On the corner of north and nowhere. A novel - and - Going back to go forward: An invitation to get lost. A critical essay

Ali Marie Jarvey

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On the corner of north and nowhere
A novel

- and -

Going back to go forward: An invitation to get lost
A critical essay

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Ali Marie Jarvey

Edith Cowan University
School of Arts and Humanities
2016
Abstract

This thesis comprises a young adult (YA) novel called *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* and an exegesis entitled ‘Going Back to Go Forward: An Invitation to Get Lost’.

*On the Corner of North and Nowhere* follows 18-year-old Nev Isles, who lives and works at Cleary’s, her grandmother’s art retreat in the Perth Hills. She dwells happily in an old cottage by herself, until her mother decides that she wants to move there too. Rather than live with her again, Nev runs away with her friend, Cole, set for the WA roads she travelled as a child and the mining town of Newman, where her father lives. The trip forces Nev to relive the slow fracturing of her relationship with her mother. Newman offers little reward. Her father has a girlfriend and wants to move from the town. As Nev grows homesick, she gravitates towards Cole. He encourages her to follow her instincts home, even though he cannot stay long himself: after they return to Perth, he has to leave for America to deal with his own family issues.

Nev and Cole’s journey back to the city is set against some of the most beautiful and isolated stretches of WA road. They find that they would rather stay lost in these landscapes, than return to chaos. It is only after a brief stay at a beach camp on the corner of north and nowhere, that they decide it is time to return home to face their troubles and inevitable separation.

While *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* is not autobiographical, it originates from my childhood, adolescent and adult experiences with WA places. ‘Going Back to Go Forward: An Invitation to Get Lost’ critically examines the composition of my manuscript, with distinct reference to these origins. It is written in two chapters, which are connected by the work and praxis of selected creative arts practitioners, whose experiences with place and literature in their youths also compel them to write as adults.

Chapter one investigates the prevalence of Edenic landscapes in WA literature, focusing on authors, such as Dorothy Hewett and Tim Winton, who aim to reconstruct
lost paradise from their youth, in their fiction and nonfiction. Cleary’s, by comparison, is constructed as an unconventional Eden that subverts the trope, thus supporting Nev’s eventual return to paradise and her maturation. Finally, chapter two investigates the influence of Betsy Hearne and Roberta Trites’ narrative compass model, which encourages female scholars to reflect on a resonant story from their youth, towards an understanding of how it impacts their research. Recognising the narrative patterns in my compass was fundamental to the development of *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*, as it enabled me to craft second and subsequent drafts of the manuscript, with attention to rites of passage in Australian YA literature.
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
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 another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or

iii. contain any defamatory material;

Ali Marie Jarvey

2 September 2016
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To my mum, Alison, and sister, Amanda: I could not have had better assistants or companions during the research trip that formed the bones of this thesis.

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Figure 1.1. Nev and Aero

On the Corner of North and Nowhere
Five years earlier...

‘Neve!’ Mum yells. ‘Pack up the rest of your stuff and be ready in five.’ She draws out the e’s like I hate, making it into Neeve instead of Nev.

It’s been Nev since I was old enough to fight her on it.

She doesn’t look at me. She’s too busy reshuffling the bags I threw in the tray of the ute. I wish she’d hurry up already. Dad and I have been parked out the front on our milk crates for ages, watching her scurry.

‘Neve? Are you even listening? Pack up and ready in five!’

Dad’s eyes meet mine. He’s telling me don’t!

‘I’m already packed. Peta.’

Dad shakes his head and Mum glares. I think she’s about to give it to me. Start off on another rant about how being 13-years-old doesn’t entitle me to bullshit and how if I call her Peta one more time, I’m done. I haven’t figured out which one she hates the most yet: me refusing to call her Mum or the name itself. She reckons Gran was still high on birthing gas when she signed off on Peta.

She wanted a name with more fire to it.

Lucky for me, she doesn’t bite. She just seethes and continues rearranging bags. Her long, green skirt puffs up as she races about, unsure of what to do with so much stuff. The ute looks heavy for a long trip, but then it’s pretty light considering it’s now holding almost everything Mum and I own.

The last few days she’s been dragging out boxes from the dusty corner of Dad and Poppy’s shed. They’ve been sitting there for years. She packed most of it in the ute. Re-stored the rest. It’s as if she leaves stuff behind on purpose to remind Dad that she and I exist out there someplace. Somewhere away from him.

They’re a strange pair, my mum and dad.
Dad’s one of those weird people that’s only been in love once. You could say it’s lucky that it was my mum, but then look how that turned out. She left a year after I was born and we didn’t see her again until I was two. That’s when she came back from the road or wherever it was she’d been hiding. She managed a year in Newman before she hiked off again, this time with me in tow.

And that’s how things stayed. Mum driving. Me following.

Mum bangs her way inside the house and is back outside just as quick. She has a large box in her hands and bumps the flywire with her hip as it tries to block her. Dad stands to help, so she half-runs, half-staggers the remaining steps to the ute. He crosses his arms and the look returns. It’s the one my parents usually wear around each other. It’s like they’re confused and irritated and amused all at once. This morning, before Poppy left for work, I asked him what it meant when two people shared a look like that.

His sad face shifted into a laughing one and he told me: *it means they’re confounded by each other.*

*Is that like love?*

*Pretty close, kid. Pretty damned close.*

Mum huffs and strains as she forces the box up over the rim of the tray.

It slots neatly into the space she’s made for it.

‘Going to put her bloody back out in a minute,’ Dad mutters.

*Not likely,* I think to myself as she spreads a tarp over the tray with a neat flick of her wrists. Mum doesn’t injure easy.

She pulls some rope from inside the ute and has to slam the door shut quickly so Aero doesn’t escape. Poor pup. She yelps and sticks her snout through the sliver of open window. Mum pokes her wet nose back in gently with her fingertips, then yelps herself when she tries to take off, but can’t. The corner of her skirt is snagged in the door.
Dad chuckles and walks over. She sees him and yanks at the material so hard that the fabric rips.

Jesus, she’s embarrassing sometimes.

Dad kneels at her feet to examine the tear and Mum’s face softens. When she reaches out to touch his hair, Dad bows his head so she doesn’t spook.

Spook. That’s another one of Poppy’s. He says women like my mum spook easy.

Mum and Dad start talking in hushed voices. I’m too far away to hear what they’re saying, so I rest my elbows on my knees and wait for them to start arguing. Dad generally edges away from fights, especially with Mum, but this week’s been different. He wants us to stay so badly that he’s been pushing at her for days. And she hasn’t exactly been holding back.

I bet you anything they even argue in their sleep.

Dad sighs.

Here we go.

I look away. You’d think he’d know better than to try. You’d think we both would.

My mum is the most stubborn lady in the whole, entire world. I didn’t think she could get any worse, but as Poppy would say, she’s bloody outdone herself this time.

You see, for the last five years or so, Mum’s taken to leaving me with Dad and Poppy every April while she heads off someplace secret. Trying to get an answer out of her about where she goes on this trip and why is like trying to count stars during the day. Hopeless. Maybe she goes to a quiet beach or south to Cleary’s, which is the art retreat my gran owns in the Perth Hills. Who knows? Anyway, when she came back from her trip last week, things were different. She started talking about settling down and getting me into school. High school. My first reaction was that I was well and truly screwed. I mean, Mum’s been home-schooling me since I was four. But then I started to think that maybe she had Newman in mind. We could finally move in with Dad and Poppy, and I could handle high school and sitting still if I got to see them every day.
Within days, Mum had her mind set on Gran and Cleary’s.

See? Stubborn.

Dad walks passed me to his garage and I pounce after him.

‘What do you do when I’m not here, Dad?’

‘Not sure, Nevy. Work I suppose.’

‘You’re always working!’

He chuckles to himself as he sifts through his box of odds and ends. He pulls out a wooden disc the size of a five-cent piece. ’Gotcha.’

He chucks the disc up in the air and catches it, before shuffling it between his two hands. Then he holds out his closed fists expectantly. I tap the right and he opens the left. It’s not a plain disc. It’s a tiny wooden flower that he must have whittled! He’s drilled a hole in the middle and my bracelet rattles, inviting the new, varnished charm.

’It’s perfect, Dad!’

He smiles and runs a rag over the bench top, which isn’t dirty. ‘So, what do you get up to when you’re gone, Nevy?’

He’s got me there. All kinds of things happen when I’m with Mum. Then again, nothing stands out right now except for the travel, with its roadhouses and short stays in sleepy towns before we set off again. The caravan parks and the renting. Crashing with Mum’s friends. It’s not always so hectic. Once a year we pick a place to settle for six months or so. Kid-time Mum calls it. I’d never admit it, but I love it when the six months is up, because I get to shadow her as she searches out new places to paint and make into art that no one is in love with just yet.

What will Mum do now? How will she chase faces and trees when we’re little fish in the city?

Dad’s eyeing me patiently.

‘We drive a lot,’ I tell him. ‘And I miss you.’
‘Well, there you have it.’

‘Have what, Dad?’

‘What I do when you’re gone.’

‘You drive?’

He shakes his head and smiles. ‘No, Nevy, I don’t drive.’

‘Oh, you miss me too!’

‘You got it,’ he says.

‘So everything works okay when I’m gone?’

I look down at my wooden charm, embarrassed at how childish I sound.

I bet the kids in my class won’t sound like me. My tummy tightens.

Before Dad can answer, I hear Mum approaching. Her sandals are neat slaps on the concrete, but when she walks into the garage she’s awkward.

‘It’s time, Neve.’

‘Whatever you say, Peta.’

‘Honey. Don’t do that. Don’t call me that.’

Dad doesn’t add anything to her plea. He lets the quiet build and I love it. Mum’s frozen though, not knowing how to fill it or escape what she has to do next.

‘We’ll call you from the road, Howie.’

‘Are you doing the trip in one go?’ he asks.

‘Maybe. Was thinking of dropping in on Kaye in Meekatharra.’

‘You two talking these days?’

‘Something like that,’ she says.
‘Aunty Kaye says she’s getting too old for that shit now,’ I chime in.

Mum growls. ‘Neve, watch that mouth!’

I smirk and look for Dad out the corner of my eye.

‘Howie, don’t encourage her!’

Dad shakes his head and folds his arms tighter. I notice the same even set of our bodies. Mum is unsure again. When no one speaks, she rushes out.

The concrete slaps are less neat.

‘You got the pup’s kit?’ Dad asks.

‘Yeppo. She has it with her in the cab.’

‘Your mum will love that.’

I beam at the thought and Dad rolls his eyes.

My new puppy is Poppy’s last bit of mischief, designed to steal my heart and piss off Mum. It’s working a treat. One of his mates brought her back from Port Hedland just yesterday. She’s a German Sheppard cross Kelpie apparently. All slobber and energy.

‘Make sure you don’t forget to feed him. And tie him up when you get to Cleary’s. He’ll bolt, you know. He needs to learn the new place. Get the feel of it.’

‘He’s a she, Dad.’

Dad chuckles and roughs my already wild hair into a nest. ‘Make sure, all the same.’

Outside, the morning sun glares and I search for Mum with a hand up to shield my eyes. She’s sitting in the driver’s seat, maybe trying to be patient.

‘I won’t ask you again, Neve!’

Maybe not.

Dad puts an arm around my shoulders. ‘You got this, kid.’
We stand for a while without talking. Let Mum bristle.

I take my cue from Dad and don’t cry. And I don’t tell any lies like see you soon. I probably won’t see him and Poppy again until next year when Mum goes on her trip.

I lean against Dad and think about what happens next. From here, Mum and I will get onto the Great Northern Highway and drive south for four hours until we get to Aunty Kaye’s: my favourite aunty who is not blood, but is as close as you can possibly get.

From there, it'll be eight hours south on the same dusty road until we reach the city. Then we’ll settle, because Mum says we have to.

Away from Dad and Poppy and the road.

I kiss Dad on the cheek and walk to the ute, kicking up red dirt as I go and coating my new white school shoes. Aero is already whining at the window. Crying. I suck up a breath and my stupid tears with it.

‘Neve Isles, pick up those damned feet!’

Okay, Peta.
Part One

Living Little

When the virus of restlessness begins to take possession of a wayward man, and the road away from Here seems broad and straight and sweet, the victim must first find himself a good and sufficient reason for going. This to the practical bum is not difficult. He has a built-in garden of reasons to choose from.

- John Steinbeck *Travels With Charley* (1962, p. 3)

Chapter One

I wake with a start and the ghost of my dream disappears about as quickly as my foggy breath in front of me. Mum. Dad. Something else.

It takes a moment to realise where I am. It’s dawn and I’m sitting on the veranda stairs of my cottage, leaning against the wooden railing. How long did I drift for? I sit up straight and my back protests, cracking several times before just plain hurting. Everything is starting to come back into focus, including the stale taste of Mum’s cider on my tongue and the memory of our argument last night. A litre of water and bed. That’s what I need. Instead I’m stuck with a sketchy recollection of my latest conversation with Mum, which starts with me itching for a fight and ends with her giving me one.

I’ve sat so long and still that dew has crept across my skin. The finest beads of water cling to the hairs on my arms. I pull down the sleeves of my jacket roughly and look to the line of trees that partially blocks my small cottage from Gran’s place. The main house. I’ll need to get breakfast on the table for the retreaters soon. I don’t normally head over until I see Gran come down the path, so I settle in to wait, dragging my fingers along the stairs and collecting a shallow splinter.
As I inspect the shard, which is one of the many hazards of my cottage, I think about ways to con Gran into letting me keep the place, instead of giving it Mum.

I moved to Cleary’s and started working here permanently in the summer after high school finished. For a year it was close to heaven. I’d work at the retreat all day and come home to the cottage at night, while Mum went home to Midland to be with her fiancé, Darryl, and shortly after, Gerry, my baby sister. Mum agreed to let me leave at 16 because I’d graduated a year ahead and it was Cleary’s and Gran I was coming to. Anyway, it was a good year. I started to imagine fixing up the old place. I really bought into the illusion of it, you know? With my savings and some patience I could work some love back into the old place.

Right about then, mid-dream, Mum sat me down and told me the new way of things. She wanted the cottage. To do it up and chuck on an extension so that we could all live there. I’ve spent the last six months watching her plan our future. Before long, it’ll be like it was.

I won’t be able to tell where she starts and I end.

A wolf whistle pierces the morning. Gran. She’s standing nearby with some of her retreaters. Their hum-like laughter reaches me as I straighten out of my memories. They wander off when Gran walks towards me. Her approach is slow. Guarded. I rest my elbows on my knees and contemplate her long, brunette hair, which is flaked with peppered threads. It’s flying around madly, untamed at this early hour.

She climbs the stairs and I let her cup my face in her hands. Her sharp, blue eyes search for something, but I give nothing away. At least I don’t think that I do.

She releases me. ‘Happy birthday, baby girl.’

I crack a smile and she lets out a quick ‘Ha.’ Gotcha, it says.

Getting a real laugh out of Gran is hard work.

She sits down next to me. ‘Are you talking to your mother yet?’

‘Are you?’ I counter.
She grins. We’ve both had a bit of trouble getting along with my mother lately.

‘What was it this time?’ Gran asks.

I shrug, because I can’t remember. I have a sharp memory, but last night escapes me just now. Lost to the cider perhaps. I’m not complaining. I’d wake a thousand mornings in a row with sour breath and a foggy mind if it meant being able to forget half the stuff Mum and I fight about. Forgetting is the dream.

Gran nudges me. ‘You ready to come up to the house yet?’

Most mornings she sets everything up so that I can have breakfast ready when she returns with the retreaters. This one will be a real mess. I cook anything that isn’t nailed down on the last day of retreat.

‘Think I’ll sit a while longer. I’ll head over shortly, yeah?’

Gran clears her throat. ‘I meant until the renovations are done, baby girl. Once this lot leaves today, the back room’s all yours. Got you next to me,’ she says brightly.

My mouth makes a silent O.

This is the offer I’ve been dreading. Mum and Darryl have suggested it often enough, but Gran saying it means something. It tells me that the contractors are here soon and the cottage won’t be mine for much longer. The day after tomorrow a few of Darryl’s construction mates are arriving to start on the extension and I have to move into the main house until everything is done.

When I move back in, it’ll be with Mum, Darryl and Gerry.

Gran squeezes my shoulder. ‘You knew it was coming.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, shall I bake cake?’

‘If you think the occasion calls for it.’ Her voice is tart and she removes her hand, saving me from shrugging it off.

Silence.
'I know it’s not easy,’ she acknowledges in a soft-ish tone.

‘Then why let her?’

I’ve let it slide until now and Gran’s face reminds me why: I’m not going to get an answer. Mum’s easy enough to figure out. She’s doing it because she needs a distraction. Always does at this time of year. It’s Gran’s decision that confuses me. For whatever reason, she’s letting Mum have the cottage and I have to be content with it.

I only work here. Only bleed for the place most days.

I’ll admit that Mum has a fairly legitimate claim to the cottage. Gran owns Cleary’s now, the business and the land, but it’s built on the bones of an old vineyard that used to belong to my grandfather’s lot. Well him and his older brother, my Great Uncle Stanley. The history behind that exchange – from the Blake’s to the Cleary’s – is a complicated one, but at the end of the day the roots of both families are deeply embedded in the place, which gives Mum a solid claim to the cottage.

By that reasoning, I’m due some consideration myself. It hasn’t worked out that way.

Gran nudges me back again and nods up at the house. ‘Want me to sort breakfast?’

‘I’ve got it.’

I stand, giving her permission to leave. She dusts imaginary grit from her knees and stretches. She wants to linger. Honestly, I could use the company, but we both have things to do.

‘Looks good on you,’ she says, from the bottom of the stairs.

Confused, I follow her gaze to the small silver ring, which is hanging around my neck on a chain. She gave it to me yesterday.

18 means something, baby girl, she said. Deserves something big.

I hold the ring between my fingers and inspect it. A little emerald is encased by dusty silver leaves and it’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever owned. Besides Aero.
When I look up, Gran’s walking away. She never did tell me where it came from.

Everything slowly comes to life as Gran leaves to find her wayward group. The old-vineyard-turned-retreat sets its clock by her. A group of magpies stalk her good-naturedly, knowing she has a small bag of mince in her back pocket. And I can hear Clary and Ed, our two retired racehorses, nickering from behind the cottage. They’re Gran’s impulse buy from the knackery last year. She came home one afternoon with a rickety horse float, a Cheshire-grin and a good luck, baby girl. If it wasn’t for my mate Cole helping out, I probably would have been maimed. Clary and Ed continue to nicker and nay, knowing that Gran’s morning walk means breakfast. Gerry’s at it too. She squeals from somewhere behind me in the cottage. I look back through the flywire and down the long hallway to the kitchen. My baby sister is dropping puffed corn from her highchair. She watches them fall to Aero, who shakes them off her head, swats at them and eats the airy treats from between the pads of her paws.

Darryl’s voice rises to tell them off and I turn away.

Last night was the second time this week that Mum, Darryl and Gerry have invaded the cottage. They’ve been doing it a lot lately. They still have their place in Midland, but crashing here makes life easier by cutting Mum’s commute to Cleary’s and enabling Darryl to get stuck into small jobs after he finishes work. He’s been pulling up old carpet and removing peeling wallpaper for weeks. At least that’s what it feels like. I spend a lot of time ignoring them as they suggest that I might be more comfortable up at the house, just until everything’s finished up. I refuse. I prefer to stay and watch their feuds unfold, which range from who drank the last of the milk to I know the contractors are due soon, honey, but we need to revise the plans for the extension. Mum loves to play with plans until they suit her. Darryl usually follows on behind for the most part, until he remembers that he hates that. Arguments flare between them constantly, then simmer down as they recover and get used to being nice to each other again.

More recently, Darryl has taken to leaving for a couple of days after they argue.
I've developed three ways of dealing with their meltdowns. I either walk away (not often), lock the front door to the cottage while they bitch it out on the veranda (more frequent), or I film their spats on my phone (almost always).

The last two send them positively psycho. A girl has to keep herself entertained.

Thinking about another night with all of us packed in together inspires a sudden desire to run away and christen my 18th. Hitch a ride south with Jimmy, my part-time boyfriend, and spend the coming weekend doing nothing but lazing in pubs.

I get as far as taking out my phone to text Jimmy when Darryl appears at the door, frying pan in hand.

‘You want eggs, kiddo?’

I wait for a happy birthday.

‘Kiddo?!’

He forgot.

‘Sure.’

The smell of burnt toast hangs in the kitchen. It’d probably set off a smoke alarm if we had one. Darryl piles scrambled eggs onto a plate, making sure the bacon in the pan doesn’t fall out.

I sigh.

‘It touched.’

‘Huh?’ he says, managing to use his I’m-in-a-rush voice on his limited vocabulary.

‘You know I don’t eat it if it touches. You cooked it together as well.’

He looks at me hopefully. He wants me to be joking. Just this once.

I’ve got nothing for him.
'Ah, bugger. Um, okay…'

It’s finicky as hell, but I hate meat. I admittedly cook it for the retreaters, but still, he should know better. I mean it’s straight out of the Darryl versus Nev playbook, the Golden Rule of which is: only bring up the vegetarian issue when you want a fight. He hates that I won’t eat meat. Thinks it’s a phase. I can also see that he’s bought cage eggs again, not the barn laid ones I practically begged for. Our hens are going through some kind of mid-life crisis and lay sporadically, meaning we’ve had to start buying eggs. My mind begrudgingly works at ways to rephrase my request without getting angry or making Darryl feel stupid. Mum keeps telling me he’s intimidated by words. Personally, I think it’s a combination of femininity and words that gets him. I swear we’re a reality TV show in the making: what happens when a guy raised with four brothers lands in a house of women?

I take the pan from Darryl. ‘I’ve got it.’

‘You sure? It’s just that I’ve got to get gone in…’ he looks at his watch, ‘…five minutes ago.’ He turfs his coffee in the sink full of dishes and starts getting his gear together.

‘Your sister okay with you?’

‘Where’s Mum?!’

He chucks some toast in his mouth, puts on his jacket and ignores my exasperation.

‘Yoga. Roped a few of the retreaters into it. She’s thinking she can finally make it a thing. Grand hey?’

I can’t help but laugh. Mum’s been trying to add permanent yoga sessions to the program for years, but Gran has never quite been on board.

Mum’s ramping up her game. Makes sense. It’s that time of year.

‘You got Gerry?’ Darryl persists. ‘If not, see where your gran’s at, yeah?’ He’s already pecked her on the head and is standing in the hallway, as if I can drop everything to look after her.

I start piling the eggs and bacon into Aero’s bowl as he watches. ‘Sure. Why not?’
*Just keep moving, Darryl.*

He stalls a moment, but decides to let it slide. ‘Gordo,’ he says, running for the door. Seconds later I hear him yell ‘shit’, then he’s running back down the hallway towards me. ‘Happy birthday, kiddo.’

Okay, so that was kind of sweet.

We give each other a solemn nod, which marks the start and the end of our respective birthday routines. We don’t do presents or hugs and it works well for both of us.

When I’m sure he’s gone, I turn to Gerry. Baby bean. Ten months and counting.

‘How are you at making breakfast?’

She *ga-gas* like it’s a riot.

I get up close to her. ‘What’s your secret, baby bean?’ I use the ridiculous, shrill voice she craves. ‘Why are you always so happy?’

Again, she’s a giggling mess. There’s nothing that won’t set this kid off.

I pull her out of her highchair and do a quick dance to shake her loose of baked beans, egg and the puffed organic corn that Mum insists she loves.

I’m on the veranda trying to put my boots on, in between prying Gerry from the ancient chicken wire, lush with passionfruit vines, when Mum appears through the trees looking relaxed and fresh, tea in hand. Her blonde hair is in two braids hanging over her shoulders, making her look ten years younger. The woman refuses to age. I reckon it has something to do with her getting knocked up at 17, just like Gran. It’s officially impossible for me to make it a trifecta, which is something small to take from today.

Mum stares at me. She’s already wearing her we-did-not-argue-last-night-face. It’s taken on a more hopeful look than an assured one lately. She leans down and pulls me into a warm hug.
'Happy birthday, honey.' I breathe in her vanilla scent before she breaks away. ‘You haven’t forgotten have you?’

I sigh. ‘Forgotten what, Mum?’

‘You promised to sit for me again today.’

Oh God. ‘I did?’

‘Yes, you did.’ She sips her tea and waits for my excuse, one eye on Gerry in case she needs shepherding. Every year I try to get out of multiple sittings for my portrait and she’s always ready for me. Gerry and I have already had two excruciatingly long sessions in the past two weeks, one of which doubled as a sitting for the retreaters. ‘Is something wrong, honey? If it’s about last night, I think we can agree to let that go.’

*Don’t bite, Nev. Don’t do it.*

I drop my boots onto my lap and work at the knotted laces.

‘You’re quiet,’ Mum says.

I can’t help but laugh. It’s a quick hiccup of a sound because I don’t want her to have it. ‘That’s unusual?’

‘Guess not.’

She walks up to the front door and relaxes against the old flywire. Personally, I wouldn’t. The thing has as much give as a lackey. You’d think she’d know that seeing as she’s been taking such pains lately to remind me she used to live here too.

Mum’s height chart, from age two to 17, is etched into the frame of the pantry, as is mine, completed, but forever a few centimetres short.

A dark patch from the inks she was testing at age 12 stains the brown shag carpet in the lounge room.

An indent from the cork of a champagne bottle marks the kitchen ceiling after she got into Gran’s liquor cabinet at 14. Always the rebel.
I think about the small rebellion I want to make happen this weekend. If I can get in touch with Jimmy, and we leave this afternoon, then I can avoid the sitting. Maybe the start of the renovations too.

My heart catches.

‘I was thinking about something. About this weekend.’

Mum looks out across Cleary’s, her maternal senses teased. ‘Neve, we have one day off before the contractors arrive to start on the cottage. Let’s spend it together. Have a break.’

She’s talking to my back, which I know she hates. I work at a knot on my boot-lace, worrying at it. I suppose this is what you get when you run your impending runaway by your mum.

‘You don’t even know what I wanted to ask.’

‘You want to go away with this boy of yours.’ My look must say how could you possibly know that? because Mum laughs. ‘You tried last week, Neve. Remember? When exactly are we going to meet this... is it Jim?’

I roll my eyes. ‘You know it’s Jimmy. And how is going away bad?’

‘We have a lot to get done.’

‘I thought you said it was a break,’ I mutter.

The knots in my boot laces seem to have multiplied. I give up and try forcing one on.

‘Come on. We’ll get a few things sorted and then we’ll relax. Spend some time together. I’m working on your present,’ she says, making it so that it’s an offer.

She knows I love presents. The witch.

I look back at her. Her smile is genuine, not forced. Yoga will do that to you, I think darkly. Then again, the less snide part of me acknowledges that she needs this weekend. This long bridge between autumn and winter is always such a weird time for her. Has been ever since Hub died. Her dad.
‘Please, Neve,’ Mum begs, drawing me back.

It sounds as if she’s asking. She’s that good.

I’m tempted to say no. To tell her I don’t want to babysit Gerry or be nice to Darryl or watch you race around in circles. Instead I say, ‘okay’ because I seem to have lost my spark lately, living in my head, letting my life tarnish as I watch on with increasing apathy.

‘Thank you.’

I give her a nod, but I’m still thinking about the disappearing act I wish I could make happen this weekend.

‘Be back here by lunch,’ she says as she scoops up Gerry with an instinctual Gigigigi. It’s more of a sound than a nickname.

‘Yep.’

‘And, Neve?’ I look up again, stupidly hopeful, although I have no idea what it is I need from her right now. ‘You’d best get breakfast started.’

She kisses me on the top of my head and fusses with my hair, pulling pieces away from my face and tucking them back into my usual unkempt bun.

Sometimes she loves my hair. She’ll curl the fly-away locks around her fingers, a secret joy dancing across her face that says this is my girl. I made her. Those days she tells me softly it’s the colour of copper or chocolate, depending on my mood and that I’m beautiful.

Other days, when I stress her out, she’ll say something like it’s a ruddy brown bulb you plant in the ground and get beauty for your patience. As if I’ll grow into what she needs me to be one day. All she has to do is wait.

My hair has been wound in a knot on the top of my head ever since.

What am I today? Coppery chocolate or a ruddy brown bulb?

Before I can decide, Mum’s walked away.
Chapter Two

When Mum is a no-show for the sitting, I seek her out in one of the places she loses time: the old shed that Gran turned into Cleary’s main studio years ago. Mum can usually be found there after the retreaters have been unleashed back into the urban wild.

Sure enough, she’s there with her easel dragged to a spot of sun, shining in through one of the windows. She’s using a small plastic palette knife to build up turquoise paint on a canvas, before smoothing out some of the peaks. It looks like water. She’s in love with the ocean at the moment. I reckon she was down at the beach four sunsets out of seven during summer and it’s all she wants to paint. Besides my portrait, that is. Mine and Gerry’s. When she’s done with the knife, she wipes it clean and sticks it in her hair, which is now piled into a high, Nordic-style bun, plaits and all. It looks heavy and my fingers itch to unwind it. To comb out the globs and flecks of paint. That’ll be Gerry’s job one day.

My little sister is currently sitting in her playpen chewing on her fingers.

Mum stirs, as if to turn. I step back outside quietly and lean against the warm, slatted wood of the studio. I’ve spent the morning cleaning. I scoured the kitchen and the bathrooms, stripped the beds, and ran a vacuum through each of the seven guest rooms. Days like these, my caretaking moves from the outside to the inside. Up the stairs, down the stairs. Up the stairs, down the stairs. I don’t mind it really. I blast my music through my earphones and let the work take over. And Jimmy.

It doesn’t take much for my mind to wander back to him now. I push all the bad stuff away and think about the last time we were together.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, making me jump. I fumble for it quickly.

Cole: Happy birthday Chika.
The quick heat that lingers from thoughts of Jimmy is replaced by something I can’t quite place. I read the message again. Chika. He always calls me that.

Still have no idea what it means.

His slight American lilt plays in my head and I can’t help but smile.

Cole and my cousin, Travis, are best mates. Have been since kindergarten. On the odd occasion that Mum and I dropped in at Cleary’s years back, I’d chase the pair, shadowing them with an insistence borne of sheer desperation. Thankfully, these embarrassing playdates didn’t happen often, what with Mum constantly moving us on and Cole spending so much time overseas trailing his own parents. Cole’s dad is an engineering genius from Perth, so Travis tells me, and his mum is this gorgeous Texan dame. Oil money, of course.

Gran loves Cole. She thinks his family is a walking episode of Dallas – I blame my unfortunately well-rounded soapy education on Gran.

Anyway, Cole moved back to Perth about eight months ago. He’s been living at my best friend Minty’s place. Or more, bunkering down in a converted shed on her folk’s property, looking after their horses for rent. Not exactly the stuff soaps are made of.

My phone vibrates again, reminding me of Cole’s message. I put it away, not wanting to reply to him straight away. I like to think my desperate days are behind me.

A breeze kicks up and the wind puffs cold April kisses on my face. My cheeks become icier and the trees sigh. Today is as tired as I am.

’18,’ I say softly, trying out the word, or more trying on the age that hasn’t fit the way I thought it would. I close my eyes and search for something different about myself. Nothing. ‘Silly Cow.’

Mum told me once that the feeling you wake with on your birthday will guide the year ahead. If that’s true, then I’m screwed, because today I’m bone weary. It’s like when you start working full-time for the first time. You get a couple weeks into it and you
can barely stand yourself. You ache, your hair’s a shiny mess and the dark rims around your eyes take on a permanent feel. Everyone asks if you’re okay and you fear that the horror stories are true: namely that you’ve reached adulthood and will be this wrecked forever.

I’m well beyond my first couple of weeks of hard work, but there’s something about today that makes me exactly that tired.

I guess things have sped up lately.

A week in the life of a shadow. In the first couple of days the retreaters barely notice me setting tables, washing and many things besides. Rosy cheeks and their harried owners are nothing compared to trees and epiphanies. Curiosity kicks in on cue a few days later after the nature-detox and they start looking for something, or someone, to fill the spaces between the trees and the sky. That’s when I begin to stick out. I start getting questions about Cleary’s and my own story. Sometimes, when I’m not hiding, I supply small lies to feed their writing or their art or their interest. Other times I ward them off with talk about caretaking: mowing lawns, building chicken coops, mending fences. We admittedly make good use of Darryl and Travis. Cole helps out too sometimes, especially with Clary and Ed. Everything in between falls to me though. The retreaters seem sceptical. Sometimes I try to explain it to them. About how I feel about Cleary’s. How it’s my place. I can never find the right words though. They look on and write as they listen, eyes flicking to their notebooks, darting between pencil scrawl and my placid face. A character. At least until it hits that my life won’t do for any exciting kind of tale.

I take my phone out again and text Jimmy.

**Me:** Want to go away for a few days? Head to Fern’s, see if they have a room...

I hear the faint rustle of fabric on skin as I press *send*.

Mum and Gerry are staring at me from the doorway.

I push off the wall with one leg and slide my phone into my pocket. ‘You’re late.’
'Hmm?'

'The sitting? You’re late, Mum. I really don’t have time for this.'

My tone and the set of my body catch her attention: the hint of pissed-off-teenager with a side of classic-arm-fold. I stare. She stares. We make a good show of it until I break.

'I'll meet you at the cottage in ten,' I tell her.

Mum passes Gerry to me without a word. By the time I’ve tangled her up in her baby sling, plastering her to my chest, Mum has already ghosted off.

I’m half way back to the cottage when I’m confronted with the sound of a car I can’t see, which is trailing a burnt rubber smell up our long, dirt driveway.

‘Travis’, I guess instantly.

A stupid smile takes over my face.

Only my cousin has a chance of cheering me up today and I hope desperately that he’s brought Minty with him. It’s the middle of the day and she’s probably at work at the salon, but a girl can hope.

Minty, or Maria when you’re trying to piss her off, is Travis’ sweetheart and the quickest friend I’ve ever made. A real vixen. Full of deadly curves and a dark wit that drives guys nuts. And Travis? Well he’s my uncomplicated cousin. He’s simple and a hundred percent genuine because of it. He’s the kind of person you can imagine reaching an old, old age. A big softy with ten great grandkids glued to each leg.

No couple in the world makes more sense to me than Travis and Minty.

I sneak along the old stone pathway, which leads through the copse of trees and into Gran's back garden, hoping to spy Travis before he sees me. Gerry wriggles in her sling as we creep along.

I hold a finger to her lips. ‘Shh-shh-shh, baby bean. We’re going on a bear hunt.’
Travis’ mud-caked ute is sitting in the driveway. That’s when the worry starts in. Karma or bad luck is biting today and my cousin, who is a few times removed on my grandfather’s side, but my best cousin all the same, is sitting on his bonnet with a meek look on his face. A begging look. And that’s before he’s seen me. Then I spot Great Uncle Stanley. Aka Uncle Stan, my grandfather’s brother. He’s out in the garden, looking over Gran’s roses. They’ve grown wild in his absence.

My last sliver of hope for an easy afternoon disappears, because my family’s annual weirdo convention is about to commence. Guest star: my loveable, but alcoholic Uncle Stan.

Mum’s going to have a coronary.

‘No bloody way,’ I whisper as I get closer to Travis and the cover of the garage.

Gerry smacks my cheek and ‘ga-rahhh’s’, mimicking my agro.

Travis’ eyes are already darting. He’s thinking on the fly.

‘Happy Birthday cuz,’ he says hastily, pulling Gerry and me into a hug.

I soften for a second, until I have a sudden flashback to last month. Namely the fire. I growl and pull Gerry out of her sling, boosting her up onto my hip, which has lost some of its inherited curve in the last few months.

‘Come on, Nevy,’ Travis starts.

‘You’re kidding right?’

‘Keep your voice down,’ he says. He takes me by the arm and leads me around the corner to the front porch. ‘Willie threw him out.’

‘Again?’ Sympathy flares, but I manage to smother it. ‘Actually, I don’t care. It’s got nothing to do with me.’

‘You could just take him in for a few days.’

‘Firstly, we have a new group arriving today, so no!’ Liar. ‘Second of all, I still have a sizeable sheet of plasterboard covering the main event of his last stay, so hell no!’
‘That was an accident!’

‘No, that was him getting pissed on Gran’s good whiskey and falling asleep on the porch seat with a smoke in his hand.’

The words are true enough, but they feel rotten as they drop. I love the old bastard.

Travis smooths his hair back with both hands. He’s owned the same anxious tick since he was a kid. ‘He doesn’t do that anymore, Nev.’

‘What? Act stupid? How about you cuz?’

‘Hey, ease up alright! Jesus, he’s off the sauce.’

He sounds honest, but his eyes tell me he’s lying. He must be desperate.

Bloody Willie. He’s Cleary’s old caretaker and one of Uncle Stan’s best mates, but the two of them can never tolerate each other for more than a few months in a row.

They barely lasted one this time.

And now Travis won’t take him.

‘Mum ripped into me so bad after he left, Travis. And she hasn’t forgotten yet either. I’ll be damned if I say yes and let you run off while I have to deal with her.’

I roll my eyes at the blatant plea in his eyes and walk to the garage to spy on Uncle.

About a month back, things had gotten busier than usual because we were trialling some day sessions in between full retreats. We needed another artist and I suggested Uncle. He’s a painter and has always helped out in the past when he’s local.

Unfortunately, I had no idea when I asked him to help out that he was no longer on the functional end of the alcoholic spectrum.

I take another moment to breathe out the frustration, remembering the fire and Mum’s reaction. She doused it easily with an extinguisher and then every ounce of her anger hit me, as if she’d caught me out in a guilty secret. Okay, so I was meant to
be keeping an eye on him, but I figured drunken pyrotechnics trumped poor babysitting in the responsibility stakes.

Luckily, Uncle wasn’t hurt and because we were in between retreats, everyone missed out on one of the juiciest plot twists to hit the place in years. The plasterboard has admittedly been drawing interest ever since. The ghost of the whole drama haunts the spot, causing the writers in particular to salivate.

Uncle Stan was devastated after the fire and was on the phone to Willie as soon as Mum had checked him over for burns. He was okay. Hell, he was ready to get up and drive away until I whispered that he didn’t have a car. He hasn’t had one in years.

_Oh_ he said. Just... _Oh._

Uncle Stan happened to be one of a few problems we had on the go at the time, so we did what we do well, if not best, and let it settle itself. Basically, we let Willie try to take care of it. Looking back I don’t think we could have managed any better than he did. Uncle will never go to AA. Not a chance.

Travis nudges my shoulder with his.

‘I’m sorry, but you shouldn’t be asking me and you know it.’

‘He’s everyone’s responsibility, Nev. He’s family.’

‘Hey! I did my part last time. If you’re so desperate I dare you to grow a pair and ask Mum.’ Travis pales visibly, which invites an evil smirk from me. I wish people felt the same way about me. Had that same kind of fear about pissing me off. Just once. ‘I’m not a doormat, Travis. From now on consider me my mother’s daughter.’

‘You are your mother’s daughter, Nev,’ he says, confused.

‘Idiot!’

‘Bitch!’

‘Bogan!’

We eye each other.
He’ll pull his weight,’ Travis ventures again, after a moment. He’s a dopey dog, sulky yet persistent. ‘Everyone knows the best writers and artists are old soaks.’

He cracks up and I pinch him hard on the arm, hoping Uncle Stan can’t hear us.

‘Travis?’

We both whirl around to face the owner of the cutting voice. As if we didn’t already know. Mum.

Poor Travis. He runs his hands through his shaggy, blonde hair again.

I make to step away with Gerry and Travis follows. Idiot!

‘Both of you hold it!’ Mum says. ‘What’s going on?’

I see the exact moment Mum spies Uncle in the garden. So does Travis.

‘Just thought I’d bring him for a visit, that’s all.’

‘Of the extended variety?’ I say. Mum’s stare cuts into me. ‘What?’ I laugh. ‘Willie threw him out. He’s not here for a visit, he needs a place to stay.’

She turns to Travis. I bet he drew straws with Willie to see who would come over this time.

‘And you said yes? Said you’d watch him?’ I turn slowly. She’s talking to me. ‘Have you forgotten our last conversation about this, Neve?’

‘That wasn’t a conversation, Peta!’

Her eyes narrow as I drop her name.

Haven’t done that in a while.

‘Why is he here, Travis?’ she asks, her eyes not budging from mine.

‘He needs a place, Aunty. No one else will take him in.’

This time she turns. ‘Including you?’
Travis is mute. He knows it’s rhetorical. She’s telling him that he’s a 23-year-old man with his own place and job, and there’s no reason for him to be turning family away.

She’s that good.

I look for some kind of sign that she’s going to make the tough decision for once.

That she’ll tell Uncle Stan that he needs help.

That he can’t possibly stay this time.

She narrows her eyes at me, as if she can read my mind. ‘He can stay.’

I feel ten different kinds of stupid.

‘How can you do that?! You bitched me out for doing the same thing last time, and not a moment ago, now you’re saying yes?!’

‘I wasn’t angry that you invited him last time, Neve, it’s that you promised to keep an eye on him. You’re at an age where I’m allowed to expect that of you.’

‘But I did,’ I cry.

‘You gave an alcoholic the key to a liquor cabinet.’

I recognise the same tired and accusatory lines she’s been using for a month now and I know I could escape this well scripted argument by walking away.

Yeah right!

‘I gave him my set of keys to get paint supplies. I love him, but I can’t babysit an alcoholic.’

‘Show some respect.’

‘Argh! You just called him the same thing!’

‘I was describing him, not accusing him. He can’t help who he is.’ I swallow a lump in my throat.
My arm is aching from Gerry’s weight and I’m losing hold of this.

‘It’s never been up to one person to keep an eye on him, so why was it suddenly all my fault last time? Did you know Gran was in the kitchen when he got into the cabinet?’

‘Don’t shift the blame!’

‘Just sharing it. I’ve apologised too many times to count. What about you?’

‘Please. Do enlighten me, Neve. What’s my part in all this?’

‘You’re going to let him back again when he can’t be trusted not to hurt anyone. Or himself.’

‘Every single time,’ Mum says. ‘This same conversation. Why can’t you show some...’

She stalls.

‘Some what?’ I goad.

‘Compassion. Empathy. Just... just anything, Neve!’

I’m lost to thinking about my callous heart, which by Mum’s reckoning wants to tear Uncle away from the place that used to be his. I’m warring against the truth of it when my next words fly sadly. Tiredly. Petulantly too.

‘Keep smothering him with your compassion, Peta. Keep doing it and see how far it fucking gets him.’

Her face darkens and for once it doesn’t scare me, because mine’s a fair mimic.

I place Gerry into Travis’ awkward arms and walk away as fast as I can without running. I already see myself reaching the safety of the cottage and driving the lock home. Packing a bag. Following through and taking off. But when I hit the tree line, I look back. At first, all I can see is Travis. Gerry is in his arms, squishing his confused face. Then I see Mum with Uncle Stan. He’s moving slow, but he’s steady on his feet and his head is bent to catch her words. She’s not short, my mum, but Uncle Stan is a giant.
The gentle kind. He links arms with her and I can tell she’s bearing some of his weight. 60-something and spent. Although, I have to admit, there’s something different about him today. Something I want to see for myself up close and put a name or understanding to. I can’t now though. Not after my prissy runaway.

Lately, it’s as if I landed in a dark hole. Mum started it. She dug a shallow pit of a thing. Then I started to wear away at it, shovelling until the sides were sheer.

I don’t know how to get out.

I continue along the pathway back to the cottage, pulling at Gerry’s baby sling, which tightens as I rip at it. Everything feels bare now that the retreaters are gone. The cottage is no better. All I find is a stash of empty boxes banked up in the hallway, ready to be filled with all my junk.
Chapter Three

After a fight, Mum usually seeks me out and forces calm between us, starting with a hug of all things. It’s a strangely effective move. It’s as if all the venom from the latest fight or harsh exchange burrows deeper with this contact to a place where it can’t tarnish the moment. The worrying part, of course, is that the poison’s still there, laying ruin to parts of our relationship. I can’t suck it out, I can only suck it up and keep going.

And so we hug it out and feed the silence.

Today, Mum doesn’t show.

I spend the afternoon packing and waiting for her, but she doesn’t come to find me.

I throw the last of my books into a box and start dragging it into the hallway. I’m close to the front door when the side tears off in my hands and I fall to the floor, catching myself with stinging wrists. My face flushes with anger as I cradle my hands in my lap. This is meant to be my place. Now I’m packing to move out, all because Mum needs something to distract herself with. She doesn’t want the cottage so much as she wants something to keep her busy.

It happens the same way every year.

The first distraction hit when I was 15. She decided to turn her hand at flipping houses: renovating them and selling for a profit. This distraction soon turned into sparky-Darryl when he rode in on his orange ute to fix her electrical mess.

When I was 16 it was a series of artwork commissioned by the State that took over a year to complete and bled her of all her free time.

When I was 17 it was Gerry.

This year, it’s my cottage and it’s going to ruin us.

I slide down onto the floor and stare at the ceiling for a while. Then I take out my phone and hold it above me. Jimmy still hasn’t replied, but I have a message.
Cole: Um was that meant for me?

I look at the last text I sent him: *want to go away for a few days? Head to Fern’s, see if they have a room...*

I sent him the message meant for Jimmy. He thinks...

‘No,’ I screech. ‘Shitshitshitshitshit!’

I’ve just propositioned Cole.

And it’s not the first time, either.

I slap the soles of my feet against the jarrah floor. This is the day from hell.

Me: OMG, so sorry! That was for Jimmy!

With hopelessness at a record high, I text Jimmy something close to the original message. Why not? How could he make the day worse?

Twenty two minutes later and there’s nothing. From either of them. My mortification is overtaken by anger and I pry myself off the floor, buoyed by a sudden desire to break something. I storm down to the back room of the cottage, which has no junk to speak of, barring some shabby wallpaper that I’ve been dying to destroy since I moved in. Mum foils me every time.

*You can’t honey, it’ll ruin the aesthetic.... Just think of all the stories... you don’t know what you’re doing... I said no, Neve!*

Okay, Peta.

It’s the smallest room in the place and faces east to catch the sun each morning, making it dark right now. The lightbulb is weak at best and it becomes a dim cover for my anger as I attack the wallpaper, pulling at the irritating flakes and madly scouring the wall with my fingertips as I search for loose bits. I always thought it would be an easy job and for minutes of blind tearing, I’m glad it’s not. I pull and scratch and strip. Soon enough though, I’m more irritated than sated. There’s no satisfying sheet
coming away in my hand to reveal a smooth, clean surface below. There’s a papery-thin layer left behind each time.

I squeal and reach for my phone, punching in the number I know off by heart.

‘Twice in a couple of days,’ Dad answers. He’s all cheer.

‘I need your help.’

‘Spill,’ he says.

‘Wallpaper. How do I get it off?’

‘I take it you’ve tried?’

‘Yep.’

‘And?’

‘It’s tearing. Isn’t it meant to come off in strips?’

‘Only in the movies, love. Have you got a scraper?’

I dance a circle. ‘A what-er?’

‘A paint scraper or putty knife. Fat, flat-like blade with a wooden handle.’

In the hallway I kick back the lid back on Darryl’s red toolbox and pull out the trays.

I stand triumphantly. ‘Got it.’

‘That’s it then.’

‘What’s it?’

‘The putty knife. You’re set.’

Dad chuckles as I walk back into the room. With one hand on my hip I look around at the four walls, then at my paint scraper or putty knife or whatever it is you want to call the damned thing.

‘Geez, Dad. I have to use this for the whole job?!’
'Afraid so, Nev. Unless Darryl’s about and has a steamer, which is probably what he’s thinking for the job, then you’ve got a long date with a wall tonight.’

‘Very funny. I thought you’d help me!’

‘Nevy, love, leave the wallpaper alone and go enjoy your birthday.’

I wedge the blade under a piece of flaking paper and push upwards, over and over until the thin sheet gives way to... I squint... a floral print. There’s more than one layer of wallpaper and it’s flowery and pretty and completely inappropriate just now.

*Just think of all the stories...*

I slide down the wall with a frustrated growl.

‘Tell me you have plans for tonight.’

‘Pfft. I have plans, Dad.’

‘Nevy?!’

‘I do!’

Dad sighs. His relief is positively palpable. ‘Good girl. Now stop wasting time talking to me and go have some fun.’

‘Sure, Dad. Will do.’

After he hangs up I contemplate my imaginary plans. He’s right. This can’t be it.

**Me:** Need company. Stat. Bonfire?

**Minty:** I knew you’d cave. Finish work in an hour.

**Me:** Bring Travis?

**Minty:** Well dah, of course I will you daft cow xx

**Minty:** Ooo, let me see where Cole’s at too!

Brilliant.
'Sprung, baby girl.'

I freeze. I’m standing in the middle of Gran’s kitchen, barefoot with a six-pack of cider I borrowed from her fridge. I thought I was alone, but there she is, sitting at the dining room table, smirking into her paperwork.

She drops her glasses so they dangle off their chain.

I hold up my free hand quickly. ‘Before you say anything, no, no and no.’

May have had a drink or two since texting Minty.

Gran raises an eyebrow. ‘I haven’t asked you anything yet.’

‘No, I haven’t seen my mother. No, I don’t want to talk about it. And probably no to whatever the last thing is. Some kind of force-feeding I’m guessing.’

Gran cracks, giving me a smile that tells me I’m right. She’s loose with her smiles. She looks you in the eye, shares a huge grin like you’re part of a big secret, then she shakes her head as if happiness doesn’t impress her.

Like I said, she saves her laughter.

‘You out with the lad tonight then? Jimbo was it?’

‘It’s Jimmy. And no actually.’ He’s being a dick, I want to tell her. He never replied to my text. Neither did Cole.

Gran’s stare is calculating. ‘Careful with that one, baby girl. We Cleary women have a habit of giving our hearts away young. Don’t go wasting it.’

She gets up and walks into the kitchen.

I chew on my lip and her words, still holding my drink-loot.
'You know,' Gran starts, using the tone that suggests she has a pearl to share, ‘a few years older and Jimmy would be closer to your mother’s age than yours.’

And there it is.

My eyes narrow as I run the numbers through my head. She’s right. Jimmy’s 25. That means if he was just a couple of years older, he’d be...

‘Doing the math, baby girl?’

‘No!’ I snap.

Gran smirks. She’s been saving that one up.

She uncovers some cupcakes on a rack. One of them is iced purple. My favourite colour. I think about bailing, but decide to give her the time she’s quietly asking of me and sit down on one of the high stools at the bench. She turns off the light, plunges a candle into the frosted cupcake and strikes a match. The small, brilliant flame dances across the dark kitchen.

I hold the lit cupcake in my palms and pull it close to my face. Dangerously close, considering my flyaway hair. I can’t help it. The flicker is mesmerising. I blow it out all the same.

A moment later it sparks up again.

Re-lightable candles.

‘Smooth, Gran.’

‘Eat up,’ she says. ‘You’ll need to line your stomach if you’re planning on drinking all that.’

‘I’m having a bonfire with Minty and Travis,’ I tell her. I don’t want her to think I’m about to slink off alone to some dark corner of Cleary’s to drink my 18th away. I want her to know that I’ll have company during the slinking and the drinking.

‘What was your last question anyway? Was I right?’
‘I’m making that green tofu curry you like and I want you here.’

‘Will she be joining us?’

‘Maybe. Says she might box up what’s left in the cottage kitchen first.’

Too bad if I wanted the place to myself tonight.

I peel back the patty pan on my cupcake and take a messy bite. ‘S’good, Gran!’

‘Your mother made them.’

I refrain from letting my mouthful tumble onto the bench. Just.

‘They’re laced with sugar, not acid, Nev.’

Her calling me Nev is tantamount to her telling me to pull my shit together. I sit up straight and swallow a ball of cake before taking another dutiful bite.

‘That right there would have to be one of the few things Hub got right.’

I look up, mid-chew, and pieces of cupcake really do tumble from my mouth this time. For the second time today she’s pointing at the silver ring she gave me.

The weird part isn’t the ring. It’s the mention of Hub that gets me.

I haven’t heard her say his name since he died. It can’t be easy, because it comes out like a hard, mean laugh.

‘Hub gave this to you?’

‘In a way.’

Gran holds out her hand. I dust cupcake crumbs off my fingers and unclasp the necklace to give it to her. The ring is absolutely tiny, with two silver leaves twining around an emerald. It’s slightly tarnished, giving it an antique feel, yet I’ve never seen Gran wearing it. She tries the ring on each finger and it barely goes beyond the first joint of any of them.
'It belonged to his mother, Rosie. Your great grandmother. Before she passed, she told me to go into her jewellery box and pick out something special. I couldn’t do it, so she made Hub get in there. Never fit. Rosie was a dainty thing, right down to her fingers.’

I freeze. If I say the wrong thing here, she’ll clam up. My great grandmother is not off-limits as such, but Gran is not prone to living in the past. Especially when it ties in with Hub.

‘You got along well with her, didn’t you?’

Gran smiles. ‘After my mother died, I spent more time in this house than I did in my own. I’d break for term at boarding school and come here. I’d have a fight with my father and come here. Rosie and Laurie never sent me away. Not once. By the time I was pregnant with your mother, they were both gone.’

Gran says it matter-of-factly, as if it’s an easy reminiscence to bear.

*By the time...* more like at the same time, for Laurie at least. Rosie went first with cancer, then two years later Laurie followed. His heart gave out one day while he was tending the vines. Gran once told me *it was for the best.*

*He had no idea how to live without Rosie.*

Gran was already pregnant to Hub when Laurie passed away. Hub found out after the funeral and took off.

In a couple of years, Gran lost nearly everyone who meant something to her. Two people who were like parents. Her sweetheart. Her father too. He kicked her out when she went home pregnant. The only person she had left was Uncle Stan.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my intrigue in check. I’ve been prone to a bit of word-vomit lately. Saying the wrong thing. Often the worst thing.

‘Spit it out before it burns a hole in your tongue,’ Gran says.
'Great Pop Cleary,' I blurt. I don’t know how to make it into a question. Mostly, I just want her to keep talking.

‘Kicked me out,’ she says. She’s smirking. ‘Gave me money for the road and the number for a clinic in case I changed my mind.’

‘A clini... Oh! Jesus, Gran. How is that funny?!”

‘More of a blessing, baby girl. In disguise of course. I would have ceased to exist if I’d stayed with my father. No baby. No Cleary’s. No you. Him kicking me out and your Uncle Stan taking me was the best thing that ever happened to me. If it’d twisted any other way, I’d be a damned sight worse off by now.’

‘Real father of the year material.’

Gran nods solemnly, although she doesn’t add anything to my jibe. She’s always telling me that it’s bad luck to speak ill of the dead.

Personally, I think that’s a load of bull. It makes for a lot of silence and we have enough of that in our family. I wish we could just call it as we see it. For example, the males on Gran’s side of our family, and some of the women I won’t mention, have a little something I like to call the runner-gene. They run from issues and often from people. So does the other side I suppose, what with Hub taking off and even Uncle Stan finding it difficult to stay still over the years.

Gran drops the ring in my open palm.

‘I don’t get it. If the ring never fit, then how did Hub get it right?’

‘He knew I loved emeralds. And Rosie,’ she says. She won’t look at me. Only at the ring. ‘He would have given me her entire jewellery box if Laurie hadn’t locked everything away out of grief. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t want anything else. It was Hub that was prone to excess. Big gestures,’ Gran explains, her eyes mockingly wide. ‘He didn’t understand that something delicate could be as delicious.’

She leans forward to pinch my cheek.

I push the ring on every last one of my fingers, needing it to fit.
‘Easy, baby girl. Remember it has to come off again too.’ She takes my hand and pulls the ring off gently. ‘You got your hands from me unfortunately. You got Rosie’s boobs though, bless her. You and your mother both.’

I look at my hands and my chest, delighted at my inheritance.

‘Nothing about you is unfortunate, Gran.’

She laughs. It wasn’t funny, but she actually laughs. The last time she did that was when she caught Mum and me gawking at Cole a couple of weeks ago. He’d come over to do some odd jobs for us and decided it was a sans-shirt kind of day.

Gran laughed for ten seconds and grinned for an hour.

‘It’ll be Hub’s anniversary soon,’ I say, without knowing why.

Gran stands straight, flinging a tea towel over her shoulder. Our soft moment flees. Perhaps to the warm corners of this house, keeping company with thousands of other such moments and memories, which linger and sleep and sometimes re-emerge without warning.

‘It will.’

‘I’m sorry, Gran. I didn’t mea...’

‘Nothing to it,’ she cuts in.

About the anniversary or me mentioning it I wonder?

Do I have the courage to press her on it?

Growing up, Hub was the subject of the quietest and most stilted conversations in my family, and those were the ones I eavesdropped on. Nobody ever spoke to me about him. They begrudge many things, not the least of which is him running off with my Aunty Kaye and leaving Gran pregnant at 17.

He never came back. Never got to meet his kid. My mum.
The icing on the cake was his death though. My grandfather killed himself just after I turned 15. Or at least that’s what we think. He drove his car to the edge of the Gibson Desert and walked into it. He let it devour him.

‘Your mum’s feeling it,’ Gran says. Soft again.

I want to tell her that Mum hasn’t stopped feeling it since it happened. The night we found out is seared into my mind. The policewoman at the door telling Mum and Gran that Hub was missing. Mum’s sad, drunk face hours later. I was so confused. We never knew the man, bar updates from Uncle every so often, yet there Mum was, breaking in half.

I don’t need to remind Gran of any of that. Instead, I watch as she places some cupcakes in the middle of a tea towel and ties the corners together.

She hands me the parcel.

Another silent cue from the second-most silent woman I know.

It doesn’t matter. I can read her well. She’s telling me I can go now. She’s also telling me that Mum is ailing – feeling it rather– and I should have a little heart. I reckon it’s because she can’t muster the compassion herself. For all her talk of blessings and disguises and never speaking ill of the dead, she’s never come close to forgiving Hub. And why should she? He hollowed out her heart, scraping away at the adoring pith that once filled her up until it was in a neat pile on the ground.

Gran’s mishmash of hate and hurt means she’s never been able to share in Mum’s weird grief or attempt to help her get over it.

I place my sweet bundle in the crook of my arm and pick up my cider.

Then I walk away before I can spew out something else that will hurt us both.
Chapter Five

I don’t go back to the cottage.

Before Minty and Travis arrive, Aero and I do a quick round of the retreat, using the last of the sunlight to pick up piles of green waste that I’ve been collecting across the summer and early autumn. Normally we don’t light the bonfire until May, after we’ve cleared the firebreaks, but tradition is sitting heavy in my stomach.

I douse the limbs and leaves in petrol, then throw on a lit match. My mind races as I watch the flames. Gran and Mum. Mum and Hub. Hub and Gran.

I fit into the loop someplace. So does Uncle Stan.

Aero leans into my legs to remind me she’s there. She gives my work gloves a good sniff, turns her nose up at the eucalyptus scent, then sneezes in protest.

‘Mum is the proverbial cherry. You know that, Aero? Actually, I think she’s the whole cake,’ I say. ‘Pain in my…’

‘Talking to yourself again?’

I do a quick 180 and see Jimmy walking towards me.

Aero growls and threatens salivary-murder. She doesn’t make a move though. Jimmy’s a bad smell, but he’s one she knows well. She slinks under my fold-out chair.

I wait for Jimmy to say something else. *Babe* or *hun* or anything sweet.

He kisses me on the cheek distractedly. His lips barely touch me.

I down the last of my third drink. There’s a messy, rough vibe hanging around me now that Jimmy’s closer. He’s fresh. Neatly ruffled like every other musician out there at the moment. His hair is still moist from the shower, jet black with peppered threads just shy of his short sideburns. He’s only 25, but he has the start of grey. I often think about that. About what made those symmetrical little sprouts of salt and pepper that
threaten to take him over. It's not a conversation we’ve ever come close to. My own hair is slick with sweat. I tuck some of it back into my messy bun.

Jimmy looks from the jerry can, to the bonfire, to me. ‘This is you for the night I take it?’

‘You’re so city,’ I tease, peeling off my gloves and throwing them to the ground.

Whenever he sneaks over to see me, he never knows what to do. He always looks awkward with his too-casual stance, surrounded by trees and space. For now, he sits down on a tree stump and starts to roll a cigarette, which he’s always more into making than smoking. He catches my eyes as he licks the paper and I turn away with disgust. He knows I hate smoking. The stink and the painful addiction of it. When he finishes, he stashes the tobacco in his jacket. It’s his good leather and I sigh inwardly because he’ll be bitching about the smoky smell of it by the end of the night. How the bonfire ruined it.

‘You got a light?’ he asks.

He looks at me expectantly and I notice his glassy eyes for the first time.

I take the cigarette from his hand and walk two metres to the hot coals of the bonfire. I make sure to burn the smoke a good way down before I pass it back.

I dig my hands into the pockets of my jacket and play with a half-full box of matches, as Jimmy starts to roll another cigarette. His first is still hanging from his mouth. The alcohol and the warmth from the fire are making me lethargic, so I sit next to him, tempted to burrow closer, but nowhere near ready to give him an inch.

We don’t do well without hoards of people and loud music to cover our silences.

‘You never texted back,’ I tell him.

‘Figured I’d see you. No need to be all over you.’

‘A text doesn’t constitute affection if that’s what you’re worried about, Jimmy. It’s called being nice.’
He looks at me as if I’ve flipped it and I must have because Jimmy and good manners aren’t exactly a decent match. He gets to his feet, puts his extra smoke behind his ear and pulls me up smoothly, with one arm secure around my waist.

'Let’s get out of here,' he says. 'Blake's at some house party at Mundaring and apparently the band's so wasted they're doing Queen covers. The owner's about to lose his shit. Be worth it for a laugh.'

Explains why he's here. The party’s close by. With Blake no less. Jimmy’s drop-kick, side-kick.

Loose ash drops from his cigarette and blows onto his jacket. He doesn’t notice. I flick it off and pull up his collar. When he smiles, sleepy and content, I could mistake it for something genuine. Really, it’s just the weed.

'You go,' I tell him. 'I'm a mess.'

He releases me quickly. ‘Did you have another bitch with your Mum or something? You’re always a cow after you talk to that...’

‘Don’t even, hey!’

‘So I’m right.’

‘You don't get to call her that.’

‘You do all the time!’ He looks me over as if to say don’t pretend you don’t, princess.

‘Being her daughter gives me the privilege. You haven’t even met her.’

He seems to notice the low pitch of my voice and the dare to go further. ‘Righto. Settle. What was it about?’

‘I don’t know. My awesome ability to piss her off I guess. And maybe my birthday.’

‘Your birthday?’ He looks freaked.

‘Settle, Jimmy. I don’t care.’ It’s true enough.

‘Why are you riding her then?’
Jesus, he’s thick. Normally I can handle him and his dumb, needling questions. Normally, we’re not that into talking. Tonight he’s too much.

‘She’s my mum, so she’s kind of meant to make a big deal of it.’

He shakes his head. ‘You have to get some looser standards, Nev.’

‘I’m dating you aren’t I?’

Gorgeous silence for a bare moment.

‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. This whole thing,’ he says, running his finger in a circle, gesturing to us both. ‘You’re not telling people this is something, are you?’

While I flail about in my head for some kind of answer, Jimmy searches in his boot and comes up with some matches. The match sparks and he cups his hand around the flame to shield it from the wind.

Only he and Mum can inspire this kind of anger in me at a moment’s notice.

‘Do I strike you as lovesick, Jimmy? Running around flicking my pony tails, penning your initials on my palm?’

‘Wanted to make sure. Same page and all that.’

‘What’s this really about?’

‘Just not keen on this being the thing everyone is starting to think it is.’

‘Who is everyone?’ I flick my hands in the air like the exasperated girlfriend I’m not. ‘We barely know any of the same people!’

I bet it was that girl hanging around him. Deni. Bitch. I can stand her crush and even the fact that Jimmy is undoubtedly going to go there soon enough. What I can’t take is getting shaped into a needy pest based on other people’s say-so. Jimmy isn’t going to spill either, meaning I’ll be stuck in this neurotic limbo for the whole night. I can’t read him. I figure this is a break from our weird setup, but he’s such an odd mix of
parts that I can’t tell. If this is dark Jimmy, he’s playing with me, hoping I’ll bite so we can do the dance where he keeps me distant, to keep me close. Either that or it’s the doped out version of Jimmy, who confuses himself as much as he confuses everyone else.

I’ve yet to come across the Jimmy with a heart, so I figure he’s not trying to commit.

‘Do you want space?’ I ask, bleeding sarcasm.

‘Never invited you into my space, Nev.’

And there he is. Dark Jimmy.

I step away.

Dark Jimmy is not to be confused with your regular jerk. He’s mean. Like now. Furrowed brows, sucking at his teeth, holding your eyes until you have to look away. It reminds me of all the times he’s held me too tight, or pinched me, leaving little mauve dimples dotted on my arms and thighs. It’s as if the girl I am at home is different to the one who walks into his place. When he sees the marks he laughs and says it’s because I can’t get enough of you.

Sometimes I think babe is on the tip of his tongue, but he can never quite get it out.

He has that look now. The look before he makes the bruises, which is the same look when he laughs about them. I watch carefully for the quick shoot of his hands, but then he’s looking over my shoulder, uninterested. He takes another drag of his cigarette. It’s pressed between two fingers and he’s squeezing it, like it made him angry. I turn to see Minty’s car. Travis is in the passenger seat. Minty, however, is already out and is watching us intently.

I forgot about them. And Cole. I scan the car again, but he’s not with them.

‘That right there, is everyone,’ Jimmy drawls. ‘And your folks and your Gran and all the others you harp on about.’ He shakes his head and blows an angry line of smoke towards me, before flicking the cigarette at the ground. ‘I’m out. I need a drink.’

This is the part where I say something.
Okay, Jimmy. Pick me up something, Jimmy. I’m on the hook, Jimmy.

When I give him nothing, he walks up close. I hold his eyes, refusing to break. Then he grips my arms and his lips are on mine, crushing. I squirm. When he doesn’t release me I bite down on his lip, forcing space between us.

With his hand to his mouth, he laughs, surprised.

Before I can say anything, Minty’s at my shoulder and Jimmy’s walking away. He would have parked his car down the very end of the driveway to avoid Mum and Gran. I watch until he’s eaten by the dark.

‘Oh, babe,’ Minty says. Her eyes are resting on my lips and she pulls out a tissue from her bra to dab at the blood she thinks is mine.

I steal the tissue and swat her away. She’s standing too close and the alcohol has gone to my head already. And I can taste him.

‘It’s nothing. S’not mine,’ I slur, as I wipe my mouth.

‘What was that about?’ Her voice is a whisper, but she can’t hide the hint of shrill.

‘I think I bit him.’ I laugh it off and toss the dirty tissue into the fire.

Travis ambles towards us, the whole scene having escaped his notice. I wish it hadn’t. If Travis knew Jimmy, he’d protect me against my own will. Instead, my cousin releases a couple of eskies and foldout chairs, then opens a stubby.

‘Did you leave anything back home?’

Minty nudges my shoulder. ‘Don’t change the subject, cow.’

‘It was nothing.’ My voice is dismissive and I make sure I meet her eyes. If there’s one thing Minty’s good at, it’s wheedling information, but then she’s dead out of luck when it comes to me, because the one thing I’m great at is keeping it in. ‘Can we do this later?’

She nods her assent and her compliance throws me. ‘Are you alright?’
'Is he coming back?’ she asks.

I shake my head.

‘You know you’ll have to introduce us eventually. I need to meet this guy.’ Her words are tough, but I know she’s relieved to have avoided him.

I could laugh. Short of an ambush there’s no way Jimmy is doing the meet-and-greet with my family or friends. I should have trusted my first instinct, which was to keep him to myself. Then again, if I was going to start trusting my instincts, I wouldn’t be with him. The last few weeks of Jimmy and I have seen some of the excitement ooze away. Hanging out with him was all for show at the start. I’d intended to flaunt him in front of Mum and watch her meltdown. But I messed up. A few nights of making out on Jimmy’s foldout bed, the music and beer melting with my newly-frantic need to be touched, and I was lost. I slept with him. I didn’t care that he tasted of smoke or that the walls of his bedsit pounded with music and laughter from the pub next door. All that mattered were his piercingly sweet hands that coaxed and teased, as if they’d never known how to do anything else.

I’d never felt anything so painfully intimate.

I told him afterwards that it was my first time and he told me that he knew. The suggestion that it should mean something was lost on him and I liked that. Then.

‘How about I just invite you to the wedding, Mint?’

‘Don’t joke,’ she replies, with a flare of dramatics that’s close to her normal self. ‘You are the oddest creature, babe. The freaking oddest. You know I have this gorgeous boy who would absolutely adore you. Worship,’ she implores, her hands clasped together in mock-prayer. The bangles on her wrists jingle out the same silvery song she’s owned since I met her.

‘I’m good, Mint. Seriously.’

‘Come on, come on, come on. Let me set it up.’

‘Ahhh... no.’
She flings her arms up. ‘You’re impossible!’ She stalks back to the car to help Travis.

‘Is Cole coming?’ I call to her.

‘Had something on. The shit. Told him he better have gotten you a present.’ I fail to laugh through my disappointment. Minty’s too preoccupied play-fighting with Travis to notice. Soon, they’re making out. I busy myself with the fire.

I must have spent a decade’s worth of luck when I found Minty. After Mum moved us to the city, I lost all sense of space and freedom. Every hour was accounted for: chores, school, work. Oddly, Mum thrived in it. She settled fast and tested her limits with a mortgage on a rundown house in Midland, which she intended to flip. Darryl followed soon after. Next to him and Mum and the house, was school. It made everything worse, especially seeing as Mum worked some kind of magic and not only got me in mid-semester, but also had me assessed so that I skipped a grade. I was nervous and shy, wandering through hallways during breaks and sitting in the back of all of my classes. Everything was new. Fights, sex-talk and a million other gritty things I’d never imagined would interest teenagers, who were 12-years-old only a heartbeat ago. All of us were packed in against each other. Not so much growing as grinding. There was nowhere to fly to and the world closed in.

I thought the library would be my saviour. It turned out to be the group of chicks who hung out by the drink fountain in a perpetual cloud of perfume and gossip. Maria in particular, aka Minty. Call it fate or whatever, but we had many of the same classes. I’d skipped a grade and by virtue of a December birthday, Minty was back one. It was her supreme ineptitude in English that brought us together. Well, that and the fact that Minty met Travis through me.

Poor Travis. Minty spent years testing his restraint in every conceivable way. Three years older, Travis refused to date her until she was 18.
They don’t make guys like that anymore.

‘I hope you have some big plans for this next year,’ Minty says. She opens a sugary vodka drink the colour of fresh blood. ‘Spill.’

I groan. She may as well ask me how the weather’s going. I try and think of something big to tell her. An overseas trip or uni or finding a cure for jackass-ery. Jimmy will be my test subject.

‘I was thinking of maybe getting up to see Dad soon,’ I tell her without conviction.

‘How long has it been?’

The months add up in my head until I reach well over a year. Maybe two.

Travis smiles sadly. ‘I wouldn’t stress about it too much. I mean you’ve had a hefty plate, cuz. Caretaking and Gerry. Aunty Peta too.’

He shivers as he mentions Mum and the three of us laugh. It’s a spontaneous, happy sound.

‘I wouldn’t even know how to ask for time off.’

‘Surely they’d understand,’ Travis says, offering Minty a foldout chair with a flourish. She curls herself up into the chair like a content feline, then unravels smoothly as something brilliant strikes her:

‘Travis, oh my god, didn’t Cole say he was looking on Gumtree for a lift north?’ She turns to me, not bothering to wait for Travis to catch up. Her hands clap together in a flurry of silver and noise. ‘Apparently he’s trying to find work on the mines or check up on his sister. If you’re keen to go, he’d come with.’

She pinches Travis and implores him with her eyes, as if he can make it happen.

He pinches her back and she giggles.

‘I don’t know,’ I tell them.
‘He’d keep you entertained at the very least,’ Minty says. She gives me a mischievous wink. ‘You can drop him off, spend some time with your dad and poppy, then head back solo. Little more than a weekend.’

She falls back into her chair with a content huff.

‘So I take it you still have your man-crush, Travis?’ I ask, trying to deflect.

‘Look who found a sense of humour,’ he says, with equal sarcasm.

Minty’s trying not to snicker. Travis hasn’t stopped smiling since Cole got back to Perth.

That’s when it hits me.

‘Oh God, Minty. Please don’t tell me Cole’s the nice boy you’re trying to set me up with.’

‘He’s not like that,’ Travis says before she can answer.

Minty raises an eyebrow. ‘Like what, Trav? Male?’

‘Yeah, you’ve lost me, Travis.’

He thinks on it a moment. ‘Nah nah, sorry, Nevy. I didn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you! He doesn’t do setups is all. Starting something when he knew he’d have to move on, well that’s just not him. He’s always moving on.’

Eight months sitting still says otherwise. The weight of what Travis is saying is not lost on me though. Obviously, the last thing he wants is me hooking up with his flighty best mate.

Little does he know, I already tried.

Travis had a party at his place a month or so after Cole got back last year. I was drunk and ended up making a move on Cole beneath the cover of a giant Marri tree. He kissed me back for the quickest minute, melting us against the trunk of the red gum. But then he seemed to realise what was happening. He bolted. Literally. He turned and fled.
Not long after that, Gran brought Clary and Ed home. I ended up having to swallow my pride and go ask Cole for help. He never mentioned our drunken fumble. He simply said *sure, Chika* and has been checking in ever since. Mostly, I think he comes over to steal some conversation. He taught me to ride and we amble across the quieter stretches of *Clery’s* as he talks to me about all the places he’s travelled to.

‘It’s cool, Travis. I get it. He’s a veritable angel.’

‘A vera-what-now?’

I roll my eyes. ‘As in nothing is going to happen. I’m well aware.’

‘Don’t stress, Nevy. He’s never even tried to crack onto Minty. She’s always spewing about that.’

‘I do no such thing!’ Minty gasps, inhaling part of her drink in the process. Travis gives her a light tap on the back before getting up to tune his radio.

‘Not even a sneaky undress with his eyes,’ Minty whispers. ‘Plain rude.’

‘Let me see where he’s at, yeah?’

It could be the cider talking, but the idea is winning me over. Screw heading south with Jimmy. What if I could head north to see Dad and Poppy?

‘Fine. See where he’s at then.’ Travis straightens quickly, prompting a quick, ‘no promises!’

Always have the option to back out I say.

I open another drink and settle back as they continue to play-fight over Cole and his immunity to all things Minty.
Chapter Six

It’s either really late or really early. Minty and Travis taxied out a while ago, full on cupcakes and alcohol and garlic buttered potatoes, which we wrapped in foil, buried in the hot coals and cracked open to eat the fluffy, white centre.

I down the rest of my drink. Open another. I’m not ready to go back to the cottage. I want to stay out here under the slick, black night and watch the dull ebb of the coals fade to nothing. It’s not long before I’m closing my heavy lids. I start to see the dreamlike silhouettes that have always preceded my sleep. There are cubic spirals and other silvery shapes against the black. These patterns mesmerised me when I was little and came as easy as breathing. I used to think that they made me special. Like maybe I was magic.

As I grew I realised I could do more with my mind than see shapes. I can remember whole conversations. Play them back verbatim. It’s a neat trick, albeit an alienating one. Nobody appreciates being told but you said last month that...

Especially not Mum. She calls it eidetic memory or the bane of my existence!

There’s sudden movement to my right. The drunk part of my brain tells me to freak the hell out, so naturally I do. Cider sloshes into my lap and my belly flutters like a demented bird. But then the movement materialises into a person with a gait. One I know well. It’s Uncle Stan. I ease myself back into my chair and take a deep breath as my sanity and stomach settle.

‘How long have you been there?’

‘Could ask you the same thing, kid.’

He’s wearing the stern look that I’ve always loved, because it’s never suited him. He’s a big marshmallow of a man, in character and physique. As Gran would say, he’s never as hard as the face he puts on. It hits me in the gut though, this face, because I haven’t seen it for a long time. I find it easy to forget the true presence of Uncle Stan when he
drinks. He drowns in it. Submerges part of himself in his desire to sate his quiet need. It becomes a trade. But he’s standing in front of me now and he looks whole. Anything would look whole standing next to me I guess. I’m dull and I can sense the irony in this shift where Uncle Stan’s looking at me like I’ve been looking at him since I was old enough to realise what he’s doing to himself.

He looks from me, to the accumulated bottles, to the fire.

I pull my legs up to my chest and try to think sober thoughts, while Uncle Stan sits on one of Travis’ eskies.

We wait in silence, until I break.

I always break.

‘I’m sorry about yesterday. You know I want you here, right?’

He shrugs. ‘Barely remember breakfast, Nev.’

‘Have you seen inside the cottage?’

‘Bad?’

‘Yep. Mum keeps reminding me that it was her place once. Makes it hers forever, is what she’s getting at.’

Uncle chuckles. ‘By that token kid, it doesn’t just belong to her. There were a few places to get up to mischief hereabouts. None as good as that cottage though.’

‘Just ask Gran and Hub, hey?’

It was meant to be a light joke to follow his. After all, it was Uncle who used to jest about where it was Mum was probably conceived, whenever she attempted to bring up the how-not-to-get-pregnant-at-16 discussion with me.

Uncle, however, doesn’t laugh.

‘Sorry. It’s just that Gran mentioned him earlier. Got me thinking about him...’

‘And now you can’t stop?’
'Not exactly. I’ve been thinking about Mum more than anything. I mean, she’s always so weird around this time of year. What with his... you know.’

I leave it there. I’ve always hated the way suicide sounds coming off my tongue.

Uncle leans forward, elbows to knees, and looks at the fire. What’s left of it. ‘Chasing after that man is as close to a legacy as you can get in this family.’

The warning in his voice is clear.

‘Who said anything about me chasing him?!’

He raises his chin. ‘Wouldn’t be the first time.’

‘Pfft, whatever. Name one time!’

‘15 rings a bell.’

‘Wha...’ Oh.

‘I seem to recall something about you taking off to Kaye’s in your mum’s ute.’

‘That wasn’t about him. Certainly wasn’t to him.’

‘Nice try.’

I turn away.

*The Runaway*, as Gran fondly refers to it, was not my shiniest moment.

Hub had just gone missing and I was snooping through Mum’s things, trying to find out more about him. I was picking the lock of a scarred mahogany chest in Mum’s room when she caught me. It was the biggest fight we’ve ever had and ended with her slapping me. It was light, but also earthshattering. Afterwards, I stole some cash, grabbed Aero and drove off in her old ute.

I needed Aunty Kaye.

I needed her to explain away a short letter I found that day, which was addressed to her from Hub. I needed to know that she didn’t steal him away from my gran.
As I remember that day, I remind myself that Mum’s not a cruel woman. I simply tested her to her last thread. Hell, I practically cut the damned thing myself. My lock-picking failure and mean words before her slap were a blunt knife gnawing. I got real good at that tactic around 15. The annoying questioning, that is. Still can’t pick a lock to save myself.

‘You’ve got more of your mother in you than you care to admit,’ Uncle says.

‘Which part? My charming personality?’

He looks down at his hands and I get the feeling he’s giving me an opportunity here.

‘Which part, Uncle?’ My voice is softer, but insistent.

Uncle sighs and leans towards the fire. ‘Hub wanted to connect with your mother when she was younger,’ he starts. ‘Five she was. About the time I sold up this place to your gran. Anyway, your gran wouldn’t have a bar of Hub. She told him he could see your mother when he got himself straight or when she turned 18, whichever came first. He did what he was told. Left off. Your mother caught wind of what your gran had made him promise when she was about 16. She took off, screaming bloody murder, saying she was going to go find him. Ended up finding Kaye instead. Two dogs with a bone, your gran and mother. Your gran refused to give her an address until she was 18, and your mother refused to come home until she’d seen him.’

‘She met him, didn’t she?’

‘Sorry, kid. That’s her part for the telling.’

I turn away from him again because I know it’s useless to press. The only way you glean anything in this family is by accident.

‘Listen,’ Uncle says, ‘what I’m trying to get at, however indirectly, is that you look good here, kid. Comfortable in a way I’ve only seen in my father and your gran. Your mother moving here is jeopardising that. I get it. Thing is, if you both keep this up, this fighting and spitting at each other, you’ll end up reliving the past. You’ll hate on each other until there’s no option but for one of you to leave. You want that?’
His stern look has crept up again.

'No.'

'Think about what it is that you need from her. Might be that she’s able to give it to you if you just ask.'

Uncle walks up to the fire’s edge, kicks the hot coals about with his steel cap and scrubs his face with his hands. He’s said too much and he knows it. I reckon he was trying to use Mum’s runaway as a cautionary tale to keep me grounded. But he got off track. Let Hub in, same as Gran did a few hours before.

Uncle keeps his back to me. He doesn’t budge and every question I contemplate dries in my mouth, inviting sips of my warm cider each time.

I want to ask him what else he knows about Mum. God knows she’ll never spill. All she’s ever been willing to tell me about that time in her life is that she left home young, which is code for ran away, and ended up finding Aunty Kaye, then falling for Dad. I always figured she was cagey about that period because she fell pregnant with me. Maybe there’s more to it.

I stand and throw every last piece of green waste onto the coals. When it catches, embers tear into the dark, starless sky.

'Sorry, kid.’

'It’s okay,’ I lie. ‘I mean... I know you’re not trying to make things tough.’

'Doing a good job of it though, aren’t I?’

'Kind of.’

'Didn’t think we’d be having this conversation is all. Keep forgetting you’re growing.’

He pats me on the top of my head. ‘Tell you something for nothing, if your mother gets an inkling I let loose anything tonight, and I mean anything, I’ll be living with Willie for the rest of my life. Don’t wish that on me.’
I laugh faintly, because that’s what he wants to hear. ‘Yeah yeah, I get it. Mum’s the word, right? Beats me why you’re all so scared of her.’

Uncle reaches his hands out over the simmering coals. That’s when I see it. His hands are shaking. A lot. He follows my gaze and crosses his arms tightly, but it’s too late. I’ve already seen him jitter.

I look away awkwardly.

Generally, Uncle is functional during the day because he drinks from late afternoon and into the night. Yet the shakes, or at least the rigour of them tonight – he shakes often – suggests he hasn’t had a drop. He’s quit enough times for me to recognise the difference.

It takes a couple more moments for me to register that Willie would never kick Uncle out if he was trying to get off the wagon again.

I turn on him. ‘He didn’t kick you out!’

‘What’s that?’

‘Willie. You little... He didn’t tell you to leave at all, did he?!’

Uncle’s glare holds for two seconds, then gives way to a barely-there chuckle. ‘Your mother has a bleeding heart, kid. Thought I’d done my dash last time. Decided the best chance of her having me back was for her to think I was on my lonesome again.’

My shocked laugh is all air. The big oaf wanted to come back, but didn’t know how to ask. And he’s up and quit drinking too.

‘Don’t you go saying anything,’ Uncle says. ‘I don’t need an audience.’

I hold my hands up defensively. He won’t get any interference from me. I came close to being the reason he couldn’t stay, what with my rant about getting him help and blah blah blah.

Plus, it’s nice to be the keeper of a secret for once.
I pat Uncle on the back and start picking up the empty bottles. When he’s not looking, I slip a cider into my pocket and whistle to Aero. She pads behind me and we walk out into the dark with a torch. Away from the cottage and the house and weird conversations that are doing my head in.

Later, when I return to the cottage, my head is swimming. I must imagine Jimmy sitting on my stairs, waiting, because when I wake up in bed later he’s not there. The heat is gone, but he lingers all the same. There’s something toxic in me that keeps singing for him. Keeping him present. He’s left a bottle of water by the bed. I must imagine that too. I imagine a lot, as I let him linger. This boy. Present, always. I wish he was just a conversation I could drown out or that he might dwindle to something less. I wish I knew how to make that happen.
I wake to a quiet cottage. I'd kill for the lazy pelt of rain on the tin roof, but the storm hasn't reached us yet. What lingers for now is the smell of it on the air, perceptible to me now as well as Aero, who has been out of sorts for days with this limbo-weather. I know this storm. It's the one that builds slowly across too-still days and has the potential to wash away the listless autumn we've been having. When I was younger, Mum whispered to me in a conspirator's voice that *these humid and claustrophobic days roll in to cleanse the hurt love in the air.* Now, whenever the heat mixes with a cloudy day, and everyone is stuck in limbo between sun and rain, I'm reminded of people pining for something. The frustration of it drives me crazy, because when I think of people broken and done in by not having something, I feel slightly damaged too. Maybe that's why I get a pinch of excitement when I see clouds roll in over Cleary's during autumn. There's a cleansing vibe when the mix of feelings in the air is stolen away by the rain, or sent to escape with the dissolving clouds. That, and my hair sits calmer.

I keep my eyes closed and imagine a whole day of burrowing under blankets and waiting on the rain.

‘MORNING!’

My heart erupts, Aero flies from the end of my bed and my blanket threatens to strangle me. Gran is at my bedroom door with a zany glint in her eye. She knows I'm spent and intends to make me pay. On cue, my head starts to pound and I recognise my too-dry mouth. The smoky reek of my clothes hits me as well, the bonfire having left its mark on me.

‘Up, baby girl. We've got the wrap-up to take care of and I figure I can feed you at the same time. Get some meat on those bones you call a body.’

I die a little bit inside. ‘Please, no…’

‘Yep, yep.’
The wrap-up is generally a prolonged affair that involves going over the last retreat and the next. We do a stocktake, confirm bookings and basically add stuff to everyone’s list. All I can think of is Mum and no allowable exits.

Then I remember Uncle Stan and small parts of our conversation last night. I swallow salty bile. ‘I don’t feel well, Gran.’

‘That’s the alcohol talking.’ She sits down and places a cup of black coffee next to a bottle of water. ‘I think we all need to do some talking today.’

Dammit.

‘Out in five,’ she says. Loudly.

‘20,’ I rebut.

She gets up and strides to the door. ‘Make it ten and I’ll let you go in an hour. It’s the wrap-up or your mother, baby girl. Says you owe her a sitting.’

I decide, naturally, that the wrap-up is the best option right now.

After Gran leaves, I throw on a clean t-shirt, some jeans and my usual jacket. She’s a damn firecracker that woman. At 52 she doesn’t come close to old. Not that she needs convincing. When she hit the half century she devised a 50 year plan, which basically means she’ll be managing Cleary’s when she’s senile. Same with Mum. She’ll probably pass away at 99 with a paint brush in her bony hands.

I’ve always assumed that’s my path too. Cleary’s that is. Uncle Stan said as much last night. It’s only as I pull on my boots that I realise Uncle Stan never mentioned where it is that he fits.

15 minutes later I’m in Gran’s dining room easing myself onto her spongy lounge with a long, nauseous breath. Gerry is in her playpen eating a book and despite the normality of the scene, something isn’t right. I bolt upright and a quick appraisal of
the room finds Mum’s easel and her art case, which spells out an excruciating morning and a conniving grandmother.

I’ve been conned and I don’t have the heart or the stomach to run.

Sittings with my mum are tricky business. They involve time you don’t have. They’re also fairly close to water torture. Not the kind where you’re the first idiot to fall asleep at a slumber party and have your hand placed in warm water. No, Mum’s sittings are akin to Chinese water torture, where you’re tied down so you can’t move and water is dripped onto your forehead in slow, repeated drops that seem to burrow into your skull. A small exaggeration perhaps, but try having something close to that happen every year. Better still, try submitting to it when you know it’s a favour to someone who doesn’t deserve it.

It’ll end up being the apology I never intended to give.

I draw closer to the canvas, which Mum’s refused to show me despite several sittings. I tip toe around until I’m facing it. There’s nothing on the canvas but a light brown glaze. Mum’s used burnt umber oil paint thinned down with turps to tint the canvas. And that’s it. Where in the hell is the portrait she’s been working on? The one I imagined with me dripping in paint and with my face in shadows.

Thunder rumbles, making me jump. I hold a hand to my chest as my heart races.

I think back on the first sitting.

I was sitting on the single-seater lounge in the cottage with Gerry, and Mum had decided that I wasn’t allowed to see her work.

*What the hell, Mum?!

*I’m trying something different.*

*They’re always different. Every single one. Why does this one have to be secret?*

She refused to say why. I remember hugging Gerry closer as I tried to recall the last time she shut me out of her art. The answer was never.
I don’t have very many memories of my mum without paint on her hands, or brushes slicked behind her ears, or a sketchbook nearby. Even when she took me on the road when I was three, her whole life was about art. Sometimes, a newspaper clipping or event would inspire Mum. It was all about the story, the pursuit of which kept us on the road, giving her inspiration to churn out pieces that she could sell, which paid for rent and food and life.

When I was five, I thought I was an artist too. There wasn’t a driveway or pathway in close range that was safe from my chalk. That is until we moved to a dank place with a wrap-around veranda and mouldy wallpaper. It had a dark cupboard in one of the back rooms, and I would sneak into it with a pink permanent marker and reimagine the insides. Mum caught up with me eventually, but she wasn’t too angry. The place was borderline derelict. Instead, she fed the little artist in me with a baby easel, canvases and paints. Shortly after came the antique mirror, which Mum always set up behind her during my sittings so that I could see her work.

I stare at the blank canvas in front of me. Where is the painting?

I’m not alone. Mum’s beside me, staring ahead. We’re both holding our elbows. The space between us confuses me more than the memories I’ve been living in lately.

Mum’s nose scrunches up suddenly. ‘What’s that smell?’

I pat my clothes self-consciously. I stink. ‘It’s from the bonfire.’

‘Hangover as well I see.’

I look back at the canvas without answering.

Mum doesn’t want to be here any more than I do. I bet Gran made her agree to the sitting so that we can try to work things out. She doesn’t want to make me forget about yesterday. She wants to be as far away from me as possible. Explains why she didn’t bring the canvas she’s been working on. No doubt Uncle Stan has had some part in her mood as well. He probably gave her the heads-up about what we spoke about last night, meaning she knows precisely what’s going to happen if she tries to glue me to a chair and make a captive audience out of me.
Mum walks into the kitchen, fills the aluminium kettle and lights the stove. The even blue rings of fire lick the metal and hiss at the stray droplets of water.

I follow her into the kitchen and look outside. The rain is here. Finally. It’s freckling the slab pathway. Uncle and Gran are stacking chairs and collecting loose bits of junk to hide from the storm that’s shadowing the rain.

*Think about what it is that you need...might be that she’s able to give it to you if you just ask.*

I turn to Mum. 'I’m not finishing the portrait.'

I sound calm, but I think I’m going to vomit.

Mum turns her whole body to me and she’s suddenly so close that I can make out the lines around her eyes. There are more creases than I remember and I can’t recall the last time we stood this close, face to face. I want to reach out and trace those wrinkles; imperfections to match the slight bump on her nose from a break she never got seen to. She has a hundred stories about how it happened. The greater shock is that I can nearly meet her eyes. Height for height. I think she’s surprised too because she’s looking at me like I snuck up on her while she wasn’t watching.

I fold my arms. Tight. ‘I’m not sitting for you until we talk about the cottage.’

She grips the rim of the sink. ‘Don’t do this to me. Not a day out from the contractors, Neve. You agreed!’

‘I did not! I was told. There’s a difference.’

‘I’m about to spend a small fortune trying to makes things better for us, so naturally you choose right now to make a big deal about it.’

‘You’re acting like you had no idea I had a problem with it.’

‘Okay, Neve. Tell me what to do then. Keeping in mind that the house in Midland’s about to go on the market and your sister needs a roof over her head. Not forgetting, of course, that the cottage is already a mess.’
Using Gerry is low, but she’s got me there. I don’t know what to do.

And she’s right. It’s late in the day to grow a spine.

There has to be some other way though.

Ever since Mum told me she was moving to Cleary’s I’ve been thinking about the house she used to dream of when she was younger. The strangest part about having a mum in her 20s is that you’re with her while she’s trying to figure herself out. For a good five years Mum spoke of subdividing Cleary’s and building a house for us.

I’m reaching now, but what options do we have that will satisfy us both?

‘You have no idea,’ Mum says. ‘How can I take you seriously when all you want is to get your own way, Neve?’

I see red. A million different shades of it. ‘I’d bleed to have you take me seriously. Hell, trying to talk to you about anything serious these past few years, let alone months, without you shutting me down and telling me what to do has been next to impossible. Do you have any idea that every conversation we have is you telling me to do something? Watch Gerry...Clean this...Do that better. And it’s not just me. No one knows how to handle you. Not Gran or Uncle. Even Darryl’s afraid of you!’

She winds her hair into a tight rope and flicks it across her back. Her stare is blank, as if she can’t remember whose child I am. ‘I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.’

The defeat in her voice matches the set her body. I caused that, I tell myself. Every day, I cause that.

I have no sympathy for her though.

‘It’s all about you, Mum. You could sit with me and at least talk about stuff, the cottage or Uncle Stan or whatever, but you’re going to try your hardest to get out of it. It’s always about you and what you want and what you get. You! Did yesterday even mean anything, Mum? Am I close to not being a kid anymore?’

Her anger splinters into confusion.
'My birthday! Jesus!'  

‘Please don’t tell me this is about your present. I told you I’m working on it.’  

‘It’s like I’m speaking another language! I don’t care about your stupid present. I’m telling you that I’m unhappy. That I can’t do this anymore. We’re fucked, you and I.’  

Salty saliva is pooling at the base of my tongue.  

Mum turns her back on me and walks over to Gerry.  

She’s going to leave and pretend this never happened.  

‘I’m moving in with Jimmy.’  

Jimmy will never let me, but she doesn’t know that.  

I get a quick flash of fear from her, which makes it worth it. ‘Over my dead body!’  

‘Fine. Maybe I’ll just move in with Dad. Or better still, why don’t I just run away. I’m about due, right? A little older than you were, slightly younger than Hub.’  

Her eerie calm is back and it must take a lot of effort because I’ve done more than blister her patience this time, I’ve taken to it with a fucking blowtorch.  

*Just react, Mum. Give me something.*  

‘What next Neve? Are you going to tell me you hate me?’  

One breath and a swollen heartbeat later, ‘tell me you don’t hate me, Mum.’  

Hurt. Hurt. Hurt. That’s all I can think of. Mine and hers. The ease with which we inflict it and savour it in equal measure is devastating. Mesmerising, even.  

I walk back into the kitchen and look down at the open tea canister until I’m sure Mum’s gone. The scent of her favourite ginger tea, which she shares with nobody but me when I have an upset tummy, is strengthening by the second. The twin cups sit untouched, a small heap of raw, brown sugar resting in the bottom of each.  

I swipe my cup into the sink and it shatters.
I plan on giving Mum time to get to wherever it is she’s headed, which is hopefully her car. Then I can leave as well. But my stomach rolls and I find myself kneeling on the kitchen floor and hurling into the bin.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

I close my eyes tightly and retch until I have nothing left. When I’m done, I rinse my mouth in the sink and slide down the cupboard to sit on the cold floor. Aero is watching me from her bedded corner. When my eyes meet hers, she pads over. She tilts her head to the side, then licks my arm encouragingly as if to say *come on. Up now.* Moments later, thunder rolls and she’s a ball of fur in my lap. I lean over so my cheek is flat against her back. I only move when my teeth start to chatter.

Outside the clouds are bruised and the rain is coming down hard. Aero stalls at Gran’s front door when she sees the vertical torrent. When the thunder hits, she splits back inside, leaving me to pull up the hood of my jacket and curse as I run towards Clary and Ed. Gran beats me. She’s bringing them into the shed next to the studio, which Cole made into a stable for us.

She waves me off and signals for me to get inside the house.

I run back to the cottage instead.

Thankfully, Mum’s car is gone. Small mercies.

I’m inside the cottage searching for a towel when lightning strikes. *Cleary’s* becomes ghost-lit and thunder is a heartbeat behind. It’s a splintering bolt that must make contact somewhere close by, because the power cuts out.

I duck stupidly and clutch my towel to my chest.

There are multiple beeps from the fridge and the microwave as they come back on. I hold my breath knowing that if the power goes again, it’ll be out for good. I count five Mississippi’s before it does exactly that.

‘Hell with a side of bloody hell.’
Chapter Eight

I wake on the lounge. The candle I lit earlier is half-spent, the wax dribbling down an old whiskey bottle. It’s pooling on the coffee table. ‘Shit.’ I touch it tentatively to see if it’s set and little wax cups form on my fingertips, reminding me of a game I used to play. I leave it and walk to the window, burrowing my feet into the shaggy carpet as I go and pulling my damp jacket around me.

The lounge is gone, I think vaguely. The bookshelves are missing too. All that remains is the recliner I was sleeping on and the coffee table next to it.

I open the curtains to let some light in. Nothing. The rain hasn’t eased and the power must still be out, because I can see candles flickering in Gran’s window. It was our secret code before mobile phones: a light in the window during a blackout meant both places were all good.

I pry the whiskey bottle off the coffee table with a crackle and place it on the sill.

I’m using the light of my mobile to find my stash of candles when I see two text messages.

**Travis:** Cole get in contact?

He must have spoken to Cole about Newman already. Dammit.

**Cole:** Looks like you’re headed away after all Chika... Trav tells me you’re thinking about going north. Might have some work lined up. Give us a call.

Double dammit.

How am I going to get out of this one?

I take a fresh-lit candle down to the bathroom, where I start the shower and peel off the damp clothes I slept in. While I wait the compulsory two minutes for the water to warm, I peer at myself in the mirror. Too much of Mum stares back. I concentrate on the differences between us, which is equally unsatisfying. I don’t remember when
the bones around my neck became so pronounced or when the dark lines became permanent smudges beneath my eyes. I finally acknowledge how burnt out I am. I’ve spent months now, working my arse off at Cleary’s in some deluded attempt to prove myself to Mum. I thought if I put my head down and worked hard enough at imprinting myself on the place, then it’d be too hard for her to come in and take the cottage away from me. Deep down, I must have sensed that it wasn’t working, or was never going to, because although my pace never slackened, I found Jimmy. Or he found me. We came together when I was at my weakest, yet I could’ve sworn at the start, when I’d sneak out to see him, that getting out of Cleary’s and finding something new made me strong.

I’m not even close to it. Jimmy’s ruining me. Mum is too, what with her plans for our overlapping future. Always connected.

After my shower I curl up in my bed. I’m so weepy it’s ridiculous, tears leaking out of me like the rivers of rain dribbling down my window. I throw my doona over my head and don’t plan to resurface anytime this century. They’ll have to carry me out, I decide. Maybe build the extension around me.

As I burrow deeper, something digs into my hip. I pull it out. Jimmy’s matches. I stare at them, dumbfounded, until it dawns that he must have been here last night after all. It wasn’t a dream. Did we...? While I was...?

I sit up quickly and wrack my brain. No. We didn’t. I fell asleep in his arms and he hates that. I woke to him leaving, then I passed out again.

Still, the matches are acid in my hands.

I throw them across the room and fly out of bed.
Part Two

On the Road Again

I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded; not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night.


Chapter Nine

Cole is beat on account of me giving him the early hours of the morning to pack and leave with first light. He got into the car and, through a yawn, said he was *going to need to kip a minute*. He wasn’t unhappy, which saved us some awkwardness.

I get the feeling he would have left in a second if it came to it.

Aero and I picked him up this morning from his shed and we’ve already passed the first road sign indicating an out. The first mammoth green one that shows the hundreds of kilometres it will take to get away. There’s no mention of Newman anywhere on that sign and there won’t be on the others for a long while yet. Instead, we’re set for Meekatharra, maybe with a quick detour to visit Aunty Kaye. If I have the courage.

Hopefully I can get us beyond that to Dad’s place by tonight.

I look across as Cole sleeps. He’s pulled down his worn cap so that it rests across the bridge of his nose. His light brown hair, which has been bleached by the sun in places to a dirty blonde, escapes from beneath the cap. It’s grown longish. Whenever Gran sees him, she calls him a big girl and threatens to cut it, which, of course, he thinks is great.
He’s not missing much as he sleeps. Only a muted sunrise through heavy fog, which has wound thick around Gran’s old Toyota. You could cut it. I can just make out the taillights of the car ahead. We almost kissed at one stage, front to tail. It’s not safe to overtake, so I ease off the accelerator and fall back.

With nothing left to do but continue our sorry pace, I set my sleepy mind to my last road trip to Dad’s. The Runaway as Gran calls it.

She makes light of it, but it was a rough couple of days.

After Mum and I argued that day, I took off up to Aunty Kaye’s. I already knew how to drive, having learnt from Uncle Stan at Cleary’s. There was no drama on that score. What I did find was that my embarrassment and anger multiplied tenfold by the minute so that I was hours from home before rationality started to blend with my hurt.

It was too late to turn back by then.

That wasn’t the worst part.

That day, I felt bad luck following me like the rank stench of road-kill that haunts patches of the highway. 20 minutes shy of Meekatharra something must have punctured the petrol tank. A small leak or a big one. I didn’t know. I pulled over when the fumes reached the cab and stared dumbly at the fuel cap for a good while. All I knew was that you don’t drive with a leak. I also knew that I was about to break that rule when a car sounded close by. Sense evaded me as I flagged it down in the approaching dark. The little bomb that didn’t belong on the road had four men huddled in. A picture of horror movie clowns. The luckiest moment I’ve ever had is when they patched the leak and syphoned off a little of their fuel to see me into town.

After the men packed back into their car and left, I tested the patchy job the whole way to Meekatharra, gunning Mum’s old ute with every window open to purge the cab of fumes. I didn’t stop until I made the safety of Aunty Kaye’s arms. By then I didn’t care that she was the other woman.
Her connection with Hub, when I was in a state to finally ask, ended up being as brief as the story she gave me. Aunty Kaye met Hub when she was working as a barmaid in a pub in Bunbury, a couple of hours south of the city. She was a few years older than him and after a short fling, they stayed in touch.

A couple of years later and Hub was at her door begging for a place to stay. He’d just left Gran, although he never told Aunty that.

A couple of months later, he was gone.

For a while he came back, only to leave again, until Aunty Kaye finally gave up trying to fix him. She told him to bugger off for good. He never did need to be told anything twice, she said. Her sadness was too sharp to miss, but soon lifted when she spoke of a flighty young blonde banging on her door 15 years after Hub’s last visit, looking for her estranged father.

Mum.

*Little upstart* Aunty laughed. Apparently, all it took to talk her down was a couple of stories and a pot of strong tea. That and the knowledge that Aunty only found out about Gran being pregnant during Hub’s last couple of visits.

Mum ended up crashing out on Aunty’s lounge and didn’t leave for three months.

I guess Mum went north after that, where she found Dad. I didn’t get the chance to ask Aunty because Mum rocked up in soon-to-be-fiancé Darryl’s car. She was an odd shade of red, as if she’d been nursing her own blend of hurt and anger since she saw me last. She got in one quick hug, sagging into me with relief and crushing me to her. I thought we were having one of those sappy movie moments, where you need to break to fix yourself properly. Nope. Before Mum let me go she whispered in my ear, *you’re not going to see the Great Northern, or any other road for that matter, until you’re at least 36.*

She kept her word. I’ve only been north twice since then. Both times to Dad’s and both times by plane. I haven’t seen Aunty since.
Cole mutters in his sleep, drawing me back to the present. His cap has slipped down. I reach over to readjust it, my eyes flickering between him and the road. Aero looks up at me from her spot at Cole's feet, then curls up again, her wet nose nestled against his soft, leather boots. *You drive and we'll rest* she's telling me.
Chapter Ten

We’re making good time after finally overtaking our slow road companion. I relax as I catch glimpses of land through the fog. We’ve passed studs and crops and caught rolling green hills through the misty press. The weather masks it, but I know this trek. The bends and the bush. Pastoral land that will slowly erode into thirsty, red dirt as we get further along.

When we reach New Norcia I pull in at the far end of the roadhouse. I need a break from the fog and my legs are cramping. It’s been a while since I was confined to a car.

With Cole still asleep, I get out to stretch my legs. My phone’s already in my hand.

Me: I’m cashing in on a favour. Sorry.

Travis: Ur apologising. Can’t b good

Me: I need you to help out Gran while I’m away.

Travis: Ur gone then? Cole with u?

Me: Yes & yes.

Travis: How long r we talking?

Indefinitely.

Me: I’m not sure.

Me: Please Travis. After this we’re square.

Travis: The money I owe u...

Little shit.

Me: Everything squared away. All of it.

Travis: Deal!
The control freak in me wants to ask him how long he’s able to help for, and whether he’ll be able to do it and his job at the same time. But then I’ll probably end up talking him out of it.

I keep my mouth shut.

**Travis:** Look after the boy for me. Legs bin giving him grief

I look at Cole sleeping soundly in the front seat. He broke his right knee in his teens. I know it gives him hassle every now and then, but I had no idea it’d gotten worse.

**Me:** How much grief?

**Travis:** Getting bad. Watch him

I tap the roof loudly with the palm of my hand and the boy wakes abruptly.

‘Morning, sunshine.’

He groans and looks outside.

The fog lifted a few times, letting the sun out before melting back in again.

‘I thought we could settle here for a while and see if half an hour clears the way.’

‘Sounds good,’ he says through a yawn. ‘I’m starving.’

He settles on a meat pie for breakfast and shouts me a coffee. I wrap my hands around the cup for warmth, while he pulls out his smokes and sets about stretching his own legs with a cringe. I curse him and Travis in my head. Now that I know about Cole’s knee, I won’t be able to stop thinking about it.

I eye him over the rising steam from my cup.

‘You should have told me your leg’s getting worse.’

He laughs. ‘Minty or Trav?’

‘Travis. Why didn’t you just fly up to Newman?’

‘Money,’ he says matter-of-factly. ‘Paying for half a road-trip’s cheaper, Chika.’
Money was my original guess. The other night I caught the tail of a conversation between Minty and Travis before they left. Quick whispers about Cole and how he finally found the guts to do what his dad has been threatening for years: he cut himself off. I think back on the conversations I've had with him since he got back to Perth, concentrating on the way he's spoken about his family. I get the feeling he has a few problems with his dad, Larry, but he speaks too highly of his mum and sisters for a guy who’s completely forgotten his kin. My guess is that the cutting only extends to the money side of things.

‘You reckon you’ll make it?’ My teasing is more cautious than playful.

‘There’s a chance. Maybe ask me again when I’ve had a few hours to sit on it.’

I hide my worry with a smile. ‘As long as you’re ready.’

If we have to keep stopping for his knee, then there’s no way we’re making Newman in one stretch. Plus, he’ll be broken by the time we get there.

Cole either doesn’t realise or doesn’t care, because he winks at me. Cocky bugger. Just quietly, I don’t mind that about him. The easy confidence.

Aero whimpers from the car, desperate to do her business.

I secure her leash and we walk away slowly so that Cole can keep the pace. Aero wanders the full length of her leash and soon we’ve reached the top of the driveway that leads to a mansion of a hotel. It looks as if it’s been dropped out of the sky and into the bush. Mum and I passed through the town often when I was younger and I’ve always adored the gritty, dirt-washed nature of the place. There’s something else about it. The town too. A haunted feeling or something. As a kid, I desperately wanted to see one of the Benedictine monks that live here, but our drive-throughs were often quick, guided by a destination if not a reason. Today is hardly less so and I find my interest in exploring disappearing as rapidly as my six-year-old-interest in the monks did, when I found out you had to be male to be one.

Cole hands me his cigarette unexpectedly and walks inside the hotel.
He’s back a moment later with a brochure.

‘Etta’s into all this sightseeing stuff,’ he says, taking his smoke back.

Etta. That’s Cole’s sister. If Minty’s right, then it’s her he’s headed to see.

Cole walks towards an old wooden carriage, which has been worn to rust and smooth wood. He leans against the wheel gently.

‘How did you get to Perth anyway? Did you fly?’

What I really want to ask is how he went from well-to-do, to nearly homeless, hunkered down in an old shed trying to make himself invisible.

Yeah, baby girl. Ask that. It’ll go down a treat.

I pinch the bridge of my nose to squish Gran’s voice out of my head.

‘No such luck,’ Cole says. ‘Drove across the Nullarbor with some mates from Melbourne. Let’s just say planes are off the travel itinerary for a spell.’

‘Jesus. Again with the car. You trying to cripple yourself?’

He laughs. ‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you? Story for another time maybe.’

I’m taken aback by his quick deflection until I follow his gaze over my shoulder. There’s a young guy headed towards us clad in harem pants, a slouch beanie and a Kings of Leon shirt. He’s jogging slowly, as if approaching a wild animal.

I bite my lip and my laughter, but pull Aero in by me all the same.

‘Hello, hello,’ he calls, easing into a walk.

Cole grins and nods. It’s a normal response for him.

‘Max,’ says our stranger. His hand flashes out so fast in greeting that I walk sidewards into Cole. He catches my elbow and chuckles softly. I collect myself, all humour gone. Max has the good grace to look embarrassed, but then he’s overtaken again. He’s an eye-popper. Seems to get excited, which makes his eyes big and eager.
I give Cole a warning glance and sure enough, he’s smirking. Here we go.

‘You two calling through? Headed north maybe?’ Max’s sentences tumble together in his eagerness and he mutters another I don’t catch.

I look behind the roadhouse to where he came from and see a solitary tent.

A lonely little thing.

‘Yeah, we are.’

‘I could lose company with a 20 if you let me hitch.’

I’m lost until he whips out a 20 dollar note. The guy has unnervingly quick hands. When we don’t make a move, he pulls out another ten dollars with a bigger smile.

‘Why not?’ Cole says.

‘Great!’ Max laughs. He gives Cole the cash and pulls off his beanie. ‘Back in a mo!’

I sit on my hesitation for a second too long as I try to figure out a nice way to say hell no. Max has already bolted to his camp and is waving back at us.

‘He’s just a drifter, Chika. Live a little.’ He reaches around me and plants the money in my back pocket. ‘My contribution.’

My cheeks flush as he touches me and I turn away quickly.

I watch Max. It’s too late to say no. He’s already collapsed his tent and is shoving stuff into a bag with epic-fast movements that match every other part of him. He looks back at us constantly to make sure we haven’t disappeared.

‘Mum will kill me if she ever finds out about this.’ She didn’t pick up hitchhikers. Ever. Enough can happen on the busy roads to make a girl cautious, let alone the long, lonely straight ones. In the space of a day I’ve hooked up with Cole and picked up what appears to be a loon.

The only positive is that Aero doesn’t seem to mind him. She reads people better than I can. I scratch the top of her head and she butts me back. All good she says.
‘How long do you reckon he’s been waiting?’ I ask Cole.

‘My guess? A while. Think of it this way,’ Cole says, tapping me on the shoulder with his brochure, ‘the only Monastic town in Australia deserves a good deed. Pay it forward, Chika.’

He steals my keys, gives me a sympathetic pat on the head and takes off at a slow, exaggerated Max-jog. He’s trying to pry a smile out of me. I do, but only when he pulls up short with a cringe, laughing at himself and his knee. Karma, if it exists, is a right loveable cow. Aero weighs in with a loud bark and butts her nose against my hand. She’s left me a present. I clear it up and fling the poop-bag at Cole when we reach the car. He catches it on instinct, much to my amusement and his disgust.

A short while later we’re back on the road again, Max in tow, having lost only the half an hour I intended. Laughter aside, I think about the rest of the trip. It feels more epic than it used to be.
Chapter Eleven

Mad Max. Now that he’s sitting, he’s more voice than presence and he’s warming to it like he’s never heard himself speak.

‘Yeah, I know Newman,’ he says with a short laugh, lounging across the middle of the back seat with Aero. I made the mistake of asking about his travels and whether he made it to Newman. In my defence, I was desperate for someone to speak. ‘Unlucky enough to get some work up that way. Just a pit stop. Know what I mean? Needed some cash flow to get south. Sad little place,’ he finishes, already distracted by something outside the car, which inspires more senseless chatter.

I surf the static on the radio for a while, praying for a musical reprieve. Nothing.

I stare straight ahead, itching for the wheel. I regret letting Cole drive about as much as I regret asking Max a question.

_You're acting like a brat, baby girl._

Maybe Max is my first test. Help me let go of my snobby, ratty ways.

I’m probably going to fail. Despite my own youth all I can do is judge Max for his. There may be more to him, but all I can see is a 20-something staring into space, drawn to his life like he just has to share. As if ignoring the mining boom and the money for hitching and camping was a better bet. I don’t begrudge wandering or snatching up some freedom when it crosses your path. It’s the haters who live under the pretence of loving that get to me and from what I can gather, Max is cast in that particular mould.

At least I can admit that life isn’t all unicorns farting rainbows.

I cut Max off mid-quip. He’s talking about his time in the Eastern States and I’m not sure I can take another comparative jibe.
I leave out the unicorns and rainbows.

‘I was born in Newman. My family’s still there.’

I look back in time to see Max’s eyes scream oh shit, but to his credit he runs with it.

‘You must get it then.’

My eyes scream hell no, although in some ways, I do.

Max looks at Cole, for backup I assume. Unfortunately for him, he hasn’t quite lived up to whatever Cole expected, so he and his Good-Sammy persona checked out 22 minutes ago.

I counted.

We all take in the view and pretend we share a silent appreciation.

I close my eyes. Maybe I can drift for a while.

‘I’m a fan of poetry myself,’ Max says. And here we go again. 'Found this wicked poetry slamming joint in Northbridge.'

I have no idea what he’s on about until I remember what I left on the backseat this morning while waiting for Cole: an old literary journal I borrowed from Mum’s collection last night.

“Legend of the Green Country’ by Dorothy Hewett,’ Max says.

My seatbelt locks in my hands as I pull it.

I keep my face passive as Max starts to read a verse at random:

...never a word of that far green country of his spirit,
Where the trees grow greener than the Gippsland grass.
All this is locked away in grief and salt.
Maybe, in death, his lips will whisper it...
The journal is opened to where I dog-tagged it earlier this morning, bookmarking my small victory. I’d been having one last look around the cottage before I left, intent on causing no other mischief than what would come from me leaving, when I saw the old edition of *Westerly* sitting on the top of one of Mum’s packed boxes.

I took it. I knew she loved it and I took it.

Then I wrote Mum a letter. It wasn’t the same as the one I left for Gran, which says *I’m sorry* and will call her as soon as I make Dad’s. The one I left for Mum is addressed to the Coroner’s Court, asking them to declare my missing grandfather dead. It’s stamped and ready, sitting in my cottage, exactly where the journal was.

She’s going to lose her mind and I don’t care. How bad is that?

The journal itself is currently subject to Max’s grubby paws.

I’m about to say something, when he unwittingly reaches Mum’s favourite verse:

> This land is not mine to give or trade,
> I have no lien on these sad acres,
> Where the crow flies home,
> A solitary reaper.
> The milky creek runs death,
> The wattle and the tea-tree are all gone,
> My father went, exiled himself in cities,
> Sour as a green apple, his tap-root broken.

‘That’d really translate live, man.’ There’s satisfaction in his voice, as if he just paid 20 times over for the ride.

He flicks through the journal to see what else it has to offer. Something gives me away. Maybe it’s my eerie calm or my you-can-jump-out-the-window-now look. Either way, he leans forward and hands me the journal.

I snatch at it and Cole clears his throat.
His frown says *behave*!

My intended deep breath is shallow and the awkward silence remains this time.

I look out the window and count burnt paddocks as they fly by. Stubble burning has rendered them singed and black. It’s necessary for some farmers to scorch the stiff grain stalks in the ground so that they can prepare to sow the next season.

That’s why they look charred and bleak.

*The alternative is a fallow field,* Mum told me one day when I was eight or nine. We were driving and I was searching for ways to interrupt her lesson on prime numbers.

*What’s a fallow field?*

*That means the farmer has to plough it and leave it for a season so the land can become more fertile.*

*I don’t understand. What’s so wrong with that?*

*Do you think they can afford to go without profit for a season, Neve?*

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t think the land should burn, but I simply said *no*, because that was what she wanted to hear.

I count another black paddock and try to push Mum’s voice out of my head.

It’s too late. She’s with me now.

I roll her journal into a tube, adding a curved cover to the coffee-ringed, dog-tagged pages. The issue date hits me for the first time. Summer 1966. It’s an oldie alright. Somewhat frantic, I roll it in the opposite direction to straighten out the curve. When that doesn’t work, I shove it down by the side of my seat.

*Does Mum know that it’s gone yet? That I am?*

*Has she found the letter?*

My shallow breath rattles out.
‘So, Max. Where did you say you were headed?’ Cole asks.

Yep, definitely failed this one.

Less than an hour later, Max is walking away from us towards a quiet service station out of Dalwallinu. Wubin I think it is.

I gave him back his money and, with a peace and no goodbye, he ambled on.

From here, I can see him chatting to an oldish couple filling up at one of the bowsers. In minutes, he’s planted himself in the car and is waving back at us as they drive off. His luck has shifted since New Norcia.

At least we were able to set him down somewhere safe. There’s a whole lot of nothing ahead of us. Not many places to drop a wayward traveller without it being a danger to them or our conscience. As thoughts of the road ahead sit with me, I find that the niggling familiarity, which has been at the edge of my mind since we picked up Max, is suddenly explicable.

Hub. That’s who Max reminds me of!

I look back the way he drove off, with his new friends and his new route. I imagine the road beneath me morphing in the same changeable fashion. Never quite fixed. It makes me ill and my palm rests on my belly instinctually, until Cole gives me a queer look. I pull down the tray of the boot and hop up onto the back edge to hide the moment.

‘You all good, Chika?’

‘Yep.’

Cole takes my old beach umbrella out of the back and pops it open.

He tilts it towards me.

I’m completely lost.
'For that dark cloud you’ve got following you around,’ he explains. I swat him away.

‘Very funny!’

He walks backwards out of reach, chuckling to himself.

‘Do you think we were a bit much for him?’ he asks, spinning the open umbrella above him. He has a smoke in his other hand. ‘Seemed like he was hoping for more from us. Or maybe less,’ he adds, raising an eyebrow at me.

The tense vibe in the car was a combination of Max’s lack of boundaries, Cole’s stoic male silence and my semi-overreaction, yet he obviously thinks I bear the greater fault. Figures.

Aero manoeuvres into the boot from the front and demands my attention with a playful nip to my hand. She wants to escape, but her lead is tied to the driver’s seat.

She’s a runner.

As I rough her up behind the ears, I hear her leg **tick tick tick** in happy response.

‘So, you’re saying I was too much?’

‘Well you didn’t kick him out, but you weren’t fixin to let him stay on.’ Cole catches my peeved look, but doesn’t appear too worried by it. ‘Probably for the best,’ he says, folding up the umbrella and chucking it in the boot. ‘Bet we catch him on the news tonight anyway. Axe murderer’s my bet.’

‘What happened to your monastic sensibilities?’ I ask, remembering how keen he was to give Max a lift.

‘Left them a few miles back.’ As if reminded of the distance, he stretches again. ‘That was a long one.’

‘Seriously?’

‘What do you mean?’
I toss up whether to share or hit the road and let him find out. I settle on full disclosure.

‘Well, from here is Paynes Find,’ I say casually, a hand up to my face to block the sun, which eroded the fog some time back. The day is heating quickly. ‘It’s an hour and a half, give or take a bit, then a little more than that to the stop after that.’

His face falls and I give him a sympathetic look, wishing there was some way to magic us there. Eat some of the time and distance for him. But there isn’t. The fastest way north, barring a plane or time travel, is by car.

‘Anything in between?’

‘Depends what you mean by anything.’

‘What’s this Pines like then?’

‘Paynes Find,’ I correct, eyeing him suspiciously. He’s lived in Western Australia for at least part of his life, yet he’s acting as if he’s fresh to it. Like the size of it is news to him.

_We’re about three times bigger than Texas, I’m itching to say. You know, your other home? The international benchmark for measuring countries and apocalyptic asteroids!_

I keep my sarcasm in check. I’m not exactly handling the distance well myself. There must be close to 700 kilometres to go and I’m tiring fast.

Cole’s curious now.

Full disclosure be damned. I don’t have it in me to wreck the next hour and a half he could spend in hope.

‘You want to drive again?’ I ask.

Cole’s eyes light up and he holds out his hand for the keys. I can imagine the slow death I’m bound to suffer at the hands of Gran when she realises I’ve not only taken
her car, but have also let someone else drive it. She has a shiny new ute to play with, but she loves this old thing.

I shoo Cole towards the driver’s seat. ‘Come on, you can smoke in the car.’

‘Nah, I’m golden. Self-control, Chika.’ He stubs out the cigarette and picks up the butt from the ground.

He’s greener than I am sometimes.

A small smile ticks up the corner of my mouth and he catches it.

In the car, I shift Aero off my seat and reach for the journal. It’s not there. I step back. Where did I put it? It’s not in my bag or under my seat or in the back.

It dawns quickly.

‘He took it!’

‘Who took what?’

‘Max. He stole my bloody book!’
Chapter Twelve

‘I’ll kill him,’ I tell Cole. We’re maybe 30 kilometres out from the next roadhouse and my mood hasn’t budged in the last hour. ‘I don’t care if he is an axe murder. I’m going to find him one day and murder him with his own axe.’

‘I believe you, Chika. You’ve told me a few times now. Although you’re getting painfully graphic.’

Cole laughs as I wring and shake my hands. My scowl bounces off him. He’s too jittery to care. I watch his hands, gripping the steering wheel at ten and two. They’re the only still thing about him. Strong and calloused from working outside. Statue-of-David-like with marked veins that pop as he holds the wheel tight. I hold up my own hands, which are small and carved with less precision, then touch the scars that are dotted across my tanned skin and the nails that are bitten back too far. I wonder how the warm caramel of Cole’s hands would look against mine...

_Argh. No no no. Don’t go there._

I sit back, close my eyes and listen to Cole’s music. He found a solitary CD in the bottom of one of his bags. It’s mostly Alternative stuff, which I like, but ten minutes later I’m back to fidgeting and the tenor of Cole’s mood has shifted to match.

Cravings will do that to you.

‘How’s the whole self-control thing working out for you? Still golden?’

‘Not great,’ he admits. He stretches carefully, taking his foot off the accelerator, leading with the points of his toes and arching his back. ‘You remind me of Etta. Swear that girl was born knowing the right nerves to hit.’

His grumble has more than an ounce of affection to it.

I pinch him on the arm and he mouths a wordless _ouch_, sarcasm even in his silence. I don’t really mind the comparison. No girl wants to be compared to a guy’s sister, but
I’ve always liked Etta. I spent the summer with her when I was 14 and she was 15. Cole and Travis were in charge of looking after her, which turned into them ditching her at Cleary’s every day so that they could hit the beach.

‘So. Etta and work. That’s the plan?’

‘Yeah. See where she’s at and if there’s anything to this job. I usually end up back in the city.’ He shakes his head as if there’s an inexplicable magic to it.

‘What’s the job?’

Cole shrugs and I decide not to press him. I know he’s a sparky like Dad and can probably find work easy enough, but there’s his knee to consider.

He stretches again, unable to sit still. I thought I was bad.

‘I said you can smoke if you want to.’

He gives me a defeated grin. He reaches for his jacket in the back with one hand and pulls out his tobacco.

‘Here, hold this,’ he says, referring to the steering wheel.

‘Just give it here.’ I snatch his smoking kit.

‘I hate rolling the bastards.’

‘You should quit!’

‘See, now why didn’t I think of that?’

We eye each other and I break first so that he can set his laughing eyes back to the road. I start rolling, glad he doesn’t carry one of those fiddly machines that spits out cigarettes, but only if you follow the secret code of papers and filters.

‘You’ve got a knack for that.’

‘I have no such thing. Evil, disgusting things.’

‘You know someone who smokes?’
‘One or two.’

I don’t mention Uncle Stan and his drunken pyrotechnics. Or Jimmy, who always tastes like smoke and seems to grate on Cole’s nerves whenever I mention him.

Cole lights up and opens his window. Heat is pulled into the car and the wind billows through in loud waves, making the air-con a distant memory.

I open my side, evening out the flow and saving our ears.

We’re at the top of a slight hill. The road stretches out before us in a long line, then eases into a bend farther ahead. On each side of us, there’s a sea of green bush and scrubbery, which follow the slightest undulations before meeting true hills in the distance. Maybe mountains. I don’t know. For the first time in a long while, my fingers itch for a piece of charcoal. I grab Cole’s Polaroid instead. My only indulgence, he once told me, forgetting his one true vice: smoking. He’s keen on capturing moments. He believes that deleting a photo or editing it defeats the purpose of wanting to catch it in the first place.

He’s gifted me three shots and says I’m not allowed to waste them.

I lean towards Cole, keeping him in the shot and adjusting the camera so that the car isn’t in the frame so much. He slows to a crawl and looks down the lens, bemused and intent. It reminds me of the face you sometimes see on a boy, right before he decides it’s time to kiss you.

I fumble the developing Polaroid into the glove box.

Apparently, they expose better in the dark. Don’t we all?

After ten minutes, Coles calls it: ‘That oughta do it.’

In the photo, the bush is a smudge of vibrant green that runs on for some distance, many kilometres, until the mountains in the background are rendered into a blue haze.

Cole is clear though.
He grins when he sees it, causing his second smoke to droop from the corner of his mouth. ‘S’good.’

I laugh. ‘Liar.’

I stare at the photo and imagine the road disappearing and finding myself alone in the middle of the scrub. No bitumen or cars intruding. How long it would take before I needed the road stretching out before me again? Declining and ascending into a hundred slight and sharp corners. The idea of getting lost out here has too much fantasy about it, a heavy dose that doesn’t do me any good right now. I need to deal with my first runaway before I jump into a second.

I write on the back of the photo. A nondescript scrawl about the time and how far we are from the next roadhouse. I stick it to my sun visor with some old Blu-Tack and replace the Polaroid. Cole’s camera bag is a tatty, leathery thing. I can’t abide animal skin, but I do adore the bag’s worn edges. The respect or love of it. Cole makes good use of what he has. Tucked in the side is a wad of photos. I’ve snooped through them already and they draw me in again. Cole doesn’t seem to mind. I see his younger sisters, Etta and Margo. A separate one of his folks. Travis with three beers in his hands and a look of happy concentration. There’s one of Minty too, standing beside her favourite horse, Clyde. There’s no envy until the last one. I’d call her a girl, but she’s more of a woman.

I remember Travis’ warning. That Cole doesn’t make ties.

Does the photo confirm or contradict it?

The Polaroids are hot in my hands. Smoke glides towards me and an involuntary cough escapes as I replace the last of Cole’s things. He doesn’t seem to mind me prying. He prefers it over my questions I think. But suddenly it’s too personal, this idea of mistakes. Vivid flashes of my own begin and it’s like a stream-of-consciousness show that starts and ends with Jimmy.
He’s with me now, riding along in the back seat, breezing in on a wisp of smoke and whispering nasty things in my ear. My escape will be enough to set him on edge. Will it be enough to finally tear at the way we’ve been doing things?

I pick up my mobile. Leaving is a start, but deleting him says something. As soon as I key in my pin, Jimmy is replaced by the other person who invites quick anger. Quick pain. I have three missed calls from Mum.

She must have gotten through in New Norcia.

She’s left three texts.

**Mum:** Call me now!

Followed by:

**Mum:** Now Neve!!

And my favourite:

**Mum:** If you’re not back home by this afternoon, things are not going to end well girl!

I’m slightly freaked out by her use of *girl*, as it generally precedes a rare Mum-meltdown where no words exist in the world but those that spew out her mouth.

She must have found the letter.

My regret is quickly chased away by the image of the cottage and how easily Mum’s been able to force what she wants on me for months now.

I growl to myself.

Cole looks across, then back at the road immediately.

Too late. I’ve spotted him.

‘Can you forgive someone and understand why they did something and still be angry with them?’ The question drops out in a spontaneous word-vomit and Cole looks at me like I just told him I got my period.
'Pardon?'

'Can you forgive someone and still be angry?' I paraphrase.

After leaving the letter, I’m not entirely sure it’s Mum alone that needs to be forgiven, but all I can think about is the cottage. The injustice of her taking it has intensified today.

Cole gathers himself, plucking his smoke from his mouth. I pass him an empty mint container and he drops the butt inside. He’s amused for a second, but as the lid snaps shut and he catches my eyes again, his own shoot forward to the road.

‘Well, that defeats the purpose of forgiving, don’t it? When you say the words, you’re saying it’s okay.’

‘No you’re not. You’re saying you fucked up and we can still be whatever we are but that doesn’t mean I’m going to forget.’

‘Well then you’re not allowed to show that you’re angry.’ He sneaks a look. ‘Forgiving is getting beyond it and acknowledging that you want to be better again. You can’t lord it over someone. When you say I’m good, you have to actually be good.’

‘Okay, so maybe you don’t forgive then. Maybe you only say you understand, but you’re still bat-shit-crazy-mad. That work?’

Cole reflects on the scenario, choosing words to fit my mood. It’s painfully slow.

‘Can’t say I know for sure,’ he says, ‘but you should get to be angry for a spell. Before the forgiving that is.’

I decide not to press him on it. He’s out of sorts now, as if I managed to sap him of energy and sense. This morning, while Cole was sleeping, I promised myself that I’d try and sit on everything until I got to Dad’s place.

Failed that one, too.

I give Cole a sweet smile that says sorry. I’m not truly insane. Promise.

He has an idea of what travelling with me will entail now.
‘I take it your family’s not big on forgiving?’

I raise one eyebrow. How did he know I was speaking about my family?

‘Something like that.’

I nod in front of us. There’s a wedge-tailed eagle, dead ahead, ripping apart a carcass in the middle of the road. Fur and bones and blood smudge the bitumen, and the eagle dances amongst it. It senses the car’s approach, but Cole brakes all the same, allowing time for the full breadth of its powerful wings to slowly expand and pull it into the air.

I do the windows up fast. The stench is nearly on us.
Chapter Thirteen

When we make it to Paynes Find Roadhouse, Cole fills up the car.

‘It’s wildflower season soon,’ I say absentmindedly, dangling my legs out the passenger side door. It’s also eerily quiet. In the outback and along the highway, the silence of the spaces surrounding you can intensify until it’s desolate.

In a morbid way, this comforts me.

Coles shakes his head, as if he expected more. ‘What’s it like?’

‘It’s something else. It’s like a carpet of flowers.’

Jesus, I sound lame. I used to be able to name any wildflower I saw.

‘When I was younger, Mum took on work as a guide during wildflower season for a few years. She’d trek people up from Perth, through New Norcia and Paynes, then across to Yalgoo and back south.’ I draw a map in the sky above me and let the sun warm my face. ‘My favourites were the Everlastings. One is average, but a field of thousands is a physical experience.’

Cole stares at me. ‘Around these parts?’

I nod. ‘People think there’s nothing out here, but if you go off road or travel at the right time you see some amazing stuff.’ I try to remember the last time I witnessed a proper wildflower season. ‘Yalgoo to the west of us, it’s a tiny place, but it’s beyond beautiful when it flowers.’

I look off in that direction and have a strong compulsion to be there.

It’s only a few hours shy of the sea.

‘Another one-horse town, huh?’
I can’t tell if he’s trying to work me up. He’s gazing east, his body turned away from me. I’m disappointed, until I remember that it’s hard to see beyond the long dusty road, encased by dirt and bushland. Quite literally. Often there’s nothing else to see.

Cole distracts himself with the bugs on the windscreen until another car pulls up. The driver honks his horn at us while we argue over who’s going to pay.

Cole drops my money at my feet and walks away.

‘You’re a stubborn witch,’ he calls over his shoulder.

I snatch my money off the ground and park the car before the guy behind me has a fit.

...stubborn witch. He makes it sound like a compliment.

He’d get a definite eye roll from Gran for that. He’s all cheese she’d say. Everyone she’s ever met has a bit of cheese about them apparently. She hates corniness and believes, quite adamantly, that this whole slick agenda is a prominent affliction of my entire generation. And the one before. She’s also deeply offended by flirting, bless her. Either Hub was a hopeless romantic and his running completely jaded her, or he was so dry and up front that the fluffy stuff was simply embarrassing for Gran after that. I mean, she hasn’t lived her life a nun, but she’s not what you’d call a romantic woman.

I’m admittedly not too fond of cheese myself.

In any case, Gran will have more than a one-liner for me the next time I see her.

I buggered off, took her car and left her to deal with the renovation. And Mum. Then there’s the next retreat. Profanity dribbles out as I tie Aero to the toe bar and fill an ice cream container with water. A sliver of shade protects us from the sun. It’s lucky I’m not going back, I decide, because chances are there wouldn’t be a job left if I did. But then the thought of never going back inspires an ache that has the potential to soften the edges of my anger.

‘I’m not sure I can take too much more of this,’ Cole says as he walks back.
I drop the tray of the boot and hop up. ‘Of what?’

He looks around. ‘Of this.’

‘How about we push through to Meekatharra and stay the night?’

The offer has a touch of awkwardness about it. It must have been brewing for a while though, because it rolled off my tongue easily and I don’t regret it.

Cole’s wary, as if I’ll pull the offer back as fast as I gave it. ‘That’s close, isn’t it? Have you got friends up that way?’

My face falls before I can set it straight. I do have a friend that way. I think.

I smear sunscreen across my face to cover the moment, because Cole’s staring.

‘It’s closer than Newman,’ I tell him. ‘There’s a place called The Commie we could check. See if they have a room. We can sneak Aero in easy.’

‘Sounds like a Russian retreat or something.’

‘Just your standard pub and hotel I’m afraid.’

Cole feigns disappointment as he stretches, then smiles with something like relief. I think I may have taken a small weight off his back. I’m glad. To a weary traveller what’s up ahead is a slightly different version of the road towards Paynes: mimicry of the worst kind, when all you want to do is get out of the car. It doesn’t matter how nice stretches of it can be, what gets to you is the hundreds of kilometres and thousands of seconds; the sun as it beats and the road as it seems to lengthen before you.

*You’re getting soft, baby girl.*

I should be worrying about getting to Dad’s place, not how to make Cole’s life easier.

Without warning, Cole leans in and wipes some sunscreen off the bridge of my nose. Then he draws the back of his fingers across my cheek gently. They’re quick touches, barely there as they graze, but I sense them keenly.

‘You know, I’m a decent bouncing board,’ he says.
I squint against the sun. All I can see is my face reflected in his sunglasses. ‘For what exactly?’

‘You’ve been acting weird since you picked me up. What’s up?’

It strikes me that Cole’s schooled in a few ways I hadn’t considered. His touch was calming, as if he knew it would be. And instead of staring at me, he feigns distraction and follows Aero’s gaze. She’s looking at a wild baby goat in the bush, as it tries to suckle from its disinterested mum. Cole knows something about getting people to talk. The duty of having sisters perhaps.

As my pause draws out, he reaches for the umbrella in the back. ‘For that…’

‘…dark cloud I’ve got following me. Yeah yeah,’ I laugh. ‘Do you think we can have a conversation without props?’

‘See, now a conversation requires words, Chika.’

He looks into the boot. I see what he sees. The bags and the suitcase. They don’t say quick getaway. They scream I’m out. Catchas never.

‘What are you up to?’

He assumes I know. How cute.

I slide out of the boot. ‘Do you want to stay in Meeka or not?’

‘And if they don’t have a room?’

‘We’ll press on or sleep in the car. We were going to try it in one go anyway.’

‘Okay. Sure you don’t have something else on your mind?’

There are very few people that can pry little pieces from me without me minding too much. I never thought that Cole would be one of them.

‘I’m sure.’
Chapter Fourteen

After four more hours on the road, and a decent stop in Mount Magnet, nothing would be better than a drink and a vacant room. But when we hit Meekatharra and The Commie, the girl behind the bar tells us there’s nothing free. Yet. She’s waiting on a late check-in who she thinks will fall through.

If he’s not here by five, then the room’s ours.

It’s four o’clock now.

After refuelling, Cole wanders back to the pub, leaving Aero and me to find a place in the shade across the road. Should probably let Mum know I’m alive. I’d text Gran if I thought there was half a chance she’d get it or reply.

Me: I’m in Meeka.

There. Done. Practically daughter of the year material.

Now we can just lea... Ding.

Mum: Have you seen her yet?

Walked into that one.

At least she’s not still psycho.

Me: Not yet.

Mum: You’ll regret it if you don’t.

Mum would have gone to see Aunty Kaye the moment she hit town.

She’s always been stronger than me when it comes to this stuff.

Mum: Go!

Me: OMG! Stop hounding me!!!
I take a deep breath. I guess it’s not her fault I’m a coward.

**Me:** Want me to tell her anything?

Mum doesn’t respond.

I throw my phone on the grass and finish the last of my lukewarm water.

Five minutes later, Aero’s back in the car with every window cracked open and I’m scouring the inside of the pub for Cole.

He’s across the room chatting to a stranger, beer in hand. He’s already relaxed, as if a drink was all it took to recover from the last stretch of road. I’m used to longer days, but the last few have combined into a mess becoming an epic episode that’s about to lead into part ten. I’ve torn myself from one home to get to the other and crashed halfway between the two. I want out already. To be back in my cottage, in my bed, on one of the days where it’s just me and my work. I don’t want to closet myself in a small motel room while I wait for tomorrow. Air closes in. It’s a quick, threatening press down my throat and I know if I’m not careful I’ll start trying to take in too much without any relief.

I walk up to Cole. ‘Are you okay to wait on the room?’

‘Where are you headed?’

‘Just have to do something.’

My voice is clipped. Cole doesn’t care. He sculls the last of his drink.

‘I’ll wait in the car. You got my smokes?’

‘I threw that shit out hours ago,’ I tell him as I storm out of the pub.
When I was a kid, I used to have a map that I dotted with people instead of places. A pin for the ones I knew and liked and loved. When it came to Aunty Kaye, she was a big, beautiful star, right over the heart of the Mid West. Before I discovered her relationship with Hub, I always assumed she was like my other aunts and uncles, who were Mum’s friends from the road. They generally started off as acquaintances, but became more after years of visits and favours on both ends. Aunty Kaye was something else entirely. She was the tramp who stole my grandfather away and one of the best women I’ve ever known.

I get out of the car, leaving Cole to his confusion. He was a quiet kind of furious for a while there. As soon as I parked at the cemetery, he was just plain quiet. The car door opens and Cole practically falls out as he tries to get a hold of Aero’s leash. When he passes it to me, he gives my hand a quick squeeze.

Aunty Kaye died in a car accident during my last semester of high school. I hadn’t seen her since I ran away the year before. Had barely spoken to her. I came home from school one day to find Mum sitting out the front with her head in her hands. When she looked up her face was screaming and I felt pieces of me wash away with the horror of it. I knew someone was gone. When I found out it was Aunty, I hated myself. My anger about Hub had slowly bled into our relationship, making our last year of knowing each other a sad, petulant one. On my side at least. There was no way to escape that or make it better. I would never get the same opportunities Mum had had over the years, where she was able to ride out her anger with Aunty Kaye, before eventually finding a way back to her.

Things got worse with Mum in the wake of it all.

I left home for Cleary’s not long after.

Aero pulls at her lead, as if she knows where she’s going. Maybe she does. She was at the funeral and the wake. There were so many people. Mum moved amongst them,
speaking to a handful of friends. Aching strangers too. At one point, I scanned the wake carefully for a lady who had dark honeyed skin with peppered hair, high in a bun, and a skirt that worked up a little on account of her curves. There were a few ladies like this, but it was only when one stood with her back to me, and next to Mum, that I caught I glimpse of the past.

Sure enough, Aero finds Aunty before I do. We sit on the red dirt at her feet.

Aunty Kaye used to tell me it’s best to think small when you have a problem. Think about the shortest path to feeling okay again and be selfish if you have to be.

That advice was sound as a kid. My most selfish acts involved hogging the ice cream or letting my anger run away with me. What about now? I’ve owned my selfish moment: I’ve run away again. I thought it was the best possible choice at the start of the day and although I’m still not convinced it was a mistake, I’m finding that being out here, on the road, well it’s nothing like what I used to know.

What if Dad and Poppy’s place is the same?

What if they don’t want me?

‘You alright, Nev?’

Cole’s standing behind me with his hands in his pockets. I can’t remember the last time he used my actual name.

I nod and he sits down next to me. Rather than being upset about having to share something private, I’m glad he joined me. The last thing I want is for him to stay mad at me or not to be able to approach me. I’ve gotten used to having him close.

‘Sorry for throwing your smokes away. And for snapping at you.’

‘I’ve got two younger sisters,’ he says, dismissing my apology. ‘They’re ten or so shy of a coven if you’re in the market for one.’

He winks and I can’t help but laugh, filling this place with a sound unheard of. He passes me a wilted wildflower. I hope he found it on the ground. It’s illegal to pick
them. I take it anyway and place it in Aunty’s cherub vase, which threatens to swallow it.

When Cole puts his arm around me, I rest my head on his shoulder and we stay like that for a long time.

‘Tell me a story,’ he says eventually, straightening his bad knee without letting me go.

He’s always asking me that. Whenever he comes over to Cleary’s and we reach a place of easy quiet between us, he interrupts it by demanding that I tell him a story. Not for the first time, I wonder if that’s because he’s trying to stop himself from sharing his own.

Cole’s not great at sharing. He prefers to listen.

I look up at him. ‘Served best with a drink I reckon.’

His delight makes my day. There’s no better place to feel or to listen to someone laugh than when you’re tucked up against them.

Not long after, I stand and drag Cole along, ignoring his groan and my own disappointment. I don’t always want to be the one shoving us along, or ending the moment, but my story doesn’t fit here. And we might have a room waiting on us.

As Cole walks to the car, I look back and find that the wilted wildflower has jumped from Aunty’s vase. It’s tumbling across the dusty ground with the wind, purpose in its speed. It may be an early bloomer, destined to burn out before the rest begin, but at least it was bright and fresh to start with.

The sun is setting by the time we get back to the pub. It’s crowded and the happy noise carries out through the open doors and onto the street. The air inside is thick all the same and after a day spent in the car, it’s unwelcome. I recognise the late check-in immediately. He’s at the bar with bags at his feet and he has a beer moustache planted across his upper lip. He wipes the back of his hand against his mouth and slicks his hair back several times, nodding appreciatively at his glass. He’s knackered and content. I get it. For me, this town used to be the prize after long hours spent on the road.
Now I can't buy a night in the place that was a third home.

Over the top of the late check-in’s head, the barmaid gives us a sympathetic shrug and motions for us to come over before ducking into the back. She hands Cole two parcels of food and a cheeky wink. She must have opened up the kitchen early. She keeps Cole planted for a minute with chatter, but his heart isn’t in it. He pays up for the food, then, as an afterthought, gets her to ring up a couple of bottles of cheap red wine. We head out to the car, a wordless agreement between us to keep going. There’s no other option.

Aero watches with excitement as we approach. She doesn’t know or care that we’ll spend the next four hours chasing Newman in the dark.

I check my phone one last time, knowing we won’t get any service on the road.

**Mum**: Tell her I miss her.
Chapter Sixteen

We’re only an hour out of Meekatharra when Cole’s knee seizes up and we have to stop so that he can stretch it out.

I give Aero a reprieve from the cab, but she’s barking as soon as I put her back in.

‘Let’s play a game called *guess how long I have left in me?*’ Cole says.

‘We could stop for the night if you need to.’

I’m shattered and my eyes are strained from focusing on the night road. I’ve dropped to 90 kilometres an hour too, which is counterintuitive considering how much I wish we were at Dad’s already. I’ve braked twice for imaginary cattle. It wouldn’t surprise me if I was actually braking for their ghosts. Their carcasses always line these fenceless stretches of highway.

Every time we drive over a cattle grate, I have to swallow my heart back down.

‘Is it safe to stop?’

‘I don’t know that it’s not,’ I tell him honestly.

Aero’s sad barks wear me down and I decide to let her out again. I’m in the middle of attaching her lead when Cole opens the passenger side. Something cries into the night and Aero darts a quick look at me. Before I can react, she rips her lead out of my hands and bolts past Cole. She’s eaten by the dark. All I can hear as I round the back of the car is the pad of her paws, quieting to nothing.

I feel the blood rush from my face and my belly flips.

The ground before us is flat with a few bushes, but about ten metres in it becomes slightly thicker with short trees and low-lying scrub.

I can’t see anything else. I can’t see her!

‘AEROOO! Get the hell back here!’
Cole whistles. It’s a piercing sound that would surely reach her, but she doesn’t return.

‘There’s a flashlight in the back! Quick!’

Cole hobblies to the back of the car and upends our bags on the ground. Once he has the chunky yellow flashlight he turns it on and underarms it to me.

I catch it and bolt in the direction Aero ran.

‘Aero. Come on baby, come back,’ I plead, my voice huffing as I jog further away from the road. ‘AERO!’

‘Here girl,’ Cole yells behind.

‘Keep whistling,’ I tell him, looking back momentarily.

Big mistake. A bush materialises in front of me and I tumble to the ground, landing hard on my right knee with both hands splayed.

The abused flashlight rolls, flickers and cuts out.

‘Aero,’ I sob, getting to my feet.

I’m drawing in breath quickly, more out of anxiety than the short run. My grazed knee shakes as I refit the batteries. All I get is a dull, worthless beam. I hurry back towards Cole who continues to whistle and call.

‘Swing the car around towards the bush and turn on the high beams.’

Cole pats himself down for the keys. He’s about to say something when he does a double-take, narrowing his eyes to try and catch something behind me. I hear sand flicking. Wild dogs. I forgot about the wild dogs. Something bangs into the back of my knees and I squeal, tumbling to the ground with my palms spread out to catch myself again. Cole’s concern is suddenly washed from his face. Through the tornado of dust I spy his laughing face. His hands are bent to his knees. ‘S’okay, s’okay,’ he laughs. My hands register a collar and fur and then Aero is kissing my face and sneezing into it. This sends Cole into another uncontrolled fit as I swipe my face and come back with grit and the day’s sunscreen and dog snot. I pull her in roughly, holding her too tight.
I’m wracked by my own laughter now, finally buying into the humour of it, although I’m close to crying too, unable to pinpoint where it becomes sad and funny. She came back. I thought today was about to become a horror story, but she came back.

Cole sits down with us amongst the dancing dust.

‘You should’ve seen your face,’ he says, reaching for his phone and turning on its torch. Something we both should have done sooner.

Between chuckles, he worries at my clothes, gently patting away the sand. He reaches my knee and I notice my torn jeans. Blood seeps into the frayed threads. My hands are grazed and raw too. Cole turns one of them over and gives a sympathetic hiss. I let him take Aero from me and help me to my feet. He ties her to the steering wheel and pokes a finger at her through the shut window. She licks it, smearing the glass with saliva.

I’m picking up the bags Cole dumped on the ground when he pulls me unexpectedly towards the open boot and hoists me up onto the edge. When I try to shimmy down, he holds me in place with his hands about my waist.

‘Where’s your first aid kit?’

‘What makes you think I have one?’

He stares at me like I’m daft.

‘It’s in the glove box.’ I put my hand into my pocket to retrieve the keys for the compartment. ‘Nonononono!’ I pinch the bridge of my nose hard in disbelief.

‘What now?!’

‘Tell me you have the keys,’ I say sheepishly.

His shoulders slump and he ages five years, confirming what I already know. I hop off the boot and spin around in a neat 360, thinking stupidly that they may have landed somewhere close. I turn Cole around and give him a light push. ‘Go that way. And don’t kick up the dirt!’
I squat down on the ground and tuck my hair behind me ears. There’s nothing close by. That would be too easy. My knee stings badly as the skin tightens. I ignore it and waddle across the gravel with the light from my mobile, searching for a flash of silver.

Half an hour later, Cole’s sitting on the back of the car, dangling his legs over the edge. ‘I think we should call it,’ he says, banging the flashlight against his hand. It dulls some more. ‘Let me look at that leg.’

The demanding tone I’m not used to edges back in.

He hoists me up onto the back again.

‘What do we do now?’ I ask.

As my wrists linger on his shoulders, avoiding my grazes, Cole holds my elbows and shrugs. He either doesn’t care or is hiding his concern well.

He runs his hands down my leg and places the sole of my boot against the flat of his stomach so that he can undo my laces.

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘Daylight will sort it,’ he says. ‘We’ll wait until morning and then we can go from there. Now sit still.’

‘You don’t seem worried. What are we going to do if we can’t find them?’

He lets out a frustrated laugh. ‘You worry too much, Nev!’

‘Maybe you don’t worry enough, Cole!’

Our eyes meet. I work on a quick comeback, but he beats me to it by ripping my ruined jeans off at the knee. I protest with a yelp. He ignores it and runs water over my cut, which is not as deep as the amount of blood suggests. It’s painful though and I kick out. Cole recoils and holds my foot in his warm hands.

When I try to wriggle free, he holds me tighter and gets serious.
'Fancy an infection?' he asks.

'Fancy a foot in your...'

'Nev!' he laughs.

I poke him in the stomach with my foot. ‘You know I’ll do it.’

‘Promises, promises.’

We stare at each other until we’re both smiling.

I relax in his hands and let him trickle water over my knee again.

It doesn’t get better. I growl at him.

‘Remind me to inflect my own version of first aid on you at some point.’

‘Good god, witch. Where’s that bleeding drink you promised me?’

Twenty minutes later Cole is pouring wine into two of Mum’s old white enamel mugs, which are as worn and well-loved as his tattered camera bag. I don’t like wine that much, but I accept a cup from him and settle on our swags, which are rolled out across the now-flat space in the back of the car. We fall into a heavy quiet, courtesy of the mild night and complete lack of company on the highway.

We haven’t seen one car yet.

I dab at my palms with a wet tissue and stretch them tentatively. They’re really stinging now. Cole reaches over and inspects them again. He murmurs something, another word of sympathy perhaps. When he blows on each palm softly, I register a warm flush of pleasure.

Everywhere.

‘Who was it that you went to see today?’ he asks.

He still has my hands in his and I can’t concentrate. I take them back regretfully.
‘My Aunty Kaye.’

‘You haven’t mentioned her much. Is she from your mum or dad’s side?’

‘Neither. I’ve told you about Hub I think.’

Cole nods. ‘Your granddad.’

‘Well, when he left my gran, he went to Kaye. They were... you know.’

Cole winces. ‘And that made her family?’

‘Not that part, no. Mum tracked her down when she was old enough, trying to make sense of Hub. She ended up making peace with Aunty instead. I can’t remember not knowing her.’

‘And your mum,’ Cole says, looking down into his cup. ‘I take it she’s the one you’re thinking about forgiving?’

I recall my slight rant about forgiveness this morning.

‘Did you at least tell her that you aren’t going back?’

Normally Cole makes blabbing easy. Drunk or sober, he’s a good listener. The kind that offers small prompts to meet your pauses, which invites you to keep going.

I’m not into it tonight.

‘You know, you never really say too much about your family. Especially your dad.’

He takes the back off the flashlight and pops out the batteries so that we’re in the dark. After a few moments, I can make out his outline.

‘Cole?’

‘He’s all bent out of shape about me leaving,’ he says quietly. ‘And Etta. She’s in Newman and he’s been at me for ages to get up and check on her. Make sure she’s
making good on her word to stay put. What he really wants is for her to go home and for me to find work up there. The mines,’ he explains when I don’t ask. He clicks the batteries back in and the weak light returns. ‘I have a trade, six months of an engineering degree and a fucked knee, which in his eyes is by design. He reckons my life goals revolve around shitting him off, you see.’

‘Do they?’

He looks up at me, a glint in his eye. ‘Sometimes. The problem with my dad is he makes it easy.’

Mothers and their daughters. Fathers and their sons.

‘You never mentioned anything about your degree.’

‘It’s not mine yet. If I had my way I never would’ve started the bleeding thing.’

‘Yeah, engineer doesn’t quite work on you.’

He laughs. ‘And what does?’

I chew my lip. ‘My first instinct would be photographer,’ I hold up a hand as he tries to interrupt. ‘But that would be too easy. I’m guessing it would have something to do with... horses?’

Cole smiles.

‘Am I right?’

‘Vet,’ he says. ‘Equine vet.’

I clap my hands together without thinking. The sting makes me tear up.

Cole leans forward. I think he means to inspect my hands again. Instead, he takes Gran’s silver ring between two fingers and weaves the necklace through it until the clasp is at the back of my neck. He places the ring at the centre of my chest.

‘Clasp at the front means someone’s thinking of you,’ he says as he sits down again.
My blush is a fast creep. I feel it reach from my cheeks to my toes. ‘Wouldn’t have picked you for the superstitious type.’

‘Gotta believe in something.’

Cole drains his drink and stretches. The day has finally caught him.

He falls down onto his swag. ‘Tell me a story.’

The last story I told him was about the time Poppy tried to teach me how to whittle and I sliced off the tip of my thumb with his good knife.

It was a silly tale, but it made him laugh.

Cole is snoring faintly before I can think of anything.

‘Unbelievable,’ I laugh. He manages to slip in and out of his moods easy enough. To find peace when it matters. I fall to a daydream. One where we have many more days together and he teaches me the trick of not holding on so tight. There’s only tonight though and he’s already asleep. Tomorrow, we separate and Cole has to go find Etta and work, and I have to go to Dad and Poppy and explain what I’m doing there. As if I have a clue. I can already picture myself driving the dry persistent thread of a highway home after they make me see sense.

They’ve always been good at that.

Aero pads into the back, circles the space at my feet three times, and drops with a thump. I find her tail with my foot and snag it between my toes playfully.

Not long after, the flashlight cuts out for good, leaving me with a gold imprint when I close my eyes, and, soon after that, my familiar shapes. The long night ahead is already demanding that I relive the day. The texts. The letter. Everything. I shake my head. I wonder if life could be as easy as Cole suggests. As easy as just letting go.
Part Three

Little Red Sweeper

...he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began.


Chapter Seventeen

Dad and Poppy Bee’s place is a three by one with a bit of short-cut grass and red dirt competing for the front yard. It’s a breath away from Radio Hill and, like many of the yards around, it’s the perfect place for making rusty, mud pies and destroying every piece of white clothing you own, if of course your parents are fool enough to buy you any.

Poppy worked as an electrical contractor in the 80s and managed to wrangle free rent because his company did work for the mines: the sparkies got a few houses in mining suburbia, courtesy of BHP. Back then you couldn’t rent or buy a house unless you worked the mines. It wasn’t long before Poppy set his heart on a small radiator place outside the franchises that ran the town and he found himself holding down a part-time garage in the small industrial area, Isles and Son, and the part-time electrical contracts. Poppy held on stubbornly to this way of life after Nanna passed away from cancer, but as the decade wore on, the demands of two jobs and raising a young boy became too much. His garage saw out the 80s, but in the early 90s he hit the mines like the rest.

He says *it was too damn hard to keep fighting the pull. You can't go against the flow that carries a mining town. You either put up or shut up.*
Poppy put up. He ended up finding his niche up at Whaleback and Dad followed suit, high school and an electrical apprenticeship later. They’ve each lived other places, farther north, but one of them has always lived in Newman. In this house.

I put the car into park and look around. Everything is so quiet. Just like the highway.

I wish Cole was still with me.

I woke this morning to the smell of coffee. My stomach growled as I crawled out the back of the car. Cole had found my billy and burner, and was making two cups of sweet, black coffee in last night’s wine mugs. Then I spotted the keys on the blanket he set out for us. I could have cried, I was so happy.

*Found them by that bush you tripped over,* he said.

We hit the road soon after and made Newman in under three hours.

I told Cole he could stay at Dad and Poppy’s, but he said no. Too weird perhaps. For now, he’s settling into his donga at the caravan park and waiting on Etta. Besides a passing comment about catching up for a drink, I don’t know when I’ll see him again.

I do up my windows. Pockets of heat hit me immediately so that I get the sensation of sweat on sweat. My door pops open, destroying the expected relief with dry heat. Aero, however, is affecting her usual cool walk around the car, her tail wagging at the exact same pace it was when we left Cole at the caravan park and she had the front seat to herself. I lean against the open car door as she pads across the lawn. She reaches the flywire and waits, constantly moving on the spot until she realises that the doggy door’s open. Was Dad expecting us? Maybe Mum made the call.

*Howie, Neve’s done a runner... yes, I’m aware she hasn’t done that since... yes... yes... yes... take care of it!*

Aero’s belly scrapes against the hatch and she disappears inside. Her excited bark tells me that she’s broached the last front: she’ll be in Dad’s lap by now.

I follow her invisible paw prints. As I walk into the kitchen, I try not to look as cooked and tired and hungry as I feel. Dad’s sitting at the kitchen table, laughing as Aero jumps
on him. When he sees me his amusement turns into a slow, lazy smile. Content-like. About then, small amounts of shame and happiness take me over, shaking me up so that I don’t know which way to look. Dad’s on his feet and his hug is immediately safe and familiar. Aero looks at me knowingly. Avoiding her stare, I let Dad rock me from side to side then drop onto the seat next to him.

He has a jug of lemonade sitting in the middle of the table. It’s made fresh in its usual green glass decanter. I pour some into a beer mug and hold it between my raw hands.

‘What happened there?’ Dad asks.

‘Just scratches. I was chasing Aero.’

I don’t elaborate. He doesn’t need to know that I spent the night on one of the loneliest roads in the country with a boy, a bottle of wine and no keys. At least if he asked, I could explain that Cole is the most annoyingly chivalrous guy I’ve ever met. Despite the fumbled 30 dollars in my pocket yesterday and a loose arm across my hip as we slept last night, he’s barely touched me.

Dad doesn’t pry. He goes back to cleaning what appears to be a car bumper. It fits nicely across the end of his kitchen table. I watch him blow dust and grit from inside the tarnished silver curve, and try to think of what to say next.

‘Sorry, Dad.’

He looks up and slings his rag over his shoulder. ‘What for, Nevvy?’

‘Rocking up mostly. And for the call.’ He looks confused. ‘Mum?’

‘Oh, she hasn’t called. Give us a drink, hey?’

The green jug is heavy in my hands as I pour another mug of lemonade.

‘Where’s Poppy?’

Dad huffs. ‘He was camping up in the park with Rex and Harry. Called through this morning to say he’s holed up in Port Hedland waiting on parts for his ute. He flogs it, then wonders why it keeps shitting itself.’
I choke down a mouthful of lemonade and Dad gives me an apologetic smile.

Poppy being away has obviously worked itself into something testy.

Poppy’s edging 70, which, according to some people, means that he should be nearing something close to incompetence. Doesn’t make sense to me. Or Dad, usually. Poppy’s sharp and mobile in ways that most blokes 30 years younger probably wish they were. He loves the Pilbara and has been camping and trekking through it for decades. If anything, he’s amped it up a bit in the last five years since he retired, especially when his old mining buddies rock into town, looking to get lost.

‘He should be back in a week or so,’ Dad says.

‘Should?’

‘Can’t tell with him these days. You head up by yourself?’

‘I drove up with a friend.’

‘This friend have a name?’

‘Cole.’

‘Cole? A bloke then.’

Last time I checked, I’m about to tell him, until I realise that’d give him a heart attack.

‘Yep. One of Travis’ mates. He was headed this way too, so I asked him to tag along. Dropped him at Kalgan’s,’ I add, saving Dad the trauma of prying. ‘He might be over at some point.’

‘Well,’ Dad says, then stalls. I reckon he’s probably trying to think about the right thing to say to his 18-year-old daughter, who’s bringing a boy into his town. Maybe his home. I rest my chin in my hands and wait for him to finish. ‘If you trust the kid.’

‘Meh, it’s fifty-fifty. I’m almost positive he’s not a serial killer.’

Dad relaxes after that. Swigs his drink and crunches his ice. But when I get up to grab Aero a bowl of water, I see him check his watch for the third time since I got in.
'Are you expecting someone?'

'Yeah. I’ve got a mate popping in. Listen, before that…'

'Hold that thought,’ I cut in, before bolting down the hall.

Dad’s odd look tells me he’s either hiding something or is about to ask about Mum. I want to spend some easy time with him before we go there.

I freshen up in the bathroom with a cold, wet flannel across my face and neck. My phone dings as I’m cringing at my tired reflection in the mirror. Then it dings some more. All the messages that would have come through on the road are coming through now.

**Mum:** Did you see her?

**Mum:** ???

**Mum:** Where are you now?

**Mum:** Are you at your dad’s yet?

**Mum:** Neve?!

**Mum:** My show is in a couple of weeks.

My stomach drops with the last one. I completely forgot.

Her last solo exhibit was over two years ago. This is big.

**Me:** I know.

**Mum:** Nice of you to respond.

Jesus. She must be sitting on her phone.

**Mum:** Will you be there?

I put my phone on silent and step out into the hallway.
There’s an odd vibe about the house. I can’t pin it straight away, but as I move between rooms I realise that the place is neat. Dad’s not prone to mess, but he’s happy for things to stay lived-in. Poppy too. My bedroom, which is still littered with my books and teak furniture, is dusted and tidy. A cleaner maybe? No. They wouldn’t go that far. It has a woman’s touch to it though. The blankets on my bed have a crisp fold and when I lift the quilt, I spy hospital corners. There’s also a new stack of books in a high tower, including a worn copy of Eat Pray Love and novels from the Gossip Girl series. Not exactly my regular reading.

I slip off my boots and creep through the house in my socks, going back across all the rooms again. I’m standing before Dad’s shut door when voices reach me from the kitchen. His easy tones are unmistakeable, but there’s another voice too. A murmur or more of a hum. I wander back to the kitchen, carrying my curiosity, and come across the strangest sight I’ve seen in Dad and Poppy’s kitchen: a lady who is not my mum. She gives me a quick look that seems to convey all the worry and guilt of someone who’s just been caught out.

Dad’s face is a slightly more intense version.

Definitely not a mate.

When no one says anything, Dad is forced to speak. ‘Nev, this is Gabby.’

‘Howie, you didn’t tell me how gorgeous she is. What a button.’ Gabby holds a hand to her mouth, perhaps in a failed attempt to catch her last words.

Gorgeous? I haven’t showered in two days, meaning I smell like fermented grapes, body odour and whatever Aero rolled in last night.

At least I’m no longer wearing my torn jeans.

Gabby’s sweet voice and button-talk is completely out of sync with her high-vis work gear. She’s a miner then. I feel my eyes pop, Max-style, and can’t help but reciprocate with some nervous laughter of my own. I’m expecting a cheek pinch at any moment and can’t decide whether to bolt. Gabby, the poor thing, well she’s red now too. Hell, who isn’t? Dad’s taken a seat to calm himself.
Everything I’ve ever wanted for him is standing in front of me in the shape of Gabby. He loves his work, Poppy, his town and me, and forgiving the one small blight on it all, Cyclone Peta, he believes he’s led a charmed life. Ask him and he’ll say so with the sort of honesty that doesn’t become most people. So, what do you wish for the man who has everything he wants? Easy. A good woman. Or at least one that will hang around.

Gabby seems to have calmed somewhat. She walks around the table dividing us and envelopes my wrists above my grazes. Her fingers are freakishly soft. There’s not a hint of clamminess, despite the mix of heat and red faces. I’m itching to wipe my stinging, clammy hands against my pants, but I don’t want to insult her.

She inspects my palms, making sympathetic clucks with her tongue. ‘What’ve you done to yourself?’

'It looks worse than it is.'

She’s blonde. Tall for a woman, but shorter than Dad. Take a few years, grow her hair out, and lose some freckles off her creamy skin, and it appears Dad has a type.

Oh god. I’m going to get more siblings.

A little brother wouldn’t be so bad I guess.

Someone for Gerry to play with.

They’d never meet though, would they?

Different parents and all that.

How weird is that?

A brother and sister with my blood, but in no way related.

‘Earth to Nev,’ Dad says, waving a hand in front of me. I give Gabby a quick once over. No baby bump.
‘So, you two are like, dating?’ My latest word-vomit has all the finesse of a six-year-old and I want to crawl into the corner with Aero, who’s decided Gabby looks better from a distance. She’s wagging her tail at a happy-mad pace all the same.

‘Yeah, that’s about it,’ she says, with a small smile at Dad.

‘Okay then.’

‘Okay?’ asks Dad. There’s a heap of hope squished into that one word.

I nod quickly, not trusting my voice, and Gabby and Dad share a quick moment; a stare that is rather like happy surprise. What in the hell has he been saying about me to make her so shocked by my good behaviour?

‘Maybe leave those hands to breathe for a day or two,’ Gabby says, as she grabs her keys. ‘I’d best be off.’

As I worry over her quick exit, she kisses Dad’s cheek.

There’s a practiced kind of affection about it.

‘Don’t leave because of me.’

Gabby’s laughter is no longer a nervous tingle, but rather sweet and deep. ‘I’ve got to go to work. A couple more days and my roster’s done though. Gotta love it.’ She rolls her eyes, which wins me over. ‘I wish I could chat proper, but I’m already pushing it.’

‘We’ll get the chance.’ I look at Dad, then back at Gabby. ‘Won’t we?’

Dad clears his throat. ‘Actually, I’m giving Gabby a lift up to Port Hedland on Saturday for some training, then we’re staying on.’

‘You’re going to Port for a holiday?!”

Dad laughs. ‘Gabby’s folks are up that way for a week and we thought seeing as our leave overlaps I might as well meet them.’

He’s meeting the parents.
The comfort that settled as soon as I walked through the door starts to disintegrate and it’s only now that I spot Dad’s suitcase sitting by the door. He’s about as organised as a meandering cat, so if he’s packed already, he must be looking forward to the trip.

It’s Sunday now. That means I’ve got him for a week.

‘You know what, we can always do the trip some other time, Howie,’ Gabby says. ‘No, no,’ she tells him when he tries to get a word in. ‘It’s a no-brainer, love. You stay here with Nev and I’ll drive up alone.’

‘No way. You have to go. Both of you.’ My plea comes out about as emphatic as Gabby’s, giving the impression that it’ll be the best thing in the world to say goodbye to Dad when I’ve only just managed to get my lazy arse here.

Dad stands. ‘We’ll talk about it,’ he says.

I’m not entirely sure if he’s speaking to me or Gabby, but I have no intention of letting him cancel on her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket after they walk out.

**Minty:** Morning mischief. Tell me I’m not your very best friend...

**Me:** Mint, you’re my only best friend. Care to elaborate?

**Minty:** Hello! Cole?

**Me:** Ahhh.

**Minty:** Surprised even myself with how good that one turned out.

**Me:** Nothing happened.

**Minty:** Say what now?

**Me:** Serious, Mint.

**Minty:** You’re telling me you spent the night together and ‘nothing happened’?

**Me:** Nada.
Me: Zilch.

Me: What can you do?

Me: ...and that was not me legitimately asking btw!

Minty: Pity that. I have some suggestions. One word... putty.

Me: Putty? Is that what we’re calling it these days?

Minty: Jeepers, Nev. As in ‘he’d be putty in your hands’

Me: Oh.

That’s when it hits.

Me: Hold up! How did you know we had to spend the night together?

Minty: Cole. Via Travis. I overheard him telling your gran.

Great.

If Gran knows, then Mum will soon enough, followed by Dad.

Talk about six degrees of separation.

What does a girl have to do to get some peace?

Minty: Are you seeing him again?

Me: Maybe.

Minty: There’s hope for you yet.

Me: How’d Gran take me leaving?

Me: Did she say anything about the car?

Minty: I’m sure she’ll be ok when you get back.

Gran’s obviously had a few words to say on the matter.

Me: Tell her I’ll get it back to her.

Minty: Promise me you’re not seriously considering staying up there.

I stall. Do I lie?

Me: I have to go. Phone’s about to go flat. Luvya Mint x
Minty: Neve Isles. Get back here dammit!
Chapter Eighteen

My first day with Dad falls away quickly, mostly due to me crashing out on the lounge after a long shower and a three-minute conversation about Gabby. The brief yet painful who, what, where, when and why the hell didn’t you tell me, Dad?

I wake to a quiet house and expect to find that Dad has left for night shift. Instead, I find him at the barbeque out in the backyard nursing a beer.

‘Really, Dad? A sicky?’

He fake coughs and takes a swig of his drink. I join him by the barbeque and watch as he turns the faux-sausages and veggie kebabs like he’s actually enjoying it.

‘Went to the shops while you were passed out,’ he says, nudging me in the ribs, looking pleased with himself. ‘Got that squidgy tofu you like.’

I hate the squidgy tofu. I’ll never tell him that.

I nudge him back, then park myself on the picket table Poppy made years ago. The yard looks smaller than I remember. I recall tea parties with Poppy and how I used to pretend I was a witch, making red dirt potions.

I surface from the memory to find Dad staring at me.

‘What’s up, Dad?’

He turns off the gas and walks over.

‘I told a small white lie this morning, Nevy. At least, there was something I didn’t tell you. Your mum hasn’t called, but your gran did yesterday morning. Said you’d be through at some point.’

I stare at my nails. ‘And Mum didn’t call?’

‘She hasn’t yet. Promise.’

Yet.
Dad gets up and walks into the house. I think he’s trying to avoid the whole mess. He’s not big on confrontation. He surprises me by walking back out with two beers, nodding in my direction to see if I want one. There’s something familiar to it, even though it’s the first drink I’ve ever shared with my dad. He eyes me with a smirk, letting me know he’s thinking the same thing.

‘Just the one,’ he says firmly.

My first sip is quick and I pretend it’s bitter, as I tuck my legs up to my chest.

A couple of minutes go by and I know then that Dad will wait all night for me to spill.

‘Do you think you could put in a good word for me somewhere?’

Dad scratches his chin, but doesn’t reply.

‘It doesn’t have to be glamorous, Dad. I was thinking if I could get my RSA, then I’m set for relief or something. With the right word of course. I handle heaps of the maintenance at Cleary’s and I shadow Darryl sometimes and Gran’s always...’

‘Nevy,’ Dad cuts in. ‘Are things with your mum really that rough?’

‘We haven’t been speaking much. When we do, it’s... Well, it’s just not good.’

‘Your gran seems to think it’s about the cottage. Last time I spoke to your mum though, she said you were keen on it.’

‘Keen! She said that?!’

‘I’m guessing your version is different?’

‘I can’t stay there, Dad. I’m serious. The only other place for me is here.’

‘If that’s what you want, then sure. But you’re going to have to help me nut this one out a bit better first.’

‘What do you mean?’
‘Well, your gran also said your uncle had a couple of words with you about Hub and he’s been fretting ever since. Worried he set your heart on leaving. Does this have anything to do with Hub?’

‘I’m curious about things,’ I tell him.

‘How curious are we talking?’

‘It’s weird, that’s all. I mean, Mum never speaks about him, but he’s still around. Like he’s in between us and she won’t let him budge.’

‘He’s gone, Nevy. Has been for a good while now.’

‘Then why does she go so crazy every year?!’ As I say it, I know there’s no point asking him that. He doesn’t see it. But there has to be some gaps he can fill in. ‘Did you help her find him when she first came here?’

He barks a laugh. ‘There was never much chance of that happening, Nevy. And that didn’t seem to worry her at the start. First time I saw her was broken down a few kilometres out of town. Still remember the exact spot. Me and a few mates were headed to the dam when we saw her by the side of the road. I ended up towing her back here and convincing your poppy to help m...’

‘You told me all that ages ago,’ I interrupt.

‘The beginning, the middle or the end, Nevy. Which one is it?’

I place my hands in the crook of my bent knees and attempt a remorseful look.

‘Within a day she’d already told me all about how her mum had been telling her dad to stay away and how she chased up this other woman he was meant to be shacking up with.’

Dad waits for me to interrupt. I don’t.

‘After she left Kaye’s, she was planning on going further north for work. She was going to wait there until your gran caved and gave her Hub’s details. The car put an end to that. She’d bought some lemon in the city. Real rusty piece it was. I managed to
convince your poppy to let her stay with us while I finished repairs on it. He wasn’t happy, but she had nowhere else to go and wouldn’t tell us where home was. That and she seemed to trust anyone she came across, which was a worry. Wasn’t long before your poppy grew sore about me mooning after her and missing work. We couldn’t stop fighting about it. I ended up spending a heap of time with your mum to make the old man angry, then... well you get the picture.’

‘She had me.’

‘Not before she took off again.’

‘After I was born yeah?’

Dad shakes his head. ‘Before that. She took off back to Kaye’s without telling me she was pregnant. I didn’t see her for a good five months, not even a letter, then she comes back close to bursting. Surprised your poppy didn’t have a coronary. She was such a skinny thing and you were a boulder on her belly. I thought she’d have it in her to settle down. Didn’t happen that way. She was with us for almost a year after you were born. Then one morning, she told us your gran had finally given her Hub’s details and that she was leaving for a while. When she asked to take you with her, I told her she couldn’t until she’d done what she needed to. Got herself right. I don’t think she had it in her to fight me on it. I mean, she was old for age, but taking a baby on the road was more than she could handle. Easy to forget she was only 18.’

So were you I want to say. But then, their situations were different. Dad may have been the same age, but he had a father and knew where his mother was, even if he would never get to see her again. All Mum had was a father who left a gap in her life and a mother who held any mention of him in so tight, it was like he never existed.

‘She spent that next year with him, didn’t she?’

‘Some of it.’ Dad looks at me and his face softens. ‘Until your mum met Hub, she thought it was your gran keeping him away from her. And that was true enough in a way. What she didn’t know was that Hub had been in prison for most of her life to that point.’
‘What?!’

‘He went away when she was five and got out when she was 16. Robbery of some kind. She wanted a father so badly that she never took a second to think that maybe she wouldn’t find one.’

‘Something happened.’

Dad nods. ‘I never got all of it out of her. She told me that she set herself up in a motel nearby and got a job at a servo. They had a few good weeks. Wasn’t long before he turned into a bastard, though, or started showing it at least. He’d get on the turps and just rage at her, calling her Izzy, thinking she was your gran. And he’d get her involved in all sorts of crap. He was selling pot at one point, which didn’t work too well on account of him smoking it. Your mum ended up skimming from the till at work to cover him one day. She quit before she could get fired. Funny part is, it was Hub who told her to bugger off. She rocked up to his place after quitting the servo and told him she didn’t have money for the motel anymore. She had nowhere else to go, but he still kicked her out, telling her he had no intention of supporting her. When she went back to try and reason with him, he slammed the door in her face. Broke her nose.’

My eyes well. The broken nose she has a hundred stories for.

‘She called from a payphone, hysterical, saying she couldn’t come back and that I was right to keep you. That I should keep you forever. I didn’t hear from her for ten months. Then one day, she just rocked back up.’

Dad taps his beer against the table until I think it’ll shatter.

‘Like I said, she didn’t say too much else. Except that she was back for good. I gave her a year at the most, but she surprised me.’

‘How so?’

‘She stayed a year and a few days.’

He chuckles unexpectedly.
He’s been saving that one up.

‘You’re hilarious, Dad.’

He smiles and jostles my shoulder. ‘I learnt early on that I couldn’t pin her to the place, Nevy. The only thing I knew was that I was happy where I was and that she had a habit of coming back. It was enough for me. Guess I didn’t bank on her changing as much as she did.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, when she came back after Hub, after not seeing you for that year, she was quieter. Determined, but quiet. Nothing came out in a rush anymore. Not like that first day I met her. And she wouldn’t leave your side. She got a part-time job doing the books at one of the mechanics, but it fell through when they stopped letting her take you in. After that, she spent all her time at home, or out at the dam, or waiting for your poppy and me to finish work. She seemed to know that it wasn’t working, but she kept on trying. Real dogged about it she was. Wouldn’t drop her lip or bite into an argument. Just kept all peaceful and stayed.’

‘For a year and three days at least,’ I say.

Dad isn’t listening. I think his thoughts have taken him someplace lighter, to a memory that only he and Mum own.

I don’t know what to do with this younger version of her. Over the years I’ve filled the gaps of her early life with my own imaginings and hurt, because she refused to open up about them. I see now why she didn’t. All she did for those first few years after she ran from Cleary’s was misstep into messes, hopping between people she thought could solve her problems, until she blundered into Hub and had to learn a hard lesson about trust. It’s safe to say she’s never quite relied on anyone since.

I rest my chin on my drawn knees and pretend I don’t sense Dad staring at me.

‘Do you ever think about your nanna, Nevy?’

The question throws me completely.
‘Um. I guess. I mean, not too much.’

‘I’m not looking to make you feel bad, love. It’s just that I learnt a long time ago that sometimes when someone’s gone, you need to let them stay that way. You can get lost in missing them.’

He looks at me knowingly.

‘You think I’m interested in Hub for Hub’s-sake, don’t you?’

‘You’re not?’

‘No. I’m not. This is going to sound horrible, Dad, but me wanting to know more is not about me missing him or looking for a way to keep him alive. It’s the opposite.’

*I want him to be dead so that Mum and I have a chance.* I can’t tell Dad this.

I never knew I had it in me to own such a disgusting truth. My nails sink into the flesh behind my knees. I can feel the blunt crescents they leave behind.

Imagine wishing someone dead.

*My phone starts ringing, saving me from explaining to Dad what I feel or mean or think.* I fumble for it. It’s Mum.

Dad and I watch it as it rings out.

‘You’ll have to call her soon, Nev.’

We both know that he’ll get to it before I do. Mum and Dad haven’t been in the same room together in years, but they’re good at telephone parenting.

‘Sure thing, Dad.’

Later that night I’m in bed, listening to Dad snore down the hallway, when my mobile dings. It has to be Mum. It’s too late to be anyone else. I sit on the edge of my bed and turn on my lamp, wishing I was sharper for our next bout.
Cole: Want to catchup tomorrow arvo?

My relief surprises me.

I check the time. It’s one o’clock.

Me: Umm... you mean this arvo, right?

When Cole doesn’t reply in the first ten seconds I worry that it was a delayed text he sent earlier. Crap. I’ve messaged him in the middle of the night. Way to look despe...

Ding.

Cole: Well yeah, if you want to get specific haha

Phew. I’m not psycho-stalker-girl.

Me: I think I can manage it.

Cole: If ur busy...

I can picture him smirking.

Me: Where & when?

Cole: Where and when u tell me of course.

Smart man. I’m trying to stall my reply when he texts again.

Cole: Can’t sleep?

Me: Ha. Not even close. You?

Cole: Sleep hates me... mind if I call?

My belly somersaults with a panicky kind of joy.

Me: I’ll call you.
Dad’s landline rings early the next morning. He runs past my door and picks up the phone with a chirrupy ‘Hall-ow.’

*Rookie mistake, Dad.*

It has to be Mum. Whenever I stayed with Dad as a kid, she would call religiously every day at about this time, knowing when to catch him between shifts or before he went out to his shed. It always had an intuitive sweetness about it.

‘She’s fine. Safe,’ Dad corrects.

I roll over so I’m facing the door.

‘Says she’ll contact you at some point... No, she didn’t say whether she is or not. I think she might b... Well what did you expect? I told... Yes I did. How about we leave it?... Yes... Yes... Yes! I will. Christ, take a breath, Peta.’

I love it when he tells her to chill.

‘If she doesn’t call then I will... Uh huh... Uh huh... Okay. Tomorrow then. Bye.’

The phone gets a good tap and I hear Aero whine at Dad as he walks out to his shed.

The door opens again: 'Oh come on you big sook. It's not the end of the bloody world.'

Everything’s quiet after that.

I think about the promise Dad made to call Mum. How he'll be on the phone to her the moment I decide what it is I want to do next. I can count on one hand the amount of times I've lied to him. I'll be in double figures soon.
Chapter Twenty

By late afternoon I’m out the door and flying down the road on my old pink bike. My basket is stacked with my portable radio and beer from the bottle-o. I told Cole I’d head over at four. That’s about the time his mate Sam is due with word of Etta.

Apparently she’s still missing.

The houses sail past and the late afternoon sun drops as I pass the oval and hit the road that leads out of Newman. It yields the town’s only caravan park.

When I see Cole and Sam sitting on the ground outside one of the dongas, I immediately regret rocking up on my lame bike. I’m flushed from the ride and Sam is missing the Y chromosome I was expecting. He is actually a she and is devastatingly gorgeous. Jet black hair in a pixie cut, tanned and oddly familiar to the girl in Cole’s stash of Polaroids. Her work boots and high-vis getup do nothing to hide her figure. I grip the loose rubber handlebars, rolling them back and forth, and Cole plays with an empty beer bottle, not realising I’m here. Sam, however, does. She gets up and tries to relay something with her eyes. I nod knowingly, as if I’ve suddenly become telepathic, and she walks off leaving a huge hole where she stood.

Cole’s shattered, fanning himself with his cap and stretching his long legs out before him. When he finally looks up at me, he’s wearing an eerie calm.

It’s a completely new shade to his personality.

He nods once. ‘Nev.’

‘Is that one yours?’ I ask, leaning on the handlebars and contemplating the donga, which is at the end of a long line of them.

The convenience and cheapness of this corrugated living has warped some of the Newman homes into lookalikes. Shed-like houses. I’m not a fan, but Cole has a habit of settling into places easily.
‘What’s up, Cole?’

He throws his cap at the ground. Hard.

I balance my bike between my legs, pick it up, and dust the dirt from it.

‘Have you ever heard of fracking?’ His question is blunt and he doesn’t wait for my response. ‘Mining. Been done for years. It’s a high pressure, high invasive technique for getting hold of natural gases in the ground. It's bleeding rough.’

He laughs darkly.

‘I don’t get it. What’s so funny?’

‘Sam's an old family friend. I got a call through to her before we split the other day and asked her to chase up word of Etta so the little rat didn’t know I was looking for her. Sam says she took off a couple of days back, up north dribbling nonsense about a proposed fracking project that way. There’s a protest.’

His face is blank. He waits for me to get it.

‘She’s protesting it?!’ I pull out the stand for my bike and join Cole on the ground with a heavy ‘hmpf’. I rest his cap on my bent knee and try to pull the bits I know about Etta into a human puzzle. ‘But she’s a miner’s daughter. You guys would have lived and breathed that stuff growing up, right?’

Cole grunts.

Being a miner’s kid must be like being a cop or a farmer’s kid. There’s the necessary moaning over how hard things are because of it, but you often walk the line of their making, as you grow accustomed to the rhythm of that kind of life. Coppers don’t raise criminals, farmers don’t raise vegetarians, and miners don’t raise hippies.

There are exceptions of course. Etta is apparently one of them.

‘She’s got a bleeding heart,’ Cole says. ‘Always wanted to join the Peace Corps and become a vegan and save the planet. Which I get,’ he adds hastily, looking at me. ‘She just did a real good job of conning Dad into thinking she was daughter of the year, you
know? As a kid, anyway. These days she’s more like me. She’s got a knack for pissing him off. Christ, knowing her, she’s probably leading the damn thing. Megaphone in one hand, a shoddy placard in the other.’ His voice gives a slight hint of his Texan roots as his anger takes over.

‘Maybe she’s just doing it to mess with your dad. She might come back and he’ll never know.’

Cole shakes his head and I realise he’s in a spill kind of mood. Probably courtesy of the empty beer bottles at his feet.

‘Dad gave Etta the same two paths he gave to me and our sister, Margo. We could either go straight into a trade after graduation, or into college. That was it. Somehow, Etta conned him into letting her study engineering at his old uni in Perth. Dad was stoked, until he found out which units she was enrolled in. She was taking a couple in environmental science, which practically screams activism to my dad. It took one call from him and she split to Newman. She bleeding ran.’

A gap in Cole’s story fills itself. Not so much why he’s here, because he explained that already, albeit in small detail. Rather, I’m starting to see where he fits into the family dynamic. The older brother. The chasing. The disappointing.

‘You mentioned that your dad asked you to find her,’ I say softly.

‘Yeah, he asked,’ Cole says. ‘After he flew to Perth with Etta to get her settled for semester, I bailed on my degree and went to stay with some friends in Melbourne. I’m not proud of it. It was just easier to do it with only Mum there, you know? When Dad found out, he went full radio silence. But after Etta ran as well, he couldn’t keep it up. He told me to get over here and find her seeing as I was doing nothing. He was spitting down the phone at least four times a day, threatening to disown me if I didn’t get off my lazy arse, go find her and then come back to finish what I’d started. That was last year. I told him to go jump and…’

‘You cut yourself off,’ I finish for him. Cole raises an eyebrow. ‘Travis,’ I tell him, selling my nosey cousin down the river. ‘What made you decide to come and find her now?’
He shrugs. ‘She’s my kid-sister. And you were coming. I guess it was the right time.’ I place my hand on his shoulder and he brushes it with his chin unexpectedly.

‘What about the job? If you get some work it might give you the time and money to track her down or coax her back.’

‘Sam says it’s not going to happen. At least not at the moment. They don’t care who I get to put in a good word, they won’t forgo the medical.’

His knee.

I try to steal some of Dad’s patience. To stay quiet and draw Cole out. It doesn’t last.

‘There’re a heap of homesteads around, if...’

‘I haven’t been able to work with horses properly for a good year,’ he interjects. ‘Even the stuff I’ve been doing at Minty’s folk’s place is agony some days.’

‘Can you get a quick fix or something?’

‘Cortisone might help, but it needs surgery is my guess. One doc in Melbourne reckons it could be post-traumatic arthritis from the break. Can happen after a while,’ he tells me. ‘It’s that or something else.’

‘They were never going to take you, were they? You didn’t need Sam to tell you that.’

Cole responds with a humourless smile. I can’t tell its direction. Does he hate me for saying it? Or himself for thinking he could shoot north and settle on something so easy? Work or Etta or his Dad’s good grace.

I watch ants investigate us and concentrate on the small contact we share, hip to hip. Cole leans against me slightly and my developing patience gets another workout as I wait for him to talk. There’s a look there that I know something about, but it’s intensified: he’s cornered and he doesn't know what to do next. I think he was using this trip to find Etta because it was logical and it gave him something to sink himself into, while forgetting where he’s hurting. What does he do now? He’s got nothing to work with. No home. No job. No money.
All Cole has is a runaway sister and an aching knee.

He rests his forehead on his folded arms. ‘I’m going to have to call him.’

My heart sinks. Cole will likely get what he needs from his dad, but it will come with strings attached. Ones that may be harder than ever to extricate himself from.

I imagine he’ll have to go home and he’ll have to stay there.

‘When’s Etta due back?’

‘Sam’s convinced her to come collect her gear and sign off on some payroll stuff. I’m hitching out tomorrow to go get her. One of Sam’s mates is on R&R. Bus back by Friday, I reckon.’

Three days.

‘That’s fast.’

‘Has to be. Once I call Dad, he’s going to get here pretty quickly. I could hold off, but I’ll probably need him to talk to Etta.’

‘How are you going to get back to the city?’

Cole shakes his head. ‘Bus. Hitch. Something will line up.’

‘I might be able to help.’

‘You just got here.’

I scrunch up my nose.

‘What is it?’

‘I need someone to take Gran’s car back.’

He straightens for the first time. ‘So you’re staying on then? You’ve decided?’

‘Close to it.’

Cole nudges the ground with his boot. ‘You’d trust us with it? Trust me?’
I place his cap on his head backwards. He lets me slide a hand beneath the inside rim on both sides so that his hair is smooth against it. ‘I trust you.’ I give him a small grin to cover how much it hurts that he accepted the car so easily. Accepted me staying and him leaving. ‘Besides, sometimes you just need to accept a good offer and know when to shut up.’

That, at least, gets a smile.

A few drinks later the sun sets and Cole and I move inside. There isn’t much space in the room so we lie down on the double bed, listen to the radio and eat a bag of raspberry lollies for dinner. Our knees tap every now and again as each song winds the night down into a lazier rhythm. Cole tells me the songs I should be listening to and I pretend I’ve never heard them, just to hear him talk about something he loves. Then, he asks me to tell him a story about Newman.

I say no, just to see what he does.

When he begs, I can’t resist.

I tell him about the Fortescue River. Swimming in it when it was teeming after a decent rainfall, or having a barbeque under the bridge when it was bone dry. I tell him about the road to Prairie Downs cattle station, where we buried Poppy’s ancient Chihuahua. It was a shady spot that owned a special brand of Pilbara quiet.

It’s hard to stop telling Cole stories once I start.

‘What does your dad do up here?’ Cole asks later, after I’ve grown quiet.

‘Shift maintenance supervisor or something. Up at Whaleback.’

He nods. I have no idea what that means, but he seems to.

‘Looks like it’s the mines for you too. What’s it to be? Foreman? Leading Hand?’

‘Ha. Ha. Very funny.’ I turn on my side to face him. ‘Do you think Etta can get her job back? If she’s able to get work, then maybe you can avoid calling your dad.’
You could stay too I want to tell him.

‘I doubt it. Not with the arrest.’

‘The what?’

Cole stares at the roof. ‘From what I can gather the protest started peacefully, but one of Etta’s new friends was tripped up. My baby sister went all mother-hen on someone and started pushing and swearing. They dropped the charges,’ he adds, when he sees my face. ‘There’s no way the mine will take her back, even if she wanted them to. I have no idea what she was doing up here in the first place. One minute she’s saying big mines are satanic, the next she’s on the bleeding payroll.’

‘She must be confused.’

‘See, now that’s what she needs. Sympathy. Don’t worry about her. She probably thinks it’s great. I mean, she’s officially deviant now or something. Plus, in our family if you can’t vie for the top, then you have to vie for something. Why not the bottom?’

I scrunch up my face. ‘So by some weird standard she’s managed a win because this will piss off your dad more than anything you’ve managed recently?’

‘Precisely.’ He seems pleased that I understand his family dynamic.

‘I thought my family was fucked.’

‘You have no idea.’ He laughs and rolls onto his side to appraise me. ‘Her last stunt was using Dad’s credit card to donate to one of the anti-fracking organisations in the States. Let’s just say it was a sizeable amount. It made the front page of the local: Aussie Magnate’s Daughter Bleeds Green for the Cause or something like that. He cut her off,’ Cole says, with another short laugh. ‘He’s fond of that one. She made up for it by applying to his university in Perth. He thought he finally had her inline.’

‘Thought being the operative word.’

‘That’s it. Do you know what the worst part about all of this is?’

‘That when you bring Etta back it will be like an apology to your dad?’
Cole laughs and runs a hand over his face. ‘I was going to say that I’ve quit smoking, but there’s that too.’

He gets up and starts shifting clothes around, presumably to look for a stray cigarette. I don’t fancy his chances. The room’s a mess.

I throw a t-shirt at him. ‘Nice place by the way. Totally worth it.’

‘It was a gamble,’ he admits, not talking about the room. He throws the shirt back at me. ‘How’s yours working out for you?’

Smart-arse. At least his smirk is back.

‘I’ll give you something to help you quit,’ I tell him.

‘What’s that?’

I pull the lackey band from my hair and tap the bed. ‘Come here.’

He sits down with his good leg tucked in and his bad one stretched out in front. I crawl across the bed and sit in front of him with my legs folded neatly. He holds his sore knee, laughs and calls me a ‘show-off.’

He’s still grinning when I place the lackey around his wrist and flick it. Hard.

He holds where it stung, his mouth agape. ‘What was that for?!’

‘Whenever you want a smoke, you flick the lackey. Negative reinforcement. Works for just about anything.’

He looks at my wrist. Sure enough, there’re a couple of bands I put there today. I started with one in an attempt to encourage better thoughts about Mum and added another after a few texts from Jimmy. My wrist has been on fire most of the day. On paranormal cue, my phone dings. Which one will it be?

Jimmy.
He’s getting insistent. I could kick myself. In front of me is a good guy, broken, but good in every sense of the word. Yet I went and spent myself on a viper like Jimmy, just to feel wanted.

Without warning, Cole steals my phone. I’m about to protest, when he kisses me. Just like that. But I barely have time to register his lips on mine before he pulls back.

My eyes dance across his amused face and I take a deep breath to calm myself.

I’m actually having trouble letting it go.

Cole chuckles. ‘Are you holding your breath?’

I shake my head.

‘Nev,’ he says softly. ‘I can’t kiss you if you’re holding your breath.’

He moves closer and closer, smiling the whole time so that my sudden anxiety turns into laughter and delight. It’s exactly what I needed and he knows it. His mouth, when it touches mine, is warm and between the soft smack of our lips I catch a hint of raspberries and beer. I lean into him, chasing the odd taste and the flicker of tongue he’s teasing me with. That’s when he tenses.

I look down at my hands. They’re pressing into his legs.

‘Your knee?’

‘Fuck the knee,’ he growls.

He pulls me into his lap and finally gives me the kiss I’ve found myself waking up from more mornings than I care to admit. It’s deep and soft, then urgent in a completely uncontrolled way, as if he needs more of me than he can get. Then it’s soft again. Teasing. I bite his bottom lip as he draws back and soon his hands are under my white cotton shirt, working along the curve of my back to the small of it. After a couple of minutes, I decide that I’ll never wear a shirt again if he’ll just take it. Each time I shimmy it up, he pulls it down and with a husky laugh says no. My tongue dances across his and I say yes in such a way that I feel him relent. There’s a strange power to it. One I never dreamed I’d have over Cole.
When he grasps the flesh of my hips, as if to control himself, I take his silent cue. Too fast, he’s telling me. I press my forehead to his and try to calm myself.

But then he starts to knead the small of my back.

Where I’m ticklish.

I laugh. I can’t help it. Cole’s face is all sin when he registers why I’ve lost it. I drop back on the bed, already ‘no-no-no-ing’ as he reaches for the spot again. I try to hold him off, without success. In the end, I give up and let our laughter melt in my ears.

‘I love your laugh,’ I tell him.

He gives me a long, teasing kiss in response and I pull him to me so that the line of his body matches mine.

His lips are by my ear. ‘I’m drunk, Nev.’

My skin prickles with pleasure and I hook one of my legs around the back of his, holding him to me. ‘Are you worried I’ll take advantage?’

‘You’re drunk too. And you’re staying,’ he says. ‘And I’m leaving. Wha...’

‘I couldn’t care less,’ I breathe.

‘Gee, thanks!’

‘I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean... why does it have to matter right now?’

He sighs. ‘Do you remember when I first got back and Trav threw that party?’

‘Really?! You’re choosing right now to bring that up?’

‘The reason I didn’t want to do anything is because I thought I was going to take off again. Granted, that didn...’

I wriggle beneath him until our hips are flush. He closes his eyes.

‘You’re a witch.’

‘And you’re a fool.’
'Nev. Seriously. I’m going to hate myself for the rest of my life, but I’m not sleeping with you, then leaving a few hours later. I didn’t do it last year and I’m not going to do it tonight.’

Oh god.

He’s serious.

I don’t embarrass myself by trying to change Cole’s mind.

He rolls to my side and we stare at the ceiling.

‘What now?’ I ask.

‘You could tell m...’

‘Cole! I swear to god if you ask me to tell you a story, I’ll call your dad myself.’

He laughs. ‘Okay, okay. How about you just tell me where else you’re ticklish?’

When I wake, the lights are out and I’m tucked against Cole. I shift so that we’re face to face and he pulls me in. My leg slips between his, twining. The swish of his jeans against mine is my new favourite sound.

‘Are you sure you’ll be back on Friday?’

‘Hmm,’ he murmurs, his voice faint, but relaxed, as if he didn’t hear me.
Chapter Twenty One

I make it home before Dad knocks off nightshift. Just. I’m squirrelling under my blankets when I hear the timbre of his work truck down the street.

He goes about his post-work ritual. Dumping his gear. Removing his boots. Making a coffee. He’ll sleep through the caffeine easily. I pull my blankets up to my nose and listen to him chat to Aero, reminding her to remind him to see to the oil stain in the driveway later, and to fix the squeaking hinges on the flywire, which I complained about yesterday.

I roll over to face the wall and pinch my eyes closed. If only sleeping was as easy as wanting to. My head refuses to switch off. Not surprising. Less than an hour ago I was sharing a bed with Cole. A painfully chaste bed, but still.

I check my phone.

Cole: x

My heart goes insane. I want to call him, but he’d be well out of range by now.

He’s already left to go find his delinquent baby sister.

He may be back in a few days offers the optimistic part of me.

But he has to leave again shortly after rebuts the caustic, evil side.

If I hold to my plan and let him take Gran’s car back, then I’m saying I’m done with him. And Cleary’s. I could always try fly-in-fly-out. Work up here and spend my time off in the city after each swing. Resign myself to seeing Cole every four weeks or so. Nope, that wouldn’t work. Not only could I not handle this second life – living in Gran’s house along with the retreater or with Mum in the cottage – but Cole probably won’t stay in Perth anyway. ‘He’s going back home to his family,’ I remind myself. I could always go visit him, but then that would be even worse than having a FIFO relationship and seeing him once a month. I don’t want him to become a text message or a phone
call or a shaky, unreliable image on a computer screen. I want the intensity of what I feel to be able to wrap around him each day and every night.

I growl into my pillow. No matter how many scenarios and solutions I come up with, none of them take into account what Cole wants.

Dad’s landline rings and I jump.

‘Hello,’ he says, picking it up after the first ring. ‘Peta, g...’

I throw my pillow over my head and count to 60.

Sure enough, the call is done by then.

Mum’s rung two mornings in a row. She won’t stop. She’ll keep calling and calling, so that she and Dad can have their one-minute conversations about crazy old me.

I pick up my mobile. I know it’s a bad idea, but I don’t care.

Me: Dad told me what happened with Hub.

Mum: Good morning to you too.

Me: Well?

Mum: What is it you’d like me to say Neve?

Me: He talked, but I still have questions.

Mum: Then go ask him.

Pfft. That’s rich.

Me: No. I want you to tell me.

I want you to tell me if you got the letter...

Me: The trips you used to take by yourself when I was a kid...

Mum: That’s not a question.

Cow.
Me: What did you do on the trips mother?

I’m sure I know the answer. She went to see Hub.

Mum: You’re asking the wrong question.

Me: MUM! You don’t get to decide that!

Mum: I bet you haven’t left the house yet.

The gall.

Me: I went and saw a friend if you must know.

Mum: That’s Cole I take it? Your dad said there was some ‘fella’

Me: Nice to see you two getting along.

I realise what she’s doing after I hit send.

She’s good.

Me: Stop trying to change the subject!

Ten minutes later and no reply.

I decide to go for it.

Me: Did you get the letter?

Nothing.

Me: You don’t have to reply. I know what happens now anyway. You tell me I’m feeling sorry for myself.

Mum: Aren’t you?

Me: Well that was real neat on your part. You could have saved us both some time and just led with ‘drama queen’

I type fast, before she can answer back.
Me: Why is he such a big deal to you?
Me: THAT’S my question.
Me: ...and don’t give me any shit about how you can’t share with me and that’s my fault and blahblahblah
Mum: You’ve got some nerve girl.
Mum: It’s been long time since you’ve wanted to share or talk about anything with me, but I’m meant to answer your questions on command?! And in a text message?!
Mum: I’ve called you 17 times Neve. 17!

Christ. Has it been that many?
Mum: Why does it have to be like this?

Because you took something you knew I loved and you did it with a smile.

Me: Apples and trees Mum... apples and fucking trees.
Mum: Don’t you dare swear at me!
Me: I just did.
Me: Fuckityfuckfuckfuck

Mum: I’m done!
Me: Consider me ‘done’ too then. I’m out.

Mum: FINE!
Me: FINE!
Mum: P.S your gran says if she doesn’t get her car back, she will be calling the police.
Me: P.P.S. Dad has a girlfriend.

Oh god. Un-send. Un-send. Un-send. Why is there no bloody way to un-send?!
Chapter Twenty Two

I slink out of my room after lunchtime and search for Dad. He’s slept off his last nightshift and is out in the shed in his old recliner, nursing a cup of black coffee and reading today’s West.

The shed is much the same. A long workbench lines three of the walls and the fourth is capped with a roller door that faces the street. I catch a whiff of cut wood and varnish, and spy one of Poppy’s projects in the corner.

‘Spill,’ Dad says.

Should I tell him about my fight with Mum or wait for her to tell him tomorrow?

‘I think I’m going to head off in a few days.’

‘What happened to finding work?’

I shrug. I don’t know what happened to finding work. I’ve been here for three days now and haven’t so much as looked online or picked up a paper or asked Dad again if he can make something happen. I don’t want to, either. After my fight with Mum this morning, I rode a few haphazard laps around town on my bike, searching for something familiar to help me get excited about the place again. I went up to Radio Hill Lookout too. I thought, just maybe, something might spark when I saw the town rolling out beneath me. It didn’t. The view was smaller than I remember. Foreign too.

‘Are you going home then?’

‘I don’t know.’

He folds his paper. He takes a while doing it. ‘Running’s not the answer, Nevvy. I reckon it’s time you called your mum. This thing you two have going on has to stop.’

His words hit a sore spot, which is rather like a broken bone split through the skin, because in that moment, it’s as if I’ve slipped into another reality. One where I’ve come out to the shed to bitch about Mum, who is somewhere in the house. We’ve
just had a fight and Dad isn’t having a bar of it. He wants us to get along and be his happy girls again.

In another reality, that scene is unfolding. All of us together.

Dad’s eyes go round when I start to cry and he pulls me into a hug.

‘I messed up,’ I mumble into his shoulder. ‘Really messed up, Dad. I messaged her.’

He holds me at arm’s length. ‘What are we talking about here? A spat or…’

‘Gabby.’

Dad releases me. ‘Argh, Nev. Why would you go and do that?!’

So he hasn’t told her.

‘She pushed my buttons,’ I cry. ‘It’s like she wants me to fight her and I know that sounds juvenile and I know I’m as much to blame for rising to the bait, but it’s always how we are, Dad. Always!’

He hugs me again and rocks me from side to side.

‘That’s not all,’ I tell him. ‘She may know that you told me about Hub.’

He doesn’t react this time, which means that Mum probably gave him the green light to tell me in the first place.

I let out a ridiculous sob.

‘Come on now, it’s not that bad.’

I can’t stop crying now that I’ve started. I plonk down on Dad’s chair and blubber, while he pats my head. I don’t want to be here. I want to go home and it kills me.

‘Let’s go get some air,’ Dad says.
We make it to Ophthalmia Dam when the sun is high and at its peak.

Dad had me bundled in the car and driving along the bumpy red dirt track, which leads to the dam, within ten minutes of my meltdown.

Aero’s already tuckered out. She’s sniffed out the area close by, marked a wee-perimeter and has skulked near the shore. She doesn’t do water. By the sound of it, we’re lucky there’s any here at all. Dad told me the dam went bone dry in summer last year. Not a drop left.

I hold my phone up to the sky uselessly.

‘This sudden shift in plan have anything to do with this fella of yours?’

‘How many times has Mum called you exactly?’

Dad doesn’t deny anything. ‘Has you messed up, does he, love?’

‘No! He’s gone to get his sister, that’s all. He’ll be back in a couple of days.’

‘And if he’s not?’

Thanks, Dad. I’d managed to not think about that for at least one minute.

‘Come on Nev, give me something.’

‘Fine. I’m acting like a crazy person in small part because of him. Are you happy? Or would you prefer the particulars? Like how I can’t stop thinking about him and how he’s made me like him, but still has all this othe…’

I stop dead. Dad’s laughing. He’s having a right chuckle.

‘What could possibly be funny about that?’

‘Hating a boy for making you like him is the closest a girl your age gets to normal. It’s a relief to hear it.’

I drop back on the picnic blanket and scowl at the clouds as they merge into rabbits and gnarly witch hands.
‘Mum and Gerry. We still need a song for them.’

Dad peers down at the list of songs he has scrawled across his palm, untroubled by the change of subject. I have several songs written across the inside of my arm.

Cole’s CD, which I may or may not have been playing incessantly in the last couple of days, wore out its welcome during the drive to the dam.

Dad threatened to snap it in half unless we make a new one.

We decided on songs that remind us of people we know.

‘How is Gerry anyway?’ Dad asks. ‘You haven’t said much.’

‘She’s alright.’ If I was being honest, I’d tell him that missing Gerry is a persistent ache that refuses to dull. But talking about it will probably make it worse, so I settle on something else. ‘She’s strangely quiet most of the time, so I figure she’s storing it all up for later. I bet she’ll be a little demon.’

‘Reminds me of someone.’

‘See, now I get the impression that I was a bit of a pest the whole time.’

Dad shakes his head. ‘You were a quiet little thing too. Took your time doing most things. It was an age before you learned how to crawl, so you used to do this commando thing, shuffling across the floor with your elbows.’ He looks up at the sky and grins, as if he’s remembering something. ‘Poppy used to call you his little red sweeper, because you’d collect all the red dirt in the house. Geez, you were a filthy kid.’

‘So I was a weird crawler, a late walker and you used me as a broom. Thanks for the memories, Dad.’

‘Speaking of Poppy, he has another trip planned after this one. If you’re thinking you need more time away, you could always tag along with him.’

Dad’s suggested no less than five jobs and trips in the last half hour, all of which would keep me suitably distracted for the next few months while I figure myself out.
‘I thought you said running was a bad idea,’ I tease.

‘Spending time with Poppy isn’t running. It’s also preferable to you shooting off someplace in search of God knows what.’

I laugh at his mild rebuke.

I could go with Poppy. But thoughts of what he might have planned for his next trip frighten and tire me in equal measure. He’s probably due to get lost in some corner of the Pilbara. One that doesn’t rely on the trusted routes and roads of my youth, but the unheard of stretches known to only the hard core traveller. The real nomad.

‘What’s with Poppy anyway? It’s like he’s packing everything in because he’s afraid he’s going to miss out on something. I don’t get it.’

I reckon I should get it when I see Dad’s face. He’s wearing that unnervingly contemplative look: the timeless one of parents and adults the world over. I should practice in the mirror later, I think sourly. I’ll have to if I’m going to have any chance of using it on Gerry effectively.

‘I’m not sure he gives himself much longer here, Nevy.’

The semi-relaxed bubble I was working on, well it bursts.

‘What?! Is he sick?’

‘God no!’ Dad shouts, losing the contemplative-sad-adult look and gaining the why-must-you-misinterpret-me-all-the-time look. It has a matriarchal hint to it.

I give him an eye roll to truly add to the moment.

‘Way to freak a girl out, Dad.’

‘I just mean that he’s been thinking about moving.’

In light of this not being the impending death I had envisaged for at least three seconds, I sigh with relief. Of course, other thoughts run through my head, like:

‘Where in the hell will he go?’
‘He seems to think he’d be okay in the city.’

Dad can’t keep a straight face. I laugh with him as I imagine Poppy caged in the city, living in some self-contained retirement community. They’d never have a dull day.

‘You know he was born down Denmark way. Even lived there with Mum for a while, before they started hopping between places up north here in the 70s. He might head back there. All I know for sure is that he needs a change. And soon.’

‘Is it really that bad?’

Dad looks at me strangely, as if he’s trying to gauge what I can handle. ‘I’ve been watching him and he’s worn out with the place. Don’t get me wrong, he loves it here. There’re just some places that you outgrow when they stop giving something back to you. That’s about the time you start letting go. Thing with Poppy is, he’s been sitting on the cusp of leaving for a good while now. I don’t think it’s healthy.’

I get it. Poppy’s stubborn. He’s been holding onto Newman and refusing to admit that his reasons for staying eroded to almost nothing years ago.

What about Dad, I wonder? He’s different. Younger of course, but more rational too. I reckon he knows that he’s due for some wear and tear to start in soon. If it hasn’t already. The question is, what will he do with it? It’s only when I look over at his contemplative face that I realise he may already have an answer.

‘Are you thinking about moving too, Dad?’

His shrug doesn’t confirm or deny it.

I don’t press him, because I’m not sure I’m ready for his answer. When I was a kid, I spent years wishing Dad and Poppy would move. Knowing they might be ready to do that now is confusing and amazing and sad, all at once.

I resurface from my thoughts to Aero licking my hand and the gentle lap of water.

‘Everything’s speeding up, Dad. It’s all changing.’
‘Life’s always changing, Nev. You just get more in-tune with the worry of it as you get older. If I was you I’d be soaking up this middle bit while I had the chance.’

‘What middle bit?’

‘This part in between where you get to be a kid for a bit longer. Being 18 doesn’t mean that you have to shaft your youth and get old. Just take it easy.’

‘That simple, huh?’

‘Given what your gran, mum and I were putting ourselves through at your age, I reckon you’ve made a good start of things. Babies having babies,’ I think I hear him murmur. I can’t help but think that his trust in me is more hopeful than it is right, but I give Newman another go in my head.

If I stayed here, this trust of Dad’s might keep me in check. I could find work after all. And on my time off I could chase Poppy and let him decide on the pathway for us both. I’d call Cleary’s on weekends. It would be a simple life. But then my childhood safety net is not as fixed as it once was. Gabby’s in the picture now and Poppy is thinking about moving on, maybe Dad too. Before long, this place would dissolve as surely as the road and Midland and my cottage. I’d end up here alone and I sure as hell can’t hack living in another shell of a home.

‘What do you say, Nev? Stay until Poppy gets back, then we’ll all have a think on it.’

I brush sand off Aero’s wet nose and let her lick my palm again. ‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I don’t think I work here anymore,’ I tell him softly. If I ever did. ‘I want more.’

Dad meets my words with a distant gaze that reminds me of Mum’s taciturn hush.

‘You’re going to tell me I sound like Mum.’ I say it quickly, because I want him to know that I get it: I’m reliving her selfishness by telling him he’s not enough.

*You’re a right cow, baby girl.*
Dad’s smiling though. ‘I was going to say you sound like me, love.’

When we get back to Dad’s, he crashes out on the lounge while we watch a movie.

My phone is in my hand as soon as I hear him snoring.

**Me:** Mum?

The day’s about done. I wonder if she’s at the cottage.

There’s a porch swing out the front and sometimes the sunsets draw us in. We sit a while, taking it in. Mum asks me stuff and I give her answers without fuss or over-anxious thoughts about what’s behind her interest. These dusky times, which cap the day and start the night, are probably the most comfortable and easy moments I’ve had with her in recent years. Except Gerry’s birth, of course. Mum asked me to come with Gran because Darryl was working away. That night spilled into chaos and peace so easily that the beauty of it is imprinted on me. If my memory ever fails me, and fate or hard luck give me only one memory to keep, that one would come close.

The sunsets we share are less chaotic, but are much the same, in that they give us a chance to step out of time and allow ourselves to be just a mum and her girl.

I touch the remaining lackey band at my wrist. I lost Jimmy’s somewhere today. I don’t know if it broke or shimmied itself off. In any case, thoughts of him have been weak. And I’ve barely touched Mum’s lackey today.

I pick up my phone again. Nothing.

I comfort-eat my way through a packet of Tim Tams while I wait for Mum to reply.

She never does.
Chapter Twenty Three

The idea that things happen for a reason is not one that I consider often. To me, life generally spills out in a chaotic mess, like a puddle of ink, content to pool in places and snake off in others. There’s no way to justify how things pan out.

Still, that doesn’t stop me hoping that maybe I’m waiting at this bus stop for a reason.

It’s the second time today I’ve been here. There are two buses in and out of Newman on a Friday. The first is from Nullagine in the morning and the second is from Port Hedland on its beeline south, which makes town mid-afternoon.

Cole and Etta weren’t on the first, and were probably never going to be, so I’ve spent all my hope on this one. Cole’s been out of range and probably out of credit, so I have no idea if he found Etta and made the bus.

A little girl with sticky cheeks stares at me while I moon over Cole.

She coughs in a mimic of adult annoyance, before losing eye contact to unwrap a lolly.

She reminds me of Gerry, although the little tyke must be about five. When she meets my eyes again, there’s a question there. I look down at my sketchbook and the small nub of charcoal in my right hand. Since I found my chalky stash, I’ve managed to blunt every piece.

I can probably get one last portrait out of this bit.

A woman watches me from a short way off and smiles when I hold up my pad.

Sticky Cheeks beams. 'I'm Freya and I'm six next week.'

'Well, Freya, my name's Nev and I wish I was six.'
My face is serious, but I can’t hold it. I scrunch up my nose and she giggles.

‘Nobody wants to be six. Everyone wants to be big.’

‘Maybe you’re right, Freya.’

She’s charmed, either by the use of her name or the knowledge that she’s right.

Her sketch starts with her eyes, which is my favourite part of any portrait, next to the soft curves of a person’s cheeks. Barring the small movement it takes to sit and get comfortable, Freya remains incredibly still. Mum would love her. I’ve never known how to sit still, not a day in my life. She used to make me sit on my hands until she was ready to sketch or paint them.

I flick the single lackey at my wrist.

Better thoughts.

Years ago, before we settled in Perth, I would sometimes wake in the night or early morning to find Mum packing. She would be getting ready to meet a deadline for some art exhibition after finishing her submission too late to post. As soon as the piece was resolved, as opposed to finished, which rarely happened with her, she would fly around the house or the caravan and get us ready to move. More often than not, she’d spring it on me, chasing me around like a demon. I’d squeal with delight as she pinched and hassled. There was a colossal build-up of energy, right up until we drove away. She adored that bit: stealing away in the dark, leaving money and keys on the bench, as we escaped a motel or broke a lease.

It’s anyone’s guess how we found places to stay with her record of bailing.

‘He’s here!’ Freya squeals.

The bus.

There’s no sitting still after that. Freya skips in circles, unable to contain herself. I add some final touches to her portrait. She’s evolved on the page, with large eyes and plump features, which are a remnant of her toddler years that are fading fast as she
spikes towards six. You can tell the detail comes from a hurried hand, but hopefully my skill will be short in returning now that I’m practising every day.

Freya takes the sketch and pays me with six hard boiled lollies. Then, with a quick bye Nevvv, she’s skipping away, observing her charcoal-self. She doesn’t look where she’s going. Not once. She simply heads for her mum or aunty and, as is the case with many kids, people part to let her pass.

I miss that. I’ve missed Cole more and I know that if I end up spending all my hope and sanity on him right here, and he doesn’t show, I’ll be a mess. Or more of one.

His word is good.

He’s the fourth person off the bus.

He’s giving me a look that says we’re in for it, but my belly still twists with nervous affection. He turns to talk to a young girl, who pushes him roughly on the shoulder, forcing him to turn back around. Etta. Cole shakes his head and grazes a hand through his hair. Etta hasn’t changed much. She’s still a compact blonde with a heart-shaped face and a slight frame. She’s also sporting bare feet. Cole seems to be having a one-sided argument about that. He pulls her shoes from her hand and throws them on the ground, emphasising something with flailing arms.

Etta folds her arms and pretends he doesn’t exist.

I roll the nub of charcoal between my fingers until it crumbles and is caught by the breeze. I wish I had Cole’s Polaroid. I never did get my last two shots.

Cole starts walking towards me. He’s smiling. Is that for me? I’ve never been good at reading this stuff. My mouth is dry and parted, words playing on my lips in a murmur. Before I can say anything, Cole pulls me into a tight hug. He lifts me off my feet and rocks me from side to side until I’m laughing.

Then he kisses me. Right there in front of everyone. Before my feet touch the ground.

I wriggle free when I see Etta scrutinising us.

‘Things went well I see.’

Cole ‘hmms.’
‘She okay?’

He meets his sister’s glare. ‘Define okay.’

I walk off to meet Etta before I lose my nerve.

‘I’m Nev,’ I say brightly. Too brightly.

I wait for her to say I know or I remember, but she doesn’t say a word.

The corner of her mouth lifts slightly to mirror her big brother’s quirky smile, but it’s not quite there. And I get none of his smooth jibes or quick laughter. She simply appraises me in a delicate, yet unnerving way.

She would have to be the most passive activist in history.

‘Don’t mind her,’ Cole calls out. ‘She’s playing the mute. Literally.’

Etta gives him a withering look that would make even Mum flinch.

Maybe not as passive as I thought.

‘I have a surprise for you,’ Cole says from behind me.

His hand is on my elbow and his breath is warm against my neck, so, naturally, it takes me a couple of seconds to give a damn about what he said and play it back in my head.

He’s pointing back at the bus. It’s Poppy.

There’s not much in this world that compares to a win you weren’t expecting.
Chapter Twenty Four

Back at Dad’s place, I show Etta to my room. Before I can say anything, she tunnels under my blankets, as if it isn’t 30 degrees outside. Cole is beat too. In between seeing to Etta and walking back to the lounge room, he’s asleep in Dad’s recliner. The weariness that runs through him escapes, forcing a yawn from me. I pull myself from the room before my guilt intrudes and wakes him, drawing him into conversations that don’t lead to neat and pretty answers, namely the one about whether he’s willing to keep his dad waiting a bit longer.

I stalk Poppy from the hallway. He’s in the kitchen making pancakes. When he sees me, he growls good-naturedly. I love that growl. It sounds like a bear laughing.

‘You got big,’ he says.

‘Thanks Poppy. That’s exactly what every teenage girl wants to hear.’

‘You’ve grown up,’ he corrects. ‘No wonder the boy is smitten.’

I hop up on the bench next to him. ‘How did you come across the boy exactly?’

‘Your dad called. Told me you were here and were set on buggering off before I got back. I conned Rex into buying the ute off me for scrap and caught the bus home.’

Christ. He’s scrapped the ute. And caught a bus. Maybe he is changing.

‘I never pictured you on a bus,’ I say, choosing to leave off talk about his ute.

‘Makes two of us,’ he gripes. ‘Couldn’t very well lay about while you were chewing up your last days here.’

‘And Cole and Etta? I’m guessing Dad had a hand in that one too.’

‘Told me to keep my good eye peeled for a bloke and girl about your age. Weren’t any others matching that, bar those two. Girl’s not much of a talker.’
For the first time in ages, Poppy and Dad living on the fringe seems to have worked in my favour. If we were in a less isolated place, Poppy, Cole and Etta might never have crossed paths. And I never would have gotten them all at once.

‘That mum of yours is getting rusty, letting you take off on your own again.’

‘Didn’t you hear? I’m all grown up now.’

Poppy turns off the stove, pancakes forgotten.

‘Are you going to enlighten me about this visit or am I going to die of old age first?’

He uses his best gun-slinging voice. It has a rough, grainy tone to it.

‘Dad’s told you everything, Poppy. And if he hasn’t, I’m sure he’ll get around to it.'

His eyes narrow. ‘Sure you don’t want to talk about it?’

I shake my head. ‘Nah.’

‘Good. Didn’t bloody want to anyway.’

We’re still smiling at each other when Dad bangs through the door carrying three shopping bags in each hand.

‘Well then, you’re a sight,’ he says, beaming at Poppy.

He drops the bags and they hug it out. They’re so used to being by themselves that they don’t realise I’m audience to their silent exchange. Poppy gestures towards the lounge and Dad gives a sly nod, before moving off to check out his new house guest.

‘That him, then?’ Dad asks.

I roll my eyes. ‘No. I just picked one off the bus who looked good.’

I walk to the doorway and peek into the lounge room. Shoulder to shoulder, Dad, Poppy and I contemplate Cole, until it gets weird. We move back into the kitchen.

‘Would it be okay if they stay on?’

‘I thought they were coming with you.’
‘I haven’t had a chance to ask, Dad. Worst case scenario, they don’t want to and they have to hang here for a bit until they sort something. That’s okay, isn’t it?’

Cole appears in the doorway, ending our conversation. I thought he’d sleep longer, but he’s standing there, looking like one of those people who can collect themselves easily after waking.

The kitchen suddenly grows smaller. I mean, I like Cole better than anyone else I’ve met in recent years, but I’m worried about how Dad will take to him.

Cole walks into the kitchen. His knee seems to be the one thing slow to recover from sleep. He makes it to a chair, leans in slightly, and offers Dad his hand. ‘Sir.’

‘Cole is it?’ Dad asks, as they shake.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Sir?’

‘Mr Isles?’ Cole questions with a smile.

‘We’ve already got one of those,’ Dad tells him. ‘Call me Howie.’

‘Sorry about crashing in on you all like this. I wasn’t expecting it myself.’

‘You run into some trouble?’ Dad asks.

Cole scratches his head. ‘Thought I had some work lined up, but it fell through.’

‘What was it? They wouldn’t take the leg?’

Cole looks surprised that his leg gave him away so quickly. ‘Yeah, that’s about it.’

‘Not an overstayer are you?’

‘Oh my god, Dad!’

‘Nev, you know I don’t give a rat’s. Just curious.’

Cole laughs. ‘Dual citizenship. My folks met on a land rig out of Houston. Mum was admin and Dad was out on contract from Australia.’
It took me forever to pry little bits out of him, yet here he is, giving Dad his life story.

When Dad gets up to put the kettle on, I pinch Cole’s arm. ‘Hey, Chatty Cathy, what made you so keen to share all of a sudden?’

He pinches me back playfully, but then his eyes narrow.

Etta’s decided to interrupt the meet and greet with an intense stare from the doorway. She doesn’t say a thing. Her thoughts are written clear across her face though: she wants to be elsewhere and she wants to be there now. It’s not aggressive, there’s more pining to it than anything.

‘This is Etta,’ Cole says. ‘She doesn’t talk just now.’

Etta’s mouth twitches in an irritated tweak. She can’t be far off letting him have it.
Chapter Twenty Five

Dad and I have said a hundred goodbyes in a hundred different ways. There’s been chatter and forced brightness, and solemn, tearless retreats. When I was small, as in five or six, and the memories of my early years with Dad and Poppy were slowly melting away with each day that passed, hysterics surpassed all adult reasoning and were generally a guarantee when Mum and I left Newman. I didn’t know enough about other families to know that our setup was strange. I felt it though. I’d be overwhelmed by it for days, until I settled into a rhythm with Mum and the road.

Dad wanders into my room after dinner and I’m curious about how this one will play out. He sits on my bed and I have a vision of him having to pack up all my stuff. If his mind, like Poppy’s, is set away from Newman, then today might have been the last day we’ll ever spend together in this house.

I barely made anything of it.

‘You need to talk to your mum, Nevy.’

‘I’ve tried, Dad. She’s not replying to my texts.’

‘I said speak, not text.’

‘It’s the same thing!’

Dad shakes his head. Perhaps he’s not here to say goodbye after all.

‘You and your mum have a good way of dancing around issues and coming clear the other side without knowing what it is the other said or needs. Sometimes, I reckon your mum takes advantage of your quiet. Works it so that she gets what she wants.’

‘Well if you see that then wh...’

‘I’m not finished. I was going to say that it wouldn’t be so easy for her if you’d just speak up for yourself.’

I roll a jumper into a ball and shove it into my bag with other bits of old clothing.
‘I shouldn’t have to explain myself to her! Jesus, Dad. I could probably live with her for another 18 years and I don’t think she’d be able to read me like you can.’

His hard laugh surprises me into silence.

‘You don’t let her. I share equal blame with your mum for not being able to make us work as a family, but I don’t think you’ve ever seen it that way. No!’ he says, when I try to interrupt. ‘Listen a sec. I couldn’t chase her and she couldn’t stay here. We were both to blame. I think I was easier for you to forgive because I wasn’t there demanding things of you all the time and because this place never changed. It’s always easy coming back to something that doesn’t change. Sometimes I reckon that meant I got the best of you.’

‘And she got the worst?’

Dad softens. ‘You’ve never been a bad kid. But you do close yourself off from her, love.’

‘I don’t know what you want me to say.’

‘I want you to see what it looks like from the outside, Nev. And I want you two to get along. Leaving was never really an option. You know that. You’re too set on Cleary’s to make a clean break. Thing is, love, your mum wants most of the same things. The only difference is, she’s including you into the bargain. While you’re fighting for the cottage, she’s fighting for you. Do you think she really wants the cottage?’

‘Of course she does.’

Dad laughs. ‘She hates the place.’

‘Dad. Seriously. There’s no way...’

‘Hates, love. Honestly. Calls it a manky death-trap on stilts and says it should have been demolished years ago. Instead, she’s going to sink thousands of dollars into the place to build a way back to you.’

I freeze.
‘She wants to be closer to you. There’s not much more to it.’

‘Come on, Dad. We practically live on top of each other. She never lost me. Besides, if that was the case, she would have told me.’

‘I reckon she thought she had a better chance of you going along with it if she didn’t tell you the truth.’

He gets up to leave, but only makes it to the door.

‘Sometimes, making things better with someone can be as easy as talking. Say, picking up the phone and calling once a week until it doesn’t hurt anymore. Or maybe just answering the phone when it rings.’

He gives me a knowing look.

... *maybe just answering the phone when it rings.*

Mum calling Dad. Him answering every single time.

‘Dad...’ I start gently.

‘Take my advice, Nev. Talk to her. Don’t wait for her to read you right.’

*Talk to her.*

Might give it a go if she ever speaks to me again.

After Dad leaves I sit for a while.

...*you don’t let her... I got the best of you... talk to her...*

I sit on my bed with my phone in my hand for ages. I want to call her. I really do. But I don’t know that it won’t turn into a fight, so I settle on the easier option for now.

Me: Mum?

Me: Mum?

She doesn’t want to talk. I get it.
I’ll give it a minute.

Me: Mum?

I wouldn’t want to talk to me either after last time.

Me: Muum?

And I’m the immature one?

Me: Muuum?

Me: Muuuum?!

Mum: Really Neve?!

Yes!

Me: I can keep it up all night.

Mum: I have no doubt. What is it?

I suck up every ounce of pride that’s been wearing a hole in my heart since I left Cleary’s.

Me: I’m sorry.

Mum: Come again?!

Me: I’m not repeating it.

Mum: Humour me.

Me: Ha. No.

Mum: What are you apologising for then?

Me: For blabbing about Gabby.

‘Just do it you big baby,’ I whisper.

Me: ...and for forgetting your show.
Mum: I knew you forgot!

She doesn’t message anything else for a while.

Then I see the three little dots stop and start as she attempts a reply.

I steel myself. Count to ten. Pinch my leg.

Mum: I miss you.

Mum: Come home, Nev. Please. I’ll apologise too if that’s what it takes.

Oh God, I broke her.

She just called me Nev.

Me: Don’t go getting all emotional Mum. I swear if you apologise too, I’m out.

Me: Again.

Mum: You don’t want an apology?!

Me: I do, but you have to mean it. Plus, if you say it now it’ll only cheapen the moment. Mum: Funny girl.

Me: I try.

Me: So. Is Gran really going to call the cops?

Mum: No. I came close though.

I actually don’t blame her.

In the minutes that follow, she doesn’t message again. I don’t mind. We’ve managed a moment in time without hating on each other. Why push it?

I walk to my doorway and listen to Dad chatting with Cole and Poppy. Their voices are synced into a steady hum. I follow it to the lounge room where they’re drinking beer and watching Mash re-runs. Etta’s on the lounge, curled up with Aero.

I slide in next to Cole on the recliner and he pulls a blanket up over me.
I listen to him talk to Dad and Poppy until I doze.

When I wake, the only light is coming from the muted television and the house is asleep. Cole’s still with me though. I ruffle his hair lightly and he looks down at me.

‘Did Poppy tell you that I’m not staying on?’

He nods. ‘You’re not going home though, are you?’

‘I am. Just... indirectly.’

He plays with the hem of my shorts, rolling a loose thread between his fingers. His other hand rests on my thigh.

‘I was kind of hoping you might come with me,’ I say. ‘And Etta.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow. Can you wait a few more days?’ When I shake my head, he withdraws.

I don’t wait for him to say no, or tell him the reason I want to stall is more about him now, than it is about avoiding home or Mum. I need more time with him.

I slide off the recliner and walk away.

I’m a few steps into my room when Cole grasps me from behind me and turns me to face him. He says nothing. His hands don’t shift though and I’m torn between wanting to kick him in the shins and something else. He squeezes my waist gently. My plan to leave could shatter right here, because I know what he could do to persuade me.

He’s not that conniving. He lets me go and sits on my bed with his back against the wall, leaving me to drop next to him, slightly disappointed.
'When you think about it, we’re close to wanting the same thing. I don’t reckon you or Etta want to go rushing back to your dad, and I could live with putting a few more days between me and home.’

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘A compromise. We leave tomorrow and wing it for a few days. We can head west from here to the coast, then south when we want to.’

‘How long?’

‘Long,’ I concede. I was hoping he wouldn’t ask. ‘The first stint would take close to ten hours.’

‘That’s your idea of not rushing?!’

I hold a finger to my lips to hush him.

I decide not to tell him about the additional ten to 15 hours to home thereafter, because he may come to the conclusion that he doesn’t have it in him to chase me and/or avoid his dad. Plus, we can break that trip into smaller ones along the coast.

I get up to close my door so that Cole can see the map that’s stuck to the back of it.

‘Once we reach the coast there’re heaps of places we can stay. Pubs. Caravan parks. Beaches. You’ll love it,’ I coo sweetly. ‘We can have campfires and swim at night. Alone.’

I’m trying to use Mum’s voice, which can be hypnotic. A voice I didn’t know I had in me until Gran told me recently that shit doesn’t work on me, baby girl. I invented that voice.

Cole’s looking at the map and drawing circles on my leg.

‘So you want to stall for a few days,’ he says.

‘Exactly.’

‘But you can’t stall here.’
‘Exactly.’

‘And you want me and Etta to come with you.’

‘Exactly. What do you say? Stall with me?’

I chew my bottom lip, entirely uncomfortable with his expressionless face.

‘Witch. Was there ever any doubt?’

His arm curves around my waist, pulling me into a hug. I bite his neck playfully and dot kisses along his jaw, realising how weary he looks. The dark rims. The can’t-be-bothered stubble. The bloodshot eyes. I kiss his lips, each time a bare graze, and his smile is no longer a smirk. It’s content and relaxed as if he hasn’t been given something in a long time. When his mouth opens to mine, I pull him down onto the bed with me.

We’re quickly tangled. I half expect, half desire the crushing need from the other night. Our insistence is gentler this time. Discovering where the curves of our bodies meet and hold is a game I could play forever.

When I eventually remember where we are, I break away slowly.

‘You can have my bed tonight. Rest your knee.’

‘Does that offer come with you in it?’

He’s going to kill me with that smile.

‘You’ll never make it out of Newman alive if I stay.’

I nod towards the door, reminding him of Dad and Poppy. I’m not out of the teenage-pregnancy-woods yet.

Cole chuckles and kisses me chastely on the forehead.

We face each other, side by side.

‘I’d take a run-in with them over one with your gran, any day.’

‘Gran? Yeah right! Mum’s the one you have to watch.’
‘No way. She’s got nothing on her mum.’ He’s adamant.

The meetings between Cole and Gran race through my mind and I find that there’s been a fair few, what with Cole helping out so much.

‘I thought you got along well with Gran.’

‘I do. She scares the hell outta me is all.’

I appraise him.

‘She’s crafty,’ he says carefully. ‘Seems to have a hand in most things.’

‘Like?’

‘Like when she bought Ed and Clary, and said it was you that had to take care of them. You didn’t question her and she was banking on it.’

‘You can’t possibly know that.’

He smiles. ‘What you didn’t know was that she’d already been on to me about helping to take care of them. Trav gave her my number. She said you’d be over at some stage and I was to help you out, for a bit of cash.’

‘Seriously?!’

‘Are you mad?’

‘No. I just had no idea. What else?’ He falters and I roll my eyes. ‘It’s too late to hold back now, Cole.’

‘Well, I heard her on the phone a couple of weeks back. Seemed to me she was trying to stall the delivery on something. The next day, you were laughing about Darryl having a meltdown about some supplies for the reno that were going to be late.’

He leaves it hanging.

‘Christ. Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘I value my life. Your dad and poppy are kittens compared to you three.’
He slides off the bed and towards the door. ‘Back in a sec.’

My mind races with the recent conversations I’ve had with Gran.

In a rush, I hear myself fighting with Mum about her controlling me, and Dad telling me everything in the world is not her fault, and Cole revealing Gran’s double life.

Then I see Gran giving Mum the loan so she could flip houses... Gran telling Mum about the art commission and making her apply for it... Gran always trying to coax another grandkid out of Mum... And Gran letting Mum have the cottage.

Mum may seek distraction, but it’s Gran that makes it happen every time. She’s been trying to keep a hold of Mum since the day she finally came home and settled on the city and Cleary’s. And her. She’s done a good job of it too.

‘Stop it!’ Cole whispers from the doorway.

‘I didn’t do anything!’

He drops his bag by the bed and falls down next to me. ‘I could hear your mind ticking over from the hallway.’

‘Are you ever going to get tired of laughing at me?’

‘Never. You love it.’

My scowl is splintered by a traitorous smile.

He holds his arms out. ‘Just come here already. And don’t let me fall asleep,’ he says as I crawl over.

He works his hand under my shirt and draws patterns on my back. In less than five minutes, he stills, giving up the soft stroking for sleep. I watch him. He’s lighter when he dozes. Less troubled. I trace his beard from his cheek to his chin.

I untangle myself from Cole eventually and head to the kitchen to make some tea. As I wait for the kettle to boil, I think about texts and secret calls and conniving grandmothers. On some level, it all enables a deep, abiding quiet. Yet, on another
more delicate plane, I feel as if we’re not so very far gone, my family, because these silent gestures show how desperate we are to reach out to each other.

There’s hope for us yet.

The text when it comes is unexpected.

*Mum:* What’s she like?
...I’d felt drowned and extinguished by vastness – not just the predictable vastness of time, and space, but the impassable distances between people even when they were within arm’s reach of each other...

- Donna Tartt *The Goldfinch* (2013, p. 676)

Chapter Twenty Six

‘The middle of nowhere,’ Cole says from beside me, tapping his dusty boot against mine.

It’s around noon. We have a few towels laid out beneath us on the bonnet of the car and we’re watching Etta and Aero wander the dirt boundary of our latest rest-stop.

Etta is sharing her lunch with Aero, who has barely left her side since they met.

Cole lets out one of his tell-tale sighs, which generally precede or indicate his boredom. He’s aching to be elsewhere. Anywhere but nowhere. I’ve never quite understood the saying *the middle of nowhere*. It seems a redundant phrase, as if places cease to be because people can’t get to them. Or don’t want to be in them. They exist, sure enough, despite the lack of cars lining their boundaries with smoke, or people roaming about.

I savour the heavy quiet and the half-ripe sun – dull, even at its peak – and recall the many pretty nowheres we travelled through today to get here. We shot through Karijini. Called in on Tom Price. Sped up to and away from Paraburdoo. That’s six hours of winding road. We’ve made good time, but now that I’m free from the car, and the pace of my body matches the world around me, I can’t help but question the speed I
set. An hour or so out of the day would have been enough to wander into Karijini, reach Circular Pool and have a quick lunch by the water. We might have been lucky and only had to share the space with a few tourists.

We could have stopped anywhere to be honest.

It’s my turn to sigh now. We’re beyond the park. No point in dwelling.

I leave Cole for a moment and walk towards Etta. She’s found herself a friend. A friend from a distance at least. A stray cow is roaming across the road about 50 metres away and Etta’s captivated. The first time she smiled like that was for a dingo we encountered as we stopped for our first break, just shy of the T-junction at the west of Karijini. The dingo looked at us, intrigued, despite the tensing of its muscles as it stayed alert and ready to flee. Cole was frozen and Aero was pressed up against the car window, willing herself outside. Etta, however, was smiling with a kind of feline contemplation, as she sat on the roof of the car.

The dingo moved into the scrub eventually, its fawn tail eaten by the undergrowth.

Etta turns from her cow-vigil now and catches me staring.

I walk closer and hold out both of my hands. They’re balled into loose fists and I wait for her to make the connection. When she does, she taps my left and peers over the top of my palm as I reveal the anti-nausea bands I found at the servo in Paraburdoo.

I also bought Cole some nicotine gum, which has yet to take the edge off.

I hold Etta’s gaze, then point at my wrist. ‘It goes here. On your pressure point.’

She lets me take her arm and I measure, finding the first pressure point without too much contact. The elastic wraps around her small wrist and the plastic button rests against a vein. When she slips on the second one without measuring, I register that she already knows what they are. She smiles, more relieved than amused. I would have given them to her sooner if I’d known she’d take them. She walks away with Aero and her warm ginger beer. Her long, black skirt is shaded with orange dust at the bottom. It reminds me of water on the cuff of pants, seeping up further and further.
She’s barefoot again too. I loaned her a pair of my old boots from Dad’s. They’re currently laced together and slung over the back of the front passenger seat.

I hop back up onto the bonnet with Cole. He allows Etta this small freedom, but continues to watch her, as if this is the place she’ll disappear. I’m not entirely sure it would surprise me if she walked into the heated mirage floating off the bitumen and never came back.

I need to forget about her, that’s what I need to do.

I pull out my map as Cole leans across and takes an apple from the esky.

‘Where to next?’ he asks.

I pull down the brim of his cap and trace my finger along Nanutarra-Wittenoom Road, before turning onto the North West Highway.

That’s where I stall.

‘Guess.’

‘Hint?’

‘E.’

Cole leans over again. Close. He takes my hand and presses my finger lightly into my thigh through the map. Partway through our North West Highway trek down, he detours onto a different road leading inland, and then onto another that switches north again, stopping at the tip of a peninsula.

I lift my finger. Exmouth.

I smile. ‘You got it.’

‘When will we get there?’ He’s wearing some of the longing that strikes Etta when she’s staring at nothing. It’s her third favourite past-time next to sleeping and dripping sadness all over my car. I still don’t know why. She hasn’t spoken a word yet and Cole hasn’t elaborated.
‘Five hours. Give or take a little.’

‘We don’t have a place to stay,’ Cole says.

My soft laughter is devoured by space. ‘We don’t have a place anywhere.’

If we had the right gear then we could’ve made a go at camping for a few days and stretched out this block of road properly. But we don’t and wandering off into the dusty landscape with only a car and a full tank of petrol would be an invitation to get lost. Not for a while, but forever.

I get a sudden vision of Hub surrounded by an unforgiving sun. The heat pressing in, making him listless. I see him lying down and never getting back up again.

Cole nudges me and I realise he said something.

‘Sorry. What was that?’

‘It’s not important. You looked far away.’

I chew on my lip. Look at my map. ‘Was just thinking what it’d be like to stay out here, instead of tearing through it.’

‘I could probably handle it a while,’ Cole says. ‘Handy work or something. You’d find kitchen work easy enough.’

‘I love how I’m chained to the kitchen in this little scenario.’

He chuckles, but his playfulness slides away quickly. ‘There’s not much you don’t have a handle on at Cleary’s, Nev. It’s me that’s the problem. If I was halfway normal, we’d be able to make a good go of it out here, you and I. I can see it.’

Cole’s version of himself is ridiculous. He’s as far from being a problem as anyone I’ve ever known.

‘Sorry, but getting down on yourself is my hang-up, not yours. You’re going to have to pick something else.’

‘Oh really? What would you suggest?’
I look at Etta pointedly. ‘Well, you do have a weakness for runaways. Maybe you could work on that.’

When his eyes stray back to his delinquent charge, I steal his apple. Juice dribbles down my chin as I take a bite and he licks and kisses it off, making me crack up.

‘Nev, you’re lucky I’m a funny guy, otherwise you giggling every time I kiss you would be a worry.’

‘I’ll work on it,’ I tell him with mock-severity.

‘Don’t.’

He puts his arm around me. I tell myself that the tension I feel straining his body will disappear once we reach the coast. Swimming might even help his knee.

‘I’ll leave it with you,’ he tells me, tapping the map.

He gets off the bonnet and one of the towels slides with him. He shakes the dust off carefully before folding it neatly beside me. Measured. Map forgotten, I watch him meet Etta, who is walking a child-like line between the bitumen and the red gravel with Aero in tow. She frowns and sidesteps as he approaches, her feet touching the ground gingerly as if they’re starting to hurt. She’s a stubborn creature. Cole walks in front of her so that he’s blocking the sun, then he moves so it catches her full in the eyes. Etta feigns hurt and moves into his shadow again, but he shifts. Insistent, she chases his shade, stepping on his feet each time she’s in range. Aero pounces along with them. Cole makes it so that they continue their dance and a smile lingers on Etta’s lips before she knows it’s there. When she catches herself, it drops.

For whatever reason, she’s decided she’s still not talking to him yet.

Watching these two trying to find a way back to each other makes me wonder what Mum and I will look like after I get home and she moves into the cottage. I don’t think our brief moment of peace will change anything. We’ll need a lot more of them.
I hop off the bonnet and dig in the front passenger side for Cole’s Polaroid. By the time I take the shot, Etta’s turned away from Cole and is back to pretending he doesn’t exist. She’s not doing a good job of it. She’s smiling again.

I chuck the developing Polaroid in the glove box and resume my spot on the car.

Cole gives Etta the distance she craves, walking to the other side of the rest stop so that a horizon of blue, green and orange separates them.

As I watch them, my tummy flips, because I realise with a certainty that scares me, that if Cole was in better shape, I’d be in real danger of disappearing with him. Walking off into the mirage on the horizon and leaving everyone behind.

When the road is relentless and does nothing but curve around the figures of hills and homesteads, which defies the myth about the Pilbara and its flat planes, a restless streak hits. It has me counting every second and minute.

Time refuses to budge because of it.

Cole’s restless and jittery, dying for a smoke. I give him the wheel to keep him occupied and continue to study my map. I don’t know what I’m looking for. I trace the scattered lakes with my fingers. They’re like deceptive frost. Their blue icicles leaking out. Water.

I’m starting to see it everywhere.

Yearning for it.

By the time we reach the Gascoyne, Cole and I have switched places again and he’s asleep next to me. Etta and Aero are in the back, snoring in unison. Etta stirs, before nestling in again. Her dirty, orange feet smear dust across the seat.
I turn back to the road and the turnoff, which is approaching fast on my right. I slow to a crawl and before I can second guess myself I take us off the highway and onto a new road.

We’re one turnoff shy of Exmouth.

A small willy‐willy dances across the road up ahead, sand flying up in a tornado‐like channel towards the sky. I smile. I haven’t seen one in years. It reminds me of what’s still to come. As we near the coast it will get cooler and the red earth will take on a slightly creamier hue. The bush will lie low and become greener, and termite mounds will litter the flat landscape that’s pocked with sheep.

I look in the rear view mirror and jump when I find Etta watching me intently. She remains sitting for a moment and takes in a few deep breaths, maybe trying to convince herself that she’s no longer sick. Nope, too soon. She drops down again, her head on Aero’s paws. That’s when I see something tucked against her tummy protectively. It’s a journal and it’s loaded with so much paper that everything threatens to fall out. The contacted cover captures me instantly, the portrait inviting in its familiarity.

Etta has the portrait I drew for her years ago.

‘I knew you remembered me!’

She opens one eye lazily.

‘Etta!’ I laugh.

She at least has the good grace to open both eyes before blatantly ignoring me this time. Then she yawns and curls herself into a tight ball.
Chapter Twenty Seven

Etta pretends to sleep, or maybe does sleep, all the way to Exmouth. She wakes as we rock into the caravan park. So does Cole. We get one dorm sleeping two, and one bed in a dorm sleeping four, right next door. Etta jumps at the shared room, snatching the key from Cole.

Her eyes mock him: *What are you going to do about it?*

When I take out my card to pay for the rooms, Cole grows wearier, if that’s possible. He walks back to the car without a word. He hasn’t really spoken since he woke up and found himself in Exmouth. He may not have fought the decision to come here, but that doesn’t mean he wants to be in a caravan park on the tip of a Peninsula, thousands of minutes from home, with a knee about to give and two crazy women for company.

I pull up beside the dorm I’ll share with Cole and sneak Aero in.

Outside, Cole is by himself.

Our cluster of four dorms is set up like a mirror: two dorms face two others. In the centre is a picnic table and the whole little complex is raised up, with steps leading down two sides. Cole leans against one of the railings lined with bathers and towels. The park has descended into happy chaos as kids play chasey, grey nomads roam and people mill in and out of the camp kitchen. Others are doing laundry or lounging in camper chairs with their tents pitched nearby. I smell sausages on a barbeque and although I’ve been a vegetarian for years, my mouth waters as I remember my lazy youth, sprawled out on deck chairs around motel and caravan park pools, eating sausages in buns, dripping with fat and sauce.

There’re a couple of station wagons directly across from us. Car-twins. They wear the same red dirt stains and two lengths of rope connect the pair from the side windows, front and back, becoming makeshift washing lines that hide a square area from view.
The row of harem pants and band shirts hanging on the line tweaks a memory, but it slips away when Cole captures my waist and pulls me to him.

His forehead butts mine.

‘I’ll go track down some food,’ he says.

‘Very hunter gatherer of you.’

‘You like that, huh?’

I smile and lean back far enough to hold his face in my hands.

He looks back at our room and I wonder if he’s thought about tonight. About us having it all to ourselves. Has he worked out how he’s going to avoid me yet?

‘What are you thinking about?’ he asks.

I shrug. ‘Stuff.’

He squeezes my hips and a tremor of heat rolls through me. But then he releases me.

‘I can come with you if you want.’

He taps his knee. ‘Need to get some blood flowing. Might hit the pub as well. I’ll hobble back soon with food, yeah?’

‘Okay.’

He walks out across the park, stretching as he goes.

Inside, I kick off my boots and I sit on my bed. Cole needs space. So does Etta. Aero has crashed out too, her tongue lolling. I head over to the shower block to wash off the day’s travel.

When I get back, I find a couple of messages from Travis.

Travis: Cuz, ur mum’s driving me insane. Stop being a brat and come home already

Travis: Ur both as bad as each othr
Me: Learn to spell already.

Travis: Oi, grammar police, stop trying to change the subject

Travis: I reckon if I get one more question about ‘how to make magenta pop’ my heads gonna xplode

The retreat went ahead as planned then.

For some reason that throws me.

The retreat is on and I’m not there.

Travis: Anyone tellya the kid took a step?

Me: What?! When?!

Travis: Coupla days before last

Me: Of course you’re just telling me this now.

Travis: Sorry cuz, bin busy doing ur job. I’ve had to use my leave for this week and the next hey. It’s getting stupid

Travis: How do u manage all this by urself?

Me: You get used to it.

Me: I’m sorry Travis.

Travis: Mean more if u were looking at me when u were saying it. I haven’t got a clue what’s going on with u and aunty but ur not going to fix anything out there

Pfft. Yeah, I’m sure he has no clue.

Me: We’re already on our way back.

Travis: Cole said as much. Also says ur looking to draw it out cuz

Travis: I told u to look after him, not cripple the poor bastard
Me: Oh yeah, because him running off after Etta was my idea. What about you letting him come up here for work? As if that was ever going to happen!

Travis: Alright alright, chill yeah?

Travis: U two a thing or what?

Me: Since when has everyone been so interested in my love life?

Travis: Since u got one

Little shit.

Me: How does Mum look anyway?

Travis: Bristly

I grin, ear to ear. It’d have to be the most apt description anyone’s come up with in a while.

Travis: Reckon it has something to do with u wracking off

Me: Jesus. Have you met your you-stuffed-up-Nev quota yet?

Travis: Getting there...

Travis: Btw gran says to tell u she’s glad ur coming home. Says u’d look crap in fluoro.

Of course Gran’s there. Where else would she be?

Me: Do you lot just sit around and talk all day?

Travis: Oi, it’s knockoff!

Me: Whatever. Tell Gran to learn how to use her phone already! I’ve left her a hundred messages.

More like three.

Travis: I’d tellya what she said but I don’t think I’d be able to clean it up haha
**Me:** Because you’re such a delicate creature yourself Travis. Be a good little puppet and tell her I’m not coming home until she replies to me.

**Travis:** She’s asking me how to turn her phone on

**Me:** She’s checking?

**Me:** You’re lying.

**Travis:** Scratch that... she’s askin where the delete button is hahaha

Of course she is.

**Travis:** Listen I gotta run. There’s something else though

**Me:** ???

**Travis:** Aunty gets wind I told u this then ur on ur own. Got it? No more favours or filling in for u...

**Me:** The suspense is killing me.

It kind of is.

**Travis:** The reno’s a bust. Contractors never arrived.

**Me:** WHAT?!!!

**Me:** What happened?!

I ring him three times, but he doesn’t answer.

**Me:** Dammit Travis. You can’t tell me that and leave me hanging!

A quarter of an hour later, he still hasn’t replied or answered his phone. Then:

**Travis:** Gran says if you wanna know the rest u have to come home.

Oh, she’s good.
Chapter Twenty Eight

It’s dark when I wake and it takes me a moment to remember where I am. I’m in the dorm. At the caravan park. I run a hand through my sleep tangled hair and attempt to pull back the skeleton of the dream I was having. Try to give it some flesh. Nothing.

I switch on the bedside lamp after a couple of tries and find that I’m alone.

Cole’s not back and Aero’s missing.

I run outside, barefoot and fretting. Etta’s sitting in the middle of the picnic table with one of my enamel mugs raised halfway to her lips. There’s a sizeable lump under the table, hidden beneath one of my blankets. Aero’s nose and paws peak out.

I rub sleep out of my eyes as my pulse attempts to settle.

‘Has Cole come back?’

Etta shakes her head and goes back to browsing through my sketchbook. She must have escaped to the shops while I was sleeping, because she’s nibbling on a hunk of French bread, covered in hummus. My stomach growls and tries to eat itself. When I join her at the table, she slides across a mug with a small splash of wine in it.

Cheap, white and sweet by the smell of it.

I empty it and she sloshes in another mouthful. We continue to play the game, matching each other shot for shot, until Etta fills the mug to the brim and nods at the food.

With my mouth full, I gesture for my sketchbook and pull a wad of tissues from my jacket pocket, releasing the charcoal I collected from the side of the road today.

I’ve been dying to draw Etta since she hopped off the bus yesterday, standing there barefoot, as if the heat didn’t hurt her. Like she was weighed down and the sun only served to intensify it. She carries it with her still, whatever it is. Benevolent and
intense. I stare for longer than is polite, taking advantage of her muteness and my inability to eat my pride and attempt another conversation with her.

There’s something about her that invites bold lines, so unlike my old, careful work, which was a colouring-inside-the-lines style that Mum tried to break me out of for years. The drawing softens slightly at the memory and Etta’s hands and face become detailed, yet I can’t help but revert, rendering patches into darkness where the light fails to reach. Melancholy catches Etta or maybe it’s the other way around. She’s looking at me now, stock still. When I stop, her boldness softens and I know she wants to say something. She can’t without giving in though.

She looks older than her 19 years, but is somehow still the kid I remember from that summer, years ago, when I was 14 and she was 15.

Cole and Etta had just come back to the city with their family. Cole was in charge of minding Etta that summer, which turned into him and Travis dumping her at Cleary’s with me every day while they took off to the beach. My 14-year-old self didn’t think much of Cole. He was gangly, arrogant and 18. Etta and I were fast friends though. She was scrappy, pint-sized and thought her big brother was a loser.

It would appear she’s still all of those things.

‘You slept for hours,’ Etta says, startling me out of my memory.

Her voice breaks over each word hoarsely.

I don’t know what to say.

‘Neve?’

‘It’s Nev.’

‘I know.’

Silence.

‘Hours? I slept that long?’

She nods.
‘What have you been doing?’

‘Reading. Exploring. You don’t seem like a napper.’

Her voice carries slightly more of the Southern drawl that seeps into Cole’s voice sometimes. It’s also soft and I have to strain my ears to catch each word. The last thing I want to do is ask her to speak up.

‘I’m not usually. I think I passed out mid-thought.’

The last thing I remember was mulling over the cottage. Then, nothing.

‘So why did you stop speaking to Cole?’

She appraises me. ‘He called our dad.’

‘Is that it?’

Etta’s eyebrows furrow at my disappointment.

‘He also called my sister. And my mum. They’re all coming to take me home.’

Okay, so that’s rough. I’ve had my family trailing behind me, tallying up my stupid decisions, but at least they didn’t feel the need to stage an intervention over it all.

‘I’m not the best person to be giving advice on this, but you know you don’t have to go back, right?’

Etta’s face grows soft. She’s tough for a girl who looks like a pebble on a pathway would trip her up, but mention of home gives her away, making her exactly that fragile. She wants them back.

‘I’m confused and that’s a dangerous thing to be around my dad.’

I decide right then that Larry and Mum have to meet. Two people so alike could never occupy the same space at the same time. One of them would have to spontaneously combust.
'My gran says that some people have a way of getting you to say or do something in such a way that you could swear it was your own idea.'

Etta huffs. ‘That’s my dad.’

That’s my gran.

Etta’s about to say something else when her mouth snaps shut.

Cole is standing at the bottom of the stairs. I wonder how long he’s been there.

He takes each step carefully, never looking away from Etta. When he’s standing still in front of us, I detect a slight, rhythmic sway. He found the pub then.

He places a book in front of me.

‘He says it’s a peace offering.’

He?

I pick up the book. It’s my Westerly. Or Mum’s. Hell, possession is nine tenths of the law, it’s bloody mine. Max!

I jump up. ‘Where is he?!’

Cole holds my shoulders lightly, stopping me from running off into the night. He’s already laughing. ‘He says he’s sorry and to tell you that it’s personal.’

Personal?

I grit my teeth.

I’m going to flay him.

‘Who are you talking about?’ Etta asks.

Cole flings his arms up. ‘And it speaks, ladies and gentleman.’

‘Hold up a second,’ I say. ‘How exactly is my property personal to him?!’

‘He said you’d ask that. He also said if you want an answer you’ll have to speak to him.’
There must be a book circulating out there somewhere, I swear it.

*How to get Nev to speak: A subtle blatant guide to manipulation.*

Half an hour later, it feels as if Max has barely come up for air.

After I got the journal back, he slunk out of the shadows carrying a goon bag, a parcel of fish and chips, and a sheepish shrug that seemed to say *sorry about the slight thieving on my part, but you were a complete cow at the time. Your fault.*

Then he started carrying on from one of his conversations last week. It’s as if time is not even linear to him. I let him stay because of the food and my stupid curiosity. It’s around 900 kilometres from Newman to here. Add that to whatever distance it was we travelled after we left him at the servo, and it makes running into him again a crazy coincidence.

‘How did you get this way?’ I ask him now.

Max deals himself out another round of solitaire, using a shabby deck of cards. Unlike some lanky people who never quite grow into their long limbs, he’s aware of his body.

‘Headed to the coast after Wubin. Around Geraldton. Waited on some friends who never showed. Must have been trying to hitch for about five hours before I managed to flag down a Winnebago headed Carnarvon way. Two sisters they were. Old ducks. Gave the outside a bit of a spruce and changed the oil. They ended up seeing me into town and putting me up in the pub for a night. That’s when I won a lift from this crew.’ He nods across the way to the station wagons I spied earlier. The harem pants and bands shirts. Of course. ‘They’re pushing through to Broome. Dry season’s started.’

‘How did you win a lift?’ I ask.

Max taps the cards.

‘Solitaire?’

‘Speed solitaire,’ he says.
‘Don’t suppose you could win a lift to another reality,’ I mutter under my breath.

Cole bumps my shoulder with his.

*What!* I mouth.

‘Met this science-dude a few days back now,’ Max continues, not noticing our exchange. ‘He’s leaving tomorrow for this beach camp about an hour south from here, but his mates have bailed. You lot keen? A little beach, a little sun,’ he coaxes.

‘Science-dude?’ Etta asks.

‘Yeah. Into the environment and all that. Real hard core. Live for the water.’

Max jumps to his feet as if his new mate’s packed life has reminded him of his current lack thereof. He piles some chips into a napkin, stashes it in his shabby jacket and trots down the stairs with his goon.

‘Smoke,’ he yells back in response to our silence. ‘You coming, Tex?’

Cole laughs and follows him out into the dark. ‘I’ve quit, Nev,’ he says. ‘Promise.’

‘How do you know Max?’ Etta asks.

‘We picked him up on our way to Newman. He wasn’t with us long.’

‘Did you see the holes in his jacket? And how he saved that food?’

I narrow my eyes. I noticed both of those things and I’ll admit that Max’s hungry, vagrant look appeals to my sympathy, but Etta’s intrigue has an edge to it. The little I know about her tells me she’s a projects kind of girl. The kind that’s drawn to causes. There’s nothing particularly wrong with that, except that I have a feeling she intends to make a cause out of Max, which will exhaust the small amount of patience I’ve been saving.

She nods once, as if to herself. ‘We should help him.’

‘With what exactly?!’

Etta shrugs. She has no idea.
‘I’ve sworn off kleptomaniac hitchhikers, thank you very much. I’m in a program and everything.’

‘You picked him up last week!’

‘That was before I knew he was a thief!’

‘You’re curious. I know it.’ She gets a faraway expression, looking off into what I assume is the dream-scape that is Max’s life. ‘A drifter with a taste for goon and poetry. I’ve seen your sketchbook, Nev. You’re going to make a living out of folks like Max one day. If you help him, this could turn out to be completely serendipitous.’

Her voice singsongs over each syllable, ending with a hint of so there.

I can’t help but recall the dingy campsite we found Max at last week with the fog pressing in, threatening to make him invisible.

Etta’s hook has sunk deep into the flesh of my intrigue. She knows it too.

‘Don’t go trying that pay-it-forward junk on me,’ I warn. ‘Your brother’s already tried. With Max no less! And by the way, it’s not serendipitous if you make it happen.’

‘What’s the harm in helping?’

‘She’s got a point,’ Cole says from the bottom of the stairs.

‘Who?’ Etta and I ask in unison.

‘Etta,’ Cole concedes.

Oh God. Max has gotten to him too.

I search for the little thief, but he seems to have disappeared. ‘Where did he go?’

‘His mates are cooking up some fish, so he bailed. Says he’ll drop by in the morning.’

Before I can reply, two girls materialise at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Hi Etta,’ one of them says, before breaking into a dreamy laugh.

‘That’s my cue,’ Etta says, jumping up.

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Cole and I share a confused, panicked look.

‘This is Angie and Fran from my dorm,’ Etta explains, suddenly animated. ‘We’re sharing with Casey, who’s just come back from an anti-fracking fieldtrip up north to see some of the trial sites. They do field-trips. Can you believe it? I’m going to check out the photos.’

She chucks her backpack on and holds the straps tight. She’s breathless.

Aero crawls out from under the table to sit by Etta’s feet.

‘When did you arrange this?’ Cole asks.

‘While you were off at the pub and Nev was crashed out.’ She turns to me. ‘You snore, by the way.’

Cole pinches the bridge of his nose. Angie and Fran sense the shift in mood, despite whatever it is they’ve been smoking. They withdraw slowly and walk into their dorm, still intertwined.

‘And is Casey as high as those two?’

‘No. Casey is an environmental grad from the city and he knows all about this stuff.’

Ah, Casey must be the science-dude Max was talking about. That explains Etta’s interest.

‘He?! Fantastic. A few hours of finding your voice and you’ve already…’

‘I’ve already what, Cole? I dare you to finish that sentence.’

Wow, they’re not even going to warm up.

‘We’re leaving tomorrow,’ Cole growls.

‘And if I refuse to come with you?’

‘I meant, we, as in Nev and I. I’m over it. I’m not dragging you back to Dad so that you can have another person to hate on. You’re my kid-sister, not my bleeding kid, Etta.’
‘Pity you didn’t reach that conclusion two days ago!’

Cole gets up from the table and is in our dorm, behind the slammed door in seconds.

Not to be outdone, Etta grabs Aero’s lead and hightails it to her own room.

After a couple of minutes, I knock on Etta’s door softly. When she doesn’t answer, I knock louder, which prompts a ‘go away, Nev.’ She’s kidnapped my dog, but apparently she has a problem with me? Brilliant. I see the at her closed door and test mine, which is not locked. Cole’s lying on his bed with his forearm resting across his brow. I stand by my bed awkwardly, until he lifts his blankets.

I practically run across the room and dive in.

I’m not ready to sleep though. I roll onto my belly and stare at him. ‘Why are your mum and sister coming?’

Cole groans, either at Etta’s big mouth or my question. He opens his heavy eyes.

‘Dad’s planning on the hard-sell,’ he says, matter-of-factly, more sober than drunk now. ‘The closest thing he’s got to breaking Etta is Mum and Margo. Etta thinks it was my bleeding idea for them to come.’

He swats at the air above us.

‘It’ll be okay. I bet you anything that by the time we leave tomorrow, she’ll be with us.’

‘You sound sure of yourself,’ he says.

I nod and shake my head, confusing the both of us until we’re laughing.

‘Do you know something I don’t?’ he asks.

‘Well, I’m pretty sure Etta’s friend, Casey, and the science-dude Max was talking about are the same person.’

Cole props himself up on his elbows. ‘How does Max know him?’
I shrug. ‘This is Max we’re talking about. I reckon Etta’s more likely to try and get us to go to the camp with the guys than she is to bolt.’

‘What’s your take on this camp? From what Max was telling me, it doesn’t seem so bad.’

I sit up. ‘I knew he’d gotten to you!’

‘There’s a bit of sense about it, that’s all. I don’t think you’ve had the break you wanted, not from your mum at least.’ I tense. ‘I’m not having a dig, hey. I don’t mind your mum. All I’m saying is, you were looking for an escape for a spell and I’m not sure you got it.’

‘And the solution is to take Max up on this second-hand-offer?’

‘Could be.’

He sits up so that we’re level.

He wants to tell me something else.

‘Just say it, Cole.’

‘Okay. I said I’d come with you because I thought we’d get to spend time together. And before you say we are, spending hours and hours in a car with my peeved little sister while we aim for random spots on the map doesn’t count.’

‘Jesus, why don’t you tell me what you really think?’

‘I didn’t mean for it to sound like that. I just want to hang out with you, Nev. Preferably in one spot. Minus the bleeding car.’

‘Listen, if your leg can’t take it...’

‘Don’t! Don’t you dare use that against me!’

I look away from his hurt face. I immediately want to disappear. To disintegrate.

‘What the fuck are you even doing out here, Nev?’ The softness of his voice begs for my attention, not my anger. ‘People would kill to have a hold of what you do at
Cleary’s. I watch you sometimes. You have no idea, because you get absolutely lost in everything you do, but I watch you. It kills you some days. I saw you bite your lip so hard it bled one day, just while chopping kindling. All because some dickhead retreater told you he could do a better job. And do you remember that day we were drinking beers after working on the stable? We spent the whole day on it. You were so tired that you nodded off against my shoulder and slept for ten minutes. Then you woke up all embarrassed. I swear you worked an extra twenty minutes to make up for it. That place is everything to you, Nev.’

I hang my legs off the side of the bed and hold a cool hand to my burning cheek. ‘You make me sound like a fool.’

‘See, now that’s strange, because I’m trying to tell you that I fucking adore you.’

‘How can you adore any of the things you just said? That girl’s a control freak. She’s insane!’

‘She’s passionate.’

‘Insane.’

‘Gorgeous.’

I get insan out, before he clamps a hand over my mouth.

He lets go with a laugh when I lick his palm.

‘Tell me what I just said, Nev.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Tell me what it is I was trying to get across to you.’

I look at the floor, then back at his pleading face. Oh God. My mind is blank.

‘You want me to...’

‘I need you to...’

‘You need me to...’ he waves a hand encouragingly, ‘...to stop being a crazy woman?’
He tries not to crack. Unfortunately for him, his laughter starts in his eyes.

‘I need you to let go of everything so that we can make the most of these next few days. Before I leave.’ Finally. He broaches the subject we’ve been avoiding. ‘Why don’t we spend a couple of days at this camp and go from there. We’ll wing it. Like you promised.’

‘Where would that leave you and Etta? You said as soon as you called your dad he’d be on a plane. You must already be pushing it, Cole.’

‘We need to forget about your mum and my dad until we’re home. As in completely clear your mind of them, Nev. Chuck your phone away.’

‘See, now you’re pushing it. You almost had me.’

He grins. ‘Come on. What happened to the girl who told me that you’ve got to know when to accept a good offer and shut up?’

‘Sounds like she was just trying to get you into bed.’

Cole’s easy laughter is back and the tension melts.

I let him pull me down onto the bed.

We’re a mess of arms and legs.

‘Tell me a story,’ he says.

He closes his eyes and waits for me to start, maybe so that he can forget about our tiff – our first with words, instead of hurt looks and peevish quiet – or ignore the fact that I’m in his bed.

In the last six months, Cole and I have managed a constant give and take, which has seen us revolving around each other without me realising. I know now that being with him will never be a mistake, even if I don’t get to keep him. That’s why I give him a kiss, instead of a story. He doesn’t stop me. It’s only when my hands work under his shirt and find purchase with his warm skin that he sits up quickly.

He holds my hands in his.
‘Nev, when I said I wanted to spend time, I didn’t mean we had to... you know.’

‘Cole, tell me you don’t want this.’

‘Huh?’

‘I want to hear you say it. Tell me you don’t want to and I’ll leave you alone. Cross my heart. I won’t try to touch you or kiss you. I’ll just drink beer with you and yell at you whenever I want and I won’t laugh at any of your jokes. I’ll crawl out of this bed too. Just tell me you’re not interested in me like that and I’ll be good.’

He lets out a frustrated laugh. When I pull back, he grabs for me and doesn’t let go.

‘I’ve been interested for months without you noticing, Nev. Listening to you talk about that deadbeat Jimmy nearly killed me. And knowing that you and hi...’

‘I noticed that you liked me in Newman,’ I say, not wanting to invite Jimmy into this bed. ‘It was hard not to with yo...’

‘Nev!’

‘You’re blushing,’ I laugh softly.

I press my hand over his heart, stopping his reply in his mouth. I spend most of my life getting angry. I know this. Half of it is also spent in blind pursuit of the same mistakes my mum and gran made. It’s a sad cycle that sets us on edge and has made me wary of connecting. Of sharing. I’ve always preferred the fringes. Clean and quick emotions. Pretending the hurt isn’t there or trying to cut people off before they can do any harm. Cole’s different. He doesn’t know it, but I crave the feelings and gestures he bleeds.

The smirk when I do something odd.

The hurt on his face when my words break his calm.

The race of his pulse when I hold him.

All of this, and more, is him connecting with me. I need it. I need him.
I hold Cole’s hand to my heart this time. He must have made some kind of decision himself, because he doesn’t talk about who’s staying or leaving. He doesn’t mention the party either. His fingertips press into my chest. It’s a teasing gesture, like he’s trying to caress my breast and carve out the thump thump thump of my heart. To own it. I pull my shirt over my head. Not because I want to be carved or owned or hurt. I don’t long for the painful intimacy Jimmy gave me. I just want more of Cole’s wicked eyes, full of the unremitting humour I find so attractive and the confidence I could drink and drink.

Our mouths come together. We’re insistent and awkward at first, laughing through kisses. But we find rhythm as every inch of us is melting down onto the bed. Beneath Cole’s weight, I shift so that there’s a small chasm of space for me to work my cool hands along the rim of his jeans. He gasps and calls me a witch. He doesn’t stop me though. Everything about him is sure now. He still murmurs against me are you sure several times, and I breathe long yeses, but he doesn’t hold himself back from me.

As his sure hands mould me to him, the days we’ve spent together fall in and out of focus, and I find that we’ve broken in such a way that we fit perfectly.
Chapter Twenty Nine

I wake to the feeling of heat. The delicious kind, like when you’re sitting close to a fire in winter and don’t want to move, because the moment you do, your body turns to ice. I’m pressed against Cole. He’s fully clothed and his boots are heavy against my bare legs. I’m only half way there in underwear and a t-shirt. He must have gone out. Or he’s going. That wakes me up. I wriggle free from his arms and lean over him, blinking away sleep in a way that’s probably as unattractive as it feels. He watches me, amused. There are two coffees on the bedside table.

‘You’re officially my favourite person,’ I tell him, as I reach for a cup.

Before I get to it, Cole pulls me into a bear hug and rolls me onto my back. His body against mine is physical memory. It shoots through me, setting everything on fire.

He pulls away and flicks the elastic of my underpants. ‘Who’s blushing now, witch?’

He pins me and flicks them again. ‘Unfair,’ I laugh. ‘You have pants on!’

‘Come home with me,’ he spills in a rush.

I’m still laughing. ‘You said no more talking about home!’

‘To Texas.’

I wait for his calm face to shift into a teasing one. It doesn’t.

‘Not forever. Just for a while. I’ll get this knee sorted and then we can come back.’

My heart catches and I’m relieved when he burrows his face into my neck.

At least when I was contemplating roaming about by myself, I had the option of Cleary’s. Leaving with Cole means really leaving. It means I’m done.

I’m searching desperately for something to tell him, when someone licks my toes.

‘Good god. Please tell me that’s Aero.’
Cole’s body relaxes across mine. The moment’s gone. ‘She was by herself in Etta’s room,’ he mumbles into my hair. ‘The wagons aren’t around and I can’t find.’

My mind scrambles back and forth between Texas and Etta and Cole in my bed. Last night. Right now. Everything.

‘I doubt she would have been in a rush to drop in and say hi this morning. She’s probably in the kitchen or something. Give her a little longer, yeah?’

‘I was trying to call her bluff. I don’t really want her to leave.’

I ruffle his hair lightly, making him look at me. ‘I know. She’ll be back though.’

‘And if she’s not?’

I sigh and kick off the blankets we share. ‘You take reception and I’ll take the kitchen.’

Etta’s in the camp kitchen at the sink washing out last night’s empty wine bottles with hot, soapy water, scrubbing them until they’re clean of their stickers and glue. Her hands are pink and her face is bright. When she finds me staring, she raises an eyebrow, as if she knows what I’ve been up to. She walks outside and sits on the grass next to a tatty old swag. It looks like Max’s. I remember throwing it in the back of the car last week.

I sit across from her and text Cole.

Etta stashes the clean bottles in her backpack, pulls out a needle and thread, and starts mending Max’s swag. She’ll have to patch a few of the gaping holes. Concentration lines her face, as she makes sure her stitches are even. I can see a lot of Mum in her. Her face is bright with focus, enjoying the moment and my curiosity.

‘You’re going to have to be careful,’ I tell her, with deadpan perfection.

She stops what she’s doing. ‘Pardon?’

‘You know. This whole decision to face your dad. It’s borderline maturity when you think about it. Might need to be careful.’
I smirk and her confused expression cracks.

‘Jury’s still out on mature. I have to talk to him yet.’

‘So are you headed back to the States then?’

‘Of course not,’ she scoffs. I don’t know how anyone manages to be delicate and scoff at the same time, but she nails it. ‘I never was.’

We both know that’s a lie, but I don’t call her on it.

‘Have you told Cole?’

The needle stills in her lap. ‘Not sure he deserves it. When we met up in Port, I could barely breathe without him telling me how neatly everything was going to go. And then he went and called Mum and Margo.’

Words seem to fail her, but I can see her clenching her fists.

‘He didn’t call them.’

‘Sure, sure.’

‘Seriously, Etta. It was your dad’s doing. Not Cole’s.’

She looks me over curiously.

‘Do you at least know what you’re going to say to your dad?’

Etta starts stitching again. ‘Words don’t work on him. Not unless you’ve got them exactly right, which has happened exactly three times in my life.’

‘What do you want to tell him?’

‘You sound like my mum,’ she says. I sound like my dad I want to say. ‘She reckons that all Dad wants is for Cole and me to stand up to him and mean it, but I reckon he wants to smother all the mistakes out of us until we’re bored out of our brains. I don’t want that,’ she says, jabbing the swag with her needle and catching her finger. She sucks on it. ‘I want to learn to fight people who do bad things. Learn how to make
them stop. I want to be more like him. Be as bold. I just can’t do it while he’s watching over me.’

‘You should tell him all of that.’

‘His ears would bleed, Nev.’

‘You never know. Maybe he’ll surprise you.’

Larry and Peta are the same. I honestly believe that they do what they think is best. Admittedly, their version of the best and how to make it happen is horrific sometimes, but on a simple level, our parents want us to be okay.

Etta’s not there yet. She’s looking at me as if I just told her the sky’s puke-green with a dash of purple glitter. I can’t help laughing. Neither can she.

Before I lose my nerve, I ask her the question that’s dancing on my tongue.

‘Do you think Cole will come back?’

Max and Cole reach us before she can answer.

‘Nev was just telling me she wants to stay at the beach camp for a couple of days,’ Etta says. She follows her stitches methodically.

‘Really?’ Cole asks. ‘Is that so?’

Max doesn’t weigh in. Smart man. He’s eating cold chips from last night and rolling from the balls of his feet to his heels.

‘What happened to your ride?’ I ask him.

‘Gone. Can catch Casey at the camp though. Easy as.’

Three pairs of eyes turn to me: a selective mute, a Texo-Australian with a gimpy knee and a kleptomaniac hitchhiker. Given that my identifier is probably something akin to an alcoholic runaway, I don’t think I can really judge. Or say no.

‘Fine! I’ll come. But that doesn’t mean I’m staying on forever!’
I bite my bottom lip as Etta squeals and launches to her feet. She loads Max up with her bags and drags him towards the car. I can hear him prattling on about the dunes and crystal water and how it’s so far off-road that not a soul will be able to reach us.

Ever so slightly creepy.

I take out my phone as Cole sits beside me. Off-road is code for no-service.

Me: I might not be able to message for a few days.

Barely a minute later:

Mum: Why?! Where are you going?

‘Maybe don’t tell her it’s in the middle of nowhere,’ Cole says over my shoulder. According to Max, we’re headed to a turquoise beach a little south of here, but a long way from home. It’s a place I’ve never heard of. One Mum and Poppy probably haven’t even seen. It really is the epitome of nowhere, if you believe in such a thing.

Mum: Well?

Me: It’s on the corner of north and nowhere.
Part Five

If the Dream Holds

The little sour apples still grow in my heart’s orchard
Bitten with grief, coming up out of the dead country.
Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth.

- Dorothy Hewett “Legend of the Green Country” (2000, p. 131)

Chapter Thirty

‘Max! If you don’t sit still, you’re going to lose an ear!’

‘My bad,’ he laughs.

I’m kneeling behind him with a pair of scissors, trying to cut his hair. It’s taken the whole five days we’ve been at the camp to convince him that I know what I’m doing.

Now he can barely wait for me to finish.

‘I want it real short!’

‘You’ve said that already. Now hold still!’

I work quickly. Even if Max does manage to sit still, it’s late afternoon and the light will start failing soon. I get in two minutes before he starts fidgeting again.

He has one of Etta’s empty wine bottles in his hands. It’s full of small pieces of smooth driftwood and shells and other bits she’s collected here.

‘She could drop it in the sea,’ he says.

‘Or bury it.’
Max startles, as if he didn’t realise he spoke aloud. The scissors slip dangerously.

‘Max! Ear. Cut. Remember?’

‘Sorry!’

He puts the bottle down next to his.

It has layer upon layer of dirt, sand and gravel. Etta and I watched yesterday afternoon as Max pulled out small plastic pouches of dirt and sand from his backpack, the colours ranging from deep ochre to pristine white. He spent forever lining them up and arranging by colour, so that when he poured the sand into his bottle, the thin lines faded in and out of each hue naturally.

My favourite is the light red, almost pink sand. It reminds me of strawberry ice cream and the change you can see in the land as you travel.

My own bottle is full of sketches. I’ve been thinking about burying it on the beach here. Nature would take it eventually, perhaps during a storm that would heave up the smooth glass and carry it out into the ocean. A message in a bottle.

‘How long did it take you to collect all that sand?’

Max holds up his bottle. ‘This lot? Can’t say I know.’

*This lot?*

‘It isn’t the first then?’

Max shrugs and itch to see his face. ‘Don’t do trinkets. The sand’s where I’ve been.’

‘What was the journal about then? Besides being *personal* of course.’ I tug at his hair lightly.

‘My grandparents read me poems and the like when I was a little tacker,’ Max says. ‘Lost them in a car accident when I was 12. The book got me thinking about them.’

My anger about the journal has long since passed, and Max doesn’t elaborate about his family, so I leave it all be. All the same, a sudden fierceness wraps around me when
I remember that he’ll go back to travelling towards nothing soon. I wish I could give him more than a haircut and a week’s company. But Max is not my job. He doesn’t need me to fix him, or make it so that he has a place to sit still.

All he wants is what he has. It’s not for me to say that’s not enough.

Cole’s voice draws me back to the present, which it does often now. He’s circling Etta, trying to get her to swim. She’s sitting in the shallows, resting back on her hands with her face bent to catch the dying sun. She was down by the water letting it lap at her feet as soon as we made camp. I can see why she loves it. She’s tanned the length of her slight frame, with only a few freckles dotting the bridge of her nose. She was made for sun and water. Cole throws some seaweed on her. She launches herself into the water where he stands and tells him where he can stick it.

And Casey? He’s sitting in his dinghy offshore with a line in the water. Aero is parked next to him, bobbing along gently as the current rocks the boat.

She still refuses to swim.

I wish we could stay longer.

For me, the five days we’ve spent here have existed out of time, with the seconds and minutes and hours bleeding together, slowing in all the right places.

I spent it down by the beach in Coral Bay each morning doing portraits, despite the mostly bumpy 40 kilometre drive each way.

I spent it living off two-minute noodles, peanut butter sandwiches and wine, and thinking it was a feast each time.

And I spent it with Cole.

Within a day of wandering the beach and dunes with him, my lips were swollen from his kisses and my cheeks were rosy for days. He loved it. I hid under a huge brimmed hat I bought in town, until I realised no one was watching us. Nobody cared if we disappeared for ages, or swam late at night, or slept away the afternoons because
we’d spent the early hours of the morning in our borrowed tent, talking about nothing.

Our time here is nearly done though. We all leave for the city in a couple of days.

’Where to after this, Max?’

’Casey’s dropping by Kalbarri on his way back. Might tag.’

That’s news. Max called shotgun yesterday in preparation for when we leave, fighting Etta for the front seat when he realised there was no chance I was letting him drive.

’I thought you were coming with us.’

’Gotta go see a man about a horse, as my poppa used to say.’

Gran says the exact same thing when she’s up to something shady and doesn’t want anyone to know what. Clary and Ed, for instance.

I peek around at Max’s face. ‘Family, friend or foe?’

’All depends on which way the wind blows.’

I pull a compact mirror from my pocket and pass it to Max. He grabs it eagerly and swings his head back and forth, then up and down, trying to get a glimpse of his cut.

’Love it,’ he says, roughing up the back. ‘Cheers.’

I smile. ‘You’re welcome.’

He jogs down to the shore to join Etta and Cole.

I reach for the Polaroid and use my last shot on the three of them.

While the photo develops in the dark hollow of Cole’s camera bag, I take out my sketch pad. I sift through, looking for a clean page. All I find is beach sand. I give it a shake and one of Mum’s crumpled drawing falls out. It’s from the first sitting, weeks ago. I trace the ghost of my outline as it shadows Gerry. Mum’s lines are like a familiar smell.

*Slouch or something* she told me at the time.
I remember sinking back into the single-seater lounge and bringing my legs up to cross them. Gerry stirred, but settled.

*See if you can lay her back against your chest again.*

*Anything else?!*

I shifted all the same, my left elbow on the armrest and the other around Gerry in case she got the squirms. We were wrapped up by the lounge, the cushy centre pulling us in.

*Okay, that works. Hold that.*

Not long after, the pencil was behind her ear again.

*Mum!*

She adjusted the easel and turned to me, thinking yet again. In those early stages of the sitting, she still had the mirror set up behind her so that I could see her work. I could only pick out a few faint lines. The canvas remained mostly plain, which is the part she hates the most: *trying to win over the white*. I watched as she picked up her sketchbook and turned away from the canvas. Her brow was damp and the air was already hot and thick. It was the kind of day that usually spells a moody mess for both of us. It was playing with her. Her hair, released from its usual plait, fell down to her waist and I watched as small wisps danced up with the humidity.

Soon, her pencil was in her hand and she was working faint, yet confident, lines onto her sketchpad. Five minutes later her face was calmer and she wasn’t with us anymore. She wasn’t a mother sketching her babies. She was a feather, holding onto a breath of wind before she was caught by the ground. There was a familiar energy to it. She started with a loose outline of my head, shoulders and chest, then began work on Gerry. Normally, she does a quick sketch of the whole body to gain some perspective, but that day, she slowly added more detail to my sister’s form and I saw her evolve on the page with soft eyes and curled hands. Her baby cowlick. Minutes later she was angelic, floating in the middle of the page, my outline looming in.
There was an interruption of some kind thereafter and Mum ripped the draft out of the pad. It slipped from the table and floated to the ground.

I kept the castoff. If she came back for it, she never said anything.

‘That doesn’t look like one of yours.’

Cole. He’s standing above me, dripping salty water on my bare legs and Mum’s sketch. Small blotches materialise where once there were lines.

‘Sorry!’

I wipe it away. ‘It’s okay.’

I don't mind at all. I love that he already knows what my stuff looks like.

He sits next to me, his wet shorts seeping into my leg. The cool touch is inviting.

‘It’s Mum’s.’

‘She’s good,’ he says.

‘She is.’

I drape his towel across his shoulders so that I can lean against his back.

He stares at the drawing beside him. Does he read as much as I do in those lines? What would it have looked like if I’d given her the chance to finish?

‘Is this what your mum’s doing for her show?’

‘We stopped talking about her work ages ago. I stopped, I should say.’

Showing interest in her life amounted to giving her something. I didn’t want that.

‘It must be getting close.’

I pretend to do the math with my fingers over his shoulder. He catches my hand and looks back at me. ‘When?’

‘Tomorrow night.’
‘Geez Nev, you kept that well hidden.’

‘Just doing what I was told,’ I say, dropping next to him. ‘Forgetting and all that.’

‘If I’d known it was so close, I might’ve toned it down a notch.’

I wipe away beads of water from his arms with the back of my hand. ‘There’s still time.’

‘Barely.’

He’s right. It’ll take 13 to 14 solid hours of driving to reach the city. Given our stop-start style of travel, it’s unlikely we’d be able to make the show. We’d have to leave well before the sun was up.

‘It’ll be ok,’ I tell him. He raises an eyebrow. ‘It will! Her paintings will be up at the gallery for a whole week!’

He nods slowly, nowhere near convinced.
Chapter Thirty One

It’s after midnight. Cole and I are in our tent, lacing our fingers in the air above us. The walls are illuminated by a lantern, which makes shadows of our disfigured puppets.

Cole’s dangerously close to sleep. I lay my cold feet over his to keep him awake.

‘Witch,’ he murmurs. ‘Your feet are always freezing.’

‘Lucky for me, yours are always warm.’

I stare at him as he plays with my hand. He’s content enough, but his knee is hurting. I know this, because he drinks when it’s at its worst and he’s had quite a few tonight. I only put the two together yesterday, when I saw him grimace and reach for a stubby. I started thinking back to Cleary’s and how after a ride he’d always suggest a beer. And as soon as we reached Meekatharra and Exmouth, he made a beeline for the pub.

I rest on my elbow and lean over him. ‘Look,’ I whisper.

He turns and sees the last Polaroid I took of him, Etta and Max.

His droopy mouth smiles along with his eyes.

‘S’good. Mine now,’ he says, swiping for it.

I pull it back easily. ‘It’s mine.’

He chuckles and closes his eyes.

‘Cole?’

‘Hmm.’

‘I wasn’t going to say anything, but I heard you on the phone to your dad this morning when we were in town.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Is he in the city? Is he mad?’
'Mmm,' he says, followed by, 'hmm.'

He’s done. I lean in close. ‘If I asked you to stay in Perth with me and you said no, you probably wouldn’t remember in the morning, would you?’

He’s quiet for the longest time. Then he laughs. ‘I’d remember.’

I push him. ‘You’re such a little shit sometimes.’

I slip out of the tent and walk down to the beach with Aero. The full moon reflects off the oil black water and we find our spot easily. I run my fingers through her coat, which is thick with salt and sand. Feet crunch behind me. I plan on letting him walk over to me, until I hear his limp play out on the sand, one heavy crunch followed by a softer one. All over again I’m the stupidest, most stubborn girl that ever lived. I meet him halfway and stand in front of him with my arms crossed.

He has no option but to stop.

He looks down at me.

‘You’re an idiot,’ I tell him.

He pulls me to him without warning and wraps me up. My arms envelope his waist and he folds his jacket around me as far as it will go, until I’m tight against his chest and can bury my face in his neck. He smells of hay, but I’m sure he’d taste of salt. I turn my lips to his skin and kiss it. Let my tongue flicker against it.

He draws in a long breath and releases it just as slowly.

We stand this way for such a long time and it’s not enough.

Eventually, we sit down on the sand with Aero at our feet.

‘I have to leave and get this knee sorted,’ he starts, then stops. I don’t fill the silence for him. ‘I can’t keep going about feeling this broken and expecting everyone to slow down with me. The next time I see you, I need to be as close to whole as I can get. Jesus, I need to be able to keep up with you!’ he laughs. ‘I’m coming back, Nev.’

He kisses my hand and I give him nothing.
I’m not trying to be mean, I just don’t know what to say.

‘Blink twice if you believe me,’ he says.

‘You know, you’re leaving it late in the game to sound so sure. About coming back.’

‘I’ve wanted to say it a hundred times, but I thought you’d kill me if I led with that. I was screwed either way, wasn’t I? You’d call me a bastard for leaving in the first place and then a bastard again for trying to cover up my leaving by saying I was coming back.’

I nearly lose what he’s saying. ‘Would not,’ I say, only after I play it back in my head.

‘Would too and don’t deny it.’

‘Seems to me like the bastard-move was asking me to come with you, then changing your mind.’

I turn away from him, because he won’t stop looking at me.

‘I didn’t change my mind, Nev, you just made up yours,’ he says softly.

‘But I never said yes or no!’

I was decided, sure, but he doesn’t know that.

He pulls at my hand. He’s got his stern face on, which means he’s about to start making sense. Trouble is, I already get it. I know why he has to go and why I have to stay.

When I don’t respond, he pulls me into his lap. My back warms against his chest. ‘You can turn away from me all you like,’ he whispers in my ear. ‘It won’t work.’

How can he leave this? I want to tell him that I’ll spend every day making him feel exactly this good if he’ll stay with me.

But I don’t. It won’t fix anything. Fix him.
How long will surgery, rehab and his penance take, I wonder? Cole thinks he’ll find a way to talk his dad around. What if he doesn’t?

‘Did you ever ask your dad if you could stay?’ Cole sighs against me. ‘It’s okay. Don’t answer that.’

‘I didn’t ask him because he’s coming back for me, Nev.’

I’m confused. ‘He was always coming back for you.’

‘No. He was coming back for Etta and I was the bonus. But then he told me yesterday that she’s been fending for herself for a good eight months now. He said she can stay, but I’m going with him. He’s coming to get me because he wants to help me get better, Nev. Off his own back!’

That word. Better. Cole breathes it against my ear and I capture the soft awe, as if he never imagined such a thing was possible. That his dad would be ready to see him.

How could I have been so blind to how much he needs his dad?

‘I told him about the vet thing.’

I turn quickly to face him. ‘You didn’t!’ My smile is ridiculous.

‘Don’t get too excited,’ he laughs. ‘He seemed... resigned to it, like I had him. Then Etta went and lit a fire under him by telling him about some new degree she’s applied for. And working at Cleary’s.’

He eyes me pointedly.

After Etta mentioned she was staying, I offered her work at Cleary’s. I figure I can use the help and she can use someplace safe to ground herself.

‘About that...’

‘Just look after her for me.’

My chest tightens.

‘What’s the plan then? Go back, get sorted, then come home?’
He smiles when I say home. The soft smile he doesn’t use so much as it uses him.

‘That’s about it. Maybe tell him I’m thinking about studying at the uni he hates in Perth.’ Cole lets out a satisfied chuckle. ‘Reverse psychology. When he says you’ll be going to such-and-such and nowhere else it’ll sound like his idea.’

‘And if that doesn’t work?’

‘Then I tell him Etta needs a babysitter.’

I scrunch my face up. ‘Have you got a plan c?’

‘Christ, Nev. I don’t know. Maybe I’ll tell him there’s a witch of a girl back home and if I don’t get back to her soon, I’ll go insane. Or more insane.’

‘You better come back. Or else.’

He laughs. ‘Or kiss ‘else’ kiss ‘what?’

‘Or else I’ll shack up with Max and be done with it.’
Chapter Thirty Two

After Cole fell asleep, I started packing for home. By the time he woke up again, I was sitting next to him, trying to think of ways to convince him to come home with me. It didn’t take much. I reckon he was close to calling it himself. We tried to talk Etta into it, but she baulked at the idea of spending the whole day in the car again. Instead, she agreed to try and make it back in time to say goodbye to Cole and her family. Her tears seemed to contradict her promise. As for Max, we left him rolling in the new swag we bought him, murmuring something about *insatiable trees*. After that, Cole, Aero and I flew, burning the coast until the road was nothing but a perpetual haze, with the landscape and towns flashing between short naps and long stints behind the wheel.

We reached the outskirts of the city 30 minutes ago.

Right now, everything blurs slightly, adding to the sharp pain that’s attacking my stiff hips and aching back. I get out of the car, allowing blood to pulse through my jelly legs. Then I rake my fingers through my sea-tangled hair, which, next to a tan, is the only evidence of my time spent away.

Somewhere along the highway, I changed into an old black dress from Dad’s. It’s slightly crinkled from its journey, but it works. Better still, it fits. Unfortunately, all I have shoe-wise is my worn pair of boots. Can’t win them all.

I smooth out the dress one last time and try to calm my rolling belly.

The gallery is well lit, but it doesn’t open for another hour. Mum will be inside, doing a final check.

I touch Cole’s shoulder. ‘Are you ready?’

He shakes his head, gripping Aero’s lead. ‘Think we’ll sit this one out. Come and get us when you’re done?’

He hugs me off my feet and we sway about like that for a while.
When I’m earth-side, Cole flicks up the hem of my dress playfully. ‘You look good in a dress.’

I push his hand away with a laugh and run inside.

There are three showrooms in the gallery, the largest of which is the main one directly ahead of the foyer. It sits in the middle and the other two rooms extend off to the left and the right, perfectly aligned.

I see Mum before she sees me. She hasn’t changed yet. She’s wearing skinny jeans and a large, white button down shirt, which is more paint, than white. Her hair is chaotic, wrapped up in a messy bun, high on her head. I laugh quietly. Except for her blonde hair, she looks like me. I watch as she steps back to appraise one of the pieces and gently butts Gerry behind her. She snatches her up with a ‘rahhh’ and Gerry loses it. Dribbles and squeals. I’m itching to run up and pluck her from Mum’s arms and never let go. God, I’ve missed her. Missed them. My heart pulses against ribs and I’m so busy watching their playful blathering that it takes me a moment to remember the paintings.

I tiptoe into the main showroom, trying to evade Mum’s notice.

My need for subtly disintegrates when I see the first painting.

I’m six-years-old and I don’t want to sit still. Mum makes me clench my hands together around my drawn knees.

I’m eight and I’m coming to the end of a year-long infatuation with flowers. I’m black and white, but the crown of roses Mum makes for me is bright yellow.

I’m ten and Mum paints me up in my great grandfather’s favourite tree.

I’m 15 and have a sour expression that won’t shift in the portraits to come.

I don’t realise I’m searching for one portrait in particular until I’m standing in front of it. Gerry and me. I’m not a ghost or a shadow in the background. My sister is in my arms and is leaning back to look up at me.

We’re not smiling, but that doesn’t change the fact that we adore each other.
The portrait becomes rheumy as my eyes blur.

Mum’s scent reaches me before she does. It’s a mix of vanilla and oil paint. Anticipation and anxiety flutter from my head to my toes in a wave. I look ahead at the painting studiously, wishing I wasn’t frozen, or that there was time to let her smell fade into a memory and give me something to hold onto before I turn to find her standing there.

I touch the bottom corner gingerly.

‘The paint’s still wet,’ I say. It glides between my fingers.

‘I finished it this morning.’

She would have painted all day, probably finishing while I was suspended in a thicket of bitumen someplace, trying to get back.

Gerry shatters the quiet with a screech and launches out of Mum’s arms. I catch her.

‘Baby bean,’ I coo softly. I bury my face in her neck. She’s all talc and vanilla. No paint to speak of. Yet. I pet the soft down of her hair and she doesn’t know what to do with herself. She starts bopping up and down in my arms and slapping my shoulders.

I can see Mum out the corner of my eye. She’s looking me over, like maybe something’s changed.

She looks around. ‘Did you guess?’

‘I had absolutely no idea.’

I never gave myself the chance to have the idea.

Mum folds her top lip between her teeth, trying to hide her smile. ‘I told your dad you’d never guess. He was adamant you would.’

‘There’s a lot of that going around.’

She questions me with a raised eyebrow.
‘I told you so’s,’ I say. ‘You get to say I told you so for something or other, maybe because I was an absolute fruit bat for a week, and I get to say I told you so because I handled it. I’m back.’

‘Running away is not what I would call handling it, Nev. And I wouldn’t be drawing attention to that right now. You’re already grounded and without a car for so, so much longer than it takes for your gran to get over you taking hers.’

I savour Mum saying my name aloud, but I still let out a sound I’m not proud of.

‘Did you just snort at me?’

‘You haven’t been able to ground me for years, Mum. I’m not going to let you start now.’

She lets out a quick ‘huh’, a half-laugh that says think again, kid. It’s Gran’s favourite. 'You don’t get to be an adult overnight. You’re still my baby, even if you don’t want to be.'

‘So I have to stay a kid for the rest of my life because you want to control me?’

‘Honey, you can twist it whichever way you like, but you’ll figure out soon enough that you are never too old to have to listen to your mother. Go ask your gran.’

She puts her back to the wall and slides down. ‘Barleese.’

‘Huh?’

‘As in we need a break.’

I join her on the ground. ‘Is that your plan for us? Every time we wind each other up, you’re going to scream barleese.’

‘I did not scream.’

‘Give it time.’

Mum’s about to bite back until she sees me smirking; not an unfortunate by-product of my time with Cole.
By this stage in one of our conversations, Mum or I would have stormed off or threatened something. Instead, we sit quietly with our hands in our laps. Progress.

I look around the room again, suddenly realising that this must be the present Mum was working on. She may be chaos on two legs sometimes, but I know beyond a doubt that she’s been planning this for a while. Maybe since the first portrait. What do I have to give her? The answer is nothing. In fact, there’s something else I need from her.

‘What happened with the renovations, Mum?’

‘I cancelled them. Although it was mostly Darryl, I guess. He stalled the contractors for a few days at the start. Said he was surprised you didn’t leave sooner.’

‘He said that?!’

She nods.

Never in a million years did I think I would have Darryl in my corner.

‘And you? Do you think I should’ve left sooner?’

‘I didn’t want you to leave at all, Nev. That was the whole point of me moving in. I thought after living by yourself you might’ve missed me. The ironic part is, that time by yourself was what pushed you away further.’

‘Mum...’

‘I need to hear it from you, Nev. That you don’t want me there.’

I try to think of a nice reply, whilst staying honest. ‘I don’t want you there, Mum.’

She closes her eyes and laughs cheerlessly.

Ever the charmer, baby girl.

‘I’m not saying I want you to leave Cleary’s. Or even expect it,’ I add quickly. ‘I couldn’t handle it if you just disappeared. Honestly. But I can’t share the cottage with you, Mum. It’s the first place I’ve felt comfortable in years. It’s just... well, it’s mine.’

Mum nods, but doesn’t say anything.
‘Do you remember that house you used to tell me about when you were younger?’

Her smile suggests that she knows where my thoughts have led me.

Maybe she’s been reliving the idea herself.

‘You’ve been talking to your gran.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing,’ she says.

‘Do you ever think about it?’ I press.

She sighs. ‘Honey, think about how much time and effort went into the plans for the cottage and look at how easily it’s fallen to nothing. Some threadbare, romantic dream from my 20s isn’t going to fare any better.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with romance.’

‘I’m not talking about boy-romance. I’m talking about the romantic dreams you use to keep yourself afloat. The stuff you have to let go of as you get older.’

‘The cottage,’ I tell her decisively.

‘Nev, that was never my dream, it was...’

‘I meant for me.’ I turn my whole body towards her. ‘The cottage is my threadbare, romantic dream for the future. But you know what? It’s not an entirely crazy one, Mum. Long run or short, I’m not going to let it go. Hell, even if it wasn’t something I loved, you know that we can’t live together again.’

She appraises me. Her frustration is guarded because she’s holding onto us not fighting. I know this, because I am too. ‘You’ve never said any of this, Nev.’

‘I am now.’

‘That you are.’

‘Well?’
‘I haven’t been back there since you left, Nev. It’s yours.’

I have to close my eyes so that I don’t turn into a weepy fool. When I open them, everything comes out in rush. ‘I’ll pay you back, Mum. I promise. For everything you put into it and if you lost money. You know I’m good for it. Maybe not like right now, but I will be and when Et...’

Mum touches my arm. ‘Honey, save your energy. And your money. The place is going to need some love.’

I hold her hand where it rests on my arm.

In the months to come, as I make the cottage my own again, Mum might start to understand exactly what she’s given me tonight. It’ll help for me to say it. To tell her what it is I need and want instead of giving her my quiet. She might gain something too. Some peace perhaps? Connection? None of these things feel like distant possibilities anymore.

For now, we watch Gerry play with my keys and charge across the floorboards.

She, at least, has already forgotten that I was ever gone.

‘I sent it, you know.’

‘Sent what?’ I ask.

‘The letter you left.’

My mind scrambles for understanding. Then it hits. The letter. The one I wrote to the Coroner. The one I haven’t thought about in days.

My hand flies to my mouth and I freeze.

‘Christ, Mum! Why?!’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you didn’t want to. And because I was just being a shit!’
'Well, the second one’s true enough. Doesn’t mean that you were wrong to write it. I realised that if you’d gotten to the point where that was the only way you could reach me, then maybe you were right. We were fucked.’

‘Mum!’ I laugh.

‘Well it’s true. Deny it,’ she says.

She knows I can’t.

‘I’m sorry then. For the way I did it. Leaving it there for you to find was cruel.’

Mum gets very calm. ‘It’s done. How about we leave it for now and talk about it some more when we hear back?’

I nod eagerly. I’m happy not to go there tonight.

‘So,’ Mum says. ‘Where’s Cole?’

‘Outside. I think he wanted to avoid all this.’

‘Are you two... you know.’

‘Mum!’

‘You ran away with the boy you’ve been swooning over for months and I’m not meant to ask?’

‘Exactly. Besides, you should be livid, not curious. Aren’t you meant to be coaxing me into finding myself and not living through a boy or something?’

‘Honestly, honey. If you were in any danger of living your life through a boy, you’d have booked a one-way ticket to Texas by now. Have I mentioned how pleased I am that you didn’t do that?’

‘I’m vegetarian, Mum. I don’t think they’d let me in.’

‘Funny girl. I’m curious though. Did you ask him to stay?’

‘Once.’
‘And he said no?’

She’s got her Mum-face on. She wants to hit him.

Lucky for Cole, he’s leaving the country soon.

I’m trying to figure out how much of my time with Cole I’m willing to share with Mum, and when I should bring up Etta working with us, when Aero trots into the showroom. She spots Gerry and makes a beeline for her, licking her face and jumping away from her chubby hands.

Hell with a side of bloody hell.

I scramble to my feet and run outside. Cole’s gone.

I was wondering how he was going to do it.
Exegesis

*Going Back to Go Forward: An Invitation to Get Lost*

*Figure 1.2. Early sketch of Nev and Aero*
Introduction

... all the time as I ran and climbed and rode over our three thousand acres I was collecting the material that would become one of the central myths of my poetry, and still remains so ... our first experiences are what form us, they colour our lives forever. (Hewett, 2000, p. 8)

On the Corner of North and Nowhere (Jarvey, 2016) has its origin in my Western Australian (WA) childhood, specifically the period of my life when my family moved from the cusp of a desert, to a city, to an ocean. I was five when we started this journey, leaving Newman for Perth, and I was seven when we eventually settled in Bunbury. In Newman, I was a barefoot little girl with red hair, who collected freckles and bindies along with her three older sisters. Even now these memories carry the confusing sensation of freedom, heat and grit, as a relentless sun stalked our play and red dirt settled over every available surface in a dusty, matte finish. In Perth, the freedom was more sporadic and I avoided the agoraphobia of the graffiti stained suburbs of Midland by escaping into my grandmother’s back garden. I would watch her feed raw mince to magpies and we would eat gooseberries straight from the bush, the small, leafy pods opening to sour fruit. I can taste them even now. In Bunbury, before we settled in the place that would come to be my second idyllic home, we rented a house on one of the city’s busiest streets. This time, much to my delight, my parents added to the suburban aesthetic, four chickens and a goat named Andrew, who eventually went to live on a big farm with a nice Italian man – the vegetarian in me has always been too scared to pursue the truth of it. Like Andrew, my family did not last long on that busy street. Finally, we came to live by the beach, a place so remarkably different to the dry heat of the north and the confines of the city. Quiet encased our cul-de-sac and there was a breadth of thick bushland for my sisters and me to lose ourselves in. A short walk up the hill behind our home and we were looking out over the Indian Ocean. A three minute sprint later and we were dripping in it.

Like Dorothy Hewett, whose seemingly quotidian youth in WA became the “central myth” of her poetry, my own creative mythos has developed naturally around my early experiences with the State’s people and places (2000, p. 8). I have long felt
that there was a story in these chaotic couple of years that saw my family drift. Not a strictly autobiographical one, which related in finite detail the particulars of this journey from north to south – given my age at the time I do not have the memories to sustain this tale – but one that negotiated the gnawing curiosity that settled on me as a teenager when I discovered young adult (YA) fiction and started to question my place in the world. Australian authors like Isobelle Carmody, Melina Marchetta and Markus Zusak defined my adolescence. I grew up alongside their protagonists, captivated by the way they seemed to skim the surface of an adult-knowing without succumbing to it; they never lost the child in them. It is here that I became intrigued by the divergent paths in my early childhood, or, more specifically, by the romantic idea that I had had the potential to be three very different young women. I was already living one of these lives in Bunbury, but I could not help but idealise the semi-nomadic existence my family had favoured for a short period, and the rural, urban and suburban WA locations we skipped over in favour of Kalari: the street that offered a straight road to the beach and became my place.

In time, my romanticism encouraged questions. Namely, what would have become of the spirited and sun-soaked Newmanite, as all who have lived there are affectionately known? And what about the little urbanite in Perth, who was rapidly becoming a people watcher? What might these young girls have gone on to achieve in their places? What kind of women would they have become?

I recognise the bones of On the Corner of North and Nowhere in these musings. My fascination with WA places coalesced naturally with my intrigue for YA literature, the result being the early determination of key aspects of my manuscript, such as genre, setting and character. From the outset I wanted to write a contemporary YA realist novel about a young woman called Neve Isles – shortened quickly thereafter, and hereafter, to Nev – whose journey would carry her into the WA hinterland and her past. Not surprisingly, I attribute the immediacy of her characterisation to the three places that tantalised me creatively as an adolescent: Newman, Perth and Bunbury. Nev’s early identity aligned perfectly with many aspects of these places. It was as if the quintessential vitality, and often malignancy, of each setting I had known came together, creating a mordant, yet vulnerable young woman who yearns for one
place to belong. In light of the time it has taken to realise Nev into fiction, “immediacy” is perhaps an odd term to quote in reference to her characterisation. After all, fifteen years spent developing a narrative voice hardly hints at a quick or even proximate development of character. However, the process of writing Nev was remarkably fluid, and while she rounded out and the plot of On the Corner of North and Nowhere underwent drastic changes, she has remained true to my early ideas about who she was and who she would become. She is part-place, part-fiction and part-anecdote; the result of my childhood spent dreaming, my young adulthood spent reading, and my early adulthood spent writing.

My ambition in this exegesis is to reflexively examine the development of Nev’s story and character, in context with the influences that shaped my creative practice, such as fiction, anecdote and place. The project, then, is fundamentally practice-based: a form of creative arts research in which personal motives and experiences can complement theoretical frames, instead of existing in traditional opposition to them. Artists who apply this to their praxis thus rely on subjective and objective knowledge during their studio enquiries. Estelle Barrett argues that it is precisely the inclusion of the self that can lead to new and sometimes wholly unanticipated knowledge (2010, p. 5). To this, she adds that practice-based research is also characterised by the evolution of practice, which is not always tracked or heeded in disciplines without an exegetical frame of reference. For example, she writes that “practice is itself, productive of knowledge and engenders further practice demonstrating the emergent nature of the process” (2010, p. 9). In short, this mode of research allows for practice to unfold as the studio enquiry progresses.

Practice-based research harmonised the personal ambition of On the Corner of North and Nowhere with existing literature and modes of thought. The result was not only the evolution of my creative practice, but also a contribution to knowledge in the form of a YA novel. That is not to say that my doctoral journey has been a neat one. As folklorist and author Betsy Hearne writes, “Discovery is rarely chronological” (2009, p. 197). Seldom can we rely on experience and research to be cumulative and linear, developing in a neat pattern towards an electric moment of epiphany. Rather, it is time, interrogation and the use of certain lenses that confer knowledge (2009, pp.
196-197). This certainly reflects my experience. From the successful execution of a research trip that spanned ten days and over 4,000 kilometres, to the plot-centric first draft of my manuscript, to this exegesis that reflexively examines my studio enquiry, my research journey has never tended towards a linear process of discovery. In many ways, it has been similar to Paul Carter’s vision of practice-based research, which he likens to “a speculative throwing forward of the mind” (2010, p. 16). The poetry of this image is not to be confused with romanticism, for Carter is quick to quip that “The image of bridge-building suggests itself, but also the prospect of failure” (p. 16). He reminds us of the skill, attention and resilience required throughout studio enquiries, which aim to produce artefacts and advance scholarly and professional practice.

This exegesis, written in two chapters, explores my efforts to craft a significant contribution to Australian YA literature. A particular focus throughout this analysis is writers and scholars whose methodological practices are embedded in their childhood. Often, they can trace the origins of their creative and academic work back to resonant experiences and literature from their youths. It was this desire to honour the connection between childhood, creativity and literature that compelled the creation of On the Corner of North and Nowhere, and as such, I allied with these arts practitioners in stages throughout my thesis. For instance, chapter one conceptualises Edenic landscapes in WA literature, focusing on the manner in which writers such as Dorothy Hewett and Tim Winton draw upon their youths in their fiction and nonfiction to recreate lost paradise. On the Corner of North and Nowhere, specifically Cleary’s art retreat, operates outside this trope, becoming an unconventional Eden that does not fragment in childhood, but extends into adulthood. Cleary’s is thus presented as a timeless idyll, which supports Nev’s maturation by demanding that she have an active role in its continuity. Chapter two considers the composition of the second and subsequent drafts of the novel. Pivotal to this exploration, and indeed to crafting the manuscript as a significant contribution to YA literature, is Betsy Hearne and Roberta Trites’ narrative compass model. They contend that the bones of scholarly and creative works are founded in childhood, during an engagement with a particular book or series of work. This second chapter explores my narrative compass, focusing on the
patterns and themes I intuited from it, and how being aware of them enabled me to craft a stronger YA novel.
Chapter One

Mental Travellers and Physical Questers

Looking back, it was not until my undergraduate degree, where I was encouraged to tease out the complexity of belonging, childhood and place through creative writing, that I began to see that the story I had been building around the places I knew as a child was imbued with recurring motifs and themes that were prevalent in Western Australian (WA) literature. Early in the third year of my studies, a lecturer, acknowledging my interest in place, guided me to Wheatlands (Hewett & Kinsella, 2000). This is a collaborative anthology of prose and poetry by Dorothy Hewett and John Kinsella, which captures the connection between WA places and their people. Hewett and Kinsella creatively examine everything from prosperity and dynasties, to drought and haunted acres, in what becomes an ode to the rural places that nourished their writing careers. I was drawn in particular to Hewett’s honest, yet melancholic elucidation of her poetry, and its connection to her childhood home. At age 77 she writes:

In the years since, I have often returned to this landscape as if haunted by it. It stands on the horizon of my mind, a dream landscape of childhood, unchanged, inhabited by ghosts larger than life, passing like shadows under a huge sky. (2000, p. 9)

Hewett’s lyrical prose invited me into this land and dreamscape that compelled her physical return as an adult, and although it was full of Gothic connotations – “ghosts ... shadows ... a huge sky” (p. 9) – to me it was a testament to the whimsical and durable nature of childhood memories. What struck me with greater force was how Hewett’s reminiscence remained comparatively dark. She asked herself of this place: “What does it stand for?” Her answer: “A child’s Eden with a black snake coiled waiting under the African Daisies” (p. 9).

The pastoral landscape of Hewett’s youth took on many figurative guises in her literary and academic career, including Eden, Utopia and the psychic garden, but there was always a malevolent being at its heart. This was frequently represented by the
figure of a snake, often a black one. It became a powerful symbol for her and appears in multiple works, including her poem “Legend of the Green Country” written in 1965 (2000, p. 128), her essay The Garden and the City (1982, p. 100), her autobiography Wild Card (1990, p. 32), and her foreword in Wheatlands (2000, p. 9). References to this black snake smatter Hewett’s work across this 35-year period and are always used in reference to Lambton Downs, the idyllic farmhouse of her youth. In each instance the creature is an antagonist: it is a sexless marriage, a harbourer of malevolence, the knowledge that something else lurks, and, above all, it is the silent companion of innocence. Hewett explains that the snake’s presence in her childhood represents “…change, sex, adulthood, the journey outwards into the corrupt world” (1982, p. 100). As such, the silent havoc it conjures becomes a neat contrast to the aesthetic of innocence she creates around Lambton Downs.

Hewett’s insights into childhood, belonging and place, delicately balanced as they are between innocence and evil, led me to other WA authors like Randolph Stow, Tim Winton and Robert Drewe, whose works suggest they are similarly influenced by childhood idylls of the WA-variety, and how they can be sites of significant pleasure and horror. Hewett, however, initiated my first connection, and I returned to her writing at the start of my doctorate to re-examine aspects of her creative conceptualisation of her youth. I was especially attentive to Hewett’s infatuation with her Edenic childhood, her exile from it, and how this prompted what she believes is “the first confrontation which every serious artist must feel with the place of their birth, adolescence and early adulthood” (1982, p. 99).

An Edenic tale originates in childhood and is “the story of loss of innocence in an unchanging, united world, for a gaining of experience in a changing, disunified one” (McCooey, 1996, p. 57). For the child in question, nature and culture exist in timeless accord with each other; the two do not compete, they coexist. This beguiling stasis is experienced from within an enclosed and safe environment, known otherwise as a paradise, idyll, garden, or simply Eden. Ironically, paradise’s salient feature is its inevitable ruin, as the child matures into the real world and uncover its true, dark complexity. Signifiers of the real world range from death and abuse, which propel the youngster into awareness, to everyday experience, which buds slowly, but inevitably,
and is often the primary cause of Eden’s undoing (Burns, 2005, pp. 89-90; McCooey, 1996, pp. 54-69). As Burns writes, “Within every Eden there exist elements that undercut its timeless unity and herald its imminent demise” (2005, p. 90). The unyielding feature of Eden, then, is that once it is lost, it cannot be reclaimed.

Hewett’s Eden, both her experience and rendition of it, is peculiar, because even at a young age she was aware that for every benign feeling or action she experienced within her paradise, there was a malignant counterpart. With life came death, just as surely as love preceded heartache, and so on. As such, the ever-favoured black snake did not slither through her childhood unrecognised until she had the value of hindsight as an adult, writer and scholar. She knew it intimately from the outset. Early in Wild Card (1990), in which Hewett traverses the first 35 years of her life with sardonic candour, child-Hewett notes a growing awareness of the snake after a nasty encounter with her mother: the indomitable pair clash over abuse that child-Hewett was meant to keep secret, but could not; her mother, favoured as she is by physical strength and a cruel spirit, wins out. Without question, this passage exhibits signs of adult-Hewett in its mature evaluation, but so too the wounded child coming to grips with a paradise that is fracturing quickly. After the argument with her mother, child- Hewett notes, “The farm is the centre of our existence, our Garden of Eden, but I always know that under the bridal creeper and the ivy geraniums, the black snakes wait and slide” (1990, p. 32). Despite what the creature symbolised, I do not believe Hewett would have found pleasure in its absence, so entranced was she by the knowledge it afforded her, particularly with regard to life’s dualities. For example, on one level, her farmhouse carefully epitomised the freedom and innocent hedonism of youth, yet the snake slowly made her aware of the restriction and cloying vice that could breed in an isolated place like Lambton Downs.

Hewett’s budding awareness of the darker realities of life functioned as a poetic precursor to her exile from her Eden at age twelve, when her family moved to Perth. Harking back to that moment of farewell, Hewett writes: “I close the gate. When the azure blue summer bird migrates back to the dry creek bed, I won’t be here. We drive away through the Day’s paddock into the future” (1990, p. 49). Part one of her autobiography, and her life, is marked by this close. Thereafter, everything changed
for Hewett, for as much as she tried she would never be truly free of her first home. She confesses that leaving it became “a symbol of exile; the impossible struggle to get back to the peace and harmony of the psychic garden” (1982, p. 100). She would journey back many times in her life, at least once physically, but most often mentally and emotionally. Her daughter, Kate Lilley, writes that towards the end of her mother’s life her writing took on a subdued feel. Yet amidst the abated passion that accompanied this period of ailing health “… she [Hewett] ruminates on beginnings and ends ‘from the dark cottage’, returning to enduring images of childhood with minimalist clarity” (Lilley, 2010, p. 9). Whether Hewett was writing home romantic and gothic, as seen in her earlier works, or in the more sparing and calculated style, indicative of her slow decline, it was an unremitting creative stimulus up until her death at age 79 (Hewett, 1982, p. 99; Lilley, 2010, p. 9).

I do not have the fierce recall that enabled Hewett to write her early autobiography, but many of the emotions she experienced around her Edenic childhood and subsequent exile are echoes of my own. I found myself drawn particularly to my short time in Midland: the east Perth suburb that became a physical interlude between my two idylls of Newman and Bunbury. I was five when we moved to Midland, nearly six. Here, the unfamiliar rush of faces, cars and activity amplified my senses to the point where I became aware of myself for the first time. I remember sitting on our letterbox at our new house one day and feeling distinctly present; like a real person. While this was an exciting period of growth it marks what I perceive as my first childhood loss, as I realised that Midland existed in Newman’s stead and we would never return. It was also exile, to the extent that it was against my will. However, like Hewett, who never appeared to wish away the knowledge that came from her encroaching outer world, or exile, I would not forego the experience. The clarity of my Midland-moments, in which the pleasant haze of early childhood met with the jolting fret of having to relinquish some of it, are responsible for the development of my creative mythos.

I am interested in a reflexive examination of my creative practice, particularly how an engagement with certain authors prompted greater thought about my mythos, which, in turn, enabled me to craft a novel that is hopefully a significant
contribution to YA literature in WA and Australia. This began with Hewett, whose candid and lyrical refrain about her childhood has always been an aside to her creative works. That is to say, her thoughts about home are an illuminating addition to her prose and poetry that do not need to be accessed in order for her fiction to make sense. Their aim is elucidation. In that vein, *Wild Card* (Hewett, 1990) is an exegesis masquerading as memoir, as it critically details the development of Hewett’s mythos throughout her creative works. The way she contextualised her childhood provided an attractive blueprint for a young writer like me: I wanted to explore my origins so that I could render the developing story in my head.

The prologue of *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* evolved from this period of engagement with Hewett. It was the first tangible development of my creative project and it fixated on Newman and Midland with the same ease and certainty with which Nev became the narrative voice. The theme of this prologue is exile, as Nev is being forced to leave her life on the road and her father, for the city:

I take my cue from Dad and don’t cry. And I don’t tell any lies like *see you soon*. I probably won’t see him and Poppy again until next year when Mum goes on her trip ... From here, Mum and I will get onto the Great Northern Highway and drive south for four hours until we get to Aunty Kaye’s ... From there, it’ll be eight hours south on the same dusty road until we reach the city. Then we’ll settle, because Mum says we have to. Away from Dad and Poppy and the road. (2016, p. 8).

Despite the melancholic tone of this scene, and overall prologue, writing it remains the most enjoyable and fluid development of *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*. It was here that I created Nev’s backstory, which went on to support her journey for the duration of my research and writing. But, more than this, my prologue enabled me to reconnect with Newman. I found that as I crafted Nev’s exile from the small mining town, towards the confined suburbs of Midland, I was visualising her re-acquaintance with it.

The immediate barrier to Nev’s re-acquaintance with her hometown was my personal and authorial distance from it. I had not been back to Newman in over twenty years, meaning that I was well removed from the period and the place I felt an emotive response to. I could not provide a contemporary view of the town. Here, I was reminded of John Steinbeck, prior to his journey across America in preparation
for *Travels with Charley*, insomuch as he too had over twenty years bridging his relationship with places of his youth and sometimes felt memory to be a more a bane than a blessing. On memory, he writes that it is “...at best a faulty, warpy reservoir” (1962, p. 5). His memories, distorted as they were by time, forced him to conclude that he did not fully know the America he so often portrayed (1962, pp. 5-6). Being unable call on my own memories with the same surety as Hewett meant that Steinbeck’s views supplemented my understanding of how memory can impact a writer’s work. One quote in particular stood out in this respect: “I determined to look again, to try to rediscover this monster land” (Steinbeck, 1962, p. 5). I began to see parallels between Hewett and Steinbeck, as they were both compelled to journey back to childhood places. However, I soon found myself deferring to Hewett again, for in contrasting the two significantly different places she called home early in life – Wickepin and Sydney – she suggests a way to engage with the past towards creative gain, and it does not rely on memory alone.

In her early 20s Hewett moved to Sydney, which differed from the places she knew in WA and not simply because she began moving amongst the East Coast milieu. She writes that her home in Sydney didn’t possess “… quite the same burden of the past, that burden of the first confrontation which every serious artist must feel with the place of their birth, adolescence and early adulthood” (1982, p. 99). Her WA home was always in the “hollow of her heart” (Hewett, 1990, p. 273). She confronted the tension that sprang from this early exile from her Eden by absorbing it; often reliving it; feeding off it too. As such, there is a sense of *going back* in much of her poetry, plays and prose, coupled with the bitter realisation that this journey is not always an enjoyable one.

Consider “Legend of the Green Country”, which was written after a painful visit to Lambton Downs at 30-years-old. The epic poem of 23 stanzas recounts three generations of Hewett’s family. She writes that it became a chapter of “lament” to accompany the chapter of “celebration” evident in her poem “Testament”, which was published 20 years prior (2000, pp. 8-9). These two poems won the ABC poetry prize in 1945 and 1965 respectively, and both depict Lambton Downs. “Legend of the Green Country”, however, was written after a visit to the old farmhouse in 1953. On this visit
she found that the farm she loved had been ravaged by time, salt and neglect, which is evident in the last lines of the final verse of the epic poem:

The little sour apples still grow in my heart’s orchard
Bitten with grief, coming up out of the dead country
Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth. (2000, p. 131)

There is a mournful tone throughout the poem – the last three lines of which feature as a prelude to the final chapter of her autobiography and also On the Corner of North and Nowhere – but the last verse captures the stoicism that marks Hewett’s poetry. She embraces the sad ruin before her, of a land lost not only to childhood, but driven to ruin by over-grazing and rising salt. It is this mournful, yet unflinching acknowledgement of the need to go back, and the strong desire to convey what she found, that captivated me. Rather than being disturbed by the possible dark wisdom a reconnection with the past might impart, the idea of going back to go forward resonated with me. What might evolve from an artistic confrontation with Newman? Not through memories, but a physical revisitiation.

Bruce Bennett writes that in many of his essays and readings he gives “special attention to the observations, intuitions and ideas of a variety of Australian questers and mental travellers for whom ‘home’ remains an important but elusive and sometimes problematic concept” (2006, p. 1). Here, he alludes to the physical and psychological aspects of the journey, inferring that there are those who traverse literal roads to revisit their homes, while others map their memories instead. Bennett makes note of Hewett, suggesting that she is a “mental traveller” who does not need to revisit Lambton Downs, because her “real’ house of childhood remains in her memory and imagination” (2006, p. 10). I disagree, to an extent. Hewett’s sharp memory certainly helped her maintain a picture of her farmhouse in her mind’s eye. However, her prose and poetry gains an evocative quality from her physical return as an adult, at 30-years-old. This retreat and return journey is, of course, not a new area of research. It is a literary convention of the pastoral trope, in which urban characters retreat to the countryside but inevitably return to the city limits. This journey to the countryside was meant to evoke strong, positive feelings about the country as urbanites experienced Arcadia, then went back to the chaos and filth of the city.
(Gifford, 1999, pp. 81-85). This does not fit with Hewett’s experience, for although she took important knowledge from her retreat, it was far from being a positive encounter.

At the conclusion of *Wild Card*, in which Hewett has retreated to Lambton Downs as an adult and is ready to return to the city, she writes:

We drove on across the railway line to the boundary of Lambton Downs. On the other side of the iron gates was a hose running hopelessly into a sheep trough, with a hole in it. Nobody came this way now. The roads were grown over, the gates wired up. Desolate, treeless except for hardy York gums and jams, the crossing over the creek was barely distinguishable, but lying in the hollow were a scatter of corrugated-iron sheds and a single brick chimney.

‘Oh God!’ we cried. ‘Oh God! Is that the house?’

Two almonds, a few figs and one quince had survived. No sheoaks, not wattles, no tea-tree, no paperbacks, no bottlebrush, no salmon gums, no stables or sheds or post and rail sheep yards, only the concrete dip left like a scar in the home paddock, littered with iron and rusty machinery ... a denuded landscape (1990, p. 271).

It is 1953, Lambton Downs is a wreck and there is no hint of a black coiled snake – it need not linger now that paradise is at its end. Hewett expresses a desire to never return to this ruin, so in many respects she is a picture of Bennett’s mental traveller thereafter (2006, p. 1). Yet this trip was invaluable, as it would help her articulate her grief about a lost childhood and a once fertile land passing out of existence. We can see evidence of this in “Legend of the Green Country”, which was published seven years after this visit:

This land is not mine to give or trade,
I have no lien on these sad acres,
Where the crow flies home,
A solitary reaper.
The milky creek runs death,
The wattle and the tea-tree are all gone. (2000, p. 130)

What we see in Hewett’s autobiography is the careful crafting of childhood memories, adult experience and fiction, which is a life spent mentally and physically questing. All of it ties together intricately, not into a weak simulacrum of experience, but a heady mix of self, culture and place. Hewett *may* have been able to achieve this poignancy
through recall alone. However, like Steinbeck, who argues that travelling helps the writer “tell the small diagnostic truths which are the foundation of the larger truth”, in much of Hewett’s writing there is a deeply emotive quality borne not only of reminiscence, but also of physical experience (1962, p. 5).

A research trip to Newman evolved from here, because going back became the ideal way to go forward with my novel. Amidst manifold ambitions, I believed that an encounter with the first place I called home had the potential to offer important insights into my past, which could develop my novel. I was especially interested in the conflicting views of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and whether my journey would resonate with Hewett’s lament and celebration, or with something else entirely. I did not believe that there was a better way for me to elicit this knowledge without “questing”, as Bennett puts it (2006, p. 1). In truth, the allure of this questing was that nothing was fixed. I could gather knowledge as I travelled, which was fundamental to the practice-based journey and the development of On the Corner of North and Nowhere. Moreover, a journey to Newman would help me create an authentic Australian road experience for my characters and readers. Lastly, Nev’s journey would explore some underrepresented WA locations in YA fiction, which would be a significant contribution to the State’s literature and the genre. As such, in addition to my need to confront my first home and create an authentic road journey, was a desire for real places to come to the fore of YA realist fiction.

To say that YA fiction lacks distinction of place would be an inaccurate interpretation of the genre. Examples from the YA subgenre of historical fiction easily counter the claim, including Julia Lawrinson’s Bye, Beautiful (2006) and Craig Silvey’s Jasper Jones (2009), both set in rural WA in the 1960s. They go beneath the puritanical sheen of small towns and their people, and expose amoral interiors. Consider also Eaton’s Fireshadow (2005), which is a parallel narrative – the two threads are set in 1943 and 2005 – that unfolds outside a prisoner of war camp in Marrinup, in the State’s Peel region. I favoured these three books in my young adulthood, enjoying, in particular, their WA focus. However, while they examine real places and issues for a YA audience, they are not written exclusively for a contemporary generation. As such, my contention was not, and is not, that mention of real places is non-existent in the
State’s YA literature or that historical fiction is in any way irrelevant. Rather, I believed that we could use more contemporary references to place, particularly as they relate to adolescent identity. For example, what might a young woman travelling through the Wheatbelt experience in roughly 2015? And would her experience in the Pilbara, after a long period of absence, be positive or negative?

**Doctoral Research Trip: “You can’t go home again”**

In the early 1990s, Bennett wrote that “[T]he study of actual places and regions, writers’ relation with them, and depictions of them, should be inserted into our national consciousness” (1991, pp. 16-17). Bennett’s argument was written in relation to the pervasive “Sydney-or-the-bush” tension that was still evident in the Australian art scene at the time (Zeller & Cranston, 2007, p. 7). He believed that we needed to recognise the distinct nature of place in our writing and our reading, beyond simple pastoral renditions that constructed Australia as a dichotomous mass. After all, one only had to live in a place that was not Sydney and not the bush to know this binary was false (1991, pp. 16-18). Fifteen years later, Bennett was still intrigued by the idiosyncratic nature of place in Australia and WA was a focus. He believed that writers of adult fiction in the State, specifically from the coast, “… [tended] towards the romantic, if not always rhapsodic end of the spectrum: they seem imbued with something of the energy they perceive here, with hints of romantic dynamism in their connection with the great Indian Ocean” (2007, p. 35). The spectrum Bennett is referring to is one proposed by Ecocritic, Scott Slovic, who contends that nature writers in America dither somewhere “between rhapsody and detachment” in their depiction of their environment (1992, p. 4). WA authors, by comparison, write of their seascapes as if in secret conversation with them (Bennet, 2007, p. 35).

To read Bennett’s comment in isolation is, perhaps, to assume that diversity of place in WA is exclusive to the coast. However, these rhapsodic constructions, which explore the nature of a life lived in rhythm and/or opposition with the sea, are indicative of wider instances of connection. WA comprises nine regions and while each one is bordered by shoreline, none of them are landlocked, they all stretch into hinterland, meaning the coast is not a buttress for each region, but one feature.
Consider the Wheatbelt, which lengthens inland from the west coast towards the State’s heart. Notable creative writing based on this region includes Stow’s *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, written in 1965 (2009), the poetry of Hewett and Kinsella in *Wheatlands* (2000), Winton’s *Dirt Music* (2001), and Lawrinson’s *Bye, Beautiful* (2006). As a collection, these publications offer an eclectic view of a region whose sea, bush, farm and outback environments compel writers to create. Bennett acknowledges this diversity – in truth, the WA-born literary critic was one of its foremost advocates – noting that for many authors, “this part of Australia [WA] has been a haunting presence demanding some form of fictional reconstruction” (2006, p. 62).

Prior to embarking on my research trip I was aware that I would not see the road and Newman as I once did. Still, I believed that I would be able to achieve an affinity with the places of my youth. To gain that sense of rhythm Bennett spoke about, and which I had once felt keenly. I was not prepared for an inability to connect; for the instinctual “place-making” that Bennett suggests is endemic to WA writers to be so immediately difficult (2006, p. 62). As we travelled – my mother and sister accompanied me as research assistants – I discovered that trying to maintain childhood sensibilities in a mining town in remote WA, no matter the oasis it had once been for me, was not going to be easy. 20 years bridged my child and adult lenses, and this presented more difficulties than it did creative stimuli. The question for me was, how to use my confrontation to create a strong setting and atmosphere for Nev? The answer did not present as I travelled. It evolved on my return as I began to research, make connections and write, often at the same time. As such, this section does not examine the research trip holistically, but moments of connection leading towards the development of a key setting in my manuscript: *Cleary’s*. (Please see Appendix A for a map of the research trip).

My research trip commenced in much the same manner as Nev’s road trip:

I look across as Cole sleeps. He’s pulled down his worn cap so that it rests across the bridge of his nose ... He’s not missing much as he sleeps. Only a muted sunrise through heavy fog, which has wound thick around Gran’s old Toyota. You could cut it. I can just make out the taillights of the car ahead. We almost kissed at one stage, front to tail. It’s not safe to overtake, so I ease off the accelerator and fall back. (2016, p. 73)
We started out from Perth and immediately began cutting through a heavy fog, which did not dissipate for an hour and a half. Thereafter, the day gradually heated until it was around 35 degrees Celsius, leaving behind the fog and the cold of our early morning start. The quiet, however, endured. Each stop, from New Norcia to Wubin, Paynes Find, Mount Magnet, Cue and Meekatharra, had a soundless quality, which lent a stillness to each place. All the while, the landscape continued to morph, from the green hills of Peel, to the stubble-burnt paddocks of the Wheatbelt, to the deep ochre of the Mid West.

When we arrived in Newman, after having spent the night in Meekatharra, we drove past Kalgan’s Rest Caravan Park, where we were lodging, and immediately into town. In place of the familiarity and comfort I anticipated, was the same pervasive quiet that had dogged us since the fog set in the morning before. I finally broached this with my sister, who laughed at my observation and told me it was always like that. As we spoke about our time on Gandawarra Crescent – our neighbours, our childhood friends, the street parties; the feel and music of it all – I understood that she was right. The noises I could recall were the ones we made to fill the quiet: kids screeching and laughing, music blasting from recorded cassette tapes, the quick slap of bare feet on hot concrete, and the *shoot-shoot-shoot* of sprinklers in the heat. The sounds I remembered were the ones we made and, although they were not entirely absent, our distinct soundtrack had long since disappeared. The hush of the town soon gave way to images I had not anticipated, including hordes of work vehicles, miners in Hi-Vis work gear and peculiar tin houses.

My mother was similarly absorbed as we drove around town. At first it was because she could not recognise our old house. We had to drive by a few times before she and my sister were sure they had the right one. It had changed too much for them to be certain at the start. She told me: “The homes have aged dramatically. People took pride in their homes. We had beautiful gardens and lawns. Now there’s coloured tin houses” (A. Jarvey, personal communication, April 19, 2013). When we finished our circuit and drove into Kalgan’s Rest, my mother’s interest shifted to shock:
“The caravan park used to be a caravan park,” she said.
“How do you mean?” I asked.
“It was an oasis. You used to drive into Newman and the first thing you’d see was the caravan park. It was trees and green. People would hitch their caravans and sit around in camp chairs. It was alive. I remember driving in that first time with your father and Aleisha [my sister] and thinking there’s life here”. (personal communication, April 19, 2013)

My mother’s impression of Newman in 2013 competed strongly with her first impression of the town in 1980. When she first arrived in 1980 she had never lived outside of Albany in the Great Southern, was newlywed by a couple of years, and had a one-year-old daughter. She was unsure of what awaited her in the north as she followed my father and his work into the Pilbara. To her surprise, she fell in love. After 14 excruciating hours on the road, in which the air-conditioning didn’t work, half the roads were gravel or under repair, and every bottle my oldest sister drank was tepid, they arrived to a neat little home that was furnished, air-conditioned to perfection and had a fully stocked fridge. The man who would one day be my godfather had set the house up in anticipation of my family’s arrival and my mother and father never forgot it. “I made it my home and that was it” she told me (personal communication, April 19, 2013). However, her re-acquaintance in 2013 did not equal her arrival in 1980. Once upon a time she had driven into Newman absolutely wrecked, but the green of the park was like a physical and mental balm. It is the first thing she remembered that gave her hope about the town. It no longer had that impact. Over the years the park has transformed to support miners from Mount Whaleback, the main mine in Newman. It now includes long rows of dongas and signs requesting silence from patrons as a courtesy to shift workers. It still accommodates tourists, but it has the distinct impression of a mining camp.

It was these early valuations as we drove through the town and settled in our respective dongas that added an uncomfortable quality to the quiet I experienced. I began to worry that my artistic confrontation would dally somewhere between disappointment with the town and a desire to escape it.

The first point of connection for me came during our second day in Newman. We were headed for Karijini National Park for the day and were fifteen kilometres
from town when we spotted a turnoff for Cathedral Gorge, which we had never travelled down in all the years we lived in the Pilbara. We detoured onto the unmarked road, but the terrain was rough and we were unable to make it far along, so we parked the 4WD and hiked up a hill nearby. Slightly winded, I took a moment to think on the trip to that point and the expectations, if any, I had for its duration. In conceiving a way to tease out and move beyond the lack of homecoming I had experienced, towards clarity for Nev’s journey, I was reminded of a quote from my early research: “… he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began” (Wolfe, 1989, p. 125). This passage appears in Thomas Wolfe’s fictional novel, You Can’t Go Home Again, which was written in 1940 and is well known for popularising the phrase by the same name. The book follows the struggles of George Webber, an author who writes a bestselling tell-all tale about his hometown and is treated with incredible malice upon his return. George departs when it becomes apparent that the wounds he has inflicted on his townspeople will not heal in his presence. It is here that his homelessness begins.

I recalled the quote, because I had never been able to fathom it. My homes had always been clear in my mind and even with Hewett’s experience encouraging me to travel and confront, the idea that you could never return home did not seem right to me. The reality was uncomfortable and well divorced from my reluctance to believe in Wolfe’s adage: I found that while I did not wish to write anything inflammatory about Newman, I could relate to Wolfe’s protagonist, namely George’s excited approach to his town, subsequent discontent, and sense of homelessness. Homelessness may seem a dramatic description of my experience in Newman to that point, but then Wolfe is not referring to true vagrancy or a penniless state of being. George is not destitute. As Steinbeck explains, Wolfe is concerned with homelessness of spirit, which descends when we realise that our birthplace endures only in memory, or “the mothballs of memory” as he puts it (1962, p. 183). This was my feeling as we rested atop that hill and my impressions of Newman as an adult competed with my childhood love of it.
Although the results of my research trip were not confined to this detour at the start of the third day, it proved the most challenging and provocative. Firstly, I amended the research trip, which at one point was intended to take us to Port Hedland in the far north of WA. Instead, I decided we would travel inland through Karijini National Park, because this route would get us to our coastal destination quicker: I was eager to record the sensation of reaching the coast after having felt engulfed by the outback. This period was also challenging in that it elicited a flurry of worries and questions. I interrogated Newman as a setting; thought in depth for the first time about how to divorce Nev’s story from mine; and I mused for a long time over how many writers’ experiences of their childhood homes complemented each other. These questions and musings were not resolved or addressed as I travelled, or even as we reached the coast. Instead, clarity came in the weeks that followed the conclusion of my research trip as I commenced writing my first chapters and researched. (It should be noted that many aspects of my research trip are included in my manuscript. With this in mind, please see Appendix B for a photographic essay of the research trip, focusing on the WA roadscapes that feature in *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*).

Recreating lost paradise: A WA predilection

When I returned home, I reread Wolfe’s novel so that I might explore George’s feeling of disconnect in context with my own. This led me back to Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* (1962) and his thoughts about his birthplace of Salinas, California. I did not yet have an answer to how close Nev’s story would align with mine or how to incorporate Newman, but I could explore the persistent and compelling desire for writers to reconstruct childhood homes, and how some of the most poignant fiction can come from a place of severe discontent. For instance, Steinbeck’s valuation, like Hewett’s and also that of Wolfe’s protagonist, is the result of going back or questing to see what had become of his beloved hometown. He describes the result in *Travels with Charley*: “The place of my origin had changed, and having gone away I had not changed with it. In my memory it stood as it once did and its outward appearance confused and angered me” (1962, p. 182). His birthplace no longer matched the images in his mind, which I could relate to. Steinbeck was forced to conclude that “Tom Wolfe was right. You can’t go home again” (1962, p. 183).
Steinbeck may have been writing of 1960s America, which is a country and an era outside my ken, but these differences softened significantly as he explored the nature of journeys and his once beloved birthplace. I could write in depth here about points of connection with *Travels with Charley*, such as the frenetic desire to be home towards the end of a long trip, the catatonia you are apt to feel when travelling gruelling distances, or Steinbeck’s emphatic belief in Wolfe’s adage (1962, pp. 183-246). However, I am interested in a specific moment of connection with Steinbeck, which complemented aspects of my journey and guided me back to my creative myth.

After reaching the conclusion that his home had changed irrevocably, Steinbeck was ready to flee Salinas. Before leaving though, he grew sentimental and returned to an old haunt called Fremont’s Peak, which overlooked every significant place of his childhood. As he sat on the peak, he gradually came to accept the diminished state of his hometown. In barely more than a page he imparts an affecting and emotive passage about the natural wonder he embraced, and was embraced by, in his youth. It culminates in the weary, yet appeasing belief that despite the tangible affect time can have on places we cherish, the past is unchanging (1962, p. 184). “Here on these high rocks,” he writes “my memory myth repaired itself” (1962, p. 183). This does not mean that Steinbeck could divorce his childhood vision of California from his adult one. For him, “one printed over another until the whole thing blurs” (1962, p. 173). He explains that “What it is is warped with memory... the whole bundle wracked until objectiveness is nigh impossible (p. 173). He found that there was no way for him to affect impartiality. That is to say, he was appeased by the restoration of his “memory myth”, but could not change that what was, existed alongside what is (1962, p. 183). His child and adult lens converged; more often, they competed.

Weeks before I had spent time resting on a peak that overlooked fragments of my childhood, reliving old memories. This was the allure of Steinbeck’s passage when I first read it: the sense of writerly kinship. There was also comfort in his suggestion that a person’s inability to reattain a sense of their hometown as it once was did not
mean the past was without value, or had changed in any way. However, it was his acceptance of the subjective state that I found most interesting, because it is evident in the fiction of many Australian authors who emphasise childhood and place in their fiction and non-fiction. In short, they reinforce the inescapable subjectivity, as they cannot write childhood without the accompanying adult view. Hewett provides evidence to support this position in her tireless confrontation that never once divorced the eyes of childhood from her work (2000, pp. 8-9). So too Bennett in his assertion that Australian writers “often negotiate the limits of the various spaces they have inhabited, especially when they attempt to re-forge the houses of their childhood” (2006, p. 5). Limits, in this context, does not refer to breaches in memory as such, but to the tangible restrictions surrounding childhood houses and spaces, as seen through adult eyes. In these cases, what was competes with what is, just as it did for Steinbeck.

I was an Australian writer exploring a difficult tether to childhood place, experienced due to conflicting lenses, ergo I should create directly from this. Yet, I resisted the idea. The concept of inescapable subjectivity and Steinbeck’s references to nature, blurring, overlapping and myth, made me think about the origin of On the Corner of North and Nowhere. Nev was a product of each of the places I had inhabited and not one of them represented a hopeless existence. That is to say, my childhood experiences in them did not marry exactly with Bennett’s limits, Hewett’s black snake, or Wolfe’s well-meaning adage. The varied practices, works and critiques of these writers would undoubtedly assist me later when Nev returned to Newman and I attempted to contextualise my experience, albeit fictionally. However, whilst writing my first chapters upon my return, I reconnected with the idea that Nev was founded on my creative myth, which did not symbolise a frenetic connection with place. I could experiment with and privilege my early feelings surrounding them. Not towards a childish conception or memoir, but towards an Eden for Nev.

I found Burns’ views on Eden helpful in this period, as she provides an interesting perspective on Australian writers who reforge childhood homes, particularly those in and from WA. Her primary area of study is the “features of Eden’s ideal that resonate with the child’s unique perspective” (2005, p. 89). This does not involve an analysis of
children’s literature. It is a critique of adult writers who appropriate a child-like perspective to recreate paradisal landscapes in their fiction. Burns examines this predilection in WA literature, with a focus on canonical writers such as Stow, Hewett, Drewe, and Winton, all of whom offer insights into their arcadian experiences through creative works and memoir – memoirs for the latter three include *Wild Card* (1990), *The Shark Net* (2000) and *Land’s Edge* (1993). Burns suggests that while interstate authors are interested in traditional depictions, including the countryside as a paradise (Victoria), or the continuation of Eden from childhood into adulthood (Queensland), those in WA have a tendency to reconstruct the past, so as to regain lost paradise (2005, pp. 90-102).

Many of Winton’s novels operate within this lost paradise trope. He has a fondness for moulding his fictional settings after places he has lived. Take, for instance, his depiction of Angelus and White Point, which are the settings for *Lockie Leonard: Human Torpedo* (1990), *Dirt Music* (2001), and *The Turning* (2004). These fictional locations are based on the coastal WA towns of Albany (Angelus) and Lancelin (White Point), both of which Winton has lived in. Ben-Messahel notes that Lancelin in particular has been influential, providing the WA author with ample material for his fiction (2006, p. 5). Hewett, too, cannot be divorced from the trope, so intent was she on recreating the paradise she once thrived in. By her own admission, her life after Lambton Downs was spent in dogged pursuit of her lost Eden (1982, p. 100). To these WA authors, and others like them, many of the locations and settings in their works are arguably designed to recreate lost Edens.

As a writer preoccupied with exploring and reconstructing places from my youth, it was not at all difficult to see evidence of this tendency in my own creative arts practice. My vision for *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*, in many respects, was about reconstructing idylls I had been separated from. As I acknowledged these links, Burns’ gaze shifted. She began to explore what she considers the “postlapsarian paradise”, which is an Eden that does not conform to the archetype, because it goes against the premise that the garden, once lost, can never be reattained (Burns, 2005, p. 94). She uses Winton to support her discussion, concentrating on his novel *Blueback*.
Blueback (Winton, 1997) begins in the seaside town of Longboat Bay, where ten-year-old Abel lives with his mother, Dora. As a child Abel worships the bush and sea environs, which fringe his home and sustain him and his mother. The ocean, however, does more than feed them. It entertains, perplexes, threatens and enchants. Within this Eden is Blueback, the old blue groper that Abel discovers one day while diving. As Abel grows from a child to an adolescent, his relationship with Blueback strengthens, as does his awareness of an encroaching outer world. The groper marks the onset of the boy’s maturation and his development thereafter is significant: he laments the cruelty of people who take more than they need from the ocean (1997, p. 40); watches the water claim a mad old diver (1997, pp. 44-45); sees Dora risk her life to save Blueback from the spear of a fisherman (1997, p. 82); waits out land developers with Dora, who resists them with a patience that inspires him (1997, p. 100); and later, when Abel is a young adult and he sees that “the ocean is sick”, he decides that he has to leave his sanctuary for university so that he might learn the secrets of the sea (1997, p. 106). Abel returns many years later in his mid-thirties when Longboat Bay is declared a marine park. At the conclusion of Winton’s fable, Blueback has outlived Dora and with the very last line is “quivering with life” (1997, p. 151). The enduring blue groper is a metaphor for the stability of Abel’s paradise, Longboat Bay, which becomes a literal sanctuary (Burns, 2005, p. 94).

A fable about a boy, a middle-aged woman and a fish, told in 150 pages and spanning over 20 years, sounds like a frenetic read. Yet Winton’s Blueback (1997) is a hypnotic tale. I was mesmerised by the lithe writing, the harmony between character and place, and the ambition of the piece, which demands the preservation of oceanic environments – this is a repetitive theme in Winton’s work, stemming from his activist spirit and coastal rearing (Ben-Messahel, 2006, p. 18). All of this held my attention from start to finish, then sat with me long after. This was not a conventional story; it certainly was not a conventional Eden, as Burn suggests (2005, p. 94). On the first score, the book defies categorisation. It is neither children’s nor adult literature, but both, with “separately packaged adult and children’s editions” (Ben-Messahel, 2006,
p. 157). Nor is it a typical Eden. Unlike traditional paradises, which break and can no longer support life, Abel manages to return to his tarnished sanctuary and dwell there contentedly (Burns, 2005, p. 94; Winton, 1997).

Initially, my interest was piqued by the parallel Burns draws between this coming-of-age narrative, Edenic landscapes and the life of its author, as all of this related to the story I was writing. But I soon realised that Burns’ elucidation of Blueback as a “postlapsarian paradise” gave me an example of how to rework the lost paradise trope, which prevailed in WA literature (2005, p. 94). I believed I could use it to construct a similarly unconventional Eden in On the Corner of North and Nowhere, thus adhering to my aim to value features of my creative myth, without inviting certain negative adult views that often warp childhood conceptions of place, making it so that a dark undercurrent is always present. This might not serve for the duration of the novel, but in my view, I could create a timeless environment that was not predicated on loss, but on support. I had in mind to construct a beach camp outside of Coral Bay that would function as timeless paradise in which Nev, Cole, Etta and Max could sojourn before leaving for the city. It was only on returning to my draft in progress and my outline, with a mind to incorporate this setting, that I realised I had already created an unconventional Eden in Cleary’s.

**Cleary’s and the Unconventional Eden**

In my initial plan for On the Corner of North and Nowhere, Nev was living in Midland with Peta, Darryl and Gerry. In the opening scene, she sat on the veranda stairs outside her home. As she ran her hands along the stairs, she caught a splinter and immediately bemoaned the sharp nature of the house. She wished she could do something to fix it, but knew that it was not her job: Peta and Darryl were renovating the house and they did not seem to need her help. Nev had nowhere to escape to and no real purpose. As such, Midland did not work as a setting. The claustrophobic situation Nev found herself in would have been sufficient to propel her out onto the road to try and gain some freedom, but it would have done little to entice her home again. Given that Nev’s return was one of the chief ambitions of the novel, I had to create an environment that
she wanted to escape from, but later return to. Cleary’s quickly became the answer.

Cleary’s already existed at the time in the same capacity as it does today: it is Gran’s art retreat in the Perth Hills. The reason for setting Cleary’s here was, as ever, a personal one, for although the majority of my time in Midland was spent in my grandmother’s back garden, there was one other place of escape: Rocky Pool in John Forrest National Park, Hovea. This picnic spot is located at the far west of the park and is a roughly 40 minute-drive from Perth’s CBD. Rocky Pool, with its brooks, trails and main swimming hole, was a favourite haunt of my father’s when he was a boy, and it quickly became mine during the year that we lived in Perth – it was the threat of not going to Rocky Pool on weekends that kept my behaviour in check. A sense of wilderness and adventure accompanied our trips there. Moreover, seeing the city from certain vantages on our journey into the Hills, as a far-off smattering of buildings, remains one of my chief delights from our time in the city.

Julienne Van Loon notes a similar curiosity in the Perth Hills during an interview with Miyuki Jokiranta, which discusses her novella, Harmless (2013). In response to a question about the story she has created – “of a contemporary Western Australia in flux”, dealing, particularly, with issues surrounding identity – Van Loon expresses a keen interest in the changing face of WA, so too the urban fringe, in which Harmless is set and she once dwelled. She notes that this peripheral environment is a “fascinating kind of place to set a story” and that despite being relatively close to the CBD, it has a “remnant bushland, farmland kind of feel about it” (Van Loon & Jokiranta, 2013). Van Loon’s observations resonate, because it is precisely the odd quality of the Perth Hills part-urban, part-rural landscape that initiated Cleary’s development. I wanted to include a setting on the fringe that Nev could retreat to; a setting that would have the potential to impact her identity construction.

When it became clear that Midland was not able to provide the safe and purposeful existence that Nev would feel compelled to return to at the end of the novel, I began working on the idea of Cleary’s as her home, instead of her haven – it has admittedly become both. I tested her in this new setting by removing her from the
stairs of her Midland home, where she was situated during the initial draft of chapter one, and positioning her at Cleary’s. More than a veranda, a splinter and a modicum of teenage angst carried across:

[I] look to the line of trees that partially blocks my small cottage from Gran’s place. The main house. I’ll need to get breakfast on the table for the retreaters soon. I don’t normally head over until I see Gran come down the path, so I settle in to wait, dragging my fingers along the stairs and collecting a shallow splinter.

As I inspect the shard, which is one of the many hazards of my cottage, I think about ways to con Gran into letting me keep the place, instead of giving it Mum. (2016, pp. 9-10).

The cottage was as natural a development as Nev working at Cleary’s. Both evolved on par. As soon as Nev moved there, she worked there. And as soon as she worked there, she loved it there. I do recall experimenting with different roles for her, including working in the city and being more heavily involved in the art scene her grandmother and mother fostered. What I found was that her introspection, her desire to stay busy and her need for solitude made her a perfect caretaker for Cleary’s. This role enabled her be part of the rhythm of the old-vineyard-turned-retreat, and to care for it, without exerting an overt presence. That is, Nev did not need to be as outgoing as Gran or her mother, but could still find a niche at Cleary’s. The scene where she is contemplating “A week in the life of a shadow” reflects this perfectly (2016, p. 23). It was one of the first scenes I wrote for Nev with Cleary’s as her home. It shows how she lives to the side and is comfortable with this existence. This supports her need to get things done and make herself useful – later in part one, she describes this as a desire to imprint herself on Cleary’s and the cottage, so that her mother cannot take it from her (2016, p. 71).

Despite the ease with which Cleary’s developed, I did have some reservations about it as a setting. This was chiefly due to the manner in which elements of my time in Midland merged with those in the Perth Hills, as well as with Newman and Bunbury. Put simply, the outback, the city and the ocean vied for my creative attention. I was trying to re-vision things I knew and the result was that Cleary’s was quickly coming to signify a plurality of place – it should be noted that by this stage of Cleary’s early
development, I had yet to engage with the idea of the unconventional Eden. As my places merged into Cleary’s, I was reminded of a quote by Bennett, who contends that “place, appropriately conceived, is a meeting ground of mental, emotional and physical states and as such a suitable focus for the literary imagination” (2006, p. 61). To me, at least at the time, “appropriately conceived” was synonymous with accuracy (p. 61). So although Cleary’s was rendered easily, I believed that the plurality I invited might detract from the reality-driven ambition of On the Corner of North and Nowhere.

My solution to this dilemma was not to superimpose characteristics of Bunbury, Midland and Newman over Cleary’s, until the art retreat lost its tether to the Perth Hills. Instead, I opted to bring into sharp focus a specific aspect they all shared: nature as an escape. This focus begins simply in chapter one where Nev sits on the veranda stairs of the cottage. She notices that:

Everything slowly comes to life as Gran leaves to find her wayward group. The old-vineyard-turned-retreat sets its clock by her. A group of magpies stalk her good-naturedly, knowing she has a small bag of mince in her back pocket. And I can hear Clary and Ed, our two retired racehorses, nickering from behind the cottage ... Gerry’s at it too. She squeals from somewhere behind me in the cottage. I look back through the flywire and down the long hallway to the kitchen. My baby sister is dropping puffed corn from her highchair. She watches them fall to Aero, who shakes them off her head, swats at them and eats the airy treats from between the pads of her paws. (2016, p. 13).

This affectionate description, which moves from the retreat into the personal space of the cottage, is immediately capped by Darryl’s blunt intrusion, when he tells off Gerry and Aero. Nev turns away, back towards Cleary’s, which is her answer to the compounding tension in the cottage (2016, p. 13). This encounter is preceded by a similar deference to nature over the cottage at the very start of the chapter, where Nev wakes up on the stairs: she prefers to doze there rather than face the claustrophobic interior (2016, p. 9). I built upon this preference of Nev’s in the first chapters of the manuscript, so that she was perpetually looking outward, away from the cottage, which she is losing. Cleary’s natural landscapes became Nev’s solace.
My focus, hereafter, was nature and finding more intricate ways to juxtapose it with Nev’s mental and emotional development. Nature in YA fiction, whether it is out on the fringe or in the confines of the urban or suburban backyard, is often used as a testing ground for the Australian teenager. It is here that rites of passage are conducted, isolation is sought and/or harmony is achieved (Niall, 1984; Scutter, 1999). Of course, the Australian landscape does not always inspire awe or provide haven. It can be a fearful place that, to put extremely succinctly, can kill, maim and haunt. However, while representations of the landscape as an antagonist prevail as a topical area of study within Australian literature, I wanted to draw on the positive aspects of nature as I crafted Cleary’s.

Finnis contends that YA narratives with a positive emphasis on Australian environments “… praise the natural environment for what it can do to enlighten, succour and educate those who venture into it” (2005, p. 53). He expands upon the ethereal quality, noting how:

Its substantial physical presence produces in the protagonist influences that have a spiritual dimension that is sensed and deferred to but not completely comprehended. It becomes a nurturing ‘significant other’ that is celebrated along with the moral and/or principled development of the protagonists involved. A partnership of sorts is established. (p. 53)

The YA protagonist may not be aware of the bond they have achieved with nature, or fathom its complexity, but it nonetheless exists – for example, Nev’s deference to the outdoors over the cottage. Therefore, just as each character’s maturity is measured by their introspection and interactions with others – they never admit “I am mature now”, it is implied through their actions and musings – the use of nature is similarly covert. That is to say, the author crafts a subtle connexion between the protagonist and nature to forward their development. An example can be seen in Melina Marchetta’s On the Jellicoe Road (2006) in her depiction of the Prayer Tree: this is a tree-house haven for teenagers, including the contemporary cast of characters in the novel and the generations preceding it. At first, the protagonist, Taylor, dismisses the tree’s importance. However, the decade’s worth of carvings and graffiti that rim the girth of the trunk soon draw her in, and she starts spending her nights there, looking for familiar names and generally seeking peace. Later in the novel, it becomes a
natural meeting place for her and her friends. As such, the Prayer Tree is a positive symbol, becoming the “nurturing significant other” Finnis speaks of (2005, p. 53).

In order to draw the parallel between nature and adolescent growth, many authors have come to rely upon motif and metaphor, as these narrative devices allow for the defamiliarisation of emotive events and relationships. For example, nature in YA fiction often becomes like a covert “testing ground” for adolescent ordeals (Nimon & Foster, 1997, p. 35). By drawing on motif and metaphor, authors are able to defamiliarise the test. This means that the protagonist may not know they are about to undergo a rite of passage or a test of mental capabilities, but an in-depth reading uncovers an intelligent use of nature to guide characters (Nimon & Foster, 1997, p. 35; Finnis, 2009, p. 51-54). In addition to the Prayer Tree in *On the Jellicoe Road* (Marchetta, 2006), which is a recurrent motif that lures Taylor out into the bushland setting and eventually becomes a site of significant personal development, is Eaton’s *Fireshadow* (2005). In the novel, protagonist Vinnie has just lost his sister in a car accident, in which he suffered disfiguring burns. Unable to cope with the guilt of having survived and the silent condemnation from his parents – “you let your sister burn”, his father accuses (2005, p. 5) – he runs away to the isolation of the bush. A particular recurring motif, which speaks to Vinnie’s experience, is fire. His badly burnt body is contrasted with the surrounding bush landscape, which has also been ravaged by flames. Vinnie finds solace in the ruin as he recognises the paradox of fire in nature, which can certainly maim and destroy, but can also permit new life (Watts, 2005, p. 6). Fire, as a motif, shows Vinnie that his life is not over; he must simply begin anew.

The use of nature is implicit in the first two chapters of *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*. I provided some examples previously in Nev’s outward focus, whereby the tension of the cottage makes her seek the outdoors. In many ways, *Cleary’s* is the main motif in part one of the novel – later in the work, it becomes the WA roadscapes. However, nature signifies something deeper than temporary escape for Nev. Each time she goes outside, she does not simply enjoy a peaceful respite. She becomes meditative. This is evident in the following scenes: when she leans against the warm wood of the studio instead of going inside for her sitting (2016, p. 21); when she finishes her conversation with Gran about Hub and heads straight to the bonfire.
(2016, p. 44); and after the bonfire when she says “I’m not ready to go back to the cottage. I want to stay out here under the slick, black night and watch the dull ebb of the coals fade to nothing” (2016, p. 55). In these early scenes and chapters, Cleary’s became Nev’s “nurturing significant other” (Finnis, 2005, p. 53), but so too her first “testing ground” (Nimon & Foster, 1997, p. 35).

By focusing on nature as I developed Cleary’s and adhering to a more holistic vision of my childhood places, in which the sentiments surrounding them and not so much the physical features were prized – the feeling of freedom experienced in my childhood places was implied, not replicated with attention to the physical landscapes of Newman, Midland and Bunbury – I began to see now that I was not only drawing on experience or relying on a classic tenet of YA literature. Cleary’s also tended towards Burns’ idea of an unconventional Eden. Conversely, it could be viewed in the first instance as quite a traditional one. McCooey, for example, writes that Eden can signify “anywhere in which it is felt that a state of grace once existed” (1996, p. 57). This could be seen to tidy my experience neatly: I was simply putting my graceful places – Newman, Midland and Bunbury – into one fathomable context, making Cleary’s quite traditional in a sense. And there were certainly archetypal elements of Cleary’s that conform to the Edenic myth, namely the portrayal of a paradise in stasis that harmonises culture (art) and nature (retreat), and an encroaching outer world that threatens the serenity of this existence (Jimmy and, in some ways, Peta). However, McCooey refines his definition, asserting that Edenic tales, or using the mythology as a literary convention, always supports “the story of the loss of innocence” (p. 57). There is no way to separate innocence lost, from paradise lost. It is here that Cleary’s deviates indisputably from the tradition, as it is a timeless place that extends from childhood into adulthood, and knowledge serves to support the idyll, not break it.

Winton’s Blueback (1997) is not technically a YA novel, but it is the text Burns uses to explore unconventional Eden. It also functioned as an appropriate frame of reference for me when crafting Cleary’s postlapsarian undertones. For example,
Longboat Bay begins traditionally as a timeless paradise that shows signs of fracturing as Abel ages. Blueback, however, halts the idyll’s full depreciation, as he guides Abel to respect and care for the surrounding seascape, which encompasses not only wilderness, but also the Jackson’s home. Abel effectively becomes a caretaker, which is an unconventional aspect that On the Corner of North and Nowhere and Blueback share: they both portray young caretakers, with green spirits, who are responsible for maintaining the balance required to support their Eden’s longevity. These roles are grounded in perpetuity, stemming back to Gran and Dora, who preceded Nev and Abel as caretakers. Implicit in this exchange of roles, from one generation to the next, is another dynamic quality of the unconventional Eden: it is not simply a personal paradise, like Hewett’s farmhouse, it is a communal one and its continued existence is in the hands of the Cleary’s and the Jackson’s. I believe that it is the mutually beneficial relationship that these families maintain between themselves and nature that supports Eden’s stasis. To put it another way, family myth feeds the timeless quality of the unconventional Eden.

The ties between Longboat Bay and Cleary’s quickened with reference to family myth. Ironically, this was not because of my mythos, but Nev’s. As an illustration, consider the following passage in which Nev muses about her home:

I’ll admit that Mum has a fairly legitimate claim to the cottage. Gran owns Cleary’s now, the business and the land, but it’s built on the bones of an old vineyard that used to belong to my grandfather’s lot. Well him and his older brother, my Great Uncle Stanley. The history behind that exchange – from the Blake’s to the Cleary’s – is a complicated one, but at the end of the day the roots of both families are deeply embedded in the place, which gives Mum a solid claim to the cottage. By that reasoning, I’m due some consideration myself. It hasn’t worked out that way. (2016, p. 12).

In this Eden that is Cleary’s we see two bloodlines meet (Cleary’s and Blake’s); we see a landscape farmed, transformed to a landscape nurtured (vineyard to art retreat); we see a matriarch welcomed into paradise, then proceed to become its most fierce advocate (Gran); and we see a young understudy intent on a similar lead role (Nev). Without exception, the merged bloodlines, the rehabilitated landscape, the matriarch and the apprentice are all depicted in Blueback. These links showed me the close ties
between Winton’s novel and my manuscript. But, more importantly, they showed me ways to refine the unconventional Eden, by concentrating on Nev’s family myth, and not necessarily mine. It was here that On the Corner of North and Nowhere became a story in its own right.

Carter contends that in creative arts research “a double movement occurs, of decontextualisation in which the found elements are rendered strange, and of recontextualisation, in which new families of association and structures of meaning are established” (2009, pp. 15-16). Before my creative project commenced, I had defamiliarised my childhood experiences with WA places, the result being an unnamed character who exhibited characteristics of each place. As my creative project began, and this young woman became Nev, I worked to never be determined by one fixed way of knowing. The result was a near constant engagement with knowledge, or, to put it another way, it was a perpetual state of decontextualisation. My confrontation with my first home, for instance, was far from being the homecoming I had anticipated. This experience offered ideas and creative material, but for every one answer I achieved, there were several more questions. I was waiting for the upswing in many ways. For the point where my research, reading and travelling coalesced in my writing so that I could start making “new families of association and structures of meaning”, not just in my research, but on the page (Carter, 2009, p. 16). This finally came with the creation of Cleary’s. An emphasis on place and my research trip, along with the manipulation of personal anecdote and memory, enabled me to craft an Eden for Nev, and, with it, her own personal myth. My writing progressed rapidly thereafter, as On the Corner of North and Nowhere became her story. As Betsy Hearn writes, once the storyteller “has absorbed the bones of a story, she can improvise its details and bring it to life” (2005, p. 39). This is the perfect analogy for my writing experience. The novel had sprung from my creative mythos, the absorbed bones if you will. Then, as everything coalesced, and Nev took over, I found that I had the unyielding structural support for the narrative flesh of each draft to follow.
Chapter Two

Towards Young Adult Fiction

“I once wrote – though in the form of a paradox uttered by one of my fictional characters – there are two kinds of poets: good ones, who burn their poems at the age eighteen, and bad ones, who keep writing poetry” (Eco, 2011, p. 2). Poetry aside, I enjoy Umberto Eco’s paradoxical utterances, which may have been made by one of his characters, but start off for him as being something he “once wrote” (2011, p. 2). The connection he feels to his protagonist, perhaps antagonist, is interesting. The lines blur. As authors, all at once we are our characters and all at once we are not. This was my experience writing Nev during the first draft of On the Corner of North and Nowhere. As I researched, travelled, read and wrote, I often meditated upon the curious middle place in which we were situated, whereby the links that bound us were neither tenuous nor inextricable. This particular blurring, between character and self, was frustrating in many ways, because I believed I would never be in a position to explore a neat disjuncture between us. With the development of Cleary’s, something shifted. Nev began to take on a character wholly distinct from my own and her story strengthened considerably. That is not to say her characterisation was complete. Nev developed as I worked to achieve an authentic and aesthetic vision of Western Australian (WA) place, but at the conclusion of my first draft, I could see that she needed a more momentous journey. Not in terms of action, but in terms of personal and young adult growth. As such, I wanted my next drafts of the manuscript to stem from a deeper engagement with contemporary young adult (YA) realist fiction in Australia; for the project to evolve from not only the principles that have come to define the genre in this country, often meticulously so, but also from the techniques that were being employed by authors writing for and/or about a YA female demographic.

Critical to this analysis, of the influence of YA fiction on the development of On the Corner of North and Nowhere, is a definition of the genre. This is not an easy
endeavour. Certain strictures have developed around such classification, notably when trying to establish lower and upper ages of demarcation, which is the ages that separate YA literature from books for children or adults. The enigmatic genre is a crossbreed between these two, adopting some of the implicit innocence of the former, whilst seeking to relate to the mature reality of the latter. Ironically, this hybrid existence reflects the liminal state adolescents find themselves in, living on the cusp of two worlds, at once a child and an adult (Campbell, 2010, pp. 73-77; Preston, 2009, p. 40). The genre is also subject to input from a variety of specialists, including authors, publishers, critics, academics, teachers, librarians and psychologists. Each field adds something to YA literature, whether through the process of creation and refinement, undertaken by authors and publishers, or the investigative work of academics, critics and professionals, whose research helps inform these books for young people. This makes for a genre that does not always tend towards easy definition. In light of this, for the purpose of this essay, the age range of YA fiction is understood in broad terms, ranging from 12 to 25. (Please see Appendix C for a chronology of events in YA literature in the twentieth century, which provides an evolution of the genre). 

This chronology largely reflects my critical engagement with the genre, but my literary engagement with YA fiction began with the books I grew with, such as S. E Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1978), Markus Zusak’s *The Messenger* (2006), Anthony Eaton’s *Fireshadow* (2005), John Marsden’s *Tomorrow* series, and the collective works of Isobelle Carmody, Sonya Hartnett and Melina Marchetta. Throughout my adolescence and young adulthood, I talked through these books, referring to characters and plotlines that intrigued me. But they are more than complements to my adolescent issues and interests. These books skilfully, albeit unwittingly, capture Cart’s vision of the genre, in that they engender “enlightenment, comity, and compassion”, thus promising an ongoing engagement with young minds (2011, p. 201). I say unwittingly because authorial intentions do not always align with this civilising ideal. For instance, Carmody and Hartnett profess to writing for themselves alone, without being especially guided by the need to civilise young people (Kirk, 2009, pp. 4-8; Scutter, 1999, p. 283). However, I can attest to the revelatory power of the genre. The
aforementioned books and authors enlightened me; they taught me values such as empathy, compassion and resilience before I could even define the terms.

Seeking ways to further define this connection to YA fiction, I returned to prominent critics of the genre, including Sheila A. Egoff (1984), Brenda Niall (1984), Heather Scutter (1999), Kerry Mallan (2009), Michael Cart (2011), and Roberta Trites (2000; 2014). It is here that I came across an anthology called *A Narrative Compass: Stories That Guide Women’s Lives*. At first, the only link to YA literature was Trites, who is a shrewd and intelligible critic of the genre. I began reading the compilation of essays because she was an editor and contributor, and I wished to trace the origin of her scholarly interest in YA fiction. I did not anticipate the impact the collection would have on my creative arts research.

**A Narrative Compass: Stories That Guide Women’s Lives**

A ‘narrative compass’ is a term coined by Roberta Seelinger Trites and Betsy Hearne to describe the internalisation of stories by female scholars. In the anthology they have edited and participated in, they contend that a particular folktale, story or poem, inclusive of those in the oral tradition, can prove stimulating throughout a woman’s academic career, and not simply as a source of loose inspiration (2009, pp. ix-xi). Rather, “Because they have so completely internalised the story that has influenced them – they understand – either intuitively or self-reflexively – the structures and patterns of narrative” (Hearne & Trites, 2009, p. xi). The story is effectively embedded at a complex level, beyond the simple pleasure of a much-loved character, theme or plot, and re-manifests in research outputs.

The *Narrative Compass* anthology comprises 19 essays, all valuable in their consideration of how a resonant story, or in cases a series of work, can be fixed in the mind to the point where it directly influences research. However, it is not Hearne and Trites’ ambition to prescribe stringent methodological guidelines for scholars who wish to engage with their narrative compass. Instead, the essays are offerings from within an experimental space that provide models for discerning a compass and investigating its influence. Examples include Trites early devotion to *Little Women* and how she developed an interest in “Alcott scholarship” as she came up against the
patriarchal elite who dominated American academia (2009, pp. 8-18); Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s relationship with the canon of Lucy Maud Montgomery – author of *Anne of Green Gables* – whose heroines, she felt, should not resonate as they did with a contemporary African-American woman like herself, but could not escape coming of age as a scholar and a woman alongside her female protagonists (2009, pp. 80-95); Cindy L Christiansen’s fascination with the character of *Nancy Drew*, who she contends is responsible for her ability to interrogate data within her field of medical science (2009, pp. 141-155); and the penultimate essay of Joanna Hearne, daughter of Betsy Hearne, whose transcriptions of her grandmother’s oral stories were her “first subject of study” as a young undergraduate and became her “bridge” to scholarship (2009, p. 180).

Hearne and Trites write that all of the essayists in the *Narrative Compass* anthology “communicate the passion of a storyteller whose life’s work has been dominated by the epistemology of narrative” (2009, p. xviii). The “life’s work” phrase is a peculiar one, as early career researchers do not necessarily have a significant body of work to analyse. In that respect, the critical concept might prove more exclusive than intended. However, in their introduction, Hearne and Trites actively welcome this cohort of early academics and students, noting that the narrative discourse can be beneficial to them. They suggest that this group can operate on a higher level of awareness during their research, because they can be actively aware of their embedded narrative from the outset, in contrast with mature academics, such as Hearne, whose analysis is largely retrospective (2009, pp. xviii).

I identify as a student on the cusp of early-career-academic status. As such, I was interested in how my narrative compass might help me achieve a higher level of awareness in my writing and research. My focus in this instance was my second and future drafts of *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*. I knew it would be possible for me to reflexively analyse the significance of an embedded narrative retrospectively within my exegesis. After all, the essays are exegetical, in that they reflexively examine the development of academic and creative works. As such, I knew I could use the model to discern my compass and analyse my manuscript. However, I was interested in an engagement with my narrative compass during the progress of my second draft, in
terms of my existing knowledge and connections I had yet to make.

In their introduction, Hearne and Trites ask women across disciplines: “Do we analyse data in certain patterns because of patterns we have internalized from knowing certain stories?” and “Do we perceive literary structures differently…. because of the influence of one powerful story?” (2009, p. xiv). These questions, and the successive five, quickly build into a rhetoric that draws the reader’s focus to the umbilical connections that can exist between the work a scholar loves, and a scholar’s life work. Life’s work aside, I read a personal challenge in these questions. Not just to be open to the models and stories I would encounter in the impending essays, but to consider from the outset my own compass. I asked myself: do I have a compass? If so, is it possible to make connections between that text and my manuscript? And how could I use this information to support subsequent drafts of On the Corner of North and Nowhere? While the answers to the latter two questions were not immediately apparent, I could easily answer the first. Scrawled in the far left margin of that page is: “Yes! Obernewty’n.”

Obernewty’n is the first book in a YA dystopian fantasy series, written in 1987 by acclaimed Australian author Isobelle Carmody. Set in an orphanage isolated by mountains and a fringe of radioactive wasteland, it follows the journey of introverted young orphan, Elspeth Gordie. Her talent for reading minds, coercion and beast-speaking make her a Misfit in a land that punishes such mutation by death. While I can trace my earliest interest in YA literature back to Carmody’s Darkfall (1997), it is Obernewty’n I internalised. My first reading at 14-years-old remains vivid and centres almost exclusively on Elspeth’s sharp, solitary nature and how it was softened, but never displaced, by the relationships she built. Two in particular have proven significant to me: her affection for gruff Maruman, the one-eyed cat she is able to converse with in her mind and her friendships with Matthew, Damien, Cameo, and, begrudgingly, Ruston, her later love interest. These relationships taught me what to look for in YA fiction. Until I read Obernewty’n, I subsisted on books like The Little Princess and The Secret Garden, which although formative and beloved, did not show me young adult women and men living out variations of my issues. The outwardly
tough, yet inwardly broken future mistress of Obernewtyn provided entirely different insights. See *Figure 1.3*, directly below, for an illustration of Elspeth and her faithful companion, Maruman, by artist Amanda Oei Wells (2015). (In my mind, *Figure 1.3* bore a great resemblance to Nev and Aero, and I commissioned Wells to illustrate the pair in a similar fashion. Please see *Figure 1.1* at the beginning of the novel, and *Figure 1.2* at the beginning of the exegesis, for a completed illustration of Nev and Aero and an early sketch. All images are included with permission).
powerful Elspeth that resonated so strongly with Australian girl readers – and why are so many of us still so invested in her story today?“ (2015, p. 3). She poses an evocative question. I have often asked it myself, but never with the same level of interest that was sparked by contemplating Obernewtyn as my narrative compass. I found it interesting that like many other women in the Narrative Compass anthology, I had internalised a book that was deemed classic fiction. Favourites in the collection include Alice in Wonderland, The Secret Garden, Anne of Green Gables, “Beauty and the Beast” and Han’s Christian Anderson’s fairy tales. While my compass was marked by Obernewtyn, my understanding of its influence lacked the conceptual holism evident in the anthology. It was not until Hearne’s essay, which caps the collection, that I found a way to view my compass in greater depth.

Like many folklorists, Hearne – also an academic and children’s author – has spent decades chasing “variants of the same story” (2009, p. xiv). In her essay she recounts her three decade long fascination with “Beauty and the Beast”, tracing her analysis of the textual, visual and oral representations, which date back to the second century A.D. Her favourite rendition as a child was a Scandinavian tale called “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, in which a young woman must set out on a quest to free an enchanted prince, who cannot escape his snow-beast form and the troll he must marry without her cunning. Despite the resonance of this story in her childhood, Hearne did not fully engage with the folktale until the age of 36. Interestingly, it was not the much-loved classic of her youth that compelled her scholarly intrigue, at least not on a conscious level, but the abundant adaptations of “Beauty and the Beast” crossing her desk as a children’s book review editor at the time. What followed was seven years of investigation into the folktale, resulting in a doctoral dissertation and an acclaimed publication: Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale (1989).

Upon her mother’s death, Hearne finally rediscovered her childhood copy of “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, and with it, the first literary heroine of her youth. She slowly began to reflect on the impact that family lore can have on a scholar’s research. Until that point she had been deeply engaged in seeking what she describes as the “bones of story”, which are “the essential motifs in graphic and as
well as narrative representations” (2009, p. 198). She was interested in the structural integrity of the folktale, an unsurprising stance given her discipline. However, upon the publication of her children’s book, *Seven Brave Women* (1997), which is a collection of stories based on women in her family, she notes that she:

... began to see the relationship between the strong female hero in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” and the strong women in my own family, all related to my deep — and seemingly inexplicable — engagement with “Beauty and the Beast”. (2009, p. 202)

It is here that she started to engage with the folktale, not from a purely ethnographic perspective, whereby a folklorist analyses the culture in which a variant has appeared as a means of understanding its evolution, but on a personal level. She opted for “a more balanced perspective that included exploring the contextual — not only the broad socio-political dynamics that nuance stories but also the personal dynamics that nurture them” (p. 202).

Hearne writes that “… we must acknowledge what was perhaps always true, that stories are too numerous and wild to control with traditional commands. It is a humbling experience to leap disciplinary fences and follow stories wherever they lead” (2009, p. 195). Evident in her quote is a desire to know stories — to leap disciplines — but never to control them by conventional academic means. Evident in her practice to-date is the actualisation of this goal. She has achieved this by allowing the structural parameters of ethnography to guide her, but only so long as they were not prohibitive. Thereafter, she allowed herself a contextual grounding, a position she was persuaded to after reflecting on a piece of her creative writing and how it was shaped by both family lore and the folktale (Hearne, 2009, pp. 194-211). As a result, Hearne’s narrative compass has become the point around which her ideas, creativity and research naturally gather and disperse. It is not, however, defined by a single point. She admits that her favourite variants have shifted throughout her life “from ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’ as a child, to ‘Beauty and the Beast’ as an adult, to ‘The Dough Prince’ as an elder” (2009, p. 208). She has evolved along with each version of the folktale, as surely as they have with each other. This journey bears a resemblance to the metaphor on which Hearne and Trites balance their ideas: a compass. Consider Figure 1.4:
I suggest that Hearne’s north is marked by “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, which is the first version she recalls reading. At her back is south and “Beauty and the Beast”. She is then flanked by “The Dough Prince” to the west and a yet to be determined variant in the east – one cannot help but fathom an east for a woman who has spent her life internalising and studying this folktale.

Using Hearne’s experience and essay as a model, I reflected on the Obernewtyn series, as I read it across my young adulthood and it could conceivably complete my compass – the publication breadth spans 28 years and seven books, with the last one released in 2015. It did not take long for me to dismiss the idea. Nev’s maturity and conception of the world did not match the tenacity of Elspeth’s in the mid to late novels. For instance, Elspeth comes of age in the series, beyond young adulthood. Across seven books she becomes a leader, goes to war, finds a soul mate and inevitably sets out on a quest that requires her to sacrifice the sense of belonging she has built for herself. Her story continues into her adulthood, which is unique in YA literature. I was still seeking ways that I might develop Nev’s character and story, with Elspeth and Obernewtyn in mind, but the whole series did not serve to complete my compass.

Still, the idea of a full compass persisted. Whenever I contemplated pulling back and concentrating solely on Carmody’s first novel, my unwavering north, I felt the
need to persist with a model like Hearne’s. That is not to say I was intent on fabricating a compass. Rather, I was keen to recognise my south, west and east, if such points existed. The difference between fabrication and recognition is important here. The first suggests a pressure to force connections, whereas I was interested in how I had intuited my existing information to create *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* and where this recognition might lead me as I crafted my subsequent drafts. I was reminded, here, of a quote by Hearne and Trites. They believe that “Women in academia frequently know exactly what stories have affected their careers, molded their values, provided them with role models, sustained them through duress, comforted them, and made them laugh” (2009, p. xi). This passage, while prompting me to view embedded narratives in less complex terms, also guided me back to my favourite YA novels. That is not to imply that the model or YA fiction lack complexity or rigour, only that recalling the strong, emotive connections to certain literature can easily be the basis for internalising narratives. This was the experience of many academics in the anthology. When I considered my compass in these terms, progress was fluid, as a particular set of books from my young adult reading emerged strongly: Zusak’s *The Messenger* (2006), Marchetta’s *On the Jellicoe Road* (2006), and Wakefield’s *Friday Brown* (2013). See Figure 1.5:

![Figure 1.5. My narrative compass](image)

While a YA fantasy novel served to initiate my compass, three contemporary Australian YA realist works completed it. I did not just enjoy these books. They
challenged and captivated me, and some of my earliest creative writings evolved from their influence. I could also see the origins of *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*, especially in the plot lines and characters. In light of this, before I analyse the impact my narrative compass had on the development of second and subsequent drafts of my manuscript, a brief summary of these YA texts and their immediate influence is necessary.

In *The Messenger*, which was first published in 2002, protagonist and first person narrator Ed Kennedy loses no time in assuring his reader of his absolute uselessness:

> My full name is Ed Kennedy. I’m nineteen. I’m an under-age cab driver. I’m typical of many of the young men you see in this suburban outpost of the city – not a whole lot of prospects or possibility. That aside, I read more books than I should, and I’m decidedly crap at sex and doing my taxes. Nice to meet you. (Zusak, 2006, p. 6)

Ed’s unapologetic candour is a complement to J. D Salinger’s Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1945 (1994), although Ed’s idiosyncratic narration is more attuned to a contemporary Australian vernacular and an abiding self-deprecation. I did not know this when I first read the book, but I did appreciate Ed’s witty, direct address and his affection for Audrey. She bleeds into the story through his unrequited adoration of her, making her a pivotal character in his story from the outset. She is the pinnacle of Ed’s ineptitude: “I never left this suburban town. I didn’t go to university. I went to Audrey” (2006, p. 17). Their bond, which is always devoid of physical intimacy, continues throughout the novel as Ed is chosen by an anonymous figure to deliver certain messages to people. It begins with an Ace of Diamonds in the mail, which has three addresses and times written across it. The people who live at these places require assistance of some kind and as Ed completes each task, helping each stranger, he takes on the role of messenger. Sometimes, all that is required of him is companionship; other times, he must be violent to ensure the message is understood. Ed’s character did not fall neatly on one side of the good or bad spectrum, which introduced me to the flawed-hero archetype for the first time outside of the fantasy genre. I was equally enamoured by Audrey’s imperfections. She is a promiscuous young women, but not with Ed. She saves her affection for him,
separating her emotions and her physicality so that she never has to give one person every piece of herself.

Audrey is an unassuming character who buoyed Ed’s story, yet I constantly imagined her narrating her own. This was the joy of reading Zusak’s The Messenger (2006): through the limitations of Ed’s first person perspective, he has crafted a female lead who is the equivalent of the male protagonist. In many ways, this book instigated my interest in Australian YA realist fiction. Until then, I was heavily invested in fantasy, but reading of young people roughly my age and in my country changed that. I still enjoyed fantasy, but with Zusak’s novel a solid interest in real stories began to build. From there, I picked up Marchetta’s Looking for Alibrandi (1992) and Saving Francesca (2003). Written 11 years apart, I anticipated a similarly long wait for her next work, but in 2006 came On the Jellicoe Road.

On the Jellicoe Road (Marchetta, 2006) begins with a prologue in which two families collide in a car accident that claims five lives. Narnie, who survives the wreck, narrates the event, detailing how she watched her family die. She is one of five main characters – Narnie, Webb, Tate, Jude and Fitz, referred to hereafter as the five – in a fractured narrative that runs parallel to the main story. As such, Narnie is not the protagonist. That is Taylor Markham, a 17-year-old girl who boards at Jellicoe School. She believes the story about the five is mostly fictional, because she is reading a story about them, penned by her guardian, Hannah. When we meet Taylor in chapter one, she is being elected as leader of her school in the territory wars. This is a fierce game they play for six weeks every summer against the local Townies and Cadets from Sydney, negotiating access to rivers, bushland and clubhouses – the five began the territory wars two decades before as a friendly game. Taylor does not want the role. Apathetic and introverted, her aim is to graduate high school and leave Jellicoe forever. She is elected leader, nonetheless, even as she loses her own: her guardian Hannah leaves under mysterious circumstances. As the novel progresses, Taylor continues to read the story of the five and eventually realises that the characters are not only real, they are her family: Hannah is her aunty (Narnie), and Tate and Webb are her parents. Upon discovering this, she runs away to the city to find her long
absent mother, who she discovers has terminal cancer. Days after Taylor returns to Jellicoe Road, her mother finally follows, only to die shortly after.

It is difficult to impart exactly how intricate Marchetta’s work is in this brief space, or to describe the strength of the emotive response I had when I read it for the first time – and often still do. It is a heartbreaking, beautiful and dark work, which demands attention from its reader. Interestingly, the complexity of Marchetta’s plot and characterisation in On the Jellicoe Road (2006) is such that some critics tend to label it as “uninviting or inaccessible to teen readers” (Cart, 2011, p. 79). They believe the acclaimed work is better understood by an adult readership. However, its complexity is precisely what I found inviting about it as a young reader. Solving gaps in Taylor’s history demands that you pay attention to plot. Rather than making the novel as exclusive as critics suggest, I found that this encouraged greater focus, the reward for which was making connections about Taylor’s family before she did. For me, this book was an invitation to participate and to feel, not just to read, and I have yet to experience the rigour of this connection in a YA novel since.

Wakefield’s Friday Brown (2013), which was first published in 2012, does not require the same fixed attention needed throughout Marchetta’s novel. However, this does not weaken its impact or value. It begins with a prologue, narrated in first person by a 17-year-old protagonist of the same name. Friday recounts a life spent on the road, trailing after her impetuous mother, Vivienne, who “doled” out snippets of her life as they sat around campfires (2013, p. 1). Friday divulges one such tale. She describes the night that Vivienne told her every female in their family is cursed to die by water somehow, like her grandmother, who broke her spine after accidentally diving into an empty pool. The curse also claims Vivienne before the prologue is complete: at the end of a battle with breast cancer, her lungs fill with fluid and she drowns. Friday is meant to go into her grandfather’s care thereafter, but runs away to the city to find her father, who she has never met. There, she encounters a mute called Silence who befriends her and takes her back to his squat where he and a group of seven youths live. They are led by Arden and Malik. Friday becomes entangled with the group and flees the city with them when the squat burns down mysteriously. Arden promises to build them a new home in a ghost town called Murungal Creek,
but it is Friday who is at home in this landscape. Soon, the squatters are deferring to her for guidance, compounding the tension between her and Arden. Days later, Silence goes missing. After a brief search, he is found dead in an empty water tank that has been sealed from the outside. Arden and Malik locked him in and took his inhaler, knowing that the fear and dust would trigger his asthma and kill him. Against the backdrop of a swelling river that is threatening to drown Murungal Creek, and surely invoke her family curse, Friday confronts Arden. She has the opportunity to revenge Silence’s death when Arden becomes trapped, but she saves her instead – it is never clear what happens to her or Malik. After fleeing to the police, the squatters return to the city. Friday, however, journeys back to her grandfather’s home. The novel ends with her taking a shovel to the pool in his backyard, which he filled in when he lost his wife. Friday breaks ground, shovelling away the dirt, thus symbolising her intention to end her family curse and finally make a home for herself.

A number of similarities between Friday Brown (Wakefield, 2013) and On the Corner of North and Nowhere are immediately apparent, including the indomitable mothers, the absent but needed fathers, and the allusion to the protagonists’ early life spent travelling Australian roads. Silence too, who is mute, bears a resemblance to Etta. I read Wakefield’s novel towards the end of my first draft. As such, it was not my intention to mimic her work. Rather, I was transfixed by the similarities. They served to compel me forward; to validate the story I was writing. It is for this reason that Friday Brown was the natural east of my narrative compass.

As I considered the importance of each realist text on my narrative compass, I was reminded that Obernewtyn was a peculiar north for a creative arts enquiry driven by contemporary YA realism. I found myself drawn back to McAlister’s question, as she asks: “What was it about the transgressive, active, and extraordinarily powerful Elspeth that resonated so strongly with Australian girl readers – and why are so many of us still so invested in her story today?” (2015, p. 3). I had yet to fully answer this question or to explore why I had internalised this popular narrative. I knew, of course, that Elspeth was key. Nev shared many of her traits, including her intelligence, introversion and stubbornness. She also had an animal companion, who was more friend than pet. Yet there was something more to it. Hearne and Trites offer a
suggestion for this internalisation, at least with respect to the popularity conundrum. They contend that the internalised stories in their anthology share a collective narrative pattern: strong female rite of passage. This means that many of the stories are about girls or women coming of age, often under difficult circumstances. Think Little Women, “Beauty and the Beast” and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. As a result, many of the essayists reflect on the theme of marginalisation in the meditative sections of their essay and how they overcame it (2009, pp. xii-xvii). It is possible for rite of passage journeys to apply to so many of these stories because it functions at a meta-level, beyond one genre; as a literary convention it is applicable to innumerable texts (Campbell, 1973). It certainly applies to Obernewtyn, which, at its most simple level, is a coming of age story about a lost young woman undertaking a journey to achieve a sense of belonging and place. Holistically speaking, this is also the story of Ed, Audrey, Taylor, Friday and Nev. Their respective journeys were soon key, because I found that the way to developing my manuscript was to pay attention to how rites of passage are conducted in my narrative compass.

Rite of Passage: Coming of Age in YA Literature

The term ‘rite of passage’ was coined by German-French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep in Les Rites de Passage – The Rites of Passage. It was published in French in 1909 and translated, posthumously, into English in 1960. Van Gennep, who was referred to with affection by colleagues and friends as “the hermit of Bourg-la-Reine”, because of his unfathomable inability to attain an academic position in French universities, believed that life is one of unmitigated ritual, whereby every individual, irrespective of culture or era, undergoes three stages when transitioning into society (Riviere cited in Zumwalt, 1982, p. 299). He writes: “I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, preliminal rites, those executed during transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world postliminal rites” (1977, p. 21). Within literary theory, this rite of passage schema has more formal recognition in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, written by American mythologist Joseph Campbell in 1949 (1973). Campbell’s seminal work presents the theory of the monomyth, in which a hero undertakes a cyclic journey, comprising 17 stages, across three acts: departure, initiation and return. The
compelling nature of Campbell’s theory was his belief that a universal story form existed, the narrative pattern of which could be seen across cultures, with archetypal heroes ranging from Buddha to Christ. His work has proven influential to contemporary filmmakers and writers, such as George Lucas, James Cameron and J. K. Rowling, who credit Campbell in the creation of their acclaimed works (Duvall & Béres, 2011, p. 29).

The parallels between van Gennep’s anthropological investigation into rites of passage and Campbell’s psychoanalytic study are self-evident, although Campbell fails to make the connection explicit. He mentions van Gennep once in a footnote (Campbell, 1973, p. 10; Duvall & Béres, 2011, p. 29). Campbell is similarly indebted to Vladimir Propp, a Soviet folklorist who examined innumerable Russian folktales and determined 31 narrative functions, which can be applied to traditional and contemporary stories. Propp’s findings, published in Morphology of the Folktale in 1928, were undoubtedly important to Campbell’s work, as he too explored the inherent structure of stories and suggested an applicable matrix (Propp, 1968).

Returning to rite of passage, British anthropologist Victor Turner was similarly struck by triadic rites. In 1966 he delivered lectures that progressed van Gennep’s original schema and in 1969 he published them in The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure. He credited the German-Frenchman several times. This time, the three stages were represented as separation, liminality and reintegration. Again, the links to van Gennep and Campbell are self-evident, although Turner’s primary area of interest was liminality (Eriksen, 2001, pp. 137-138; Duvall & Béres, 2011, pp. 29-30). Turner writes that:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous ... Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols ... Thus liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (1970, p. 95)
Turner notes how society, in lieu of a definition for these initiates, hastens to liken them to something else entirely, making the penultimate stage of the rite of passage journey symbolic and ambiguous. That is, meaning is implied through symbols, as opposed to firm definition, hence the surfeit of words employed by Turner in the passage above to signify the strange experience of being between two places or states: threshold, betwixt, between, liminal, ambiguous, indeterminate, invisibility, bisexuality and eclipse (1970, p. 95).

Duvall and Béres observe how Turner’s work on the liminality resonated with the generation in which he published, becoming applicable not just to the Ndembu tribe, who helped him articulate his ritual process, but also to those in Western society living out the tumultuous period of the late 1960s (2011, p. 30). In particular, young adults in this period “had chosen to embrace marginal lifestyles in protest against the values of mainstream society” (p. 30). Of their own volition, they were attempting transition into new social contexts, not pre-existing ones, making them iconoclasts. As such, the liminal phase for these initiates was as indeterminate as ever. Such rebellion is society’s main fear in the ritual process, because there is a decided risk to convention when a person “refuses to be reintegrated and rejects its [society’s] values and hierarchies” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 138). That is not to say rebellion is normal. In refusing reintegration, “The individual for his or her part risks anomie and social homelessness”, the fear of which generally keeps them on the pathway to completing their rite (2001, p. 138). The 1960s were different. Young people found that they did not wish to be governed by existing conventions and power structures. As such “Turner’s teachings of ‘betwixt and between’ carried strong relevance and resonance for people living in those social times of intense transition” (Duvall & Béres, 2011, p. 30).

The tumult of the 1960s had positive ramifications for not only the lives of young people, but so too their literature, which was on the cusp of burgeoning into a genre. As Patty Campbell writes, “the social and political climate was exactly right for the birth of exciting ideas and new literary forms for young people” (2010, p. 3). With social upheaval came determined authors willing to test boundaries, notably S. E. Hinton who wrote The Outsiders in 1967, one of the first YA books (Cart, 2011, pp. 24-
Hinton was just a teenager when she published her debut novel about class warfare in America. She believed that authors needed to move beyond staples of romance and obedient young characters and emphasise reality in their work, inclusive of the radical social change the era was witness to (2005, pp. 12-13). In an article written for the *New York Times Review* in 1967, she says:

> All we hear is how teenagers are rebelling against authority, against lack of authority, against country, against parents. This is partly true. It is more true that all we are doing most of the time is asking, “Why?” and getting as an answer, “Because it’s always been done this way”. (2005, p. 12)

By affirming that teenagers were in fact rebelling and arguing that this was in response to dogged attempts by adults to hold to tradition, Hinton was trying to redress the balance between the two parties in the social change debate. Although the impasse would continue, Hinton’s book and her voice challenged other authors. Standout American novels followed, including Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman* (1968) and Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974). These books opened up a literary niche for the 13 to 18-year-old bracket and sparked a period of genre development that was characterised by stark realism. The fiction thrived on previously taboo themes, or at least issues that had classically been left to parental and teacher control such as sex, pregnancy, drugs and abuse. Authors found that they were allowed to explore style and content, independent of cloying voices that demanded censorship for young minds (Cart, 2011, pp. 21-37).

Literature for young people had finally begun to parallel their real lives. But, more than this, it was nuanced with a distinct rite of passage flair. For instance, the characters in these stories, like their real life young adult counterparts, had reached the liminal stage of their rites and were having difficulty reintegrating into the societies they were separated from. Campbell had admittedly made the connection between story form and anthropological rite of passage two decades prior. Moreover, the term *Bildungsroman* has long been used to describe these coming-of-age narratives. However, it was not until the late 1960s that there was a genre to support these kinds of stories for young people. (See Appendix C for information about the novels that helped establish the genre, as well as a definition of key YA terms, beginning with the *Bildungsroman*).
Rite of passage has become a tenet of YA literature, developing steadily alongside the reality of the adolescent and young adult experience (Proukou, 2005, p. 62). We can see evidence of this in the aforementioned works of Hinton, Cormier and Zindel, but so too Australian YA fiction of the 1970s and 1980s. It admittedly took longer for our fiction to develop an evocative realism that was similar to the steadfast trend in America at the time, but the influence inevitably crossed the Pacific. Niall writes that this period of YA fiction in Australia is classified as “the golden age in publishing”; “to put it another way, it’s the decade in which a new niche market opened up” (cited in Scutter, 1999, p. v). Consider *Puberty Blues*, which was published in 1979 (Carey & Lette, 2012). Like Hinton’s work, it was also written by teenagers and exposed the reality of adolescent gang warfare. Sex, violence and drugs became the focus in the lives of two young Sydney schoolgirls, Debbie and Sue, as they infiltrated their local surf gang in Cronulla and were initiated into its horrific, seedy life. The book was published just shy of what Scutter refers to as the “anti-sentimentalist stance taken by writers for young adults” in the 1980s (1999, p. 112). However, it has all the makings as the adolescent duo opted to include explicit content that demonstrated their reality, instead of ignoring it. Lette says, “we wanted to write down our story to help liberate the other surfie girls whose talents were lying dormant” (2013, para. 3). Again, we see rite of passage and reality converge in YA literature: characters Debbie and Sue did not wish to reintegrate into the society they were separated from, which was precisely Carey and Lette’s reality. They demanded more for themselves and from their community.

In tracing the evolution of YA rite of passage, I could see that my narrative compass emulated the triadic ritual process perfectly. In each novel, there is evidence of *separation, liminality* and *reintegration*. But, more than this, I found that I had instinctually incorporated the schema into my first draft of my manuscript. I attribute this to the innate nature of rite of passage stories. As Proukou writes, “we know them [rite of passage myths], but we are not sure how we know them. They reside in the heritage of imagination that is ours as humans” (2005, p. 62). My imagination had created such a journey for Nev, as she separated from Cleary’s, was suspended in a liminal phase as she attempted to resolve her issues on the road and in Newman, and
reintegrated home at the conclusion of the novel. Each stage, however, lacked the sophistication penned by Carmody, Zusak, Marchetta and Wakefield, especially with regard to characterisation, which became a notable area for improvement in my manuscript. In light of this, from the first complete draft of my manuscript to the last, I adhered to the triadic rites of passage conducted within my narrative compass, ensuring that I steadily built upon the foundation I had incorporated instinctively.

**Separation: The ‘transformational call of adolescence’**

*Separation* for a young person requires “leaving the world of childhood either physically or symbolically” (Larson & Martin, 2012, p. 38). Proukou concurs, but also notes that “the separation from childhood is a complex trial, begun in adolescence and symbolic of all transformations of consciousness, particularly from one state of understanding to a higher or clearer one” (2005, p. 63). This gives an idea of the complexity of the rite to follow, for it is not a harried journey from childhood to adulthood; the young adult does not achieve full maturation upon leaving their community. Instead, *separation* becomes the “transformational call of adolescence”, beckoning the initiate into their *liminal* phase, the turmoil of which is not immediately reconcilable with maturity (p. 63).

Despite the complexity of the *separation* phase, it is nonetheless a brief period in the ritual process in my narrative compass. For example, in each novel, the protagonist has entered liminality by the fifth chapter. However, in *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* it takes Nev all of part one to *separate* from Cleary’s: at the beginning of part two she has set out for the Pilbara and does not intend to return home. Her exit is the result of slow building stress, not a single, catalytic moment. The prospect of Jimmy having sex with her while she was unconscious was certainly an instigator – in the last scene of part one, Nev catapults out of bed with Jimmy’s matches in her hands and everything changes thereafter (2016, p. 71) – yet her *separation* is mostly due to the tension that builds across part one. This was a deliberate construction. I wanted to craft a slow exit for Nev, from Cleary’s, so as to impart a dual-vision of her at ease in her Eden, whilst being progressively riven from it. This would later support her return home as she realised she had always had a place
to belong. However, as I edited part one, I contemplated beginning Nev’s story from part two as I engaged with my narrative compass and studied each protagonist’s early entry into liminality. Nev’s separation, by comparison, was protracted. Starting her story on the road after a brief interlude at Cleary’s might serve to create a more fluid beginning. However, I found that Zusak’s attention to the development of Ed’s character prior to his separation provided justification for a less swift exit for Nev.

In The Messenger, Ed’s separation occurs after he visits the first address on the Ace of Diamonds at midnight, as instructed by his anonymous watcher (Zusak, 2006). He leaves, broken, after having witnessed three things: a drunk man rape his wife, a young girl of eight cry for her mother, and a woman, who is wife-victim-mother, sit on the porch of her home and weep. Ed realises that the assault is a nightly one and that it is his duty to end the rapist’s life – instead, he ends up chasing the man from town with the threat of death. With this event, Ed separates from his former life. Yet, this former life is imperative to his story because this is where he details his combative relationship with his mother, his adoration of Audrey, his odd friendships with Marv and Ritchie, and his blind love for his flatulent dog, Doorman. He even foils a bank robbery. I believe these connections and backstory create a bond between Ed and the reader prior to his shattering separation, making it a more poignant experience than if it were the first scene of The Messenger. For example, if page one of the novel began with Ed visiting the first address at midnight, and separating at that moment, then it would be bereft of his early narration, which details the flawed yet vital people in his life and his own imperfect character.

In light of Zusak’s example in The Messenger (2006), my intention was not to reduce the length of part one in my manuscript drastically. Instead, I aimed to support Nev’s sustained separation through her relationships. My first task was to lessen Hub’s role in this section and, subsequently, in the novel. In my first draft, he played a pivotal role in Nev’s departure. As such there was a great deal of backstory that served as a barrier to Nev and other characters’ full development. Imagine, for a moment, a cotton scarf. If you pull on a loose thread hard enough it will snag along the entire garment. You need a deft, patient touch to smooth out the bunched cotton, otherwise you will create more snags that will inevitably overlap, crisscrossing with painful
intricacy until you lose the original marker of ruin. This is what I envisaged in editing *On the Corner of North and Nowhere*, with attention to diminishing Hub’s influence on the story. I knew that if I was not careful, I might disrupt the narrative entirely. My ambition began simply. From the first draft to the second, instead of needing to know her estranged grandfather, Nev wants to know him; in place of severe mystery around his character that prompts her to leave Cleary’s, there are gaps that pique her interest and it is her mother’s behaviour that forces her departure; and where Nev thinks about the day she might meet Hub, she knows she will never have the opportunity because he presumably commits suicide when she is 15-years-old.

The process of reducing Hub’s impact carried across several drafts of the manuscript, meaning his transformation took time. However, there was a measure of control in this crafting; a slow unpicking of stitches that left holes to be reworked, rather than bunched cotton in ruin. In these spaces, in part one, I took time to make characters more present and authentic, as Zusak has done. I wrote a phone-call scene between Nev and her father in chapter three to show her instinctive deference to him, despite the physical distance between them (2016, pp. 34-35); I strengthened the bonfire scene in chapter five to show Nev’s affection for Travis and Minty, and developing disgust of Jimmy (2016, pp. 43-53); and I wrote Cole into part one in many small snippets to make his presence in part two less abrupt. The most prominent example, however, can be seen in the development of Gran, notably during Nev’s failed attempt to steal cider from her fridge (2016, pp. 36-42). In this chapter, Gran starts a conversation with Nev about Hub, which is a rare occurrence. She recounts her time at the old vineyard as a young girl before it was Cleary’s, her pregnancy, her father’s failed attempt to convince her to have an abortion, and her near-homelessness. The delivery of this amount of information is intentional. It gives Gran control over her history, making her far more personable than when Nev relayed the same information in large introspective chunks in the first draft of the manuscript. There is also a feeling of disclosure when Gran speaks, which makes content new, not only to the reader, but also Nev. It was an authentic way to deliver important information about key characters, and, at the same time, draw back on Hub’s
influence. The chapter admittedly ends with Nev thinking about her grandfather, but so too the complexities of “the second-most silent woman” she knows (2016, p. 42).

The result of this characterisation is such that Nev’s separation remains elongated, but Cleary’s is firmly established as her place. Her story, hereafter, is about finding a way back home. This may seem ironic, given her propensity to view it as tainted and lost: Peta’s influence is such that Nev cannot see a place for herself at Cleary’s any longer. However, as Proukou writes, YA literature, like young adulthood, is “about the fantastic flux of being” (2005, p. 63). No pathway is ever as clear as first thought and it does not remain fixed. The protagonist on their rite of passage journey, inclusive of its trials and transformation, is assured of reaching this conclusion. However, prior to their return, they must first undergo liminality: the most indeterminate stage of a character’s life.

**Liminality: “Betwixt and between”**

“The term liminality refers to risk-taking experiences that occur in spaces outside of the normal rhythms and expectations that shape one’s life” (Larson & Martin, 2012, p. 38). “[O]utside the normal rhythms” can refer to physical journeys away from home and community, as well as mental ones, which are signified by a disruption to daily life (2012, p. 38). Interestingly, in my narrative compass, protagonists generally undertake this phase without a guide. This means that when they separate from their community, they are removed from adult influence, signalling an immediate lack of counsel in the stage to follow. This might seem like a natural progression of rite of passage. After all, separation implies a level of solitude as the initiate breaks away from their former life. However, anthropologically speaking, solitude was not always the ambition of rite of passage. Elders used to be responsible for taking initiates in-hand, which ensured the positive exchange of important information. The young person was thus guided into adulthood, often alongside initiates of the same age (Larson & Martin, 2012, pp. 38-40). The use of past tense here is intentional, because young people are not always guided in this manner in contemporary society. Rather, we see instances of what Larson and Martin refer to as “artificial rites of passage” (2012, p. 38). The pair highlight how first times, like sexual intercourse and the
consumption of drugs and alcohol, are ritualised, their premise being that without guidance in the form of traditions or adult mentoring, many teenagers construct ritual around the experiences they feel are mature or are due to them (2012, p. 38). Grimes explores a similar tendency in his research and suggests that in these cases, the young person in question has merely taken part in a ritualised celebration, or “initiatory behaviour”, which lacks power to mature them into adulthood (2002, p. 91).

I was interested in analysing the absent-adult trend in my narrative compass, with respect to how each author filled the void left by these adults, or rather, who they use to fill it. In each book the protagonist’s young companions act in the stead of authoritative figures, thus guiding the main character in the same way a traditional elder would. This was a compelling discovery and not simply because it is the apparent preference of all the authors in my compass. The same narrative pattern was evident in my manuscript. For instance, Nev runs away from Cleary’s and enters her liminal phase without a guide. However, she is not alone. She is accompanied by Cole. He is indeed an adult, but he is also a youth undertaking his own rite of passage, making him Nev’s companion and not an authoritative figure.

It is in the absence of adults that friends like Cole come to the fore in the liminal stage of YA rite of passage journeys. They exist to support the protagonist’s story, but, as in real life, they also have their own lives to lead. As such, they are of value to the protagonist’s development, whilst enticing the reader to their cause as well. Consider Jonah from On the Jellicoe Road (Marchetta, 2006). He is portrayed as a brute in the early stages of the novel, but he is not so easily consumed by the tag of bully. He softens progressively as Marchetta gives insight into his abrasive personality. The reader discovers that when Jonah was a boy, he accidentally killed his abusive father in defence of his mother and younger brother. Furthermore, on the day he met Taylor for the first time, not long after the event, he was planning to commit suicide to escape his unbearable guilt. Taylor did not know it at the time, but their meeting saved his life (Marchetta, 2006, p. 178). These revelations give Jonah a life beyond the pages, the turmoil of which makes him an attractive companion for Taylor, who is similarly lost in pursuit of a place to belong.
E. M. Forster believed that the benefit of a complex cast of characters is that they draw each other out effortlessly (1990, p. 79). This is certainly true of Jonah and Taylor, yet it is not the only relationship that teaches Taylor the importance of human connection. One of the most profound in the novel is between Taylor, Jonah, Chaz, Ben and Raffy – they are Cadets, Townies and students from the Jellicoe School. At the beginning of the story they are adversaries, but it is not long before the pretence of hate is gone and they are simply friends. Taylor marvels at their collective friendship, which helps her admit to certain longings: “These people have history” she muses, “and I crave history. I crave someone knowing me so well that they can tell what I’m thinking” (2006, p. 160). After having been abandoned by the adults in her life and denied her family history, Taylor has developed a mistrust of relationships and adults. But her friends, who are living out variations of her own issues, guide her back towards affection, purpose and empathy. Owen implies that this quality of writing is what makes Marchetta a standout author, because there is not simply attention to whole characters, but to “fully rounded friendships” that have “all the weight and complexity of real-life relationships” (n.d., p. 10).

At different points in her liminal phase, during draft one, Nev travelled with Cole, Max and Etta, and although they coaxed her to take different routes at times, they did not command her like her mother did. In this way, they drew out Nev’s character because she enjoyed the freedom of these friendships. The problem was that this drawing out was never quite complete, as Max, Etta and Cole were only characterised well enough to form superficial friendships with Nev – Cole is an exception, because a romance develops between him and Nev, but this too required work. I was drawn not just to the idea of creating counterparts to Marchetta’s Jonah, Raffy, Ben and Chaz, who are robust characters capable of protagonist roles, but also to Forster’s notion of round and flat characters. His basic premise, while dated, prevails in English literature today, insomuch as it is still used to distinguish characters of importance from those who simply exist to support the protagonist’s growth. A defining quality of a flat character is that they remain unchanged for the duration of a story and are exceptionally easy to describe. A sentence will generally suffice (Forster, 1990, p. 74). This can be advantageous, as these characters become like structural pivots: they
“never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere” (Forster, 1990, p. 74). Jimmy is a flat character. Despite the mystery Nev attributed to him when she started seeing him, he lacks complexity and his purpose in On the Corner of North and Nowhere is such that he is never required to develop any. His role is confined to his effect on Nev. Travis and Minty are similarly flat. They are crafted as superior to Jimmy, notably in their affection for and treatment of Nev, as well as the general sincerity of their characterisation. Nevertheless, they do not evolve beyond one-dimension, or, as Forster would likely contend, they are not “capable of rotundity” (1990, p. 78).

It was not my intention to render Jimmy, Minty and Travis whole in second and subsequent drafts of my manuscript. Satisfied with their characterisation, my aim was to round Cole, Etta and Max. Far from inspiring a complex deviation from rite of passage, I found that this rounding is pivotal to the completion of the liminal phase of each protagonist in my narrative compass. Put simply, a one-dimensional companion is not capable of taking on an elder role, which is what the protagonist needs to complete this phase and reintegrate. A three-dimensional character, however, can be of great influence. It is true that young companions often enact this nurturing role without conscious effort, but it is nonetheless apparent in the way they incite positive growth in the protagonist.

Max, the “kleptomaniac hitchhiker” is a primary example of a character who exerts positive influence without being aware of it (2016, p. 206). He was always intended to be flat in the first draft of the manuscript and he could easily have remained one-dimensional, but for the close resemblance he bore to Hub. In my second draft, I began juxtaposing aspects of Max’s character against Nev’s grandfather and while they were not similar in many respects, their vagrant spirits did align. Generations apart, their persistent desire to wander subtly subverts Nev’s sensitivity to Cleary’s, providing opportunities for contrast as she slowly succumbs to the pull homewards. This begins in part two when Nev and Cole drop Max off at the petrol station, before leaving for Payne’s Find:
As thoughts of the road ahead sit with me, I find that the niggling familiarity, which has been at the edge of my mind since we picked up Max, is suddenly explicable.

Hub. That’s who Max reminds me of!

I look back the way he drove off, with his new friends and his new route. I imagine the road beneath me morphing in the same changeable fashion. Never quite fixed. It makes me ill (2016, p. 85).

As Nev makes the connection between Hub and Max, she becomes uneasy at the prospect of being a drifter. But it is too early in her journey for her to return to Cleary’s. Instead, she persists with her road trip and it is not until she reaches the end of her time at the beach camp out of Coral Bay that she concedes that she wants to go home. Until that point, she was merely headed in that direction. Again, Max is part of this valuation, for as Nev contemplates where he might head after they all leave the camp, she is both happy and fretful: she is happy for herself because she is close to home, but fretful for Max because he does not have one. Her changed feelings toward Max are the result of spending a week with him, the shift of which is depicted in the last conversation she has with him as she cuts his hair on the beach. It prompts Nev to think:

I remember that he’ll go back to travelling towards nothing soon. I wish I could give him more than a haircut and a week’s company. But Max is not my job. He doesn’t need me to fix him, or make it so that he has a place to sit still.

All he wants is what he has. It’s not for me to say that’s not enough. (2016, p. 210).

Max is no longer the crazy hitchhiker in harem pants and a beanie who dislikes WA, even as he traverses it. He is a lost young man whose experiences of home and family are such that he would rather drift than allow himself to settle in one place. In this chapter, Max becomes a more complex character, capable of existing beyond On the Corner of North and Nowhere. He achieves a round quality, which enables Nev to make valuations about her own life. She may not be entirely ready to reintegrate by the end of their last conversation – even when she does, Max will not be with her – but she is close and he helps her to see this.
Etta, “the selective mute”, has a more dynamic impact on Nev than Max (2016, p. 206). Initially, she existed as an extension of Cole’s story, giving him purpose in north WA. This meant that beyond a desire to aggravate her father, she had little motivation as a character. In fact, she remained at a constant level of quiet fury from part three to part five of the first draft. The only trace of roundness appeared when she spoke about her father and hinted that she needed to be away from him to see what she was capable of. As a way of testing her importance in the novel, I removed her, making it so that she was never physically present. In this scenario, Etta still motivated Cole to travel north, but he never found her. Her absence created an immediate rift in the manuscript. It not only went against the premise of rounding Nev’s friends and friendships, it also jettisoned the only physical female presence in her liminal phase. Minty and Gran remained strong influences in their unerring support of Nev, but they did not travel with her. Nev needed the perspective and friendship that often only a same-sex companion of the same age can provide.

Aapola, Gonick and Harris believe that girl-friends measure their behaviour, personality and appearance against each other, not in a purely superficial or competitive manner, but towards an understanding of how other young women conduct themselves (2005, p. 111). As such, friendships between girls “are a powerful cultural force, representing sites of collective meaning-making ... It is between and amongst girls as friends that identities are variously practised, appropriated, resisted and negotiated” (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005, p. 111). Younger concurs, while inferring that “Seeking out other women” is as embedded in YA literature as it is in feminism, with both serving to illustrate “the power of female bonding” (2009, p. 122). In literature, as in life, these personal developments cannot always be achieved when a female’s sole companions are male. Yet this was precisely the situation I had written Nev into in my first draft. She travelled with Max and Cole, refused to take her mother’s phone calls, was shunned by Gran who believed radio-silence would coax her home, only conversed with her father in Newman, did not text Minty, and when she did eventually meet Etta, she could not entice her to speak.

I attended to the absence of female voices with text messages between Nev and the characters of Minty and Peta. In a short period of time, this became Nev’s chief
method of communication with most of her family and friends, female and male alike. The unanticipated benefit was that I was able to curb her isolation, which to that point was extreme. However, beyond these text messages, Nev still needed a strong physical female influence in her liminal phase. As such, I returned to Etta’s character. Strengthening her character began with a simple shift in ambition: I made her less wayward and more curious. This new-Etta still meanders in the Pilbara in search of protests and new ways to anger her father. However, she also wants to return to Perth to start university and can acknowledge the positive influence her father has had on her, as well as the negative. She confesses as much to Nev: “I want to learn to fight people who do bad things. Learn how to make them stop. I want to be more like him. Be as bold. I just can’t do it while he’s watching over me” (2016, pp. 205-206).

During this same conversation, Etta tells Nev that she plans to stay in Perth, which incites an off-the-page development: at some point during the five days the group spends at the beach camp, Nev asks Etta to work at Cleary’s alongside her. The offer Nev makes Etta is more important than its covert delivery suggests. By agreeing, Etta shows that she wishes to follow through with her ambition to remain in Perth, which is important to combat any perceived flippancy in her character that might deflate her back to flat. It also provides Nev with a companion for the future. More importantly, Nev’s offer suggests that she is working on the conditions of her reintegration. Young people undertaking rite of passage journeys are expected to exercise independent thought and action towards the latter stages of their liminal phase, which, in turn, will enable both independent and dependant participation in their community upon return (Larson & Martin, 2012, p. 39). By offering Etta a place at Cleary’s, Nev is asking for her help. Put another way, she is attempting to relieve herself of one of the burdens that forced her to separate: the heavy workload she took on at the retreat to prove a point to her mother. This suggests that she is nearly ready to reintegrate, for in acknowledging the dilemma and trying to resolve it she is maturing beyond her initial, juvenile response, which was to remain silent in hopes that it would make things better.

Concentrating on Max and Etta’s three-dimensional characterisation had the desired impact on Nev’s liminal phase. She began to round and was noticeably more
personable and mature. She remains introverted in On the Corner of North and Nowhere, but compared to initial drafts, she has a softer persona that shows her desire to connect with people and to transition into a new phase at Cleary’s. Cole, the “Texo-Australian with a gimpy knee”, is responsible for this softening in many ways (2016, p. 206). He is Nev’s unrelenting companion throughout her liminal phase, just as surely as she is his. This storyline, where two characters are conspicuous love interests from the outset and act as complements, is an enduring feature of YA fiction. It is evident in my narrative compass in the relationships of Elspeth and Rushton, Audrey and Ed, and Taylor and Jonah. Even Friday, whose love interest is a diluted version of the one typically found in YA fiction, has a companion in Wish. Mallan suggests that romance persists in the genre because it “has the capacity to open up worlds of enchantment, trauma, dream, and symbol. For even its youngest readers, romance explores the deep-seated fears and pleasure of the human psyche” (2009, p. 29). Romantic storylines are important for the pre and post-pubescent demographic, who are exploring emotional and physical responses to their desired sex, often for the first time. It is not always enough for them to understand their growth in biological terms; science certainly cannot explain to them how to form lasting and authentic connections with people. It is perhaps for this reason that the genre tends to link “gender and sexual identity with a similar finding of an essential self” but so too “an equally essential other” (Mallan, 2009, p. 31).

In the latter drafts of my manuscript I was focused on the development of Cole as Nev’s “equally essential other” (Mallan, 2009, p. 31). While he had always functioned as a round character, I knew I could develop him further. Given that he is physically absent during Nev’s separation, and his primary role in her reintegration is his abrupt departure, Cole’s most significant role was in Nev’s liminal phase as he helped her combat plausible reasons not to return to Cleary’s.

All YA characters are tested throughout their liminal phase to ensure that they are ready to complete their rite. I refer to these tests as plausible reasons not to reintegrate; Campbell refers to them as “refusal of the return” (1973, p. 193). The difference between the two is, that in YA fiction the protagonist actively battles with their reasons not to return during their quest and their return is the end goal, whereas
in the monomyth the hero considers return once their quest is complete (Campbell, 1973, p. 193). In *On the Jellicoe Road*, Taylor has at least two plausible reasons not to *reintegrate*: instead of finishing high school she could leave for the city after Hannah departs or when she visits the city later in the novel, in search of her mother, she could decide to remain there (Marchetta, 2006). These storylines are possible, just not from within the context of rite of passage. This is because the success of a person’s rite is predicated on them returning to the location/community they *separated* from; not integrating into any place, but *reintegrating* into their place (Eriksen, 2001, p. 138).

Nev has three plausible reasons not to return to Cleary’s, or more, to avoid a confrontation with her mother, which she believes she cannot win. She could opt to stay on the road and become a drifter, she could settle in Newman with her father and Poppy for a period, or she could follow Cole to America. Further refining Nev’s liminal phase was about her considering these possibilities and ultimately deciding on Cleary’s. This is where Cole came in. I used him to help Nev address each plausible reason not to *reintegrate*. This began in Newman at his donga where they almost sleep together. Cole reciprocating her feelings, at least physically, surprises Nev and thereafter he is tied to her thoughts about the mining town. For example, the next morning Nev muses over ways to ensure their paths interconnect, such as working fly-in-fly-out (FIFO). She is forced to conclude that “No matter how many scenarios and solutions I come up with, none of them take into account what Cole wants” (2016, p. 147). Thereafter, Cole is inextricable from Nev’s thoughts about home and Newman. She admits as much to her father when he pressures her at Ophthalmia Dam to divulge why she is feeling melancholic. Howie is pleased to hear about Nev’s developing feelings for Cole, as he believes a crush is natural at her age. In truth, Cole’s impact is more significant. He encourages Nev to start thinking about events and people, instead of reacting to them. This is demonstrated towards the end of the same conversation between Howie and Nev at the dam, in which she reaches an unanticipated conclusion:

> If I stayed here [Newman] ... I could find work after all. And on my time off I could chase Poppy and let him decide on the pathway for us both.
I’d call Cleary’s on weekends. It would be a simple life. But then my childhood safety net is not as fixed as it once was. Gabby’s in the picture now and Poppy is thinking about moving on, maybe Dad too. Before long, this place would dissolve as surely as the road and Midland and my cottage. I’d end up here alone and I sure as hell can’t hack living in another shell of a home. (2016, p. 156)

This valuation is quick and insightful, expressing an opinion, which, to that point, has only been implied: Nev cannot stay in Newman. She is forced to tell her dad “I don’t think I work here anymore ... I want more” (p. 156). That Cole is not the primary reason for this final valuation is a promising sign of growth. It shows that although he incited Nev to really focus on Newman as a home, he is not solely responsible for her final decision to leave it. In short, it is important for her to achieve independence on her journey, not to develop another relationship of dependence.

Acknowledging that she needs more than Newman can offer her marks the beginning of Nev’s self-realisation. Thereafter she grows progressively more aware about where she does and does not fit. That is not to say she is ready to return to Cleary’s. On the contrary, Nev coaxes Cole into following her to the coast, knowing it will delay their journey home and give her more time with him. This delay tactic speaks to Nev’s inability to reintegrate – she is not yet ready or mature enough – but it does lead to another musing about life on the road as they rest in the middle of nowhere:

As I watch them [Cole and Etta], my tummy flips, because I realise with a certainty that scares me, that if Cole was in better shape, I’d be in real danger of disappearing with him. Walking off into the mirage on the horizon and leaving everyone behind. (2016, p. 182).

The idea of getting lost makes Nev anxious. Not only because it puts her in danger of living Max’s life and Hub’s fate; it also shows her the power that Cole has over her, even if he is unaware of it.

This middle of nowhere scene is an effective precursor to Cole’s offer in chapter 28, when he asks Nev to go to America with him. Instead of general unease, which bubbled up at the thought of getting lost with Cole in the landscape, Nev’s internal response is immediate this time because Cleary’s is foremost in her mind, not on the periphery: “At least when I was contemplating roaming about by myself, I had the option of Cleary’s. Leaving with Cole means really leaving. It means I’m done.” (2016,
It is a climactic moment, for in envisaging this new path with Cole, in which she is fully distanced from Cleary’s, Nev admits her true feelings for home. She had already expressed a desire to be back there in Meekatharra after texting her mother, as well as in Newman immediately after fighting with her, but these moments were a juvenile response to immediate change: Nev did not like the shifting dynamic of her life, which made her long for comfort. However, by the time Cole makes his offer, Nev has already opposed, quite fully, two plausible reasons not to reintegrate, which puts her in a good position to deliberate another. She admittedly does not give Cole an answer until the last scene at the beach camp, but she immediately knows her own mind.

The respective trials of each protagonist in my narrative compass help them to achieve peace with their past, but so too an intelligible and positive estimation of where they fit in their community. Choice is inseparable from this realisation. That is to say, each character reaches a point towards the end of their story where a choice they make signifies not a tentative desire for a new Self or place, but an instant acquisition of it. In this moment, the indecision from their preceding story is gone. They return to their community, ready to confront whatever made them separate, always with a level of success. Nev’s choice, which affirms her new Self and ends her liminal phase, occurs in the second last chapter during her conversation with Cole at the beach camp. Here, they finally talk about Cole’s departure to America and the offer he gave Nev to return with him. He concedes that he is still leaving, but reveals it is mostly because of his father, who wants to help him get better: “That word. Better. Cole breathes it against my ear and I capture the soft awe, as if he never imagined such a thing was possible. That his dad would be ready to see him” (2016, p. 218). Nev’s anger, which is a product of Cole leaving and her own decision to not go with him, wanes with his response. She did not understand how much he needed his father – in reality, Cole is also negotiating plausible reasons not to return home and coming to the conclusion that he must. Cole’s decision guides Nev back to her issues with her mother and by end the next morning she is determined to make the gallery opening the next night. Nev recognises the action is hasty, but that does not
curb the excitement that builds in anticipation of home; at having finally reached a point where she can confront her mother and return to Cleary’s.

Reintegration: “Narrative closure” and the Absentee Mother

“Narrative closure in young adult (YA) novels, in particular, typically provides a point where the individual has arrived; a moment of self-realisation or self-actualisation, whereby the struggles of finding one’s true identity have been overcome” (Mallan, 2009, p. 7). Mallan refers to this conclusion as “paradoxical” for the journey is cyclic: “seek and ye shall find what was there to begin with” (2009, p. 7). The protagonist essentially returns to the place where their story began. This could be classified as a feudal tenet of the genre, even counterintuitive, because the character returns to the place they longed to escape. Really, it is neither. As an illustration, consider this well embedded narrative conclusion from within the rite of passage schema, in which return is referred to as reintegration. The YA protagonist is only able to reintegrate if they have matured and achieved belonging. That is not to say that they must have undergone a complete metamorphosis of character, only that they must have negotiated beyond their initial response to the identity, familial or social crisis. Once the YA protagonist reaches this conclusion they have achieved “a moment of self-realisation or self-actualisation”, to use Mallan’s phrasing, and are ready to transition out of liminality (p. 7). They are also exceptionally close to the conclusion of the novel, such is the rapid completion of the last phase: in my narrative compass, Elspeth, Ed, Audrey, Taylor and Friday all reintegrate within the last eight pages.

Nev’s reintegration begins the moment she sets out for Perth with Cole, and ends with her conversing with her mother at the gallery (2016, pp. 220-228). However, in early drafts of On the Corner of North and Nowhere, this return was laboured, dithering between 30 to 50 pages as I attempted narrative closure. In these drafts Peta maintained her vice grip on the cottage and Nev returned home resigned to this outcome. There was meant to be maturity in her acceptance, when really it was passive resignation. By studying my narrative compass, I realised that the story could not end with Nev in this docile state. Furthermore, I could not justify a long reintegration in the same way I had her separation. Like the protagonists in my
narrative compass, Nev has already negotiated beyond her plausible reasons not to return by the end of her journey. As such, she did not need to reiterate thoughts and emotions she previously mused over. Nor did her story need to conclude with a neat epilogue in which Peta shifted focus to building her own place at Cleary’s, Etta began working at the art retreat, and Cole did or did not return. Nev’s chief concern as she reintegrates is her mother, for her narrative closure is inseparable from the confrontation she must have with Peta.

Peta’s character is akin to all the maternal figures in my narrative compass. In each novel, the mother of the female protagonist is either deceased or missing for the majority of the story. Younger refers to this as the “absent mother trope” and notes how it prevails in YA serial fiction (2009, p. 107). For example, in these serials, which avoid narrative closure to engage readers for future publications, female parents are generally missing, allowing the books to become like “stand-in” mothers (2009, p. 111; 2009, p. 120). Each publication guides the reader, “transmitting cultural information that sometimes challenges oppressive gender roles for young women” (2009, p. 121). Younger suggests the mothers are not capable of this nurturing because they tend to prepare their daughters for submissive positions in their communities, based on their own experiences. By comparison, the “stand-in” mother, which is the literature itself, encourages young women to contest normative gender roles (2009, p. 111). Younger applies this absent mother trope to YA serials specifically, yet it prevails in the genre as a whole. Scutter, for instance, notes its prevalence in both nineteenth and twentieth century literature, and explores the strange preference for this trope in YA literature (1999, pp. 200-201). It is also evident in my narrative compass, particularly as it relates to the absentee guardian on the YA rite of passage journey. In both instances, the absent mother and adult are seen to be inappropriate role models and are thus removed from influence.

On returning to my narrative compass, I could not reconcile the idea of absentee mothers and gender stereotyping. That is to say, looking through each novel with a rite of passage lens, focused as I was on reintegration, I was not convinced that each mother was made absent because of her innate desire to force unhealthy gender roles on her daughter. Nor were they entirely inappropriate role models. A cursory reading
of Friday Brown (Wakefield, 2013) and On the Jellicoe Road (Marchetta, 2006) could certainly make it seem as if the mothers, Vivienne and Tate, are removed to mitigate their influence. After all, they are promiscuous, selfish and use sex purely for gain, none of which serves to guide Friday and Taylor towards a healthy view of their sex and sexuality. However, a close reading of the novels shows that it is precisely Vivienne and Tate’s absence and failures that make them the most important role models their daughters could have. For instance, Vivienne and Tate separate from their homes as pregnant teenagers and do not achieve reintegration until their deaths in their early 30s. This means that Friday and Taylor are born into the chaos that defines their respective mother’s liminal phase and for many years are made to follow her indeterminate wanderings. The reason Vivienne and Tate choose this existence is because they are either unwelcome back home or find it too painful to return. When they do finally escape this rootlessness, it is followed quickly by their deaths: in yet another parallel between the texts, Vivienne and Tate are both diagnosed with terminal cancer and return home to die. In doing so, they concede to the reintegration they avoided so fervently as young adults and finally complete their rite of passage journeys. Vivienne and Tate’s harrowing lives and ends demonstrate that they do in fact have something important to teach their daughters, and it does not relate exclusively to gender: they unwittingly offer a vision of what can happen when a young person fails to reintegrate during their youth.

But for a handful of differences, Peta is a mirror of Vivienne and Tate. She leaves home after an altercation with her mother – the absent mother trope extends back yet another generation in Friday Brown, On the Jellicoe Road and my manuscript – and becomes pregnant shortly after. Both events mark the beginning of her liminal phase, into which Nev is born and thereafter must endure. While Peta does not die or remain on the road, her rite of passage is nonetheless incomplete, because although she returns to Cleary’s, she does not move back there. Instead, she chooses to nestle in the suburbs of the city. Implicit in the distance she creates from the retreat is a desire to remain detached from Gran; to punish her for keeping Hub a secret from her for much of her younger life. As a result, Peta never fully reintegrates. When Hub presumably dies, she looks even less likely to complete her rite and Nev becomes
progressively aware of her volatility. This is demonstrated in part one as Nev contemplates how her mother seeks distractions each year around the time of Hub’s death (2016, p. 32). Peta effectively becomes a cautionary tale and Nev attempts to distance herself from her by moving to Cleary’s. When this does not work – Nev’s action prompts Peta to finally move home – she leaves the retreat for Newman, indicating a strong desire to disconnect from the overlapping future her mother has planned for them and achieve a healthier path in life (2016, p. 70).

As I compared Nev and Peta’s journeys, alongside those of the characters in my narrative compass, I came to see that mother-daughter rites of passage are about more than each parent’s failure to reintegrate earlier and how this serves as a warning to her daughter. They also highlight the active role these mothers and daughters play in each other’s final stage. In short, in order for the protagonist to reintegrate, her mother must do so as well. This is demonstrated in On the Jellicoe Road when Tate returns to Jellicoe Road. She is compelled home by Taylor, who she must see before she dies (Marchetta, 2006, p. 275). Taylor’s reintegration occurs as a direct result of Tate’s, specifically in the pages between her mother’s return and her death (Marchetta, 2006, pp. 283-289). Friday’s reintegration is also influenced by her mother’s and is similarly achieved in the same place. At the end of Friday Brown she reintegrates into her grandfather’s home, where Vivienne chose to die and thus complete her rite.

On returning to my manuscript I could see that I had two crucial challenges in moving forward with the final draft. The first was to achieve a connection between Nev and Peta during the final stage of their rite of passage journey. However, this was not as simple as having them return to the same place at the same time. If it were, then their meeting at the art gallery for the show would have served as a satisfactory reintegration for both. It did not because the pair decided to keep things much the same as they were, with Peta moving to the cottage and Nev sullen in her acceptance. In this scenario, they would never be able to complete their rite because they did not overcome their issues. The way to correct this was closely connected with the second challenge, as I saw it: Peta’s characterisation. For mother and daughter to reintegrate, I would have to develop Peta. This was a difficult task because the depiction of her as
an antagonist, her absence throughout the novel, and the limitations of Nev’s first person perspective had combined to create a distant character who was alienated from the reader. She was not, for instance, nuanced in the careful manner of Tate and Vivienne, whose self-indulgent traits were tempered by flashes of kindness and fierce love. I returned to my manuscript with this in mind, seeking ways to develop Peta’s story, for in doing so I could build towards a simultaneous reintegration for her and Nev, and thus a more satisfying and authentic narrative conclusion.

As I progressed with my final draft, I concentrated on what I perceive as the redeeming qualities of Vivienne and Tate, which are delivered in brief stages throughout Friday Brown (Wakefield, 2013) and On the Jellicoe Road (Marchetta, 2006). Often, these qualities are the result of a pleasant memory, such as when Taylor recalls how she used to see in her mother, “flashes of a passion beyond anything I’ll ever experience” (Marchetta, 2006, pp. 14-15); they can also result from a new perspective, such as when Friday finally learns that her mother ran away from home because she wanted to avoid having an abortion (Wakefield, 2013, p. 331). I believe that the impact of these examples is such that the reader is able to sympathise with Vivienne and Tate, even though the image of the inadequate mother remains intact. I focused exclusively on this effect in my manuscript, softening Peta’s character gradually by delivering content in short scenes, instead of concentrated passages. The idea was not to override the indomitable aspects of her personality. Rather, I wanted to add a gentler dimension. Consider the following scenes: Peta text messages Nev and asks her to tell Aunty Kaye that she misses her when she visits her grave (2016, p. 105); Nev finds out about the first time her mother met Hub and how it ended violently (2016, pp. 126-132); Howie confesses to Nev that Peta does not like the cottage and is only moving there to be closer to her (2016, p. 167); Peta asks Nev what Gabby is like (2016, p. 176); Travis tells Nev that the renovation did no go ahead as planned (2016, p. 188); and Peta admits that she has not been back to the cottage since Nev left (2016, p. 225). All of these scenes were created or crafted in the final draft to make Peta more personable. I wanted to show that in addition to the hardened version of her, which the reader is privy to in part one, she is honest in her
affection of Nev, and her actions and verbalisations are simply an indication of her desire to be closer to her daughter.

Peta’s characterisation was the last significant contribution to On the Corner of North and Nowhere. With her motivation as a character complete, I was able to follow the tradition of the literature in my narrative compass and pinpoint Nev’s reintegation to a moment, or at least a page. Consider the following scene, in which Nev has just asked Peta about her old dream of building her own place at Cleary’s:

‘Do you ever think about it?’ I press.
She sighs. ‘Honey, think about how much time and effort went into the plans for the cottage and look at how easily it’s fallen to nothing. Some threadbare, romantic dream from my 20s isn’t going to fare any better.’
‘There’s nothing wrong with romance.’
‘I’m not talking about boy-romance. I’m talking about the romantic dreams you use to keep yourself afloat. The stuff you have to let go of as you get older.’
‘The cottage,’ I tell her decisively.
‘Nev, that was never my dream, it was...’
‘I meant for me.’ I turn my whole body towards her. ‘The cottage is my threadbare, romantic dream for the future. But you know what? It’s not an entirely crazy one, Mum. Long run or short, I’m not going to let it go. Hell, even if it wasn’t something I loved, you know that we can’t live together again.’
She appraises me. Her frustration is guarded because she’s holding onto us not fighting. I know this, because I am too. ‘You’ve never said any of this, Nev.’
‘I am now.’
‘That you are.’
‘Well?’
‘I haven’t been back there since you left, Nev. It’s yours.’ (2016, pp. 225-226)
This scene is pivotal to the conclusion of the novel, because Nev finally verbalises what she wants and Peta listens. To be more precise, the moment when Peta says she never returned to the cottage is when everything falls into place for Nev. She finally has a home and her rite of passage is complete. This scene is closely followed by the positive conclusion of Peta’s rite, which actually occurs days before Nev’s return:

‘I sent it, you know.’
‘Sent what?’ I ask.
‘The letter you left.’
My mind scrambles for understanding. Then it hits. The letter. The one I wrote to the Coroner. The one I haven’t thought about in days. My hand flies to my mouth and I freeze.
‘Christ, Mum! Why?!”
‘Why not?’
‘Because you didn’t want to. And because I was just being a shit!’
‘Well, the second one’s true enough. Doesn’t mean that you were wrong to write it.’ (2016, p. 226-227)

Peta’s prolonged mourning of Hub was one of her plausible reasons not to reintegrate. Years before, she decided that Howie and the road would not be enough to keep her from Cleary’s. Hub, however, remained an obstacle to her completing her rite and her inability to let him go created distance between her and Gran, but also her and Nev. By sending the letter Peta demonstrates her desire to move forward and her ability to finally complete her rite. But, more than this, it directly impacts Nev. This time, however, it is for the better.

Achieving peace between Nev and Peta helped me to write the narrative conclusion that had remained elusive in nearly every draft of On the Corner of North and Nowhere. In many ways, their tentative coming-together is simple and belies the complexity of what went into crafting that moment. But, such is the quality of the YA literature I aimed to emulate. The arrival of each protagonist in my narrative compass, in which the trauma and angst of the preceding novel is resolved, is exceptionally brief when compared with the first two stages of their rite of passage journey. This creates the allusion of simplicity. The reality, however, is that this point of self-realisation is the sum of many parts and much planning.

In concluding this chapter, I am reminded of Hearne’s experience with narrative and research, as well as her views on how best to achieve a “whole” product (2009, p. 195). She writes, “I believe that analysis, which by definition separates its whole into parts to find their nature, can obscure our understanding if we do not return afterward to synthesis, bringing together those separate parts into a whole” (p. 195). This was my experience writing On the Corner of North and Nowhere, especially after my first draft was complete. I found that while the places I had rendered were
authentic, Nev’s story needed a closer connection to YA literature. Hearne and Trites
narrative compass model was invaluable in this respect. Without realising, I had
intuited themes and literary devices from my own compass into my manuscript. Rite
of passage was by far the most dominant device. My analysis of it, however, did not
obscure my understanding, because by recognising the three stages of the schema –
separation, liminality and reintegration – I was able to refine the manuscript to its
structural heart. Thereafter, I was constantly working at “bringing together those
separate parts into a whole” (Hearne, 2009, p. 195). The product is On the Corner of
North and Nowhere: a YA novel developed from personal experience, but nonetheless a
YA novel in its own right.
“The eyes of an adult and the eyes of a child see differently. The glass darkens, there are only hints and flashes of that lost world” (Hewett, 2000, p. 9). Dorothy Hewett wrote these lines as part of a foreword to a poetry collection, just two years before her death. As an elder, she could still recall her earliest years, but never with the clarity of those first impressions that bound her to the farmhouse of her youth. Childhood nonetheless endured in the form of her creative myth. This artistic centre, which stemmed from youthful experiences, refused to be overridden by time; it fed Hewett’s creativity until her death at age 79.

Like Hewett, I too ran across Western Australian (WA) landscapes that were slowly inscribed into my creative myth as a child. I found that On the Corner of North and Nowhere sprang readily from this “lost world” of red dirt, graffiti and seawater (Hewett, 2000, p. 9) – from Newman, Midland and Bunbury. However, developing my manuscript was not as simple as adding flesh to the bones of the narrative, which formed in my adolescence when my curiosity about WA places merged with my interest in YA literature. Time had strengthened this story, but it had also given me a new perspective: I had the competing lenses of childhood and adulthood to consider as I began writing the novel. This opposition was never more apparent than when I undertook a research journey into the State’s hinterland to gather material for an authentic road story and confront my past for creative gain. There, I experienced an unanticipated sense of homelessness, which forced me to consider framing my manuscript from a uniquely WA perspective, whereby the narrative centres on recreating lost paradise. In this scenario, Eden is always unattainable, because once lost, it cannot be restored. Unwilling to sacrifice the heart of my novel, which was about privileging the idylls of my childhood, and thus my creative myth, I decided to subvert the Edenic trope. Little did I know, I had already done so through Cleary’s. My task, thereafter, was to really spend time on the retreat; to create an enduring paradise for Nev. Ironically, crafting an unconventional Eden that drew upon some of the feelings inspired by my three childhood places, marked a shift away from them.
My writing became more fluid and *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* was easily distinguishable from my autobiography and mythos.

While the first draft of my manuscript was driven by a need to create authentic and aesthetic visions of WA places, the second and subsequent drafts were aimed at shaping a stronger piece of YA literature. I was still compelled by childhood experiences and how they impacted my creativity as an adult, but this time it was the value of literary experiences that held my focus. I was interested in stories from my youth that had resonated; that had taught me important skills about life and people. Betsy Hearne and Roberta Trites’ ‘narrative compass’ model was crucial here. They encouraged me to consider a novel that had impacted my creative arts practice and research to that point, and how this awareness might benefit future drafts of my manuscript. I discovered that my narrative compass is completed by several stories, all of which share a common theme: YA rite of passage. These are not coming-of-age novels in the prosaic sense. Each story is presented in three stages – separation, liminality and reintegration – which guide the YA protagonist towards a mature conception of where they fit in the world. Shaping subsequent drafts of my manuscript, and creating a stronger YA novel, required that I adhere to how rites were conducted in my narrative compass. It quickly became the natural point through which I filtered all ideas about my manuscript, particularly with regard to characterisation.

In many ways, *On the Corner of North and Nowhere* is my first ode to my creative myth. However, it is chiefly a piece of YA literature, as I have not been compelled to write by my past or place alone. I have been guided by the stories I matured with. I believe that the result is a narrative unique from my past, yet compatible with other contemporary works of Australian YA fiction. It is my hope that my creative arts research and practice have culminated in a strong piece of YA literature, which, if published, can impact young people in the same way the genre has me.
References


Appendix A

Map of Western Australia: Research Trip Itinerary
Appendix B

Photographic Essay: Western Australian Roadscapes

This Appendix provides a photographic essay about the roadscapes encountered on my research trip and how I incorporated them in On the Corner of North and Nowhere.

Figure 1.1: New Norcia Hotel

Figure 1.1 and 1.2 were taken in New Norcia, which is Nev, Cole and Aero’s first stop on their road journey. Figure 1.1 shows the long driveway the trio walk up, while Figure 1.2 shows the worn carriage Cole rests against as he has a cigarette (Jarvey, 2016, pp. 77-78).

Figure 1.2: Carriage

Figure 1.3: Blue haze
Figure 1.3 shows a carpet of green scrubland, leading towards a haze of seemingly blue mountains. It was taken during a rest stop by the side of the road as we made our way to Paynes Find. This photograph was the motivation for the first Polaroid Nev takes (2016, p. 91).

![Figure 1.3: A carpet of green scrubland leading towards a haze of seemingly blue mountains.](image)

Figure 1.4: Wedge-tailed eagle  
Figure 1.5: Emu

Figures 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6 give an impression of the wildlife that fringes and occupies the roadscapes of the WA hinterlands. These animals keep company with an unfortunate number of animals killed by cars. The sight of this roadscape carnage – often cattle and kangaroos – is rivalled only by its smell.

Figure 1.4 was taken on the road to Paynes Find, from inside the car. Just prior to its image being taken, the eagle was in the middle of the highway, dancing and feasting on a carcass. Nev and Cole experience a similar incident (2016, p. 95).

Figure 1.6 was taken just shy of a T-junction at the west of Karijini National Park. The dingo features in the novel, as Nev muses about Etta’s character, particularly how she is drawn to animals (2016, p. 178).
Figures 1.7-2.1 show how WA roadscapes can vary. As we travelled, there was a searing quality to the outback, courtesy of the red dirt, mammoth blue skies and persistent sun. But the landscape morphed, nonetheless. It did not remain barren or uninviting throughout. For me, the most common aspects of this hinterland are its immensity and ever present quiet.
Nev muses over the changing nature of the landscape with Cole, when they reach Paynes Find Roadhouse. She reminisces about wildflower seasons and tries to curb Cole’s growing restlessness about the long road ahead (2016, pp. 96-99).

*Figure 2.2: Newman*

*Figure 2.3: Mount Whaleback Mine*

*Figures* 2.2 and 2.3 are both taken from Radio Hill Lookout in Newman. *Figure* 2.2 shows a large portion of Newman, whereas *Figure* 2.3 shows what gives the town its purpose for existing: Mount Whaleback mine. Nev visits the lookout in the novel and becomes more disenchanted with the town. She hoped to fall in love with it again, but found that she could not (2016, p. 150).
Figure 2.4: Peak

Figure 2.4 was taken on the third day of the research trip. We detoured towards Cathedral Gorge and stopped short, choosing instead to hike up to a small peak overlooking the landscape. I felt disconnected from Newman by this stage. I used this feeling to craft Nev’s thoughts about Newman: she felt that despite her history there, she could not remain, because it was no longer the place of her childhood.

Figure 2.5: Ophthalmia Dam
Figure 2.6: Ophthalmia Dam 2

Figure 2.7: Shoreline
Figure 2.8: Buoyed

Figures 2.5-2.8 were taken at Ophthalmia Dam, which is roughly 20 kilometres out of Newman. It was a regular haunt of my family’s in the 1980s. It remains so for many people today, although it has dried up at least two summers in recent years. The dam
is the scene where Nev realises that she needs more than Newman can offer (2016, pp. 155-161).

Figure 2.9: The Road.

Finally, I believe this photo captures some of the feeling of On the Corner of North and Nowhere, as it evokes a sense of past, present and future. In many ways, it is also evocative of the period of adolescence, balanced as it is between the echoes of childhood and adulthood.

Figure 2.9 was taken six hours out of Newman. In terms of the novel, it is taken just before Nev, Cole, Etta and Aero’s road stop in “the middle of nowhere” (2016, p. 175). It is during this scene that Nev starts to create distance from the interconnecting future her mother has planned for them. She may not be ready to return to Cleary’s, but it represents a subtle shift in the novel, as she finally begins to think about where she fits. So while the research trip continued hereafter, Figure 2.9 concludes this photographic essay.

References

Appendix C
A Chronology of Events in Young Adult Literature: 1795-1984

1795 – Johan Wolfgang von Goethe published Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. It is considered one of the first books in the Bildungsroman tradition – in contemporary literature, the Bildungsroman is known as a coming-of-age narrative and the term is typically used in reference to young adult (YA) literature (Engel, 2008, p. 263; Trites, 2000, pp. 9-20).

1868 -1869 – Louisa May Alcott published Little Women in two volumes. Trites writes that Alcott “defined youth as a time when people have enough zeal and social power to be reformers” (2009, pp. 13-14). She argues that American YA novels continue to be written in this tradition, with protagonists depicted as freethinkers and advocates of positive social change (pp. 13-14).

1870 – The term Bildungsroman was first referenced by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. He writes that books in this tradition:

... all present the youth of their times as he steps into life in blissful ignorance, searching for related souls, experiencing friendship and love, as he then struggles with the hard realities of the world, and thus, in manifold encounters with life, matures, finds himself, and comes to know his mission in this world ... The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as necessary transitional stages of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony. (cited in Engel, 2008, p. 263)

Dilthey’s passage is written as if to define YA literature. However, the term YA would not come into circulation for almost 100 years, meaning it has no bearing on Dilthey’s estimation of coming-of-age narratives. However, there were writers in this period who were writing for and/or about the adolescent, such as Alcott and Mark Twain. So while adolescence was not yet a social phenomenon, writers were starting to become interested in a young readership. Their experiences, of transition and stepping out into the world, were a key focus (Trites, 2000, p. 8-9; Dilthey, cited in Engel, 2008, p. 263).

1904 – G. Stanley Hall published Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education. Hall’s ambitious work was discredited by many, but it proved seminal as he “invented” the term adolescence in a world where children entered adulthood in the same period in which they entered the workforce – often before they were teenagers (Cart, 2011, pp. 4-5).

1930 – This decade saw the emergence of American youth culture. Adolescents attended school in greater numbers in light of the Great Depression. The close proximity of students to each other led to social bonding and a heightened
sensitivity to popular culture (Cart, 2011, pp. 4-7). “The merchandising of and to ‘the juvenile’ had begun” (Cart, 2011, p. 11).

1940s – American teenagers began accruing market power during post-war economic growth. This made them an incredibly lucrative demographic and they started coming to the attention of publishing houses (Trites, 2000, p. 9).

1941 – Another term to describe youths emerged: teenager. According to Palladino, the first reference to the word appears in Popular Science Monthly in 1941 (cited in Cart, 2011, p. 6).

1942 – Maureen Daly published Seventeenth Summer. Daly did not intend for the novel to be exclusive to an adolescent audience, but it is nonetheless considered one of the first YA books (Cart, 2011, pp. 11-12).

1951 – J. D. Salinger published The Catcher in the Rye. Like Daly’s novel, the book was aimed at an adult audience, but soon became a revered favourite for adolescents. It is credited as the prototype for the genre, particularly with regard to voice, as reflected by Holden Caulfield’s idiosyncratic narration (Campbell, 2010, p. 11; Niall, 1984, p. 273).

1950s – In Australia, fiction for adolescents, or children as they were still referred to, continued to be written in the Billabong tradition, which valued “the simplicity and contentment of the outback life over city sophistication” (Mills, 2007, pp. 422-423). Authors from this period include Colin Thiele, Nan Chauncey and Joan Phipson.

1956 – Television was introduced around Australia (“Australia Celebrates”, 2006).

1956 – Amidst American culture shock, and the pastoral sentiment reflected in the Billabong tradition, Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye was banned in Australia by the Custom’s Department, without being referred to the Literature Censorship Board (Moore, 2012, p. 222-223).

1957-1958 – Niall writes that Australians “were not ready then for Holden Caulfield whose idiom is inseparable from his point of view” (1984, p. 273). However, the prohibition of Salinger’s novel quickly became a national embarrassment and literary censorship faced harsh, but deserved criticism (Moore, 2012, p. 223).

1958 – In light of widespread criticism of the ban, the Literature Censorship Board ordered the first ever review of the banned collection and of censorship protocol. The prohibition on The Catcher in the Rye was lifted easily (Moore, 2012, pp. 223-224). Board member E. R. Bryan notes that Salinger was “uncannily successful in presenting [an] adolescent attitude through a first person account” (cited in Moore, 2012, p. 223).
1957 – The Young Adult Services Division (YASD) was founded by the American Library Association (ALA). As a result, fiction for adolescents was officially considered distinct from fiction for children and adults in America (Star, n.d.). There was also a firm acknowledgement of the term young adult, which had become well recognised in literary circles (Cart, 2011, p. 7).

1960s – In Australia, this period saw a shift away from the Billabong tradition and the adventure story. Niall writes that “The certainties of the pastoral mode yield early in the 1960s to doubt, panic and despair as vulnerable children struggle against overwhelming natural forces” (1984, p. 231). Where once the theme was adventure and survival, in books from the 1960s to the 1970s “the main adversary is the land itself” (p. 231).

1964 – H. F. Brinsmead published Pastures of the Blue Crane. By Niall’s reckoning, Brinsmead was one of the first Australian children’s authors to explore adolescent alienation, albeit in a “mild form” (1984, p. 274).

1967-1974 – Although Salinger’s canonical work provided the prototype for YA fiction, the genre has more formal recognition in S. E. Hinton’s The Outsiders (1967) and Robert Cormier’s The Chocolate War (1974). These American novels opened up a niche for the 13-18 year old bracket and sparked a period of genre development, which was characterised by stark realism (Cart, 2011, pp. 21-37). Cormier, who is considered the godfather of YA fiction, once said: “I’ve aimed for the intelligent reader and have often found that that reader is fourteen years old” (cited in Campbell, 2010, p. 88).

1970s – In this decade, the developing realist subgenre was often pitted against another: the YA problem novel. It became a radically popular fixture of developing adolescent fiction, markedly in American, but also in Australia. This subgenre relies on sensationalism and the author’s social conscience to drive the narrative, not in the direction of rich, evocative characterisation, as in realist fiction, but towards plot-orientated melodrama (Egoff, 1981, pp. 14-15; Cart, 2011, pp. 32-35).

1970s – Themes such as alienation and introspection, which were evident in American YA novels, did not quite filter into Australian YA fiction until the early 1970s. Ivan Southall, who was already a prolific and beloved writer at the time, was a standout whose protagonists in Bread and Honey (1970) and Josh (1971) matched that of Salinger’s, Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye (Niall, 1984, pp. 273-274).

1973 – By December of this year, there were no books remaining on the banned list in Australia. The process of literary freedom that began with The Catcher in the Rye was complete (Moore, 2012, p. 251). As such, Salinger’s book was not only responsible for inciting the genre, it also enabled literary strictures to be “progressively dismantled” (2012, p. 251).
1974 – Lu Rees, president of The Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA), ACT Branch, proposed “that a national collection of Australian children’s literature should be formed, featuring files about the work of Australian children’s authors and illustrators along with their books” (Alderman, 2012, p. 122). Rees was a passionate advocate for Australian children’s literature and believed that an archive should be established to compile and safeguard works of merit. She donated 500 books from her personal collection to launch what became the Lu Rees Archives (University of Canberra, n.d.).

1979 – Gabrielle Carey and Kathy Lette published Puberty Blues on the cusp of what Niall refers to as “a golden age in publishing” in Australia (1990, p. v). Like S. E. Hinton, Carey and Lette were also teenagers when they wrote their breakout novel about class warfare. Puberty Blues arguably helped develop the anti-sentimentalist stance adopted by authors in the 1980s.

1979 – Rees proposed to add translated works to the Lu Rees Archives, which was eventually agreed to. “By 1979, the collection as a whole had grown to some 1,000 books and 60 files of materials about authors and illustrators” (Alderman, 2012, p. 122). The collection was building in popularity, with more and more people becoming interested in literature for young people.

1980s – Examples of Australian YA realist fiction from this decade, which was admittedly diluted by romance paperbacks and horror serials, include Victor Kelleher’s Taronga (1986), John Marsden’s So Much to Tell You (1987) and Robin Klein’s Came Back to Show You I could Fly (1989). Books like these propagated what was an anti-taboo style, thus adding to a developing hoard of books shedding convention to convey the reality of what it meant to be a young adult.

1983 – The CBCA recognises a category in their annual awards for older readers; Australian YA literature shifts irrevocably from children’s/junior literature (Nimon & Foster, 1997, p. 3).

1984 – The first YA imprint in Australia – an imprint is a division of a publication house – followed the decision made by the CBCA in the previous year to include a category for older readers. The imprint was started by Barbara Ker Wilson for the University of Queensland Press and was called the UQP Young Adult Fiction list (Ker Wilson, 1998, pp. 141-147). This was 17 years after the imprint Laurel-Leaf was established at Random House, whose first publication was Hinton’s The Outsiders (1967).
References


