane. Maybe you could have a quiet word with her later.

    Loud laughter and the buzz of conversation drive Diane and Martha out on the deck. A family of ducks make a vee to the opposite shore and the slap of water against the sides of moored boats drifts across the canal. Earlier in the day, between the shade sail poles, Ron had strung fairy lights. They give the deck a festive *al Fresco* look. Just right for the occasion. Two birthdays to celebrate. Two Leos. Two lions.

    Wait here. I have something for you. Diane disappears inside the house then emerges with a mauve package tied with a large, pink bow.

    It's too nice to open, Martha says. Barb wraps her presents in brown paper and ties them with string. Martha slowly unties the bow, removes one sticky taped spot after the other, taking care not to tear the paper.
Rip it, Martha.

The search for the perfect present had taken Diane weeks. It had to be light enough for Martha to take home with her, but not jewellery. Martha wears only gold and silver. More than Diane can afford. She considered several nice tops, but Martha is not one to dress up, preferring to wear shirts and slacks, except the odd free flowing mu mu, on special occasions. Like tonight.

Finally, ribbon wound into a neat circle, paper smoothed and flattened, Martha holds up a long, hand-painted, silk scarf.

The ochre colours are the earth, the aboriginal patterns will remind you of Australia, and when you wear it—Diane gives a little laugh—think of me.

Martha slips the soft silk around her neck and flicks an end back her shoulder.

Do I look like an author? My writing group will be so impressed. Diane sighs with relief.

Martha leans forward. Give me your paw, she commands. Turning Diane's hand palm upwards, she cups it in her own. Taking from her pocket a silver and gold intwined necklace, she curls it into Diane's palm. Happy Birthday.

Diane gazes at the gleaming coil. Noticing Martha's bare neck, she shakes her head. I can't—.

I want you to have it.

But—

Martha gently folds Diane's fingers and holds her fist closed.

It's yours. And no arguments.

Diane hesitates. Every instinct shouts to give it back, but one look at Martha's stern face tells her not to try. The decision has been made. Accept the gift with grace.

With both ends of the necklace pinched between thumbs and forefingers, Diane clasps it at the back of her neck. Holding her head high, she pats the gift with her left hand. Her eyes shining, she gives Martha a hug.

I'll wear it always.

Are you two going to sit out there all night, Ron calls. Martha has a plane to catch tomorrow.
You gave Martha a copy of your writing group's latest anthology signed by all the members. Something light for her to read on the plane. Your short story on page nineteen, a celebration of your twenty-two years of pen friendship. Martha admired the seascape cover, with 'Casting a Line' scripted in a fishing line cast across the page.

How does a writer choose a title? Christina, founder of your writing group, when walking with her two girls along the Kubunji Beach pier watched an angler's line snake into the water. Imagined it forming into words. Or it could be a line in the text that leaps out at you. Maybe for this work in progress 'What Time is it There'? But you still like 'Hen's Lay, People Lie'. It reminds you of Martha.

You pick up a long, white envelope with a red-and-blue striped border. A dark blue PAR AVION AIR MAIL in the left hand corner. How many years have you corresponded? Over thirty? Where has the time gone? You still write long, newsy letters, but these days, apart from your letters to Martha, you rely on emails. It's hard to remember a time when letters were written by hand or typed on a typewriter.

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After removing the rug from my knees, I slowly climb the stairs to my study. With a
sigh, I sink into my chair and search for my yellow pad and favourite slim-line pen.

Dear Diane, I hardly know where to start. Barb has been taking care of me with really 'tough love'. Of course there are times when I resent it, even though I know she is right. She sometimes gets mad at me because I don't follow her orders properly. She is an extraordinarily good caregiver. She looks up drugs I've been given and their possible side effects. As a result, with my consent, we cut back on many of them, and what a great change. Before, my memory was terribly impaired, and I felt dopey too much of the time. I was not helped at that nursing home. The beds were uncomfortable. The food damn near inedible and the care varied a great deal.

Barb brings me a cup of coffee. She stops, stares at my neck.

Why are you wearing that chain, Moth-er? Where is the one you usually wear?

Which one?
You didn't leave it at that nursing home, did you?
I have trouble remembering what day it is. Why should I worry about a necklace?
I hope you haven't lost it.
I can't believe what a snob I am, Diane. Not a social one at all. About books, yes—with no basis in fact, just my twisted mind. As you know, I continually escape in mystery books, but get quite snooty about romances. Mills and Boon? No! Readers Digest? No!

Because of that I missed a most wonderful book that it seems everyone else has read and loved: '84 Charing Cross Road' by Helen Hanff. My friend and neighbour, Jane Watkins, lent them (there's a sequel—'The Duchess of Bloomsbury Court', or is it Street?) to me the other day. Tiny little things and powerful. I sat down to look at them and don't usually like letters (except ours, of course), but I couldn't put that first book down.

Now, I feel like a fool. I bought '84' and have ordered the 'Duchess'. Have you read them? If not, please let me send them to you.

The edition I bought said that Helen died in '97 and I grieved. Also, a movie was made in 1986 with Ann Bancroft and Anthony Hopkins. Was I on this planet?

In the midst of my "living" with Helen in New York and in London, I kept thinking about you. Your anthology story about our friendship touched me deeply. Maybe one day you could write more? It would make a good book. Looking back, our friendship seems almost unreal, but how I love living and getting to be part of your family. I have no pictures of our first meeting, but my memory pictures are still crystal clear. It doesn't seem possible that it is so many years ago.

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Reliving your first meeting and ensuing pen-friendship, and
Martha's prompting, planted the thought to write a longer
version of your story. It would be an opportunity to publish her
poetry, limericks and double dactyls. A mark of respect for
someone who was the catalyst for your writing journey. There is
no greater tribute than to lovingly record a life.
Reading '84 Charing Cross Road', seeing the simplicity of the
letter format and understanding how powerful it could be,
spurred you on.
Naively, you thought it would be simple. A small intimate book
so different from the epic proportions of your mother's story
covering two world wars and a depression. This would be an
uplifting little tale of two women, who, in spite of differences
in age, culture and countries, formed a lasting friendship. A
common story. True, but one that in troubled times reinforced
the good in human nature. And underlying all these lofty aims
was the thought that it would give Martha a lift when she needed
it most.
Diane wanders back from the letterbox with a stack of mail. Nothing from Martha today. She stops at a stamped, self-addressed envelope from Greenleaves Publishing. Rips it open and hastily withdraws a single page.

Dear Diane Simpson:

Thank you for sending us your manuscript, but...

Diane sighs. Another rejection to add to the mounting pile upstairs. She'll soon have enough to wallpaper her study. Seventeen in all. All for different reasons. The manuscript was engaging, exciting, interesting, well written, but was not what we are looking for, the wrong genre, not marketable, too similar to one we have recently published. Or, the manuscript needed to be expanded, shortened, and—best excuse of all—we only accept manuscripts from an agent. The trouble being, to get an agent you need to be published. And to be published, you need an agent.

At least this time, the publisher hasn’t returned another pristine, first three chapters that never left the packet. A coffee mug ring or a mustard smear on the title page would at least indicate someone actually read her submission. But this rejection slip was a doozy.

Thank you for sending Ossie Mumma. Ossie Mumma? The working title of Diane’s book is Valerie G. Diane laughs. This is a new one. Rejected for the wrong story. The writer of Ossie Mumma will receive her letter saying, Thank you for sending Valerie G, but unfortunately... If only Diane and this other writer could get together and share notes. What a laugh that would be.

The letter goes with the others on top of the manuscript in the bottom drawer.

Dear Martha, I’m getting used to publisher’s rejections. So far, I’ve sent Mum’s story to Giramondo, Hardy Grant, Penguin and Picador to name a few. Don’t get excited. I’ve done a basic outline for our story, but it’s hard to find time to write. I’m sitting, here with the gas heater sounding like a helicopter, the garage door keeps going up and down, and the washing machine vibrating its way out the laundry door. The old saying is that troubles always come in threes so this should be it, for this week at least.

I’m currently studying playwriting at Holmesglen TAFE. Our teacher says to write about something you know. Of course for me, it has to be the hairdressing salon.

The clients watch Diane’s every move. They chatter amongst themselves, well aware of their place in the hairdressing queue. She works as fast as she can, but the pain
in her left knee creeps up into the thigh, her leg a log of wood. She glances at her watch and grimaces. Another two hours before she can have more painkillers. She grits her teeth. No time to stop, not even for a cup of coffee. Grabbing a mug, she fills it with hot water from the tap and sips it between scissor snips.

The pressure is constant: help her elderly clients over to the basin, wash and condition the hair, place rollers, position ear-guards, cover the lot with a net and pop under the dryer. Today, she will put the timer on for thirty minutes instead of the usual twenty. The extra ten minutes will give her time to clear the backlog.

She glances at the waiting faces. Eve flips the pages of a magazine. Maureen holds up her knitting. Look how much I've done since I've been here. Margaret passes round a box of chocolates. She'll give chocolates a miss today. Diane's stomach turns at the thought of the gooey centre clinging to her teeth. She must have done ten clients already this morning and still the queue is out the door. Who'd want to be a sole trader?

The pain nags Diane, worries her, frays her nerves. She is constantly evaluating distances. How far to the basin? How many steps to that chair? She should do something about it, but the x-rays taken five years ago were fine. It must be vascular. She just needs to lose weight and exercise. An image of Martha, eighty and walking a kilometre every day, makes her sigh with envy.

The village notice board posted line dancing classes with Ruth at 2:00 p.m. Saturday. That should get the circulation going. It will be fun to wear tight blue jeans, a western shirt, large Texan hat and move in time to twangy bootscootin' music. She laughs at the mental picture. Martha would be horrified to see her in such a get up. It's like imagining Martha going bush dancing with corks dangling from her hat.

Ruth shouts and claps her hands. Vine to the right. Clap, clap, clap. Billy Ray Cyrus belts out Achy Breaky Heart from a CD player in the corner.

Vine to the left. Tap, tap, tap. Diane, hands on hips, swings her bottom and stomps her boots, but when she gets home, she'll crawl up the stairs hoping against hope to make it to the bed, perhaps to sleep.

Each evening, a pillow under both knees helps… for five minutes. Between her legs. Ahhh, better. For five minutes. Maybe at her back? Then back to the knees. The physio says to exercise through it. No pain, no gain. When her legs are fit and strong, the problem will go away.
Niggling at the back of her mind is, could it be her hips? Of course not, the most severe pain is in her knees. And the achy stiffness in her lower back? Sciatica, of course. Her back always the weakest link.

A memory of leaning over the bath to wash her small daughter and being stuck in that position for several days still causes pain. And when she pulled out shrubs? It went again. That time she gave a credible impersonation of an orang-utan, knuckles dragging on the floor, as she tried to keep the household going.

Eve suggests swimming. Diane pulls on old bathers abandoned for years. Modesty skirt in front, flippers on her feet, boogie board under her arm, every morning she launches herself into the sea. She ignores a teenager’s laughter. Just wait till she gets older.

Thelma suggests bike riding. Diane’s legs become slimmer, body leaner and she feels better than she has in years. But when she walks, her right leg insists on dipping and clients keep asking about her knee.

*

How I wish you could be here, Martha. We opened last night at the State Theatre. It was wonderful to see my girls romp across the stage. The audience laughed, yes, really laughed. I’ve included a program from the Fertile Ground New Plays Festival.

Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow
A modern bittersweet comedy

There are ten women to every man living in the Palm View Retirement Village. Lisa, the village hairdresser, does the same clients every Friday. After many busy years, her elderly clients are coming to terms with no longer being needed. They also fear illness and loneliness, but the greatest fear is Alzheimer’s and being sent to a nursing home. They cope by being cheerful, cynical or downright difficult.
The combined ages of the four actors exceeds two hundred and sixty years theatrical experience. Playwright, Diane Simpson...

Lights dim and the rustle of sweet wrappers and programs gradually cease. Diane slips into the back row of the theatre, her fingers crossed. She’d cross her eyes if she thought it would do any good. Ron and Kerry have front row seats. What will they think? The curtains open to the tune of *When I’m Sixty Four*. Diane looks at the crowded stalls and hugs the thought that these people have paid. Yes, paid good money to see her play.

Reflecting on the roller-coaster ride this play has taken her, she is aware that to have made it to production was due to never giving up. And luck: blind, wonderful, fantastic luck. Diane rubs her scalp. This stress would give anyone alopecia. Limping is bad enough without her hair falling out in clumps. A small price to pay. Her palms tingle. She had never felt so alive in her life. She wants to pee. Desperately.

What if the play doesn’t work? What if the characters, so alive in her head, die on the stage? Too late to run now. Lisa, in three-inch-high-heels, mini skirt and jangling bracelets, totters across the stage carrying a cup of tea with teabag string dangling. She waves her tail-comb in the air. Hi Jean, she says. The audience laughs at the play on words. Lisa nails the part, telling joke after joke, and the audience laughs. Not a titter, but a good belly laugh.

Diane is on the edge of her seat. The more the audience laughs, the more her girls come alive. Merl taps her foot as she sings *You Are My Sunshine*, Jean tosses her hair and snaps at Merl, Lisa twitters and dithers around the stage, fluttering and fussing, and Elizabeth silences them all with one withering glance. The finale. The ‘special’ light shines on Lisa and Jean with their arms around each other, then slowly fades to black. The audience stands and claps and Diane’s girls are called back time and time again. Lisa beams at the wolf whistles and waggles her bottom when she leaves the stage.

The after party is a blur of congratulations, champagne and back slapping. Ron and Kerry stand to one side, until Diane finally makes her escape.

It was fantastic, Mum, Kerry says, kissing them goodbye.

When they reach the sanctuary of their home, Diane breathes a sigh. What did you honestly think of it?

Not bad, he says.
She punches his arm. Her bed has never felt so good. She has never felt so
good.

Happy? Ron asks: but there is no reply, Diane is dreaming of her girls.
them out.

In spite of her brief success, constant pain has Diane refusing social invitations,
hoping there is always a seat on the train, and swallowing too many over-the-counter
painkillers. She can't close her bathroom cabinet because of herbal remedies.

One day in the hall mirror she is shocked at the haggard face, bent body.

Dr. Hughes slides four x-rays into a backlit frame. The winged image of
Diane's pelvis, resting on the bulbous tops of her leg bones, flank two, knobbly knee
bone films. He stabs a forefinger at the x-ray. Your pain is caused by severe
osteoarthritis in your right hip.

Diane shakes her head.

Dr. Hughes is sympathetic. The cartilage has gone. It's bone on bone.

It's my knee that hurts.

When someone has a heart attack, often the pain extends down the left arm
and into the hand. Dr. Hughes scrawls on his prescription pad. He tears off the page
and hands it to her. Face it, he says, looking her squarely in the eyes. Your hip is
stuffed.

Finally, the words sink in.

Osteo.

Osteo equals old.

Her grandfather sourly muttering with pain as he stomped around the house
leaning on his cane.

Her mother in a wheelchair, teeth clenched, declaring, They're not going to
cut me. Remember Else?

Aunty Else, who had the operation only for the hip to dislocate. You've never
heard a scream like it, dear.

Dr. Hughes is insistent. You need a total hip replacement. Ring me when you
are ready.

Diane limps out of the surgery.
Hip replacement. She imagines cut muscle, cut bone and a metal rod. She'll wait a bit longer, but the debilitating pain grips her knee. Remembering her mother, Diane knows that eventually her leg will lock and the femur will crumble until there is no bone left. And always the pain. Constant, unremitting. Reaching level nine on a scale of one to ten. Diane accepts the inevitable, picks up the phone and dials.

With the operation date marked in red on her calendar, Diane visualises herself, leg up, in a wheelchair, ski cap at a jaunty angle, telling friends, I was skiing down the Woollybutt trail when I hit a patch of black ice, tried to miss this big boulder, but…. Dramatic skidoo rescue, Channel nine news, hospital and a hip operation. It will make a good story for Martha. Or she can limp up to the admissions desk and say, I'm booked in for a new front suspension, and while you're about it, I'll have my fifty-thousand-kilometre service. Whatever the story she tells, Diane is determined to be a happy hippie, dancing, swimming and living again with a smile on her face.
Dear Diane, No real need for this letter as not much has happened here. Early morning exercises take half an hour, and I'm back walking two miles a day. My doctor says if I was fitter, I'd be dangerous. Barb and I co-exist amiably, but it is crowded. Santa Fe is becoming busier every day, and we are thinking of building on my five acres at Portal. I'm sure I'll be fine on my own down there. I...

The pen clatters to the floor. I rub stiff fingers. Bending to pick it up, I half expect to see Chuck's chair in the corner of the room. Forgetting it has long gone to charity. I shiver and pull on a sweater. There is a darkness in that corner. A spot where the sun doesn't reach. I shiver again. Maybe the front door isn't closed properly. It could be wide open, like the other day when I came back from the library. Barb swears she closed it when she left.

Kicking a snake draft-stopper back against the gap beneath the door, I still feel a flow of cold air. A new crack in the adobe wall close to the door jamb makes me blow on my hands for a little warmth. This place is falling apart. Barb complains that the roof still leaks, wardrobe doors refuse to slide, and that's just a couple of the repairs she's listed on the kitchen whiteboard.

I glance at the half-finished letter, hesitate then enter my study. Maybe some time spent reading old friends will settle me down. Barb will soon be home with potatoes and coffee. I can't read then. We'll spend the afternoon thumbing through books featuring designs for cabins, beach homes and straw bale houses.

John Master's name in gold stands out from all the others in the bookcase. You know you've arrived as an author when your name is more prominent than the title. Perfect choice, but how to get to his books. Barb's stuff is everywhere. Everything she has collected over her lifetime is stored in this house. Boxes fill every room, some stacked ceiling high in Chuck's garage. Eight years since he died, and she still won't let me throw out a nail. But that's her problem now.

I'm stuck between two boxes marked Bathroom/towels and Clothes/cushions. The front door hinges squeak and moan.

You should give half this junk to charity, I shout.
I got the Kenya coffee, Moth-er. She dumps parcels on the kitchen counter and fills the coffee percolator.

When will you use any of this stuff? I extract myself from the overcrowded room.

They were all out of Dakota Chief potatoes. She measures coffee into the pot and wipes a spot of water off the counter.

I escape outside and juggle my writing pad on my knee.

*I should follow Chuck’s example, Diane, and keep copies of the letters I’ve written to you because half the time I can’t remember what I’ve told you, so you’ll just have to ignore repetition. If you haven’t read ‘My Ishmael’ — the third in the saga — do try and get it. It’s really the best. Then, a friend of Barb’s gave me her copy of ‘Tuesdays with Morrie’ by Mitch Albom. It’s a small book, but super-powerful, and leaves you with a wonderful feeling. It’s about an old sociology professor who is dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease, which killed my brother). The author was Morrie’s student and had attended Tuesday class. When he got news of the illness, he flew to visit him every Tuesday until Morrie eventually died. Trust me. It is not depressing. You’ll love it.*

*For doing my volunteer work at the library, I can choose a book to have my name inscribed inside. I suggested they get at least three copies, for I’m sure it will take off as more people hear about it.*

The shopping bags jiggle and bounce in the back of the four wheel drive as I try to miss deep potholes in Terrillos Road. She wanted to drive, but this is my car and I’ll do the driving. If Barb drives, we’ll be gone for ages. She won’t go over forty miles an hour. I want to get the goddamn groceries and head for home.
We pass clusters of tacky little boxes that pass for houses fronting bitumen roads. Many with a square of green lawn out front. I shake my head. Migod. What will happen to the water table in a couple of years? Cars beep and speed past. Young men, one hand draped across the steering wheel of their souped-up cruisers, wait at traffic lights. Doof, doof, doof.

When we enter an area of old adobe homes with Madonna blue gates and sparse desert gardens, I relax. Remnants of the old Santa Fe. But it was depressing living in Santa Fe back then. More so now that smog has become part of everyday life. The only thing I will miss is the library. But Ginny already knows me in the branch in Portal, and the air will be fresh and clean. Unpolluted by progress. I think with affection of the sleepy hollow at the base of the Chiricahua Mountains. That wonderful old Apache name rolls off my tongue.

The housing design books are neatly stacked. Spread over the table is a floor plan for a spacious doublewide home.

I don't like the rectangular shape.

Then let's move things around, Barb suggests. The kitchen could be a little larger, and if we move the garage to here—she points to the plan—it will be perfect. A bedroom and en suite at this end for you. A sitting room in the middle and a bedroom and en suite for me.

I need a porch front and back. I imagine reading outside on balmy evenings. And more room in the laundry.

Barb marks our proposed alterations onto the plan.

Let's give it to Doug's son. He's a builder. We'll see what he says.

Barb rolls up the plans and places them in a cylinder.

After weeks of waiting, I finally collect the professional blueprints of our house from the Santa Fe Post Office. They are perfect. Everything is where I want it to be.

Are you sure you want to live there, Barb says. It gets so hot in summer.

It cools down at night

Where will you get provisions?

I don't need much, and Geriton is only seventy miles away. She doesn't mention my age.
Diane, I'm busy packing more boxes to take to Portal.

Just sign here. Where there's a cross. My attorney points to the bottom of several official documents. I sign.

And here.

He witnesses my signatures. The title papers to the Santa Fe house are pushed over to Barb and the procedure is repeated. Barb gives the attorney a hundred dollars, and he hands it, and a receipt, to me.

Cheapest sale of a home I've ever witnessed. He stares at me over the rim of his glasses. You're sure you know what you're doing?

I sit exhausted, surrounded by half-filled boxes. What to pack next? And where to put it.

Do you want these? Barb asks.

What?

I wish you'd get hearing aids, Moth-er. She points to shelves stacked with my mother's needlework. Rosebud garlanded tablecloths, crocheted doilies.

When will you use them?

I shrug my shoulders. I'm worn out trying to decide what I want. Not much. I want to get away from clutter. My greatest problem is my books. Every one a treasured friend. I must cull, but how will I decide between them? A mother cannot choose between her children. And it's too expensive to ship books to Diane.

Eventually, a small box is packed and ready to donate to the Santa Fe Library. Let them do with them as they will. Turning to my journals, I throw up my hands.

Leave them here, Barb says. I'll look after them.

I sigh with relief. I can visit them when I come to Santa Fe. But before I follow Barb downstairs, I grab my Kenya journal and add it to the books to go.

We arrive at the house in Portal. The shady porch protects the front door from the hot Arizona sun. Before I turn the key in the lock, I close my eyes and listen to a desert wind rustling grasses and the week-week call of a Common Poorwill. Peaceful gentle sounds, undisturbed by man. This is my Africa. I am home.
Barb bustles around, unpacking, stocking the refrigerator, filling the pantry and making up beds.

Migod, where do you get your energy? I flop into an armchair. An oasis in the middle of chaos. I'm pooped.

You've been great, Moth-er. I didn't think we'd be in by now. Barb wipes sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. A smile illuminates her face. It's been a long time since I've seen her so happy.

Look. She points out the kitchen window. Musk hogs drinking from our dish.

I relish her delight. Lifting the footrest of my favourite chair, I lean back, fold my arms and close my eyes.
Hazy images of beeping machines drift past Diane's slitted eyes. An inflated balloon hand with jutting fingers white against a blanket. The hand of her childhood nightmares fills her mind. It smothers everything, fingers expanding, about to explode. Diane opens her mouth, but the scream of terror never bursts from her swollen throat. Is it a dream? Blue leads snake across the bed. She tries to push them away. The balloon hand refuses to move. Deep shit.

Martha's image. Martha, guzzling two litres of port a day. Scared of frying her brain. Head in hands, calling on all the love in the world. To help her.

Diane sends up a silent plea. Calls on everyone she knows, Ron, Kerry, Mum, Dad, Martha. Help. An intensive care nurse at the foot of the bed drops Diane's file into a holder. Two fingers grasp her wrist. The nurse studies her watch.

You'll live, she says with a smile and pats Diane's hand. I'll tell doctor you're awake.

Diane's legs are strapped on either side of a wedged pillow. She feels like a new born mewling, I want. I'm thirsty. I'm wet. Change me. I'm hurt. Make it go away. Her raw quivering body the only reality. The nurse pulls back the covers, bowl of hot soapy water on the bed.

Ups a daisy. She rolls the fragile quivering body onto the side, sponges and dries Diane's back.

Sighs of relief, the soapy flannel caressing her bruised spine. Slowly the room comes into focus. Voices. Other beds. Other patients. She is back in the world again.

In North Ward, Diane wants to vomit. A repugnant smell comes from a needle bin on the bedside table. Her stomach heaves. What is it about the smell that revolted her? Is it connected to her traumatic time in the ICU? When Kerry was four, she heard a tune playing on the radio. Upsetting a tumbler of milk, she slapped her hands over her ears and screamed, Turn it off. Turn it off. It was the relaxation tape playing while Diane gave birth to Kerry after a long, protracted labour.

Diane throws a towel, smothering the needle bin.

The anesthetist stands at the foot of Diane's bed. You've been .

Diane raises an eyebrow.

You swelled, turned red, blood pressure dropped to forty and your heart fibrillated.

Diane's fingers tighten on the blanket.
But you stabilized. We'll check you for a stroke and any heart problems before you leave. Walking towards the door, she turns, If you hadn't been in this hospital. You wouldn't have had a chance.

Diane smiles her thanks.

The last rays of a setting sun shine on her bed. Who or what saved her? A talented anaesthetist? Dedicated doctors and nurses? A well-equipped hospital? All the love in the universe? Maybe all four.

Diane lies on top of the bed, her feet encased in a pair of bright yellow, furry blobs resembling chicken feet, complete with stuffed red claws. With her white elastic compression stockings, she feels like Foghorn Leghorn from children's cartoons. She's ready to kill Kerry for pulling them onto her feet, and then leaving. Diane can't reach down to take them off. But the sight makes her laugh.

The door opens and her specialist walks in. He takes one look at the outsized chicken feet. Tries not to laugh. Tries to talk sternly to Diane.

You're not going to try to walk in those, are you? She vigorously shakes her head.

Diane is home convalescing when Kerry arrives with a new laptop. Thought this might come in handy. It's better than your old one. She places it on the kitchen table. The array of icons at the top of the screen impresses Diane.

Click, click, and she is on Google. Click, click, and folders are opened or filed for future use.

During Diane's childhood, she attended many magic shows where magicians extracted gold coins from people's ears, doves appeared from under silk scarves and rabbits emerged from hats. This computer has the same spellbinding fascination. She wants to know more.

Kerry shows her how. You just click this, then this, and then this happens.. Go on Mum, have a try. What if she hits a wrong key and everything disappears?

From the start, Diane has trouble. She clicks. It flashes a warning. Clicks again and an hourglass refuses to budge. She waits, but it will not move. It sits there, humming tunelessly, just like Ron sits in the car, engine running, waiting for her to slam the front door and jump in.
The screen freezes. She switches it off. Waits five minutes. Presses the on button and cracks her knuckles until the blue sky screensaver appears and fluffy white clouds scuttle across the screen.

Diane constantly telephones Kerry asking, Why won’t it print? Or, The screen's a funny colour. Or, Why does it keep saying the program will terminate? Kerry patiently tells her to press this, click that, and order is restored.

Slowly, Diane solves the problems and eventually wonders how, in the early days of her study, she managed with just an exercise book and pen. Her computer now keeps her accounts and pays her bills. Organises holidays and collects and delivers letters. Plays soothing CDs and stores her memories. Diane has learnt a new language and has a new name. disimpson@yahoo dot com dot au. She sends perfect emails and the red underlining of mistakes and green for grammar in the text reminds her of Martha. Her work edited and neat on the page, she spends hours everyday tapping away at university assignments. Martha’s story on hold.

You glance back over this last section and can’t help laughing. Computers are supposed to make life easier. They allow the writer to cut, paste and move script from one section to another, but on this computer keyboard the ‘e’ key keeps sticking and ‘edited’ becomes ‘ditd’ and ‘neat ‘nat’. It makes for crazy reading. Your work ditd and nat on the page. You may even resort to writing longhand if this persists. Martha still prefers you to send handwritten, ‘real’ letters rather than neat computer printouts. She feels scrawled script captures the emotional essence of the writer. You notice in her letters a comment about the American national debt is always in short, angry strokes; reported antics of her grandchild in soft flowing script, while the entries in her hiking journals march across the page.

***
As soon as the house is finished, Diane, why don't you come and stay in Portal? I'm sure I've accrued enough frequent flyer points to get at least one of you here. Tempted? We can work on our story, and I can take you to all my favorite places. The canyon is beautiful at any time of the year. In August, we could celebrate our birthdays together. I, too, have thought often of our long friendship and marvel at it. Would that our turf were as close.
Dear Martha,

When I see your writing on the envelope, I drop everything and enjoy catching up with your news.

We are experiencing a most unusual summer. We haven't been able to open the door leading to the deck because the wind has been incredible. It sweeps in violent gusts over the roofs of the houses across from us, hits the water and riffs forward like a dark sea serpent until it breaks in choppy waves onto our sandy beach. Today, the tide is the lowest I've seen for a long time and our dingy is nearly suspended above the water. The ropes to the jetty are as tight as banjo strings. At this time of day, the big brown dog in the house across the water usually plays with his plastic ice cream container, but today he just stuck out his head then scuttled back inside. However, the man across the way, with three boys under five years of age, is braving the elements to sit and have a beer and have some peace. But that's enough window gazing.

Portal sounds like a great place. Is it really as idyllic as you describe? It's amazing that so many of your friends from 1945 still live there. I can't wait to see...

Diane drags a backpack out of the bottom of the wardrobe. At the last minute Ron has decided to come. The list of comments, Too tired, What about my heart tablets, and Nothing for me to do; suddenly replaced by: You can't manage on your own. I'm coming with you. Had he thought she would back down? Not make the trip without him? How much time will she have with Martha on her own? She yearns to talk face to face, hear Martha's voice, watch her expressions. To learn firsthand about her new friends, Pete and Junella, and the tiny hamlet of Portal. But this time it will be different. Martha and she will discuss books they've read. Evaluate the writing.

Diane lifts the backpack onto the bed. On top of a package containing the now obligatory, homemade fruitcake, she slides the creative writing component of her latest course. She also adds a hastily cobbled together thirty pages of Martha's book. The flight of fifteen hours and fifty-two minutes will give her an opportunity to revise. The poor standard of her writing bothers her, but what an opportunity for Martha to wield her red pen.

They will sit at the kitchen table, heads bent over a stack of bulldog clipped pages, and thrash out issues of omission and addition. But will Martha agree to any deletions? In her last letter, she insisted every person involved be included in the
story. It means a cast of thousands. Diane has tried to write and explain, has even telephoned, saying it is impossible. For the sake of the story, many people must be left out.

But they were there—was Martha's unyielding reply.

Diane raises her right arm, takes a quick whiff and winces. She smells like Wombat road kill. She's experienced plenty of those on their outback travels. What a trip. Fifteen hours from Melbourne to Los Angeles. Two hours in another plane to Tucson. Four hours in Barb's four wheel drive to Martha's home in Portal. That is bad enough, but when Barb picks them up at 10:00 a.m., she wants to show them everything along the way. Add to that a detour to shop at Trader Joe's.

Bouncing in the back seat of the four wheel drive, Diane's eyes cross with fatigue. She can't focus. Several hefty digs to Ron's ribs are necessary whenever his head falls back and his mouth becomes a bug catcher. At least, he doesn't snore. An unexpected thunderstorm saves them. Barb heads straight for Portal without any further detours.

6.30 p.m. One hundred degrees. Long shadows promise relief from soul-searing heat. Diane slumps on the high-backed, bottom-polished church pew on the front porch of Martha's new adobe home: a strange piece of furniture for a self-proclaimed atheist. Ron is prostrate on the double bed in the second bedroom. His bare feet dangle.

The adobe home is just as Diane imagined. Situated on five acres surrounded by mesquite bushes and desert dust. Jack rabbits, pigeons and even fickle musk hogs drink from several water dishes tucked amongst native grasses. In her letters, Martha gave a detailed description of solid beams called vigas, ceilings lined with natural wood panels, brick floors, and a steep galvanised roof. She refused to have a traditional flat adobe one like the constantly leaking roof in Santa Fe. Thick walls of sundried clay bricks and straw help keep out the extreme heat of summer and the bitter cold of winter snow. The home is comfortable and inviting.
A sizzling early morning sun sucks at an already dry land. The day promises to be a scorcher. A ceiling fan above Diane and Ron's bed slowly circulates hot air. Do I smell coffee? Ron levers himself up on one arm.

Diane drags on shorts and a top then pulls on runners. Only afterwards does she remember Martha's warning to look for scorpions hiding in the toes. In the kitchen, her friend boils eggs. Barb slices apple cake.

You're up early. Diane's smile is cheerful, but guarded. Not for us. Barb points to a clock with her knife. We left at 6:00 a.m. for our walk with Pete.

You must be keen. Diane likes the idea of an early morning walk, but 6:00 a.m?

If you can get up early enough tomorrow, you should—
Hi everyone. Ron sniffs the air. Do I smell toast?
Is the toast ready, Moth-er? Barb taps her mother's arm.
Martha looks up from the stove.
What?
The toast. Barb points to the toaster.
I can't do two things at once. Martha hastily drops in two slices and stares at them as if willing them to be done.
She picks up the chicken-shaped timer, checks the front and holds it to her ear. I'm timing the eggs.
Why don't you use the timer on the oven? Barb impatiently flicks back an escaped strand of hair. It's more reliable.
I like this one. Martha shakes the chicken then places it back on the counter.
Barb looks at Diane. The stove timer's more accurate, isn't it, Diane.
Clattering forks in the cutlery drawer, Diane pretends she doesn't hear.
Martha places a plate containing several supersized iced donuts and four wedges of orange cake in the centre of the table.

During breakfast Diane has one donut, but Ron has three. Diane looks at his ever expanding waistline. He will become more than His Roundness if he stays here too long.

The Nissan Pathfinder is backed up to the garage door. Barb is anxious to begin the eight-hour drive back to Santa Fe.
After she has gone, Diane helps Martha by folding the tea towels and napkins so neatly that Ron comments on the quiet that she must be trying to impress. She is never that tidy at home. Is she trying to impress Martha? Trying to fit in with Martha's lifestyle? Not wanting to rock the boat? Why stay two weeks instead of one?

You can't come all this way for a week, Martha argued in her letters. I want to take you to my writing group, and there is the Desert Museum down the road, not to mention the mountains. A week isn't long enough.

Diane already regrets giving in. Will this visit prove the old adage that fish and visitors stink in three days?

After lunch, Martha settles into her favourite lounge chair. Beside her several bookmarked biographies, glasses, a box of tissues and small tumbler of water.

Barb is a wonderful help, she says, kicking up the bottom of the recliner. But I'm exhausted when she goes.

Diane washes the dishes and Ron dries, making sure they don't spill water on the floor.

Rinse them well, Martha calls. When I was at your place, I thought I'd get chemical poisoning from detergent residue.

How has her family managed to survive so long? She, and even her mother, always filled the sink with hot water and added heaps of dishwashing detergent. The foamier the better. She used to scrub the dishes with a scouring pad, place them in a drainer, then wipe them with a tea towel. Rinsing after washing is only a recently acquired habit. Diane suspects it may have been promoted to sell double sinks or to scare people into buying dishwashers.

Martha looks at her watch. Siesta time. She gestures towards their room. Off you go.

Ron's jaw drops in surprise. Now?

Martha checks her watch again. It's one-thirty. Everyone has a siesta after lunch.

He obediently heads for the bedroom door, muttering, When in Rome... Do you always have a lay down in the middle of the day? Diane asks.

Hens lay, people lie, Martha corrects. If you doubt that's right, check with Theodore Bernstein. She nods towards the bookcase.

Diane's face warms and she takes a deep breath.
I'll take your word for it. She hurries to join Ron.

Closing the door of the bedroom, she lowers her voice before she explodes.

This is like a constant grammar lesson. Diane sits on the side of the bed. She drags off a runner and lets it drop to the floor.

Sent to our bedroom with no discussion. And no thought that we might want to do something else. The bed squeaks. A second runner hits the floor.

Martha assumes we will do as we are told. She plumps her pillow into shape then lies next to Ron. Worst of all? She turns to him. She's right.

Ron's belly is shaking.

It's not funny, Ron. Diane punches his arm. His belly wobbles harder, and he snorts with laughter.

It's the middle of the day, he whispers.

Diane can't help snickering.

Ron holds his shaking sides. I feel like a naughty kid sent to my room.

Shh, Diane covers his mouth with her hand.

Pillows in front of their faces to deaden the sound, they laugh until tears stream down their cheeks.

I'm so glad you came, Diane finally manages to gasp. A fortnight of afternoon naps will drive me crazy.

I'm a good buffer, aren't I.

They count wood knots in the ceiling. One hundred and fifty-three.

Diane opens the back door.

Don't go outside. Martha warns that packs of musk hogs lie in wait to attack and scorpions hide, tails raised ready to sting.

Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun. Locking the door, she tells tales of friends who live in the mountains putting metal plates across outside stairs to stop marauding bears.

People are the problem. Stupid people. They travel to national parks to see wild animals and leave their picnic scraps behind. The bears soon learn that picnic baskets are found in the back seats of cars. She puts up two hands as if warding off evil. They've been known to eat the leather upholstery.

Martha's eyes blaze with a passion bordering on anger.
She places the draft of what she now calls The Book in front of Martha. Any chance of working on this?

Martha glances at it. We'll look at it later. She turns her back and walks away.

Diane places it back on the buffet and sighs. Diane the student. Martha the educator. What happened to the dream of talking as equals? Each empowered in their own field?

I'm going for a quick walk, Diane calls.

But it will be dark soon.

I'm not going far.

Ron. Go with her.

It's just a stroll up to the end of the road. I'll only be ten minutes.

When Martha has finished with them, Diane and Ron look ready for an African safari. Long-sleeved shirts, hiking sticks, whistles in case they get lost. Martha has already insisted they wear their hiking boots. Diane has a survival pack on her back containing a flask of water and tourniquet in case of snakebite.

All we need is a cut lunch, Ron mutters. Martha hands him a torch.

It's still sunny.

It gets dark quickly in the desert. She gives Diane an extra stick to ward off rattlesnakes.

Be careful of the musk hogs. They often feed under the large juniper tree at evening.

Rugged up and armed, they set out for their ten minutes of freedom. Ron stomps down the dusty drive, muttering, I'm not going to last two weeks.

Later, Diane sighs as she takes off her boots. Am I doing anything wrong?

Ron shrugs. Suggests that maybe house guests are too much for Martha at her age.
There had been no hint of friction in Martha's letters. In retrospect your letters to each other were only ever filled with stories of everyday life, funny incidents, amusing anecdotes, never anything personal. No grief or despair. It took you hours to write to Martha. Labouring over sentence structure, correct spelling, and ensuring the content safe to be read aloud to the Cochise County Writing Group.

They love your letters, Martha said in one of hers. You cringed at the thought of your letters as performance pieces. Knowing there was an audience made you change the way you wrote. You got quite carried away and added and subtracted. Made sure each story had a beginning, a middle and an end. Began using metaphors and wrote about constellations of daisies, and described baby plovers as cotton wool balls on toothpicks scampering along the beach.

Before posting you re-read every word, changed anything too personal, aware that your words were being shared with others. Bright and breezy is your definition of what you wrote, but a later letter from Martha revealed it was pride in the writing that made her share selected sections with her friends. You would never have thought to read Martha’s letters out loud. Not even to Ron. So you swapped recipes, travel stories, shared the odd hope and dream, applauded successes and only rarely revealed anything emotional or controversial.

Martha paces the floor.

I'm glad I left Santa Fe. Can't stand the place. Too many Americans. She pushes her hands deep into the pockets of her jacket.

They keep building tacky houses and creating ghettos of concentrated charm. Can you understand people who move to the desert and plant a lawn? Why don't they leave their goddamn city culture behind? She stares at Diane, daring her to disagree.

Martha is angry at the world. Angry at her loss of status, that Barb has tied up all her money and controls everything she does. The don't do that, don't buy that, is
transferred to Diane. Martha constantly tells her what to do, where to sit, try this, put that there, close that, lock this.

Diane walks away. It is a small distance from the back door to the low rock wall by the side of the house. Yet it is a world apart. Doves coo, finches scratch and flutter. She gazes at the mountains.
Diane waits patiently while Martha backs the Rav Four out of the garage.

Get in, Diane, I'm taking you to the Desert Museum. Despite a cushion, Martha can barely see above the steering wheel.

As they drive down to Cave Creek Road, Diane clutches the seat, hoping Martha will not pick up her nervousness. A tiny gold elephant on a chain swings backwards and forwards, hypnotising Diane. The sun flares through the windscreen, and she relaxes in spite of herself.

Where is my goddamn sunshade? Martha drives one handed and bends down to look in the side pocket. The car drifts to the wrong side of the road. Diane's stomach lurches. Hoping her intake of breath isn't too loud, she resists the urge to grab the steering wheel.

Careful, Martha.

Martha doesn't answer. Finding the shade, she drops it onto her lap, pulling the car back on course. Diane sighs with relief, until Martha, using both hands, pulls down the sun visor. The car drifts again.

Last year, Ron hit our letterbox when he was looking for his sunglasses.

Martha pulls up in front of the museum. Looking around the deserted car park, she says, Can't see any mailboxes here.

The museum is a large PVC weatherboard clad building on the edge of the road to Rodeo. It shimmers in the afternoon heat, the only building for miles in the treeless desert.

Mike's a wonderful young man. I helped him organise an exhibition of our groundbreaking research. Martha pushes open the large, wooden door and points to a glass display cabinet featuring reptiles.

She introduces Diane as 'my friend from Australia' and proceeds to talk to Mike about famous people and exotic places. When Martha over-emphasises her role in Chuck's desert expeditions, Diane shifts from one foot to the other. Looks at the ground.

Come into the back, Martha, Mike says. I have a rare Micruroides euryxanthus you'll be interested in.

He leads the way until they stand in front of glass case containing a brightly coloured coiled snake. Martha leans forward, gushing like a mother seeing her newborn for the first time.
He's exquisite. She peers through the glass. Motions for Diane to come closer.

See the unique red and yellow coral bands. She smiles and chants. *Red bands next to yellow, harmful fellow.* Have you taken pictures, Diane? You'll want to share this with Ron.

Back in the museum shop, Martha still glows with pleasure. Turning away from her animated conversation, on the pretext of admiring a collection of turquoise Indian jewellery, Diane works her way over to a stack of souvenir clothing. Placing both hands inside the bottom of a XX2 ochre t-shirt she stretches it. Perfect for Ron's ample frame, but she can't imagine him displaying a snake, crawling out the eye socket of the skull of a longhorn steer, at the coffee shop in Kubunji Beach. Maybe a cap with 'Arizona Desert' emblazoned above the peak? Definitely a turquoise necklace for Kerry. Diane glimpses herself in the mirror on the sunglasses stand. Are the multiple silver chains with tiny charms looped around her neck and matching silver bracelets a bit over the top? The younger university students assure her they are trendy.

Martha prattles on about desert critters, reptilian breeding habits, snakes, and Chuck's pioneering herpetology research. Work done thirty years ago. Martha a widow of eight years, yet still playing the part of the famous man's wife. Still wanting to be important.

Mike stands first on one foot and then the other, his hands busy tidying the counter. He turns a yawn into a cough, covering his mouth with his hand.

Diane keeps her distance, as Martha, in a loud voice, recites scientific names an average person needs a dictionary to understand. What happened to the woman who inspired her for so many years? Has Martha always been an elitist, using language to bolster her self esteem? How could Diane not have seen this? She stares at the diminutive figure and feels numb. The striving to emulate Martha has gone. She has fallen off the pedestal. Martha thinks The Book is her biography and it is already turning into an unrealistic hymn of praise. Martha wants it to be true. But true to what?

* * *
I carefully place my coffee mug onto a coaster and pick up the draft of the biography. Settling into my chair, I scrutinize the scrawls, circles and connecting arrows of Diane's outline. Trying to take it in, I gaze out the window. This is my life, recorded, preserved. I smile. Something tangible to prove to Barb that I didn't always live in the shadow of her father.

I twist my neck from side to side to release pressure building at the base of my skull. What have I achieved? Most of my life was spent supporting Chuck. There is always my poetry and limericks, but are they good enough to be forever preserved in the pages of a book? Fear knots in the pit of my stomach.

A jack rabbit hops into the clearing, distracting me. It cleans its whiskers and wiggles its ears, which delights me, makes me feel at one with the land and its creatures. The beauty of the place must be included in the biography.

I flick through page after page of prose. My photographs will put some life into it, but how to decide from the albums lining the shelves in the study at Santa Fe? All represent a special time and place in my life. I look again at the sketched outline, but cannot see where Diane has indicated which pages the photographs will go. And what about my friends? How will Diane fit it all in? I press my fingers hard into the back of my neck and wince. What about Merril?
Propped on the side of the bed, Diane ties tight the laces of her hiking boots. Martha would not approve of sloppy laces on the walk to the library. Diane can't risk another black mark, yet another part of her wants to let the laces flop. And to hell with it.

You go, Ron says. Don't worry about me.

Diane waits for the gulp guaranteed to make her feel guilty. His crestfallen look says abandoned. Unloved. Without a television to veg in front of, Ron is lost. Martha's television is being repaired.

Diane points to the bookcase. There's a huge selection to choose from.

Read a book?

She should have known better. This is the man who cringes when he sees her emerge from her study with A4 paper in her hand

You're not going to read it to me are you? His usual response. She had long learnt to keep her studies separate from everyday life.

Giving him a quick hug, she strides into the kitchen. Martha, in Gore-Tex safari outfit, complete with boots and peaked cap, leans on two hiking sticks. She surveys Diane's footwear and nods approval. What is it with Martha and good boots?

Handing over a spare backpack, Martha hunches her own into a more comfortable position on her bent spine. Diane wants to shoulder it for her. The determined stride tells her not to try.

Humidity hits them like a sloppy tongue, and already Martha mops her neck with a kerchief. Diane stops, sniffs the air, revels in the smell of dry grasses carried on a hair-ruffling breeze. Listens to the soft sounds of desert creatures: a rustling of lizards, chirping birds, and the faint cry of an eagle, soaring high over mountain tors. So different from barking dogs and slamming car doors back home.

Crunching on gravel, they hike down the dirt driveway to the main road. Martha sets a cracking pace, breathing in and of her mouth in gusty breaths in time to her steps. Diane's long legs a definite advantage. They smell the garbage collection point before they see it.

A dollar a trash bag, Martha gloats. How cheap is that?

Two small wood buildings, flanked by Ocotillo cactus, huddle close to ancient ash trees. American flags flutter patriotically from their roofs, the whitewashed library and Portal Post Office ooze decaying pride. Originally a school, but the young people have long gone. Portal reminds Diane of the retirement village, only here the houses
are spread out, hidden within the vegetation and away from prying eyes. Martha
checks her post office box before mounting wooden steps leading into the cool
recesses of the library.

Ginny, the librarian, hurries over and takes Martha's backpack. As wide as
she is long, her eyes sparkle when she grabs Diane's hand. Shaking it heartily,
Indian beads dance on the t-shirt with the message: Behind every great man is a
woman rolling her eyes.

Diane is once again an Australian friend. Martha hurries over to her favourite
Classics shelf to search for Catcher in the Rye. Diane, browsing for books discovers
the library's public computer. She asks Ginny for the internet password and begins
typing.

There you are. Martha drops the book on the desk beside the keyboard. I've
been looking everywhere for you.

Emails, Diane says, beaming. I haven't been near a computer for a week, and
they're stacked a mile high.

Martha glances at the screen, before hurrying off to ask Ginny about a book
by Alice Brown.

Diane looks in dismay at the list of unattended mail: coursework to download,
deadlines for her Lakeside and Postgrad Writers Groups, friends wanting to catch up
and innumerable communal internet jokes. She vows to remove her email address
from all joke lists, but doesn't want to hurt her friends. It is their way of keeping in
touch. Better to delete them unread, although sometimes she is tempted to play a
potentially funny video clip.

Martha stands behind her. Several books in her arms.

Ready?

In a minute.

We need to get back.

Won't be long, Diane says, tapping furiously on the keyboard.

* * *
The blonde head bent over the keyboard, the intense face totally focused on the task in hand, oblivious of me. Just like Merril. I'd stand by the window of our New York apartment, searching for her brassy, orange halo bobbing in a sea of brown, striding up the hill. I'd grab a book, drop into my armchair, pretend to be reading, but every sense tuned to the sound of the key in the lock.

How was your day? I held my breath, knowing I could be greeted with either a smile and bright chatter, or a grunt and shaking plaster when her bedroom door slammed and the bolt shot home.

Night after night I woke and saw the light shining under the door, her constant raids on the refrigerator our only contact. Finally, she would emerge with red-rimmed eyes and blink as if seeing me for the first time. She never allowed me to read her long stories or completed novels, but sometimes I would sneak a peek. It helped me understand the wild swirls of paint erupting on her art class canvas. Ferocious fire and black despair in abstract confusion.

I always knew when things were not right with Merril. The locked bedroom door and the same tape over and over again. *The sun has drowned in a deathly sea.* Lyrics of misery and hopelessness. Lost in her own world for days, only to emerge to hurt and destroy.

My mind races back over the years. Lesbian? It explains the crew cut hair and denim overalls. Lack of male friends.

She would never tell us. What would her father say? He wanted her genes to perpetuate his dynasty. Brilliant grandchildren to succeed and excel. How Chuck revelled in the accolades, the incredibly high marks, the flashes of academic brilliance. He consistently ignored Merril's weird behaviour.

I try to understand her. Read every book I can about mental disorders. *You Never Promised Me a Rose Garden* the closest I come to understanding her. Schizophrenic? Maybe. Manic depressive? Certainly. Everytime I suggested a specialist, she'd say, There's nothing wrong with me. Go see him yourself. Barb knew to keep out of her way. Wounded too many times.

Maybe if I'd handled it better. Maybe...No. I shake my head to clear it of memories. Feel the anger rising. I did the best I could at the time. Made my choices. Now, I will live with them.
I dump the books into my backpack, wave goodbye to Ginny and march outside.

* * *
Hurry up, taxi's here. Ron drags his suitcase to the front door.

In the bedroom, Diane folds the last t-shirt and places it into the suitcase on the bed. Why is it so hard to pack everything back into a case at the end of a trip? She hadn't bought much, but the case is overflowing. Martha hurries into the room with several shirts and a pair of pants, tags dangling, draped over her arm. She hands them to Diane.

They should fit.

Diane recognises expensive Gore-Tex clothing. The same brand as Martha wears on her trips to Africa. Always silently admired by Diane, but far beyond her budget.

That's lovely of you, Martha. But I can't take them. She indicates her brimming case.

Surely, you can fit them in. They pack down to nothing. She places the clothes on top of the pile.

I appreciate the thought, but... Diane puts the clothes back onto the bed.

Martha grabs the pants.

The legs zip off, she says and demonstrates. Holding up shorts, she twists them to and fro. Suitcase wheels click clack past the bedroom door. A car door slams. Diane grabs the shorts and throws them into the case. Martha stuffs the two severed pants legs into a small gap between some undies and sandals.

And the shirts have vents under the arms. Martha shoves them into Diane's hands. Wonderful for hiking.

They are amazing, but—

No buts. Put them in.

Diane hesitates. The taxi horn honks. She shoves the clothes inside, leans heavily on the lid and, with difficulty, zips the case secure. She'll worry about it being overweight when she gets to the airport.

Ron's head appears in the doorway. Get a move on, he says before striding back down the hall.

Diane envelopes Martha in a hug. Feels the brittle bones. I can't thank you enough—

Wait. Martha's hand grips her arm. Diane glances at the door expecting to see Ron's anxious face. She doesn't want him to have another heart attack.

What is it? She grabs the case.

Martha's nails dig deep into her skin. There's something I have to tell you.
Diane stops. Martha's face tells her something is wrong.
Merril is...She hesitates.
What about Merril?
She...Isn't in Alaska.
Diane straightens, rests the case back on the bed and waits to hear what
comes next.
Martha stares at her, trying to find the right words. Finally, she blurts out,
She's dead.
Diane shivers and, instinctively, her hand goes to the hollow in her chest just
above her heart, and she drops onto the bed. When?
The fourteenth of April. Martha bows her head.
Oh, Martha. How terrible. How on earth have you managed to cope with this?
Diane leans forward to embrace her friend, but Martha holds up her hand.
You don't understand. The fourteenth of April—1974.
Outside, footsteps on gravel. Muffled voices. Ron's voice in casual conversation with
the taxi driver.
Before we met? The marriage? The new business? Martha doesn't answer.
Why didn't you tell me?
I meant to.
Diane shakes her head, You let me believe...
Martha looks pleadingly at Diane. In my letters, I still had Merril.
Diane faces her. But all these years.
I'm so sorry.
Diane's voice catches. Was anything you wrote true? What else did you lie
about?
You didn't always tell the truth, Martha snaps back.
Diane heaves the case off the bed. Stretched it maybe, but I never lied.
I'm sorry, Diane. It just happened. And once I'd started—
I feel such a fool. I trusted you.
The taxi horn honks twice. Ron hurries in, his face flushed. Mopping beads of
perspiration off his forehead with a handkerchief, he grabs the case out of Diane's
hand and starts towards the door.
Come on, you two, he says impatiently. Taxi's waiting.
At Kubunji Beach, Diane glances up from rinsing dishes in the double sink and stares at the picture-filled corkboard. How many times has she done this in the past, always with a sense of escape, a sense of adventure? Mentally joining Martha riding an elephant through tall African grass, hiking Coyote Trail, dancing at an Indian Pueblo, munching crusty corn bread. But it is more than that. There are other photos. Martha and her reading side by side, standing in front of a chilli-framed doorway, arms around each other's waist. Amigos. How much of it is real?

She slowly removes the photos from the board and drops them into the rubbish bin. Ron scowls his disapproval.

The old girl's in her eighties.

So?

Imagine carrying that grief for all those years. I think you're over-reacting.

For twenty-five years I believed her lies.

Ron crosses his arms. Is that so bad?

I told everyone about Merril living in Alaska. About her husband, their life, the falling out with Martha. Diane draws indignation around her.

In the book, I have Martha with two daughters. I've workshopped sections at the writers' group—

Ron gathers Diane in his arms. She pulls away.

She was the one insisting on facts. For it to be true. Now, she's made me a liar too.
I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Diane, but her death was too raw. I couldn't say I only had one daughter when I'd had two. Letting you believe she was still alive helped keep her alive for me. Let me imagine what her life might have been like if she had lived. Put yourself in my place. What if it had been Kerry? What would you have done? Please write.

I reach for the envelope. Will she open my letter, or toss it in the trash can? She hasn't answered the last five, or returned my calls. I check the contents of my post office box hoping to see her handwriting below colourful, Australian stamps. Ginny keeps asking after her.

    I miss her letters, full of fun and domestic details. Of sunshine when there is ice on the ground. Of soft-footed kangaroos when a dying jack rabbit screams.

* * *
Diane sighs as she flicks through the mail. Nothing different. Just the usual advertising leaflets for carpet cleaning, and real estate agents offering to sell their house. Glancing out the window at clouds reflected in blue water and three pelicans waddling along the beach, she screws up the leaflet. Throws it in the bin. She sighs at a letter from Red Energy, obviously a bill, and one from Civic Compliance. Either Ron or her caught by a speed camera. Probably her. Life is hectic lately. She always seems to be preparing lessons for her creative writing students, racing to Sandston University, or the shops, or Ron's doctor's appointments. He keeps telling her to slow down. Telling her she is a lead foot.

At the bottom of the pile is a familiar striped Par Avion aerogram with American stamps. It tugs at her heart. She's no longer angry, or upset. It's just that some unspoken bond of trust has been broken, and she doesn't have the same joy or interest in reading about Portal any more. Martha's last three letters all the same. How the lie kept the dream alive.

Diane glances at the cork noticeboard. Alongside a newspaper clipping featuring Elizabeth Jolley in her grey cardigan, there is one photo of Martha. The strong face is pensive, arms folded on her lap.

What would she have done if, heaven forbid, Kerry had died? Diane shudders. To lose a child is unimaginable grief. But to be part of a lie for twenty-five years? She feels a fool. How easily deceived. Never questioning, believing everything Martha told her was fact.

Even with The Book. She argued with Martha, fought tooth and nail to be able to use her imagination. Call it fiction. Martha insisting that every minute factual detail be recorded. What a laugh, when all the time, she was living a lie. From now on, Diane will allow her imagination to fill the gaps. It will no longer be Martha's story, or hers. For so long she has dithered between fact and fiction, not knowing the boundaries, trying to balance between a hymn of praise to Martha and a genuine warts-and-all account of their long friendship. Hopefully now, it will reach beyond auto/biography and become a story about women's lived experiences. Moving into fiction will give her a creative freedom she has never had before.

She'll send a bright and breezy postcard from the conference in Sydney. She won't have time to write a letter. Texting and emails has made long letters a thing of the past. Diane opens her laptop, signs in and checks her emails.
To: "Diane Simpson <dsimpson@yahoo.com.au>
Subject: Premier's Awards

Dear Diane Simpson,

I am delighted to inform you that your manuscript, Valerie G, has been shortlisted in the Victoria Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript. The...

She reads the email several times, before dissolving into tears of joy. Her mother's story finally accepted.

Diane glances at the cork board. Elizabeth Jolley, first-time author at fifty-five. What would she think of Diane? I'm older and don't own a grey cardigan, Diane whispers. Elizabeth smiles down in a whimsical way.

You've got mail, Ron calls, throwing a stack of letters on the table.

Diane reads the invitation and shivers with delight. Ron sips coffee, black and strong.

Any tea cake left?

She shakes her head.

Come with me? She shows him the invitation. He raises his eyebrows and rattles the sweet biscuit tin.

It's the Premier's Literary Awards presentation night.

His eyebrows lift higher. Are you serious, he says.

She nods.

Shaking his head, he opens the newspaper. Not my scene.

Diane sighs, but doesn't give up and appeals to his addiction to movies.

It's the academy awards of the literary world. He doesn't look up. And dinner is included.

He laughs. You're not getting me into a monkey suit.

Diane raids her wardrobe and drags out the peacock blue, pure silk jacket she had made for Kerry's wedding. It still looks great on her, even over her t-shirt and jeans. It will be perfect over black slacks and top. The matching scarf and bag the finishing
touches. Finding a padded hanger, she hangs the jacket on the bedroom doorknob, stands back and looks at it. It's still fashionable, and will certainly save a fortune. But this is her big moment. She will be mixing with interesting, influential people. Without a partner beside her, she will need to feel confident. At least look like an author, whatever that means. She runs downstairs, grabs her purse, drives to Southland Shopping Centre and buys a stunning black-and-green flowing jacket. To hell with the cost. She will sashay into that room and enjoy every minute.

The train rattles into Flinders Street Station. Diane joins the throng of Saturday night revelers. Gaggles of shrill girls in skimpy dresses totter on outrageously high heels down crowded streets. They remind her of plovers strutting the beach, calling their mates.

Trams clatter past, but tonight, Diane hails a taxi.

The Sofitel. With a grin she settles back in the seat.

The taxi sweeps into the forecourt of bud-lit potted palms, glitz and glamour. A doorman swings open the door and, in true Hollywood style, Diane alights one foot at a time. Feeling like Scarlett O'Hara, she sweeps up the staircase and into the atrium. If only Rhett Butler was beside her.

She is early, but deliberately so. She wants to savour this special occasion. To see and even meet the Crème De La Crème of her literary world. Helen Garner, Brian Castro, Andrea Goldsmith, Tim Winton, to name a few. To have her name on the same program is a dream come true.

Dinner is served, cutlery clinks, expensive wines flow and the awards begin. First the keynote speaker, then The Vance Palmer Prize, Alfred Deakin Prize until finally,


Diane crosses her fingers. The envelope is opened. She holds her breath.

And the winner is...

Diane remains optimistic and is happy to have made it this far. To be shortlisted validates her as a writer and might tempt a publisher to take a punt on *Valerie G*. She makes a vow: The day a publisher accepts her manuscript, she will give up hairdressing. She just wants a book to hold.
5:00 a.m. I hit the alarm button on the silver clock before my ears are blasted. Why do I set it? Eighty-six years of rising at five a habit. The sun forces heat through the crack between sill and open pane. It is hot, but not too hot. Not yet. By late afternoon, stucco-adobe walls and Madonna blue gates weather and crack. An owl, winging home, screeches to its mate, wind rustles sun-baked grass, and there is the familiar chuk, chuk, chuk whaaas of a covey of quails. Throwing back the sheet, I sit on the side of the bed and blow a kiss to Ndume, my silverback gorilla, his image forever captured and framed. His wise eyes penetrate my soul. Two antiques, bound together by fate after a chance meeting in Rwanda. Is he dead now? Murdered by poachers?

I spread a thick Indian rug on the terracotta floor. Half an hour of exercise always puts me into a positive frame of mind. What other eighty-six year old can do twenty back rolls, twenty sit-ups and twenty full-body push-ups...at least ten on their fingers? I may be short and fubsy, but even Diane thinks I’m a fit old girl.

The coffee percolator burps. Outside the kitchen window, pesky musk hogs grunt and snuffle under a mesquite bush, searching for tender roots before the Arizona sun dries them crisp. Chuck’s wristwatch tells me to hurry. Pete will be waiting. I grab my peaked cap and hiking sticks then step out into the heat and dust of another desert day. My Chiricahua Mountains glow in the distance, shadows quickly recede from the tors. The crossroad is empty, and I sit on a boulder until I see Pete’s lumbering, Texas-born frame.

Sorry to be late, he says, pointing to his left sneaker. Goddamn sore toe.

We stroll down Cave Creek road and chat about Barb and the two dogs, Santa Fe, our grandchildren and the latest developments at the Portal Research Station. An ancient juniper tree marks our mutual limit. I pat its rough bark before turning for home.

The phone rings. I leave Cheerios crackling in milk. Pete’s voice is urgent. Put on your TV.

Why?

Just turn it on. We’ll talk later. The phone dies.

I’m transfixed. New York’s twin towers spew smoke. The commentator’s high-pitched voice sputters in the background. Plane hits. Thousands dead. Flames lick a black slit near the top of the north tower, papers flutter from broken windows, smoke
mushrooms into the sky, helicopters circle like desperate bees watching the destruction of their hive.

This is New York. My home for over thirty years. I feel I know the people who work in those towers. Eight forty-five in the morning most are at their desk, sipping coffee or gathered by the water cooler. Talking about their children, office scandals and the photocopier that doesn’t work. Goddamnit, Mo has his office near there.

How did two planes end up wedged into the side of those towers on the tip of Manhattan? The TV spits out statistics. How many people have died? The guessing continues. Four thousand, maybe five? Commentators grab scraps of news. Try to make sense of the unimaginable.

The south tower caves in. The second tower crumples. A thick, choking grey dust cloud billows up Liberty Street, enveloping people as they run. A deliberate, planned attack. Terrorists. The word chills me to the bone. Al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden. Bush has a lot to answer for. I know the history.

The image plays over and over again from every possible angle. A black-suited figure nosedives head first from the north tower. In mid-flight, he twists, sits, rolls and plummets one hundred stories, destined to repeat it a thousand times on TV. I walk away, as the barp barp of fire engines, whistles, screams and loud exclamations spill into my sitting room. If only I could turn back the clock to five a.m. Back to the screech of an owl.

The pall of shock and disbelief enveloping New York spreads around the world. I punch the ‘off’ button. Blessed silence fills the room. Outside everything is the same. The mountain tors glow gold against a deep blue sky. What would the last Chiricahua Apache think of this catastrophe? Every day, proud Purple Plume, wrapped in his blanket stood on the highest tor, hand sheltering aged eyes gazing across his vast land. A warrior. A survivor of tribal battles and conflict with white settlers over scarce resources and the ownership of land. Personal battles, man to man. You knew your enemy.

I brush away tears with the back of my hand. President Bush and his inane policies. There’s so much machismo going on in the world. When I tip out soggy Cheerios, my hand shakes.

Outside, the sun shines. Nature’s cycle continues. Birds sing, rattlesnakes curl in the shade and the ditch is dry. I wipe my eyes. Nothing will be the same
again. I glance at the clock. 9:30 a.m. Sixteen hours ahead, Diane is asleep, unaware that the world we know has changed forever. Lucky her. The ramifications of this tragedy will soon hit Australia’s shores.

* * *
10:30 p.m. Diane folds the last of the ironing and glances at the TV. John Wayne lumbers across the screen, both barrels blazing. True Grit. Ron is stretched out on the couch, remote control in hand, watching a cowhand beg for mercy.

Coming to bed?

In a minute. This is the big shoot out. Ron pats the seat beside him. Diane has seen this movie countless times. Can almost quote it word for word. What is the fascination with the American Wild West? Countless ‘classic movies’ have emerged from the era of gunslingers, bandits and Indian wars and taciturn, dangerous men. Diane flops onto the couch and rests aching legs on the ottoman. Tom Chaney tips back his Stetson, hand hovering over his gun. John Wayne’s lip curls. He rocks on the balls of his feet. Diane slowly mutters, You better believe it, pilgrim.

Ron laughs and rubs the nape of her neck. Tired?

She nods. The video credits scroll down the screen. Ron flicks to channel nine. There might be some late night news.

Dear Martha, I tried to get through, but the switchboard was jammed.
I know you are safe in Portal, but I...

Diane pours coffee from the percolator into an extra large mug: the one with the Christmas tree design. Wrapping a woolly dressing gown close, she steps out into the cold, early morning air. Rainclouds smother roofs. No hope of a glorious sunrise painting the sky pink today. She has a close connection with America and its people. It began long before she met Martha with family tales of World War Two. Stories of her dad driving trucks loaded with medical supplies and food to American army bases all over Victoria.

Her mum, sleeves rolled to her elbows, baked dozens of scones to fill hungry bellies. The next-door neighbour's three teenage daughters appreciated gifts of nylon stockings as 'scarce as hen’s teeth'. Mary, the gorgeous one with big blue eyes, received more than her fair share and ran a licked finger up a back seam to check it was straight.

Photos in the family album of gum-chewing, brash young men with cheeky grins and knife-pleated caps. Australian and American sailors travelling from Melbourne to Crib Point, relaxing at her parent's rambling old house beside the Stony Point train line. A perfect halfway point to 'sleep it off' overnight, even if it was beside the fishpond, after a night 'on the town'.
A photo of Navajo Steve playing cricket in the backyard. Where is he now? Later, Martha’s letters revealed a hidden world of literature, and Purple Plume’s Chiricahau Mountains towering over a hamlet called Portal.

A finger of sunlight pokes beneath lifting clouds. Plovers call. It has been a long night. Many times today, she will see the twin towers fall. A gentle breeze rustles palm leaves and boats bob beside jetties. The early morning light catches the gold and silver necklace around her neck. Instinctively, Diane strokes the strands.

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All I see on television are images of tortured metal, and emotional eyewitness accounts clog the airways. I can't turn on the television without hearing the *Star Spangled Banner* or *God Bless America* sung, played or strummed. I cringe at a photo of a fire fighter placing an American flag on a pile of rubble in a deliberate replication of the famous flag-raising on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. Is our nation gearing up for war? My pen skims across the page, the writing ragged. I don't care.

*Diane, the more this goes on, the more I worry and the more anti-organised religion I become. I am patriotic, but I don't want to see 'God Bless America' emblazoned on billboards at every corner or stamped on my drugstore receipts. There is an excess of flag waving. It reminds me of Samuel Johnson's observation, 'Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels'. I also fear we will not be able to make critical remarks about the government or the president without becoming suspect. Bush is an idiot with foreign policies to match. Will I be incarcerated for chanting this limerick? Mr. Bush is not just a wimp. With policies starting to limp. He is also an ass. Who is so full of gas, He could fill and manoeuvre a blimp.

We can't reason with such fanatics. One woman, here in Portal, wrote a letter to the paper saying what she thought should be done if we capture Osama bin Laden. “Bring him to the U.S.A. to have a sex change operation and send him back to the Taliban to live as a woman.” Fitting punishment, don't you think?

I read through the letter, putting a comma here, full stop there, then scrunch it into a ball and throw it in the trash can.

* * *
Pigeons flutter to coo and peck at Diane’s feet. She shakes the last muffin crumbs out of the paper bag and looks at her watch. Five minutes before the bus arrives. Five minutes to bask in spring sunshine before making her way to Sandston University. She coughs, blows her nose, but nothing will clear her nasal passages of petrol fumes from the continuous ebb and flow of cars around her bus stop island in front of the supermarket car park.

The twelve forty-five Warrigal Road bus hits the kerb when it pulls into Mordialloc. Diane groans. Cowboy is at the wheel. No hope of writing during the trip today. It is not just his distinctive cowboy hat, or the way he twirls his mobile phone and ‘holsters’ it in his side pocket, but the way he tailgates and bullies the cars in front, and pulls back on the steering wheel when forced to stop. Passengers barely have a foot on solid ground before he lurches off, bumps over the kerb to force his way into the stream of traffic. Regulars know to hang on tight when he is at the wheel.

Diane grabs her satchel and jumps clear of the door. She must not be late for supervision with Jason Walder. She calls him Mr. Do-able. His students huddle around, and he convinces them that anything is possible. He is considered the highly motivational ‘football’ coach of the creative writing world and he has agreed to read her manuscript.

The traffic lights turn green. Across the busy intersection, the main entrance to Sandston University is roped with blue-and-white-checked crime scene tape. Hoses snake across wet concrete looking for prey. Fire personnel drench white-hooded, space-suited rescue workers, standing legs apart, arms outstretched. Police cars block the side road, blue lights flash. Diane pulls up the collar of her jacket and hurries to join the students sheltering from the cold wind in the heated comfort of McDonalds. Threading her way to the counter, she orders a Mc-latte.

What on earth’s happened? she asks the trainee, who flicks a stray strand of lank hair out of her eyes.

Anthrax, she replies. Do you want fries with that?

Juggling her polystyrene-cupped latte, Diane pushes through the crowd, trying to find a seat. A youth stands. She smiles her thanks and sinks onto the stool. There are some advantages to being a mature aged student. You are often mistaken for a lecturer. It is inconceivable to some students that anyone with wrinkles would
study, just for the love of it. The door opens and a blast of cold air chills the room. A
collective whisper runs through the crowd.

False alarm, the student next to her says. Talcum powder in the envelope. His
smile stretches from ear to ear. The creative writing building is closed for today.
Diane is disappointed to miss her appointment with Mr. Do-able, but as Martha
would say, there is always an unseen benefit. Cowboy is not driving the bus on the
hour-long trip home.
The paper crown on my head tips over one eye. Junella quickly straightens it.

Smile. Junella points the camera. Flash, flash. Hold it. I plant the smile back on my face. Flash, flash. Blanche lights the candles on a large sponge cake. I'm afraid the icing will melt. The Cochise writers gather around me and lustily sing. All this fuss over being ninety. What's the big deal about living that long?

It's very strange, Diane. I'm not morbid, but I think often of death. And oddly, it's because I feel good. When I was angry and depressed in Santa Fe, I found myself wishing to die and get out of life. But here, where I am happy and want to live, which I frequently consider a selfish wish, I do think of death.

At this very moment, I think I know why. Because I am healthy, I find myself making, in my mind, ridiculous plans. I hear of trips going to some great place in five years and want to sign up. Then, reality sets in. I may not be alive then. Quite true. That's why I think of death, and it doesn't scare me at all. Like everyone (who does think of it) I hope for a quick and easy one. An assisted one, if necessary.

I am amazed at the number of people who don't want to talk about it, or make plans. I know I'm not as strong or agile as I used to be and, yes, there are always accidents. I'm aware of the need to pay attention to driving or moving about the house, but my mind does wander and, fortunately, considering the world's population, no one can live forever. Now that's a happy thought.

I can't get out of the habit of writing to Diane, so I'm writing letters to her in my diary. It saves land-fill.

The colourful postcard of Sydney Harbour Bridge arrives in my mailbox. Brief, chatty words in Diane's familiar handwriting, bridging the gap between us.
Ginny sits beside me in front of the library's computer. I peer at the screen. A small black mark flashes. Ginny nods, and I begin to type,

Dear Diane, Maybe I should call you dsimpson@yahoo? Kind Ginny has set up this email account for me at the library, but I still don't know what I am doing

* * *

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Diane breathes a sigh of relief. It is so much easier to communicate with Martha this way. She has to admire the effort. Quite an achievement for a ninety year old. Martha can't grasp how to create a new email, but at least she can click the reply button and send an answer.

To: "Martha Jackson <libportal@yahoo.com>
Subject: Amazing

Dear Martha,

You are amazing. I couldn't believe the email was from you. I'm so pleased Ginny is there to help. Emails are a great way to keep in touch.

Diane finishes the email and clicks send. Rubbing aching shoulders, she sighs. Enough emails for today.

You feel guilty when Martha asks for a newsy, handwritten letter, but there just isn't time. You forward the odd internet jokes and pages of literary fun that argue that English speakers are verbally insane. Strange plays on words, such as, we recite at a play, and play at a recital. Ship by truck, and send cargo by ship. You flick them off to Martha, who shares them with her writing group friends. You seldom lick a stamp these days, but you constantly email. How easy it is to send quick snippets of news, and stay in touch.

Coming to bed? Ron calls. It's past eleven.

Diane has just one more email to open before she can call it a day.
To: Diane Simpson <dsimpson@yahoo.com.au>
Subject: Valerie G

Dear Diane Simpson,
I am delighted to inform you that your manuscript, Valerie G, has won the Winton Press International Fiction Quest.

Winton Press
12 Duberry Lane
Victoria, Australia

* * *
Diane can't stop smiling. The Melbourne Writers' Festival is in full swing and the marquee at the old Sugar House buzzes with excitement. Winton Press have placed posters featuring the launch of Valerie G in prominent places. Diane weighs the book in her hands, admires the cover. She hugs her mother's story tight. Revels in the feeling of having stepped over some obscure literary line. She is not a J.K. Rowling. This will not be another Harry Potter success story, but the glow of satisfaction and joy is indescribable.

Sitting beside her university supervisor, who will introduce her as The Author, Diane’s knees shake. Every chair is taken, but they are people she knows: family, friends, the Lakeside Writers' Group, postgraduate group and many others. With so many supportive familiar faces, all fear of public speaking falls away. These people are here because they care. She blesses them all and wishes Martha sat in the front row. This journey began with her. She was the one who made Diane think, search for answers, look up words. The catalyst of this incredible journey.

Diane stands in front of the microphone and opens Valerie G.

* * *
Dear Diane, I'm sending you a real letter because yesterday, I nearly drove Ginny out of her mind. I tried three times to email you and lost it each time. How I wish I could be with you, but I'm with you in spirit and as proud of you as if you were my daughter instead of proxy daughter. 

Today was our writers' group meeting. They all asked after you and send you their heartiest congratulations. Halfway through the morning, Blanche asked us to write for fifteen minutes without lifting our pen. I wrote something stupid, for it's hard for me to write on command. I should have written about hugging a tree in Botswana and apologising to it because one of my kind had carved initials in its lovely skin. Still makes me furious to think about it. One gal, a new member, wrote an excellent piece. She is going to mail me a copy since she lives quite far out of town and doesn't come to the post office everyday as I do.

I'm still walking daily (6.a.m.) with Pete, but I limit the distance to just over a mile. Partly because of the beastly heat and also some arthritis. Today, Pete and I had to look out for traffic. Pete said if it gets any worse, he will have to move. I said "Where"?

Have you read any of Barbara Kingsolver's books? I hadn't, for some reason, but I took 'The Poisonwood Bible' out of the library and was so impressed by it that I've bought a paperback copy to send to you. Then I started on her earlier works. Gad, she is so talented.
At the Qantas boarding gate every seat is full. Cranky toddlers run endlessly up and down luggage-laden aisles, suck their thumbs or scream and struggle in their mother's arms.

Attention all passengers on Qantas 477 travelling from Melbourne, via Sydney to Los Angeles. Due to mechanical problems, your flight has been delayed.

A collective groan rises from the waiting crowd.

Diane glances at her watch. Three hours to fill. She strides over to the newspaper stand, glances at the titles of several books, ignoring the copies of Valerie G. Finally settling on We Need to Talk about Kevin, she makes her way to the counter, handing the shop assistant the exact change.

Have a nice day. The sales girl takes another look at Diane. Aren't you the author of...She points to the stack of featured novels. Diane nods.

I loved it, she says, placing Lionel Shriver's book into a plastic bag. Diane smiles her thanks, flips her long scarf over her shoulder and heads for the Qantas First Lounge.

The New York bookstore is filled to overflowing. People sit cross-legged on the floor. All clutch copies of Valerie G. Diane grabs both sides of the podium, prepared speech ready. So many hopeful faces. How many have novels stuffed in bottom drawers? They look at her with anticipation. She can see the thought: If she can do it, so can I.

Diane taps the microphone, adjusts the position and smiles. She imagines she is in the Eltham Regional Library talking to a group of friends.

Forgetting the formal speech, she talks about the passion of writing. Of jotting notes in an exercise book and the advantage of reading, and learning from other writers. How to smile and keep typing after the seventeenth rejection. The benefit of writing classes, writing groups and university courses. She shares how researching and writing the novel became a journey of self discovery. Emphasises the invaluable support of others. She talks about Martha.

Her watch shows she still has seven minutes left. They wait for her to continue. Deciding to recount an anecdote, she launches into the story of the time
she was in the middle of the editing process, tripped over a mat and broke her right wrist. She unconsciously rubs the spot.

In plaster up to her elbow, Diane paces the floor. The last chapter of the novel still unedited, the launch of Valerie G a month away, and she can't type. Kerry arrives, flowers in one hand and a box in the other.

Try this. Kerry holds up the box titled Dragon Naturally Speaking. It's a speech-activated computer program.

Two hours later, Diane sits in front of her computer, headphones clamped to her ears, the attached microphone curved in front of her mouth. An good imitation of a telephone switchboard operator. Or a performing rock star.

Just tell the computer what you want to type, Mum.

This is great, Diane says. Delight turns to amazement when 'This is great' magically types across the screen. She laughs.

HA,haaaa haaaaa, haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa appears.

She learns to voice punctuate by chanting. Full stop. Comma, Capital T. Scratch that. Bracket that, etc.

Diane relaxes in the chair, confident the novel will be ready in time.

But it was not all smooth sailing. There are problems. Once she told the program to type, 'Dulcie struggled to escape her restrictive culture'. Dragon printed 'Dulcie struggled to escape her restrictive cold chair'. And the time she dictated a letter to Martha, telling her how much she enjoyed being a guest speaker, concluding with, I had a 'terrific time in Yarrawonga'. Dragon printed that she'd had a 'horrific time in Rwanda'. After that, Kerry did most of the typing.

Encouraged by the swell of laughter, Diane waves a copy of her book above her head.

As you can see, Valerie G made the deadline.

In her room in the Hilton Hotel, Diane kicks off her shoes and sighs. It has been an exhausting week of author signing from Miami to Washington, New York and Boston. She checks her diary. Finally, the rat race is over. Time to head off for some R&R. Time to visit Martha.
Diane dodges slow-moving commuters and races past passengers using the moving boardwalk in the Albuquerque airport terminal. The wonky wheels on her pull along case click and clack. She glances at her watch. 1:00 p.m. Drawing a deep breath, she lets it go with a gusty sigh. A strong headwind from New York has resulted in an hour's delay. Barb will be waiting in the basement car park of the Grand Hotel.

It's cooler for the dogs, she said on the phone. Give me a ring as soon as you arrive.

Frantically pressing keys, Diane tries to use her mobile phone, but the international roaming hasn't worked since she arrived. When she finds a public phone, her haste makes the required coins nearly miss the slot. They clatter into the change receptacle underneath. She takes a deep breath. Surely Barb understands that airlines are often delayed.

Using quarters, rather than dimes and nickels, Diane tries a second, third and fourth time. She wants to kick the phone, pound it with her fist and shout, work, damn you, work, but to no avail. If she had taken the bus to Portal, she wouldn't be in this predicament. All she wants is five days on her own with Martha. For the first time in their lives, they can ignore family commitments, chat, laugh and share memories. They'll sit on the old church pew on the front porch, watching the sun set behind the mountains and laughing at squabbling pigeons scratching in the dust. But Barb had argued that the trip to Portal was too far, too difficult, and she had to see her mother anyway.

You see, Barb had said on the phone, if I take you, I can bring food down and do the cooking for you both. My mother essentially eats micro meals, which are very salty. In exchange for that, maybe I could go hiking for a few hours, while you keep an eye on the dogs.

And now, because of the blasted delay, Diane has to worry about the two dogs stuck in a hot car.

Her case clacks through the exit doors and a blast of heat adds to her rising panic. Are the dogs dehydrating? Oh well, she is in America and hot dogs are part of the scene. Diane smiles at the flippant thought, glad she is regaining her sense of
humour. It has been an exhausting day. A woman standing next to her talks on her mobile phone. When she finishes, Diane asks if she can use it to make a call.

   Where are you from? the woman asks.

   Australia. To forestall a lengthy conversation, Diane explains that Barb has already waited over an hour. When the woman hands over her phone, Diane nervously flicks back her hair and beams her thanks. What Martha said is true. People in New Mexico are a friendly bunch

The battered Nissan Pathfinder pulls into the arrivals bay. Barb's mouth is set in a firm line. The hug is brief. She grabs Diane's case and lifts up the back of the 4x4. It is crammed to the roof. Portable coolers at the bottom, bulging garbage bags overlaid with bedding. A fox terrier, asleep in a cage, opens one eye. Barb holds up a finger in warning. When she shoves Diane's case on top of the wire before slamming the door, he doesn't bark. Barb's top-dog status confirmed.

   Diane pushes a bottle of water and several bags to one side with her foot, then hoists herself into the passenger's seat.

   This reminds me of the time I met your mum in outback Australia. She tries to move the seat back. We had to pack everything but the kitchen sink. Are you staying a month?

   I always have to restock Moth-er's fridge. Barb stares at the twisted gold and silver strands of Diane's necklace. Her face hardens. And she hasn't enough bedding for you.

   Diane squirms in her seat. For the second time in ten minutes, she feels she has inconvenienced Barb.

   How is Martha?

   Moth-er is well, but very forgetful. I have to ring her daily, or she wouldn't cope.

   Diane expects changes in Martha's appearance and health, but her last email was clear and concise. Her current theme the environmental destruction of the planet, and she has George Bush firmly in her sights.

   I hope I'm as good at ninety-three, she replies.

   The seat is so far forward, Diane's chest is two inches from the dashboard. A bulky garbage bag behind her headrest threatens to tumble forward. Hopefully, Barb will not brake too hard. Something slimy drops onto Diane's shoulder. There is a
panting sound and a musty animal smell behind her left ear. She turns her head and looks directly into curious brown eyes. A kelpie cross, tongue lolling, sits on a cushion on top of a pile of bedding level with Diane's head. A long dribble of drool stretches to Diane’s shoulder. She moves closer to the passenger door.

After what seems an eternity, Barb speaks. Good trip? Without waiting for an answer, she grinds the gears, grips the wheel and they speed off over the overpass, through town then onto the Interstate Highway. Barb's face is taut, her knuckles white. She is leaner. Not one ounce of excess fat. Her face is more angular, as if the skin has been stretched tighter over the bones. Diane regrets the bars of chocolate responsible for her 'love handles', although Ron doesn't complain about the extra kilos. Barb's luxurious hair, gripped in an elastic band at the nape of her neck, hangs to her waist, swaying when she leans forward and looks from left to right. Well brushed and shiny, it must still be her pride and joy, even with the streaks of grey. Who does Barb take after? Definitely not Martha in stature or features. Barb has Chuck's height, but that's where the resemblance ends.

We'll stop at McDonalds. Barb grinds the gears. Give the dogs a break.

Diane dreams of a Big Mac with extra pickle. Leaving too early for the sumptuous breakfast at the Hilton she's only eaten an in-flight takeaway bowl of instant noodles.

I have vouchers for free thick shakes. Barb dives her hand into the side pocket of the car to produce two dockets. That should see us through.

A deep-throated growl followed by a sharp bark, makes Diane jump. Matilda, pricked ears turning like radar, has spotted grazing cattle. The dog barks at any moving animal, but cows are top of the list and require a more vocal warning.

She is so clever. Barb beams her approval. She won the Talented Dog section at the Santa Fe Dog Show. I made her a pink tutu, and she stands on her hind legs and spins.

Diane smiles her interest, but her back is killing her. She is grateful that Barb's mood is lighter even if the conversation is only about the dogs.

At MacDonald's, Barb hands Imp's lead to Diane. She can hardly stand. Her right leg is numb, which is more than she can say for her back. If only she could get some painkillers out of her suitcase, but one look at Barb is all she needs to change her mind. Imp pulls and tugs, aiming for a straggly tree. The landscape is a dustbowl
and the heat intense. Sweat beads on Diane's forehead, but she would face the fires of hell to stand and stretch. The dogs back in the car, Barb hurries into MacDonald's.

Diane's nose quivers at the smell of an all beef patties on sesame seed buns. Although she hadn't insisted on having a Big Mac, she will definitely have a whinge about the seat.

Maybe they can rearrange the luggage. Maybe she can move the seat back before Barb returns. Diane slides her right hand along the base of the seat until she finds the adjustment button. She tries to move the back of the seat into a less upright position. It refuses to budge. There is too much pressure from the luggage behind.

Barb shoves a thick-shake through the window, They wouldn't honour the vouchers, she says. Diane offers to pay, offers to buy coffee, or a burger, but Barb refuses. Diane winces as Barb says, Make yourself comfortable. It's eight hours to Portal.

The headlights cast shadows amongst the mesquite bushes on either side of the mile-long gravel drive. Animal eyes gleam then fade. The small adobe house with its high-pitched roof comes into view. Martha waits under the porch light. She hurries to the driver's door.

Why didn't you call me? Martha's brow is creased with worry. Barb mutters something and lets the dogs out.

Like a giant bear, Diane wraps her arms around the short fragile frame. Martha is smaller, more stooped, the osteoporosis hump obvious under the African shirt. Her short, curly hair is grey, the face more lined, but her smile is genuine.

The dogs bark their delight at being free. Refusing to participate in the joyous reunion, Barb unloads the car.

Martha grabs Diane's arm and hurries towards the door. It's good to see you. Remember when—

Moth-er, Barb calls.

The kitchen is a chaos of boxes, bedding and food, all unloaded with military precision.

Put this here. That there. That goes in the refrigerator, Moth-er. Not that one, the one in the garage. Don't put that bag on the coffee table.

Diane stops what she is doing like a guilty schoolgirl and winces.
It will scratch. Dad made that table and it's worth a lot of money, Barb said.

The topic of money came up frequently on the drive from the airport. Barb can't afford to go to a hairdresser, or buy more than two coffees a week. She complains how Martha makes poor investment decisions without consulting her and is not looking after their Portal home. Diane just nodded, offering a brief word now and again, especially when Barb said that she had to shout because her mother was deaf. Diane commiserated because Ron has two hearing aids and commented that hearing loss was just a part of growing older.

When all has been sorted, stacked and put away, Diane closes the bedroom door and sighs. How will they all get on together for the next five days? Diane must be up and dressed by 5:30 am in readiness for the 6 o'clock walk up Cave Creek Road. Will she be able to sleep? Diane laughs at the thought of Ron counting knots in the ceiling. Misses his laughter, wishes he was here. This is not going to be the relaxed reunion she imagined.

Heaving her case onto the big double bed, she finds a couple of spare hangers in the wardrobe. The size fourteen Tee's and bulky jackets, too big for Martha, must belong to Barb. Diane pushes the clothes back along the rail and hangs up her shirts. The rest of her stuff goes into an empty chest of drawers under the window. Had Barb cleared out her things to make space for her, or is this kept for guests?

The room is as neat as a new pin, and Diane wants to keep it that way. She would have willingly taken the couch in the lounge, but Barb insisted on giving her the room. Diane is glad she did. Having a room to retreat to will be her salvation. But the thought of Barb on the uncomfortable couch takes the joy away.

I'll be all right. Barb throws a pillow onto the couch. Don't worry about me.

On the big double bed, watching the ceiling fan circulate hot air, Diane absentmindedly smooths the sheet beside her. She misses Ron's familiar shape. It is early morning in Australia. He is sitting on the side of the bed, planning the day. How close they have become in the past fifteen years since the shock of Ron's retrenchment.

That Tuesday, he started work as usual at 7:00 a.m. When everyone had arrived, management called a meeting. The workshop was closing and the sixty odd workers
were to collect everything from their lockers and go home. They would not be back to
the workshop again.

Their first reaction was disbelief, followed by the purchase of several slabs of
beer. Diane would never forget picking up the phone and hearing Ron’s slurred
words, Come and get me.

Of seeing Johnny Bolton, tears streaming down his cheeks, arms flung
around Ron’s neck crying, I’sh luvs yu, Ron. Sobs wetting the shoulder of Ron’s
grimy dust jacket.

Has she ever told Martha how profoundly retrenchment, and Ron’s
subsequent heart attack, affected them? Or about their decision for him to retire?
How much do they hide from each other in their letters? When did Chuck retire? It
must have been before they met, but Martha never talked about that.

Diane looks back on the years spent working, skimping, saving and then
blowing the lot on travel. But had that been wise? Did they act out Aesop’s fable of
The Ant and the Grasshopper? Laughing and dancing throughout the summer
without a thought of the financial winter ahead? Is Barb right to look after every
penny?

They couldn’t afford Ron’s fare for this book tour. A lucky escape for him.
Diane smiles at the thought of dragging him around the book circuit. Not his scene. If
only he was here to talk to. To laugh and count one hundred and fifty-three knots in
the ceiling. This time she is the odd one out, a shag on a rock, spreading her wings.
Dit,dit,dit. Dit dit dit. Diane rolls over, grabs the travel clock and snaps off the alarm.
5:30 a.m. She pulls on slacks and t-shirt then sticks her head outside the bedroom
door. The lounge is in darkness. On the couch is a hump of bedclothes with Matilda
at Barb’s feet. Imp pushes a wet nuzzle through the dog cage wire and sniffs in
anticipation. There is no light under Martha’s door. It is not like them to be late for
anything, but it had been a long day yesterday. They must be exhausted. Should she
wake them? She goes back to her bedroom and leaves the door open.

Propped up by pillows, Diane double checks the clock. 5:37 a.m. With a sharp
intake of breath, she realises the clock is set to a different time zone, and she is an
hour early.

She absentmindedly runs her thumb and forefinger along the interlaced
necklace, feeling smooth metal. Will it be a better day today? Maybe Barb will get up
and smile at her mother, relaxed and refreshed from a few hours sleep, the stress of the trip forgotten. Mothers and daughters. They can't live with each other and can't live without each other. Families and relationship can be so different. At ten, Diane already knew her mother's beliefs and view on life and had accepted them as her own.

Buy a car and forget carpets. A car took you out into the country. It meant camping holidays, adventures, laughter and, because the cars were always old and needing repair, plenty of drama. Like her mother always said, today's tragedies are tomorrow's funny stories. The motto they lived by was seize the day. Use the good crystal. Don't cry if it breaks. Pick flowers.

What memories does Barb have of Martha? Did Barb give her flowers? When Diane was eleven, in minute letters within a scrolled floral border, she printed her mum's favourite poem and placed it in a tiny frame. Her mum kept it on her bedside table until the day she died.

I'd rather have one little rose from the garden of a friend, than all the choicest flowers when this weary life must end.

Diane dreams of her childhood. Picking wild flowers in the vacant block next door and placing them carefully into the pocket created by grabbing the bottom of her skirt and holding it up against her waist. Yellow dandelions, white onion weed and native grasses. Mummy, she calls, racing through the squeaking flywire door. These are for you.

Her mother smiles and takes the offering, arranging them in the special vase from the crystal cabinet. Ruffling her hair, her mother sniffs the flowers and inhales deeply. They smell of spring, she says, wiping a blob of pollen off the end of her nose.

Are you ready, Diane? Barb's voice is impatient.

Diane jumps off the bed and hurries into the lounge. Should she salute? Leaning on a hiking pole, Martha looks like an intrepid hunter setting out for an African safari. But she has no waist. Her ribs rest on her hips.

Barb buzzes around, snapping leads on the dogs and shouting, I've told you before, Moth-er. Use two sticks. She looks at Diane's court shoes. You can't wear those. Where are your hiking boots?
I didn't have room, Diane protests, thinking of the glamorous outfits and strappy sandals needed on the tour.

Barb takes a spare pair of boots out of the wardrobe, insisting Diane put them on. It is a small victory when Diane, with a pained expression, is adamant they are too small.

Martha insists on driving to the turn off.

Don't park there. Barb waves her mother forward. Move up further.
But I always park here.
Up further, Moth-er. She points emphatically to a spot further up the road.
But—
Someone will come around the corner and hit you.
Martha slams her foot on the brake. Goddamnit gal. You've got a bug up your butt today.

Barb leads the way, the two dogs, like miniature harnessed huskies, trot up the winding road. Walking beside Martha, Diane's feet march to an unheard beat.

I'd rather have one pleasant word in kindness said to me, than flattery when my heart is still and this life has ceased to be.

She wants to yank the bouncing pony tail. To shake Barb. Tell her that her mother will not be around much longer. Diane knows only too well what it is like to lose a mother. The feelings of helplessness, the constant questioning. Did I do enough? Could I have done more?

I'd rather have a loving smile from friends I know are true
than tears shed round my casket when I bid this world adieu
Bring me all the flowers today, whether pink or white or red.
I'd rather have one blossom now, than a truckload...

Maybe she could try and have a heart-to-heart talk with Barb. Will it help? The feeling soon vanishes. No one understands the loss until it happens to them. In four days, Diane will fly back to Australia to write funny emails and send literary jokes.
Barb will be the one who cares for Martha in her old age, but will all of Barb's decisions be in Martha's best interest?
Diane hums a few bars from *Fiddler on the Roof*. *Sunrise sunset, sunrise sunset, swiftly flow the days.* Two out of five gone already. She sips from a mug, grateful for the jar of instant coffee from New York she threw into her bag at the last minute. Long fingers of shadow creep towards the porch. A cool breeze stirs the mesquite leaves and the plastic bowl of water for the native birds and animals is half empty. A pot clatters to the floor. Angry words force their way through thick adobe walls. They are at it again.

She squirms in her rickety folding chair and gazes with longing at the distant mountains. The last rays of sun skim across purple shadows in deep ravines. An owl answers its mate. Nature is peaceful, like a softly clucking hen fluffing its feathers and settling down for the night. Why can't Barb be the same? She bickers, argues, fights and snaps. If only the serenity of the mountains could encompass the house.

Two packets of cookies open, Moth-er? Why do you do that?'

Diane tries to concentrate on the book Martha gave her. *Breakfast with Buddha*. Roland Merullo questions the busyness, the stress of modern life. She questions what does it matter if Martha opens two packets, or has a little sugar, a little wine. Relax. Have some fun.

You should finish one before you buy another. Don’t you keep a list? Barb clatters a spoon around a pan.

What?

It’s wasteful, Moth-er. Cookies cost…

Picking up the folding chair, Diane moves farther along the porch away from the kitchen window and strident carping voice. Ever since she arrived, Barb has been cranky.

Yesterday at breakfast, Diane left half an oily croissant and was surprised this morning to see the Glad-wrapped, microwave-heated remains on her bread and butter plate. At her request, Barb tossed a packet of bread onto the table. Diane deftly removed two slices.

And they’re full of sugar. Five grams per cookie. Do you want diabetes Moth-er? No. Well read the list of ingredients.

Diane wants to stride in, grab a packet of biscuits, throw a couple of coins on the table and eat the lot. Her stomach rumbles. A wrap with hummus has left a gap that only a packet of biscuits will fill. But there are side benefits. A pinch of her love-handles convinces her they are smaller.
Martha drags a folding chair out the back door. Diane opens it and places it beside her own. Martha's sweeping gesture encompasses the mountains and valley. Magnificent, isn't it. Now you know why I live here. She slumps and angrily wipes away the tear trickling down one cheek. Damn blocked tear duct. They can't do anything for it.

Are you okay?

Martha pats Diane's hand and nods. Suddenly she smiles and from inside her shirt produces a packet of Trader Joe biscuits. Noticing Diane's surprise, she says with a wink, What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve.

Chomping a biscuit, they giggle like school girls.

What happened to the old church pew? Diane brushes crumbs off her t-shirt. Ants scurry towards the unexpected bounty.

Martha sighs. It's in the garage.

Diane raises and eyebrow.

Barb says someone might steal it.

Diane can't control her mirth. That pew is as heavy as lead. It would take two men to lift it.

They press fingertips on their lips, shoulders shaking.

Wiping their spectacles with tissues, in companionable silence, they watch Jack rabbits, large translucent ears twitching at the slightest sound, drink from the dish beside the dry ditch. A slight breeze carries with it the heady scent of yucca plants and the saguaro cacti stand tall and proud against the skyline.

She means well. I don't know what I'd do without her. Goddamnit, she had a tough time as a kid.

Martha points to the book on Diane's lap. I was always a reader. Always had my nose stuck in a book. A couple of years ago, after an argument with Barb, she showed me a photo taken when she was a baby. I was sitting on a couch with her in my arms, giving her a bottle with one hand and holding a book in the other.

Nothing wrong with that.

My head is turned away. Martha stares at the ground. I'm reading, Diane. I'm not looking at her, cuddling her. I'm reading while I'm feeding my baby. Sometimes I dream that Merrill is calling me and I don't hear. My nose stuck in a book.

I put Kerry in her pram and propped the bottle up on a pillow. It doesn't mean we're bad mothers.
Martha pats Diane's hand. I'm glad you came. Dark clouds appear above high
tors. A flash of sheet lightening brightens the sky.
I love summer storms. Martha leans back in her chair, watching nature's
display.
The song of crickets hangs in the air. Forked lightening streaks to the ground.
One thousand and one. One thousand and two, One thousand...Diane
counts. At one thousand and six, thunder rumbles.
The heart of that storm is six miles away, Diane calculates. Odd drops of rain
splatter thirsty ground. Martha pushes her chair back further under the porch. You've
done so well. It's a great book.
What about our book?
Martha tugs at her ear. Do what you like. Maybe add some fiction. I'm not an
interesting person. She runs her fingers through her hair.
Chuck wanted me to be. She laughs. But not for my sake. Only so it would
reflect well on him. He said I could have any interest I wanted outside the home, as
long as it didn't interfere with researching and typing his latest paper. Nothing fitted
apart from hiking. Martha rubs the palm of her hand with her thumb.
It makes me angry, but it's my own fault for being a doormat and putting up
with it so long. She scuffs the patio bricks with the toe of her boot. I wanted to leave,
but I was afraid. Who would take care of the kids?
Diane leans forward in her chair, staring across the valley. Martha indicates
with her head towards the kitchen. Barb had enough nerve to walk away from her
marriage when her kids were grown. By then, I'd adapted to my life.
We all do the best we can at the time. Diane starts to gather her things, but
Martha resumes talking.
We never worked well as a family. When Barb was eighteen, she begged for
my permission to join the army.
Diane waits for more, but Martha is lost in memory.
What did you say?
I said no, of course, Martha snaps.
Diane's intake of breath is audible.
I couldn't let her go. Not that it did me much good. Ungrateful gal eloped with
Ted three months later and—.
Where's Matilda's bowl, Moth-er, Barb calls.
Martha slowly rises to her feet. Don't forget to put your chair back in the garage. She indicates her head towards the kitchen. We wouldn't want it stolen.

Diane sits in silence as rain hides the mountains and the night creatures emerge.
Barb arranges slices of carrot cake on an earthenware plate. What are you taking to the luncheon today, Moth-er? she calls.

Martha produces a packet of frozen miniature wraps. She slides the Alfoil tray out of the packet and puts it in the oven.

Barb grabs the empty packet and reads the label. You can't take this tasteless trailer trash food.

But I like them, Martha says, looking at the bite-sized wraps through the glass front of the oven.

What's in them?
Meat.
What sort of meat? Barb turns over the packet and carefully reads the list of ingredients.

You take your cake, Martha snaps. I'm taking my wraps.

Barb grabs a tissue and eradicates a spider crawling up the wall.

They pile into the car. Barb drives, Martha is beside her and Diane is behind them, nursing the tea-towel covered tray of miniature wraps. Ten minutes later, they arrive at Nancy Chow's home for the monthly meeting of the Cochise County Arts Network.

Over twenty people gather in the large room packed with tables and chairs. Martha introduces Diane as her Australian pen friend who has just published a book. Diane blushes at the obvious pride in Martha's voice. Barb appears with a stern face and, taking her mother's elbow, steers Martha away. This outing reminds Diane of the Australian comedian Rolf Harris's three-legged character Jake the Peg, de da duddle dee da dum. She is the extra leg.

Women greet Martha and peck her cheek. Men shake hands and offer their seats. A new member of the group gives Martha a hardback copy of The Arabian Nights.

Found it in a yard sale. Thought you might like it.
Martha fingers the silk endpapers, checks inside the flyleaf. I'm overwhelmed. Clever you. This edition is by none other than Richard Burton.
I've scored big this time, the new member whispers as he passes Diane.
She debates whether to stay with Martha or let mother and daughter be together. Deciding on the latter, she wanders over to the kitchen. Surely they will have a couple of bottles of wine. Red or white, it doesn't matter, but Sauvignon Blanc if there's a choice. Wine will calm her, relax her so she is able to cope with anything. Stemmed glass in one hand, the other resting on her hip, she will confidently move amongst the crowd, chatting on any topic they like to introduce. But too much and she will slur her words before the world spins and her eyelids droop with fatigue. All she can find is orange juice and lemonade. Maybe a blessing.

The kitchen bench is covered in food-laden plates of all shapes and sizes. At potluck luncheons it is grab a plate, stand in line and help yourself. She tries a bit of everything. Sour belly pork, sweet potato pie, hot chilli and, of course, some of Martha's 'trailer trash'. She makes sure she finishes with a slice of Barb's carrot cake. She does not want to be accused of favouritism.

Diane finds herself sitting next to Junella, who survived two awful marriages before a failed attempt at being a nun. Now, she writes murder mysteries. It never ceases to amaze Diane how easily some people tell a condensed Reader's Digest version of their lives to a complete stranger. It happens often, in buses, trams and trains as she travels back and forth to Melbourne. Why her? Is it her age? She has turned sixty. A milestone in anyone's language. Or does it show somehow on her face that people and their stories fascinate her? Often Diane weaves some aspect of these shared lives—a mannerism, dress, or event—into the narrative of her next book.

Junella’s life story intrigues Diane, and she leans forward to hear every word. She observes the flowing orange jacket, Medusa-like black hair and unexpectedly small stud earrings. Why so small when large hoops would have completed the wanton gypsy look?

Ding, ding, ding. Nancy Chow taps a teaspoon on the rim of a glass. Quiet everyone. The entertainment is about to begin.

Have you got any poetry to read? Junella asks Diane.

She shakes her head. Junella assures her presenting is not compulsory.

At the end of the room are a piano, podium and microphone. Martha breaks away from her group of friends and sits beside Diane.

Aren't they a great bunch, she says. We—
There you are, Moth-er. Barb drags up a chair.

Diane glances around. Barb and she are the only people under seventy years of age. It's like stepping back in time to the family get-togethers of her youth. Her mum insists on dressing her in the pink frock with the frills so she can recite a poem in her plumiest voice for the assembled extended family.

'Missing' by A. A Milne, she says in a high-pitched, ten-year-old voice.

Has anyone seen my mouse? I opened his box for half a minute.

Just to make sure he was really in it.

Will she be expected to perform here?

The first person today is Jeannette Blondell. Nancy hands over the microphone to a buxom woman with 'I Don't Think So' written on her Tee-shirt. Jeannette grabs the podium with both hands, leans forward and, in a loud voice, recites twenty-five verses of a dubiously funny poem. She waits for the applause to die before asking if maybe everyone would like her to read another.

When a male member offers to recite a poem, she reluctantly releases her grip. He has written it for his wife's seventy-fifth birthday. She sits directly in front of him and, with misty eyes, treasures every word.

The only thing missing is a string quartet in the background playing *Sweet Mystery of Life*.

An ancient couple sit together on the stool in front of the old upright piano and play and sing their own composition. It is a light-hearted, upbeat tune which has Diane tapping her foot. They bow in unison.

Nancy Chow opens a blue leather-bound book, adjusts her glasses and reads about running barefoot through grass, searching for arrowheads amongst Indian ruins, morning sun on mesas and the challenges of growing old. The poem concludes, Away from mechanical racket, bird sings.

There is a moment of silence, recognition of artistic beauty and eloquence, before the applause.

Who else has something to contribute? Nancy asks. Her eyes search the room and settle on Diane. What about Martha's Australian friend? Author of *Valerie G.*

Diane flicks back her hair, prances across the room and grips the podium. The majority of people are smiling. To hell with Barb's crossed arms and thin line of a
mouth. Diane takes a deep breath and says, I would not be here today if it hadn't been for a chance meeting in 1975 with an amazing and inspiring woman. She indicates Martha. Diane is relaxed, confident that she knows the extract of the novel off by heart. She looks around the room at Martha's friends, hesitates, and finally says,

This is by, and for my friend and mentor, Martha Jackson. Quizzical Quartet. She pauses, then slips in theatrical mode, ready to deliver every line.

This craze for youth is quite uncouth.

That age is bad is very sad.

Forget your looks.

Just read some books.

This was obviously written by Martha, Diane says. Laughter ripples around the room.

No tummy nip.

Go on a trip.

You want to live?

What can you give?

She leans forward to engage her audience.

No angry shove.

Invest in love.

She smiles at Martha. Thank you for thirty-five years of friendship.

Amidst applause, Diane makes her way back to her seat. Martha's cheeks are pink. She leans close to Diane.

Our friendship is precious, she whispers, eyes shining. You are my ray of sunshine, and I'm so proud of you.

Martha! someone shouts. Have you something for us today?

Martha grins and hurries to the podium. Nancy lowers the microphone.

Martha looks over her spectacles at her audience, You all know what I think about politicians. Hoots of laughter. A wicked smile highlights her face.

A senate leader named Dole, Martha begins.
Several men in the audience whistle their delight. Apparently senator Dole is not popular in Portal. Is thinking about a new role. He used to be witty, Martha pauses for effect. But now he's just shitty. And totally losing his soul. The clapping extends for several minutes and Martha makes her way back to her seat. That should stir them up. She adjusts the cushion before settling. I'll never forgive Dole for sending our troops to Bosnia.

Junella leans towards Diane and whispers, Our Martha can be seen as opinionated, but we always rely on her to enliven things. A feeling of camaraderie overwhelms Diane. When the room is divided into three and a song sheet with the words to the musical round “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” is handed out, she is not surprised.

At first, her voice is a whisper, but she is soon caught up in the enthusiasm of her group and sings with just as much gusto as Junella. Diane has forgotten how much fun singing a round could be. Her group finishes with Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, gay this life must be.

Barb taps her watch. We have to get going soon. Martha hurries off to chat with friends. On her own, she is animated, her face flushed with pleasure. She laughs, argues, is opinionated and is the Martha Diane remembers.

She leaves Martha chatting with her friends and wanders into the back garden. Strolling down an ochre brick path winding through flowering cacti, she admires huge bumble bees pollinating purple echinacea. Eager sprinklers pump scrawny desert plants to artificial splendour. All around her, couples and groups of friends sit on seats carved out of native wood, animatedly discussing literature, art and everyday life. If only Ron was beside her. In spite of the singing and fellowship, she has never felt more alone. She leans on the gate leading to a chicken pen and listens to the clack and bubble of bickering hens.

Back at Martha's house nothing has changed. The constant nagging, barking dogs, and extra house guests tire Martha. Her normal routine disrupted, her home and life chaotic. Her laughter full of small humiliations. On her own in this tiny community she
has self worth. This group of tolerant, happy retirees appreciate and love her. Diane decides to leave a day early.
I lean forward to peer at the large road map spread over the kitchen table. Barb stabs a forefinger at a red spot.

It's two and a half hours to Sierra Vista, she says to Diane. I'll be gone all day. You can look after Moth-er.

I walk away before I say something I will regret. Does she think I'm a child? I start clattering dishes. I'm quite capable. I live here on my own on five acres, cook clean and shop for myself and walk every day. And help out at the library. But I don't want to drive to Sierra Vista just to service and re-register the car. She wants to add her name to the title. Is she worried that she won't get it when I die?

I flop into the battered recliner chair I brought from Santa Fe. One of the few pieces of furniture from the old place. I left most of my stuff behind, but the new bed with a double mattress is heaven for my old bones. And how many Indian rugs and artworks do I need? I lean over and rub the stone belly of Kokopelli, the dancing humpbacked flute player with huge phallus and feather antenna. The old Zuni woman in the Santa Fe Plaza told me it brings good luck.

My hand automatically reaches for the book beside me on the coffee table, but I hastily pull back. Barb hates to see me reading. Says I love my books more than her. Is she is right? Books never answer back, or berate me for scraping a chair or opening two packets of cookies. She blames me and her father for all her troubles.

I lie back, fold my arms across my chest and close my eyes, but my right knee aches and pains. Rubbing helps a little. I glance at two heads bent over a map. I didn't tell either of them about the fall.

The road to Cave Creek stretches ahead. So early in the morning, yet hot sun scorches my back.

Sorry, I can't make it this morning, Pete said on the phone. The grandkids are here.

I miss his lanky frame and gruff good humour. Preoccupied with the titles of books I want Ginny to get for me, I trip and go down hard. I manage to roll onto my butt and hug my right knee. Blood oozes. Godamnit, I've ruined my brand new hiking pants. Pain sets in.
Junella’s van chugs up the road and swerves to the shoulder. Sticking her head out of the window, she shouts, What are you doing there, Martha? I hurt my goddamn knee, I shout back.

She helps me into the van, takes me home, washes and bandages my grazed knee, a bruise already forming.

Weeks of treatment follow. Ice packs, then heat and heavy duty painkillers. My doctor in Geriton is away. Her replacement puts a pressure bandage on upside down and my foot balloons. It takes two weeks before Junella gets me to a doctor in sinful Sierra Vista.

After hobbling around the house on a walker, I am full of self-pity. In my letters to Diane, I write about my latest book and the weather and forget, for a brief while, the pain of my injured knee, osteoporosis, the wheeze of emphysema and loss of hearing. Barb soon finds out when she does my accounts and pays the bills.

Barb’s hand waves from the driver's window. My little RAV Four disappears down the gravel driveway, tiny gold elephant cheerily swinging from the rear-view mirror. If only my daughter could be as freewheeling. I love to see her, but she should leave. I'm tripping over dog cages, blankets are stacked on the couch, nothing is where it should be. I'm too old. I must face it. I'm a selfish old hag and don't want to be bothered.

I throw the keys to Barb's Nissan to Diane. I'm not going to drive this gear-changing tank when I'm used to my fully automatic RAV. Diane walks towards the passenger side of the car.

Where are you going?

She jangles the keys.

That's the passenger's door.

I forget that you drive on the wrong side of the road, she says.

No. We drive on the right side. Diane gets my feeble joke, at least it gives us a laugh.

I wondered why there was no steering wheel, she says. She walks to the other side.

Grabbing the panic handle, I hoist myself into the passenger's seat. Diane crunches the gears, and we lurch down the left side of the road.
Keep right, I shout.
Relax. I've been driving for forty years and have an unblemished record.
Forty? More like sixty for me. I used to turn the crank handle of an old Ford before it would start. Nowadays, you turn a key. I put my forefinger on my lips. And don't forget, not a word to Barb about where we are going. If she asks, say we've been to the post office.
Diane crunches the gears and nods.

The Nissan's wheels bounce over a dry pebble ford, then grind up the gravel drive leading to the Southern Research Station. Before we reach the main building, leafy ancient elms— a welcome sight in the extreme heat— replace the cottonwood trees lining the track.

The office is deserted. I hand Diane several information pamphlets on palaeontology, geology, archaeology and astrology. The familiar words roll off my tongue. I feel at ease. Here is respect and recognition. Here, I'm known as the famous Chuck Jackson's wife.

Diane looks through racks containing information about flora, fauna, hikes and tours. On the counter, I find a brochure entitled *Southwestern Research Station, American Museum of Natural History, Portal, Arizona*. Subheadings include history, location, facilities, volunteer program, grants and accommodation. I grab Diane's arm and steer her outside. I want to show her the cabins where we used to live.

A group of young people splashes, shouts and plunges into the Station's swimming pool. Their shrieks of delight make me wish I could join them, but I am not the young woman I was in 1947. There's no way I'll show these young ones my ancient body.

Don't you wish you were a postgraduate researcher, Diane?
I'd love someone to fund me to jump into that pool. Why didn't we bring our bathers? She chuckles.

We reach the old cabin tucked against the canyon wall. With a sigh, I lower myself onto a wooden seat in the shade of an old alder tree. Diane joins me. Childish spirits ride the winds, laughing and whispering names.

Let's go to the summit, I suggest, pointing to craggy tors. The view is breathtaking.
We park under a canopy of dogwoods near the start of a trail. Canyon walls rise steep and high as we follow the winding forest track to the summit. Even with my wilderness boots and the two obligatory hiking sticks, I am soon bent over and wheezing. Diane slows down to match my pace. Damn cigarettes.

It's thirty years since I smoked, Diane. I pretend to admire the view, but I'm angry at the memory of constantly patting my pockets to reassure myself I had my cigarettes before I could leave the house. Of the death rattle of a cough that disappeared after three weeks, but I still got emphysema.

Martha, we've been walking a long time. Do you want a break?

It's been several years since I've been here. I look around. Trees grow, bushes die, but rocks always stay the same. I point to two pinnacles side by side. I recognise those. And just look at the view.

We flop onto a groundsheet thrown beneath a tree and I rub aching bones. Tall cedars, strong arms reaching to a canopy of blue, frame the mountain range rolling into the distance.

It is breathtaking. Diane's camera clicks.

We sit close together, the fitful wind fanning our faces. The sun takes flash lit pictures of the baked earth. Grass shrivels. Diane follows my silent lead. There is plenty of time to talk. A plane drones overhead.

Remember when we first met, Martha? How many years ago now? Over thirty? What a blessing that was. Diane wraps an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze.

Best day of my life. I dare not look at her. She glances up at the speck of silver. I wonder if the pilot can see us.

All he sees is pristine forest. Bile rises in my throat. At least here, man has not chiselled the mountain, built tacky houses, drained the water or put up fences. I stop myself before I go too far. Diane waits for me to continue.

Here, the world is as it should be. A peaceful place.

A small lizard scuttles under a fallen log.

The gals were happy at the Research Station. Barb was only six, so she doesn't remember much. Merril was nine.

Time passes too quickly. Diane gazes into the distance. Look at us. You're in your nineties and I, my sixties. I often think of when Kerry was small...I'm so proud of her, Martha, and the woman she has become.
Stupid tears sting my eyes, and I blurt out, This is where I scattered Merril's ashes.

Diane's mouth opens, but soon closes. She looks around as if seeking a marker. I'm surprised at the intensity of the hurt and yet, I want to talk about Merril. I want Diane to know her. To understand.

The comforting weight of Diane's arm still rests on my shoulders. A stray ant struggles past carrying an outsized load.

I can't begin to comprehend what it must be like to lose a child, Martha. Diane stares across the valley.

You never get over it. The words are no sooner out of my mouth than anger wells up again from somewhere dark inside, like a rattlesnake uncoiling to strike. I want to lash out, to shout and scream Merril's name. I pick up a stone and throw it as hard as I can down to the valley floor far below. It clunks against the nearest tree. Merril. Her name pounds in my head. I feel it, taste its bitterness on my tongue.

Diane holds me. An eagle soars, and I shudder as hot wind burns my skin.

I'm not going to pretend that I can feel your pain, Martha. I still have my daughter, but I'll never forget the day my mother died.

Trees move gently in the wind rising from the valley. Cranes fly overhead, half angel, half bird.

Tell me about Merril.

My mind slips back thirty-six years to the apartment in New York.

She was... I can't find the right words, but soon they tumble out as if they will never stop. I talk about Merril's genius, her incredible ability to succeed. Unlimited energy, artistic flair and the drugs, drinking, violence and depression. Her complete lack of a moral compass. How I never knew who she would hurt next. Usually it was Barb. The fear. Constant fear that she would wreck a car, steal Barb's boyfriend or smash a priceless statue.

I'd stand at her door only to be told, Go away. You're not wanted here.

Diane winces and squeezes my hand.

Two in the afternoon. Cops knocking on the door...I...They found her body in Central Park. Overdose. A suicide note in her pocket.

Diane's arm tightens around my shoulders,

I always knew there was something drastically wrong with her. Chuck put it down to rebellion. He couldn't accept she was sick. You know what Chuck's like.
Diane nods.
Merril was the apple of his eye. She was in a coma for two weeks. Liver gone. Then lungs.

My mind is back in that stark white room, listening to the beeps of the ventilator. She looked so young, so untouched. No accident scars, no blood, no bandages. I stroked her cheek half expecting her eyes to fly open. Afraid of what I might see in them. But she was dead. Brain dead.

We turned off the life support.

Tears trickle down Diane's face. She roughly brushes them away. An eagle cries. Sweat and tears drip off the end of my nose. Vanish into thirsty soil.

She's at peace now, Martha. Can you be too?

Maybe you believe in an afterlife, Diane. I don't. I shiver in spite of the heat. The pain never goes away.

What do you believe, Martha?

I don't know. I gaze at the clear blue sky.

I sit and think of Merril and my parents. People I knew and counted on. I don't talk to them, but I'm communicating. My father always said, If you remember me, I'll come back. That's something anyone can have. You don't have to believe in anything. It's just there.

When my mum died, I was touched by how many people were there for me.

Chuck always said that people are no goddamn good. They make me angry. Especially if they ask, When did you lose your daughter? What a stupid thing to say. I didn't lose her like some purse or object I left behind. She didn't pass on. She died.

Diane hugs me tighter. Thirty-five years of grief pours onto Diane's shoulder.

I let both my daughters down.

Mothers always take the blame. There were two parents, not just you. And Merril was forty, not four.

* * *
Diane escapes to her room, clutching the well-worn book Martha has given her to read. On the cover of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* is the shadowy photo of a young woman, head bent, half her face covered by wispy hair, her thin arms crossed protectively across her chest. Her expression is one of intense sadness as she hides from life in the seductive world of madness. Diane devours chunks of words and adds her tears to stains already there. She learns about schizophrenia, chemical imbalances of the brain, mania and depression and the anguish of a mother and child.

Outside her door, Matilda and Imp yap, Barb carps and controls and Martha twists and turns, forgets and stumbles. She seems to be shrinking into her skin. Two women, two dogs are too much for her. It is time to leave. Barb does not query her reasons.

I thought you were leaving Friday? Martha says, but accepts the excuse that it would be better for Diane to leave Thursday and get a good night's sleep in Albuquerque before the long trip home.
Dear Diane, I'm such a procrastinator. It takes me ages to start a letter. Here goes. I wish we'd had more time together. Maybe then it would not have been so tiring for this old hag. Too much going on all at once, and I'm no longer used to it. But I am now, more or less, recovered and back to normal. So I hope you know how happy I was to see you. I just wish Ron could have been here as well. Even if it meant an added person.

I had to go to Geriton yesterday, and it was an ordeal. Kept waiting, at the doctor's for an hour, another hour at the place to get new glasses, and I spent too much for the latter. I was really done in when I got home. Amazing this morning that I was able to go out at six walking with Pete.

You know how much you mean to me.

So much love, Martha.

Ps. Your 'prime' proofreader caught you on the first page of your letter. It is "fewer" not "less" people. Check your 'Careful Writer'. This is done lovingly as I trust you know.

3:00 a.m. The laptop open at first draft, Section Three, 1985 of The Book. Martha fills Diane's thoughts. Writing the story of their friendship means she can stand back. See them as they were so long ago. Reflecting on the past allows her to be more objective, to see both of them warts and all.

A crescent moon is suspended in indigo. She crosses to a folder of Martha's letters, amazed that she has kept so many. Why are there are so few of her own? Opening the folder at random, Diane looks beyond Martha's words. Hidden beneath descriptions of blooming yuccas and the ditch running dry, she sees again the probing, questioning, prompting that always spurred her on.

Martha saw in her a potential Diane never knew she had. The ability to learn. To question and explore and an insatiable need to make more of herself. The desire to discover new worlds. She laughs. Little did Martha know what she was starting
when she first recommended a dictionary. Diane glances at her bulging bookcase and row of certificates on her study wall. Guiltily, she re-reads Martha's email, her fingers automatically tapping the computer keyboard.

Dear Martha, I can't believe I'm actually typing a real letter. And will stamp and post what is now called 'snail mail'. How life changes. Everything seems to be emails these days, and people keep in touch via ‘Facebook’ and ‘Twitter’ Internet sites. I thought computers would lighten the workload and give me more time for myself. Instead, they are so time-consuming that there is often no opportunity to sit in the sun and watch the seagulls line dance.

I think one of the main reasons why I felt so relaxed and at peace at your place, after the frantic pace of the book tour, was not having to worry about replying to emails. Those glorious Chiricahua Mountains dragged my gaze up to the sky to cloud-watch and daydream. Nancy Chow had it right when she wrote, Away from mechanical racket, bird sings.

Diane hesitates. What to write next? What can she say about the visit?

Has Barb got over her hissy fit? Does she comprehend that it doesn't matter if you have a chocolate biscuit? For crying out loud, you are over ninety. I hope when I'm your age, I can have all the chocolate biscuits I want.

Diane runs track changes and then starts again.

It was so special catching up with you. Barb did a great job driving me all the way to Portal, and cooking for us. It was hectic for you having not only myself and Barb, but also the two dogs.

Diane smiles at the memory of Barb saying, I'm going to wash Imp. Do you want to watch? and being offended when Diane had preferred to sit in the shade and read.
Martha, I know how I felt when Kerry came to stay the week before I left. She slept in my study, which made it difficult to organise any paperwork to take with me. You know what a night owl I am. I got on the plane hoping I had managed to gather enough documentation together to see me through the tour. I loved having her and wouldn’t have missed it for the world, but I was also out of my routine and the house was a shambles. I’m sure this is how you must have felt with all of us there. But I have enough heart-warming memory pictures of my stay with you to keep me warm all winter.

Pulling her woolly dressing gown around her, Diane turns the heater up another notch. Soon she will quietly slip back to bed and cuddle up to Ron's ample frame.

You're like ice, he will murmur in his sleep. Snuggle in.

I arrived home to the coldest winter temperatures Victoria has had for years. Rain, hail, sleet and snow on the hills. After the heat of Arizona, I was a little tardy in putting on my winter underwear and, without my nether regions protected, I caught a chill. But I'm fine now. All this week, I've done nothing but laze around and sleep. I guess all the travelling caught up with me. On the last leg of my journey home from Albuquerque, to Dallas, to Los Angeles and then Melbourne, our full-to-the-brim airbus encountered a headwind, and we had to divert to Sydney to take on more fuel. Ron was waiting to meet me at Tullamarine when suddenly the arrival time went from 7:55 a.m. to 10:15 a.m. Poor guy had a long wait, and it cost $45 for parking fees.

Diane wonders if he had even missed her. The house was just as she left it and the refrigerator still packed with frozen home-cooked meals.

On the plane home, I had a brilliant idea. We went straight from the airport to the Melbourne Hilton Hotel. It was bliss to share stories over a leisurely dinner. After a relaxing night we arrived home ready to face the 'mechanical racket'.
Diane leans back in her chair, clasping her hands behind her head to ease the ache in her shoulders. The first light of dawn shines under a bank of clouds. Already the birds are making a commotion. Ron will stir and the day will begin. But first, she wants to explore her side of the relationship with Martha. What did she give to someone who had the associated power and status attached to her famous husband, travelled the world, wore only the best clothing, state-of-the-art hiking boots, and never wanted for a penny?

Adulation. And later? From the filing system, Diane pulls a folder. Copies of some of her letters sent after Kerry gave her a computer. Printed off so she could hold a page in her hand and, out of respect for Martha, wield a red pen. Later, she learnt to track changes on the screen. Now only a folder of stored emails remain.

Words leap from flipped pages. I admire the...respect your...I wouldn't have thought of that.

Dear Martha, Last Tuesday night, I went to the Palm Beach Writers’ Group. They all insisted on hearing about you and send their love. You are obviously an honorary member and integral part of our group. I’m sure you will enjoy your signed copy of our latest anthology.

Christine Neil worked so hard to put the anthology together, and I felt guilty to have run off and left her with the lot. She is an amazing woman with so many talents. Our writing groups are so alike. Wonderful, supportive people who know how to have fun. How lucky we are. It’s so rare to find altruistic groups like this these days.

I hope you like the photos. I’ve included an extra one for Pete, featuring the walk up cave Creek Road. He’s such a gentle soul, who cares for you and protects you.

Must get this 'real letter' posted to you today

Much, much love and hugs,

Diane and His Roundness xxxxx
She checks for any red underlining and green grammar suggestions, then deletes the tracked sections and, finally, adds a post script.

P.S. Would you believe we are off to Kerry's 40th birthday? Yes. 40th. Where has that time gone? I must scan some early photos of her for her party. Isn’t that a Mum’s role, to embarrass her offspring on special occasions?

Diane prints, signs, folds and addresses an envelope. How long it has been since she licked a stamp?

The reply came handwritten on yellow paper.
Dearest friend, It is still fairly cool, the greenery is still with us and the ditch is gargling and trickling past the pump house. The scent of flowering yuccas triggers salad-day memories. I really miss you. I console myself with a very good book written by one of your countrymen, Tim Flannery. It's 'The Eternal Frontier'. It's all about North America from its very beginning to its possible demise. He seems to feel, as I do, that we appear to be trying to hasten the latter by our greedy behavior.

If the copying machine at the library is working, I'll send you what I read to the writing group yesterday. They all sent their regards to you, and were sorry you'd left.

Are you both well? I do worry about his roundness, so please, please starve him a bit. I'd love him just as much when he's skinnier. Barb may possibly come down from Santa Fe next week and take me for my check-up in Geriton. I can't say I look forward to the trip and certainly not to a doctor's appointment. Oh well, asi-es la vida.

With so much love,
Martha
Hi Martha,

It's 5:00 a.m (Ron is tucked up in bed and snoring) and I'm trying to create some law and order here in my study. I've made a hot drink with a teaspoon of honey and a dash of cinnamon. I find it gives me a better boost than tea or coffee these days. I get so tired of coffee but, unlike Ron, I'm not keen on green tea. Our weather has been up and down like a yo-yo. One day extreme heat and the next, I'm wearing a coat. Today should be about 26C, and I'm delighted to say that just when the gardens look as if they will curl up their toes and die, we get a solid downpour of rain and the plants lift their heads and smile again. I don't have to worry about a garden as such because we have no 'fragile' roses or delicate plants here. I've replaced them with wild Iris and succulents. They will survive anything nature can throw at them and generously provide the living greenery my heart craves. A small parcel is winging its way to you. I hope it arrives okay.

I think of you so often and we send our love,

Hugs from Diane and His Roundness xxx

Attached to the bottom of the email is Martha's reply.
Dear Diane, So happy to hear from you this way as I find it increasingly difficult to write long letters (that I really prefer to get). I still enjoy my life and know that I'm lucky in so many ways. I no longer like to eat a lot and avoid as many celebrations as I can. I think of you everyday and will try out my phone card one of these days. "What Time is it There"? Lots of love, Martha

From: Diane Simpson <dsimpson@yahoo.com.au>
Subject: All Okay

It is a gorgeous day today, Martha, and I'm cooped up here for at least the next couple of hours. I must write a conference paper and pull together my PhD colloquium presentation. There always seems to be so much university stuff to do. This morning, just as the first rays of sun gilded the topmost leaves of the melaleuca gums, I dragged my kayak out onto the canal. Suspended between water and sky, I dipped my oar into reflected clouds. A flock of swallows swooped and sang just about my head while entranced, I floated between two worlds.

Diane's pull-along business case clicks and clacks down the bricked path, tugging like a recalcitrant puppy. Perched on a hill. Sandston University is a rural-style campus with rambling buildings. A cold wind twirls fallen leaves. Clutching her red poncho close around her neck, she hurries to the self-opening doors. Short hair has its disadvantages in winter. The doors part, and she hurries through, reflecting on how fortunate the new tollway was completed just before she started her doctorate. It takes twenty minutes off the trip from home to here and still she is late.

So much to do, so little time to do it in. She owes Martha a letter, cryptic emails a stopgap. What is needed is a two-paged newsy letter, filled with love and
care, but she is already late for supervision and needs to dump her bag at her workstation.

At home, warm, winter sunshine streams through your study window. Your office chair has a back support and armrests to ensure your comfort. On castors, it rolls easily between desk and table.

Time passes and you keep tapping, the novel slowly taking shape. You lean back, roll your shoulders and ease your neck before quickly returning to your imagined world of Arizona sun and Australian sand.

Neighbours go, new neighbours come and still, you type, day in day out. From your window, you wave to the newly arrived elderly couple tending their garden. They wave back. You promise yourself that as soon as you get a spare minute, you will personally welcome them. But first, let them settle in.

Three weeks later, there is a knock at the door. You open it to find the new neighbours with a plate of cakes. When they see you, their mouths drop open.

You can walk, the woman says in disbelief. Apparently, seeing you in the same position by the window day after day, they thought you were in a wheelchair.

Diane still has to pinch herself that she is at Sandston. The story slowly taking shape. When she opens her locker, seven butterfly clipped sections of the first draft of the novel, plus the exegesis, reassure her that progress is being made. Like so many other students, she is pushing to meet deadlines. Sometimes, it feels like she has one foot pinned to the ground and is spinning in circles.

Lee, in the next cubicle, cheerily waves, headphones in ears. Is she busy transcribing texts for her thesis or listening to the latest rap group? Diane checks for a smile or a frown. She sometimes dreams of being a young, international postgraduate student like Lee. Living in student accommodation overlooking a lake with only herself to look after, although the social life sounds full on.

Or even Jenny on the other side of the partition, who goes home to a mother’s care. Washing done, food on the table, a room of her own. Diane is the matriarch of her family. It is her role to care for others. A role she would not change for all the
spare time or space in the world. But she must write that letter. A woman in her nineties on the other side of the world is waiting.
Dear Diane, Did I reply to your last email? I think I did. Maybe i hit the wrong button. I just read four books in two days, and my mind is a bit fuzzy. If you haven't read 'The Glass House' by Jeannette Walls, do try to find it. It is almost as good as Angela’s Ashes and as disturbing. Made me happy I was able to quit drinking. I've just had my 48th anniversary of the event on May 22nd.

Ginny hands me a stack of books. She smiles. That should keep you going for a couple of days.

I peer at the titles, some old, some new. I can't wait to get home, turn on the air conditioner and start reading.

Great t-shirt. I point to the caption. She throws back her shoulders. Emblazoned across her ample bosom is, Every time you destroy a book, God kills a kitten.

The drive home seems longer than usual. Maybe it's the heat. The sky has never looked bluer, but I pant and wheeze walking to the back door. I guess Barb is right. Even for this short distance, I need two sticks. Holding onto the porch post I savour the feel of warm wood. Sit for a moment on the old pew my writing group helped drag out of the garage. The gabled pump house that I've labeled 'The Chapel of Perpetual Pessimism' squats beside the dry ditch overgrown with mesquite.

Unlatching the back door, I dump my bag on Chuck's handmade seat, turn on the air conditioner and fill the coffee percolator. Deciding to rest for a few minutes while it perks, I walk towards my old chair. My head feels light, vision blurry and my left leg seems to have a mind of its own. I stagger. See the looming arm of the chair. Reach out to save myself. Everything fades to black.

Diane clicks the blue Skype icon on her computer. The cheapness of computer-generated international calls means she can talk for half an hour and still have over twelve dollars in the account.

Bip,bip, bip—bip **baarp** bip….Skype tries to establish the now familiar telephone link between Floral Waters and Portal. What time is it there? Skype repeats its insistent bip,bip. Someone must be there. A ninety-three year old, recovering from a hip replacement, can't stray far.

Where is Barb, or the housekeeper, Anita? Bip, bip... Maybe Martha is in bed, snuggling under warm blankets, Nadume, in all his silverbacked glory watching over her. Someone needs to be there.

Skype keeps ringing. Maybe she is back in her old adobe home in Santa Fe? She hates it there. Santa Fe would be easier for Barb. It's hard to work out what time to ring. 8:00 a.m. Saturday in Australia—6:00 p.m. Friday in New Mexico. But what about daylight savings? Everyone forgets that.

Bip,bip, bip—bip-**baarp**. You have called 808-727-2692, Barb's recorded voice intones. Please leave a message after the beep.

Hi Barb, it's Diane. I was just wondering how Martha is going. I'll ring—Barb's voice interrupts. Diane. I've been meaning to call you. Barb hesitates. Moth-er died.

When? she whispers.

Last Saturday.

Barb… Her voice catches. I'm so sorry. What happened?

Moth-er stopped eating. I told her the consequences. She said goodbye to Elizabeth. She didn't want to, but I insisted. I told her, Your granddaughter needs closure, Moth-er.

Diane cannot speak. She reaches for tissues, which mush in her hand. If only she had one of Ron's large, soft handkerchiefs. If only Ron was beside her.

Barb continues, Elizabeth flew from California and arrived just in time.

Diane visualises the last goodbyes. A small, fragile body under pristine white sheets. Elizabeth crying. Martha hated goodbyes, but would have agreed. Anything for peace. Diane catches her breath and tries to hold herself together. A voice that doesn't sound like her own says, I'm so sorry, Barb. I'll go now and call you later. Look after yourself.

A click breaks the link.
Slumped in front of the computer screen, Diane stares at the Skype icon, her nerves jangling. Why such a shock? Of all people, she should have known at ninety-three a hip replacement can be fatal.

She pictures Martha deciding, enough is enough. But to starve to death—that takes time; a painfully slow shutting down of the body. Renal failure, blindness. Is that what really happened, or is that the story Barb wants others to believe? A flash of Martha with a plastic bag over her face. Diane shakes her head. No. Accept the story.

Ron emerges from their bedroom, fresh from his shower.

How’s Martha? He sees Diane’s face. His arms wrap around her and the touch of his roundness brings more tears. She snuggles into his warmth, soft velour against her cheek, and breathes in the familiar soapy, day-old sweat, woollen smell that triggers the comfort of shared years.

She wasn’t bad for a Yank, he says.

Trust Ron to make a joke, but this time Diane can’t laugh.

Think about the good things. Remember when we first met at the Dig Tree?

Diane’s thoughts race back to the people they were then and once again blesses that chance meeting and the years of letters that followed. Letters that became the centre of her world. But the centre can move and shatter.

I’ll make you a cuppa.

His footsteps plod downstairs and she closes the study door behind him.

_Dear Barb,_

_I still can’t believe that Martha your mum has died. Why didn’t you tell me? You must have had plenty of warning if she decided to starve to death. Although that sounds like a cock and bull story to me. I think, in the end, you helped her, but I can’t let my mind go there. And what business is it of mine anyway? I wasn’t there. I couldn’t help you. I couldn’t help her._

Diane screws up the letter and throws it in the bin. Grabbing her jacket, she walks out the door, down the steps and along the sandy curve of the canal. Head bent into the wind, collar pulled well up around her neck, she doesn’t hear the neighbours’ dogs bark a greeting, or the wind singing through tall palms. She is back on the road to Cave Creek with Martha and Pete, laughing, chatting, heading for the old juniper tree to give it a hug.
Dear Barb,

You are in my thoughts. Are you okay? I still can’t believe that your mum has gone. It is always a shock. I remember the feelings of loss and sadness when my mum died. All the words in the world didn’t help, and the fact that our mothers enjoyed long fruitful lives doesn’t make it any easier. Your mother’s death has left a big hole in my life. I will always be in debt to her for her interest and concern all those years ago for a young, uneducated Australian mum.

Diane eventually seals the envelope and slips it into her coat pocket.

May 1st. An email arrives.

To: Diane Simpson <dsimpson@yahoo.com.au>
Subject: From Barbara

Dear Diane,

Hope you are both doing well. Thanks for your support. By the way, have you seen the small Kokopelli statue Mother had on the coffee table beside her chair? It’s the only thing Elizabeth wants, and we can’t find it anywhere.

Barb

A box of tape recordings haunts you. Brief informal conversations you had in 2002. There are so few. When the tape recorder was on, she rarely wanted to talk, and the best conversations were when you turned it off. For you, it is the sound of her deep, opinionated voice that you want to hear, but it is too soon. You must give yourself time and believe the writing will come to life, in Martha’s voice. Not yours. Yet woven within the writing is your story. Martha and you in the context of history, revealed via your recollections.

Diane gives Kokopelli’s tummy a rub, runs downstairs and pulls the kayak into the water.
CLIMACTERIC

Not for me the gentle tease of hesitating spring
Nor again the vague unease of gravid summer.
Exultantly, I join the trees in autumnal celebration
Blazing painted defiance of heavy, thickened trunks
The flamboyant dance subtly quickened
By the premonitory breath of winter death —. MRB
BEYOND EPISTOLARITY

THE WARP, THE WEFT AND THE LOOM
No literary form is more revealing, more spontaneous or more individual than a letter. (P.D. James 2009: vii)

In the myth of *The Metamorphoses* by Ovid (1922), Arachne, the daughter of Idimion, lived on the coast of Lydia and was proud of her special craft—that of weaving beautiful tapestries and rugs. To prove that she could outdo the goddess Minerva, protectress of the art and craft of weaving, in both dexterity and the beauty of designs and colours, Arachne challenged Minerva. The tapestry woven by Minerva was of great elegance and grace, but Arachne’s was judged by the other gods as more beautiful. In a fit of rage, Minerva picked up her shuttle and struck Arachne on the head and turned her into a spider (Ovid 1922, Book Six: 1.)

For millennia women have been spinning, weaving, and sewing. The fibre arts are considered women's work (Wayland Barber 1995: 29). Two thousand years ago the handloom was brought to England by the Romans (Guest 1823: 2). When weaving on handlooms the lengthwise warp acts as a net to capture the crosswise weft threads and hold them in place. This prevents them unravelling. Collectively, the warp and weft create a piece of fabric. These handlooms were mainly operated by women (Simkin 2011). It can be argued that epistolary writing has also been seen as predominantly the domain of women (Jolly 2008: 35). Women weave narratives of
self into epistolary texts such as letters, diaries, emails, blogs and social networking (Sadlack 2005: Silverman Bowen 2004).

The choice of the epistolary genre for 'Hens Lay, People Lie' originated from my desire to write and weave a story about two women penfriends from a woman's perspective. Using my American penfriend, Mickey, my life experience, and a collection of letters and journals as research data, I set out to explore the connection between letter writing and the creation of a writing self. The novel had its genesis in my chance meeting in 1975 in outback Australia with this older American poet. Therefore, the novel is layered with actual and imagined letters, diary entries, email correspondence and literary quotes all of which are set in an Australia/USA cultural and historical context between 1975 and 2010.

Epistolarity is a versatile genre; one that allows writers opportunity to experiment with its physical nature, its form and the principles of its art. Epistolarity is notoriously difficult to define (Bray 2003: 28). The word 'epistolary' comes from the Latin word 'epistle' for 'letter'. If we suggest that epistolary books must consist of a series of letters we lock into a long tradition of 'letters only' epistolarity. Prominent books in this vein range from Lettres Portugaises (anonymous 1669), to 84 Charing Cross Road (Hanff 1970), to the more recent Life on a Refrigerator Door (Kuipers 2007) and The Antagonist (Coady 2011).

Lettres Portugaises (The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun), published anonymously by Claude Barbin in Paris, but believed by most scholars to be written by Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne, comte de Guilleragues (1996), exemplifies monologic epistolarity: the letters of only one character (Bergmann 2003: 187). It is epistolary fiction in form, comprising five letters written by a Portuguese gentlewoman to the lover who abandoned her. The letters are simply listed from one to five. On the other hand, the narrative structure for the book 84 Charing Cross Road is dialogic: the letters of two characters consisting of formal, business style letters between New York freelance writer, Helen Hanff, and a second-hand book dealer, Frank Doel. Similarly, Life on a Refrigerator Door shows the fractured relationship between a busy mother and daughter via a series of post-it-notes: a modern phenomenon in the busy twenty-first century family.
For my purposes, the 'letter only' form was too restrictive. I chose to explore the potential of a variety of epistolary forms that experiment with structure and voice, because I wanted to use narrative description to provide background to events.

For this novel and exegesis I have adopted Elizabeth Campbell's definition: 'an epistolary novel is a novel that is written as, or contains, a series of documents. The dominant forms include letters, diary and journal entries, newspaper clippings, and since the event of the internet, blogs and emails' (Campbell 1995: 334). This gave me the freedom to experiment with different structures and write from several points of view. A variety of epistolary forms is discussed in Chapter One.

Before attempting to write creative epistololarity, and use the techniques of fiction in the creation of a range of amalgamated and imagined letters, diary entries and email correspondence, I needed to immerse myself into the world of the epistolary novel. I discovered that, along with many other writers, I am indebted to those who have gone before (Woolf 1973: 9). Research revealed that many contemporary women in postcolonial cultures, in which women have been doubly oppressed, by a patriarchy itself oppressed by a chauvinistic imperialism, have written epistolary novels. More generally, during the past thirty-five years a significant number of epistolary novels by women have appeared, some of which use the traditional 'letters only' epistolary structure. Since the 1980s there have been a significant number of novels that make use of epistolary conventions in an unconventional manner (Campbell 1995: 334). These contemporary novels are experiments in style and form. They have broken free from the sentimental style of the late 17th century which continued to the early 19th century (Austen 1811: Behn 1684: Davys 1725). They reflect the versatility of the genre: versatility that allows writers opportunities to examine physical characteristics, style, content and the principles of craft (Sadlack 2005: 1).

Two examples are the acclaimed *The Colour Purple* (Walker 1983), and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver 2004). In *The Colour Purple*, the main protagonist, Celie, writes her letters to God, and later, to her sister, Nettie. Via these letters, author Alice Walker explores and reveals the marginalised world of black women living in America during the early 20th century. *We Need to talk About Kevin* consists of letters from Eva to her dead husband about their psychopathic son, Kevin. In it Shriver examines how a heinous event can impact on a town, a marriage, a family
and an individual. These books reveal how epistolary novels can highlight social issues and in turn instigate cultural change (Campbell 1995: Jolly 2008: Kauffman 1992).

The ability of the epistolary form to integrate social critique into its narratives attracted me (Sadlack 2005: 20). Often the themes and subjects explored in epistolary novels by women include aspects of women's history previously neglected in literary fiction (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000: 12). A term has been associated with this writing: herstory. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976) and Gregory Ulmer (1989) a herstory is history written from a feminist perspective, emphasising the role of women, told from a woman's point of view. Writing in the 'shed' - the space through which the shuttle passes - between fact and fiction, women are writing narratives which challenge historical metanarratives and an alleged 'political incorrectness' of the word 'history' (Detrick 2010: Nestle 2012). The purpose of using herstory is to emphasise that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories (Ellis & Berger 2003: Gadamer 1976: Ulmer 1989). Indeed, many contemporary epistolary novels tell an historical or modern herstory. These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine (Turner 1999) is the story of a feisty pioneer woman who is neither a prostitute with a heart of gold, nor a martyred stoic. We Need to Talk About Kevin (Shriver 2003) is about modern motherhood guilt and Grace Notes (Patrick 2008) reveals the female domestic world of the ageing, email-resistant, Grace. These stories, including 'Hens Lay, People Lie', challenge the boundaries of traditional epistolary metanarratives in the narrative form by enabling women to have a more idiosyncratic voice. Deborah Ohrn and Gloria Steinem (1995) further argue that every word a woman writes changes the story of the world and revises the official version.

Mickey and myself, along with many other women, are situated as 'other', making choices in a patriarchal society. My critical reading of contemporary women's epistolarity enriched my writing because these texts are written by women, tell women’s stories, and examine women’s lived experiences (Campbell 1995: 332). Many other contemporary epistolary novels such as A Mercy (Morrison 2008), which exposes what lies beneath the surface of slavery in early US history, are uniquely placed to shed light on how and why women are writing and telling their stories. They spoke to me as a woman because they told things from a woman's perspective, gave
me permission to delve deeper into my own thoughts and feelings and empowered me to write more honestly. I now want my readers to feel the same intimate connection when they read my novel.

The following seven chapters are the interwoven threads of the exegesis. A discussion investigating epistolary style, content, principles of craft and where the epistolary genre stands in respect to the literary canon leads to an exploration of women's lived experiences, and the phenomenon of écriture féminine. This relates to the problems associated with collaboration and how the tight threads of nonfiction restricted the story. The result was my decision to move from fact to fiction and subsequently into a hybrid genre. The methodological requirements of autoethnography empowered me to distance myself from the autobiographical experience and I acknowledge the importance of informal and formal mentoring as a theme in the novel. Reflection on the relationship between the two main characters in the artefact highlighted the importance of mentoring in the creation of a writing self. Also examined are the ethical contract between myself as writer and my reader, my responsibility to the novel, its genre and its dimensions, to people affected by the novel, and finally to myself. In the last chapter I explore how the emotional distancing of writing fiction can supply an ethically safe creative space. Thus, creative epistolarity takes the genre one step further: beyond epistolarity.

'Hens Lay, People Lie' evolved from herstory, to ourstory, to theirstory and finally became The Story. Detached from the autoethnographic loom, it became a separate piece of art. The joy of this creative and exegetical process is that it has taught me to explore, experiment and work with the different threads needed to create an epistolary novel, but also to recognise a dropped thread when I see it, learn how to pick it up and how to avoid making the same mistake again when I weave my next design.
Women’s letters are the product of their lived experience and culture, their education and their reading and their intellect. (Sadlack 2005: 16)

The journey of this PhD began with my passion to tell the story of my penfriend Mickey's intriguing life and our thirty-five year friendship. My first consideration was what form to use to write this story of our lived experience (Ellis & Berger 2002: 467). We had corresponded for thirty-five years and I had a fragmented and varied collection of letters, journals, poetry and limericks. Therefore it seemed a natural progression to write this narrative using the epistolary form.

I began by researching the genre and studying the works of other contemporary female epistolary writers. From those published in the last thirty years, I selected five texts to discuss throughout the exegesis. *The Colour Purple* (Walker 1983), *These is My Words* (Turner 1999), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver 2003), *The Household Guide to Dying* (Adelaide 2008) and Elizabeth Jolley's *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1984). These texts challenge the boundaries of epistolarity, are written by women, tell women's stories and examine and value women's lived experiences: they give women an authentic voice and highlight neglected life stories, and cultural positions (Altman 1982: 195: Goldsmith 1989).

Janet Gurkin Altman connects the contemporary epistolary style ‘with its experimenting with elliptical narration, subjectivity and multiplicity of points of view,
polyphony of voices, interior monologue, superimposition of time levels and presentation of simultaneous actions' to postmodernism (Altman 1982: 195). And indeed, many postmodern women writers are experimenting with ways of using the letter to remember, return, reflect and write and rewrite their lives (Campbell 1995: 336).

The steady increase over the past thirty-five years in the number of women writing autobiographically-driven stories in the epistolary genre reflects the popularity of the genre. The stories of women’s marginalised world such as the narratives of prostitutes, religious sisters, pioneers, and many females previously omitted from the pages of history, have been written (Jolly 2002: 267. Autobiography is the foundation supporting the majority of these emerging stories which give a voice to previously silenced women by examining and revealing their lived experiences and cultural positions (Brooks 2007: 54: Richardson 2000: 934). These previously repressed stories are very different from those of the previous centuries.

The long tradition of women's epistolary writing, going back to 1671, includes the letters of Madame de Sévigné who corresponded with her daughter for over thirty years (de Sévigné 1756). I soon realised that when Pauline de Simiane, Madame de Sévigné's granddaughter, decided to officially publish her dead grandmother's profuse, emotional and gossipy correspondence, she rejected any letters that dealt too closely with family matters, and any that were poorly written. Many letters were actually rewritten before publication and are therefore a biased representation of the lived experience of seventeenth-century women (Longino Farrell 1991: 2).

The majority of epistolary writing during the seventeenth-century, rather than depicting a mother-and-daughter relationship, focuses on the love and/or seduction story. This type sentimentally portrayed an innocent trusting woman who is deceived by a self-serving lustful man (Campbell & Larson 2009). The most famous example of a novel containing love letters expressing the sorrow and rage of the abandoned woman is *The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1996). This slim book, only forty-five pages in length, was first published anonymously in 1669. The monologic five letters were ostensibly written by a Portuguese gentlewoman cloistered in a Franciscan convent, to the French officer who had seduced and abandoned her. Recent scholarship has identified Gabriel de Lavergne, Vicomte de Guilleragues as
the author, but the debate about authorship continues. This book achieved instant success and spawned a host of imitations. For example, Aphra Behn, a prolific seventeenth-century dramatist of the English Restoration, used the epistolary letter form of *The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun* as a model for highly acclaimed *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684) the first English epistolary novel (Gardiner 1980: 69). Behn, however, combined the letter format with elements of drama to write the story of the wooing and seduction of Silvia by her brother-in-law, Philander. Behn's amatory, or romantic fiction, was written by a woman for women of the times (Gardiner 1980: 71).

A women's genre of writing was firmly established by the 19th century, as exemplified in many works of Jane Austen, whose literature to this day finds a dedicated readership/viewership for the many adaptations and reproductions of her texts. As is well known, in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen chose the genre of epistolarity to explore the amatory fiction of her predecessors. A letter sent from Austen's minor character, Lucy, to her ex-beau, Edward Ferrars, is featured in *Hell Hath No Fury: Women’s Letters from the End of the Affair* (Holmes 2003: 271). Austen's *Lady Susan* (2005), is an epistolary novel and it is argued that Austen's unpublished novel 'First Impressions', which was redrafted in the 1700s' to become *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), may also have been epistolary (Haker 2000). Suffice to say, *Pride and Prejudice* can be classed as an epistolary novel because it contains an unusual number of letters quoted in full.

The development of the genre across the centuries has permitted authors to explore the parameters of epistolarity such as the authorial freedom to 'emphasise postmodern fragmentation, shun essentialism, debunk universal truths, replace grand narratives with local accounts of reality, and support a plurality of viewpoints' (Jary & Jary 2000: 475). For instance, epistolary novels like *Woman Between Mirrors* (Cunha 1989), *So Long a Letter* (Ba 1981) and *A Love Letter From a Flying Moon* (Griffiths 2011), blur the boundary between letter writing and novel and use different forms of the epistolary genre to tell their story. These forms range from Ba's (1981) traditional letter format to diaries, journals, emails and even post-it notes (Kuipers 2007).
There are many epistolary novels by women which use a traditional epistolary structure. Two examples are *A Woman of Independent Means* (Forsythe Hailey 1978) and the more recent *Grace Notes* (Patrick 2008). Both books contain identifiable letters. I recall reading Helen Hanff’s *84 Charing Cross Road* (Hanff 1970) when I first dreamt of writing Mickey’s story. Hanff’s letters come in pairs and are a dialogue between Hanff and book seller, Frank Doel. The letters are only one page or less in length, and are peppered with literary quotes and book titles. Hanff’s letters use conventional alignment with the sender’s address and date in the top left-hand corner and are signed at the bottom. It occurred to me that Mickey’s actual handwritten letters could be replicas of this format.

When I began writing the novel I initially used this formal format, but I soon found it too limiting. Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey in the introduction to *A Woman of Independent Means* (1978) comments, ‘Letters are a very dramatic device, spanning time, eliminating the need for narrative description and most important, enlisting the imagination of the reader to supply the offstage action’ (Forsythe Hailey 1978: viii). That seemed quite a challenge for both myself as writer and for my imagined reader. Yet, unlike Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, I wanted to use narrative description to provide ‘off-stage’ action and events rather than leave it all to the reader’s imagination.

I began to search for other contemporary forms of espistolarity as a possible model for the artefact. Australian author, Debra Adelaide, in *The Household Guide to Dying* (Adelaide 2008), has a journalistic ‘Dear Abby’ style. At first this was appealing. As Janet Altman points out, an important characteristic of epistolarity is the confidential, even confessional, nature of the letter. She adds, ‘...it is not surprising to find the priestly confessor figure’ (Altman 1982: 62). The main character in ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’ is not a ‘priestly confessor’ figure because the content of Martha’s letters are never confessional, or approach the closeness and emotional content of many contemporary examples of the genre. I did not want Martha, the main character modelled on penfriend Mickey, to sound like an ‘agony aunt’ (Craig 2012). She is an older woman providing advice and maternal wisdom, but on a literary, not personal level.

I experimented with using a diary format in the hope that this form would enable me to reveal, through the characters, Martha and Diane, our respective voices while
providing insight into our cultural, social and literary worlds (Sinor 2002: 5). However, according to Imelda Whelehan:

Diaries are not just about the recording of events and occasions, but often have a confessional function and this involves the reader in a voyeuristic relationship with the protagonist. For that reason, even fictional diaries may seem unbearably personal at times and, at their best, might evoke the sense of guilt prompted by reading an actual diary. (Whelehan 2002: 22)

A diary gives permission for the reader to look into the intimate thoughts and problems of another. This intimate, personal style of diary writing is reflected in Nancy Turner's epistolary trilogy (1999, 2005, 2007) about the life and times of Sarah Agnes Prine. Turner tells Sarah's life story through the device of a diary with several letters interspersed throughout the text. Turner's novels contain private thoughts and candid discussions of life, sex, family and friends. This approach was too intimate and revealing for my story.

Furthermore, I did not want 'Hens Lay, People Lie' to follow Helen Fielding's 'Chick Lit' example, *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1997), which focuses on a woman whose daily success and failure rate is documented by calorie counts, cigarettes smoked and alcohol consumed (Whelehan 2002: 12). Nor did I wish to emulate the level of traumatic personal emotional exposure found in the classic, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank 1947), about a Dutch-Jewish teenager who kept a diary when hiding from the Nazis in occupied Holland before being betrayed and dying in Belsen concentration camp.

The more I considered the diary format, and investigated the prolific work of French-Cuban diarist, Anaïs Nin (1954), the more I realised that the protagonists in my novel would not reveal or share with each other the confidential contents of a personal diary. Thus the diary format was only appropriate for the half page prologue of 'Hens Lay, People Lie' because it facilitated a space for the protagonist, Martha, to give the reader a one-off glimpse into the depths of her despair at the suicide of her forty-year-old daughter, Merril:
It should never have happened. Not like that... I tried to gather her in my arms when she tumbled to earth. Lift her out of blackness. She left me grieving in the dark... ( Artefact: 4)

Another example of the modern epistolary novel is Winterson's controversial *The PowerBook* [sic] (2001). It differs from others in the genre by utilising the technique of electronic medium of emails rather than traditional 'penmanship'. The novel is set in cyberspace. The main protagonist, Ali, is a virtual narrator in a networked world of e-writing. She lets the reader choose who they want to be, their location, character, and even the clothes they wear (Kellaway 2000).

In contrast to Winterson's novel, computer-generated emails were too modern for the 1975-1995 section of 'Hens Lay, People Lie', yet towards the end of the novel brief emails were included to reveal the advent of new technology which added an element of immediacy to the communication. Emails reveal the character, Diane, becoming more confident in her own skin, while underscoring the effects of old age on Martha and her reluctance to accept changes in every aspect of her life. To keep in touch with the computer savvy, novel writing Diane, Martha, at ninety years of age, with the help of the local librarian, learns to send an email.

Dear Diane. Maybe I should call you dsimpson@yahoo? Kind Ginny has set up this email account for me at the library, but I still don't know what I am doing.

( Artefact: 208)

This narrative moment in 'Hens Lay, People Lie' captured through the email exchange, reveals a dramatic shift in the relationship between Martha and Diane.

For some time, I remained in search of a narrative structure for the 1975-1995 section of 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. Elizabeth Jolley's *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1984) became a seminal text for me. This story is an example of an epistolary novel written in continuous prose. The only whole letter is Miss Peabody's first letter to the novelist (Jolley 1984: 1-3). This initial letter changes both Miss Peabody's and the ageing author, Diana Hopewell's lives, by providing them both with a sympathetic, understanding reader. Jolley also uses letter fragments to weave parallel stories into
the narrative. In effect, reader, writer, and text are fused. Characters are readers and writers; while readers and writers are characters. As Susan Gillett observes, ‘by manipulating genres, Jolley manipulates ethical attitudes and constantly reminds the reader that her work is a work of fiction, not reality’ (Gillett 1991: 106). Jolley’s book remains predominantly epistolary in that the fragments of letters reveal the story of penfriends.

To purposefully subvert the traditional notion of the epistolary genre, I creatively experimented with letter fragments, journal entries, limericks and double dactyls, and used different points of view and voices within the text. I also tried different styles and fonts in an attempt to reflect the age, education and character of the main protagonists. For Martha I chose a formal, old-fashioned loopy ‘Lucida Calligraphy’. My choice for the younger Diane was the younger, print-like font, ‘Baskerville Old Face’. A ‘Courier New’ computer printout style was appropriate to represent the voice of the computer-literate older Diane.

In a fractured, postmodern way, I experimented with embedded dialogue (without quotation marks) in the narrative, and used a combination of prose interspersed with letter fragments, but also added journal entries, limericks and poetry. These intertwined epistolary threads of letters, combined with prose and poetry, provide insights into the emotional and psychological motives of the main characters and are evidence of their increasing self-awareness.

Once I had seized upon the postmodern, unconventional, and experimental epistolary form to write my story, I became concerned with the legitimacy of the epistolary novel as a genre. Every writer dreams of having their writing valued. Yet arguably, women are socially constructed to write in informal creative ways: diaries, journals, personal letters and emails. However, women’s epistolary writing can be dismissed and considered inferior in terms of a literary canon (Croker 2010).

The love letter was viewed as a literary form in which a woman’s passionate and emotional nature found its expression. Linda Kauffman notes that literary history and epistolary tradition lead one to expect women’s letters and novels to focus on private emotions (Kauffman 1992: xxiii). Such emotional writing was criticised for its
structural and grammatical imperfections, rendering it invalid, in the eyes of men, as true literary material (Gilroy & Verhoeven 200; Sinor 2002; Smith & Watson 1998).

However, Erin Sadlack, in her thesis *In Writing It May Be Spoke*, makes the distinction that, far from being personalised sentimental narratives, 'women’s letters are the product of their lived experience and culture, their education and their reading and their intellect' (Sadlack 2005: 16). This is evident in many epistolary novels, including *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance* (Jolley 1984) and *The Star Garden* (Turner 2007), where both authors explore the marginalisation of women, lesbianism, loneliness and old age. Female marginalisation is also evident in the works of Austen and Brontë.

Jane Austen (1813) and Charlotte Brontë (1933) are considered two of the most widely read and beloved writers in English literature (Southham 1987: 24), yet their work was deemed marginalised by virtue of their gender and by virtue of their chosen form, including epistolarity, and by the very fact that their work was popular (Kenyon 1992; Wells 2010). Within their popular narratives sat biting social commentary and representation of women at odds with the social mores of the day (Butler 2004). Whereas, in the majority of nineteenth-century novels written by men, the female protagonists were constructed as religious, modest, passive, submissive, and domestic (Serrano 2010).

This struggle by women for self-representation and recognition has continued in colonial cultures where the genre of letter writing was perceived as a female form and therefore trivialised (Jolly 2008: 24). According to Erin Sadlack, this trivialisation stems from women’s historical marginalisation from the public sphere (Sadlack 2005: 4). Impeded from occupying the authoritative voice of ‘philosophy’ and ‘science’, women’s voices were located in the realm of the ‘other’ most notably the arts and particularly through epistolary writing (Jones 1993: 107). However, Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven argue that rather than letter writing itself being the particular province of women, letter writing is an influential rhetoric that persists in Western literary circles. They claim that letter writing ‘...equates epistolary femininity and feminine epistolarity, a rhetoric that derives largely from a particular view of the eighteenth-century novel and its association with women’ (Gilroy & Verhoeven 2000: 1).
More recent scholars argue that the epistolary form is now accepted as part of the literary mainstream (Gubernatis 2007; Jolley 2008). During the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s ‘feminists reinvented the image of the woman letter writer’ (Jolly 2008: 3). In the same way as Brontë and Austen had ‘reinvented’ the nineteenth-century heroine, feminists symbolically tore up love letters to an absent man and wrote letters exploring questions of sexuality, separatism and strategy (Jolly 2008: 40). This may have contributed to a social and critical climate in which the epistolary genre could flourish (Campbell 1995: 341). Anthologies that showcase women’s letters such as *800 Years of Women’s Letters* (Kenyon 1992) and *Letters of the Century* (Gunwald 2008), which contains four hundred and twenty-three letters, are evidence of a consistently developing genre. However, it is interesting to note that there is no mention of the epistolary novel in important literary histories from Britain, the United States of America and Australia such as *The Book History Reader* (McCleery 2001) and *The English Novel, An Introduction* (Eagleton 2004).

I found this showcasing of women’s letters encouraging. However, in spite of the rise in the respect afforded epistolary writing, the primary issue for me was whether epistolarity as a literary form was the logical form in which to tell this story. My challenge was that there was not just one story. There were multiple stories to tell: there was ‘herstory’; Mickey’s story of a world-travelled poet who became a mentor to me, a woman thirty years her junior; and ‘mystory’ of creating a writing self and finding my voice in the telling of my story. Our letters made it ‘ourstory’, a narrative of two marginalised women. How was I to weave these stories into an individualised yet cohesive pattern? I decided this could be achieved by ensuring the three main characters in the novel had their own distinctive voice. This meant deciding which points of view would be suitable for the protagonists: penfriends, Martha and Diane, and the novelist voice of the mature Diane.

In ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’, all letters, journal entries and epistolary sections are in first-person narration and are, I believe, the authentic voices of the characters. Fact and fiction remain blurred with the letter fragments remaining in first-person to emulate what Linda Kauffman contends is the traditional *je crois te parler* (I think I’m talking to you). This motif informs all epistolary production and writing and nurtures the illusion of speaking with one who is absent (Kauffman 1992: xix).
First person narration draws the reader's attention to the narrator (Nunning 2007: 91). The reader has the sensation that he/she is being spoken to by a person who is telling her own experience. To write the characters' voices with hopefully the appearance of authenticity meant including poor grammar, clipped words and quirks of speech. This did not sit well with my professional writing training to have Martha swearing and Diane talking in clichés. On reflection, as a writer I was aware that this novel was part of a PhD and could be criticised for grammatical imperfections (Jensen 1991: 2). Every cliché and colloquialism jarred. What writer has not experienced an enthusiastic member of a writing group, when workshopping, triumphantly pouncing on a cliché. Initially I removed every one. However, after revisiting Erin Sadlack's thesis *In Writing It May Be Spoke* (2005), and Turner's epistolary novel *These Is My Words* (1999), I re-discovered that my quest for a realistic voice for my characters was integral to the telling of this story and gave nuanced voice to each protagonist. I put back all the clichés, 'goddamnits' and 'gals' because I was committed to privileging the voice of my characters. By honouring women's voices I joined other women in telling 'theirstory' (Ellis & Berger 2003: 470).

Martha is the main protagonist. As the novel starts with her story, the reader is taken into her mind and experiences the story from her intimate first-person point of view. This choice, I believe, privileged Martha's voice over the younger Diane's, which is written in the third-person. The power of first-person point of view is evident in Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2004). This romantic tale about Henry, a Chicago librarian with a genetic disorder that causes him to involuntarily time travel, and the long suffering Claire, is told in first-person narration. This makes compelling reading as the reader slips, not only through time, but also between the two stories. However, when used for both characters, this voice limits the reader's knowledge of scenes or events the characters have not observed. Story information can only be learned by inference (Bone 2011).

Initially, the younger Diane's voice was also in first-person, but the more I wrote the more I wanted to honour Martha's voice. The further emotional distancing of third-person narration was essential for me to write the character Diane which was based on my own experience. Third-person narration also allowed more flexibility within the narrative and allowed me to describe Diane's actions, reveal story information and events to fill in the gaps not covered by letters. This narrative device is a technique I
used to reinforce the characterisation of the younger Diane and to establish and maintain the dramatic tension between penfriends Diane and Martha.

An example of the benefits of third-person narration is A.S Byatt's bestselling contemporary epistolary novel *Possession* (1990). Winner of the 1990 Booker Prize, this story is about two contemporary scholars, each studying a Victorian poet, and the reconstruction of their subject's secret extramarital affair through sixty-two letters, journal entries, poems and modern scholarly analysis of the period (Jeffers 2002: 139). The bulk of the narrative is in third-person narration which takes Byatt's reader beyond the protagonists' experience. Indeed, it is an intellectual mystery and triumphant love story in which the reader is propelled beyond Roland and Maud's thoughts and feelings into a world of academia, love and despair. What emerges is an extraordinary counterpoint of ideas and passions. By using third-person narration, Byatt is able to cover events beyond the correspondence between the characters (Arthur 2008).

In 'Hens Lay, People Lie', the novelist's voice of the mature Diane has gone through many reincarnations. At first, this older voice was realised through first-person narration, but the 'I' pronoun did not allow me to include a whole community of writers (Gerard 2001: 56). A shift to the more reflective second-person narration was a breakthrough. The 'you' was a way of inviting the reader to become part of a community of writers (Gerard 2001: 57). It is also the voice of the writer who is writing (Carter 2012). Like Jolley, in Miss Peabody's Inheritance (1984) I wanted the novelist to represent a community of writers and, via her voice, provide insights into the highs and lows of writing a novel.

By privileging the second-person narration of the older Diane at specific narrative points within 'Hens Lay, People Lie' I hoped that the reader would relate to the text as occurring in the immediate present (Richardson 2006: 14). This voice was used to entice the reader into the story and yet it provided the distancing I needed to tell the story (Fludernic 1994: 445).

However, the novelist Diane's second-person voice addresses the reader who is holding the book (Robbe-Grillet & Howard 1989). This, in fact, was also a decision with ethical implications that I was unaware of at the time. In Chapter Six I will make
clear it was intrinsic to the way I could tell Mickey's story, *mystory*, and *ourstory*, while inviting the reader in.

The intimacy involved in second-person narration makes that voice notoriously difficult to maintain over large blocks of text (Wilson 2011). Therefore, I have kept it to small bursts of no more than one page in length. I used this voice to add light relief and to reveal the writer's journey. The decision to introduce the voice of a mature Diane who is a novelist was, and may still be, problematic. This mature voice, woven throughout the text, represents the voice of the writerly self and is similar to the author's voice in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*:

> I have a headmistress in mind, you know, a tremendously responsible sort of woman, the novelist's large handwriting was black on large sheets of paper. (Jolley 1984: 1)

Unlike Jolley's 'author', in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, the danger was that the voice of the novelist in my artefact could be considered by the reader as intrusive and disruptive to the flow of the story. My attempt at resolution was long and circular as I moved through readings of Hélène Cixous (2004), Laurel Richardson (2005), and Linda Kauffman (1992). Despite the enlightenment of these thinkers I do not feel I have reached a resolution, because even though this character tops and tails the story, I am still not convinced that this voice will remain in the published artefact. This debate will continue to evolve in further drafts as the novel interacts with agents and publishers, but this is beyond the life of this PhD project. Campbell and Wasco claim that 'the ultimate aim of feminist research is to capture women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as a source of knowledge' (Campbell & Wasco 2000: 783). To bring my two main characters to life and tell a *theirstory* I researched the theories of feminist thinkers and their interpretations of what they term *écriture féminine*. This is discussed in detail in the following chapter.
Chapter Two: Gathering the threads

Feminisms and *écriture féminine*

Feminism is a perspective, a way of seeing, and epistemology, a way of knowing, and an ontology, a way of being in the world. (Allen & Walker 1992: 201)

According to Rebecca Campbell and Sharon Wascoe (2000), much of contemporary feminist scholarship and research strives to give voice to women's lives that have been ignored, uncover hidden knowledge contained within the experiences of women and instigate social change (Cixous 1997: 249; Campbell & Wasco 2000: 783). In a patriarchal society, women are seen as the 'other' and therefore often silenced. Feminism challenges this silencing (Maynard 1994: 18). During the course of my research for this PhD I found myself returning time and time again to the work of Hélène Cixous.

I’ve discovered a kindred soul [Hélène Cixous] who speaks to my heart as well as my mind. More often than not I find myself nodding as I read her thoughts and theories on when, where, why and how women write their stories. (Journal One 2008: 63)

Studying the works of Cixous such as *The Newly Born Woman* (1975) and her translated notebooks (Cixous 2004) led me to visit and analyse the theories of other feminist thinkers and writers such as Clarice Lispector (1986), bell hooks [sic] (1990), Carolyn Heilbrun (2002) and Margareta Jolly (2011). By examining and reflecting on
their theories and practice, I began to apply feminist theories, where 'femininity' is constructed rather than innate, to my own life and work. The writings of these women articulated perfectly the position of women such as Mickey and myself. As I noted previously, we were situated as 'other', living and making choices in a postcolonial, patriarchal society. This insight empowered me to critique my own life and question where I was going, but most of all, to question 'why' I made and continue to make my 'choices'.

Like Lispector, 'while there are questions that need answers I will go on writing' (Lispector 1986: 11). However, this constant questioning demanded courage as I crafted the characters in 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. I consider a woman's voice—her ability to express herself either verbally, in writing, or any other way—one of her greatest gifts. It is an essential step towards empowering women because this is how women affirm their sense of self and reveal their inner selves (Cosgrove & McHugh 2000: 821). I wanted my characters, Martha and Diane, to have a voice, one that expressed aspects of their personalities, character traits and eccentricities. Carolyn Ellis explains that recording our stories 'allows for the silenced voices of others and the silenced parts of ourselves to speak themselves' (Ellis 1997: 130). This challenges the 'oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing' (Tierney & Lincoln 1997: 4). For me, the challenge became to write this story and to connect with the reader in a way that made the gaps, silences and omissions as much a part of the narrative as the written text on the page.

Abigail Brooks claims that 'much of contemporary feminist scholarship and research strives to give voice to women's lives that have been silenced and ignored' (Brooks 2007: 54). In her essay, 'Le rire de la méduse' (The Laugh of the Medusa) (1986), Hélène Cixous outlined her argument for the organic emergence of a new style of writing she termed *écriture féminine* that would allow women to transform their history and capture the opportunity to speak (Cixous 1986: 312). Although accessible to men and women alike, *écriture féminine* is viewed as the way women experiment with the internal structuring of words to represent and make meaning of their experience.

In a similar vein, Susan Dunn acknowledges that *écriture féminine* writes the female body and female difference in narratives but considers that it 'is not determined by
biological difference but arises in opposition to the rigid binary structures of patriarchal order’ (Dunn 2012). To Cixous, the practice of écriture féminine is part of an ongoing concern with exclusion, with the transformation of subjectivity, and the struggle for identity (Conley 2012). Finding their voice empowers women to challenge oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing and gives women the opportunity, via their stories, to transform their history. Letters are written by men as well as women and embody complex social codes (Jolly 2008: 3). However, I see my exchange of letters with Mickey explicitly as a form of women’s art, certainly as a creative process. Like other life-writing forms, letters can allow a glimpse into the way women write and women’s willingness to prioritise relationships among themselves, particularly in contrast to men (Jolly 2008: 36).

In her thesis, *Towards an écriture féminine: Woolf, DuPlessis, Cixous, and the Emerging Discursive Tradition in Women’s Online Diaries*, Deborah Silverman Bowen claims that:

> There is an emerging new form of women's discourse which is proving to be almost exclusively the purview of women writers. This kind of women's writing is not a divisive movement or discordant act, seeking to separate women from men, or women's writings from those of men, rather, women's writing is simply an acknowledgement of the differences and a development of a new discourse, neither derivative nor appropriated. (Silverman Bowen 2004: 61)

In fact, Cixous explains that this emerging form of women's writing has 'the potential to circumvent and reformulate existing structures through the inclusion of other experience' (Cixous 1988: 29). Through my research I discovered that the boundaries of écriture féminine continued to shift, defying definition. I found support in Mary Klages' position. She maintains that écriture féminine cannot, and should not be defined because to define it is to pin it down, to limit it, to anchor it within a patriarchal stable system of structure (Klages 2006: 102). Cixous herself in *The Laugh of the Medusa* suggested that the practice of écriture féminine can never be theorised, enclosed, encoded, coded, which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist (Cixous 1992: 313).
Silverman Bowen claims that any woman is free to engage in *écriture féminine*, but it is only when women come together and adopt the ideological premises of feminist thinkers like Cixous, that it is possible to legitimately argue for the presence of what Silverman Bowen defines as '...a larger broad-based reinterpretation of linguistic and writerly mores' (Silverman Bowen 2004: 60).

Insights gained from my review of feminist thinkers and their interpretations of *écriture féminine* now inform a new understanding of my writing practice. Whereas my first novel *Pickle to Pie* (Whitting 2007) was a male story written from the perspective of a male protagonist, 'Hens Lay, People Lie' is a story about, and told by women. It represents a significant change in my artistic practice. I have joined other women writers weaving stories with their own coloured threads. I belong to a community of women writers telling neglected life stories and feeling empowered to experiment with genre, voice, structure and style.

Marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism leading to the development of the study of postmodernism, as explored by Hassan (1987), Ashcroft et al. (1989), Lyotard (1992) and Seidman (1994), among others, became part of my exegetical readings and my research into the form and nature of the story itself. Judith Butler, on the other hand, acknowledges her debt to Foucault when she questions the political intent of the bundling together of a variety of epistemological and theoretical positions under the banner of the 'postmodern':

I don't know about the term "postmodernism" but if there is a point, and a fine point, to what I perhaps understand better as post-structuralism, it is that power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms. (Butler 2004: 67)

I recognise the synergy between postmodernism and post-structuralism and many theorists of various persuasions, including feminists, have adopted the postmodern/post-structural philosophies that I explored when writing 'Hens Lay, People Lie' (Jary & Jary 2000; Ozumba 2002; Sarap 1993). These include shunning essentialism, debunking universal truths, replacing grand narratives with local accounts of reality, seeing the world without absolute values and supporting a plurality of viewpoints (Jary & Jary 2000: 475). A close examination of these theories is beyond the scope of this exegesis, but I saw my role less as a postmodern analyst
and more as an artist with a critical focus. My aim was not to attempt to evaluate the accuracy of a worldview or argument, but to be suspicious of all claims to truth and ‘to map out the contours of a discourse and investigate its implications for relations of power’ (Smith & Riley 2009: 117).

My research list of prominent feminists is endless, the theories endless. There are so many variations of feminist theory that it is now more accurate to talk of feminisms. It seems that little has changed since I studied first and third wave feminisms. (Journal Two 2008: 34)

According to Jary and Jary, the main concern of feminism is women’s oppression and subordination to men (Jary & Jary 2000: 211). Bell hooks takes this argument further and explains that to be a feminist is to want to end sexism in all its forms and to liberate males and females from domination, oppression and sexist roles by eradicating the ‘ideology of domination’ that she sees permeating Western culture (hooks 1981: 195).


To understand the motives behind the actions of my characters I felt I needed to understand their position in society or, more importantly, how they perceived their position within their culture, and why they felt that way. In the process, I had to interrogate my own beliefs, that web of meaning by which all events are interpreted and all political actions measured (Holman-Jones 2005; 783).

As suggested above, for centuries and across cultures, women's stories have been neglected and forgotten compared to the many thousands of men's lives recognised and recorded (Brooks 2007: 55). According to Joyce McCarl Nielsen, women's culture, history and lives have remained 'underground and invisible and relegated to the underside of men's culture, history and lives' (McCarl Nielsen 1990: 10). To uncover the hidden knowledge that women have cultivated from living on the margins, Judith Cook and Patricia Leavy make the case that ordinary, or lowbrow
cultural objects such as letters, can be transformed into texts with deeper significance (Cook 1983: Leavy 2007).

Leavy’s argument regarding the value of ordinary cultural objects led me back to my collection of letters as primary research material. I began to read them as complex texts, to be interpreted on a number of levels. The paper used, the pen, ballpoint pen or pencil, the script of the message, or the message itself, and language used (Nichols 2004; Sinor 2002). Analysis of these characteristics revealed much about the history of the letter and more importantly for a writer, the imagined history of the person who wrote it.

Some of Mickey’s letters, written in longhand with black ballpoint pen, are on yellow paper. Whenever I see handwriting on yellow paper I always imagine Mickey, hunched over her writing pad and complaining about the heat of an Arizona summer. In ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’ I had Diane question this use of yellow paper and in the process, was able to reveal many details and insights into Martha and her life such as age, place and habits.

The last two years of Martha's letters are in loopy script scrawled on bright yellow paper. Why yellow? Maybe the lone general store in Portal, Arizona only stocked one colour? Why didn’t she buy a white pad on her monthly shopping trip to the larger town of Geriton? Maybe yellow was easier on ninety-year-old eyes. (Artefact: 6)

The letters also revealed the hidden world of a shared women’s experience of relationships, marriage, childrearing, work and domestic duties. What is left unsaid in letters can be revealing. There can be trust and an unstated understanding between women which can remain unsaid or unarticulated on paper. Because of shared experience, it is simply understood (Allen & Walker 1992: 199).

In Chapter Five of ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’, this shared experience is revealed when Diane, writing to Martha, glances at the kitchen clock. She hastily concludes the letter with, ‘Sorry. Must go. Six o’clock’ (Artefact: 31). This final comment underlines the mutually recognised family dinnertime and Diane’s reason for the abrupt end to her letter. By unconsciously revealing the time constraints placed on a woman in the
domestic realm, Diane signals an unspoken shared cultural experience that other women implicitly understand.

Abigail Brooks argues that the family is patriarchy's key socialising institution because it is able to introduce control and conformity where political and other authorities cannot reach (Brooks 2007: 64). This is particularly pertinent in 'Hens Lay, People Lie' given that, bowing to social expectations and pressures, the character Diane left school at fourteen and was married by nineteen, and Martha, at twenty-one, gave up her dream of a career in biology to marry her thirty-six year old college professor. For a woman to marry and participate in family life often meant surrendering to the norms of the time. Similarly, Kate Millett explains that the cultural norm was taking the name of her husband, moving to her partner's residence, and often trading domestic services for financial support (Millett 2000: 45).

My theoretical readings around patriarchy and ideology propelled me forward and informed my decision to experiment with the character arc for Diane. For example, late in the novel, Diane takes a clinical, critical and even harsh look at her friend Martha. She recognises how socially controlled and socially determined both their early womanhood and domestic roles have been. Inevitably, this recognition of herself and Martha as the ‘other’ in a culture in which women are traditionally voiceless and powerless (Smith 1990:12) forms the climax of the narrative. Something was missing in their lives. I saw it as my role as author to show what it was: for Diane it was a lack of education and for Martha a lack of recognition of her scientific skills. This insight enabled me to write characters that were more well-rounded, to write them showing faults and weaknesses as well as celebrating their strengths.

The analysis of my exchange of letters with Mickey enabled me to understand how my characters could be shaped by their socially constructed history and why they would see themselves as undervalued and powerless within society. I was then able to fill in the blanks of unspoken disempowerment hidden in their letters and to write the silences that women readers may fill in (Barthes 1987; hooks 1990). This helped me create and place my characters into a fictionalised world of women striving to find their place in society. I saw that many of my personal beliefs and practices aligned with those of a wider female experience and a new sensitivity now informs my writing...
of marginalised women as evidenced in the writing of Martha and Diane (Leavy 2009: 149).

It would appear that most of the 20th century women characters in contemporary epistolary novels have suffered some sort of patriarchal oppression ranging from marital rape to being considered the chattels of men. (Journal 2 2008: 3)

I was surprised when a trusted colleague remarked that Martha was an unlikeable character. I revisited my writing of Martha to see if she was in danger of becoming a stereotype, that of a woman completely subservient to her famous husband. I also checked if I was unconsciously perpetuating sexist roles and therefore the ideology of domination and oppression. It was possible that my colleague was reacting, as many women still do, to a character that reflects their own powerless position in society. My new understanding helped me to realise that I was guilty of all offences. The result was a revised draft.

In the new draft, although Martha, the character, remained situated within a male-dominated scientific culture, she was still plagued by moments of self-doubt. Over the period of the penfriendship, Martha became a strong, opinionated and vocal character obsessed by environmental, political and social issues. Inevitably, the penfriendship needed to reflect both protagonists' changed life views over the period of their correspondence. By applying my personal observations and reactions, as well as thoughts from my academic reading to the novel, I observed that 'Hens Lay, People Lie' had moved beyond ourstory to become a representation of theirstory, (Ellis & Berger 2003; Ulmer 1989).

I am not writing the lives of female archetypes of Madonna or whore. I am representing a generation of women, ordinary women struggling in the domestic realm of the 20th and 21st century. (Journal 1 2008: 90)

Recognising that there are multiple stories within one narrative prompted me to research how other women were writing and weaving their stories into the fabric of society.
Contemporary creative epistolary women’s writing is a subversive form of writing that values the day-to-day existence of women, and produces colourful, individual and experimental narratives, underpinned by shared experiences. The epistolary novels now emerging radically rewrite women’s lives in a postmodern genre. Creative epistolarity reflects postmodern philosophy with its fragmentation, repetitiveness, unconventional use of language and abandonment of chronology (Allan & turner 2010; Hassan 1987).

To write ’Hens Lay, People Lie’ I had to reach inside myself and create a new fiction. Over thirty years ago, Cixous explained that women must write themselves, and realise that ‘in order to truly write as/from themselves they must reach inside and create their own stories’ (Cixous 1980: 309). Nineteen years later, Carolyn Heilbrun reinforced Cixous’ argument and took the discussion further when she said:

> We live our lives through texts. They come to us like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form and medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (Heilbrun 1999: 37)

In the process of writing this story, like Drusilla Modjeska, I found ’...the story I did not know, the image and narrative I struggled to bring, like myself, into being’ (Modjeska 1994: 31-32).

I now write in my own style, my own voice, knowing that the more I understand myself, the more the colour and pattern of my narrative threads will change as I weave my colours into the vibrant tapestry that is écriture féminine. To write this particular emotional, personal and complex story, I needed the safe space provided by fiction. That safe space remains the 'shed' between the threads on the loom and it is this space that I explore in the following chapter.
Chapter Three: Weaving the threads

Between fact and fiction

For nonfiction, the writer stands outside the project and creatively interprets evidence based material; for fiction, the writer stands inside the project and creatively develops the possibilities. (Banks 2011: 2)

In this chapter I explore why the move into a hybrid genre between fact and fiction was necessary. In particular I address the problems that I faced in the process of creating a story which aimed to capture the identities of the protagonists involved. The main challenge was to resolve a conflict between Mickey and myself of scientific epistemology and artistic hermeneutics as ways of knowing. In the process of resolving this problem I discovered that fiction allowed me to use, but also move beyond, the theoretical framework of feminism and to approach writing ethically (see Chapter Six). It privileged the research data, yet still honoured life experiences. My newly-found position as an author of a mediating text between fact and fiction gave me the confidence to enter the safe space of the 'shed'—a newly formed sense of the possibilities of epistolary writing. I discovered the safe writing space I needed to tell this story and negotiate the tight threads of nonfiction which bound my story.

Non-fiction is based on facts, whereas the strength of creative nonfiction, including creative epistololarity, is in the art of storytelling. Therefore, my approach necessitated writing about facts 'using a wide range of literary techniques' (Gutkind 2001; 173). I found myself in the widening gap between the traditional, but now porous borders of
nonfiction and fiction, in a new subgenre, borrowing from both. These porous borders challenge the perceived authenticity expected of autobiography and biography (Heyne 2001; Richardson 2000; Steinberg & Root 2007). This is further discussed in Chapter Four.

In the beginning I questioned how to tell the story of my friendship with Mickey. It was auto/biography, by which I mean both biography and autobiography, not only because it wove my words with those of my penfriend but also, as revealed in Chapter One, because the lives of penfriends are inextricably intertwined (Binhammer 1993: 107). Biographical life-writing is variously described as art, fiction, a literary endeavour, history, science and sociology (Backscheider 1999; Bowen 1968; Petrie 1981). There is a perception that a biographer's task is easier than that of a novelist because biographers have a ready-made plot of birth, death, education, career, and marriage (Bowen 1968). As Backscheider points out, it is not that simple. She argues that, 'the biographer is explorer, inquirer, hypothesiser, compiler, researcher, Researcher Extraordinaire, selector, and writer' (Backscheider 1999: xxi). Taking this point further, Ann Oakley maintains that the enterprise of auto/biography, '...inhabits a liminal world at the intersections of fact and fiction, (social) science and art, objective narrative and personal life story' (Oakley 2010: 435).

Another difficulty was that Mickey came from a direct epistemological scientific lineage, which was reinforced when she married her herpetologist professor. Her life was dedicated to biology and science. Whereas I had been moving via interpretative autoethnographical informed research into a hermeneutic way of knowing. This difference is akin to the weaving of cotton and wool.

When weaving, the tension depends mainly on the threads used. If you use cotton, the more you weave the more the tension increases. This makes it more difficult to open a 'shed', the space between the warp and weft where the shuttle passes to create the design. Eventually, the tension can become so great that the warp threads break. Wool has far more elasticity than cotton, and it is possible to weave an intricate design while maintaining an even tension. This ensures that the space between the warp and the weft the 'shed' where the weaving occurs remains open. In my experience, writing nonfiction is like weaving with cotton, and writing fiction is weaving with wool.
However, with my writing there was a further problem: threads can tangle. When writing about Mickey's life it was impossible to separate myself from her stories, and I discovered as Kendall suggests in *The Art of Biography* (1965) that 'any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within' (95). Mark Freeman takes this even further when he questions the authenticity of biography and autobiography, noting that:

> Autobiography involves an interpretive engagement with the ostensibly unrepeatable past, by looking backwards and situating the movement of the events within a more or less coherent narrative form. (Freeman 2007: 122)

I took comfort from Freeman's claim that the 'comprehensive auto/biographical study of lives is an important way of understanding the human condition' (Freeman 2007: 123).

In the aftermath of postmodernism, notions of 'truth' are questionable. My research into a hermeneutical way of knowing revealed that for me, there is no ultimate 'truth' but rather an open-ended presentation of Mickey and my realities. Instead of an inflexible outcome, my hermeneutical studies ended with common themes and shared meanings (de Mann 2000: 192). This in turn questioned the epistemological framework of Mickey's arguments. As de Mann says, 'The binary opposition between fiction and fact is no longer relevant: in any differential system, it is the space between the entities that matters' (de Mann 2000: 197). My desire was to understand the story underpinning our penfriendship and Mickey was insisting that the story had to be 'true'.

I began my artefact by attaching my auto/biographical strands to the methodological framework of my loom by writing a nonfictional epistolary account of our friendship. However, I soon encountered a problem. Mickey was not a reliable witness on events of her life. Facts, dates and events supplied by Mickey, after extensive research, often turned out to be wrong, and Mickey did not take kindly to being corrected. This reinforced Linda Hutcheon's argument that, 'to write one's history is to order, to give form to disparate facts, in short, to fictionalise' (Hutcheon 1987: 96-97). As Ann Oakley observes:
Autobiographies are not a comprehensive collection of facts, but construed narratives. They offer a coherent retrospective life story which has been manufactured from the actual fabric of life; a mythological rearranging of one's life history (Oakley 2010: 426).

I'm bogged down in research, and the artefact is in my terms, pedestrian. Where are the sights, sounds and dialogue that give a story life? Where is the passion? (Journal 3 2009: 236)

Mickey insisted on the inclusion of everyone related to the story because, 'they were there'. To include them all would result in a cast of hundreds. Committed to her scientific principles, Mickey also wanted the story to be a 'truthful' reconstruction of time, place and people. This was when I realised that we were coming from two different traditions, her epistemology and my hermeneutics. Yet, as Barthes argues, we are all created by our underlying cultural ideologies. For him, 'ideology permeates all of society, even language; it has no territorial privilege granting judgement from some point outside itself' (Barthes 1987: 109). He also contends that in writing autobiography, we are in effect reading and writing our lives to produce a text to be read by others who bring it to life through the act of reading. If this is so, the story will become a different story depending on each reader (Barthes 1987). My cotton threads tightened. Mary Evans explains in Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography, that 'telling the whole story of a life or of a relationship can only ever be an exaggerated claim' (Evans 1999: 1).

Few of our letters have survived. There are none from the early years. The pile looks small and insignificant. (Journal 3 2009: 156)

How was I then going to fill the gaps in the story? Most of the letters I had were from Mickey and there were only a dozen of my handwritten copies. This was reversed in the latter part of our relationship when computers gave me the capacity to save computer typed letters and emails. The combined collection needed to be heavily edited and amalgamated from a sheer stylistic point of view—no one wants to read a collection of dull facts (McKissack & McKissack 2010). I also wanted to include
shortened sections from our journals and combine documents such as diaries and letters and oral accounts. Decisions also had to be made about additions where there were gaps in the research because of what could be perceived as Mickey’s mythological rendering of her life story (Hutcheon 1987: 97), for as Brenda Niall reminds us, the biographer must tolerate these absences or else turn novelist (Niall 1996).

To write my book and to follow the hermeneutic path I wanted to follow, of interpreting all forms of communication, written verbal, and non-verbal, I needed to take the leap from nonfiction into a mediated text, half-way between fact and fiction (Bazerman 2007; Layto 1999; Richardson & St Pierre 2005). The text in these hybrid genres is mediated by the interwoven diverse imaginative and factual links within the text (Fairclough 1995).

Eric Heyne (2001) laments that over the past twenty years there has been little progress in the theoretical understanding and lack of widespread agreement about the nature of mediated texts and the fiction/faction distinction, and other critics share his sentiment (Heyne 2001: 322). When writers combine imagination and reality to produce a new approach, while still drawing on the parent genres, writers may succumb to the limitations of one or both parent forms (Lator 1999; Spinnuzzi 2003). However, this unique genre of mediated text between fact and fiction, offers its readers a wealth of treasures. It can be lyrical, expository, informational, reflective, self-interrogative, exploratory, analytical, or whimsical (Steinberg & Root 2006).

To help me understand how such a mediated text would assist me in writing my artefact, once again I turned to Elizabeth Jolley. In Miss Peabody’s Inheritance (1984), the letters the aging novelist writes about her novel in progress are so real that Miss Peabody believes the characters in the novel to be real. So much so, that Miss Peabody searches for the theatre in London where the characters in the novel attended a matinee. Virginia Woolf provides an explanation of the experience of writing a novel when she comments that:
Imaginative work...is like a spider’s web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners...But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in midair by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to the grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (Woolf 1927: 45)

We may not see the threads, but they are always there.

Fictional letter writing allows a fluid merger of theory and imagination. For example, running through the text are reflections on the power of language to shape, weave and create meaning, understanding and identity (Derrida 1978; Nielsen 1990; Norris 2010). These reflections, situated in the ‘shed’, the gap between fact and fiction, show where knowledge can be intuited, articulated or performed. This process can evoke a feeling of authenticity. The merging divergent discourse of author, narrator and protagonist has a stabilising effect on both the author and the reader (Forché & Gerard 2001: 1).

The fictional techniques used in constructing mediated texts include metaphors, blanks, cuts in the text, different points of view and voices through which the characters speak (Davis & Ellis 2008: 104). These techniques gave me insight into the characters’ personal experience (Gutkind 2001:173) and were also crucial in delivering emotional details that would engage readers (Angrosino 1989; Richardson, 2000: 926).

Many other authors make the leap into mediating texts. For example, when Kate Grenville began writing her book *The Secret River* (2005), she intended it to be a non-fictional account of her convict-turned settler ancestor, Soloman Wiseman. After several drafts she was still finding it hard to 'bring the book to life', especially in the absence of records. Eventually, *The Secret River* became a novel (Maral 2006). Like Grenville, I used fictional techniques to fill gaps in knowledge and dialogue ‘to reveal character, not convey information’ (King 2007: 145). This is important in character driven novels such as 'Hens Lay, People Lie’. I propose, as does Susan Vreeland, that characters are the most important part of a story and that facts alone, no matter
how arresting, will not evoke an emotional response in the reader or make them care enough about the character to finish a novel (Vreeland 2002).

Creative epistolary fiction provided a psychical distance between myself and the story. In this space I could capture and write what was emotionally challenging and write myself into understanding (Pearson 2001:45). Fiction became the place to confront and explore ideas that in my own life I was reluctant to face. It also protected me from the emotional pain often associated with writing solely about one’s life experiences. Fiction empowered me to risk failure when experimenting with epistolary conventions in an attempt to produce an original text. It enabled me to joyously weave with brightly coloured wool.

In brief, although writing fiction meant that I could distance myself from the auto/biographical experience, it was the methodological requirements of autoethnography that empowered me to distance myself from the fiction as well. I wove into the story the daughter I never had. This ability to move further into fiction was my salvation when in Chapter Seven I explore writing from mourning. Autoethnography also allowed me to deal with the problems and challenges of writing this story. I needed a research model that was creative and personal—one that was able to withstand the taut tension of the auto/biographically informed text, and still enabled me to weave epistolary fiction without losing my safe creative space between the two. In the coming chapter I discuss how autoethnography fulfilled this brief.
Chapter Four: Building the loom

Autobiography to autoethnography

I am my data; I’m in it and it’s me. I cannot stand back from myself. I have become a subject of my own exegetical research as much as I am an authorial presence and character within my novel. (Gill et al. 2008: 249)

A flourishing life-writing culture has become one of the most dynamic and rapidly developing fields of international scholarship and it is one that generates great interest among the public (La Trobe University 2011). It is a conspicuous feature of the Australian literary scene and an integral part of mainstream literature (Ho 2011). Among other sub-genres, life-writing includes biography, autobiography, memoir, epistolarity and autoethnography.

Autoethnography means focusing on yourself (auto) and your experiences as a person and writer/painter/artist whilst you participate and self-reflexively observe the social world in which you are situated in culture (ethnos). In the research process it is often expressed in writing (graphy) (Lincoln & Denzin 2005: 1115). In this chapter, I discuss the different approaches to autoethnography such as evocative or heartfelt autoethnography (Ellis 1999: 669), and analytical autoethnography (Anderson 2006: 373). However, autoethnography that includes the stories of others, is still without a consistent title. It has variously been called ‘interactive autoethnography’, ‘group autoethnography’, ‘collective autoethnography’ or ‘duoethnography’ (Norris 2012). Autoethnography that includes new forms of ‘experimental writing’ (Olesen 2005) has
become a popular research methodology among insightful social scientists, but especially among researchers such as Ellis (2009), Ellis and Bochner (2000), Holman Jones (2005), Liamputtong (2007), Muncey (2005), Miller (2008), Norris (2012), Richardson (1994), Sparks (2000) and Spry (1997).

There has been a surge in autoethnographic writing in recent years. Back in 2000, Clough observed that it had rapidly become ‘the most developed form of experimental ethnographic writing’ (Clough 2000: 280). Since then, numerous researchers and authors have identified autoethnography as a potentially provocative new way of approaching writing and thinking (Berridge 2000; Denzin 2006; Ellis 2004; Reed-Danahay 2006). Autoethnography enabled me to address the challenges of how to honour my research data, how to honour life experience and how to represent it.

By using the self as research data, autoethnography moves beyond genres by crossing literary and sociological borders (Devault 1996: 30). The main autoethnographic tool was my collection of hand-written reflective and reflexive writer's journals. They are an invaluable record of my artistic practice and critical thinking. The journals reveal how the methodological requirements of autoethnography empowered me to distance myself, not only from the auto/biographical experience, but also from the fiction. As a result my writing practice moved further into fiction.

Autoethnography connects the personal to the social, cultural and politically gendered nature of my writing journey, and it assisted me in the meaning-making process (Ellis 2004: xix). For example, I asked, how did I arrive at this stage in my life? What processes enabled me to start a PhD? Why did I want to study, especially at my age? I questioned the importance of mentorship and how the world around me has enabled or constrained my choices and why I wrote this second novel.

Ideas of feminism, postmodernism and creative epistolarity were the coloured threads I used in the hope of weaving a different story into the fabric of human knowledge. It was reassuring to discover that I could use this autobiographical research practice as 'a method of data collection, a mode of analysis and a way to examine, evaluate and contribute to written history' (Ellis 2004: 13).
Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner take this idea of self as researcher, and as research data, further. They claim:

Authoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth, autoethnographers gaze first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outwards on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward exposing a vulnerable self. (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739)

Autoethnography became the methodological tool I used to unpick the hidden meanings within my collection of letters (Ellis 2007: 13).

In order to weave any kind of textile, the weaver needs to start with the warp threads. Warp comes from the Old Norse word, varp, which means 'the cast of a net' (Simkin 2011). The warp of a fabric acts like a net to capture the weft, holding weft threads firmly so that they will not escape (Smith 2010). Warp threads tend to be coarser and stronger, because they must be able to withstand tight stretching (Simkin 2011). They also provide a core of support for the finished fabric giving it body and form. I see the autobiographical threads underpinning and informing my creative writing as the taut warp threads of my literary design firmly attached to the autoethnographic research framework of the loom.

The ascendancy of postmodernism into the humanities has allowed me to use creative writing to represent stories of myself and others and to use what Richardson and St Pierre (2005) term 'creative analytic practices'. This describes research and writing that belongs to a blurred and enlarged ethnographic genre to which creative analytic practices have been applied. Richardson and St Pierre explain that:

creative analytic ethnographic practices display the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined, both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing. (Richardson & St Pierre 2005: 962)

My desire was to write a well-researched and engaging story of Mickey’s interesting life and our penfriendship. However, in the process I had to acknowledge the importance this project had for myself. My life experience underpins and overlays my
writing practice, and situates the stories in 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. I was on both the inside and the outside of the text: writing like a novelist, but thinking like an ethnographer.

Carolyn Ellis says that autoethnography is:

> Research writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self consciousness, and introspection...[and] claims the conventions of literary writing. (Ellis 2004 xix)

This provides ‘autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation that challenge the status quo’ (Bochner & Ellis 1996: 2).

My writing became a reflexive form of self analysis, and intertextual representation that challenges the status quo (Denzin 2005: 945). Like Laurel Richardson I welcomed the blurring of genre, ‘the complexity of writing, the shaggy boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction,’ ‘subjective’ and ‘objective,’ ‘true’ and ‘imagined’. I desired my work to be both scientific, in the sense of being true to a world known through the empirical senses, and literary, in the sense of expressing what I had learned through significant writing techniques and form (Richardson 2000: 253).

Ellis, Bochner, Denzin and Richardson are sociologists whose books and journal articles promote autoethnography as a legitimate method of qualitative research. Autoethnography as an emerging methodology is constantly being redefined, developing rapidly in the fields of communication, education, family therapy and slowly gaining acceptance in many other disciplines such as creative writing (Ellis 2004: 194). In a similar vein, James Buzzard, in his book, *Disorientating Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth Century British Novels* (2005), argues that only the term autoethnography is new. He claims that the nineteenth-century British novel’s role in the complex historical process ultimately gave rise to modern anthropology's concept of culture and its accredited researcher, the Participant Observer. Buzzard studies the nineteenth-century novels of the Brontë sisters and others as ‘metropolitan autoethnographies’ that began to exercise and test the
ethnographic imagination decades in advance of formal modern ethnography (Buzzard 2005).

The choice to use myself as research subject meant paying critical attention to the practical values and theories that inform everyday actions and examining 'my writing practice both reflectively and reflexively' (Bolton 2010: xviii). The more I researched my multiple ‘truths’, challenged the dominant discourses and learnt to honestly embrace complexity, the more I evolved into a woman who wanted to own and understand her own story. The novel is not author-free. My incompleteness, adventures, energy, insights and my growth as a person and as a writer all underpin the autoethnographic writing practice (Miller 2008: 94). Autoethnography ensures that I can use myself and my own experience as a woman and a writer to expand and inform my data (Wall 2006: 3) whilst still enabling me to speak freely and in a way that will ultimately be self empowering (Butler 1992: 6). Autoethnography is a loose and nebulous term, but within this paradigm there is no right or wrong way to tell a story. Therefore, I could conduct my research on an emotional, physical and academic level and was not tied to one particular research method that would have inevitably constrained my data collection. An autoethnographic methodology meant that I could embed the personal in the social.

The function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world, and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about. (Sartre 1978: 18)

Bochner maintains that autoethnography empowers the self and others and ‘opens the possibility of cultural transformation’ (Bochner 2000: 270). Similarly, Holman Jones calls on writers to make texts that cause readers to think and feel, and in doing that, writers will instigate cultural, social and political action. She contends that the point of autoethnographic texts is to change the world (Holman Jones 2005: 765). It would appear that Holman Jones hopes that these stories will showcase injustices and be a catalyst for social change.

Ironically, in the preface of the second edition of Jane Eyre (1933), it is clear that Brontë views her work as an act of social regeneration. She wishes to expose hypocrisies, to unveil or challenge those who find it ‘convenient to make external
show pass for sterling worth’ (Brontë 1933: viii). The recollections of her character throughout the novel are infused with a highly personal and passionate sense of injustice. James Buzard’s research suggests that nineteenth-century writers such as Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen may have been engaged in experimental ethnographic writing and the unsuspecting forerunners of what became the academic enterprise of autoethnography (Buzard 2005).

Focusing on the writer’s subjective experience, rather than the beliefs and practices of others, autoethnography produces knowledge by rejecting the concept of the detached observer. Bochner claims:

The investigator is always implicated in the product. So why not observe the observer, focus on turning our observations back on ourselves? And why not write more directly from the source of your own experience? Narratively. Poetically. Evocatively. (Bochner 2000: 270)

The move beyond the literary traditions of auto/biographical writing to the academic enterprise of autoethnography gave me the ethnographic skills and the permission to investigate my own life, but how poetically? How evocatively?

Research revealed an emerging continuum in the way autoethnography is defined and practised. There is a vast difference in the focus on auto (self), ethnos (culture) or graphy (the research and writing process) from one researcher to another. On one end of the continuum are those who emphasise the artistic evocative and emotional nature of the autoethnographic process. These include Denzin (2003), Ellingson (2006), and Holman Jones (2005), who advocate an interpretative, emotional and evocative practice which translates into autoethnographic informed writing that places a significant emphasis on subjectivity, which Ellis terms ‘heartfelt’ autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 747). These highly personalised, compelling and revealing texts, in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experience, are concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences.

On the other end of the continuum, autoethnographers such as Leon Anderson (2006) stress the analytical and the scientific in a form of ethnography which Denzin disparagingly calls the ‘Third Chicago School’ (Denzin 2006: 422). Analytic autoethnography emphasises a commitment to a systematic research agenda and to
improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. Self-reflexive investigation of my PhD research writing practice revealed that I fulfilled the requirements of Anderson’s five autoethnographic steps. These are, that the researcher (a) is a full member of a research group or setting; (b) uses analytic reflexivity; (c) has a visible narrative presence in the written text; (d) engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self and (e) is committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson 2006: 375). 

My research works at both ends of the continuum. Ellis maintains that autoethnographers need to look inwards exposing a vulnerable self, followed by a courageous sharing of stories that encourage compassion and empathy (Ellis 2004: xix). The openness and emotional communication is often revealed in the personal letters between women. Feminist thinkers and exponents of écriture féminine such as Hélène Cixous (2004), Virginia Woolf (1927) and Clarice Lispector (1989) advocate the need to break through barriers of shame, cowardice and fear to a vulnerable writing self in order to engage readers hearts and minds. This writing captured my enthusiasm. Written in easily understood language it was an effective form of communication. Such texts reflected the openness and emotional connection often found in personal letters between women.

In spite of the emphasis on qualitative research, highly personalised autoethnographic narratives have been criticised for slipping into what Sara Delamont calls, ‘emotionally explicit self-indulgent trauma therapy’ (Delamont 2007: 4). My own experiences as the subject and object of research gave me the authority to use myself as research, but how much was I prepared to reveal of what one conference delegate at an international Qualitative Research conference I attended called, the 'yucky stuff' of life?

As a case in point, there is a fine line between revealing a vulnerable self and what is often termed 'narcissistic navel gazing' or even 'confessional writing', 'misery memoirs', or 'Misery Lit', (Twitchel 2011:621) even if it is, as Joanna Gill states, 'immensely popular' (Gill 2001: 82). Journalist Arifa Akear's article (2010), reveals how literary judge, Daisy Goodwin, was overwhelmed by the volume of misery literature entries for the prestigious Orange Prize. Supporters of the genre contend
that 'Misery Lit' directly confronts often ignored topics, while others argue that the appeal lies in voyeurism (Twitchel 2011: 622). Many well researched and evocative autoethnographic narratives of self, 'staged as imaginative renderings that allow the researcher to exaggerate and swagger with the purpose of revealing intimate details' (Sparks 1998: 21) remain too personally confronting for me.

Intimate detailed stories of domestic violence, sexual abuse, degradation, and torture during the Qualitative Inquiry Conference in Illinois made me squirm in my seat. They are important stories and need to be told, but I cannot write this way. (Journal 3 2009: 59)

Another issue of concern raised by these evocative stories was the effect on the author. Reflecting on past emotional experiences, and writing about them, as I do in the novel, can be cathartic, but facing your demons is not always beneficial. It is possible to be distressed again by reliving the experience (Douglass & Volger 2003). However, although this is a fertile area of investigation, it is outside the scope of this exegesis.

Drawing on the work of Bochner (2002), Ellis (2004), Jago (2002), and Spry (2001), Holman Jones writes, 'Autoethnographic texts focus on creating palpable emotional experience as it connects to, and separates from other ways of knowing, being, and acting in/on the world' (Holman Jones 2005: 767). I attempted to write honestly and create a ‘palpable emotional experience’ but, culturally conditioned to not reveal the traumatic events within my life, I drew back from what I perceived as self-indulgent cathartic revelations (Twitchel 2011).

This reluctance to privilege emotional experiences may well be why I used a letter-writing format for 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. There is a distancing between writing the letter and the events. In the process of writing, events can be turned into sanitised, edited, or embellished stories. I reflected on the need for this personal distancing and took my findings back into the novel. My characters share the joys and heartaches of their lived experience, of births, deaths, loss and betrayal, but are hesitant to 'divulge all'. There is always a ‘holding back’, a distancing from the events which when committed to paper are turned into stories. An example is when Martha
is struggling with the aftermath of her husband’s stroke. It was a harrowing experience, but she glosses over the seriousness when writing to her penfriend, Diane.

_**I tried to ring you, Diane, but only got the goddamn answering machine. I apologise for the long silence and hope you understand. Chuck has had a stroke, but he is home and coping well. Barb is insisting I still go on the trip to Kenya... (Artefact: 112)**_

The unstated pain is there in Martha’s swearing at the answering machine and Diane reads between the lines. Often, what is unsaid is more powerful because the reader applies their own interpretation, undoubtedly bringing the text to life in their own unique way (Barthes 1987).

Motivated by a desire to seek interpretive forms of understanding and an aspiration to represent lived experience that used Leon Anderson’s analytical practices, I also wanted to write engaging, useful, more accessible texts that change hearts and minds (Foley & Valenzuela 2005: 221). After all, if the work does not touch the heart of the reader, the understandings will not linger (Sameshima 2007). The writing must strike a chord of recognition and to do this the writing must be passionate. I wanted the reader to reflect about his or her own life through the medium of my writing. A combination of both analytic and heartfelt autoethnography became the foundation of my writing loom.

Letters and autoethnographic writing have much in common. Both have omissions, additions, disguises, and representations of reality and are often closer to the art of fiction than is acknowledged. Both give the writer permission to use strong metaphors, and dramatic recall. Richardson describes an autoethnographic narrative of the self as:
A highly personalised, revealing text in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experience. Using dramatic recall, strong metaphors, images, characters, unusual phrasings, puns, subtext and allusions, the writer constructs a sequence of events, a 'plot', holding back on interpretations, asking the reader to 'relive' the events emotionally with the writer. The researcher uses the writing techniques of fiction. They are specific stories of particular events. Accuracy is not the issue; rather narratives of self seek to meet literary criteria of coherence, verisimilitude and interest. (Richardson 1994: 516)

Richardson explains that this also applies to the autoethnographic researcher:

Narratives of the self are staged as imaginative renderings, they allow the [researcher] to exaggerate, swagger, entertain, make a point without tedious documentation, relive the experience, and say what might be unsayable in other circumstances. Writing these subjective narratives, [researchers] are somewhat relieved of the problems of speaking for the 'Other', because they are the Other in their texts. (Richardson 1994: 516)

Richardson's discussion highlighted my need to write between genres to 'make a point without tedious documentation, relive the experience, and say what might be unsayable in other circumstances' (Richardson 1994: 517). I wrote in the gap between heartfelt and analytic autoethnography, as well as between fact and fiction. To work between genres, using a fictionalised self, to weave my life stories through a space between binaries and into gaps, exclusions, silences, and questioned givens, meant that my novel was messy, uncertain, multivoiced and a form of cultural criticism (Denzin 2005: 935).

Analytic autoethnography and creative heartfelt autoethnography were two vital parts of the framework of my methodological loom. This meant that I engaged with the novel in a different way. I saw not only my life as data, but my work as data and the drafting of the novel an act of research. It changed me as a writer and a thinker. Autoethnography was the methodological framework that held the autobiographical foundation in place while I wove epistolary fiction through the story.
Practice-led research offered a multiplicity of research methods, which on their own were not sufficient to address all of the research questions the artefact raised (Mäkelä 2009). However, autoethnography, the qualitative research tool I used to analyse my collection of letters and epistolary fragments to make meaning of my life and relationship with Mickey, enabled self-interrogation in the investigation of my writing practice.

Autoethnography empowered me, nevertheless, it still did not fill all the gaps. Although I saw my reactions, both as a woman and as a writer, to be an invaluable part of the research process, the capacity to generalise out of my own life was limited. When contemplating making my experience available to others, I realised that I could create more entry points for others through fiction. Autoethnography provided me with the confidence to realise that what I needed to tell this story was to go further into fiction.

The literary devices and artistic framing of fiction enabled me to understand more through fiction than I could through nonfiction. It established an interactive environment where creative writing and established theory combined to allow a fluid merging of theory and imagination (Derrida 1978: Neilsen 1990). While my writing was informed by an autoethnographic methodology, my writing practice developed into what I construed as creative epistolarity. Writing fiction enabled me to distance myself further from the auto/biographical experience, but it was the methodological requirements of autoethnography that empowered me to distance myself, not only from the auto/biographical experience, but also from the fiction. By mobilising creative epistolarity, I addressed the challenges of how to honour my research data, how to honour life experience and how to represent it.

Writing can be an isolating experience. Many writers seek the support of trusted likeminded people willing to share artistic and practical feedback. My supervisors became mentors and Mickey was also a mentor. Our correspondence reflected this mentoring process. The importance of such mentoring is explored in Chapter Five: The experienced weaver.
Chapter Five: The experienced weaver

Informal and formal mentoring

Mentoring is to help and support people to manage their own learning in order to maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be. (Parsloe 1999: 5)

The mentoring experience is a major theme in ’Hens Lay, People Lie’. Women mentoring women, often via letters or emails, is an important aspect of developing as a writer and this is reflected in my novel (Anderson 2004; Kraft 1992; Millier 2011). My initial research was to revisit my own experience of mentoring in my journal writing. I discovered that both informal epistolary mentoring and PhD supervision have played an essential role in the writing of the artefact and the formation and development of my writing self.

Informal mentoring and PhD supervision existed at the same time and it is important that they do. Mentoring in the form of supervision within a PhD legitimises the process of writing, provides psychosocial support and oversees the development academic and creative writing skills in the student practitioners (Krauth & Baranay 2002: Kroll 2009). In an ideal world, both forms provide the writer with a safe space in which the writer gives herself permission to forge ahead, to write freely, to experiment, to fail.

To clarify my thinking, and to investigate further the theme of mentoring in the novel, I again revisited the weaving metaphor.
A young Australian woman meets an elderly American weaver and they become penfriends. Via letters the American weaver sends instructions and the Australian woman begins to build a loom, ties on warp threads, weaves the weft and creates her basic designs. The American weaver suggests books on weaving and alerts the Australian woman to expert weavers working in her field. When they meet, the American weaver introduces the Australian woman to her group of weaver friends. Over the years the American weaver watches with interest the other woman's progress and celebrates her successes. Likewise in 'Hens Lay, People Lie' Diane is encouraged by Martha. Diane returns to study and embarks on an educational and literary journey. Martha is content to write poetry and limericks to be read at the monthly meetings of the Cochise County Writing Group. Ultimately, Diane mentors other women, encouraging them to write their stories.

To understand the relationship between a PhD candidate and supervisor I tell the tale of a weaver who dreams of weaving an intricate and innovative wall hanging. Her penfriend has taught her how to set up her loom and weave basic designs, but now the weaver wants to move on, to learn more about the craft, to experiment with complicated patterns and try different methods. She has an elaborate design in mind and beside her is a pile of coloured wool, cotton and silk yarn, beads, piezo cables and tinsel wire. She joins The Weavers' Guild and is placed under the guidance of an experienced weaver who has produced her own woven artwork and is well versed in the techniques of weaving such as length of threads, consistency of textures and the tension needed to create a well-balanced design. The apprentice weaver produces samples, and the experienced weaver makes suggestions on possible techniques available to achieve the desired result. They work together on an artefact that can be detached from the loom and used as a template for future innovative creative works. This is an idealistic model, but the weaving metaphor emphasises that the whole enterprise of mentoring is a continual learning process.

My research has focused on women supporting women and passing on knowledge within a mentoring relationship (Thompson 2000). However, it is recognised that not all supervisory, or for that matter informal mentoring relationships, grow into a stable one of trust and mutuality with powerful positive outcomes. There are many accounts of disempowerment, personality clashes, power plays and bullying. This is an interesting area for further research (Beyene et al. 2002; Healy 2010). But what is
meant by the term mentoring? Within the literature, there are many definitions (Blake-Beard 2001; Ehrich et al 2004). The closest definition to what I consider a holistic mentoring experience, by which I mean both informal and formal mentoring, is by Clutterbuck and Megginson (1999). They propose that 'mentoring supports a process that is about enabling and supporting, sometimes triggering, major changes in people's life and work' (Clutterbuck & Megginson 1999: 4).

Interest in mentoring relationships has grown considerably in recent years as evidence continues to accumulate indicating that those who are mentored accrue substantial benefits from a relationship which is built on trust and thereby generates higher self esteem and empowerment (Allen et al. 2005; Fagenson 1989; Scandura 1992; Turban & Dougherty 1994). The question is how did this relate to my project?

The two main characters in 'Hens Lay, People Lie' enjoy a close long-term relationship based on trust, connectedness and mutuality (Fagenson 1989). Initially, Martha is the older wiser woman passing on collected wisdom to the younger Diane. As well as offering friendship, Martha recommends thought-provoking books to Diane. Reading the works of famous authors expands Diane's literary knowledge. Virginia Woolf, in her preface to *Orlando* (1973) emphasises the benefit of learning from others when she lists the many friends who helped her to write her book. She says:

Some are dead and so illustrious that I can scarcely dare name them, yet no-one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of ...Emily Brontë to name the first who comes to mind. Others are still alive and although they are as illustrious in their own way, they are less formidable for that reason. (Woolf 1973: 9)

In 'Hens Lay, People Lie', illustrious others, dead and alive, including the exchange of letters between Martha and herself, are an essential part of Diane's education and are instrumental in her developing a writing self as well. Martha's first letter to Diane suggests buying a dictionary.
Diane reads the letter twice, savouring Martha’s childhood memories and family news. It is a generous response. But there is a sting attached. Neatly folded behind Martha’s words is the letter she sent. Every spelling mistake underlined in red, the correct spelling in firm minute script in the margin. She is shocked to see so many.

For years she’s been writing letters to friends and family. Loves the feel of the pen skimming across the paper, unable to keep up with thoughts tumbling onto the page. Little daily dramas, cute kiddie sayings, camping adventures—with never a thought about spelling. If she had to spend time checking every word she'd never write to anyone. Diane screws her edited letter into a ball and throws it into the waste paper basket. Why bother? She doesn't have time for such nonsense. Leave correct spelling and well crafted letters to ageing poets.

She starts to walk away, but turns, retrieves the letter and smoothes it out on the bench. Maybe she should get a dictionary. (Artefact: 22)

This extract reveals much about both characters; Martha’s inability to overlook spelling mistakes and Diane’s ability to accept criticism. What if Diane had left Martha’s letter in the waste paper basket? Her retrieval reveals a maturational element attached to the acceptance of the relationship as one of nurturing. The mentoring friendship originally depended on Diane’s perception of the offered assistance as a 'gift' (Kamvounias et al. 2007). In all aspects of education, a main requirement for learning is the student's willingness to learn from others.

Linda Kauffman argues that epistolary writing can be considered an educational tool (Jaqua et al. 2004; Kauffman 1992). The letter writer is the teacher and the letters can be a 'primer', as is the case in 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. Diane practises the craft of writing and improves her literary skills by ensuring her replies to Martha contain correct spelling and punctuation. By turning daily events into stories Diane enhances her creative writing skills (Kauffman 1992). This literary ad hoc 'apprenticeship' with Martha empowers Diane to resume her interrupted education within recognised
institutions which require a socially acceptable level of linguistic and cognitive skills (Fulmera & Jenkins 1992). A history of informal epistolary mentoring is Diane's passport into the world of education as a mature-aged student, and the foundation of her writing and academic career.

Diane's progress is revealed in the novel via the letters. Wedged between recipes of Hotpot Chilli and Clam Chowder, Martha corrects Diane's literary mistakes. In this extract from the novel, Martha chastises Diane. The author Diane remembers how this affected her.

*Your letter finally arrived, Diane and I don't know when you mailed it. You wrote “Fri” but no date, and there was no postmark.*

You never made that mistake again. Martha, via her letters, informed, reprimanded and educated. (Artefact: 39)

Diane yearns to one day be accepted as one of Mickey's literary circle, but this does not prevent moments of annoyance and ambivalence.

The theme of women mentoring women is repeated in many epistolary novels. In *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1984), for example, the correspondence between the two women dramatically changes Miss Peabody's life and personality. The Australian novelist's letters teach Miss Peabody how to 'read', 'write' and 'live'. When Miss Peabody has made the journey from London to Australia and is sitting in the dead novelist's chair, pulled up to the novelist's desk, surveying the unfinished manuscript, she looks around the room:

Miss Flourish would be sure to know where it was possible to get a typewriter. Miss Peabody, though she made abysmal typing errors, knew she could type well enough. All she really needed to enter into her inheritance was a title. (Jolley 1984: 147)

The letters between Miss Peabody and the novelist had been Miss Peabody's ad hoc apprenticeship into writing novels.
A similar writing apprenticeship is evident in Nancy Turner's *These is My Words* (1999) where Sarah Prine's sister-in-law, Savannah, is her mentor. The positive effects of this mentoring relationship are evidenced when the spelling, grammar and syntax in Sarah's diary slowly improve. Eventually, towards the end of the novel, Sarah passes on her literary skills to her children and other members of the family. The *protégée* has become mentor. By contrast, in 'Hens Lay, People Lie' there was a danger that the benefit of Martha's mentorship to Diane would dominate the story. This raised the question of reciprocity. Diane received the support and wisdom of the older woman, but what did Martha get out of the relationship?

Much has been written about the benefits derived from formal mentoring relationships and is usually focused on mentors giving and *protégés* receiving (Blakebeard 2001; Ehrich et al. 2004; Gibb 1999; Gillies & Wilson 2004). Informal mentoring is only mentioned briefly within this literature, and recognition that within formal and informal mentoring relationships 'the *protégée* can make meaningful return to the mentor is not commonly acknowledged' (Kamvounias et al. 2007: 17). Kamvounias et al. argue that although the benefits within a mentoring relationship have been characterised as the gift of mentoring they 'reconceptualise notions of giving and receiving as the gift in mentoring' (Kamvounias et al. 2007: 18). This is more inclusive and encompasses the acknowledged concept that mentors give to *protégée* and the less recognised view that *protégés* give to mentors. The gifts may include confirmation of the mentor's skills, of their humanity in maintaining culture and sustaining their instinct to nurture through work-focused intimacy with their mentee.

The idea of mutual gift giving is evident in 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. Via their letters, Diane receives support and wisdom from Martha, and in return Diane gives Martha respect and a friendship that begins with adulation and becomes collaboration. However, the main benefit for both women is that their letters overcome a sense of isolation.

The letter writer in epistolary fiction is often isolated, even when there is an exchange of letters. They are even more isolated in monologic epistolary novels such as *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver 2003) in which there is no exchange *per se*. In fact, it would appear that the isolation of the writer is often essential to
epistolary writing (Campbell 1995: 335). In the epistolary novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, letters were exchanged because the writers could not see each other. Thus the act of writing gives the writer the feeling that the addressee is present and that she is speaking to the reader (Campbell 1995: 335). Letter-writing, I would argue, assuages isolation, but it is when mentoring is present the isolation of working on one's craft is alleviated.

The theme of isolation is evident in many contemporary epistolary novels. For example, in Miss Peabody's Inheritance (Jolly 1984), Miss Peabody, unmarried and well into her fifties, has for thirty-five years worked inefficiently and unenthusiastically at a dead-end typist job in London, but her nights belong to the novelist. Miss Peabody first attends to the endless demands of her malingering, bedridden mother before sitting alone and replying to Diana Hopewell's letters. The one thing that has changed her life is her sending of a fan letter to the Australian author and the unexpected reply. However, for the aging author, the letters to Miss Peabody allow her to work through plots, characters and scenes with an interested reader, and this alleviates her sense of isolation whilst plying her craft.

In 'Hens Lay, People Lie', the main protagonists are also separated by distance. Yet, by writing to each other, both women feel connected and no longer isolated. Within this supportive informal mentoring environment, Diane is free to practise the craft of writing. But writing a novel is not crafting a letter. It is a long-term commitment and can be an isolating experience. We sit for hours creating characters, exploring plots and weaving lives into stories. To overcome a sense of isolation and to advance as writers we seek out like-minded people who not only dream the same dream, but are passionate about writing and will guide, support and sustain us during the writing process.

Elizabeth Jolley wrote Miss Peabody's Inheritance during her time as Writer in Residence at the Western Australian Institute of Technology. On the dedication page at the start of the novel she offers the book 'as an expression of thanks to the Artist in Residence Committee and, in particular, to Derek Holroyde, Brian Dibble, and Don Grant' (Jolley 1984). This gesture emphasises how important it is to a writer, even a celebrated author such as Elizabeth Jolley, to have a supportive network of colleagues and friends and a safe nurturing environment in which to write.
When first smitten by the desire to tell this story, I looked for the supportive environment of a writing network in which to develop my writing skills, engage with theory and qualitative research and experiment with the techniques associated with the craft of writing. The PhD by artefact and exegesis offered a candidate the opportunity to research, write and develop a manuscript and accompanied theoretical exegesis. This turned out to be achieved with formal mentoring from the top down via the support of two supervisors under the umbrella of the university (Kroll 2009).

It is not only PhD supervisors who mentor. Students help each other. PhD candidates are encouraged to join others in their cohort to learn through osmosis what can be termed 'Water Cooler Wisdom' (Water Cooler Wisdom 2012). Social media websites such as <www.thethesiswhisperer.wordpress.com> are fast becoming respected on-line communities where candidates can meet and share ideas and concerns. Local writing groups and personal collaborative relationships provide a sense of community and provide support and feedback. This can alleviate the isolation commonly associated with the writing of a novel.

Cheryl Dahle observes that 'Wo-mentoring', often seen in formal university supervision relationships, but also evident in informal relationships, is an approach to mentoring that 'in spite of its name is also available to men' (Dahle 1998). This declaration of political correctness by Dahle does not disguise the fact that Wo-mentoring is obviously intended to help women realise their goals and dreams through one-on-one mentoring partnerships between women, thus demonstrating the power of women helping women (Thompson 2000). According to Dahle, this style of mentoring is about 'personal growth and development. It is more about learning than power' (Dahle 1998). In this sense, it is an empowering relationship based on trust.

To build trust in a mentoring relationship it is necessary for both parties to have a commitment to the confidentiality of discussions, speak and act with consistency, understand faults without exploiting them, and seek to learn from and to value the differences in perspective (Roberts 2000: 153). This applies to both formal and informal mentoring relationships.
Underpinning my writing journey is a plethora of emails between myself, supervisors, colleagues, writing groups and writing friends, including ninety-three year old Mickey. (Journal 3 2010: 239)

I realised that Mickey had her own list of women mentors, ranging from her beloved mother-in-law to members of her writing group, but reflecting on the women who have been influential in my writing journey I researched the acknowledgment pages of published PhD theses to see who had been significant in their writing lives. All authors acknowledged that without the support and guidance of their supervisors they would not have succeeded (Werner 2004). Also mentioned are informal mentors who have guided the writer by contributing writing expertise, creative feedback, editing and proofreading. There may also be listed an enthusiastic group of colleagues family and friends. Research of the acknowledgement pages of published epistolary books from Virginia Woolf (1922) to Toni Morrison (2008) revealed long lists, sometimes several pages in length, of people who have supported and helped the writer achieve her dream.

Nevertheless, it is important not to see the mentor as having all the answers. Clutterbuck and Megginson tell writers to be selective about the advice they receive and emphasise that it is essential for the protégée to follow their own instincts and develop their own style: 'The mentor helps the learner to develop insights and understanding through intrinsic observation (i.e. becoming more aware of their own experience)' (Megginson & Clutterbuck 2005: 4). This can trigger major changes in people’s life and work. As I researched and wrote the artefact and the exegesis something transformative happened. As well as trusting and working with supervisors and colleagues, I learnt to trust the guide within.

In many epistolary novels, (Adelaide 2008; Balint 2004; Jolley 1984; Turner 2007), including 'Hens Lay, People Lie', a main character is searching for her true self. In her search for herself she looks for a guide. Finally she realises that her most trusted guide is within her. In 'Hens Lay, People Lie' this is central to the resolution.

The support of supervisors, writing groups, friends and colleagues, all contributed in differing ways to the writing of 'Hens Lay, People Lie' and provided an emotional safe space based on trust for me to learn the craft, experiment, know myself and write the novel.

A turning point. The overarching writerly voice of the mature Diane, in the last chapter, will complete the story and continue the tradition of the woman protégée becoming a mentor. (Journal 4 2011: 100)

Trust engenders self respect, which results in empowerment and leads to responsibility. The next challenge for me as a writer was, from this safe space, to explore my ethical responsibilities to people associated with the writing of the novel, to the contract between writer and reader, to myself as a writer and to the story.
Chapter Six: Sound working practice

Ethic of care and ethic of justice:

The heart learns that stories are the truths that won’t keep still. There is always another version, another eye to tell what it sees, another voice ready to speak. (Pelias 2004: 171)

'Hens Lay, People Lie' is an ousrstory (Gadamer 1976; Ulmer 1989) and that means collaboration. This can be fraught with danger and entails compromise on both sides. Both parties have their own perception and memories of the relationship. Mickey and I had our own stories.

Initially, I questioned how to tell this story and reflected on the ethical implications and possible impact of my literary choices. My ethical responsibilities were to people associated with the story, to the contract between writer and reader, to myself as a writer, and to the work. Writing 'Hens Lay, People Lie' in a hybrid genre that straddled fact and fiction, as discussed in Chapter Three, provided me with the fundamentals of an emotional and ethical safe-writing space. I needed this safe space to deal with problematic ethical issues discussed that arose in the writing of the novel.

Ethical questions imply a certain moral obligation to 'care about the responsibilities we have to others and seek to resolve the nature of these responsibilities and obligations' (AAWP 2011). Therefore, ethical considerations need to be viewed within the contextual understanding, firstly, that humans are social beings in relation
to one another, and secondly that the philosophical study of morality has been concentrated for the most part in reasoning (Noddings 1984). My ethics are informed by an ethic of care. The logic underlying an ethic of care is 'a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach' (Gilligan 1982: 73).

Nel Noddings, (1984) in her cutting-edge book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, notes that ethics is gender based. Noddings makes the point that women tend to have an ethic of care, whilst men are more inclined to follow an ethic of justice. Although this sounds essentialist this is not the purpose of my argument. Noddings weaves a compelling philosophical argument for an ethics based on natural care. However, she draws an important distinction between natural caring and ethical caring (Noddings 1984: 82). The distinction is between 'I want to care' (natural) and 'I must care because it is an appropriate way of relating to people' (ethical). Noddings claims that ethical caring is based on natural caring and is 'rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness' (Noddings 1984: 83). She argues that an ethic of care is a basic and preferable approach to ethical dilemmas.

Margaretta Jolly and Lawrence Kohlberg put forward the view that women think through their felt responsibility towards everyone's needs, while most men weigh up their 'rights' and responsibilities in the abstract (Jolly 2008; Kohlberg 1981).

Margaretta Jolly builds on the work of Noddings' and Gilligan in her epistolary book, *In Love and Struggle* (2008). She explains that behind women's writing is a persistent ideal of the ethics of care. She asserts that:

> In contrast to an ethic of justice, which hopes to treat everyone the same through a principle of human equality, an ethic of care is premised on the idea that 'no one shall be hurt', in the face of the obvious differences between people and their needs. (Jolly 2008: 87)

An ethic of care is premised on the belief that the world and its people are maintained and repaired through the nurturing of relationships. Gilligan (1982) turned long held notions of what constitutes ethical values upside-down. She argued that women already practised an ethics of care when considering what might be done in a particular situation, action was determined by considering the best way to preserve
and nurture the relationships involved. Joan Tronto contends that in order for people to be fully human it is necessary that all genders practice 'both an ethic of justice and an ethic of care' (Tronto 1993: 86).

The 'ethic of justice', at least since the eighteenth-century, rests on the belief that the best way to care for people is to 'respect their rights, to be fair and rectify wrongs' (Friedman 2001: 399). But in the 1970s and 1980s, the same period that saw the rise of feminine epistolarity and produced auto/biographical discussion, the 'ethic of care' was formalised by psychologists and philosophers such as Carol Gilligan (1982), Sara Ruddick (1980) and Virginia Held (1993). This feminine form of ethics was outlined in Gilligan's (1982) In a Different Voice:

> The reluctance to judge remains a reluctance to hurt, but one that stems not from a sense of personal vulnerability but rather a recognition of the limitation of judgement itself: ...moral judgement is renounced in an awareness of the psychological and social determination of human behaviour, at the same time that moral concern is reaffirmed in recognition of the reality of human pain and suffering. (Gilligan 1982: 102-3)

A reluctance to judge and to hurt resonated with me, and is the core of my ethics in relationship to writing 'Hens Lay, People Lie'. In the beginning of our penfriendship, Mickey was upset by my inadequate writing skills and corrected the spelling mistakes in my letters. This was not done to hurt, or condemn, but to teach and educate a younger woman. In later years, we took care to support and nurture each other. This educational and personal journey is woven through the novel and is revealed via the letters between Martha and Diane.

The reluctance to hurt, however, prevented me from writing the story I wanted to tell. When I first put pen to paper, Mickey and I had trouble collaborating. Our conflicting views ranged from omissions and additions to form and style. I was depending on our subjective experience of penfriendship and socially and culturally constructed memories. I sent Mickey early drafts, but wrote as if she was looking over my shoulder ready to offer alternative versions or denials. Collaborating on the story came at a price. Ethically I was not prepared to hurt Mickey's feelings.
Reflexivity was an important strategy: I questioned my attitudes, assumptions, values and habitual thought processes in striving to understand our complex relationship. Ethical issues can be especially troublesome in autoethnographic work because at the base of such work are personal stories situated in everyday lives. Autoethnographers use the examination of the vulnerable self to reveal the broader context of the experience under study (Ellis 2004). There are many reasons why this is ethically challenging, but the main reason is because to write about ourselves means we write of others, perhaps without their knowledge or permission.

Not surprisingly, then, there are many ethical challenges for the writer who chooses to write from life and I was always mindful that I was using extracts of Mickey's letters and her life story. This initially held back the writing of the novel. I needed to engage readers' hearts and minds whilst still protecting our relationship (Behar 1996: 223).

Nevertheless, it was also my story, and by concentrating on my ethical concerns for other people, the artefact was in danger of becoming a hagiography to a penfriend. This is not an uncommon phenomenon when the writer and the subject of novels are close friends (Reinhard Lupton 1996). Yet I was not being ethical to the story (Bloom 2003: 279). To honour the life experiences of two women penfriends I had to unpack what being fair and ethical to myself and to the story meant.

I focused not only on the ethical treatment of the individual subject of the research/narrative, but also on the ethical implications between myself, my readers and my story. A further authorial decision was to use fictional techniques and devices in service of the narrative (King 2007: 129). A challenge faced during the process of creating a fiction which aims also to be true to the identities of the ‘real life’ protagonists involved, was the possible clash between the imperative for being true to the perceived ‘facts’ around which the story is based, and the spoken or unspoken notions of betrayal or perceived bias and justification. Lynn Bloom says:
Where living people are concerned there can be virtue in protecting the innocent, the vulnerable, the voiceless, private people who would be destroyed if their inmost secrets were betrayed. This is an ethical issue that I suspect all scrupulous writers of creative nonfiction and biographies of living people contend with routinely-and resolve differentially, on a case-by-case basis. (Bloom 2003: 279)

More generally, Paul Carter (2010) observes that ethical considerations need to be viewed within the context that in relation to one another, humans are social beings. Therefore, ethics is socially prescribed and is embedded and embodied. Our culture, life experiences and background all impact on how and what we write (Suinn 2010: 55). When women write they often have to pull away from their many responsibilities to get their words on paper. Throughout the writing process this apparent gendered multiple positioning as author, female friend and confidant, alongside my family nurturer/carer role created much conflict and personal reflection focussing on my ethical treatment of people and text. Yet by reflexively challenging our values and engaging in ethical analyses sound ethical writing practice is established (Bolton 2010: Sin 2004).

In my journal writing I asked questions about my values and looked at whether I was being fair to Mickey, fair to myself and to those around me. In this way I felt that I established an ethical writing practice as suggested by Bolton (2010: 11). My ethical debates between myself as friend, and myself as author, led to much 'navel-gazing' (Hemmingson 2008: 5) particularly with respect to notions of 'truth' and 'fact'. What needed to be revealed for the narrative to work as a cohesive and interesting story remained of primary importance throughout the writing process. By deciding upon an autobiographically informed narrative the construction of the text required me to ask structural questions. From whose point of view should the various components, scenes and episodes in the story be framed? And I was always mindful of my initial decision to include Mickey's letters. This necessitated finding a solution, a way of writing that enabled me to address not only the formal logic of fairness that informs the ethic of justice, but also an ethic of care where my writing did no harm (Jolly 2008: 83).

Writers hold the trust and sensitivities of many people in their hands as they craft a work of art from their imagination and the lives of people around them. I grappled
with the question of whether to write about dysfunctional marriages, alcoholism and the exploits of children and grappled with how much of my life I could reveal before it impacted on family and friends. I believe it is important to treat the lives of people at the heart of the story with the respect I would like others to apply to my life (Hansen 2009). However, by compromising the story for the sensibilities of those whose stories were being told would not have been being true to the narrative I felt compelled to write. My unpacking of the notions of a ‘formal logic of fairness’, which informs the ‘justice approach’ (Lau et al. 2007: 4), led me to weave through strands of fiction. By writing an epistolary novel in my genre of choice, now hybrid and multi-faceted, the internal fairness and ethics to the text itself was in part resolved. Fiction allowed me to distance myself from the autobiographical and gave me the creative space to create characters (Bolton 2010: 128). This in turn protected Mickey and myself.

Once questions of voice and structure were decided the next imperative for me in writing this story was to stress the importance of time and place. In 'Hens Lay, People Lie', Diane lives in suburban Victoria, Australia and travels to the Outback. Martha lives in a close knit community in New Mexico and explores the Arizona desert. It was an ethical imperative for me as a writer to engage in extensive research to ensure that the topography, flora and fauna, climate and seasons of these two countries and locations were correct. I wanted the reader to experience the similarities of both locations: the expansive cobalt blue skies, searing heat and thirsty sand. I also wanted them to understand the differences between mountains and mesas, and the differences in vegetation and wildlife. The contract between writer and reader would be broken if I placed koalas in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of New Mexico.

Kate Chedgzoy states, 'A place on the map is also a place in history' (2007: 1). My characters were also situated in time and culture. These were additional areas of extensive research which I associated with my responsibility as a writer. My aim was to write stories that are believable and give the reader a sense of authenticity and truth. This carries the writer and reader into a deeper dimension of trust.

Michael Pearson's imperative for trust and believability drove my ethical decision to honour the contract that connects the writer and the reader. Readers expect the
writer to deliver what they say they are providing. Writers, in turn, trust their readers to understand and respect their writing (Pearson 2001: 46). Readers of nonfiction, while not naively believing everything in these texts, read nonfiction with an understanding that these narratives will contain reliable and trustworthy information (Brien 2006). However in *The Autobiographical Pact*, (1989) Philippe LeJeune outlines his idea of a contract between author and reader in which autobiographers explicitly commit themselves, not to some historical exactitude but rather a sincere effort to come to terms with, and understand their own lives. Of course, no author can ever completely represent the intricate complexity of reality in writing, but to attract and maintain the trust of their readers, authors need to strive for the highest levels of verifiable accuracy in their work. If the story is presented as a hybrid genre such as creative nonfiction, or auto/biographically informed fiction it is assumed that the story is based on reality but the techniques of fiction will be used (Brien 2006). Transparency reinforces a relationship of trust between the writer and the reader (Gutkind 2001).

The contract between the writer and reader is honoured in Lionel Shriver's epistolary novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), a novel that focuses on a mother's desperate attempt to understand why her son, 15-year-old Kevin, brutally murdered seven of his fellow classmates. The reader is aware upfront that the story is told from the mother's perspective. Even though the information that the husband has also been murdered by the child is withheld for dramatic effect, the reader is firmly positioned between the mother and the husband who is an active presence in the story. The mother is writing to an absent person and it is left to the reader's imagination as to his whereabouts. Thus the integrity of the story is maintained.

It is interesting to note that Nessa O'Mahony outlines her position very clearly in her verse novel, *In Sight of Home* (2009). She declares:
What follows is a work of fiction. Although I have used extracts from the Butler letters where necessary, I have invented entirely new letters, or adapted the original ones, where plot required it. I have created a cast of fictional characters whose lives, contemporary and historic intertwine with those of the Butler family. Some of the events described in these pages did happen, others are pure invention, others still a blend of both. I will leave it to the discerning reader to decide which is which.

(O'Mahony 2010)

There is a similar declaration page at the beginning of 'Hens Lay, People Lie'.

Another occasion that presented me with a challenge as a writer was when I sent a section of the first draft of the original non-fictional book to Mickey. As soon as Mickey read where I had written about her husband passing away I received a letter asking me not to use 'weasel words' (Watson 2004). She explained that from her perspective when people died they did not rest in peace, go to God, or pass away. They were dead. This was too blunt for me. We agreed that any reference to death in her sections within the book the word 'dead' would be used and in my sections I would use the term 'passed away' thereby allowing for differentiation (Artefact: 111).

Mickey's priority for the developing story was fact and truthfulness. Being steeped in the scientific community of her husband’s profession as a herpetologist, Mickey wanted to stay true to the facts as she knew them. In 2002 when we first discussed collaborating on a book, Mickey insisted on dragging out a pile of old photos for inclusion. From past experience I knew that it would be difficult to find a publisher willing to go to the added expense of reproducing photographs. They enhanced, but were not essential to the story. We decided to leave the decision until later, but I was uncomfortable knowing how strongly Mickey felt about their inclusion and hoped a publisher would make the final decision. Consequently my exegetical and journal reflection became focussed around potential omissions and silences (Cixous 2004).

Eventually, given the inevitable construction and mediation implicit in any representation, I requested Mickey's permission to use a hybrid of auto/biography and fiction. For years a dedicated reader and member of a writing group, Mickey finally acknowledged the challenges I was facing and agreed that fiction was
perhaps the best way forward. Fiction gave me the distance I needed 'to see, feel and analyse the work' (Ketelle 2004: 450).

After attending the Qualitative Inquiry Conference 2009 in Illinois USA, I took a four day field trip to Arizona to visit Mickey. The hope was to share my research and writing with her. Much to my surprise she was no longer interested. 'You're writing fiction now aren't you', she said. When I answered, 'Yes', she replied, 'Good', and started talking about the weather. At the time, I wondered if her lack of interest was age related, or whether she didn't want to revisit the past. Did she trust me to do justice to the story? The laptop remained unopened.

My initial reaction was shock, followed by sadness, because one of the main joys in writing this story was to record this intriguing woman's life. Later I realised that fiction gave me a safe space to write but as a consequence Mickey no longer felt attached to the story. Yet her withdrawal was also a relief. I had agonised over behaving ethically towards her, often torn between my respect for her and my desire for the emotional and writerly freedom to tell the story as it was unfolding. As a writer, it was liberating to have Mickey's permission for me to claim the story and tell it to the best of my ability.

Eight months after returning to Australia my writing and research stalled when I learned that Mickey had passed away. The contract between myself as writer and Mickey as subject had changed. I wondered what I owed the character Martha in the novel, and felt that Mickey, or my perception of her, deserved special respect because she could not submit alternative versions or denials. Mickey's death led me into a state of mourning. I needed distance, time and reflective space where I could evaluate this new aspect of ethical writing of care of the self and others. I became engaged in the ongoing interplay of fact and fiction, with questions of ethics and self expression, each striving for integrity, often creating conflict for me as an artist and a human being. Chapter Seven explores how I wrote from mourning, working in the 'shed' between the threads on the loom.
Chapter Seven: Writing within the 'shed'

Writing from mourning

The dead leave us starving with mouths full of love. (Michaels 1997: 20)

When Mickey died on Saturday the 16th March 2010, my writer's journal remained closed; the novel and exegesis frozen. How to write the unsayable—to write through silence into a safe space? My mediated text, balanced between fact and fiction, meant that half of my writing was in the real world. I was telling another woman's story as well as my own. I had worked through many writing issues, and told numerous stories of literary and personal goals, but I came full circle when faced with Mickey's death. At the heart of the novel were two real women. Now, one was lost and one was grieving.

There is a difference between grief and mourning. Grief is often unsayable. It happens in a space that no word has entered (Rilke 2002: 9). Nearly a century ago, Freud outlined how mourning is the process of dealing with grief (Freud 1917). Phyllis Silverman and Dennis Klass in Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief (1996) suggest that when we discuss the nature of grief:

We are at the core of the most basic questions about what it means to be human, for the meaning of the resolution of grief is tied to the meaning of our bonds with significant people in our lives, the meaning in family and community and the meaning we ascribe to our individual lives in the face of absolute proof of our own mortality. (Silverman & Klass 1996: 22)
So how can a writer move from grief, to writing from mourning?

In the mid 1980s, James Pennebaker, the father of narrative therapy, conducted clinical research on the power of writing to restore mental and physical health. He concluded that narrative expression was cathartic for a grieving person by helping to integrate thoughts and feelings and that people who wrote about traumatic events did not need as much medical help to overcome grief (Pennebaker 2004). Other studies have shown that writing about a traumatic experience is cathartic for the writer (Bolton 2007; Chung 2001; Holly 1989). Louise DeSalvo (2000) claims that writing can be a restorative tool. She describes how the writers Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, Audre Lorde, and Isabel Allende, have been transformed by the writing process (DeSalvo 2000: 4). How to explain this state of affairs? Bolton points out that written expression may be more powerful than verbal expression as ‘it does not disappear on the breath’ (Bolton 2003: 97). She claims that it is the writing process itself which brings clarification to the writer (Bolton 2007: 111). A journal provides a safe private place to deal with strong emotions, thoughts and feelings. Yet, many writers decide to write and tell their stories in a public forum with the aim of helping others.

In *The Grief Book: Strategies for Young People*, (2004) Elizabeth Vercoe describes her experience of grief and how difficult it is for her to focus on anything but her memories.

It is that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach that you go to sleep with and wake up with. It is the tears rolling down your face as you wash the dishes, walk down the street or sip a cappuccino. It is not being able to say what you want to say. It is wishing that you were somewhere else; never being comfortable anywhere. It is clutching and grasping at memories...It is overwhelming (Vercoe 2004.)

By writing down her experience of grief, Vercoe has externalised what is happening to her while she grieves. In an attempt to make sense of the world, and by sharing that knowledge with others, Vercoe is dealing with her grief and writing from mourning.

Mourning is a private act, but it can also be a public one. In the literature about and by the bereaved, I found texts that ranged from clinical to moving to maudlin. Some
people use writing as a way to work through emotional issues by privately writing of grief in personal journals and diaries. Others write and publish memoirs such as the heart-rending *Paula* (1995), in which Chilean writer Isabel Allende weaves her own life into a letter to her dying twenty-eight year old daughter. Two recent memoirs about coping with the loss of a loved one are Megan O'Rouke's *The Long Goodbye* (2011), about mourning her mother and Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* (2011). The most touching of all was Sandra Arnold's *Sing No Sad Song: losing a daughter to cancer* (2011). These books add to a growing genre that includes Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), a memoir of her husband's death, daughter's illness, and Didion's efforts to make sense of a time when nothing made sense. In her latest book *Blue Nights* (2011), Didion mourns a lost family, lost youth and talks about her inability to write. David Rieffs' *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008) is a loving tribute to his mother, the writer Susan Sontag, and her final battle with cancer. Last but not least, Anne Roiphe's *Epilogue* (2008), explores late-life widowhood. This mourning of mothers, daughters, sons, husbands and friends showed me, 'the reader', that my experience was not unique. I was not alone.

There is a large body of literature advocating that writing about grief can be cathartic and that writing can assist healing (Arnold 2010; DeSalvo 2000; Freud 1917; Pennebaker 1990). Many people, in order to move forward and begin to cope with grief, they have to write down their thoughts and feelings (Adams 1998; Pennebaker 2004). Writing is a way of preventing the unravelling of the grieving self and enables the bereaved to move from the effects of grief and the inability to mourn, to the process of mourning. It is possible to write out of mourning, or to mourn while writing (Baker 2011; Hecq 2010).

Nevertheless, there is also extensive literature about the risk of debilitating depression if the writer revisits painful emotions (Kammerer & Mazelis 2006; Stone 2004; Wurtzel 1999). In order to make progress, the writer has to risk the danger of slipping into depression. Joy Livingwell, online columnist for the Neuro Linguistic Programming website, warns of the danger inherent in reliving grief when she advocates that it is essential for the person involved 'to get the useful life lessons from less-than-positive memories, without getting upset or re-traumatized' (Livingwell 2011).
On looking back over my experience after Mickey's death, my position is that writing can be cathartic, but also dangerous. For me, to write and revisit painful emotions, I found the journal a safe emotional space; a gap between reality and imagination where feelings and emotions can be intuited, articulated or performed. A space to write. Yet, I was aware of the danger of being brought undone by my own words: stabbed by syntax, bowled over by both understanding and misunderstanding. Terry Williams writes: 'Words are always a gamble, words can be splinters from cut glass' (Williams 2001: 7). I made the decision to write in my journal. However, it was several months before this decision was realised and I could make visible the size and shape of my grief. I felt that by completing the story, I would honour Mickey and my writing self.

Writing careers may begin out of pain and loss, and loss can take many forms: loss of a person, country, health, youth and language (Cixous 1997; Gressor & Glassock 2004; Jensen 1991). I saw that the two women in my artefact began writing letters to each other from this position of loss and even reparation (Klein 1975). In 'Hens Lay, People Lie', Diane writes to Martha out of an unconscious sense of loss of educational opportunities and a desire to learn. When Diane begins to write, she addresses that loss, but the catalyst that makes writing an integral part of her life is the loss of her mother. Martha finds consolation in the penfriendship having lost her eldest daughter.

In the real world, writing was the way Mickey and I coped with loss. This became evident during one of our discussions in Arizona in 2002. However, it wasn't until after Mickey died and I was searching for answers by researching the writings of thinkers such as Atwood (2002), Cixous (1997), Kristeva (1989), and epistolary novels such as *The Household Guide to Dying* (Adelaide 2008), *The Colour Purple* (Walker 1983), *Life on a Refrigerator Door* (Kruipers 2007), and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Shriver 2003), amongst many others, that I finally understood—our letters, although superficially bright and cheery, were a thirty-five year uninterrupted work of mourning. Writing was a bond between us that enabled us to move on in our lives. Mickey's letters were instrumental in the achieving of my dream, an education. My letters helped her come to terms with losing her daughter.
Before I could bring myself to write, however, I had to come to terms with my recent loss. Over ninety years old, recently hospitalised, Mickey had refused to eat; she had willed herself to die. I found this out by chance a week after she had died and my creative drive faltered. There was no funeral to attend nor a healing ceremony, just a hole that could not be filled. I gathered black around me and grieved.

Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989) asks:

> Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation? (Kristeva 1989: 3)

Sigmund Freud argues that the symptoms of melancholia entail 'profound painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity' (Freud 1927: 224). Although melancholia is a pathological illness, grief can also involve a lack of concentration, disorganisation and a numbness that we are unable to transcend (Phillips 2009). There are times when we feel we are going crazy (Noel & Blair 2000).

I could not speak about Mickey's death, or write in either the exegesis or the novel. Not even my journal.

> Time passes with only the sound that dew makes
> I leave my words behind me
> like clothes on a beach
> step into silence (Haig 2006: 32)

A theme in contemporary feminist writing on depression emphasises the mute suffering as the mourning of women (Schiesari 1992). Jennifer Radden points out that this attention to loss of speech is to be found in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* (1989), Luce Irigaray's *To Be Two* (2001), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), and that 'women's estrangement from language is explained by an estrangement from the self' (Radden 2000: 34). Profound losses leave us paralysed and mute, unable really to comprehend them, still less to speak coherently about them. It can be both. Max Simmons argues that this muteness and 'estrangement from language' are not purely the province of women, but rather a common human response to loss (Simmons 2000). However,
there are those who have written from their grief or mourning such as French writer and psychoanalyst Marie Darrieussecq (2009). In *Tom is Dead*, the narrator is a mother grieving for her four-year-old son. In the novel, she tells of her grief, of how she temporarily lost her ability to speak (Darrieussecq 2009).

The influential French literary theorist, philosopher, critic and semiotician, Roland Barthe's posthumously published *Mourning Diary* (2010) reveals how he was silenced by the death of a loved one. The day after his mother died in October 1977, Roland Barthes began a diary of grief and mourning that continued until his death in 1980. Writing brief notes on index cards, he reflected on a new aloneness, on the ebb and flow of sadness and a depression that prevented him from writing.

> The high seas of suffering—leave the shores, nothing in sight. Writing is no longer possible. (Barthes 2010: 231)

These scraps of sentences reveal how profound loss can adversely affect a writer and yet, perhaps intuitively, writers know that writing is their salvation and will stop them losing their minds.

I am a writer and writing is the way I make sense of the world. In spite of others using writing, I could not. I could not understand my inability to write. Mickey's death was not my first introduction to grief. I had grieved for aunts, uncles and close friends, and the ultimate orphaning loss of both parents. During those difficult times, writing had been my salvation. I write because then I do not have to speak. I write with the colours of memory. I write because I believe it can create a path in the darkness. So why was I suffering from writer's block? Because, when Mickey died I was in the middle of writing a fictionalised account of our friendship. I was immersed in the autoethnographic exploration of the memories encompassing both of our lives. This grief was different from any others I had experienced. As Didion reveals in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) each individual grief is 'a place none of us know until it happens' (Didion 2005: 188).

> The voices of others. 'She was ninety-three years old'. 'She had a long life'. 'She didn't suffer'. 'You're still upset?' 'Get over it'. 'Move on'. 'Mickey who?' (Journal 4 2010: 126)
One day, despite my attempts to 'get over it', I was shocked out of my lethargy. My son asked me what was wrong. At my raised eyebrows he told me that I was talking to myself—out loud, loud enough for him to hear me in the lounge room. I was stunned. Was I losing my mind? Was grief pushing me into madness? (Kristeva 1989: 18).

That night, I opened my journal.

At this time, I read Robert Burton's ancient, but ground-breaking book, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). All those years ago, Burton suffered from depression and spent his life trying to come to terms with the condition. In his book, he separates what he regards as normal everyday subjective and behavioural manifestations of melancholy from more entrenched and serious conditions such as schizophrenia and mania. Reading Burton helped me express my own suffering and recognise it as 'transitory melancholy which goes and comes upon every small occasion of sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, fear, grief, passion or perturbation of the mind' (Burton 2004: 163). This reminded me of my mother's mantra during family crises, 'This too shall pass'.

However, at this early stage in my grief it was not the time to tell my story. Unlike Karen Upton-Davis, I was not ready to give testimony to the trauma in my life by bearing witness via my writing (Upton-Davis 2009: 10). Within Freud's own early writings on trauma was the possibility of integrating the lost event, or the death, into a series of associated memories, as a way to permit the event to be forgotten (Freud 1917: 250). However, to see Freud's model as simply letting go and moving on does not do justice to the idea of resolution, including the process of overcoming denial of the loss and hence enriching the self (Small 1996; Bowlby 1998). In fact, Silverman & Klass argue that there was a difference between Freud's theories and his own experience of grief (1996: 7). To them, Freud's letters describing his own writing from mourning when his daughter Sophie died, can be read as a realisation that he could not cut old attachments and form new ones. I was not ready to let Mickey go. I needed to find a way to tell my story beyond the painful repetition of suffering.

Epistolary fiction is a way to explore the tangled web that is grief. Writing fiction demands that the writer transcend an original experience and through imagination and craft construct a story allowing readers to relate to their inner stories (Arnold...
The first epistolary novel that comes to mind about coping with grief is Lionel Shriver’s *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2003). By writing letters to her dead husband, protagonist, Khatchadourian works through the overwhelming grief of losing husband, daughter and son. These novels effectively describe the grief journey from inside the skin of the bereaved person.

Many of the texts previously mentioned cast light on my own experience, but they did not describe it precisely and provided few clues on how to frame my own narrative. How does a writer express the inexpressible? Words have power over our lives and I was dealing with words like regret, love, loss, guilt, memory and remorse.

Cixous claims that, ‘Words are the doors to all other worlds. At a certain moment for the person who has lost everything, be it a being or country, language becomes the country. One enters the country of languages’ (Cixous 1992: 19). According to Julia Kristeva, the language of death, like love, is ‘impossible, inadequate, immediately allusive when one would like to be straightforward. It is a flight of metaphors. It is literature’ (Kristeva 1987: 1). Similarly Andrew Solomon suggests that depression ‘can be described only in metaphor and allegory’ (Solomon 2002: 16). Philosophers Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor, at its simplest, is a figure of speech that unites disparate areas of human existence. Thus it is a powerful form of communication because of its ability to unite the abstract with the physical and visual. It is the immediacy of the image that makes it so compelling. Metaphors can be a substitute for the scream of pain, the grunt of depression, the keening of grief that continues until there is no breath left. For example, in *Glitter*, the last chapter of ‘Hush’, a memoir of cot death (forthcoming), Dominique Hecq offers fragmented writing as a way of coping with grief (Hecq 2010). She writes, ‘I am doing it again, fragmenting my narrative as I feel the anxiety rising—cutting up sentences/words/reaching for the letter through metaphor—eee...’ (Hecq 2010: 3).

Wrapped in the maternal fabric of words, in my journal, I wrote unfettered, unedited, unintelligible words. I moved beyond words to a silent space and images of felt knowing. But my unfinished warp and weft were attached to a silent loom. The design incomplete, waiting for an ending. The only writing I could do was fragments on a page. Like Sandra Arnold, I saw the act of writing—or even trying to write—of imagining to write—as meaningless, vain and silly (Arnold 2010: 4).
Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia (Kristeva 1989) gave me further insights. In it Kristeva writes: 'Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components; that is doubtless a way to curb mourning' (Kristeva 1989 97). Kristeva also says, 'to revel in it at times, but also to go beyond, moving on to another form, not so scorching, more and more perfunctory' (1989: 97). I attempted to write the exegesis as a way to ease back into picking up the threads of the novel. The exegetical component of this meant swapping my artistic hat for that of researcher (Green & Bowden 2008). By removing the emotional involvement I engaged in a more structured and contained style of writing. My aim was to develop an exegesis by connecting the praxis and the creative work to a wider emergent field (Hamilton & Jaaniste 2010: 39), and this focus helped me write while mourning.

There are many other writers who agree with Cassandra Atherton when she claims that theory can help you understand what is going on in your writing practice and can help you move on (Atherton 2010; Avieson 2008; Milech & Schilo 2004; Ramey 2007). As this dissertation suggests, the creative work and the exegesis function as alternative ways of approaching and addressing the same research question (Hetherington 2010: 8). By exploring that question via reflexivity the writer moves on in her writing practice and personal journey.

I had already discovered that critical theory and creative writing formed a reciprocal relationship and invigorated each other, as mentioned in the preface, and I began to return to regular writing with baby steps. From the black, scratched marks on the page of my journal I slowly began writing one exegetical paragraph at a time. However, for the first time in my writing career I became locked into a destructive cycle of procrastination. Where was the joy of writing? The passion? Buried in research, I hid behind the taut threads of academic writing. The work of the exegesis: of literary search, methodology, preface and introduction provided a distancing; a safer space. The novel waited. Deadlines loomed. How to pick up the threads? The desire to write creatively was still there. I wanted to keep going, but didn't know how. This unsettling indecision gave me new insight and empathy for my characters, but I still could not find a safe emotional space to write creatively. Clarice Lispector explains: 'No it is not easy to write. It is as hard as breaking rocks. Sparks and splinters fly like shattered steel' (Lispector 1986: 17).
How to finish writing ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’? How to protect myself from depression?
Recently experienced bereavements can awaken echoes of past deaths, to which we have not been able to resign ourselves. As Anne Michaels says in her poem *Memoriam*, 'Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist' (Michaels 1997: 20). The danger of being destabilised or retraumatised by retelling the experience is an extensive area of research that goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet suffice to say, two and a half years into the candidature I had come full circle. Back to Hélène Cixous.

I believe that one can only advance along the path of discovery, the discovery of writing or anything else, from mourning and the reparation of mourning. (Cixous 1994: xxvi)

Cixous' theories and life experiences resonated within me. When Cixous was eleven, her father died. She describes this event as having a formative influence on her as a writer. Loss and the need for consolation became key motivating forces in her writing life.

In the beginning the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, of having been thrown outside. Of having suddenly acquired the precious sense of the rare, of the mortal. Of having urgently to regain the entrance, the breath, to keep the trace. (Cixous 1994: xxvi)

Writing as a reparation of loss is a major theme in Cixous' work (Cixous 1994: xxvi). According to Susan Sellers, Cixous views language as a compensation for, and a means of living, and inscribing, loss (Cixous 1994: 40). I felt that through language I could give substance to Mickey and by recording her life-story I could keep a trace of her alive within the pages of a book. But not now.

I returned to my journal. When I did not want to write, when I was feeling brain-dead, writing about the ordinariness of life without sorting, sifting, editing, connected me with the living and with the dead (Adams 1998: 4). It created a place to be in ordinary conversation with anyone—from myself to my old penfriend. It connected me to Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Jolley, Margaret Atwood and Margaretta Jolly. I could smell, see, touch and taste the story waiting for its ending.
The earphones hurt my ears and my fingers tremble as I turn on the tape recorder. Mickey’s highly opinionated deep voice permeates my being. Informal conversations we had in 2002. There are so few. When the tape recorder was on, she rarely wanted to talk, and the best conversations were when I turned it off. For me, it is the sound of her strong, opinionated voice that is important. It triggers deep emotions. I must believe the writing will come to life in her voice. Not mine. Yet woven within the writing is my story. Mickey and I in context with history, revealed via my recollections. (Journal 4 2010: 233)

A submission paper for a respected creative writing anthology went from my desk to a shelf, onto the spare bed and finally the floor. I picked it up, and began revising five thousand words from the start of the novel. I was back in the heat and dust of the Australian Outback, to that first meeting. I was soon singed. The five thousand words needed line editing, but I sent it anyway. I had picked up the threads and was weaving again. To gather pitch black threads and weave them through the existing colours in the writing practice is to transcend grief. To move from grief to the acceptance of mourning.

Unlike grief, mourning is a sublimatory process and so, for artists, acceptance often comes with a return to creation (Kristeva 1989). At first I kept Mickey’s dying out of the book as if she must not die again. Yet just to think this was to let her go. Dominique Hecq suggests that although writing may be an uninterrupted work of mourning, it may also be a structural necessity. Drawing on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, she suggests that the respected writer James Joyce avoided psychosis by deploying his art (Hecq 2008: 1). To complete ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’ I was drawing upon personal tragedy to write fiction for publication, therefore I had to transcend the raw material and through imagination and craft construct a story that allowed readers entry into what Nafisi describes as a space denied by reality (Nafisi 2004: 10). However, this space had to stop short of the brink of psychosis.
Life is a tapestry and death leaves a hole. I looked at the empty space and realised I had never willingly allowed any empty spaces in my life. Life had been about hanging on to what you had. Anything I had ever let go had claw marks on it. Yet this empty space was different. With wonder, I began to see it as a creative space, an opportunity to move on through the process of creating (Riggs 2007). It became filled with possibilities. I began to weave the tapestry bigger so the hole was less obvious. Writing the ending to the story allowed me to make visible the size and shape of my grief and through language I could give substance to Mickey.

In May, in water-cooler conversation with another PhD candidate, for the first time I talked about Martha the character in the novel and thought of her as Martha, not Mickey. At that point I realised that a huge shift had taken place: a distancing.

There is a break between friend and character. I can write Martha, talk about Martha, think Martha and keep Mickey, friend and mentor safely tucked in my heart. I'm remembering the woman and writing the character (Journal 5 2011: 29)

But was I writing from an idealised memory of Mickey? Had my grief and mourning turned the novel into a representation of somebody perfect and had I ignored imperfections? 'Hens Lay, People Lie' was once again in danger of becoming a hymn of praise—until I remembered Mickey's opinionated honesty. The character Martha now strides through the pages of the novel warts and all.

A motivating factor in my decision to include Mickey's death within the novel was the belief that writing about my own experience would not only create a way through grief for me, but would also enable other bereaved writers to 'witness the experience of reconstructing [their] own map' (Frank 1997: 17) for writing from mourning. Louise DeSalvo's writing (1999: 206) reinforced my belief that my story would help others to cope with grief and mourning. As I pointed out in Chapter Four, it was emotionally challenging to follow Caroline Ellis and the other exponents of emotive autoethnography, and reveal a vulnerable self. Whenever I wavered I thought of Hélène Cixous, Virginia Woolf and Laurel Richardson.

To me my texts are elements of a whole which interweaves my own story, are the seasons, days in the Great Year of my life. (Cixous 1994: xv)
Writing is what I do, in spite of the problems. What I had to reclaim was the sheer joy of writing; the intimate relationship between me and the page. Through this practice I hold communion with my deepest self. I did not want to bury Mickey or to praise her, but '...to exalt her exceptional contribution to my own happiness and belief in the worthiness of life itself by the testimony of her own' (Barthes 2010: 260). Perhaps this is the gift of every daughter—even a proxy one.

The blackness of loss and grief woven through the text added depth to the colours already woven through the story.

I have always wanted wings. To fly where I belong, to become who I am...winged and moon-swayed. (Griffiths 2011: 3)

Ultimately I learnt to trust myself and find my own safe space to write from mourning. On my magic carpet I let my imagination soar—to follow Jay Griffiths and fly to the moon, to live in my imagination, to experiment with plot and characters, to swoop and fly and write from multiple stray moons.

Morning sun gilds the topmost leaves of the melaleuca gums. I drag my kayak out onto the lake. Suspended between water and sky, my oar dips into reflected clouds. Between two worlds I find the end to our story. (Journal 5 2012: 233)
Concluding the journey

As long as there are questions to which there are no answers I will go on writing.

(Lispector 1986: 11)

To embark on a practice-led PhD by artefact and exegesis is an emotional and enlightening experience. To grow as a writer and move on in my life I stepped out of my comfort zone of creative writing to pick up the threads of critical theory, reflexivity and qualitative research and used them to enliven my writing practice, write a novel and articulate the journey. However, I was always mindful that at the heart of this story were two women.

There are many elements that can be discussed in an exegesis, but if all were included it would be the same length as the novel. For example, a sustained examination of both feminist and postcolonial theories was discarded. Similarly, a detailed discussion of mother/daughter relationships based on the works of Carolyn Heilbrun and Marguerite Duras was reluctantly abandoned. Often, for the sake of the story, the best writing and research can end up in the wastepaper bin. As both writer and scholar, this was my choice.

For this exegesis, I privileged a discussion of the craft of creating an epistolary novel and this led to a discussion on the major developmental threads and learning curves experienced along the way. The decision to divide the final draft of the exegesis into seven chapters to match the seven chapters in 'Hens Lay, People Lie', reflects the inseparable connection between both the artefact and the exegesis. Each chapter of the exegesis has a dialogue, albeit at times oblique, between critical theory,
epistolary narratives central to the field and the voice of my unfolding novel. This
dialogue allows me to offer new and significant insights and knowledge to my field.
The novel itself is part of this contribution.

In this work I set out to write the story of my penfriendship with Mickey, but in trying
to tell Mickey's story I have been enabled to tell my own. To me my texts are an
integral part of me and have become interwoven with the days, seasons and years of
my life (Cixous 1994: xv). I decided to use my life as qualitative research data
through autoethnographic writing in my journal. Autoethnography enabled me to use
a variety of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both
traditional and innovative methods (Chase 2005: 651). I became my data and a
subject of my own exegetical research as much as I was an authorial presence and
character within my novel (Gill et al. 2008: 249).

I was both on the inside and the outside of the text: writing like a novelist, but
thinking like an ethnographer. Although I saw my reactions, both as a woman and as
a writer, to be an invaluable part of the research process, if I had remained in
auto/biography and autoethnography the capacity to generalise and theorise out of
my own life would have been limited. When contemplating making my experience
available to others, I realised that I could create more entry points for others through
fiction. This resulted in my original contemporary auto/biography breaking out of a
generic straight jacket to be a multi-faceted and essentially hybrid practice which
included fiction. By using novelistic and fictional narrative techniques, hybridity and
fragmentation of the story, changes in voice and character perspective, I contend
that 'Hens Lay, People Lie' stands beyond epistolarity and thereby contributes to
new knowledge in the epistolary genre.

Many fictionalised autobiographical novels such as 'Hens Lay, People Lie' use
creative epistolarity to reveal and examine social concerns many readers share.
These narratives address and give voice to those who suffer illness, oppression,
misfortune, and tragedy. They also give voice to those who wish to speak in a spirit
of inquiry, amazement and affirmation, even celebration. A combination of sensitive
research, autoethnography and creative epistolarity produces novels that celebrate
life and storytelling in a language everyone can understand: texts that cause readers
to think and feel have the capacity to instigate social, cultural and political action.
Therefore, 'Hens Lay, People Lie' is more than a story of two women and a thirty-five year penfriendship, more than the exploration of their literary journey and their fight to find their place in society. I believe that creative epistolarity is uniquely placed to challenge metanarratives by providing women with a safe space to find their voice and write their stories. My hope is that women writing self-reflexive creative narratives, in their own individual style and voice, will inspire and empower other women to weave the colours of their lives and the warp and weft of their stories into the fabric of society, thereby adding to the tapestry that is *écriture féminine*.

Reflecting back on the PhD journey I realise that I now know more about myself as a woman, and as a writer. The inseparable relationship between the artefact, journal and exegesis and critical analysis of theories and thoughts, accompanied by an exploration of my writing practice, all within the pages of a journal, are now an integral part of my writing process. When writing 'Hens Lay, People Lie', I discovered a safe space in which I found my voice. From this safe space I worked through grief, wrote from mourning and told Mickey’s and my story. The knowledge I have gained from creating this novel will lead to further experimental creative works beyond epistolarity. I have left the safety net of the epistolary genre and taken the next step forward in my writing career.

It is now time to detach the creative work from the loom and showcase it in a public space. To the viewer it may be a woven work of art, wall hanging, mat, rug, or even a magic carpet ready to take them on an adventure through the lands of epistolarity, *écriture féminine*, fact and fiction, autoethnography, mentoring, ethics and finally through mourning to come to rest in the land of self-knowledge.

The knots are tied and threads cut. The project may end, but the questioning, evaluating and exploring continues.
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List of Publications

This PhD has resulted in the publication of the following


Whitting, G 2012. 'Building the loom: autobiography to autoethnography', *Masters lecture LPW 706*, Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale, Victoria, Australia.

Conference Presentations
