

2006

Dead Man: And an accompanying exegesis: 'Labyrinthine modes in Dead Man and The Castle by Franz Kafka.'

Anna Green
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Green, A. (2006). *Dead Man: And an accompanying exegesis: 'Labyrinthine modes in Dead Man and The Castle by Franz Kafka.'* Edith Cowan University. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/67>

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/67>

Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author's moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).
- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Dead Man

And an accompanying exegesis:
'Labyrinthine Modes in Dead Man and
The Castle by Franz Kafka.'

Anna Green
BA (Hons)
Curtin University of Technology

Thesis submitted for the award of
MA (by Research) in Writing

Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Services
Edith Cowan University
2006

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

Dead Man is a novella about four brothers. They live an unrestricted life until their mother decides that they lack fear and this lack could make their lives difficult when they are adults. To combat this, she recruits the help of another boy to create a sense of fear and threat that remains endlessly elusive, that will make her sons more wary and alert than she thinks that they would otherwise be capable of. Neuroses always seek their source and Dead Man explores this notion. The source of neurosis for the brothers in Dead Man is a real person; a real physical presence, and, like regular neuroses, it convolutes the characters' perception of their 'place in the world'. Dead Man subverts the notion of neurosis by making the force of the ailment an actual physical being, rather than a misapprehension and projection. To represent the phenomena of neuroses, a non-linear narrative is employed in the construction of Dead Man. This non-linearity aims to represent the persistence of over-referencing that is the mainstay of a neurotic state where the past, present and future are in play at any given moment.

Rather than delve into the 'usual suspects' of psychoanalysis and theories on neuroses, I have, instead, written an exegesis 'Labyrinthine Modes in Dead Man and *The Castle* by Franz Kafka' which is based on the non-linearity of Dead Man and the similarities it shares with *The Castle*. The essay explores the instability of the sign and the subversion of the 'concept' of time in both works and how this phenomenon could be described as labyrinthine.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) *incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;*
- (ii) *contain any material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the text; or*
- (iii) *contain any defamatory material.*

.....

Anna Green

.....

Date

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Richard Rossiter, for his support, guidance and time throughout the production of this thesis. I would also like to thank the English Department at Edith Cowan University for giving me this opportunity.

My parents, Pauline and Trevor Green, have loved and supported me throughout this endeavour and I wish to thank them also.

Contents

Copyright statement	ii
Abstract	iii
Declaration	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Contents	vi
Novella: <u>Dead Man</u>	1
Exegesis: ‘Labyrinthine Modes in <u>Dead Man</u> and <i>The Castle</i> by Franz Kafka’	84
Reference List	102

Part one.

Michael held his breath before he opened the door and then he pressed himself forward, leaned his body against the wood and exhaled into the dark of the hallway. The warmth inside the apartment enveloped him. It seeped through his jacket as he pulled down the zip, and as the material slipped off his shoulders, he caught a whiff of the air that had been trapped so close to his skin. It was an odour like no other – it was not from him, and the strangeness of it always disturbed him. He stepped to the side and ran his hands down his chest but it didn't go away. He shook his shirt, brushed his hands across it, down it and then he did this again until these motions seemed to stir the air and the smell became slimmer, more diffuse, and then it melded with the smell of her cooking. She'd been making a pie and he'd spent all day looking forward to it. Down past the hallway shone a dim light and he found her asleep on the couch, a book on her chest, and her chest rising slowly in her spread-eagled body. Shining above was a reading lamp and she looked warm and pink in the mute light. As he breathed in her image, he stood in her warmth, her quiet and her comfort. And he bent down towards her; down to where she lay, and then reached to kiss her slightly parted lips before he stopped short. He didn't want to wake her.

Stepping back from her body Michael pulled off his shoes and walked to the kitchen, flipped on a switch and filled up the room with its whiteness. The kitchen hummed in its barely there monotone and the aroma of baking hung in the air as soft as mist. Bending down to the oven, he opened the door and a rush of heat blew into his face and he could taste the food already in his mouth. This was too much. The smell was overpowering – he lost all control and pulled out the pie with his bare hands and dropped the scalding dish. His flesh squealed and his arms remained frozen in front of him. He remained in this position as he thought about what he should do. The burns on his hands screeched for a reaction but nothing clicked into place. There was something missing, there was a hole in the road of his synapses, so it took a few seconds for him to move his hands, manoeuvre his fingers up to his mouth and purse his lips to blow but then no breath came out. He was distracted by an envelope placed by the phone. It was addressed to her: *Simone*, in a childish scrawl; big black letters and he stared at this until he smelled something bad. Acrid smoke was rising from the bench and was filling the kitchen. He lunged at the dish and swore at himself after he had lobbed it into the

sink. His face reddened. A big black mark had appeared on the bench and the stink was filling their kitchen.

Michael's hand hovered over the envelope before he clutched at it, pressed too hard and the square form crumpled a little in his grip. He couldn't relax his fingers. He held the envelope in front of him and flexed his fingers as he clutched the letter between thumb and forefinger and then passed it from one hand to the other and then held it between both palms as he tried to roll his shoulders loose. There was a tightness in his neck that was making him squint, the hand that held the envelope seemed too far away from his body and then the pain of the burn disappeared and then throbbed back into life again. He dropped the envelope and then stared at it on the ground as he blew on his fingers. It hadn't been opened yet. Why hadn't she wanted to see inside? It was addressed with a clumsy hand but the writing seemed purposeful and each stroke dug a trench in the paper. The content was small and loosely packed and there was no stamp on the envelope; no post mark, post-code, city or surname, and he wondered if someone had delivered it by hand to their post-box, or slid it under the door. He decided he was going to ask her about it. He wanted to wake her and ask her about it. He walked to the living room and decided that they should open it together; he would suggest that they should never have secrets from each other. And then he saw the ladder as it poked above the balcony's railing. The screen door was unlocked and he moved past Simone's sleeping body to slide it open and a rush of cold air flew against his skin and his aching face as he stepped down onto the floor. It was dark and Michael was too high up and he couldn't be sure if he saw someone down there. He couldn't be sure if the ladder had been used by someone to get inside his home. There was movement in the bushes below him but Michael didn't begin to climb down the ladder because he needed to know who or what was there. He climbed down because language had escaped him. There was no way he was going to give form to the anxiety that was shaking him down each of the steps.



Michael was usually fairly quick to see the truth. He had grown up on a farm with his three brothers. He was the eldest after Richard, the younger two were Alistair and Francis and all four boys shared a room. Twin beds flanked the walls and each night they waited for the first one to fall asleep so lit matches could be held up to that boy's closed eyes. Whenever this happened to Michael, his dreams would explode and he would jolt up and often get burned by the flame. Nightmares of the sun falling down on

him were ever-present and he couldn't help worrying that this could happen when he was awake. His mother said nothing whenever he voiced this concern and so Michael understood that there was nothing to be scared of. She attended to their bodies, to their cuts and bruises and burns and so they were swabbed down with calamine before being sent back out to play. This play was everything to them and there was miles of it. They lived in the middle of bushland with a town in the valley below them. No other farm stood near them. There was cleared land for tilling but nothing grew and as the boys got older their games grew bigger, more flurried, more sucking in of air. And they sucked and they filled their lungs and each gasp was like a burst of rage but there wasn't anything to be angry about. They lived and they swung themselves around and this was enough for them. It had to be enough for them because there wasn't much else that was there.



Michael shook and his fingers grasped each rung too hard. The ladder was made of aluminium and it was covered with flecks of paint; a relic from renovations that had recently taken place. He concentrated on what he was doing. He climbed down and worried that he wasn't doing this properly and then he wondered if he was climbing too slowly and the ladder seemed rife with complexity. When Michael had landed on the ground, it took him a few seconds to let go of the last rung. He didn't want to turn around. He couldn't make a decision about the best thing to do. The *best* thing would have been for him to climb back up but he decided not to follow this instinct. He decided to follow what he suspected had provoked this compulsion in the first place and it disappeared into the darkness as soon as he turned his head.

Towards the end of Michael's more typical of days, he would make a to-do list in the evening. He would stick this list on the fridge and in the morning he would find more things added with the pencil that Simone carried in her bag. First on this list was that he should remember to brush his teeth. He had forgotten once and had spent the whole of that day feeling self-conscious and he had tried not to breathe whenever he said anything anyone's way. The second on the list was a reminder to check his work diary and see if there was anything extra that he needed to take. The third was that he shouldn't forget his wallet or this diary and that he should pack both of these in his bag. This other diary contained a far more ordinary list, a list of appointments and bills to pay that didn't seem so routine and simple and weren't things that seemed

unreasonable for him to forget. This was the list that he *should* make and he could leave this diary anywhere without feeling that it held anything strange, anything questionable, anything that could be indicative of something else. Something far more difficult to place.



It should have been talked about, it should have been resolved, but no decisions were made to help ease the tension on the farm. The boys' parents didn't argue about the farm's failure and, in fact, barely talked at all and so their situation, in all its barrenness, settled into itself. Anything they wanted to grow would not. All that was undesirable had staked its claim and lay dormant in the ground until spring came and the roots spread and the rain would gather in thick clouds and then bucket down for Michael and his brothers to run and play in. This play was all slush and mud, dirt behind their ears and ingrained in their clothes and nothing existed outside the worlds they created. The wind would brush the hair from their eyes and it would be fragrant with pollen and they would savour these new smells. Their stomachs would expand with sweet air and they would watch the farm around them sprout into a wonderland of colour. And then the boys' play would settle to touch and look at spiders and worms around delicate flowers of which the small yellow ones were thought best. With the trees towering over him; still from the lack of breeze, Michael would see the flowers change into spiky, soft cotton balls – ready to spawn and ready to be blown by the wind from his lips. Exhale then gush – and the fragile network of seeds were blown apart and carried through the air like tiny parachutists escaping from a gutted and spiralling plane.

To the boys their father was a recalcitrant hero and they waited for his second wind. David Collatt had bought the land under good instruction – advice that he had sought and then paid good money for. Advice that eventually changed location and for which he could never find a forwarding address. All liability disappeared and so it seemed to him that there was nothing left to do or hope for. He was once in the navy – secure with a comfortable job. There were no conflicts, no war ravaged nations. There were just endless ports and endless women and the feeling that everything was okay. And this okay had worn thin with him and he had decided to find a better life. It would be a life that would reward him after the hard work of it had transformed him. He wanted to be the man he always knew that he could be. There hadn't been a large amount of time between this idea and the point at which he was faced with a different reality. He had

sat on the porch as his wife lay inside; heavily pregnant with their first child, and he had looked out to overgrown acres, water-logged fields and he focussed in and out on the endless thrumming of insects. These insects made noise all around him but he could only ever see one or two – they were an invisible force and they got into everything. No matter how well food was stored and how well it was sealed, he would always find the wilted body of at least one in each meal.

Dave Collatt liked to remember how his wife looked in dresses, in skirts above the knee. Maria had good legs still: strong legs, but the image of her in flimsy material would dissolve whenever he saw her walk past him. Her steps were too wide, her legs too firmly footed – she was too much for everything that needed doing and so he avoided her. Each day at five she would make their breakfasts. She would make it as early as she could because she could never predict her sons' behaviour. If one of them woke early and there was nothing for him to do, he would make a nuisance of himself, demand too much of her and she would get annoyed and open the door and tell him to go away and not bother her. To find enough food for all of them was her biggest dilemma. They were always hungry and she never had the money to buy what they needed. She had to consider everything that was possible for her to do. After she had fed them their breakfast and sent them outside to play she would hop in her truck and drive down the mudded-up highway. Maria would drive into town and she would wonder what could be done better – what there was that could make life easier for her in that home.



Michael had forgotten to check if Simone was okay. He had climbed down a ladder, a ladder that could have been put there for *any* purpose, and he had forgotten to check if she was okay. This anxiety about safety was ever-present. There was the time when he and Simone had just started seeing each other and she had stayed the night. She had woken him up because she said she heard a burglar. She said she was sure that someone had gotten inside his flat. He had told her it was nothing – just noises of the building settling and that she should just go to sleep. Michael pretended not to be awake the next time she said she heard something. He kept his eyes closed when she whispered his name and when he woke up in the morning and saw that she wasn't lying next to him, he didn't get up to look for her and tried to go back to sleep again.



Maria often stared for long periods out the window. She stared out the window and stared at nothing as she thought about her day. Breakfast hadn't been enough; she had scraped the cupboard bare. She had thought about adding paper to their porridge just so it would fill them up but she had been caught by her husband tearing paper. She told him it was a letter from the bank and that she would talk about it with him later. She needed to know that he was worried about *something* as he lolled his lazy body on the porch. She pulled off her apron, walked out the house and got into the truck. She backed the truck up and then turned it around, drove through the broken gate, down the sloping road and then she pulled her foot from the brake. The road seemed to free-fall beneath her and she imagined herself driving past the town, driving over the other side and then driving and driving towards the cliff that dropped adjacent to a popular picnic place. She would give those picnickers something to look at. She would be their spectacular view. She would speed past and break the fence and drive over the edge and she would leave nothing behind because there was nothing that she wanted to save herself for and go back to.

And the boys were playing silly buggers. Darting and screeching and laughing hysterically – they spun their way around the garden. They felt chilly in thin macs and with no boots on; they ran in the hills and were brazen against the weather while the wind in their ears created hallowed sounds that echoed and felt deep. All life outside of their games had no real existence for them. They created kingdoms and wars and took turns to gang up on each other. They didn't feel pain, they gave pain and this pain was passed around like a Chinese whisper – distorting and abstracting into a meaningless form which they pulled out of the air to hurt each other with.



Michael Collatt put his head down as he walked down the street and he decided to turn into less familiar territory. It was cold and the air he breathed out was visible to him. These breaths made him remember something, something that had to be pointed out to him. He had been doing it without knowing. Every second or third breath was taken in through his nose and was directly expelled through his mouth; the air never passed through his body. He would breathe rapidly and feel light-headed and the more breaths he took, the less air entered his system. His circular breathing would take over and the air would whistle through his nose, his nasal passages and his mouth until he would

feel light-headed and almost pass out. As he walked now, Michael took care to focus on the oxygen he pulled inside of him. He made sure that he drew it in hard enough, deep enough to be sustainable for him.



In one place or other, the pile of letters would grow until the bills were sorted out; stored away or stuck to the fridge with magnets. And the rain had poured down, having not stopped for days – it had turned their little farm into swampland. And this swamp led to muddy trails in the house and David could see his wife bent down and scrubbing at them. She had come back from town, entered the house, filled up a bucket with water and then had fallen to her hands and knees. Dave sat on the porch and smoked his pipe and remembered his days in the navy. He remembered the time of their first docking, after days on the sea, the blue all around and clear weather – they had yelled with excitement at the break. All mates gathered round, about to jump from ship to port and a few days leave – and they stood on the water like movie stars, smoking cigarettes as they suppressed their excitement for the crowds. To get off the boat was done in single file, orderly like, until they gathered together on land. And they stood in rough circles and organised outings and the drinking of beer, and other things – sly winks aside. And around them waited a gathering of girls, some standing in groups and giggling while the lone ones looked expensive – all knee high skirts and red lipstick, hair piled high and stuck fast. They knew that the gigglers weren't going to be easy; more there for the view and excitement – never there to be approached too keenly, but all of them knew that for the right amount of cash the high heeled girls would be willing.

They snickered together as they gathered around their mother – all ready to eat. She ushered them round the table – set it, and served up the soup that was waiting. Pumpkin and stale bread, butter that she'd made from their one goat and they'd spoon it in as they dunked their bread, their dripping chins all warm and wet and with a cloth in hand she'd watch them eat till her husband came in and she'd leave; into the kitchen, where she would spend her mornings and early afternoons, making the soup or sandwiches (depending on the weather). And when they'd left the table Maria would gather up the dishes, wipe down the table and pick up the keys for her truck.

There was always so much to do – so much to *organise* for them. Maria would drive down the empty street, her head heavy with responsibility, and she would park at the side of the road. Sliding out of the car her eyes would pierce the closed door ahead of

her, its plastic signs faded and the smell of meat in the dry surrounds. The green and white frills on the pork chops and the skewer that held a sign in the steaks made her legs drop a little and the heat fell down to her crotch. Puddles wept and splashy feet, the clouded up sun and she, wet and dripping, opened the door of the store and walked inside. The smell licked her face in a pleased and anxious greeting; he'd been waiting all day for her and he stood smiling at the back with his cleaver.

Some of the girls at the dock had met the lads later on for a drink. They were solid drinkers; all four of those girls, and the lads had discussed amongst themselves who was up for a ride. Dave Collatt knew that trying to bring down prices was always hard with the poorer girls, some give it to you on the cheap – being a sailor and the like – but others aren't so keen to make it easy. They know how hard it is – being out at sea for such a long time, with sex on your mind every minute and they milked it for all it's worth. They were teasers, the lot of them, and the lads would always look out for each other and pull back the ones who were going to get themselves into trouble. The trick was not to get too drunk with any of them, cause when you're off your head you can't see through some of the harder wired girls, with the flinty eyes and their hands on your pockets – checking out the bulge. A few of us got well ripped off and we got weary of all their little tricks. Some of them made up sob stories and promises and tales of their sick mothers. It could all get a bit much for the softer blokes and we had to keep an eye on them. We'd tell them that they couldn't leave without us checking out the girl they were going with and whether or not she was asking a decent price. I think we saved many a mate from getting ripped off. Few could tell the truth of the matter.



Michael hurried across the intersection while all around him was flash and speed and wet-flecked panic. He had been walking and then he had stopped for no reason and realised that he had stopped in the middle of a busy road. He had blinked and the world seemed to rise up and speed towards him; blare its horns and flash its lights. He ran across and a car swerved away and he landed on the path and shook his head as his stomach spasmed and dropped. He didn't need to think about this reaction – he knew the sensation in his gut was from hunger. It must be time to get something to eat. This revelation cleared his head and as he started walking again a nursery rhyme played its familiar tune in his head:

Step on a crack

And break your mother's back.

And Michael didn't avoid the cracks, in fact he didn't even look down to notice them but he couldn't help walking to the rhythm of the rhyme and it was imperfect – the second line of the verse being longer than the first – so his left leg stepped out too widely, awkwardly and his stomach rumbled and he knew that he must look strange to the people in the cars driving past. He *knew* that he was being judged by the ungainliness of his gait.



Hunger sat in their bellies like frogs, croaking and jumping and then sitting in a dead weight as the boys lay about, listless in the hills. Around them was just the summer dry and everything was patchy and yellow. Scratchy twigs and thorns and prickles stuck to their hair and clothing, itchy bites forced them to move and they'd snarl at each other for no reason. Lunch had come late this day, this week, this month and was smaller in size than they could remember. They had been served up a sandwich made with stale bread and rusted up meat and they had milk and it was all they could do to keep from starving. They were always hungry, they always mewled for more – and each child would note, would watch and remember, as she, their mother Maria, stood stern – stood complete and whole and unwavering. And the boys sat and they scratched and they ached until one of them began a conversation about food. And all of the meals they'd had rolled around in their stomachs from memory. The taste in their mouths and the thick wads of meat and pastry in tough little grips. Like bears trapped in dreaming – they rolled around in the grass with slavering chops and their eyes closed tight against the sun.



As dawn broke through the curtainless window Dave Collatt opened his eyes and looked at her. She was white skinned and flawless, red hair and freckles, beautiful through the creeping dawn glow and he kissed between the blades of her back as he tried to remember her name. She murmured as he lifted his lips, turned her body towards him and looked at him with heavy lidded eyes; blurred eyes, and she said that she'd be needing her money now as she had to be getting home, she'd never meant to spend the night but she'd had nowhere safe to stay for so long now and it was nice to sleep in a comfy bed. She pulled on her dress as he went for his wallet and she asked

him when their ship was leaving, would he like to meet at the same time tomorrow – or better yet – did he think he could lend her some money, she didn't usually ask but her mother was sick and....

Maria picked up her clothes from the floor and put them on as she looked around her. She was in the butcher's storage room and the meat hung on hooks; carcasses spread out; rib-cages open like wings; stuck up, swinging and glistening with red. The cold swept her skin in rushes. The butcher had bent down to the floor and he had picked up her shoes and he handed them to her. She wiped the bottom of her feet with the rag that she had used on her body. The floor was covered with sawdust and he had pulled her down onto the only congealed patch of blood on the floor. She liked his peculiar desires as she could tell that he was ashamed of them. He had watched her wipe herself down afterwards and he said he would give her more money if he could be the one to wipe between her legs. She had obliged him and laughed as his hand shook. She felt no shame when he handed over the meat and money. It was a small town and he was in her power because she didn't care what any of them thought. She was just a woman in a shop and there hadn't been enough money in her purse to buy what she wanted and now she was confronted with the smell of meat and worry and the cold that touched her skin in a thousand tiny handprints.

The truck had rolled up with the sun glinting on its roof. It came towards them like a force in the weather and this was all they needed to let out a long drawn out war cry, start the charge and go. Each of them sweated and was flushed and was ecstatic with the sight of the sun as it warmed up their thin little bodies – covered with mud to their knees and their necks dirty. The charge ended up around the newly parked truck and their mother got out so they quieted. Into her shopping sack she reached and pulled from it a parcel covered with butcher's paper and told them they were going to eat meat. So on went the charge – further afield and down the muddied slopes, tumbling over rocks and into puddles. Dirt flecked on faces and smeared in stripes like war paint, their game was formed from splashy mud and sunbaked clay as they waited to be called inside for their meal.

All of the flowers in the valley were budding, it was green and lush and Dave stepped onto the porch and filled his lungs with air. He didn't think about how his wife had managed to make such a large meal for them, he just enjoyed how it felt in his stomach and the fact that he could still taste it in his mouth. He walked down the steps and past

the truck and down to where the scrub got thicker. He thought about how much he could have done with the land and then his mind wandered back to his swing chair on the porch and the tobacco on the table and the stool he used to prop up his feet. As he ambled back to fill his pipe and sit down with a drink, he caught a glimpse of his wife and the boys sitting at the back of a clump of trees and bushes. He stopped to watch them and saw her spooning stuff out of a jar and feeding them, one by one. It was honey and sticky and it dripped down the sides of their mouths. Not a sound could be heard from any of them but he could hear the birds in the trees and the rustle of the leaves as the wind blew. He watched and each boy was patient as he waited his turn and each boy's eyes were trained on Maria's hand as she dipped the spoon into the jar and reached out her arm to feed them, over and over again.



Michael stood up and realised that he had eaten too much and too quickly. Hunger had ruled and won, and his gut churned in circles its digestion – heart burning pokes at his chest. There was no time to sit though he needed to get going as it was getting late. He walked past the pain as it gripped him – tried to shake it off but it held on fast and rose higher – into his mouth and it left a bad taste as he burped. As the air left his system it eased a little of the pressure and he could up his pace to a stride. The rain had slowed and all that remained were people still blocking his route. They were ducking into and converging around the various pubs, clubs and cafes and as they swerved into doorways they momentarily blocked his path and slowed him down. He veered around and then he surged forward and as the path cleared he felt like he could move slower, he could breathe again and he held his head down as he walked.



Dave Collatt didn't want to think about the children. Dave Collatt had too many other things on his mind. He walked back up to the house and reached the railing of the porch and gripped it hard. He had to grip hard because his knees had buckled and his chest hurt and after he had pulled himself up the steps, he sat down, leaned forward to cough and considered all the things that could be wrong with him. He coughed again and decided not to think about this and so he leaned back and thought about the first time that he'd met her – she was all brown hair and brown eyes and lightly tanned skin, she was *that* girl: the girl who was fresh and beautiful. All around were birds that were singing out their varied tunes and fluttering about in the trees – twigs and moss and

green tinged water, and the feather that fell on her hair. He had laughed as he pulled it off and her eyes had smiled up at him. She had held her hand out for the feather he held between his fingers and then he had placed it in her palm for her to blow off. It traced the path of her breath in a fluttering twirl and was taken off by a gush of wind until it dropped near the shore of the river, bobbing over ripples as it floated downstream. He stood still and watched it until it was out of view and then he turned around in time to see her walking away.

Maria emerged from the bushes with the empty jar in hand and the spoon in her fingers as she sucked it clean. Without a glance his way, she walked past him and swung herself into the house, leaving the fly screen to bang after her. From the kitchen came the sounds of pots and pans clattering and the plates as they scraped when they were pulled from their place in the cupboard. These clattering scrapes and the shuffle of her feet relaxed him back to his daydream and he closed his eyes against the sun. His mouth dropped and then sagged as he dozed off and little snuffling snores blurred their way from out of his throat as the boys gathered around to look at him. Silent as mice, still as the clouds in the sky and with sombre looks on their grubby faces; he was startled to see them and with a jerk and a start he woke up as his pipe dropped down from his knee. The sun had sunk low in the sky and the valley was red, pink and silent. From the house came the smell of her cooking and the shuffle of little socked feet so he picked up his pipe, buckled up his belt and went inside for his next meal.

Dave inhaled as the soup was placed in front of him and he appreciated the beans she had added to enhance it. It was a tomato soup and it was rich and he dunked in large chunks of bread after smearing butter over with a thick knife. The boys chattered around him at a flurried pace and their cartoonish faces looked like rubber masks in the uneven light. She would often eat her meals in the kitchen. He could see her back and her arms, her swiftly dipping spoon and her hands as they tore chunks of bread. He saw her as he listened to what the boys were saying but their conversation was in a garbled kind of gibberish that only they could understand. It was high pitched and squeaky and then there were little bubbles of laughter and then dribbling chins; they finished their meal quickly and went outside to play.



Michael heard the shouting of children somewhere near-by. He walked across a busy road to a park and saw a group of them standing near a streetlight and then others

straggled out from behind various trees and from hidden nooks and then he saw the rest of the children walk or run out of the dark. They gathered together in a circle, stood in a pool of light and they held their hands to the middle. And the tallest boy stood central to them so all of the children's knuckles were held his way and their high bubbling voices rang out in a wavering tune, a song imbued with fear and death and a woman who swung with a hammer. The boy tapped the closed fists around him and beat out the tune as the voices slowed and rose and the ending drew near and he moved his body with the oncoming drama – arms raised high and dropping in swoops on excited fists and knuckles white and flinching in anticipation. And then there was the shout and the shriek as the circle collapsed away from the little girl who was it. They ran away for her to start up the chase and Michael stuffed his hands in his pockets and continued to walk down the road.



School-mornings were spent on the bus into town, and the little boys sat hunched at the back as they gorged down their lunches. Breakfast wasn't ever enough and they never could wait for lunch, so they shoved their small meal down their itchy red throats and licked their fingers with relish. They had only sandwiches, just one each, but the butter left a residue and a faint trace of smell so they spent the rest of the bus ride sniffing their fingers and eyeing off the other children. As recess came around, they would sit in the tiny schoolyard near the squeaking swings and the yellowed grass – and they would become ravenous. And the smallest children would suffer, each boy became a bully and each knew what he wanted. They would pin their targets down, a knee on each vulnerable chest, and they would press down harder until sandwiches were given over and promises were made to not tell. Each boy at intervals during the day would give warning glances to their target and threatening whispers and notes would be sent their way. At lunch-time a new target would be pinned to the ground and their teacher would hold his back to the window; the sun warmed his neck and was out of his eyes. His lips would purse against the muffled cries as he set about marking their textbooks.

And they were just boys being boys when they got home and they would yelp as they punched each other as they ran through the valley in a flurried chase. The clouds had started to gather again and they were making the most of the weather, kicking the dust up with their shoes and their bare feet as they put together a pile of dry twigs. They were going to make a bonfire. They hadn't had a bonfire ever and were told by their mother how to make one. She had explained to them over breakfast that she would like

to see them build one. She said that they should have a celebration because it was her birthday and she had always enjoyed fires, even when she was a little girl. And the boys had spent the rest of the day arguing and chattering in a high-pitched burble the hows and the wheres and the who was going to do what. The lowest point in the valley was thought best for a fire and they set about stacking the wood. A little nest had been built when their mother came home, and she hauled from her truck a bloodied sack and they all gathered around and grabbed a little bit of the bag and then hauled it along in the dirt.

As the sun set, the red and pink sky hung over them like mother-love and the birds in the valley quieted. They gathered around the sack as she reached in and pulled at some little white horns and dragged out their goat. Its throat had been cut and the body was skinned and the flanks were all cut away, but they knew it was theirs – its bell hung over the railing of the porch and it tinkled in the wind as they all stood aghast. And the boys turned to look at her and she smiled and said that the rest of the meat was wrapped up in foil in the car, along with some peeled vegetables. She said there was nothing for it but to have the goat killed as the summer was coming and the dry would settle in and the grass would all die leaving nothing for an animal. She said that it was the only thing for it, that it was better this way, that it would have been cruel if it was kept where it was.



When he saw Maria the next time he was dressed in civvies; his uniform was packed up onboard, and this did nothing to help his confidence. As she walked towards him over the other side of the river he lurched awkwardly and took a few stumbling steps towards the water. He had come back down to the place they had first met hoping to see her again and he was willing her back when the vision of her rustled through the trees. She walked across and stood on the other side of the river and she pretended not to see that he was standing there. Smiling to herself, she raised her eyes and looked at him and she smiled at his expression as he dropped his gaze and blushed. His heart was warm and stinging in his chest and his gut was clenched and dropping to his feet. He called out to her and told her that he was going to walk across and meet her and she pretended she couldn't hear. Pulling up his trouser legs and then pushing off his shoes and socks, he walked into the water and stubbed his foot. He tried to suppress the yelp that snapped out of him and he sucked in gulp-fulls of air and tried to regain his balance as she laughed. And then she danced on bare feet, hopping quickly up and

down and spinning, her face pointed to the sky while pride pushed him on. After a few minutes of careful negotiation, thigh high in water and toes spread out, probing the blind sharp ground, he reached her finally and pulled her into his arms and kissed her full on the mouth. His exhausted lungs and laboured breath sucked the laughter from her mouth and his gut moved up to his chest.

They had walked hand in hand for the next few days, around the little town and along the docks and river. They went drinking together in pubs and would remain there till the early hours dancing. And she would spin around the dance floor and move away from him with the music until he gathered her together in his arms and held her tight as they swayed. She would stumble to their table when the song ended and she would spill the drinks that were bought for her and cheerily dance with anyone who asked; shoes off and dress wet she would dance the whole of the dance floor until the band stopped and until she was too drunk to move. At each evening's end he would pick up her tiny figure and search for her shoes amidst the mess of beer and bottles; when he'd found them he'd put them on and together they'd leave – she asleep and in his arms. He smiled at his mates as they congratulated him on his prize – she was a good sort and a laugh and pretty to boot – and he was proud.

He met her family on the fourth day, with only a couple of days left until he was back out to sea. He'd asked her to marry him when she was drunk and in his arms and he wasn't sure if she'd remembered until she said that he should meet her family: to get their approval before he was back on duty. And he was invited around for dinner. Wearing a suit and tie, he knocked on the door and white paint cracked off with his knuckles. The house was opened by a cautious but eager face, and he couldn't help but fold her in his arms and kiss her passionately. With a hand on his chest, she pushed herself back and he plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out the ring; a ring he had been told was not real gold and he hoped that she would not recognise this. At the end of the night he walked home, kicking up the dirt with his feet. Her family were elderly and poor, quiet, and he noticed the only time she hadn't look bored was when he spoke about the city, about the theatre and the cinema and the broadwalk for shopping, the restaurants and the crime rate, and the famous people he knew via someone else. She had sat rapt but she never looked right at him – she seemed to focus just a little over his shoulder. He touched the place gingerly, smoothed down the collar and straightened himself up. He knew he was a man who tried to see things in the light of what they could be and he had realised then that although he had her, it would take some time for him to convince her of this.

Dave Collatt had left as the carcass was dropped on the ground and he went inside and watched from behind the shrouded window. He was staggered and they carried on stacking twigs and logs and organising the goat remains on a spit. He was sure goat meat wouldn't taste good but he suspected that wasn't the point. They were having trouble lancing the goat on the spit, and finally she shook her head and tossed the carcass on top of the heap of wood; he heard her tell the boys that they couldn't bury it because the rain could expose the corpse, so the best way to dispose of it would be to burn it – just get rid of it once and for all. The meat was wrapped in foil which glinted red as the fire started, and the boys howled in an impromptu war dance. From behind the window he saw her smile and laugh and he couldn't for the life of him remember the last time he saw her do this. But this laugh was new, this laugh bent her body double as it echoed up to him.

They had married anyway – in spite of his fears and because of them (she struggling against him as he held on tight). He had retired from the navy after three more years at sea, a myriad of stories bunched up his sleeve and two and a half years of letter writing – to his girl. The ceremony was small, just a few of her relatives and a couple of his mates and afterwards they had honeymooned in the big city – small by his standards, but he was sure it was big enough for her. He could only see himself now as a farmer, as a man who worked the land and the elements. Here was a man with a wife and a firm grip. He always had the desire to reign-in the tenuous and now there were tingles up his arm as he squeezed. It was time for a new challenge, a new territory to seize. He loved his wife; he was never unsure of this, but he hated the way she looked at him when he talked about his dreams.

There was a little boy in their tiny country school who was smaller than all of the rest of them. He was sickly and sweet and spidery-veined and his mother dropped him off and picked him up every day, always meeting him at the gate. On the first day of school, as they walked there for the first time, he had tried to not let go of her skirt as the other children had peered at him. He was scared of their eyes and soon became frightened of their fists. At recess time the bigger boys gathered around him and poked him with sticks as they asked him questions. Where was he from? How old was he? Why did he suck his thumb – did he think he was a baby? And: what did he have for

lunch? At the end of the day, he cried a lot and when his mother asked him what was wrong he lied to her.

And the children stared to the front of the room with their mouths set firm in silence as the teacher marked up the lesson on the board. It was nearing the end of the day and he was slowing his speech and actions because it was hot and the older children were staring at him irritably. Their little classroom had a thin tin roof without any insulation and no amount of opening windows could disperse the heat that hung inside. Summer was a season that had struck and the air they breathed was thick and seemed to cling to each of the children in a sullen, lethargic vapour. And the smallest of them seemed worst affected, they looked distressed and claustrophobic, they had red faces with tear-filled eyes and held their fists clenched under the tables. At the end of the lesson he rattled the bell that signalled the end of the day and watched them stand up and squeeze towards the door and the stalling bus outside.

And how quickly they ran outside! Furtive looks over shoulders and sleeves and the bigger boys eyeing them off. He stood at the door of the school and watched them board and then organise themselves onto seats, he saw them and they were deadly quiet; as quiet as they were when they sat inside and he was trying to teach. The smallest children had their heads down and were avoiding the eyes of the big kids hanging over them, all of the littlest ones had their bags clutched in tight little grips and brothers and sisters sat close, bunched up and holding each other's sweaty palms. And whenever he witnessed this quiet, this extreme unease, it needled him for a second before he dismissed it as the bus turned out of sight and he went back inside to organise the next day's lessons.

Maria stopped and thought of all the things that could be going on – all the things they could be doing wrong now. They were late for dinner and she put down the last plate, walked out the front door and scanned the area as she walked onto the porch. She peered into the valley and saw a small light in the distance – it flickered as it moved and it spun around a single spot so she pushed her feet into shoes, walked away from the house and then past the blackened remains of the bonfire. She walked past her car and the trail of goat-blood, nearly all scuffed away. And then she heard a scream and a yell of pain and she picked up her pace and ran to them.

They should have known what it meant when she didn't look at them and when she finally did, they should have known how bad it was because there was nothing on her

face. She had emerged out of the dark and she had held out her arms for the boy. She had knelt over him and then she looked back at them and told them to go back inside. She had said this and then she kept her head turned towards them but she didn't look at them and instead looked down the path she was expecting them to walk down. It felt like they weren't standing there anymore; they had already left and she was following the path of their movement with her eyes. They watched her and waited for her to tell them to go again, or just say something *more*, but she turned to face the boy and her sons didn't want to watch her lean into him. As they walked away they could hear the sobs, his weeping moans, and they strained to hear her soothing voice which seemed to hum, hover around the noise, cushioning all of the sounds.

Home. Home. Home was around his mother's waist as he curled his frail young arms and looked up at her. He pleaded with his eyes for her not to leave and she just looked and she smiled as she stared down at him – masking her concern. They had walked to school over the sun-baked pavement and the children clambered down from the bus to stare at him. They surrounded him and he seemed to be pulled from her grip by their gaze. These were ruthless eyes and they were peering at her only child but Kerry felt that there was not a lot she could do as it was school time now so it was out of her hands. And the feel of his sticky fingers clung to her skin as he moved into the crowd of children and she wiped her hand on her skirt. Her son was sweet-eyed and sullen, weak-kneed and silent, dressed up in layers. She did her best to stuff him with food each morning because he was small for a boy his age, and she wasn't sure what else she could do for him.

And neglect provoked the worst in them and Michael was hate-filled when he chased, and his hate was like a kind of joy – crackling and cackling with heat. This, for him, would always be the most tangible kind of pleasure, and he often thought there could be a monster inside him – pummelling on his chest to get out. His brothers ran ahead of him and they yelled but their words were blurred by the wind as the whistling in their ears drowned out everything. They ran and they were arrogant with it and everything that lay along their way became trampled and clogged up with blood and dirt.

Michael walked up the path towards the farmhouse as his brothers moved inside and he decided he would wait for her. She hadn't said anything – there was no mention of punishments and instead of being relieved, this bothered him. He moved slowly as he walked up to the house and he imagined her squeezing his hand and then rapping him on the bottom and telling him how disappointed she was and that he should just go to

bed. And he waited for her to catch up with him and he waited by not turning around, he wanted to try and not let her know that he was holding back so he held one hand onto the railing and had one foot on the step and the other lagging behind. He wanted to hear his mother's familiar soft tramp behind him, he wanted to hear her no-nonsense but still soft voice ask him what he was waiting for: he should have gone straight to bed because it was cold. And it was cold; he had forgotten how cold it could get when you stood still, when you weren't running and playing, when the heat didn't course through your body till you were too hot. Michael still couldn't hear her behind him so he walked backwards down the steps and backwards down the path and he didn't look to where he was going and he held his hand high in the air and imagined her grabbing it. He thought, surely, she would walk into him soon so he kept on going further backwards and he walked off the path and into the dirt and he got scared for a second that he might fall or bump into something hard but he kept on going. He walked until he bumped his head on a looming tree branch and then dropped his hand to feel behind him the bulk of dry wood. He turned around. He saw his mother coming up the path and she walked past him without looking his way. She had the boy they had been chasing wrapped in her arms; he was held tight, almost squeezed as she sat with him in the light of the porch. She was talking in a low voice and Michael strained close to hear what she was saying to him.



And now he stopped. He had been walking down a near-empty street. The crowds had cleared, the shops were closed and Michael was heading into an industrial area. Factories and parking lots flanked the road and none of it seemed familiar to him. There should be houses on this street. He wasn't sure why he wanted so badly to see her and this had finally made him stop. He had walked so far because he suspected someone had been inside his home and he wondered how this could have anything to do with his mother. It was like he believed that she could help him even though *she* had never helped him with anything. He dwelled on this as he wondered if her house was still there and he couldn't remove her voice from his head. It was a murmuring voice – he couldn't discern any words. The voice was in monotone and it was like humid air; it both weighed him down and frustrated him. It made him sweat. He hated that he had been going to see her because he couldn't figure out why. He wanted a drink; this was something he knew. He wanted a beer and so he turned around and traced his steps and tried to stop the compulsion of discerning words from the noise in his head.



Michael walked straight past his mother and the boy. He opened the front door of the farm-house and didn't look back before he closed it behind him. He walked through the kitchen, into the hall and then into the room that he shared with his brothers. Richard was standing in the middle; his face was still dirty, his pyjama top was unbuttoned and there was a grimy line indicating the beginning of his neck. He was grinning – he looked victorious while the other two boys remained quiet.

“We got him this time, Michael. We got him really good.”

And Michael looked at his older brother and felt something he couldn't place. Foreboding dropped though him and he blinked. He left the room and walked towards the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his hands and face.



Michael held onto the door frame so he wouldn't stagger onto the road. The bar was closing and he was being ushered out and he didn't see the face of the person who helped him to the door, he just felt their hands above his elbows. He had tried to shake them off, he slurred that he could walk alone but they hadn't let him go and now he had to make his own way down the street. He still felt the need for someone to guide him. Stumbling towards the brightly-lit intersection, he hailed a taxi and fell in. He shifted in his seat, sat up and sat down again. There was a papery crackle in his back-pocket and he couldn't remember what it might be. He pulled it out and shouted for the driver to turn the music down. It was *that* letter and he didn't want to be distracted by anything as he opened it.



They ate their meal in silence; spooning gunk into their mouths and cracking on the salty stale biscuits – and none of them said a word to each other. She sat at the head of the table and watched them eat, a warm cloth in hand and eyes occasionally glancing outside. Michael glanced out as well. He looked to where she was looking but he couldn't see anything and so he just spooned stuff into his mouth. At the end of the meal she made them wipe their faces and clear up the plates as she stood by the window with her arms crossed, a tea towel slung over her shoulder, ready to wash and

dry and then settle them all off to bed. And they had hung around, quiet, as she bustled and paced and she opened her arms wide and then ushered them to bed and closed the door behind her amid the numb groans of their father as he lumbered out of the room. And more steps were heard and they didn't sleep, they couldn't sleep and Michael wondered at what she was doing.

She did everything that she was meant to do. She prepared for the morning as she would each morning afterwards: she fed the small, bruised boy as he cried into the meal she had made for him. It had taken so long to coax him inside. She had told him that her boys were now fast asleep and asleep was the place where they couldn't hurt anyone. Sleep was where they were kept safe at night. She dressed his wounds and told him that he would soon feel better and that bad dreams would be her boy's punishment. There was silence after she said this and the small injured boy looked up and saw the woman whom he had been told to call Maria stare into the nothing in front of her and then she blinked and looked back down at him again.

"My sons don't see how they hurt you. They don't see anything that they don't want to.... You're so thin, but then you always have been haven't you?"

Kerry worried about his size, she always had. On the day she woke up and he was placed in her arms, his pale sickly face had gone from white to red to purple and she thought he'd stopped breathing, but then he just cried for food. She fed him and his skinny cheeks had risen in and out as he sucked from the teat of the bottle. And the veins on his forehead bulged. He was an ugly baby and she could never admit that she hated him for this. She wanted to be able to look at him with love and because she couldn't do this she worried. And she worried about him a lot. She worried when she spoke to her doctor, she worried when she spoke to her friends and she worried when her husband came in and she cuddled the baby until he cried. His little face against her breast as she tried to love the life out of him; squeezing, squalling, squishy baby, so, a few years later when the first day of school arrived, she was relieved.

At the school-gate, he had clung onto her skirts and looked up at her with his bulging blue eyes. Watery and viscous, fair hair and slight smiles – he had held on to her with all the strength in his world and she saw the other children as they peered. And there was nothing more she felt she could do for him and she pried his hands off her dress and he was left – surrounded by the other kids – big boys with bare feet and sallow faced others with staring eyes and a teacher with his back to the classroom. Kerry left

him and felt pity as she walked away but her arms swung free and she rubbed off the memory of his moist hand on her skirt.

And there it was: her zippy little machine, her blue smarty car and she and her husband had laughed as they bought it – it was so out of place in the country. As she got in she took out her lipstick and smeared it on her lips and started the car up to go. It whirled before it chucked itself down the street – bobbing on the road as she put on the radio and sung along to some pop music and expelled some of the pity that had settled in her. This pity left in a tuneless exhale and she was filled with a mindless burst of good feeling. All the flowers were in full bloom and the cows in the fields looked pretty; it was a beautiful day and he was forgotten about. She parked her car and walked towards the fields; towards her husband on the tractor and there were a number of farm-hands around and with relief in her heart, she called out to him: “Honey, would you like a glass of juice?”

His days at the school were like murder and he grew thinner as his lunch was bullied away. He spent his days trying to shrink and become too small for anyone to see, so he stopped walking with his head up and he made no eye contact and he kept to the sides of the room. Each time the bell rang for recess he tried to cower around his desk and stay inside but he was prodded out by silent rulers and sharp little fingers hidden behind bags. He was poked out towards the playground and there were whispers in his ear – voices at his face and back; he shouldn’t dare to not go and play, he shouldn’t dare to get the teacher’s attention, he shouldn’t dare tell anyone about it. Out in the bright sun, out amongst the playing equipment, he would get kneed in the stomach as he tried to ignore the hunger pains. Each day, at the end of school, he’d wait by the gate for his mother and she would move slowly up the path as he willed her to walk a little faster. And the big boys bent down, towards his ears, breaths smelling of milk and cookies and cake, and they’d whisper for him to be careful. And then he’d shrink to the ground and through the cracks of the fence till her skirts finally arrived and he’d reach up to leave, holding on to her hem before she shook him off and took his hand to go.

Kerry had not noticed that he had gotten thinner, and the bruises on his chest she’d dismissed as the remnants of rough play – he was a boy after all, even if he was a sickly, ugly, frightened one. She ignored him and he knew he was unloved and the emptiness of this filled his world and he stared at her with his bulging eyes and realised one day that she was getting fatter. Around her middle a bump protruded and his father patted it with the flat of his hand and said:

“This is going to be a big one, Kerry. You should put your feet up – the boy can look after himself.”

And then one day his mother wasn't there and she came home a week later with a bundle all wrapped up in pink and smelling of shit and talcum powder. Both of his parents bent down and they showed him a baby and told him to say hello to his sister and from the folds, tucked deep in the blanket a tiny red, weak-looking face peered sightlessly out at him and he held his arm up to her and spread his fingers across her face and realised how big he was in comparison to her.

She left the baby alone only when she went off to sleep and at all other times she cooed at it as she fed it, and said it was beautiful as she changed its nappies and laughed at its stinky shit. And her son watched her; he watched her every move. He kept out of sight until she moved out of the baby's room and as he heard her shut her own door, he reached up to the crib and began poking the baby with his fingers: jabbing and tight little light-fisted punches until the baby opened its mouth to scream. And he covered its face with a pillow until it quieted, and he continued to pinch and to poke and to whisper in its ear to shut up, to never tell anyone about it, to never let anyone know. His head jerked back as a hand grabbed at his neck and pulled him to the other side of the room, against the wall, and then there was a scream from his mother as she reached for her baby.

His mother cried as she tried to shake the baby awake and his father took him by the collar and dragged him out to the car. As the car started up, the little boy stared at the box in front of him; it was the glove department, and he had always been too far away to reach it before but his father had forgotten to put on his seatbelt. And the little boy tried to grasp at the latch as they bumped over roads, bumped and careened as they drove and he had to grip onto his seat. Greenery loomed towards them and shadowed the car as it stopped. His father stepped out, slammed the door shut and walked to the passenger side. The boy stared at no-one as the door opened and he got out to see where his father was. He stepped out to see his father step back inside and then his father started the car to go. And there was violence as he left, violence in the sound and the surrounds and the dirt spat in flecks all over the little boy.

And he told her everything. Maria's face was kind and her hands warm as she held the boy's hand and stroked his cheek. And he told Maria everything. And this everything

was as much as he could say with as many words as he knew and it didn't seem enough but she was looking at him as if she understood. She told him that she would never tell anyone what he did and that he could make up for this very bad thing that he had done. He could make amends for it. The little boy couldn't think what she meant. How could he make up for it? How could he ever make something like that right again? He had put a pillow on top of a baby's head and then the life had disappeared from out of her. The only thing that could make things better is if life was made to fade from him as well. And she stared at him as he thought this and he wanted her to look away but he didn't know what to do, what to say, how to let her know to stop and finally she said she knew what he was thinking and he would just have to learn how to keep himself away from them.

And Francis had always run the hardest. He was the youngest brother and had to work more to keep up. The valley was hot and yellow and dusty and he knew the crust of snot in his nose would be black and it would be like the blood and dirt beneath his fingernails which he often picked out under the dinner-table. They were chasing that boy again – they had found him cowering beneath their house. And he was blanker than ever, and whenever Francis saw his face, he saw no fear – he just saw someone running. It was like nothing else was meant to happen, that this was expected from all of them: the four brothers would chase this smaller one who was not related to them. And they ran for what seemed like ages and Francis's chest hurt and he was relieved to see when the others got the kid down and then they hit him and trussed him up. Finally, they had finished but although they all felt like cheering they stood around quietly instead. It was as if it was awkward to cheer. It had been made wrong somehow. This *wrongness* was from something the boy was doing even though he wasn't doing anything at all: he was just staring at the ground. They stood around him for a while – Richard kicking up the ground with his feet and Michael imitating him, until they heard the voice of their mother calling them inside to eat.

He said nothing. His body ached from his nights in the cold and the injuries he sustained from the attack: bruised back and scalded skin and welts as big as garden slugs. All he knew was that he hurt in every place that he could feel and she was looking at him as though she expected something from him and he had no idea what to do. He felt bewildered and over-burdened – too small and he wanted to be smaller and she got up out of her chair, picked up his bowl and took it away to the kitchen. He expected her to leave the bowl in there but she filled it up and placed it in front of him again. She sat next to him and took his hand and told him she was going to give him a

present. She said it was a gift for a boy who had nothing. And she smiled as she told him that this boy was him. She told him that he should listen carefully, he should take it away with him; remember as much as he could but not to worry because she would tell him again; as much as he needed to know. And then she proceeded:

“All mothers want what’s best for their children. Sometimes it mustn’t seem like this, but in all cases – even yours – this is true. I think your mother knew what was best for you too, that is why she sent you my way. She knew how things could work out to be alright for you....I want you to be my little helper. Richard, Alistair, Michael and Francis are a handful...It’s not so bad now because they have me to watch over them but I worry about what will happen when they are older....I see what they do to you – how they don’t care about how much they hurt you and what they take away from you, and I wonder how much worse this could get. My boys don’t think of what they’re doing, they just act on...instinct. I want you to help me make them care. I’m doing my best to try and turn them into good men but I know my boys need more than just me – they need something else to help guide them.”

Richard stopped ahead of the steps that led onto the balcony and watched each of his brothers walk inside. He *needed* to do something but he wasn’t sure what this something could be. The boy had hidden beneath the house. He had hidden in the one place where they couldn’t reach him because they were too big to squeeze through the slats. He had been chased by them and he had run around the side of the house and then slid through this crevice that he had made for himself. They had stood in a circle around this gap and then Richard had fallen to his knees and lunged forward to grab the boy’s foot and then just as suddenly, let go. He told his brothers that he lost his grip. After he had watched Alistair, Francis and Michael climb the steps and walk inside, Richard trailed around the side of the house and then sat in the dirt near the broken place. He wondered what the boy was doing and he whistled into the dark as though calling for a dog and then changed the tune into the sound a bird might make. He heard movement and then there was silence and then a voice spoke:

“I know that you don’t mean to do what you do. I know that you can’t help it.”

And Richard thought about this until he made it make sense. He decided that the boy meant that he couldn’t help letting go of his ankle. There must have been *something* that made him stop doing it and he asked the boy to tell him more but there was silence

and Richard wondered if this thing was inside him or if it was beside him; he wondered if it was a kind of shadowy force.

“You have to help them in the future. I can only do so much. I want you to be there when I am unable to. I have done my best with four sons who are reckless and are too sure of themselves and I am worried because I have seen what can happen with men like this. Men who are too sure of themselves make bad decisions – they don’t think things through and so they fail. I don’t want my boys to make a mess of their lives. I want you to help me make them aware of the possibility of things not going as they expect them to. For the moment, when you’re living here, I want you to tell me what has been happening...I want you to watch them but I want you to keep away from them. I just want you to tell me what they get up to. You will help me and in this way, you will make me happy and I will feel like I did a good thing by taking you in.... I will look after you, help you grow up and then you can help me in return. When my boys are adults, I want you to be the one to watch over them as I won’t be able to. I want you to make them aware of things they won’t see for themselves. You will be their voice of caution. You will do this by taking things away from them, by making them unsure of what they think is happening. They need to question everything they think is going on. I want you to do this by doing exactly what you should be doing now – I want you to disappear from them. You’ll be my little helper because I want you to take to the night and trace my sons’ steps and shadow them. I want you to follow them and be a flicker in the corner of their eyes, creaks and shuffles at night and small things that disappear. You are going to be the shadow on the wall that moves when they are drowsy and makes them try hard to believe that they’re only dreaming. You are going to create the constant feeling that there is *something* that they should be worried about. If they are always aware, always worried, then this will keep them *safe* and successful in the world. I want you to keep them on their toes; train them to be cautious. Every little flicker of panic that you will create for them will make them question what they’re doing, will hold them back a little, will give them a better sense of what could happen; this will give them a better perspective of the world. It will make them more cautious, more well-rounded citizens. You have to be the one that creates the unease that will make them question what is real, what is *safe* when everything appears as though it isn’t. And you must never let them know that it’s you – that it is you who follows them, that creates their unease – that it is not just *them*. You must convince them that you don’t exist and that the only thing that does is their *fear*. And you will take this role, this gift that I’m giving to you and be grateful because every boy

deserves a second chance. Every boy, sweet-heart, and every boy like you. You can share my sons' lives but you can share it in the shadows, in the corners of their eyes. This is what will be best for you too. I am giving you a second chance at life and you will have to prove yourself capable and you must never ever ever let them know what you are doing."

The boys had picked him up on the third day of his abandonment, he was the little boy from their school and they had wondered what he was doing wandering around. He was covered all over in flecks of dirt and it looked like someone had spat mud on him, so they flicked mud on him some more. And, poking him with sticks as he passed out, they taunted him with nasty names and the meanest innuendo. What was he doing so far from home – had he lost his mum, or had she lost him? Was he coming to visit them or was he just an ugly loser without any friends? Was he lost or did he run away? Was he an ugly loser who nobody could love properly? Was he a skinny little runt boy who looked like he hadn't eaten for days? Was he a bloody little bruised boy who had passed out on the ground and was now not moving? Was he a pukey little blood throwerupperer who jerked up and looked at them like he thought he was going to die? Was he heavy and were branches scratching at his face? Was he leaving a bloody trail as they dragged him home? As they dragged him home to their mother to see what she could do for him.

He dropped his spoon as he looked at her. She was staring at him far too closely again. She was going to repeat what it was that she had just said. There was silence and he closed his eyes to listen. But she said nothing, the silence lingered and he opened his eyes and she was standing over him. She was frowning, her arms were held open but she dropped them. She told him he smelled bad. This could be a problem because the smell might awaken them, might alert them to his presence. Sitting down opposite him, she rested her chin on her hand and her elbow on the table and she considered him. A crash was heard from the bedroom and she put her finger to her lips and the boy wanted to reach out and touch her hand. She stood up and shouted that they should go back to sleep. The boy liked that she shouted at them because it meant that her whispers were only meant for him. And she whispered and she told him a lot of things and from her quiet tone and the closeness of her presence next to him, he liked to believe that she loved him; loved him much more than her own boys: the sons she didn't seem to have any patience for. She smiled at him, stood up, put on her shoes and walked out the front door and the little boy panicked. He didn't want her to leave – ever – and when the

door opened and she came back into the room, he calmed himself and he breathed in her warmth as he sucked in his fill of her presence.



Simone lay on the couch and squeezed her eyes tight as the sun inched its way onto her face, shone on her eyelids and heated up her body till she was too hot. She felt drained even though she had been asleep for more than eight hours, her back hurt and there was a sense of something *wrong* but she dismissed this as she yawned herself into a more awakened state. The sky had cleared today and the rain had stopped and she felt pleased as she groaned and sat up on the couch and rolled her shoulders to get rid of the tightness that had settled there. Her neck hurt as well and she rubbed the back of it with her left hand and the sleep from her eyes with the right. As her hand left her face she noticed her book was splayed on the ground, the pages were folded in on each other and she picked it up and straightened it out and pressed the cover between her hands and as she did this, she tried to remember where she had left off in the story. Her dreams had been vivid and tangled and she still felt wrapped in them because she never had any idea that she was asleep when she was dreaming. Often, when she had awoken, she would feel confused and the threads of her night would still be sticky on her and she could feel dirty, muddled or anxious. She had been dreaming that she was cooking and she had too many mouths to feed and these mouths were whining and cloying and sticky and wet and now she couldn't remember if Michael had come home. She couldn't remember if she had greeted him, if he had woken her up and if she had fallen straight back to sleep and had forgotten about it. She remembered making a pie but she couldn't remember whether she had eaten any of it. She looked up at the clock and saw that it was nearing afternoon and then she felt a twinge of panic. Perhaps Michael had never made it home, maybe there was an accident, or something else, and this something else niggled at her, tugged at her scalp, twinged at her brow until she plucked at it, squeezed her hands together and sighed as she dismissed it. There was a bad smell in the room. She walked to the bedroom and found him asleep; sprawled out on the bed with the sheets at his feet, the doona on the floor and the stink of beer, belches and stale smoke and she felt a sense of relief.

In this relief she jumped on the bed with her hands and her knees and made his body bounce with the impact. She said his name softly in his ear and then kissed him on the lips until he rolled over and squinted at her and then closed his eyes. "Just five more

minutes – half an hour--”, he felt like shit. *He felt like shit.* And he muttered it louder; loud enough for her to hear and so she told him she was going to make some coffee.

And it was the least of it for her that the kitchen smelled bad. The bench revealed a scorched pit and the baking dish had been slung into the sink. The pie was still sitting in this dish, uneaten, left out over night; the tap dripping onto it and she boiled over. All that effort for nothing, all that time spent baking for him because he always said he liked her pies and now the kitchen bench was burned black and stinking. What a bastard, pig...son-of-a-bitch. She would not be paying for it. He could repair the bench – pay for his own lunacy. She decided to go out. She made the decision to spend the morning in the city and do a bit of shopping. Damn it! And she got into the shower without saying a word to him, without making the coffee, and without trying to wrap herself around his state of mind. He did things like this all of the time, careless things, he said he got distracted but she knew it wasn't that hard to keep focused during these small tasks – these insignificant everyday functions that he couldn't seem to focus on or else tended to put so much effort into that they were often rendered hopeless.

Michael opened his eyes as he felt the rise of vomit. He swallowed hard and clenched his face before he dragged himself to the bathroom where he heaved. For more than half an hour his face was contorted in the toilet and his hands were clenched white to the chilly side – his body shuddering, face wet with sweat, mind blank with the process and foul taste. As the toilet flushed he ran the tap and splashed water on his cheeks and his neck and gushed mouthfuls down his throat. Disgusted, he sniffed the air and realised that there wasn't just the smell of his vomit and the burnt bench but also the ever present damp and he admonished himself for not fixing the plumbing. He would do it properly, he would do it this weekend, he would buy the right tools and he would fix that dripping tap, find out what was clogging the sink, he would find out what it was and...it would be okay; he just had to try harder this time. Because the stink might spread and then God-knows what it might turn into.

She watched him sand down the bench and she felt annoyed, she began to say to him, to poke at him, that he should call someone, get it done properly or else he should buy a new top for the counter – her voice shrill and upping the ante on his patience. It was a bad morning but finally she left, she went shopping – he gave her a list of tools that he would need and she humoured him and said nothing as she put this list in her bag. That evening, as Michael met her in the hall-way, he could tell she had almost forgotten about the bench, she had bags of shopping and her face was flushed as she told him

what she had bought and then the smell inside hit her and her face darkened and he tried to tell her that the smell was mostly from the bathroom, he had had a few problems with the bench but he was sure he could finish it during the week – there were a few set-backs but he was sure now that he had a good grasp of what it was that he should do. And she sighed and she shook her head and she said that the very least he could have done would have been to have opened some windows.

They had take-out for dinner because the kitchen was cluttered with work-tools and clumps of plaster and the kitchen bench that Michael had removed. Simone ate on the couch with the plastic container perched on her knee and as she picked at her food she sighed and tutted as frequently as she could without overdoing it. He had made a mess of it but she couldn't be bothered to help find a solution so she sank into a drama of tuts and ticks and then lapsed into a quiet stewing. Tonight she would tell him that she wasn't in the mood and he would withdraw his hands and be hurt even though, she thought, surely by now he should know that she wouldn't respond differently when something like this happened. *Sometimes*, she thought, *it's just all so infuriating*. Michael sat and stuffed food into his mouth and she realised that she had always hated the way that he ate but tonight he looked a little different. He looked concerned. When he came back from the kitchen after throwing the cartons in the bin, he sat opposite her and he reached a hand to her knee before he pulled it back, held both hands in his lap, rubbed the skin on his right thumb and said that he wanted to show her something. He said he wondered if she could make things clearer for him; and she wondered if he could see the aversion on her face as he stared into it and she was uncomfortable because she felt shifty, entangled – trapped by him.

“I think you can tell me something...I'm not sure. Before I went out drinking last night, I found this letter. Your name was on the envelope. I'd like you to read it and tell me what you think of it.”

Dear Sir/Madam

We wish to inform you of the work being carried out by a council maintenance worker around your residence. We wish to apologise in advance for any future inconvenience and hope to make some explanation for any disturbance that has already occurred.

For any more information please call our administrative staff on 9387 1432 during office hours.

Yours sincerely,

Gavin Walsh
Chief Groundsman

And she was relieved by it. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting but it was nothing like this and she raised her eyebrows, smiled at him and lowered her voice in the way that she did when she thought that he was losing his mind.

"Uh huh. And what is it that I am supposed to make of this?"

And he explained that it wasn't just the letter, it was the envelope that it came in and he showed this to her and it had her name printed on the front and she shrugged her shoulders and stared at him and said that she still didn't understand what he meant.

"It doesn't make sense. I called that number, Simone, I expected no-one to be there but there was a Gavin Walsh and there is work being done around here but they haven't sent out letters, Simone. No-one authorised a letter to be sent out and no-one there remembers writing one."

"So they made a mistake – and how does that mean anything?"

"Why is your name printed out like that then – tell me that doesn't add up to something."

"Well, it doesn't, Michael. I could have done that. It was probably an unconscious thing; when I was thinking of something else or when I was talking on the phone."

"...it's not your writing though."

"Michael. It's not anything."

And Michael frowned, squinted at the envelope and ran his thumb-nail down the indented lines of her name as he wondered who it was that she could have been talking to on the phone.

Simone had had a long day and as she opened the door of their apartment, she wished that she felt more relieved to be home. She was glad, though, that she didn't have to do much for dinner. She had made a pie that morning and now all she had to do was heat up the oven. She sniffed the air and frowned, dismissed the idea that there was a strange smell; the smell of someone standing near her, and she decided to give Alistair a call. Alistair was the only brother of Michael's that Simone felt that she could talk to, it seemed that he *understood* much of what she was going through and he always wanted to know more. As Simone talked on the phone, as she ran through her list of irritations, she picked up a pen to doodle on the blank envelope that sat in front of her. She doodled and she was abstracted by her irritations, her worries, her concerns for the future and these doodles weren't like anything she had drawn before – she drew the letters of her name but she saw only her hand as it pressed hard against the paper. She talked about her partner and everything that was wrong with him, everything that she couldn't seem to help with or fix, and she wrote her name as though it was lingering in the air. It was as though it was being whispered near her and she couldn't help transcribing exactly what she heard.

It amazed her when he got paranoid. It amazed her that he really did think that someone was out to get him. She would ask him what other proof he had and he would say 'nothing' and then he would say that this was exactly the point – there was so much proof that he had trouble determining where or what it was but this envelope *had* to be something – it was nothing like anything he had come across before. And she told him he was being ridiculous and he would tell her that she didn't *want* to understand and she would seethe in irritation at him. Most evenings, he would watch the television and when he got up she would see chip crumbs or chocolate wrappers littered all over the couch. She would clean up after him and she would be annoyed because she knew that if she left it for him he wouldn't do it, he wouldn't see it – it would have to be pointed out to him and even then he couldn't see this as further cause for her irritation. He was blind to the bulk of all the thoughtless things he did. Each night, as Michael settled himself in their bedroom, Simone would trail through their flat, filled with annoyance, and she would absentmindedly unlock all the windows and doors that Michael had conscientiously locked before wrapping himself up in their bed.

And Michael is getting more upset and she sees no reason for him to feel this way. She looks at him and can't get over the fact that he seems to have sunk into himself. Tears are spilling over his face and it seems to her that he is sopping over the edge, barely clinging to any semblance of self-control. He is over-reacting and there is nothing more to it than this and she tries to understand why she is feeling so spiteful. This spite is held hard within her and she begins to stroke it, caress it, reduce it to the plain truth and she is irritated by him. His anxiety is on display, he is putting on a show. It is as if his fear has taken on a life of its own and she thinks that maybe she can smell it, so she raises her nostrils and sniffs. He sees her as she does this and she sees that he looks confused and then maybe a little disgusted. She feels ashamed of herself; guilty, implicated in something she doesn't understand. And pulling his body over to hers, she presses her face against his forehead in a wave of regret, and then lips to cheek – his tears rolling down and then onto her skin, into her mouth and she tries with all she has to be understanding for him



Dave Collatt had died in his sleep. The air had been stale – his wife found him when she went into the bedroom; Maria had been off to bed – her nightie was on and slippers were off and she was pulling back the sheets. His face was grey and peaceful and he looked deadly old and un-breathing. She had pulled the pillow from under his head and had cried into it. Muffling snorts and a runny nose and him, that smell; his remainder, the remainder of him. And she cried until morning and then she put the pillow down and walked out of the room, closed the door behind her and walked towards the hall bureau, to the drawer where she kept her things. She had them tucked at the bottom, beneath the good cutlery that she was given at her wedding. There were white forms and pink, carbonated copies and business cards, bank statements and life-insurance details and real-estate listings in the city. Spread out on the bureau was her new beginning and she gathered up the pages, tucked them back in, woke up her boys and organised breakfast and the coroner and the best place to bury him.

It was in a cemetery near the city. The boys were relieved that he would be buried near their new home; the home that they had yet to feel comfortable in. And all of their father's old friends from the navy were at the funeral and they stood alongside their mother and told the boys what a great man their father was. And the ceremony was short. All the big men gathered around their mother and they consoled her as she cried.

And she lamented the lack of money and how she was going to pay for it all and they shoved sealed envelopes into both of her hands as she protested. They were kind and she said that they were handsome still and that she was grateful. She looked up at them; her eyes wide and coy and she said that she never regretted it – if she hadn't met her husband, she wouldn't have her boys. And she drank a lot more; more than she should, more than she could – and they knew that she didn't see the sideways glances and hear the mutters about taking her home. And she told everyone there that she had good boys, strong boys who were going to have good jobs, and they were going to make her proud.

One by one, they left her new home, her suburban home, near a high school and the city and all the amenities and where it was safe. Her boys had become distant, quiet and secretive, but she was never unnerved by what she thought was their discretion. She was glad they were growing up. Francis left home early and when it came time for the last one, Michael, to leave she wrapped her engagement ring in a piece of cloth she had cut from her wedding gown and placed it in some folds in his suitcase. And she kissed it as she tucked it in, and she left on the white cloth a faint trace of pink lipstick; an eternal reminder of her presence. And she thought this was fitting, apt, and she knew that there would never be a foot stepped wrong by any of them – they had been gifted with good sense, and there was nothing more she could do for them. As Michael closed the door of his car, she rubbed a spot on his cheek as though there was a mark there that she should banish from him. And as he rolled down the street in his brand new car she rubbed her two fingers together as she tried to prolong the memory. The touch of his skin.

As the sun went down on the little boys, they tumbled on top of the smallest and tried to beat the life from him. They were determined to discover if this was something they could do. They felt consumed by a force: it was in the wind, it was in the hills, it was in the tips of their fingers because their whole bodies streamed with it and so they beat their fists down and this force burst out of them and they saw it leak from the mouth, the nose and the eyes of the body on the ground. This display made them euphoric: time seemed to stop and their hunger vanished. And they beat down harder: Richard at his head, Michael at his stomach, Francis at his legs and Alistair yelled and howled and swung a stick in the air and then slammed it down on the ground. He tasted blood as he bit his tongue. From behind them came the voice of their mother. She shouted at them but none of them turned around and then time seemed to fragment as she said:

“Why do you have to make things worse for yourselves?”

And the blows that they were enforcing lost their drive. With just one sentence, she had called what they were doing into question and there was no space for them to respond. She turned her back and walked to the house and they were left with a problem that they couldn't find a solution for. To boys who had never been punished – never had a sense of the consequences of anything they did – this question, this warning had no ominous ring because it was hypothetical, an abstraction. The violence they were enacting was reflected back to them and the blows they were delivering were received back as self-doubt: what would be worse? Was it bad now? Why did she say it with a tone of exasperation as though it should be obvious to them? The boy disappeared beneath their fists; his body had become as irrelevant as his name and their blows became more fervent because frustration reigned as they couldn't get a handle on what she said. There was something at work but this was something they didn't have access to and the trees, the dirt, the sky lost their ordinariness and seemed painted on: they became unreal and laden with complexity. Their euphoria felt misplaced; it had fallen to the ground and the earth had changed and now nothing seemed simple. Everything around them had the potential to be reflected back at them and they wondered what was going to happen and who it was that she thought they were.

Part two.

It had all gone according to plan and Richard Collatt grinned, leaned back, stretched out his arms and lifted his feet to the desk. A whole body stretch, each tendon a ripple and he sighed as he relaxed into the comfort of his leather bound, ergonomic and all-executive chair. The deal had been signed. He had found out the best way to attack the competition's game-plan, he had gotten under the radar and now he could arise from the events of the past few months and allow them to try and analyse how it had been done – how he knew which tactic they would take before they even had the chance to implement it. He knew that they would accuse him of sending spies, of illegal entry into confidential files, but there would never be any proof of it so this would eventually work in his favour – it would be proof of their fear and of his reputation as an enigma. He was the infiltrator of the financial sector but he had never felt the need to see inside, to hack into their computers, to rifle through their files. He just had a sixth sense about it. He was the eldest of four and more successful than the lot of them. He was smart, he was attractive and he could sit back now and watch and wait, answer a few phone calls, have a few lunch meetings, and wait for the profit to arrive, to knock on his door in the guise of his accountant. And he would be solemn as he heard how much he was worth, how much the company had grown, how much more the investors had sitting in their laps. And he would stare straight ahead as he heard the report and he would incorporate a slight furrow in his brow, a mark of concentration, a line of concern: professional pleasure – an expressive furrow that said: Yes, but what next? And he would discuss with this man his ideas for the future, and he would give every impression that he valued the accountant's opinion just so he could see the glint of admiration in his eyes. And after he had left the room Richard could be assured that he would be thinking that Richard Collatt was a man destined for big things, destined for a life wielding great influence, a life beyond just the stinking rich. *Stinking rich*, and Richard leaned back in his chair and laughed at the phrase, *stinking rich*. Crude, so very crude and ordinary.

And more ordinary still after he thought about it, because he truly didn't think he smelled at all.

They decided to move because the lease was up and they needed a fresh start. And they had found the perfect place but Simone suspected that this wouldn't improve things between them. On the day they had organised to move Simone cleared through the apartment in a strained and frustrated half-day as she picked and she packed and she hauled stuff off to the car. By herself. And the absence of him, in one way or another, was becoming a theme for them. Every time she dropped something she swore at him: at the image of him in her head, and she was clumsy with rage. She felt tired – everything was weighing her down, defeat seemed to be pulling at her knees, tugging her away from the task at hand and her hands were full, lugging the contents of their apartment to the trailer outside. She couldn't stop dropping things and this clumsiness was slowing her down even more and she wondered where her energy had been spent. It must have been Michael. She had told him that he was getting worse, his paranoia was becoming even more hysterical and now it felt as though they weren't in a relationship anymore – they were just manoeuvring through, negotiating in silence. They had spent weeks in miscommunication; it seemed to Simone that everything Michael said had bubbling beneath it an undercurrent that she wanted to push down because she found it annoying and she could see that his eyes burned with resentment. She managed to keep quiet as Michael arranged to do something else that day – the day that it was most inconvenient. She had to do it all by herself and there was just too much – too much goddamned work to do. And there was something more than just resentment in the way that Michael looked at her lately. It was as though he was seeing something else there; something inside of her that she couldn't recognise. Simone covered a cloth with cleaning product, reached up to the top of the glass and rubbed at the mould, the black and white flecks were like cancerous spots, she thought, and she felt a tiny bit of pride: she hadn't bothered to wear gloves – she wasn't afraid of dirt or the poisons in the cleaning product. It was just skin, just her hands her skin; just wrinkled white and dirt beneath the nails, smelling of ammonia, alien... and the mammoth task ahead, a packed car with too much weight, dust everywhere, she would have to have the carpets cleaned and then there was the confrontation that she was going to have with Michael....

"I took a lot of the smaller stuff from the house with me. It's still in the car. I just packed it all without thinking too much about it so I probably took a lot of stuff that we don't need...for this place anyway. I don't know, we should just go through everything

– sort it all out. You need to stay with me and help me, Michael. I won't be able to take on the heavier stuff alone. I don't want to try and do this by myself.”

And he knew that it was in his best interests to do what she wanted. The next day he had helped; he did everything that she had asked him to, and then instead of planning an evening together in their new home, Simone made arrangements to go out alone. Michael waited until she left before he made sure all of the windows and doors were closed. He peered into the garden and he made sure nobody was out there before he closed the curtains tight and made sure of no gaps. He hated gaps – anything that anyone could peer through. Michael scratched at his head, he scratched at his back and he concentrated on his body's aches, his bad back, his whining joints and he began to feel depressed so he tried to think of something else. Flicking on the television he sat for a while and watched the news, but he couldn't listen, he couldn't register anything they said and when he made the effort to he was confused by most of what they talked about. Where in the world, he thought. Where were the isms and the ologies and the leaders with all their indiscernible names. It was all so far away and the words began to blur into one – a long grey hum and his jaw ached with tension. Grey sheen and sheik, warfare and Pakistan, Shiites and Kyrgyzstan, Kashmir and Ireland, stocks and brokers and takers, mutton and lamb and good food, adverts for fast food and the taste on his tongue, blood as he bit it and the little things...the small things...shiver down his spine ... a jerk of his head...safe but something missing...something there...and the outline of his face...her smile...down...and the jerk of his body as he remembered that bad dream. The smell in his room flickered past and he remembered the shadow at the end of the bed. He flicked off the TV, thumped a fist to his chest and switched on some music; he turned it up loud, too loud, and he amplified the bass before he went to the kitchen to find something to eat.

“Simone. Are you there? You're breaking up a bit, I can't really hear you but I just wanted to tell you that you didn't get any butter in... Can you hear me? Can you go pick some up?...No, some butter!.. Yeah, okay... You're not going to be late are you?”

As soon as he puts it down, the phone rings and he picks it up to hear an incessant hum, an irritating whine down the line, the familiar twang. It was Francis; a member of his ever-present harping reality: family, family, family chanting in his head, a chant that always required too much energy to wave away. Vague and paranoid; each singular moment. Trapped in a second: he was he was he was, and it would never go away, *it wouldn't go away*, “It won't go away Michael – that smell, it's everywhere, even when

I go outside I can still smell it. I thought it was in some of my clothes so I burned them, and then I thought of burning everything and then I thought I was losing my mind but I can still smell that smell. It's that smell Michael, *that smell*, do you know what I mean Michael, do you? Hey...Michael?"

And he puts the phone down but he puts it down casually. He says that he has to get something to eat.

RUINED. At the front of all of the papers and printed out in big bold and black – half a page of the one word and Richard felt a little smug. The company had toppled, they had run out of choices and now they have to merge their corporation with his. Everything had run according to plan and his smugness swelled and erupted in a spiteful surge of anger that left a caustic taste in his mouth that was familiar. He spun around in his chair and tried to enjoy the bad taste, succeeded, and was propelled back into his previous state: the glory state, the triumph state, the thriving kingdom finding place in his mind with that old familiar smile. He was doing well, better than well – and he knew now, for sure, the flavour of this success. He reached for the phone to call his secretary but before he had a chance to click at the intercom, a short sharp rapping trilled at his door and she entered. To disturb him. She stood in front of his desk and told him she would like to move to another department. She said that she wanted to go because of a number of reasons. The first was her belief that he was corrupt and the second was her understanding that he was a misogynist. She said that she cannot work with someone who had a problem with women and that she would like to be transferred as soon as it was possible. After this speech there was silence; silence in which she shifted from one foot to the other, again and again, until he smiled at her and said: "So tell me Clare – if you think I am unethical and also a misogynist, why would you be so frank in stating how you feel about me before you ask for a favour?" And she looked dumbstruck and he knew that she was, and yet he was still a little shocked by her naiveté, shocked and amused and he rang for security to escort her out as she stood with her face in her hands; she was sobbing and he told her that as much as she feared for his lack of morality, he feared for her financial welfare as she no longer had a job. As the security men take her by the arm and led her to the door, he can't help but shake his head in pity, but not for her – he shook his head in pity for himself at having to work with such stupidity.

His days were long and he drank hard at night, or at least he pretended to; buying vodka drinks and martinis and then emptying them out in the bathroom sink. When he had filled his glass with water, he moved back to his cluster of colleagues and friends. Friends, and he used the term loosely, would slap him on the back as they got drunker and hail him a genius of the stock market; he was a maniac at the helm and they admired the state of his guts. Rock solid, they said, he was wired tight, and they all bought him drinks as they laughingly said that he should be the one buying, being the one with the cash and the constant windfalls. And his contempt for them grew as the night became drunker and they slurred and they dribbled and their language became coarse. They would look like fools and he would always say so in the morning. And they would always look abashed and he could see that they wondered – how did Richard do it? How could anyone have such complete control?

Control had to be exercised everywhere. And Richard walked towards the elevator, reached his hand out to press the button and opened the door but this gesture stopped short of its mark. He was struck by the idea of *germs*. With his arm outstretched he was flooded by images of the countless people who had touched this button already. There was no way to measure it – there was just the magnitude of all the past interactions with this button and the residue that remained. Richard held his breath, he breathed out and then shook his head. He pressed the button, wiped his hand on his pants and chuckled as the doors closed behind him. There was no point thinking about it, about the bodies that sweated and excreted around him. He would be at home soon and he could take off his shoes, take off his suit and wash his hands and face. The door opened and he walked into the underground car park. He walked to the back of a line-up of cars and inspected the area. Parked in its usual place was his Ferrari 360 Modena. Its lights flashed and its doors clicked open as he walked over to it and after he had seated himself inside, he relaxed and the world clicked back into place. He steered his car onto the road and thought about all he had accomplished that day and of all the things that he planned to accomplish tomorrow and the world seemed *right* to him. Nothing seemed out of place.

The street stretched out to nothing as Michael stared out the window with glazed-over eyes as his fingers twirled and rubbed themselves around a bit of disintegrating paper. It was his all-day bus ticket. He had wanted to drive his car that morning but it wouldn't start and he couldn't think what was wrong with it. The bus turned and he realised he had reached his stop; he stood up and pressed the bell and prepared himself to get off. He hadn't caught a bus in years and he was worried about what it was that he

was meant to do. The protocol of it made him wary. He stood up and held onto the railing, smiled at the woman sitting near him who looked away and he waved at the driver who was looking back at him through the rear-view mirror. This man held his gaze but didn't wave back and he was slow to open the back door. It must have been all wrong. Michael had done nothing right and he stumbled a little as he misjudged the width of the last step. He walked past and he could feel the people on the bus watch him. As it drove away, Michael still felt observed by someone. He didn't look around to see who could be there but he stared straight ahead and then broke into a run when he was just a short distance from his home. He plunged his keys into the lock as he tried to convince himself that it was all in his head – that there was no-one behind him, but he couldn't look around to check. He stared straight ahead as he closed the door and he heard Simone on the phone and he wondered who it was that she was talking to.

In the moment before he pressed his foot on the brake and the second after he had seen the woman fall onto the road, Richard Collatt had mused on the problematics of human nature. His instincts told him to keep driving, to keep going and to not stop, because here was a chance to know what it was to kill. No-one could successfully argue that this split second plan would be anything other than a traffic accident. It would seem unintentional. Richard finalised this thought and took action but then he couldn't help slamming his foot on the brake. The woman lay unscathed on the road, just inches away from him as his leg was clamped on the brake and his vision dimmed. He was stunned: his body had reacted against him; it had jerked away from what he wanted to do, it had saved the woman, spared her life when all he wanted to do was damage her. And now he felt trapped, suffocated, and he needed to tear himself away from the situation. People gathered around his car and helped the woman from the road. She was elderly and frantic calls were made on mobiles and people tapped onto his window to try to get his attention. Congratulatory looks dropped into concern as he didn't move and he looked sick. He wanted to get out of the car, get some air, but he didn't want to stand amidst the sentiments outside: he didn't want to stand in that mawkish rabble. An ambulance blare in the distance turned the gawking faces away from him and his knee jerked in a spasm that he was glad none of them saw. He held both hands down to his convulsing leg to stop it banging against the dashboard. His hands were beginning to shake. None of this was meant to happen and he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to will himself back towards self-control.

Michael didn't take his shoes off but made the effort to be light-footed as he walked. He heard Simone's voice start up again and he needed to know what she was saying.

She had the door to their bedroom closed and the cord from the phone trailed under it. She was hiding something; there was something going on, something that she didn't want another person to hear and he swallowed and looked around before he realised that she must have been expecting him. She had closed the door because she didn't want him to hear her conversation. Michael rubbed his hands down his chest and stepped carefully across the carpet and held his ear to the door. She wasn't saying much. She was listening and he held his breath and waited for her to say something more, *something* that he could confront her with.

"I don't know – he's just an accident waiting to happen. It's like he has no self-control, or too much, or something... *Something's* wrong and I can't handle it anymore... I don't want to have to deal with it... he should sort out what's wrong with himself... I just want things to get back to how they used to be; how they were when we first met..."

Carried around in the air was dust from her vacuuming so she sneezed several times with short blasts of air and then wiped her nose rapidly on her sleeve. The garbage from last night was still sitting in the kitchen and she tied it up before she slung it outside to the bin. Rubbing her hands on her tracksuit pants, she now felt thoroughly dirty. Just the smell of the outside bin was enough to make her feel as if she should have a long hot shower and wash her hair and brush her teeth, shave her legs and armpits, scrub her skin until it was smooth...and she had only half an hour. He would be here soon and she knew him well enough now not to rely on him to be late. She panicked as she pulled off her clothes and turned on the water and tried to brush her teeth as she shaved her legs, and waited for the conditioner to work. As she thought about what to wear, she realized she had few choices and little time so she slipped on her new robe. It was blue and silk and had embroidered red flowers – perhaps a little presumptuous to answer the door in but she knew he wouldn't mind. And her flat was clean to spotless. Wine was in the fridge and food ready made – a cold spread in hot weather; it was covered with cling wrap on the table. And she ripped off the sticky plastic as the door bell rang and, running a hand through her hair, she answered the door with a wide smile as Michael handed her a bottle of too warm red and said:

"Hello Simone."

And she liked the way he said her name.

Wheeling its way in the distance, the blaring sirens of the ambulance were all Richard could hear after the flashing lights had disappeared into the next street. He had watched the ambulance stop in front of his car and had seen the officers go through their procedure until they had finally lifted the injured woman away. Now, because the ambulance had gone, the people that had blocked his route began drifting away and he could move his car as the space cleared. The faces that had surrounded him were still lodged in his head and they were like black seeds stuck between his teeth which he wanted to pick out. They had surrounded the accident like scavengers around a carcass and he thought them basic and uncivilized. Uncontrolled. And he concentrated on each limb, each digit, as he started the car, manoeuvred down the street and relaxed into the familiar glide as he drove. He realised that he loathed the uncontrolled; the basic and unmodified – those people were blatant and he wanted to put pins in the eyes of their gawking masks (and the stab in his chest). He jerked in his seat and he grabbed at the air with one hand as his mind went blank. Somebody was in the car with him. Somebody had always been in his car with him. And he swung around to face the back seat before he slammed his car into a tree.



There was wine in the fridge for the first couple of months of their relationship and they tasted around and developed their favourites and constructed a routine of the utmost softness, sensuality and sex. And Michael's voice never stopped sounding good when he said her name, and whenever they met he would always say it – "Hello Simone", and she would always feel like he was talking to the wholeness of her, her real self – so this was true love. And she knew that she knew him so well and it was down to her depths, down to her toes where it hurt a little. And everything was made right only when they were in each others' arms and she could relax any remnant of tension. And it was early on that they had moved in together – to their first home – an apartment near the city, near both of their jobs where it was quiet and they pooled their resources to buy a second-hand car.

And now it was only alright. It was okay but she was glad to see the back of him. He dragged his body from the bed and walked to the bathroom to wash his hands and face. She could hear him brushing his teeth and spitting into the bowl, she could hear him urinating and flushing the toilet and she didn't hear him wash his hands before he came back to bed. She pulled the covers tight around herself as he entered the sheets and she did not answer as he muttered goodnight because she didn't want him to hear the

irritation in her voice. As he slept she didn't. There was an anxiousness in his voice as he mumbled in his sleep that made her want to go and lie down in another room. But then there'd be questions, an argument, accusations and she had never stopped holding firm to the idea that silence would be the calming factor in their relationship. And Michael thrashed about and threw himself against the sheets, against her legs and then he woke her in the morning by complaining that he was feeling sore and bruised. From his back she could smell the sour smell of fear, and it was on the sheets. She changed them when he left to shower and then she went into the next room and put on the news and filled up the house with the sounds of even-toned voices and even-toned crises that were too far away and weren't so hard to digest. Everything in their home had become so hard to swallow and so nothing could be just *okay*. Simone breathed in and she sighed out as she moved around the house and felt a restlessness threaten to become overwhelming.

"I think we should do some redecorating – just paint the walls or something. I'll ring the landlord tomorrow and see if we can do it. We just need to do something with the place, give it something more; make it more homey. We just need to give the place a little bit of a lift; just a little bit more *something* and then maybe it will be easier for us to settle into it."

And they had laughed – high pitched and rapid, arms flailing wide and dizzy in half-made grasps at each other; the fear of falling while sitting on the roof and both of their faces turned up to the sky. The light breeze blew against their skin and a thread of hair touched her cheek. A fragile caress. And she smiled against the sun and, closing her eyes, she rested her head on his shoulder. And he moved his body around as his arms embraced her; he kissed her cheek, her neck, her hair. Feeling him then felt like the whole world and his lips were against her cheek as she breathed in his breath and he brushed the hair from her face. And she knew then that they could move away from all that had happened. And thank God. She just wished that they were able to stop laughing.

It was late-afternoon when they had finally finished eating, it was a large meal and they had cooked it with music playing loud in their kitchen. They had played at being Madonna with her dancing style – wrists with imaginary bangles held high. And when the food was ready they had turned down the stereo and spread out the table with napkins and forks and a bottle of wine and they ate as their eyes flicked across each other's faces. The conversation was light and the food was good—a quiche with a

perfect filling and fresh bread; they wiped up the oil of their salad with the fluffy white bread and ripped through the tough brown crust with their teeth. And they became tipsy and they giggled into their plates as Michael got a short burst of hiccups. Holding her breath, Simone had laughingly tried to get rid of them for him.

Soon they had laughed the whole of the afternoon – they had just laughed and the apartment seemed bright and sparse and perfect. Perfect as they sat on the couch in each other's arms and stroked each other's skin as they watched a movie. It was a love story with a feel-good end and when the credits rolled they became uncomfortable. Simone walked to the kitchen to pour them some drinks. When she came back her face dropped as Michael's looked serious. He looked as though he was going to ask her something and she wasn't sure if she could conjure up a good enough answer for him.

"I don't *know* who left the empty juice container in the fridge. Shit Michael! Maybe you've been sleepwalking and you drank it then. Maybe I put it back there without thinking. Maybe you put it back there without thinking. It doesn't mean anything. Why do you insist that there is something going on when there is nothing more to it?"



Just a few hours after the funeral, after they had buried their father, their mother was flirting and being coy with his old navy mates. These were their father's buddies; sea companions they had heard so much about – moving parts in the stories they knew so well that it was almost as if they were their own memories. They were men that their father had always doted on in his reminiscences and she was making a fool of herself. With her coquettish voice and her fluttering eyes that looked into tolerating faces and drinking more and more until she began to dance. She dragged the unwilling bulk of one of their father's friends onto the cleared space in the middle of the room and she spun around him as he moved awkwardly. He was trying to move away from her without embarrassing her or making the situation worse. And she dragged over to dance another of her husband's friends and another, and when one of them had finally had enough she jeered at him and said he wasn't man enough for her anyway. And Richard, Alistair, Michael and Francis were embarrassed and ashamed, and they distanced themselves.

As the men and their wives left the funeral party she was left at the door and she waved them off. She waved them off as she ignored the feeling that one of them should have

offered her a lift home. She leaned on the door frame as her body heaved with an excess of alcohol and food; she was feeling sluggish but she made the effort to wave them off with enthusiasm. The parlour for the wake stank of cheap wine and stale food and she sat down in her black dress and began to finish it off.

From the kitchen a fly buzzed around the dishes piled high in the sink – it sat and it fed, and then buzzed to the living room where she had fallen asleep. It circled around her body; its hum camouflaged by the music that was playing and then the hum became loud after the record stopped. With a final circle around and then sinking down; it landed on her rising and falling chest: just a black speck on the brown of her shirt. And then it rose and flew towards the sickly sweet of her breath – her slightly parted mouth – her lips, and it sat and rubbed its legs.

“Mmmhmm.”

Simone answered sleepily and Michael got up and opened the window, pulled the cover back over her shoulders and got back into bed. He had spent the night drinking and now he wanted to mould his body up against her back.

“Do you want me to move over, are you still too hot?”

“Yeah, just a bit.”

And so he moved to the other side of the bed.



It is the biggest kind of blue and it laps upon the shoreline and each boy dips his toe in and then runs away screeching and then races back to dive. This is their first experience of the ocean. They are on holiday and the two brothers, Alistair and Francis, have the afternoon to themselves. The ocean is vast and enveloping and there are rising clouds of disturbed sand as they run their fingers across the bottom and there is sea-weed that brushes their legs and makes them gasp as tingles run through their feet. This gives them a rush of sweet fear and they squirm in the water and swim towards the shore and shout stories of sea-creatures. These sea-creatures are omnipresent beings, as vast as the water they have been swimming in. They sit on the shore and chat about these monsters and this is all-consuming until Alistair becomes bored and stops. He stands

up and starts to walk along the beach and then he begins to collect shells and squints at their detail. Francis kicks the sand up with his feet; he runs and laughs as he tries to get his brother's attention. He runs across the shore-line with flapping movements, with sprays of water, until he becomes tired and forgets and lies down and closes his eyes so he can swim through the clouds in his head. Free, and the gulls screech over him; they wheel through the air like swooping hands and his eyes start open. He turns to his brother, sees his back and calls out, "We should go Alistair – it must be getting late". And from the distance, he sees his brother's face frown, and he sees that his brother knows the situation. It is time to go, and then everything around them breaks into fragments.



Francis fills the glass to the top with water and then drinks it down, his head tipping back and some spills at the side of his mouth. Dribbles on his shirt as it trickles down his neck and he wipes his hand across his mouth and lifts his tie to dab at the sweat on his face. He had been thinking of this drink for a long while and now that it was running down his throat, he felt better. His work day slipped behind him and it merged with the others in a never ending tick of the clock. Opening the frontdoor after what felt like a lifetime of slog because he couldn't remember when he had woken up. He didn't want to recall the shrill of the alarm clock as it had drilled a hole in his sleep, the water as it ran cold in the shower. He didn't want to remember cursing the small tank and the coffee he had no time to drink as he tried to find the keys to his car. Then the traffic that he sat in was a monotony not welcome and he had tried to listen to the news. He had tried hard to listen but there was mist behind his eyes as if he hadn't fully woken up. And then sitting behind his partitioned desk, he had sipped at his morning coffee and waited for the phones to ring and he had thought that he would try try try to do good work – even though he wasn't really sure what that was. There were just phones ringing and the never-ending tick of the clock.

And now he couldn't find it: the receipt for the suit that was too small and too tight and far too expensive. Francis couldn't find that all-important bit of paper. The bit of paper that was worth more than all the money in his wallet and he was sure more than in his bank account as well. He had to find it, he couldn't have just lost it, there was no way he would be able to keep an ill-fitting suit in his cupboard. It was an ill-fitting expensive waste of space that would forever be jeering at him, forever keeping him on edge, so he pushed hard against this displeasure and panicked. He darted around his

tiny apartment and he burrowed into bins, pockets, wallets and cupboards, under couches, between the pages of books and in his car, but it wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere: so he searched again and he looked through twice and then he looked through everything slowly. Hysteria rising to a buzzing pitch, his hands were shaking, fumbling over everything. The sun was hitting his eyes from the too-wide windows, space was closing in and he got paranoid.

Along the path that lead back home the road was quiet and empty. Humming in the distance was the city, but Michael couldn't hear it. It seemed quiet to him and he listened to his foot-steps and he listened to the wind in the trees and he listened to a dog barking because he was trying to hear anything that shouldn't be there. He had heard that there were gangs of young kids – high school kids, who roamed around at night and mugged anyone who looked vulnerable: pensioners and high-heeled women. Simone. Simone had often said to him that she wouldn't be caught dead wearing heels because they were a hobbling device created by men to stop women running away – she had said this jokingly but she always wore flat shoes and he realised now that she reminded him a bit of his mother. Michael's brow crinkled and lines spread over his face; he frowned as he heard the sounds of two low voices talking behind him.

Simone wanted to see Alistair. She had rung him but he hadn't answered his phone. It bothered her because she was relying more and more on having him to talk to. She decided that when she spoke to him next she would tell him that he was her rock. He was the one person who saw what she meant when she talked about Michael. He saw the problems and knew exactly what to say to make her feel better. It seemed to her that he wasn't surprised by anything – not even the peculiar way his brothers behaved. There was a time just recently when all four brothers had got together. It was Michael's birthday and Simone had never seen all four of them in a room. Alistair seemed to have had time to talk to everyone whilst Richard had been aloof. Francis stuttered and couldn't retain eye-contact when he spoke to her and Michael drank too much and complained that someone had wound his watch back when he was asleep because, lately, he had been five minutes late for everything that he did. Richard said nothing and walked away when either Michael or Francis had tried to talk to him. Simone saw this and didn't know why he was there and she had walked over to ask him why he had to make everything worse for everyone but before she could do this, his eyes had become fixed onto hers and he had blinked before his gaze dropped down the length of her body.

Simone had filled up all of the bottles and she was stacking them up on the shelves. She had spent the day making preserves of fruit and vegetables and had a lot to tidy up. The kitchen smelled of sugar and vinegar and her hands were covered in oil. As she washed up, she wiped down the benches and then she went outside to sit in the sun where she fell asleep. She awoke as her toes curled down towards the sensation on the sole of her foot. It was water and it splashed down to the ground and she opened her eyes and saw Michael. He had the hose in his hand and was grinning at her as he held it just under her toes and then over the front of her feet.

Now she walked through the city and looked at herself in the shop-windows. She felt that she looked a little frigid. She was feeling her walk; every step that hit the ground was making her body quake with a too large sense of herself. All she saw when she glanced at her reflection was a body lumbering uneasily and she wished she had stayed at home with Michael. With Michael; with his fidgeting bulk on the couch awaiting the drama of hot and cold, cold and hot and she felt chilly. She had decided that morning to tell him that she was leaving. Finally, she had decided to bite the bullet and she wanted to meet up with Alistair to talk over this idea before she confronted Michael with it. She had arranged to meet Alistair because he was always good to talk to. He understood his brother so well. Out of all of them, he was the most well-adjusted. Michael was paranoid, Francis was a mess and Richard was arrogant but Alistair was the calm one. It impressed her that he was so curious about his brothers. He always asked Simone how Michael was, what he was doing, what he was saying – how he was dealing with everything. And there would always be a pause after she said what she had to say about Michael. There would be a pause and Simone would feel *listened to*. She wondered how Michael would manage after she had told him she was going to leave him and she knew that he wouldn't handle it well. He wouldn't be able to understand her perspective; he would convince himself that something else was happening – something more than just the hurt of her leaving. He would create another scenario – a more insidious, dramatic story that would give meaning to all the pain he'd be feeling. Simone paused and considered this and thought about all the scenarios that this could account for and she realised how much it made sense and she wondered why she hadn't thought of it before.

Francis's receipt had disappeared but he drove into town anyway. He drove there and he parked near the shop and as soon as he had walked inside, he explained to the shop-keeper that he had bought a suit there – he couldn't find the receipt but he had to return

it because the trousers were too short and he had decided that it was far too expensive anyway. There was a sign on the counter that requested receipts for any refund or exchange and the shop-keeper pointed to it. Francis explained his situation again. He said he should have been told that the trousers were too short when he had bought them. He said he felt he'd been conned into the purchase. The suit was slung onto the counter and Francis said that he wouldn't leave until the girl he had bought it from verified what he said and he fumbled over his words as he fiddled with the plastic covering on the suit. There was a pause as the shop-keeper considered him and then he said that Francis could get his money back if he had a receipt. He said that this receipt was a particular necessity for acquiring any money back, so if he found it, he should come back but otherwise, sir, unfortunately, the store has a strict policy....

And he waited until she came – looking annoyed and making too much noise as she slammed into the shop. She glared at him as she talked to the shop-keeper and as they both turned to face him their expressions showed contempt and condescension. From beneath the counter she pulled a box, lifted the lid and told him she didn't recognise him but they always kept secondary records of sales. She opened up the shoe-box and Francis saw that it was packed with slips of white and yellow paper. She dipped in her hand and moved it around, gave a malicious swirl to the contents and then pulled out a few random strips which she made as though to look through. Her hands were slack and her face was bored and she shook her head when she had finished.

"I'm sorry we don't seem to have it. Now if you don't mind we're pretty busy and we need to get on with our work."

And he stared at her blankly. Her boredom had snatched away his anger as she patted down the lid of the box. He grabbed it – he reached over and pulled the box across the counter, tucked it under his arm and walked with it out of the shop.

There were a lot of people in the restaurant and Simone sat opposite Alistair and forgot what she wanted to talk to him about because she just wished that she could see his eyes. The light from outside was reflecting on his glasses and she handed him a menu hoping that he would take them off to read but he folded it up without looking inside and asked her why she had wanted to meet with him. Simone had always been disarmed by his bluntness and she blushed and hoped he couldn't see this. He asked her again and she said that she just wanted to get a load off her chest but now that she was

with him she didn't want to talk about Michael. She wanted to talk about him instead. Alistair seemed to consider her and she felt unsure of this attention. She smiled and hoped she looked confident. He looked at his watch and said that he couldn't stay long and Simone asked what he was planning on doing. She asked if she could tag along and said that she didn't want to go home yet: "Not to Michael". And she rolled her eyes. Alistair said nothing and Simone wished that they hadn't met up that day; she wished that she hadn't wanted more than just their usual discussions on the phone. She was hurt that he didn't want to have lunch with her.

Gripping the box hard, Francis walked from the shop and walked past his car and directed himself onto the road. Into the traffic. He didn't want to deal with anything anymore. This had been the last straw. The box meant nothing but he held it in front of him, he wanted to drop it but he couldn't let go. He walked into the middle of the street and stepped onto the median strip. He saw a truck coming but before he could take a step forward, he crumpled onto his side and then he couldn't move and he closed his eyes as the traffic passed by him.

Alistair stared straight ahead as they walked down the street and Simone followed him. She felt the need for small talk. She twittered at first and then paused and began again: this time sounding whiny and strained and she cringed a little as she heard her voice. This shrillness was reverberating; ranging wide across her self-consciousness and she hated that she was feeling so uneasy and then he turned to her and smiled and then said: "Yes", when she paused and she felt eased back into the situation. They were walking through the high-rise and neither of them looked up and she admired the profile of his face: straight nose, sloping forehead and the dip between his brows. And she chattered on, feeling like an idiot with old inanities slipping out – the more she talked about Michael, the more she started talking *like* him and she didn't want Alistair to think they were similar. Simone could never bear long silences. She liked him, this brother of her boyfriend's, but so what...his vague blue eyes occasionally turning to points, his mouth and his small white teeth: crooked at the bottom but nearly perfect, a thin face but angular. And his back. He was tanned and sculpted with outlines of muscle, lean, and he had strong arms.... Soon the crowds and the traffic became too loud and Simone was glad she didn't feel like she had to talk anymore. She appreciated the purpose in his stride and she let herself be taken along; amid the crowds and heavy bags, her bag against her arm, her shoulder, banging on her hip and her hands as they adjusted its weight. A drip of sweat down her back – droplets on her upper lip. And even though she was no longer speaking he still looked at her sometimes and smiled and she smiled

back; wiping her lip before he noticed, before he turned his head, his neck, his back, and her body. It was tangible. And the burden of her bag on her shoulders was making her lift her head high on her neck and the breeze that moved around them, against them, was sweet on her face from the tiny beads of moisture. She was staying close to him because she was worried about losing him: she had a fear of being cut from his side by the intercepting crowd.

And this was it – there was nothing left for him to do. His body had crumpled. He had wanted to make one final gesture but now he couldn't move, he couldn't even manage to step forward and this made perfect sense to him. *Loser*. And the word sunk comfortably into his brain, into the pocket that he kept for it, into the groove. He was Mr.—I'm sorry I've forgotten your name, and with this indictment the final word, he tapped into a blocked reserve of will and rolled into the oncoming traffic.

It took less than a minute: Simone and Alistair were about to cross the road when a car's horn blared, and then there was the sound of skidding brakes and a shrieking from the sidewalk. They both ran over and then they stopped in their tracks when they saw Francis. Alistair pushed her back and ran to his brother. He dropped to his knees and shouted for everyone to get back. He glared at the people who were beginning to surround him, them, and this caused the crowd to quieten. This silence was filled with the gasps of Francis and the low voice of Simone as she called for an ambulance.

Simone had no words for Alistair. She sat in the ambulance and wanted to hold his hand but this didn't seem right. She didn't know what to make of the events that had played out on the street. Francis's gasps had been slowing and bubbles of blood were forming at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were glazing over and yet he still seemed to be focusing on something. Francis's eyes looked as a person's do when they are trying to place something, someone in front of them. Alistair didn't look at his brother's eyes but he looked around, and then looked down, paused, held his hand to Francis's face and then looked around again. Simone wondered if Alistair was looking for a perpetrator; she wondered if Alistair thought that Francis had been pushed. She thought that this sounded right and she wanted to know if Alistair had an idea of who this was and she had finally built up the courage to ask.

"Who did what?" asked Alistair. "What are you talking about? Is there something that you know that you should tell me?"

And Simone shook her head. She realised that it must be just her. She was translating the situation badly. She was looking for someone to blame just as Michael would do. She had projected Michael's behaviour onto Alistair and she was angry that Michael could contaminate her thoughts and make a horrible situation worse even when he wasn't anywhere near her.

As they sat in the ambulance, Alistair watched Simone and realised that she hadn't seen anyone push Francis, but he couldn't peel his eyes from her face. She avoided looking back at him. She was just like all of them – all of the girls that Alistair had ever met and talked with. She said things that seemed strange and bothered him. He couldn't stop staring and he didn't want to look down at his brother; at the blood or the expression on his face. Francis had never had girlfriends. He always said that he couldn't see the point. Alistair had always found them difficult, always been told that he drove them away. He had once begged a girlfriend not to leave him. He had felt like locking the door and forcing her to stay and it was only afterwards, when she had wrestled her way free of him and had escaped, that he realised that he had never liked himself much when he was with her. He had just wanted something in his life that was certain, he wanted everything she said to have a clear source and not be so difficult, so onerous, so overfilled with other meanings that she said she had never meant to indicate.

Richard Collatt had spent the week taking taxis. They were often late and he *knew* that they did this on purpose. They wanted to make him aware of how difficult they could make life for him; he was under their power but now he would have the last laugh. Today he wouldn't tell the taxi-driver *what* he was doing, he would just tell him the location: the address of the mechanic, and then he would pick up his repaired car and *then* they would know that they couldn't have any more power over him. He walked into the bathroom, looked into the mirror, looked over his shoulder, splashed water on his face and looked into the mirror again. It was still there; he hadn't imagined it – a black dot was visible above his left eyebrow. It was as if someone had drawn it on his face as he slept. *Someone* had marked him without him knowing and he rubbed at the spot until the only mark that remained was a redness that swelled a little and felt sore. He looked at himself and smiled. This redness looked good to him. It looked like a job well done. It looked like the first solution in the list of things that had gone wrong. He needed to find the source of it all. He had crashed his car and then everything had started going badly. He couldn't see the reason why. He had only one clue; only one thing to go on. It was something that had been said to him quite recently. *She*:

Michael's girlfriend: Simone, had said to him: "Why do you have to make things worse". And the room had fallen silent. Resonance seemed to ping off the walls – she had struck a nerve and Richard saw his brothers stare. Simone *knew* something. She saw something in him. Richard straightened his back, tucked in his shirt and knotted his tie. He pushed this knot up to his neck and pushed it against his throat. He pushed it until he choked and the triangle tips of his collar rose up to his chin and had to be patted down after he had released his hand. He was in good shape. He was in fine form and the walls around him seemed to close in; they seemed to breathe and flit and whisper. He *had* to go to the hospital. He *had* to go because Simone was there. He *had* to pick her up and find out what she knew. Find out if there was anything more for her to say and enlighten him with.

Simone stood outside the hospital and wished that she smoked so she could occupy both of her hands. She pressed redial on her mobile and let the engaged signal sound in her ear. She had never known Michael to spend so long on the phone. It was more likely that he had just left it off the hook. She felt like throwing it in disgust – of all of the times for Michael to fuck up; this was one of the worst. She needed his help. She needed him to be a buffer for her. She needed to be with the someone that she knew how to handle because Alistair had been acting so strangely. In the ambulance, after she had asked him who he had been looking for on the street, he had stared at her for a long time. Francis's body was zipped up next to him, the paramedic was scribbling down notes and Alistair was focussing his attention on her. She wasn't able to make any kind of conclusion from this. It was as though she had done something wrong. She was relieved when she looked up and saw Richard's red car roll through the hospital boom-gates. She walked to the curb to greet him as she tried Michael's number again. The car drove up, stopped in front of her, the window rolled down to reveal his smiling visage and Simone opened her mouth to speak but this action was cut short as she caught sight of the gun in his lap.

Alistair walked out of the hospital and he couldn't see her. She had disappeared and he was glad he didn't have to worry about being distracted by her anymore. She hadn't meant anything when she asked if he thought Francis had been pushed. It was the kind of statement he could hear his mother saying even though she would never have said anything like this before. Alistair had the task of being the one to tell her about Francis's death. He still couldn't believe that his brother was dead. He couldn't believe that if he dropped by Francis's home there wouldn't be anyone to open the door when he knocked on it. Alistair walked through the car park and out through the hospital

gates and he sat at the bus-stop. He sat and he waited and he stared into the middle distance and thought of nothing. On the bus, on his way home, Alistair thought about getting his bike out. He would go for a ride. This would clear the fog in his mind. It was a beautiful day and he wanted to circle around. He wanted some time to come to grips with it.

Alistair had taken off his spectacles to ride and a pair of non-prescription sunglasses shielded his face. The city was blurry around him but he didn't need to see to know where he was going because he knew this part of the city so well that it was like the back of his hand. He could ride around and not be distracted because there was nothing that he needed to see because nothing was going to look out of place. All was going well until he saw a cart parked at the corner of two streets: Main Street and Fifth. In the midst of densely packed pedestrians and cars slowing down to park, there was a wheeled up cart, new blue and red, blurs of bright, and a man he at first thought was a woman; apron on, a wide girth and flowers in a red fist.

Gift wrapped. And Alistair braked to slow and then came to a stop in front of him.

"I've not seen you here before," he said.

"Naah mate, just starting up—bought the business from my brother."

"You have a brother?"

"You want to buy some flowers, beautiful uh? You want to buy some for your mother! She'll love it! All women love flowers. All women love flowers and then they leave their men alone – know what I mean? Huh, huh....eh? You know? You know what I mean?"

And he bought the flowers. He bought them and then he wheeled around a corner and tossed them into a bin. *Damn it!* He thought, and he wished he had never taken them. He was driven by an impulse and *she* had seemed to be at the heart of it. He needed to see his mother and tell her about Francis but he hadn't bought the flowers to console her. He bought them so she wouldn't think badly of him; he was scared that she might think that *he* had pushed Francis onto the road. This was ridiculous and he peddled away again and he peddled hard as the wind pulled the back of his shirt and created a pocket of air, a pocket of air, and he peddled hard against this impediment. Tick tock

tick tock back. As the flower seller had rested his hand on Alistair's shoulder, after he had taken his money and then handed him the flowers he had said:

"The women – they always hold you back."



Their mother had never *asked* them why they had to make things worse for themselves because there had never been the time for them to respond. They had stopped beating down on the body on the ground and the world seemed deadly quiet as they watched her walk inside. As she had closed the door behind her, each boy looked at his hands, looked at his feet and wondered about the expression on his face as he wondered about the meaning behind what she had said. Something about them was bad and she said it would only get worse because of what they were doing. The boy on the ground stirred and moaned and there was a feeling in their stomachs that twisted a little and was sore. It felt like an empty spot – a space that needed to be filled somehow. The boys realised that it was time for dinner and they dropped their sticks and didn't glance behind as they walked up to the house. Eating seemed like the most logical thing to do but it didn't seem *right* somehow. Their hunger seemed to be beside the point. It had lost its drive and they realised how much this force had played a part in their lives. As their stomachs flexed and churned, the air around them felt odd: it felt still and watchful. They walked under a tree and a branch fell in front of them and this seemed mechanical. It seemed as though someone had broken it off and dropped it onto their path. They walked up the porch stairs, opened the door, slipped off their shoes and stepped into the house. The table was set with placemats that were framed by glasses and cutlery. As each boy sat down he had the sense of having left something behind and it gaped. Their mother lay their meals in front of them and they looked down and saw that she had served them meat and this meat was sitting in a pool of its own juice: just the way, she said, that they liked it.

"It's not juice at all: it's blood," said Alistair.

And none of them were able to eat. They just prodded and poked and examined the contents of their meal before they asked to be excused and then they went straight to bed.

The next morning, after they had woken up, they didn't rub their eyes to get rid of the crusts that had formed there because they kept their arms rigid to their sides. They were tucked under blankets which formed a barrier between them and the beginning of the day. Apprehension wasn't a feeling they were used to and they were hypnotised by it. Their mother was walking around outside: they could hear the tread of her shoes. She was walking past their window and they could hear a ripping sound as she pulled some of the slats from the veneer that surrounded the bottom of their home. The boys lay still and held their breaths as they wondered what she was doing. They could hear her crawling in the space beneath them and they could hear the sound of something heavy being dragged. *Something* was being dragged out from under them and it was being pulled through the hole that she had made and then there was the sound of coughing and crying and the soothing voice of their mother as she said that everything would soon be alright.

Maria organised her husband's funeral and sat before the paperwork spread out on her bed. She wanted to get out of the room, stretch her legs, and she opened the door but then closed it in front of her. Her sons were in the kitchen and she didn't want to be near them that day. She was pleased that they had finished their breakfasts, had finished making lunch and now they were talking quietly amongst themselves as they packed sandwiches into their lunch-boxes. They were always so quiet when she moved past them. Maria stood with her shoulder to the wall and opened the door a crack to watch. They weren't talking anymore and were silent. She wondered if they knew that she was listening in to them but then realised that this feeling of being watched and listened to was one they should have all the time. She wanted them to *know* she was there without them realising she was anywhere near them so she exited her room by the window and didn't wonder about the best way to get back in again.



Simone took another look around and tried to think of a way to escape. The windows were fixed and the door was locked. There was a kettle that looked heavy enough to break the glass but she wasn't sure if it would. She still didn't know why Richard had brought her there, all she knew was that he seemed to have lost his mind and she looked around the room again. She was in a kitchen: it was the kitchen in their mother's home, the place they had spent their adolescence and it looked as though it hadn't been utilised in years. The door handle turned and Richard entered and told her that he liked the way she looked as she sat there and Simone froze in fear. He had the

gun with him and she didn't want to do anything because she knew that even the smallest thing could set him off. She had not paid enough attention to the gun in the car because she couldn't see any reason for Richard to be holding it. It had lacked purpose for her then but now it was all she could see. Nothing she said to him was benign; nothing could be just *said*. Everything was loaded and he asked her to explain what she had meant and Simone couldn't remember what she'd said to him.



Richard recalled when their mother had announced their move from the farm to the city. She had made this statement out of the blue and she got up to clear the dishes away. Richard decided to stay home from school and help his mother pack. He didn't want to move house but he didn't know how to say this to her so he thought that the best way to get her attention was by helping. His mother had been opening the curtains in their bedroom when Richard had informed her that he was planning to help. The sun had lined her silhouette as she bowed her head and she had looked like an angel but when she turned around Richard saw that this was not the case. She looked thoughtful. She said that it wasn't like him to offer anything and a small smile creased the lower part of her face. Richard had walked his brothers to the bus and then had returned home to help her pack. He had followed all of her directions and she had looked pleased with him. She looked as though everything was going as she expected and Richard felt a pleasure that he hadn't experienced before. As he sat on his knees in the living room and pulled out a drawer of plates that they had never used, he heard something behind him. It was a hovering presence – he had a sense of someone watching him, examining what he was doing. From the kitchen came the sound of his mother's voice and Richard spun around to see who had been watching, but there was no-one there. There was nothing but the expression that he had seen on her face that morning which was disturbing him.



Alistair stopped at the traffic lights. He got off his bike and waited for the red light to blink off. The pedestrian lights flashed green to the side of him as an urgent ticking sounded but no-one hurried across. The street was empty of pedestrians and yet the cars in front and behind had to stop for them. It reminded Alistair of an urge that he often had. Sometimes he closed his eyes to let something or someone move past. He closed

his eyes and yet he was sure that if he opened them there would be no-one there. There was *no-one* there but he wasn't confident that this would turn out to be true.



To thank her son for his help with their move to the city, Maria took Richard on a trip to the cinema. She held his hand when they got off the bus and he wanted to tell her that he was too old for this but he was scared she would let go. They walked through the city and it seemed like his hand was being pressed too firmly; the tips of his fingers were turning purple and he had lost most of the feeling in them. He felt her anger as they dropped their pace behind a slow-moving crowd. She wound her way around them and he became scared of people moving in before he could get past. He was scared that she would let go and he wouldn't be able to find her. He wanted to go home. He didn't feel like they were going to the movies anymore – they were battling their way through the city and he didn't like this because he didn't understand what it was she thought they were battling through.

It wasn't a film that Richard would have picked. In the opening scenes, he saw a woman sitting to the side of two men who were arguing. This argument seemed pivotal to the film because everything else that happened referred to it. The argument itself was complex and Richard could not understand much of what was said. He knew that the characters were members of the Mafia and the film was set in New York but that was about all. Just before this argument took place, one of the men indicated that the woman sitting with them should go somewhere else and the other man pressed her knee and told her to go make some drinks. This happened a lot during the movie, whenever the two main characters confronted each other, the woman was asked to leave the room. She was meant to seem unimportant and so, because he didn't understand the rest of the story, Richard decided to focus his attention on her. At the end of the film, he realised that this attention had been rewarded. He saw a different film from his mother. He felt like he saw the *real* film: the film that the director must have known only certain people could see. At the end of some scenes the camera would zoom in to her hand, and there was always the same ring on it and this ring had a big green stone. In a blurred corner of the picture at the end of the film, the ringed hand of this woman picked up a phone just moments before the rest of the characters were killed. The ending shots didn't contain the woman but had a bloody shoot out between this gang and another. According to the film it was one of their own gang-members that had betrayed them but according to the sides of the film, the blurry corners that Richard had

decided to pay attention to, it was the woman who was the catalyst for the story and it was only Richard and the invisible director who were aware of this.



Sitting at the table, Simone felt weary and dirty. She wanted to wash her face, her hands, but there was no soap, no towels – just a kitchen sink. The situation was grim but monotonous, and she hoped this monotony would serve as a buffer for her nerves. She wasn't sure how she was handling it but she suspected she wasn't well. She had lost all concept of time and situations kept repeating themselves. Richard would unlock the door and enter the room, smile at her familiarly and then ask her to tell him more about what she knew and Simone would look around – searching for something to say and Richard would grimace and then change the subject. He would ask her if there was anything that she needed but she knew that whatever she asked for wouldn't be forthcoming. For some reason he just liked asking her the question.



The brothers didn't ask each other where they thought their mother was. She could be anywhere in the house but the noise of the traffic on the street outside obscured the sounds of movement inside. They had ten minutes before they had to head off to high-school. They had made their lunches, packed their bags and got dressed into their uniforms and yet something was *missing*. There was something that they needed to do but none of them knew what this could be. The hum of the city didn't obscure the noise from a door closing behind them but none of them looked around. They were preoccupied with checking their pockets and then checking the contents of their bags. Everywhere they looked revealed all as it should be and yet something was *wrong* and they couldn't leave the house until they found out what this was. They had a constant fear of being caught short. Richard's fingers twitched and his arms stiffened from pent up energy and he wanted to put his hands around something. He chewed his bottom lip and realised what was missing: there was an absence; a sense of something that had just left the room. It was then that Richard felt they were safe and that nothing out-of-the-ordinary would happen to them that day.



Her decision had been made. Simone convinced herself that it wouldn't be too hard – she would figure something out and then give him what he wanted and then give it over in spades. And she would do this, first of all, by being vague. She would allude to something, give him the impression that there was something she couldn't quite say and hopefully this would lead him to confide more in her. The only thing she knew was that she had triggered something in him and the word *triggered* made her laugh. *Calm down*, she thought, and she held the sides of her head and pressed down hard, rubbing at her scalp with the flat of her palms. Her biggest problem, her biggest fear, was that because she didn't know what he wanted, she wouldn't be able to get a handle on the consequences of what she said. She didn't want to track these consequences through her mind so she bit down on the image of this oppressive man. This man who locked the door behind him when he came into the kitchen, who allowed her nothing, no bed, no comfort, and the humiliation of having to piss in the sink. He would have his oppressiveness validated, anything he wanted – anything at all, and she would give it to him, her hands held out; held out to him, he who held the gun – the gun that clicked in her mind like a trigger.



They didn't know whether their mother was at home or if she had gone out and Richard had said that he knew nothing bad was going to happen to them that day and Alistair *understood* this was true. Things that they put down and walked away from would not disappear and they wouldn't question whether the thing had been placed down by them in the first place. Nothing was going to move behind them when they were positive that they were the only ones in the room. Their day would be simple, straightforward, and they wouldn't have to back-track and question their perception of everything that had taken place. This was what Alistair thought Richard meant when he said that nothing bad was going to happen to them that day and it was only afterwards, when he was walking to his first class, that it seemed strange. Richard shouldn't be able to anticipate when bad things were going to happen. This was something that no-one was meant to know and Alistair opened his eyes wide: he opened them as far as they would go so he could enlarge the scope of his peripheral vision but he couldn't see anything other than what he usually did. Richard saw things that Alistair wasn't able to and Alistair knew that his younger brothers weren't able to see much either. He had heard them talking about it. He had once heard Michael scream and he heard Francis run into the room. Alistair had stood behind the closed door and listened in and heard Michael crying and

then he said that he was *sure* he saw something. Something was always creeping up behind him but it disappeared whenever he built up the nerve to turn his head.



Simone decided that it was time for her to go. She would not be made to stay any longer because she knew that Richard wasn't able to let her go as his need for whatever he thought she knew had eclipsed everything rational. His breathing became loud when he was near her. He would breathe her in and she would feel shame about the way she must smell because it had been so long since she had cleaned herself; so long since she had brushed her teeth. And he breathed in and then told her that she must know something because she reminded him of the sensation he got whenever he knew that something strange was going to happen to him.



Alistair needed more evidence. He had spent the entire school-day thinking about it. He wanted to know more about how Richard could have such a firm grasp on what was going to happen to them and he wanted to know where their mother was; it seemed like they hadn't seen her in days. He walked through the house and found Richard in the kitchen. He was looking out of the window. Alistair walked up behind him and looked where he was looking; he looked without his brother noticing he was there. Richard was staring at their mother, she seemed to be in deep thought – her brow was furrowed, her chin was raised and she was staring into the middle distance. Alistair saw this, saw what his brother was looking at and he knew what Richard was thinking: Richard was thinking that she appeared to be considering something or someone in front of her. Alistair leaned over and asked if this was what Richard was doing and his brother jerked around and said he didn't realise that Alistair was there. Alistair asked again if he thought that their mother was considering someone in front of her and Richard had shaken his head and hadn't answered and told Alistair never to sneak up behind him again. Alistair wondered if Richard knew where their mother often disappeared to and then he wondered if Richard also knew where their things went. He walked into his brother's room and sat with him on his bed. He asked him if he thought that there was something wrong with their mother and Richard asked him what it was that he meant.

"It seems like she doesn't want to see us anymore. It's like we don't really exist or have a place in her life or something."

And Richard said nothing. He looked up and strained his neck forward like he was trying to hear something in the next room. Alistair listened but he couldn't hear anything. Richard's eyes narrowed and then widened and then he blinked and his expression became blank and it was as though he was dismissing everything that he had just heard. Alistair sat on the bed and watched as his brother left his room. He had wanted Richard to answer him because he wanted to know what was going through his brother's head. Their mother had once asked them why they had to make things worse for themselves and Alistair suspected that Richard knew the answer. All Alistair knew was that the worst was happening now – it was happening most of the time and he was sure that there must be a cause to it. There was a force at work and Alistair didn't turn around when he heard a breath, when the breath reached his neck. Alistair wondered about Richard as his neck tensed in anticipation of a second breath and he got up and exited the room and decided to find out what the rest of his brothers were up to.



The light was shining too brightly on Simone's face, hurting her eyes, but she squinted out of the window anyway. She didn't know where he was but as long as he wasn't outside she had, perhaps, a reasonable chance. The windows in the kitchen were fixed and could not be opened so she reached across to the stove and grabbed the kettle. She swung it with a flailing swing and a burst of energy. The window shattered and she leaped out, landing on her hands and knees but then rolling head first into the stump of a tree. There was blood pumping from her wrists almost immediately and she looked up at the jagged lines of glass that had made the parallel slashes that were now leaking at her sides in the dirt.



Alistair walked down the stairs and thought about what Richard had been listening to when he had asked him his question. Alistair had heard nothing, there had been nothing in the next room and so he wondered if whatever Richard had been listening to could only be heard by him. He wanted to find out what this was. Alistair walked through the hall and into the kitchen but found nobody in there. He looked out to the garden and then traced his steps to the front hall again. He avoided the closed door of his mother's room and walked up the stairs and thought about it. He thought about everything that had happened and everything they did. He thought about the things she had said to

them and what it could mean and Alistair felt like there was something more to it: something that he could not pin down and explain. He just needed to be persistent and hunt it out and Alistair felt like he was on the cusp of widening his point of view and he felt refreshed – determined.



Simone woke up next to a dead man. His skin was grey and he was emitting an odour of damp and rot. It was sweet. And the sweat under her skin broke out in rivulets as she tried to lift her arms but they hurt too much and then she raised her head and the tendons in her neck shrieked and she saw that her wrists were covered in brown sticky strips of material. They were brown from dried blood. And although there was pain, she turned her hands over and up and saw fresh blood seeping from under the folds of these bandages. Her body was seeping amidst the stench of the room and she heaved herself up from the carpet, was blinded for a moment by her own sweat, raised her arms to wipe her face on her sleeve and then saw a window in front of her but it was barred like the others and so she turned towards the door, flung her torso towards it, slamming herself against the wood until the lock gave way. And then she ran, elbows out and pointing like stubby hysterical weapons, she shouted as she raced out onto the street.



Alistair sat at the back of the classroom and didn't attempt to listen to the teacher as she droned on. None of what she said seemed important. He sat hunched over his desk and drew in the margins of his page. He drew spirals and cubes and shaded in sections of different shapes to give the illusion of depth as he thought about his brother. Alistair had been making his way down the stairs, he had been frightened of falling although this had never happened before and then he walked through the house to find Richard and he found his brother in the kitchen. He was making a sandwich and he was moving very slowly. When Alistair asked him what he was doing, Richard had dropped the knife he had been holding and exclaimed: "I knew I would do that!" And Alistair had been struck by this expression and realised that his brother said this all the time: Richard knew that he would do that, Richard knew this ahead of time. Alistair drew a spiral: the larger circles were at the top and then they twisted down to smaller ones and a black dot at the end. Beneath this black dot, Alistair made a few strokes and created a

stick-figure – it was lying at the bottom of this spiral like someone about to be sucked up.

There was a girl who went to their high-school who tended to stare a lot. She stared at Richard as he ate his lunch in the quadrangle. He tried not to meet her gaze because he felt shy around her and he was surprised when she came over and sat next to him. She told him that she found him interesting and she had been wondering about some of the things that he did. She said that she wondered why Richard's head always twitched as though he was trying not to turn his head and Richard tried not to stare at her breasts. There was noise behind them: it sounded like someone approaching and Richard flinched and put a hand to his face. It was nothing. The breeze had dislodged a pinecone and it had clattered onto the pavement behind them. Richard heard her sigh and then she muttered beneath her breath. She pressed her hand to his knee and he didn't say anything after she got up and said:

"I don't think you see what everyone else does when they look at you."

And Richard had spent the rest of his lunch-break examining his hands as though they could give some indication about what she meant.

Richard sat at his desk studying and Alistair stood in the doorway and asked if he knew what was wrong with them.

"Aren't things the way they're supposed to be?"

And Alistair asked: "What way's that?" And Richard looked confused. He shook his head and asked Alistair to go on but Alistair had forgotten what he wanted to say. The silence filled the room and the boys felt uncomfortable. Alistair forgot what he wanted to say next because something had gotten a hold of his tongue. Richard shuffled in his seat and then tugged at the cuff of his shirt, his eyes narrowed and his face tilted up and then his features relaxed back into place and Alistair said that he had to get back to his homework. When he was safely back in his room, Alistair thought about the expression that so often transformed the features on his brother's face and he felt sure that there was something about Richard that needed to be understood by both of them.

They were watching television before they did their homework and neither Richard nor Alistair wanted to get up and answer the phone. It continued ringing and Richard got

up as the adverts came on. He walked over and then leaned in to reach it and it stopped but his hand hovered as though he was waiting for it to ring again and the phone trilled into life. He picked it up, sighed and said hello, yes, okay, and then, bye and then he put it down again. He said that it was Michael and that Michael would be late home. It seemed to Alistair that Richard had known that it was Michael all along and that he knew that the phone would ring again. He had also been irritated at what Michael had wanted to say to him because this was something that he had known as well. It seemed to Alistair that if Richard knew this, then he must know a lot about other things and Alistair decided to find out how far this knowledge went.

“I think I know what’s been going on, Richard.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I know what makes you different.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Ever since we moved to the city, we haven’t been able to do anything properly. It’s like we have to take too much care with everything. Dad died, we moved here and now nothing makes sense anymore – it feels like anything could slip away. We can’t look backwards or forwards because we have to look around ourselves all the time because nothing seems safe. It’s like something’s out to get us. I think mum thinks that it’s just us that makes things bad but I think that there’s something more to it. You’re able to see things that we can’t so you should be able to see what makes things bad because you have a sixth sense or something. You have something that should be able to help us see whatever it is.”



And Simone ran down the street as she held her bleeding wrists in front of her. She had to get to a hospital. Blood was trailing down her arms and collecting on the undersides of her elbows before it dripped down onto the road. She didn’t know how much more blood she could lose because she was already feeling light-headed. She was running as quickly as she could and only stopped when a car drew along beside her and someone asked if she was alright but their voice seemed familiar to her – she couldn’t see a face, or place a name but it frightened her enough for her to keep running on.



“So, you’re saying that I have a hold of something that you don’t?”

“...I guess so – yes. You’re the one who can let us recognise whatever it is that we need to see because you are more connected or something.”

And Richard swung in his chair and thought about this. He had an impulse to sniff the air but instead he breathed expansively through his nose. He stood up.

“You’re right. I do feel like something is around me – inside of me. It’s some force...you’re right; I do have some kind of sixth sense or something.”

Richard’s nostrils twitched and his eyes flicked to the left and the right and then back to Alistair again.

“...I have sixth sense – that must be the name of it. That must be the reason why I always know when things are going to happen before they even occur. I think I must have had it even when we were kids, even when we weren’t living in the city.”



Richard had stalked the perimeter of the farm. His father had been pronounced dead that afternoon and now there were things that he needed to get done. It was time for Richard to make the best out of things. The farm had lain dormant for too long now. Richard had seen enough of the other farms in the district to know how much could be done with it and he wanted to do what his father had been unable to. At just twelve years of age, Richard felt like he could do what his father couldn’t because he was possessed by a spirit. From behind him was the crackle of twigs and the rustle of bushes as if someone was following and he felt okay about this. There was a place for everyone in Richard’s newly-acquired sense of responsibility. It was time to start anew, start acting like a man would and he walked down the drive and he walked up to the house, saw his mother pull boxes from her car and carry them inside and he saw Alistair watching from the porch.

“She says we’re moving,” he said. And there was laughter in the bushes to the side of them. There was laughter and Richard could have sworn that this laughter was directed at him

He was *Richard Collatt*. He had *known* what to do with the farm. It was in his blood; an untapped force. He was second generation; the second coming. He was God’s gift. As Richard walked up to the house, he felt the ground beneath him suck at his feet and he looked up to see if the rain was going to start again. His father had always seemed so surprised by the weather. Richard had tried not to feel shock when he died. He blinked and directed more energy to his ankles so he was able to move more quickly and he squinted his eyes so everything looked firm in its place but when he opened his eyes wide again everything looked wrong. The house seemed wonky, the sky seemed like it was the wrong colour and his mother was pulling boxes from her car as Alistair called out: “We’re moving.” And afterwards, when Richard tracked this memory through his mind, he couldn’t be sure who had been laughing at him, he couldn’t be sure who had snorted and guffawed and made fun of him because it had only been his mother and Alistair who had watched him as he had walked up the path to their house.



Richard didn’t say anything more about what he felt he possessed, instead he sucked the air through his nose, registered the smell that lingered and felt sure that Alistair was right. He had some kind of sixth sense. He had a knowledge of how things would pass because they had always hovered for a second before creeping past and then Richard knew what to expect and everything would be heavy with these consequences. It was like a new set of rules had been established and these rules worked against regular expectations. Alistair was looking at him and frowned and Richard wondered what his brother was thinking. He often appeared to be considering something when he looked at him and Richard hated that he did this. He hated that his brother could be so assessing: so quietly observant. He had often thought that Alistair was plotting to take something away from him and he thought about this now. He came to the conclusion that by claiming to know what made Richard different; by claiming to know what made him *special*, Alistair was trying to take some ownership of it. He wanted what Richard had and in order to take it he needed to find a name for it. Alistair was fishing for information. Richard had a sixth sense and his brother wanted to know its location. Richard *understood* that to locate it was to scare it away and he wasn’t going to let Alistair have that power. He stood up. *No-one* had the right to try and manoeuvre under

the radar with him. He was *Richard Collatt* and no-one had the right to assume that they had anything over him.

It was never discussed again: Richard denied that their conversation had ever taken place. Years passed and Richard's sixth sense took on a life of its own. He became attached to it and ever more dependent on it and it left its smudged handprints on everything he did. While he was at university, Richard never recognised the impact this sense had on the way that he moved: he never recognised that his movement was stilted. Each step that touched the ground was connected to a thought and this thought was something that his body wanted to dance with but he was unable to get a hold of the rhythm. His movement was laboured and the fact that he was moving too slowly wasn't recognised by him, so when people overtook him as he walked through the grounds of the university he felt like they were trying to show him up. He wondered who in hell they thought they were. He questioned the perception they had of themselves as he tried to suppress the niggles of self-doubt that plagued him. He made the effort to think hard about what he was doing; he thought hard about the way that he moved and what it could mean to an observer and whenever he felt people stare, he convinced himself that he was communicating the *right* thing. He hoped that he appeared as he would like to be: like someone with a firm grip on everything that was happening. He pushed his shoulders back and made the effort towards even larger steps until he caught a glimpse of a couple of first-years walking behind him, imitating the way that he moved and then a group of people sitting on a patch of grass who turned around to laugh at him.



Simone passed out on the road and then awoke some time later in the ward of a hospital. Her wrists had been bandaged and the rest of her body was covered with a blue gown. As she sat up in the bed, a nurse entered and strode towards her. This nurse had a warmish smile that seemed a bit too tight around the edges and Simone felt wary of her. She put a hand on Simone's forehead and checked her chart and asked her what happened and she didn't know how to explain about Richard. She felt it was her fault but she could not understand what she had done wrong. She had said something and that had triggered everything and then she had said something *else*, but this was later on when Alistair was with them. And she tried to say to the nurse: "Alistair is dead". But no words came out. The nurse touched her leg and this was a warm gesture and so

Simone relaxed and then she said to her: “Alistair is dead, and I think I had some part in his murder.”



Richard had entered the university common room and it erupted in its derision of him. Richard had entered the room and he felt like opening fire on it. He wished he was holding a gun. There was something that he needed to get a handle on. Every tendon in his body was rigid. He was self-conscious and this self-consciousness was creating a delay in him: Richard wasn't on time anymore. Instead of just moving, he was thinking about it, and this was dragging him back. He was being held back by something and this was making everyone laugh at him. This *something* needed to be held onto by *him*. He needed to grab a hold of it because as soon as it wormed its way free, he had trouble convincing people that he was *better* than them.



Richard Collatt straightened his tie and took one last look in the bathroom mirror. He needed to head off to the office but he couldn't get past the idea that there was something wrong with his reflection. Something seemed to be missing from the face staring back at him. It was as if his features had shifted somehow in his sleep and now he was out of proportion. Every day, after he had woken up and had gone to the bathroom, he would glance at himself in the mirror but today this glance had developed into a long drawn out stare. Richard stretched the skin on his face with his fingers, he adjusted the tension in his facial muscles and changed his expression again and again until he realised that a lot of time had passed and now he was running late. He rushed to get dressed and he rushed out the door and it still seemed to him that he was moving too slowly. As he walked into the office his hand hit the wall when he tried to grasp the doorknob and close the door behind him and he realised how foolish this must look – how inept. His secretary stared at him and he avoided her gaze. His office seemed larger, somehow, he felt like it dwarfed him and he sat down at his desk and didn't know what to do. He picked up a pen and couldn't help grasping it too hard and when he wrote on the page in front of him his writing was ugly. It was ham-fisted. The keys on his computer seemed to have moved out of place and when the phone rang, he had to lunge for it. After he panted a 'hello' into the receiver, he heard the voice of a business associate in Sydney, she let him know that the deal was going through, the plan of attack had been successful and Richard Collatt felt himself relax. As he washed

his hands in the en-suite of his office he forced himself to look into the mirror again and his features seemed to have fixed back into their regular place. He thought to himself: *I have a sixth sense and no-one can take this away from me* and then it was as if nothing odd had ever happened, nothing had unnerved him – nothing bad had happened to him at all.

Richard had been going through the motions of the most ordinary of days – backwards, forwards, two steps sideways, when he heard a guttural noise which disgusted him. It was a strange gasping choke and it came from a corner of the partitioned office he was striding through. He stopped, stood on his tip-toes and peered over the short white wall. He saw the back of a man sitting in front of a computer, the screen was empty and sweat was pouring down the back of the man's neck.

"Are you alright? If not; go home. If you are – get back to work," said Richard in the light voice he had perfected to complement the gaze he always used on his inferiors. The man wiped his forehead and turned around. Richard was confronted by his brother. Francis looked worried. He looked as though he had a lot on his mind.

"I'm sorry, Richard. I was trying to find your office and I just wanted to sit down for a moment."

And Richard met his brother's embarrassment with a small smile. He asked him what he was doing now and after Francis said he wasn't sure, Richard asked if he wanted to go and get something to eat.

The restaurant made burgers and had an American theme. Francis ordered without looking at the menu. He ordered without looking at the waitress, he kept his head down and then received the meal by removing his hands from the table. Richard stared at him, amused, and Francis caught his eye and flinched. Richard knew that Francis wanted to tell him something, wanted Richard's advice or help and Richard didn't feel the need to make his brother comfortable. He just waited to find out what was wrong.

"I was fired – that's all, really...it took me so long to find this job. I didn't know what to do when they said they had to let me go...I just cleared my desk. Alistair said I should talk to you – that you might help me get something else...something in your company, maybe...even, y'know, if you don't think you can do that, perhaps you might, uh, do something to tide me over for awhile. It doesn't have to be very much.

It's just so expensive to live in the city and I don't know how long it will be until I get another job."

"Uh huh. When did this happen? How much do you want, Frank?"

"I'm not sure...I'm not sure...it's okay. It doesn't matter...it doesn't matter – I knew this would happen."

"...Knew what would happen?"

And Francis had looked embarrassed. He said it didn't mean anything and Richard knew that this was un-true. Francis *knew* something. None of his brothers had ever asked him for money before – how could it be possible that they would know what would happen when they asked for it? Although Francis wasn't looking at him, Richard felt like he was being examined. He felt Francis considering something between them. Then he said:

"I know the reason I was let go from my job: I just made too many mistakes. It was strange though, when the mistakes had been made it was like *deja-vu* or something. I think I always knew it would happen. Things would disappear or suddenly be broken and I had always kind of guessed that this would happen. I always seemed to know when it would happen and what it would happen to – it was like a pattern of events or behaviour was in play. But then, whenever I suspected something was coming, I would think: how do I know this? It seemed crazy and so I never did anything about it and then when it happened, just as I thought it would, it seemed crazier and I had to think to myself that I must have been imagining that I ever thought that it would ever occur because it doesn't make sense – I'm rambling but how could I ever know things like that...I don't know what's going on...I think I might be losing it or something...something is definitely wrong, has always been wrong, has always been out there to get us..."

And Richard said he didn't know. He said he didn't know how to help his brother and he stood up and, without paying the bill, left the restaurant.

Richard walked quickly across the street to his car. As he drove down the street, he was struck by the idea that something bad was coming. Something bad was about to occur but he couldn't think what this might be. He tried not to think about what Francis had

told him. His suspected that his sixth sense was no longer working as it should be. The dread that he always felt was attached to nothing that he could recognise. Richard drove and realised that he was sniffing the air without knowing it. He could hear the snuffles, he could feel the short intake of air as it ran through his nostrils and down his wind-pipe but he hadn't realised that he was doing it. There was a bad smell in the car. It was bad like body odour and he sniffed his armpits, sniffed at the collar of his shirt and he couldn't be sure that it wasn't him. He felt sick at the idea that he could smell so bad without knowing it. He thought that it must be something in his car. He looked in the rear-view mirror to see the back seat but there was nothing there. He pulled open the glove department and saw that it was empty and he breathed through his mouth so he couldn't smell anything until he realised that he could taste the air. It was coating his tongue, infecting his body. He needed to stop driving, to park and figure out what it was but before he could do anything he saw an elderly woman crossing the road and he had an overwhelming desire to run into her.

Around her now was white; just these calm-faced people. Alistair was dead and Simone was surrounded by white coated medics who wanted her to explain what had happened and she was so relieved by their concern that she couldn't seem to blink. She told them about the things that she knew and then felt that she didn't, so she told them again and knew that she wasn't – and the dead body. It was the dead body, you see – she had recognised him and then it had all come back to her and then it went but she didn't go on, didn't explain more because a hand was placed tenderly on her back and a voice started up: a calming voice, but condescending. She grabbed at the hand and pushed it away. She got up as they reached to restrain her, and she slammed her arms down on their pressing limbs and screamed for them to listen to her. She said they had to listen to her because she was scared and she was worried that Richard would kill someone else.



Alistair was going home and it was the first time since he had started riding his bike that afternoon that he thought about this. He was going home, going to see his mother and – although he was the bearer of bad news, bad news that he still hadn't come to terms with – it would be good to see her again. He hoped that she could be with him when he rang Richard and Michael. He turned the corner and realised that he had reached the right street only when he looked up at the street-sign. It was the only thing

around that was familiar and he didn't want to miss anything else so he got off his bike and walked with it. There were only a few houses left on this street. An ugly tower-block of apartments dominated the sky-line and the rest of the street was lined with disused storefronts, closed restaurants and dingy unsanitary delis and take-away shops. He couldn't see or hear anyone inside these shops and no-one else was walking on the street. It was like the place had been abandoned. He reached a familiar looking gate and leaned his bike against the fence. The house looked exactly the same but the garden had been neglected and was out of control. The path to the front door was obscured by weeds. Alistair stepped up to the door and paused before knocking. He heard a rustling in the bushes to the side of him and his neck stiffened. It was only a noise. He closed his eyes and waited for whatever it was to pass and then he decided to open his eyes earlier than was usual for him. A fat grey cat crawled from under a bush and stared at him. It fled and Alistair laughed to himself as he knocked on the door. He laughed and he shook his head and waited to be met by the familiar face of his mother.

Simone lay asleep, sedated, and she was dreaming that masses of something were sidling up to her as she lay, unable to move, on the ground. Things were creeping up to touch her arms and legs, the soles of her feet, and she couldn't move her head to see what they were. She could only stare unblinking ahead. After she had woken up and remembered back to this dream, she thought that the strangest thing about it was that she couldn't actually see anything as she stared upwards – she was staring at nothing because the whole of her attention was focused on the feeling of being surrounded, of being touched. She could remember hearing them come up to her – she could hear crushed leaves, rumpled dirt – wheezing tracks on the ground. There was a sliding up of soft to touch; a brush at her neck and the ever-so-slight disturbance of the hairs on her arm. She could hear sounds from further back whilst the ones closest to her touched her and moved away, touched her and moved away and then they slid across her, on top of her; nuzzling into her hair. They were bodies; dead bodies and they had clambered on top of her until she screamed herself awake.

Richard opened the door and told Alistair that their mother no longer lived there. Alistair walked inside and noticed that the air smelled bad, like a place that had been shut up too long and he wanted to open a window. Richard did not look well. His left eye was twitching. Whenever Alistair looked at him, half of his brother's face quavered and then retracted back into place. He decided not to talk to him about Francis. It seemed to him that Richard already knew and was not handling it well. He was looking

around all the time and Alistair wanted to tell him that he didn't think anything could be there. The house was empty. He had to think of a way to calm his brother down, to focus his attention. He needed Richard to get a hold of himself.

And Richard was ready. He was ready when Alistair's eyes dropped and he asked about the smell. He was ready as Alistair looked towards the back room; gaze lingering, and Richard imagined the hair in Alistair's nostrils quiver as he smelled the foul air and tried to determine what it was. Alistair said: "It smells like something dead." And Richard thought: *that something is you*, and he laughed to himself as his brother turned his nose upwards and sniffed once and then twice and again.

Alistair had always wondered about both of his younger brothers' paranoia. He could never convince either of them that things usually work out for the best. He would tell them that it was just the way that you looked at things. Alistair had always called Michael a 'glass-half-empty' kind-of-guy and Michael had always responded that if his brother got him a beer he would have more good feeling than a sober man could ever think possible. And Alistair knew that this wasn't true. After a stint of too much drinking, Michael would often ring Alistair when he got home. He would ring and then he would ramble and grunt and run through the list of reasons why he believed that someone was out to get him. At the end of this list, Alistair would tell Michael that it was unrealistic to think that anyone could ever be that focussed on what he did. And Michael would laugh after he said this. He would laugh but this laughter was a grim chortle. It would come from the back of Michael's throat and the words that he would say next would be wet from excess spit and he would swallow and then say again:

"Fear isn't just a feeling, a part of who we are but it's a real person, did you know that? Did you? Does everyone know that?"

Richard sucked in a breath and it seemed to Alistair that he didn't breathe out before he walked out of the kitchen. Alistair heard him walk down the hall and then turn a key to unlock a door. After this door was opened he heard some shuffling noises and then the sound of something large being dragged. He saw Richard's back turn into the room and Richard's hands were holding a pair of legs, just above the shoes. Alistair saw that a body was being dragged into the kitchen and he stepped forward, clutched onto the back of a chair and had the sinking feeling that, somehow, Richard had gotten a hold of Francis's body. But these weren't the legs of someone dead. This body was alive, it

was writhing, trying to pull itself out of Richard's grip and he dragged it further into the room and Alistair saw that it was Simone. A gag was covering half her face but he recognised her hair, her eyes and then her voice as she wrestled her mouth around the gag and spat out:

"He thinks that someone's been fucking with him!"

And Alistair didn't have the chance to ask who. He frowned and looked behind and then a bullet crushed the bone of his temple. Richard had pulled the gun from his pocket and shot him and then he dragged his brother's body from the room.

Simone woke up alone. Her head was pressed against the table and she rubbed hard against the spot as she imagined a red mark from blood settling under her skin. Her body ached from too much time in the small wooden chair and the dripping tap seemed monstrous. She wondered how many days she'd been sitting there – it seemed to her like weeks but she calculated that it had been less than three days. Less than three days of being told that she knew who was doing it when she didn't even know what *it* was. *It* got into her brain, *it* muddled her thoughts, *it* confused her. It had taken on a life of its own and she had even thought about naming it. It would be "Robert" and she giggled. "Robert" would be far more approachable than Casper the Friendly Ghost. "Robert" would have had a hard life, a difficult childhood – but he would have taken steps to overcome it. He would have had his time; he would have buried his demons and gotten over it. He would be the better person for it. For *what*? She thought, and this confused her enough for her to name it and she giggled and thought about how many of these *it* children she could send out in the world. She would have an army of *its*, doing their best, making the world a better place and she remembered again the body in the next room and the *its* tumbled on top of her. They clambered at her hair, put their fingers up her nose, in her mouth and she closed her eyes so they couldn't poke into them. There was a cat outside – she sometimes heard it mewling – she suspected that it was being fed by someone and that this was why it kept coming back. It was waiting to be taken care of, waiting to be stroked by a kind and loving hand, and she was glad that there was still that response somewhere. Against all odds.

Simone stood in front of the hospital and dialled the number again. Michael had definitely left the phone off the hook. Alistair could come out at any moment and she had no idea what to say to him. She felt like she had put her foot in it. Alistair was

upset that she thought he saw someone there – saw someone push Francis. She pondered on why this was more alarming than Francis killing himself when she saw a red car manoeuvre through the toll-booth and drive up towards her. She recognised Richard. He rolled down the window after he stopped in front of her and she reached down to talk to him and then saw the gun in his lap. He fingered it and she dropped the phone and he told her to get inside. It seemed odd to her that she sat down and put on her seat-belt, it was like the gun had no meaning for her. She said: “It’s amazing that you knew to come here.” And this made him tighten his grip and he pulled the gun up to the steering wheel as he drove. There was a pause before he told her that he had a feeling that something was going wrong and then he had become curious about what this feeling could mean. He said that it was bothering him. And Simone said: “No-one pushed Francis. How could there have been anyone there when no-one else was actually seen!” And Richard stiffened as Simone wondered at what she had just said. She didn’t understand why she had needed to say this to him but then she thought that the reason must have been *woman’s intuition* because it seemed *right*, somehow. It was like the words came from deep inside her; they were a force to be reckoned with; a stranger after her own heart and she didn’t have the perspective to see it differently. They were words that she realised only much later on were beyond her better judgement. At that moment they seemed logical. They seemed like *the way of the world*, they were common sense and there was nothing about what she said next that seemed strange beyond the overwhelming urge she had to say it to him:

“It’s easy to blow things out of proportion – to make something up so that you don’t have to be confronted with what’s actually been going on. Nobody pushed Francis and you shouldn’t think that anybody did. Don’t you see? Every boy deserves a second chance....”

And Simone was struck by something. *Something* made itself clear to her and then flittered away but she felt compassion and it welled inside her, it touched her heart and then touched her hand and Simone reached up and rubbed her eyes and wanted Richard to know what she saw in him:

“I think you are who you are because your mother didn’t love you. She loved someone else much better and he has always had the upper hand with you. Your strength has been turned against you and it eats you up because he knows what triggers that response in you. He’s known how to turn you inside out ever since your mother told him how to. She has always known what has been best for you.” And Richard jerked around to look at her. He wondered who she was talking about and he felt scared. The

blare of a car horn turned his attention back to the road and he concentrated on driving. The gun was clutched between the steering wheel and his palm and Richard's mouth was dry and so he swallowed. He pressed down on the clutch and changed gears and felt a sensation in his stomach that he wanted to pummel and grab onto. It had eyes, a nose, a mouth and a voice that spoke to him. It said: *I know that you don't mean what you do. I know that you can't help it.* And Richard felt the urge to stop the car and let Simone out. He felt the urge to drive back to his place and carry on as normal by *taking care* with everything he did but he fought this instinct. He was going to carry *something else* through. The gun gave him strength. It was like an extra part of him – a brand new development. He *knew* that he was meant to pick up Simone so she could say what she had just said to him but now he wanted more than just this revelation. He wanted to push the situation to a place that *the compulsion* didn't want it to go and he stroked the gun and felt the urge to visit his mother. He wanted her to see him with it. He wanted to give her a surprise and Richard blinked. He blinked once and then twice and again as he realised that *the compulsion* to pick Simone up that morning hadn't involved the desire to bring a gun. This was something that had been his very own decision.

Labyrinthine Modes in Dead Man and *The Castle* by Franz Kafka

Introduction

There were a number of different avenues that I could have taken in writing an exegesis based on Dead Man, such as focusing on the novella's psychoanalytic subtext (in terms of its play on the notion of neurosis) or the theme of punishment and control. I have decided not to focus too heavily on the motivations of the characters as I believe they are not the main force behind the trajectory of the novella. Instead, I have decided to focus on the ideas behind the structure of the story and the notion that Dead Man is a labyrinthine text and that *The Castle* (1930) by Franz Kafka is also labyrinthine.

A labyrinth is a structure that obstructs direction. Physical labyrinths or mazes are composed of pathways that subvert the 'fact' that paths are designed to be followed with a direction or location in mind: traversing a regular path is to go from one point to another; the path itself is rudimentary. Labyrinths obscure the destination with the complexity of the path, therefore to develop an understanding of the path is the priority and the destination is lost. Dead Man is a novella with a non-linear structure that uses the juxtapositioning of vignettes of narrative to form a trajectory. This structure creates an interactive narrative in the sense that the story requires navigation. In focussing on the trajectory I do not want to focus on the mechanics of the work, which can mostly be attributed to a sense of pace and rhythm, but the ideas behind this format. A linear narrative functions by having the reality of our experience of the world as a reference while a fragmented narrative is more 'interactive'. Readers need to 'map' their progress through the narrative; they need to orient themselves. *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) requires a similar commitment from readers although its labyrinthine structure is different to Dead Man because it is linear. *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) is labyrinthine because the sense of time and the significance of the events in the story are skewed. Both *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) and Dead Man cannot be read without an awareness of the structural peculiarities of the narrative and although these structures are not similar, they both require navigation and can be categorised as 'labyrinthine narratives'.

Juxtapositions and Labyrinths

It was in the earliest stages of writing Dead Man that I realised its non-linear structure was labyrinthine. It was never an intention of mine to write it this way and this form can be attributed to the influence of film and television editing whereby cutting

techniques are used as a tool for creating the exposition. This technique is reliant on visual indicators that allow the trajectory of the story to be cogent and not disorient the viewer. Known as 'juxtapositions' they are the arrangement of settings that create comparison, contrast, suspense, rhetorical effect or character development. The juxtapositions in Dead Man are used similarly to those in film but have a slightly different effect. They provide clues to the narrative but without the immediacy of the visual medium of film; these clues are more involved and require more of a reader. The story dips in and out of past moments, past perspectives, all of which compel the reader into creating a dialogue with the text as he/she determines their ever-changing location in it.

Non-linear narratives require interaction because they challenge a reader's familiar perceptions. To deny time is to deny the rules of the concept behind it: that there is always a past, present and future. This denial of our concept of time is therefore a denial of the function of history: a denial of patriarchy. This subversion of time equates to a challenge to the preconceptions of narrative structure. A narrative 'should' have a logical progression. It should mirror our concept of 'life's trajectory' by having a beginning, middle and end. Although the narrative in Dead Man finishes on the last page, the arc of the story is skewed and the actual 'end' of the story occurs three-quarters of the way through. This structure subverts patriarchal notions of narrative structure. Mirroring this challenge is the plot of Dead Man in which the story's initial protagonist, Maria, has usurped 'regular' notions of care-giving because she is an elusive presence and is not a nurturing parent who is involved in her children's lives. For them, her presence is determined by its lack thereof; by her neglect of them and also by her decision to recruit a boy to haunt their lives and 'watch over them' for her. Unbeknownst to them, her aim is to instil a presence in their lives that will allow them to manifest the neurosis she believes that they need to keep them 'safe' as it will subdue their 'fearlessness'. The boy that she has recruited for the task of watching over them makes them feel watched, although they can't see him, and because they can't see who they are being watched by but 'sense' someone there, they watch themselves in a panopticon-like system of control and punishment (Foucault, 1975, p.195). Their mother is punishing them for their childhood in which they were reckless and reminded her of her husband, their father, whom she blames for her disappointments in life. In denying her sons their masculine nature by asserting that it is 'bad' and needs to be managed, Maria denies them their birthright, their place in the 'order of things'. By using the phrase 'order of things', I am drawing on Foucault's notion of cultural codes:

The fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception its exchanges, its techniques its values, the hierarchy of its practices – establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. (Foucault, 1977, p.xx)

Dead Man positions the reader in a winding narrative that could be described as labyrinthine. It turns backwards and forwards between past and present and between the different points of view of the characters. It is without an established ‘order of things’ and so the reader’s place in the narrative has to be constantly located and determined in the continuous disruptions in time and place. Non-linearity subverts our assumptions about the predominance of ‘history’ and the evolution of a narrative as there isn’t a ‘realistic’ perception of time. It subverts our ideas of progress and development even though the juxtapositions in Dead Man could be considered a more ‘realistic’ representation of human experience. Dead Man dips between different periods in the time-lines of the character’s lives which is indicative of the fact that a person’s present and their future is always influenced by their past (Crydermen, 2000).

Bildungsromans and the Predominance of Time

A Bildungsroman is a narrative that charts a character’s development within the context of a defined social order. It is a quest narrative that charts a character’s search for meaningful existence. Its ‘quest-like’ attributes are located in the conflict, or hurdles, that the ‘hero’ has to overcome as their needs and desires are not in synchronicity with the values that are determined by ‘society’. The quest is rendered successful when this conflict is resolved and the ‘hero’ finds their place in the ‘order of things’. Both Dead Man and *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) are antithetical to the form and intent of a Bildungsroman. It could be argued that in Dead Man the non-linearity of the narrative challenges the evolution of character through the traditional conception of history and yet the non-heroic outcomes of the characters may in a sense confirm the need for such linearity: the characters’ belief in the ‘emerging triumphant’ construction of the Bildungsroman.

The Castle (Kafka, 1930), which, although it is unlike Dead Man in that it is linear, still does not obey the rules that govern our conception of time as daytime in the story is fleeting and night-time is sudden and lengthy. As with Dead Man, it is a story that doesn’t have a ‘neat’ or regular resolution. A Bildungsroman as Patricia Tobin notes in *Time and the Novel* (1978, p.5) is a narrative that anticipates its ending because everything that happens in the story develops towards the conclusion because this

conclusion is always in sight. It is a narrative in which our concept of the time-line of life mirrors the shape of the story. If our concept of time is linear then the realistic novel conforms to and confirms a 'common sense of life' (Tobin, 1978, p.5). A Bildungsroman is a coming of age novel that gratifies the sense that human life is purposeful because it is meaningful. Dead Man is a story in which the male protagonists' purpose or place in life is taken away and they struggle, and ultimately fail, to create meaning for themselves while Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1930) is a novel in which time and the motivations and character of the protagonist 'K.' are skewed and therefore frustrate the desire for meaning that a reader expects will be fulfilled.

In her book, *Time and the Novel*, (1978) Patricia Dreschel Tobin discusses the concept of time and how this relates to language or meaning. She describes time as being similar to the notion of genealogy whereby one event is the catalyst for another or circumstance 'gives birth' (Tobin, 1978, p.6) to other circumstances. She suggests that the linearity of genealogic descent and the destiny inherent in realistic narratives like Bildungsromans are similar to the structure of language itself as 'sequences imply their own terminations, and closure can be traced back to origin' (Tobin, 1978, p.9). Essentially, Tobin argues that language and time are patriarchal but it is useful to draw from this theory as her reinterpretation of time and language is transposed into familial terms – terms which are pertinent to the themes of Bildungsromans. In *Time and the Novel* (1978) Tobin describes the sentence as a 'family of words' (Tobin, 1978 p.18), and so 'both life and thought are delivered to us with a paternal guarantee of their legitimacy' (Tobin, 1978 p.18). Patriarchy asserts its order and narrative structures such as Bildungsromans declare and then follow through with their intentions and are irrefutably legitimate because they conform to the structure of language and therefore consciousness because they are the 'wedding' of a 'mimetic, verbal intention to time.' (Said, 1975, p.143)

Roland Barthes determined mastery of the sentence as 'cultural pleasure':

Linguistics has always believed in the sentence and the dignity of its predictive syntax, as the form of a logic, a rationality. The sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions. It is always obliged to end; in fact, it is the power of completion that defines sentence mastery. It is a cultural pleasure. The law of closure, a compulsive idealization, is intolerant of fragmentation and imperfection. (Barthes, 1975, pp.49-50)

If cultural pleasure is determined by an adherence to patriarchy then both Dead Man and *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) subvert the assumptions that can be made from the above quote. In both texts, time begins without the end in sight. In Dead Man the phenomenon of 'the ending' is subverted as its location is not in the 'regular' position at the end of the narrative and *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) is without a conclusion as Kafka never finished writing this novel (Brod, 1948, p.3). The myth surrounding Kafka is that he was at odds with the society he lived in; he was displaced and with this displacement in mind there is a view to understand the peculiarly timeless sense of linearity he achieved in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930).

A Brief Biography of Kafka

Death of the father would deprive literature of many of its pleasures. If there is no longer a father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflict with the law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred? Today, we dismiss Oedipus and narrate at one and the same time: we no longer love, we no longer fear, we no longer narrate. As fiction, Oedipus was at least good for something: to make good novels, to tell good stories. (Barthes, 1975, p.47)

In the above quote Barthes explains the powerful force of 'The Father' in storytelling. This father is the face of patriarchy or the 'order-of-things' – the object that conflict can be directed against. Kafka had a difficult relationship with his father (Fischer, 2006) and his place in the 'order of things' as described in his diaries (1910-1923) is as ambiguous and elusive as his work is. Jorge Louis Borges, the Argentine writer with a fascination for literary labyrinths, believed that Kafka had few literary precursors (Borges, 1962, p.234). If we accept this claim, there can be no 'answers' for Kafka's work in the sphere of his literary background. Perhaps he had no sense of 'cultural pleasure' (Barthes, 1975, pp.49-50) in the literature that was available to him. To lack a sense of 'cultural pleasure' (Barthes, 1975, pp.49-50) is to, perhaps, have felt alienated from it and the roots of alienation can be sourced back to a person's background, the biographical details, the 'anti-Bildungsroman' of Kafka's life.

Born in July, 1883, (Hamilton, 1974, p.3) Franz Kafka was the first of six children and he spent the earliest part of his life in a ghetto in Prague. (Hamilton, 1974,

p.3) His family were not close and he was alienated from them as well as from the general society of Prague as he was part of the Jewish minority (litweb, 2006). It is a part of Kafka's mythology that he had a poor relationship with his father. This element of Kafka's history is nearly always discussed when any analysis of his work is undertaken. His father, Hermann Kafka, became wealthy and sent Franz to a middle class school that was meant to help him assimilate into the German-speaking upper class and lose his Czech-speaking, Jewish origins (Nervi, 2005). It is clear from Kafka's diaries (1910-1923) that his father was a tyrant and that his relationship with him was a constant source of angst. When a person's earliest experiences are formed by an over-bearing, over-ruling male figure, the expectations are that a person would either conform to the expectations that have been established for him or to revolt against them. It is not apparent in any of the biographical detail recorded about Kafka's life that he could ever have been declared a bohemian. The most quantifiable aspects of Kafka's day-to-day existence were as unremarkable as his writing is not. In 1901, he started studying law at the University of Prague (Hamilton, 1974, p.4). In 1906, he received a doctorate in jurisprudence and gained a position in his uncle's law office as a clerk (Hamilton, 1974, p.4). After this he worked for 22 years in a part-time semi-governmental position in a Workmen's Accident Insurance Company until tuberculosis forced him to resign in 1922 (Hamilton, 1974, p.4). In a report on his work at the company his Supervisor made the judgement that: 'Dr Kafka is an eminent worker and possesses great talent and ambition' (Hamilton, 1974, p.4). This statement gives the impression that Kafka 'fitted in' to the position that the society in which he lived allowed him when the subtext of his writing gives exactly the opposite impression – of protagonists who are always oppressed and misunderstood.

An area in which he strayed from what was expected of him – and where he revolted against his father's dogma – was religion. In pulling his family out of the ghetto and into middle-class Prague society (Nervi, 2005), Hermann Kafka denied their Jewishness and so Kafka developed ties to his faith only when he reached adulthood and eventually married a woman of orthodox faith (litweb, 2005). Religion and family can form the fundament to a person's character in terms of their function of establishing a foundation of ideals and so Kafka must have experienced a degree of conflict between the cultural and religious ideas of his childhood and those he espoused as an adult. This may be a key to understanding his work. When he pondered on how much he had in common with other Jews or with Jewishness in general he came to the conclusion that: 'I have hardly anything in common with myself' (Greenberg, 1965, p.25). This elusive quote is an indicator of how alienated Kafka felt in the 'order of things' because it seems as though he could not adequately understand himself and

therefore he would not have been able to recognise a place for himself in the society in which he lived. He was denied religion at a young age and had a difficult relationship with his family – his father in particular – and so his place in the ‘order of things’ would always have been provisional. This ‘order’ and the elusiveness Kafka confronted when faced by it is elucidated by the following passage from his diaries (1910-1923) which has labyrinthine qualities in the images it evokes and describes.

Unease because my life so far has been a marching on the spot, at most a development only in the sense that a tooth undergoes one as it becomes hollow and rots. For my part there was not the slightest leading of my life, none that stood the test. It was as if, like any other human being, I had been given the centre of a circle, and as if, like any other human being, I then had to walk along the decisive radius and then trace a nice circle. Instead of which I constantly started out along a radius but was forced repeatedly to break it off as soon as I had begun. (Examples: piano, violin, languages, German studies, anti-Zionism, Zionism, Hebrew, gardening, carpentry, literature, attempts at marriage, my own flat.) The middle of the imaginary circle is full of jagged beginnings of radii, there is no more room for another attempt, no room means age, weak nerves, and no further attempt means the end. If ever I carried the radius a bit further than usual, in my law studies, for example, or the engagements, everything was that much worse rather than better. (Spiers and Sandberg, 1997, p.16)

Allegory and Dreams

Allegories are stories that are imbued with heavy symbolism which reveals moral meaning. They are the mainstay of religion and the purpose and message of an allegory is intended to be unambiguous. They are examples of the heavy hand of the ‘order of things’, and they are the antithesis of dreaming. The experiences of ‘K.’ in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) are similar to those found in dreams where order is ambivalent and yet the desire for order is omnipresent which is described very well in the following quote:

The non-self comes before the self; geometry before the spirit. (Groethuysen, 1946, p.400)

The above quote is from 'The Endless Labyrinth'. This essay explores the relationship between Kafka, dreaming and the nature of a labyrinthine experience. Groethuysen suggests that only order enables the absurd and without a sense of the absurd we are unable to argue effectively (1946, p.399). When we dream, there is no order and no sense of absurdity and so there is no sense of validity or otherwise to our stance when we try and engage in an argument (Groethuysen, 1946, p.399). Everything that happens to us is connected and linked and everything seems both logical and incomprehensible (Groethuysen, 1946, p.400). There is no line of reasoning that enables your search for 'The Law', and there is no empty space, no refuge, from this anxiety (Groethuysen, 1946, p.400). In *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) time lurches forward into sudden nightfall and night-time is when the bureaucracy of the Castle is at its most active. K. seeks to discover truth from the workings of this bureaucracy but he always seems to be locked out of any authentic knowledge. *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) reveals a world in which 'The Law', or truth has been abandoned; a world in which history has come to an end. Time is static and unable to be gauged 'properly' and events lack narrative significance and become problems. Truth has vanished and left anxiety in its place. Perhaps Kafka's work was never written to be 'understood' as little as the labyrinthine nature of dreaming can be mastered.

To be trapped in a labyrinth is to be entrapped in a mechanism that renders you powerless. The usual modes and instincts that determine direction become useless as the paths inside a labyrinth are constructed to enforce a new code of behaviour; a code that is established only to be changed again. Travellers in a labyrinth could determine that the only way that they can stop moving in circles and arriving back at the place from which they had started, is to make only left turns and so this theory is followed through and progress is made until one final left turn is made and they are confronted by a dead-end. To traverse through a labyrinth would be similar to having a conversation with a person who speaks a different language to you, or, perhaps a more appropriate analogy would be the situation of trying to gain information from someone who is trying to hide that information from you. They withhold what you want or need to know but this isn't something that you can feel certain about and so you become entrenched in the ambivalence of the situation; in the smoke and mirrors of deception. Ambivalence is the feeling of being affected by something that you 'can't put a finger on'. When you think you have the answer the situation makes you unsure again and you are on a never-ending quest to resolve the predicament that you have found yourself in.

There are some obvious parallels between *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930), Dead Man and the phenomenon of a labyrinth. As has been suggested, Dead Man and *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) are quest-like but these are non-heroic quests as the destinations are never securely reached and the arcs of the stories remain elusive. At the end of Dead Man a sense of clarity is established as to the whereabouts of an invisible protagonist: a character that exists only in the form of suggestion, but the fact that he is never revealed in any physical form adds to the 'smoke and mirrors' or ambivalence of the narrative. The enigma of this character helps drive the labyrinthine composition of the narrative. The protagonist in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930), K., has been hired to travel to a village to carry out surveying work for the Count who resides in the castle at the centre of the village. K. never reaches the castle. His route is obfuscated by the villagers' ambivalence towards him whenever he seeks their help. The reader doubts K. as much as they doubt the intentions of the other characters in the story as it is not clear who he is or what his intentions are because he often contradicts himself. The narrative of *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) is misleading and it seems as though Kafka, by writing it in this way, is trying to communicate something other than what he is *telling* us. K.'s character is never established; the reader cannot 'pin him down'. He is as elusive as the invisible and never fully realised character in Dead Man.

The characters in Dead Man are seeking to find salvation – or, at least, more rational explanations – for their behaviour but this explanation is never forthcoming and they remain 'lost' in the story. *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) has a similar theme. K. is summoned by the Count of the castle to work as a land surveyor so he enters the village surrounding the castle believing (or so it appears) that his position is assured. Every advance he makes to reach the castle and put this position to use is thwarted. The passages for K. are always dead-ends and he never reaches his salvation. His position at the castle – and so his character – seems tenuous, irredeemable because the reader wonders what is 'wrong' with K. that this journey should be so difficult. The society he has entered into, for the most part, rejects him and so we, as readers, wonder if we should too. We wonder what it is about this man that so much misfortune befalls him. What do the other characters recognise in K. that the reader doesn't have access to? Where is the order that we can align our perceptions to which would allow us to recognise the trajectory of the story and therefore recognise its end?

Modes of a Labyrinth

It is useful to dissect the labyrinthine modes that are utilised in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930). These are the tools with which Kafka created the illusion of a sub-text or puzzle. The narrative is elusive and encourages close examination and yet any examination of the text reveals little and so the narrative is 'unsolveable'. Kafka refers to himself by using the first letter of his own name to name the character, K.. Readers come to the conclusion that 'K.' refers to 'Kafka' only because no other name for the character is given. Following Derrida (1998, p.93), K. is a signifier of the signified; the signified being 'Kafka'. With no other referent in *The Castle* that could be attributed to the signifier 'K.', there is some security between signifier and signified. Signifiers and signifieds, or the word and idea in the reader's mind (Derrida, 1998, p.93), are often ambiguous in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) and readers are confronted by this lack of clarity. A signifier cannot be ambiguous in itself but it can when it is made to slip away from the signified when their relationship becomes unstable (Derrida, 1998, p.90). Meaning is lost but the process or drive of signifiers establishing a signified is active and so meaning tries to redeem itself again by the 'branching out' of a signifier across a wider perimeter. A signifier can accrue a number of signifieds and in doing so it makes redundant the possibility of stable signification (Derrida, 1998, p.93); meaning is not concrete and a state of ambiguity ensues which Derrida labels as 'differance'. This sounds similar to but is different from the way that metaphors work. According to Derrida (1998, p.93), language could be described as functioning in the same way that metaphors do because the play of signifiers remove language from its declarative intention and in this removal a dichotomy is present which always privileges one aspect over another eg. presence over absence.

If signifiers act as we understand metaphors do, then metaphors themselves are even further removed from the intention and the 'effect' of language. They replace the literal meaning with a chain of possibilities.

Metaphor...is determined by philosophy as a provisional loss of meaning, an economy of the proper without irreparable damage, a certainly inevitable detour, but also a history with its sight set on, and within the horizon of, the circular reappropriation of literal, proper meaning. (Derrida, 1985, p.207)

This chain is different to the ambiguity Kafka creates in *The Castle* (1930). Instead of a line that is developed away from the original signifier and loops back again, which is the effect of metaphor, ambiguity branches out close to the signifier and so the signifier always remains in sight – its effects or signified, though, are obscured. There is no

straightforward meaning that can be made from the signifiers in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930), but there is also very little of the 'long haul' to meaning that occurs with metaphor because meaning is often just not established. There is no sustained satisfaction for the reader because signifiers have the potential to 'land' but are then made redundant by a conflicting signifier and so on. They are not dismissed but they stay, they settle and they build up.

The following sentence is false.

The preceding sentence is true.

(Hofstadter, 1979, p.21)

The above statements work in a similar way to *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930). They are neither true nor false and are known as an 'Epimenides's paradox', or 'liar's paradox' and they are derived from an ancient statement from a Cretan called Epimenides who said that, "All Cretans are liars" (Hofstadter, 1979, p. 25). This paradox is effective as the initial signifier, the initial reaction is to have found sense just before the conflicting signifier destabilises it and then the first signifier comes into focus again as we retrace our steps to see what had happened. This process is mesmerising and forms a loop. This happens because the signifiers seem so simple, so straightforward because they are when they work alone but together they lose the simplicity of their premise. In their 'un-logic' there seems to be a logic at play. Zeno's paradox is the most well-known paradox and has its place, in its various forms, in the annals of philosophy as a conundrum alluding to the infinite. In its original form, as proposed by an ancient thinker called Zeno of Elea, the paradox is composed like this:

Movement is impossible for the moving object must cover half of the distance in order to reach its destination, and before reaching the half, half of the half, and before half of the half, half of the half of the half, and before... (Borges, 1968, p.238)

To get the best sense of this paradox is to hear it in its different forms as Borges demonstrated in his essay: 'Avatars of the Tortoise' (1968). According to Borges, a century after Zeno concocted this paradox, the Chinese sophist Hui Tzu determined that a staff cut into two pieces again and again has no end. There is the series: $10 + 1 + 1/10 + 1/100 + 1/1000 + 1/10000 + \dots$ (ad infinitum), and there is also the example of William James's form of the paradox in which he claims fourteen minutes can never pass because seven have to pass first and before this seven, three and a half and then

before three and a half, one and three quarters and so on (Borges, 1968, p.239). The signifiers of each of these forms of the same paradox create the same overall effect which is the inverted notion of movement and the abandoning of 'common-sense'. To create this effect, the signifiers are initially 'bounced back' from their 'common-sense' signified until the skewed pattern of time and movement becomes established and a sense of signification takes place. Although an abandoning of common-sense is what is required of the reader in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) signification rarely occurs and can only be established when considering the novel as a whole and determining that its structure is labyrinthine. In Borges essay 'Kafka and his Precursors' (1968, p.234), he writes that he finally discovered some precursors to *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) in Zeno's paradox. K. can never reach the castle because he is always covering half the distance and he is covering half the distance until infinity. There is no end in sight and so his quest is a labyrinth of corners and dead-ends – the more he travels the smaller the distance he covers to infinity and the impossibility of his quest to end.

Dead Man also questions the assumption that a story could or should have a clear sense of an ending. Some degree of resolution is established but the narrative concludes in the middle of the last quarter of the time-frame. This 'ending' does not conform to the 'reality of time' and so it lacks the signified of an 'actual' end. The narrative ends but the reader moves backwards through the events that have taken place and so the story continues on. In *The Logic of Sense* (1990), Gilles Deleuze proclaims in the introduction that 'sense is a nonexisting entity' (1990, p.xiii) and to understand this is to understand non-sense, or where language works beyond good sense/common sense. 'Becoming' is a process which negates the present. Deleuze articulates that 'becoming' means that there is no time-line, there is no past and no future because neither of these are distinct and yet they still exist. It is a paradox and paradoxes are considered absurd because they affirm that two states that are opposite in sense and/or direction can exist in the one sign at the same time (Deleuze, 1990, p.2). Deleuze refers to Plato in his statement that:

'Hotter' never stops where it is but is always going a point further, and the same applies to 'colder', whereas definite quality is something that has stopped going on and is fixed...the younger becoming older than the older, the older becoming younger than the younger—but they can never finally become so; if they did they would no longer be becoming, but would be so. (Deleuze, 1990, p.2)

'Becoming', suggests Deleuze, is the paradox of 'infinite identity' (1990, p.2). Such a paradox questions the assumptions inherent in patriarchal or 'everyday' thinking because it eludes the present and contains both senses and directions at the same time. It is cause and effect, future and past, active and passive. It is ambiguity and ambivalence. When 'good sense' prevails, signs and their signifiers and referents retain their proper place (Deleuze, 1990, p.1). Nouns and adjectives connect and the world branches out accordingly. But when these things are made to lack their assumed (denotative) currency, when their position is made hazy by the force of surrounding events which push and pull them out of shape, identity becomes lost. It is apt that when the 'dead man' of the title of the novella is revealed his position as a 'dead man' is still not assured. Alistair's death happens after his dead body has been assumed by the reader not to be his as he is still alive in the non-linear narrative and so the signifiers of his state do not establish their proper meaning and Alistair rotates in a position of 'becoming' dead. It is also apt in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) that K. has no full name and the position he offers of himself as land surveyor is made redundant not by his or anyone else's denial but by the force of events that do not have their basis in 'good sense'. His uncertainty or ambivalence to what is happening structures the events and he follows the double direction (by double direction I mean what is *actually* happening and K.'s perception of the events, which in the story lack any differentiation) that this creates. 'Good sense' has been destroyed by the paradoxes that skew his sense of perspective and in skewing this – which is his sense of direction in the story – they sabotage his identity and the reader is left with K.; a character without a name and without a clear sense of motivation for his actions because the reader is never assured of the position he claims to have as a land-surveyor for the village.

K. had reported his arrival, and only after that, as the letter pointed out, had he known that he was engaged. (Kafka, 1930, p.30)

To demonstrate the labyrinthine ambiguity of *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930), I will focus on just one small section (pp. 23-30) at the start of the second chapter. In this section it has been established that K. is a land-surveyor and he wishes to get to the castle but so far has only managed to traverse a short way through the village in which the castle is situated. The first paragraph describes K. coming back to the inn at which he first arrived after time spent in the village trying to reach the castle. He had left in the morning and is surprised to see darkness settling when he arrived. It seemed to him that he had only been gone 'an hour or two'. There has been a loss of time; time and space are no longer in tandem and so nothing is 'right'. The situation is ambiguous because

the signifiers created from 'time' have lost their signified with him. Memory is also not functioning as it should; K. enters the inn and is greeted by the landlord whom he has met before. He also meets two men whom he had previously seen walking from the castle; the castle which K. hopes to enter and never will. The landlord introduces these two men as K.'s 'old' assistants whom he had been expecting. K. seems to accept this when it is clear that he has met them only once before.

'It's your assistants,' corroborated the landlord in a low voice. 'What?' said K., 'are you my old assistants whom I told to follow me and whom I am expecting?' They answered in the affirmative. 'That's good,' observed K. after a short pause. 'I'm glad you've come.' 'Well,' he said, after another pause, 'you've come very late, you're very slack.' 'It was a long way to come,' said one of them. 'A long way?' repeated K., 'but I met you just now coming from the Castle.' 'Yes,' said they without further explanation. 'Where is the apparatus?' asked K. 'We haven't any,' said they. 'The apparatus I gave you?' said K. 'We haven't any,' they reiterated. 'Oh, you are fine fellows!' said K., 'do you know anything about surveying?' 'No,' said they. 'But if you are my old assistants you must know something about it?' said K. They made no reply. 'Well, come in,' said K., pushing them before him into the house. (Kafka, 1969, p.24)

From this excerpt, the reader determines that there is duplicity at work between the assistants and K. but that K. is agreeable to this duplicity. In fact it does not seem to surprise him and the assistants make no effort to convince him of their position as his 'old' assistants. The pauses that K. undertakes indicate a consideration of the situation and a lack of ease but they do not evince the expected dismay that could be considered the usual reaction to such a situation. K. assumes a complicity in a situation which it seems he does not understand, and so the reader is enticed to wonder at the perspective that K. is developing. The bureaucracy of the castle and the villagers seem to have an agenda which is not accessible to K. and K.'s character cannot be 'pinned down' by a reader. The signifiers of the castle do not have a clear signified and K. is interpreting these signifiers according to a point of view which is not apparent and so the information that the reader has to process is inaccessible and we are as lost as K. appears to be in the novel. We go down into the multi-layered labyrinth of *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930), and the exit is not in sight.

In Dead Man a similar premise occurs when Michael confronts Simone about a letter he found. This letter seems banal in its ordinariness but Michael believes it to be suspicious; no-one at the office from which it was sent authorised its delivery, but the information it contains is correct. The information in the letter is questionable because of its obscure source. This obscurity becomes the signifier and so the signified is obscure also. Suspicion causes this obscurity to transform into elusiveness and this elusiveness, by definition, carries a weight of potential meaning. The signifiers of this letter have expanded beyond its most obvious and banal intention and even the evidence of Simone's name scrawled 'suspiciously' on the envelope is given a banal reason (she was absent-mindedly 'doodling' as she talked on the phone). The 'chain of signification' is apparently endless.

After K.'s interactions with his 'old' assistants in *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930), he is sent a letter from the Chief of the Department that hired him. This letter welcomes him into his position in the village, directs K. to anyone who could offer him assistance and direction and states that the chief himself will endeavour to keep an eye on how he is going. It is a letter that is succinct and appears unremarkable:

My dear Sir, As you know, you have been engaged for the Count's service. Your immediate superior is the Superintendent of the village, who will give you all particulars about your work and the terms of your employment, and to whom you are responsible. I myself, however, will try not to lose sight of you. Barnabas, the bearer of this letter, will report himself to you from time to time to learn your wishes and communicate them to me. You will find me always ready to oblige you, in so far as that is possible. I desire my workers to be contented.
(Kafka, 1930, p.28)

From this letter, K. conjures up a multitude of different meanings. He decides that the letter is offering him a choice between two directions as it asserts that he has a position that, so far, his experiences in the village have denied. This letter gives him the impression that he is 'a free man whose independence was recognised' (Kafka, 1930, p.29) in some parts and a minor employee in others when it seems to the reader that neither of these assertions is apparent. K. inflates the content of the letter to match his own state of mind, his ambitions and his paranoia and this paranoia causes the signifiers of the letter to become skewed and in doing this, there is the creation of different avenues for the trajectory of the text. This idea of paranoia opening up

alternative paths in a narrative is also a tool used in Dead Man. The nameless, invisible protagonist causes the brothers to be paranoid and their paranoia compels them to seek meaning for their experiences and as the invisible character is never seen by them, any meaning they establish is, as it is with K., detached from the 'reality' of the signifiers they are presented with. In spite of the fact that it is obvious that K. is obtaining far more information from the letter than is possible, this situation does not seem absurd because the 'order of things' that would allow absurdity has not been established in the story. In Dead Man, any meaning that the brothers' determine about their circumstances are clues for the reader to establish the 'reality' of the story and so the absurdity of the characters' misinterpretations about themselves are narrative threads for the trajectory of the story and so 'absurdity' has lost its 'dismissible' quality and is validated by the story in a way that is not 'reasonable' to 'the order of things'.

The Challenge of Interpreting an Elusive Text

In the essay 'Symbolic Bond and Textual Play: Structure of *The Castle*' (1977) Charles Bernheimer locates the effectiveness of Kafka's text in its ability to simultaneously encourage and frustrate interpretation (1977, p.368). As K. tries to read the symbolic structure of the castle, the reader is trapped in the process with him (Bernheimer, 1977, p.368). The shifting time-frames in Dead Man also serve to frustrate a reader's efforts. The characters in the story are driven by their past but lack understanding of this while the reader is left with a narrative puzzle that the protagonists in the story can offer limited help with the deciphering of. Both narratives challenge familiar conceptions of the experience of reading. As K. fails in his undertaking to determine the structure of the castle, so does the reader:

K.'s defeat is emblematic of the failure of symbolic interpretation to bridge the gap between life and literature, existence and text, meaning and sign. (Bernheimer, 1977, p.368)

The symbolism of the narrative does not 'add up' and the castle – this trope of authority disappoints him in its lack of grandeur and yet he becomes entrapped in the perplexity of trying to become accepted into its 'fold'. The 'order of things' has been deconstructed as 'expectations' are never met and yet the desire to construct order out of the ambiguity of the text is omnipresent. Without this desire to create order Dead Man would lack a trajectory as the puzzle of the narrative form would remain unsolved

and as much as Dead Man is 'solveable', *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930) is not but it relies on our impulse to 'make sense of things'.

Literature is an assault against the limit.

Although it has a contemporary tone, the above statement is a quote from Kafka (who died in 1929 – the date of the quote is inadequately referenced by the source: Litweb, 2006). It is indicative of the attitude he had towards the 'order of things' and the subversive nature of *The Castle* (Kafka, 1930). This is not a heroic stance, though. If K. is indicative of Kafka himself, then Kafka did not think highly of his 'assault against the limit' because K. debases himself when he tries to gain entry into the castle, into the 'home' of the 'order of things'. 'Home' in Dead Man is a place where 'order' is denied. It is where four boys are punished for the recklessness of their characters and therefore have the 'natural' order of their lives subverted by an 'alien' presence. It could be argued that their 'defeat' by the oppression of this invisible presence, the effects of which are partly their own creation, is also an example of the failure of interpretation. Dead Man's elusive, invisible protagonist and the trajectory of the text challenge familiar concepts of 'life', 'meaning' and 'sign' as they are represented and embodied in traditional realist texts.

Reference List

Baudrillard, J. (1990). *Cool Memories*. Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The Perfect Crime*. Verso.

Borges, J.L. (1970). *Labyrinths*. Penguin Books.

Capdevila-Arguelles, N. (2000). *Todos Somos Kafka: Metanovel as Device to Represent Female Literary Subjectivity and Authorship*. Exeter College, University of Oxford. Retrieved 7th May, 2006, from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.dragon.mec.es/uk/pub/Don/Don15/index.html>

Cryderman, K. (2000). *Jane and Louisa: Narrative Architecture and the Act of Reading*. Retrieved 7th May, 2006, from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.scholars.nus.edu>

Deleuze, G. (1990). *The Logic of Sense*. Columbia University Press.

Dowden, S.D. (1995). *Kafka's Castle and the Critical Imagination*. Camden House, Inc.

Farrell, J. (1996). *Freud's Paranoid Quest: Psychoanalysis and Modern Suspicion*. New York University Press.

Faulkenburg, M.T. (1993). *Church, City, and Labyrinth in Bronte, Dickens, Hardy and Butor*. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Fischer, C. (2006) <http://www.kafka.org/index.php?id=185,303,0,0,1,0>

Flores, A. (1977). *The Kafka Debate*. Gordian Press, Inc.

Flores, A. (1974). *The Kafka Problem*. Gordian Press, Inc.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Second Vintage Books Edition.

Foucault, M. (1977). *The Order of Things*. Tavistock Publications, London.

Greenberg, M. (1965). *The Terror of Art*. Andre Deutsch Limited.

Grodal, T. (1997). *Moving Pictures*. Oxford University Press.

Hamalian, L. (1974). *Franz Kafka: A Collection of Criticism Edited by Leo Hamalian*. McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Hofstadter, D.R. (1979). *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid. A Metaphorical Fugue on Minds and Machines in the Spirit of Lewis Carroll*. Penguin Books.

Kafka, F. (1930). *The Castle*. Vintage, Random House, Australia.

Kafka, F. (1910-1923). *Diaries*. Secker and Warburg/Octopus

http://www.litweb.net/biography/25/franz_kafka.html

MacGillivray, J.A. (2000). *Minotaur: Sir Arthur Evans and the Archaeology of the Minoan Myth*. Jonathon Cape. Random House, London.

Matthews, W.H. (1922). *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development*. Dover Publications, Inc. New York.

Nervi, M. (2005) <http://www.kafka.org/index.php.biography>

Neumeyer, P.F. (1969). *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'The Castle'*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. New Jersey.

Ommundsen, W. (1993). *Metafiction?* Melbourne University Press.

- Patton, P. (1996). *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*. Blackwell Publishers, Ltd.
- Pope, M. (1976). *The Story of Decipherment: from Egyptian Hieroglyphs to Maya Script*. Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Said, E. (1975) *Beginning, Intention, Method*. Basic Books
- Sharp, D. (1980). *The Secret Raven: Conflict and Transformation in the Life of Franz Kafka*. Inner City Books.
- Smith, R. (1995). *Derrida and Autobiography*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stephens, J. (1992). *Reading the Signs: Sense and Significance in Written Texts*. Kangaroo Press Pty Ltd.
- Stoltzfus, B. (1996). *Lacan and Literature: Purloined Pretexts*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Theisen, B. (2006). *Simultaneity of Media: Kafka's Literary Screen*. MLN. Baltimore: April 2006. Vol. 121, Iss. Retrieved from Academic Research Library database. (Document ID: 1042131781).
- Thiher, A. (2005). *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing*. John Hopkins University Press Fall 2005. Retrieved from Academic Research Library database. (Document ID: 911508881).
- Tobin, P.D. (1978). *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative*. Princeton University Press.
- Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Methuen, London and New York.
- Wolfreys, J. (1998). *The Derrida Reader: Writing Performances*. University of Lincoln Press, Lincoln.